

House Higher Education Committee
February 16, 2023

Testimony of Amelie Wall and Mike Wall
Maple Plain, MN

Chair Pelowski and Committee members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HF 687.

Amelie Wall

I am 22 years old, and I like to sing, swim, play basketball, post on Instagram regularly, and make my family and friends proud of me in all that I do. I have Down syndrome. That means that I don't learn as quickly as other people but it doesn't define me.

Last year I graduated from the BUILD program at Bethel University in St. Paul, MN. The BUILD program provides an on-campus educational experience for people with intellectual disabilities. At Bethel, I had great courses, supportive instructors, and peer mentors. I learned to explore career options through internships, and gained independent living skills by living on-campus. It was a place I called home for two wonderful years. I loved every second of my college experience so much, because I was treated as a full member of the student body. I hope that others in Minnesota can have this experience too.

Now that I have graduated, I am living at home with my parents and working part-time at two paid jobs. I'm also working as an unpaid intern to help my speech therapist with social media marketing for her business. I would like to do more social media and public speaking, advocating for people with disabilities. Going to school at Bethel gave me self-confidence, time management skills, and friendships that I value. I think these skills help me to be a good employee. As a representative of the alumni advisory committee, I get to help plan and create fun activities for us alums to get back together and continue our friendships.

Mike Wall

As her parents, our goals for Amelie were no different than our goals for our other children: be happy, be independent and find a way to give back to her community. When she was born in 2000, opportunities like post-secondary education options were only beginning to be developed. My wife and I had no idea if there would be anything like it for Amelie. Bethel's BUILD program was a dream come true.

Amelie's experience in our local public school and Unified sports through Special Olympics-MN prepared her for the BUILD program because these programs are designed around the same concepts of inclusion and shared learning. These programs not only benefited Amelie and others with disabilities, they changed the culture of the

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campus for all students. For example, when Amelie's high school friends who served as her mentors and partners were asked on their college applications to describe their most meaningful high school experience, many of them referenced their engagement and understanding of the unique talents and strengths of the athletes involved in their Unified Activities Club.

Amelie had similar experience at Bethel where she was included in the daily life of the campus – academic, athletic, music and social. She graduated with a higher level of self-confidence, interpersonal skills and awareness of her talents and aspirations. We strongly believe others would benefit from more inclusive post-secondary education options that enable people with disabilities to continue their development, transition to better employment options, and be a vibrant contributor to our community.

Amelie and Mike Wall

We ask that you support HF 687 so that there are high-quality inclusive post-secondary education options in Minnesota.