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Good morning Senator Shapiro and members of the Committee,

My name is Laura Buckner; I live in Longview, Texas. I am a licensed professional counselor, a former special educator, and the parent of a 21-year old young man with developmental disabilities and a 17 year old high school junior headed for college. Professionally I am with the Texas Center for Disability Studies. I have the opportunity to train and work with professionals, family members and self-advocates all over the state.

I was here in June of 2008 to talk with you about transition for students receiving special education. You might remember me; I brought my hiking boots and water bottle, fresh from the 3 day hike I'd just taken up Pike's Peak in Colorado. I compared my hike and experience on that mountain to the mountain that awaits every high school student after graduation, and the preparation such a hike requires. And I let you know that students with disabilities in Texas are not prepared for that mountain. Many falter and fail on the mountain; many more never even set foot on the trailhead.

Today I am here to tell you that things have not changed. Transition continues to be a burdensome exercise in paperwork, a series of checkboxes, just another procedure conducted in the space of an ARD meeting that rarely leads to real-life outcomes for the students involved. The fact that it doesn't begin until the student is 16 years old only complicates the situation. We have a case of too little, too late.

Consider for a moment what happens to a typical kid in a typical Texas school. For that kid, transition planning begins at the age of 13-14, when the student is in the seventh grade. In that seventh grade year, counselors meet with students and families and talk with them about the student's plans for the future. They begin mapping out a course of study at that time. The student is encouraged to consider taking classes in the eighth grade that will count for high school credit. They begin learning about dual-credit classes and how those help high school students gain college credit before graduation. My younger son's 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher required every student in her class to do a career exploration project which included applying to two colleges of their choice. She wanted them to begin considering their futures and planning ahead.

That transition planning for typical kids continues once they get to high school. Counselors meet with students and families annually to review their course of study and their post-secondary goals, alert them to PSAT and SAT testing opportunities, provide them information about upcoming college fairs, etc.. They have walked us through every step of the process for our younger son.

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Compare that step-by-step process to the transition planning that students with disabilities in Texas receive. For those students, transition planning doesn't even begin until the age of 16. I have heard that there are districts in the state who have continued to being transition planning at 14, but most wait until 16 as required by the state.

Transition in Texas is characterized by low expectations, limited knowledge of best practice, lack of information about available resources and options, and an overall sense of disconnectedness – as if what happens in the student's high school life and what happens in his adult life are two separate things, rather than one leading to the next. We rarely see a well-written post-secondary goal, which means that the IEP goals that should support those post-secondary goals are seldom connected to actual post-secondary outcomes. The interagency linkages that are intended to connect students and families to community resources don't happen. Transition programs that enable students to continue their education beyond the 4 years are few and far between; many students graduate not because they are ready but because the school has nothing more to offer. Even the fact that special education services are an entitlement and that community based resources are not is a terrible surprise to many families.

I regularly talk to families who tell me their son or daughter has just graduated high school and they are wondering what they should do now. Many have never heard of the Medicaid waiver lists, or of DARS, or of the possibilities of supported or even self-employment. Their sons and daughters have graduated to the living room couch.

There is much to be done if we are to improve transition for students receiving special education services in Texas...for them to realize real-life outcomes such as college, work, and independent living in their communities. A starting place, it seems to me, is to begin when everyone else begins...at the age of 14.

My 21 year old son is working. He has achieved many of the post-secondary goals we wrote when he was still in high school, but there are others we are still working on. Those outcomes were years in the making and would not have been a reality had we not begun as early as we did. I knew enough to ask. I encourage you to do what you can to make it happen for those who don't know to ask.