

local news

Early Intervention cuts would hurt our most needy children

By Danielle Kane
Guest Columnist

I urge Gov. Deval Patrick to withdraw his proposal to drastically raise eligibility requirements and impose massive fees for families receiving services from the Massachusetts Early Intervention program.

How is it comprehensible to remedy a budget shortfall by putting the state's most vulnerable children at a greater disadvantage? Doesn't he see that this will cripple special education budgets when the children who were denied services in their critical formative years suddenly enter the public schools ill-equipped to access the curriculum?

Both of our sons have been fortunate to receive services through Early Intervention. Our older son, Timmy, had significant gross motor delays but caught up to his peers after 10 months of EI therapy. We want to tell you about our second miracle, Christopher, and how Early Intervention has made an incredible difference in his life – and ours too.

When Christopher was exhibiting gross motor and speech delays at 15 months old, we were referred to the

Kennedy Donovan Center in Southbridge for Early Intervention services. At the time of his assessment, we believed Christopher would need just a few months of therapy to catch up. He had low-muscle tone, just like his older brother, and a seemingly common speech delay. However, at his reassessment six months later, we found Christopher's gross motor skills had improved, but his expressive communication skills remained stagnant and receptive communication slipped behind even

further. His speech therapist had concerns that he would be non-verbal. Additionally, we had growing concerns about the inconsistency of his skills and his social interaction. He seemed to exhibit some sensory integration issues. By his second birthday, Christopher was referred to the UMass Child Development Clinic for evaluation. A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder was suspected and, at the evaluation three months later, confirmed.

While it was difficult for us to accept the diagnosis, we are amazed and encouraged every day by the progress Christopher has made since. We work

with a team of caring professionals through Early Intervention who provide nearly 10 hours a week of Applied Behavioral Analysis therapy, a weekly speech therapy session, a weekly developmental session, and a weekly playgroup of his peers. His vocabulary is blossoming, he engages eye contact and social interaction, and he follows simple instructions. With this combination of services, Christopher has demonstrated a tremendous capacity to learn.

We feel incredibly blessed.

We cannot imagine where we would be now if we were told at that first evaluation that our child's delays were not severe enough to trigger eligibility for services. We cannot imagine our son's development now if we hadn't had an observant service coordinator and advocate over the last 18 months who listened to our concerns and proactively pursued diagnoses and therapies to help him.

Yet under the eligibility guidelines now proposed by the state, Christopher may very well have been denied services. In fact, under the proposed eligibility guidelines, one in three children now receiving services would not be eligible. That's a shameful disservice to our most vulnerable citizens — the next genera-

tion of governors and directors and teachers and parents. And there will be ramifications, as these children enter the school system with unattended developmental delays and with parents who have not been educated on how to advocate for them.

Not only does the governor propose more stringent eligibility, which could prevent children like Christopher from receiving early services and diagnoses that could make all the difference in their lives, he seeks to impose exorbitant fee hikes for EI families. Under the proposal, my family's annual fee would increase more than six-fold, from \$180 to \$1,200 per child. This would present a serious financial challenge to us, but for some it would be quite devastating and frankly insurmountable. It may, in the end, decide whether or not a parent seeks services for his or her child, no matter how needed.

Don't further disadvantage our children with special needs. Please, we ask that the governor work in partnership with the Massachusetts Early Intervention Consortium to find budgetary solutions that preserve program eligibility and minimize the financial burden on families like ours.

Your Turn

Quaboag 350th art contest prizes awarded



Clockwise from left: 8 year-old Christopher Paquette of West Brookfield stands beside his