

A Certified Future: Our Family's Push for Special Education Funding

Rhys Gay, Father of Everett



My eight-year-old son, Everett, is a vibrant, joyful child with Down syndrome. From the moment he was born, my wife and I committed ourselves to not only supporting him, but also advocating for the broader community of individuals with disabilities. We've championed inclusive policies like Everett's Law, which passed unanimously in Oklahoma in 2021, and we've taken our advocacy to the national stage, most recently traveling to Washington, D.C., for the Down Syndrome Advocacy Conference to fight for Medicaid and Department of Education funding.

Our family stands at the intersection of hope and challenge: we are privileged to be in a strong school district, yet we recognize the work that needs to be done to support students across the state of Oklahoma and the entire country. What makes the work for inclusive education even more personal is that we have three children: one who is in gifted and talented programs, one with special needs, and one who's right in the middle. **For us, inclusion isn't just a theory, it's a daily lived reality.** We see how different educational supports enrich all of our children. And we believe every child benefits when classrooms reflect the full spectrum of human diversity.

The right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment is the foundation of equal opportunity for all students. Everett thrives when he's alongside his peers, not isolated or separated, but supported in ways that meet his needs while preserving his dignity and potential.

Every one of Everett's teachers has brought heart, dedication, and a desire to help him succeed. We are truly grateful for their efforts. But they are placed in an impossible situation by a system that is under-resourced and overwhelmed. This isn't a failure of individual educators, it's a failure of a system that cannot recruit, train, and retain enough qualified special education professionals. In just five years, Everett has had five different special education teachers. That level of turnover is incredibly destabilizing for any child, and especially for one with complex needs. One was working under an emergency certification, not because of a lack of care or effort on their part, but because the state has failed to adequately staff and support special education.

When schools are forced to rely on emergency certifications, it's a clear sign of a system in distress. In these conditions, teachers struggle to develop effective IEPs, implement accommodations, and manage behavior support plans. The growing dependence on emergency certificates highlight why we need more federal oversight and funding, so states like mine are held accountable and assisted in providing every student with the resources, support, and inclusive education they are legally entitled to.

When we underfund and undervalue special education, we lose more than staff, we lose trust, consistency, and ultimately, opportunity for our most vulnerable students.

Certification is not a luxury. It's the baseline our kids deserve. Without sufficient federal funding, states like mine will fall further behind. Since 2016, the number of emergency certified teachers in Oklahoma has nearly tripled, and this will only get worse by consolidating and limiting funding for personnel development through IDEA.

Federal funding is not just about dollars; it's about direction. It's about ensuring that no matter where a child is born, they have access to a fair, inclusive, and empowering education. Increased funding ensures better-trained teachers, stronger accountability, more resources for families, and higher expectations for outcomes.

Congress must act by passing the IDEA Full Funding Act and fulfilling their promise to fund 40% of special education costs. Providing increased funding means more students in mainstreaming classes learning alongside their non-disabled peers. It also means sufficient and continued training for our educators, resources for parents, and assistance for schools and districts to help meet the requirements of the law. It's time to deliver the resources and support every student needs to thrive. **Our kids aren't optional. Their futures aren't negotiable.**