

For Immediate Release

DATE December 16, 2024

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Autism Alliance applauds Congressional floor speech calling for urgent action to support students with disabilities

Congresswoman Tlaib addresses the floor on December 5, 2024 making call for full IDEA funding and drawing attention to significant disparities for Michigan students¹

View here: <https://tinyurl.com/AAOM-Tlaib-floor-speech>

SOUTHFIELD, Mich. — The Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) applauds the Congressional floor speech given by Representative Tlaib drawing attention to barriers facing students with disabilities in Michigan to access educational opportunities and achieve outcomes on par with their neurotypical peers.

“We have to confront the chronic apathy in Michigan when it comes to how the education system is under-serving our children and youth with disabilities,” said **Heather Eckner, Director of Statewide Education for the Autism Alliance of Michigan**. “In Michigan, we’re talking about ensuring a ‘guarantee’ of education as a pathway to prosperity for greater social and economic mobility. Right now, that is a broken promise for most students with disabilities in our state.”

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) codified the inherent right of children with disabilities to a public education designed and funded to meet their unique needs. Michigan has historically underfunded special education, denying children with disabilities the rights guaranteed to them under IDEA. AAoM is closely aligned with the principles of IDEA, and wants to ensure that children with disabilities have as comprehensive an education experience as possible.

Currently, only 58% of Michigan students receiving special education obtain a traditional, four-year diploma compared on-time to 84% of their neurotypical peers. This greatly impacts opportunities for post-secondary education, employment and independent living. This data underscores an urgent issue – Michigan is struggling to adequately prepare the over 200,000 students with disabilities, nearly 15% of the total student population.

AAoM leads statewide efforts focused on special education through its Michigan Parent, Advocate & Attorney Coalition (MiPAAC), a statewide student-centered advocacy group working to identify advocacy priorities to address existing issues across the special education system. By convening and catalyzing multiple stakeholders,

¹ House live stream/video pages. <https://live.house.gov/>. (4:28 time stamp)

AAoM is working to raise expectations, expand opportunities, and improve outcomes for students with disabilities with an overall aim to transform Michigan's education system into a top 10 state for special education outcomes, producing

The full transcript of Congresswoman Tlaib's floor speech:

*"Mr. Speaker, this is a plea on behalf of 182,000² families who will have students with disabilities in Michigan. Year after year, we continue to fall short on the promise to fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which many call IDEA. **Failing to help our students to obtain the services they need to learn is again, years that we cannot get back for our children.** With this shortfall, we continue to undermine our students with disabilities.*

The education gap is continuing to widen. There is currently a 22 percent dropout rate for students with disabilities in Michigan, where for non-disabled students, it's only 8 percent.³

*Students use assessments to measure student proficiency and achievement, and under the IDEA, students with disabilities are expected to participate in state assessments. However, every year between 2017 and 2022, the State of Michigan has requested the Department of Education to approve a waiver to increase the 1 percent gap required by the federal government for the number of students with disabilities who can take Michigan's alternative assessment. It's because we're at double. **We often don't do enough to support our kids who need to go through this, nor do we advise our parents properly.***

*State cuts often shortchange individuals' learning plans that are crucial for students with disabilities. However, according to the **Autism Alliance of Michigan**, the dropout rate for students with disabilities is double the amount, but disparities are even worse for students of color with disabilities.*

We need to fully fund IDEA, and we know that will help Michigan serve our students. It will help reduce the amount of inappropriate assessments and improve access to information and support for our school districts.

But, it is disheartening to see the State of Michigan's Department of Education now before an administrative hearing judge, because they are not in compliance with the federal laws. This is the first time in 27 years that our U.S. Department of Education had to drag a state through an administrative hearing process. And it is shameful that we're at this point after over a year of negotiations.

We got to do better. These are our children, and again, we cannot get these years back for them. We have to do right."

About the Autism Alliance of Michigan

The Autism Alliance of Michigan (AAoM) is a 501(c)(3) organization serving as a trusted ally and partner for thousands of families across the state. AAoM's mission is to lead efforts to raise expectations and expand opportunities for people connected to autism across their lifespan. The organization's Education pillar drives initiatives that address systemic barriers to education, focuses on student-centered advocacy, and educates families on related topics – working towards its goal to make Michigan a top 10 state for special education outcomes. For help finding resources, providers and information contact our AAoM Navigators at 877-463-2266 (AAOM) or email at navigator@aaomi.org. More information about AAoM's Education pillar can be found at www.autismallianceofmichigan.org/education-initiatives.

² MI 2023-24 Special Education Counts - 217,569 students eligible. <https://www.mischooldata.org/special-education-counts-data-files>.

³ Heather Eckner and Kara Shawbitz (2024) *Michigan Special Education Experience Survey: Report to the Community Autism Alliance of Michigan*. https://autismallianceofmichigan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/2024-special-education-experience-survey-report_20241024.pdf.

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