

Dear Madam Chair and Members – Good afternoon,

My name is Idil Abdull and I am a Somali Autism Mom.

There are times when one remembers what they were doing when they got particular news. For me, one particular time is when I received an email from my son's principal Jaysen Anderson from Jefferson high school in Bloomington telling me that my son who has nonverbal autism and does not understand what suspension is has been suspended for five days.

I remember thinking this can't be. Why would anyone in their right mind suspend a child with nonverbal autism who cognitively does not understand cause/effect and needs one on one at all times. I forwarded the email to someone else because I couldn't believe it. I mean I knew that students of color were disproportionately suspended in Minnesota, but I thought – not my son. Surely, no one in their right mind would think or take such an action. I was wrong.

It turns out that students of color irrespective of their cognitive ability or understanding are disproportionately suspended, expelled and segregated. This is both heartbreaking and hurtful to me as a mom and as a human being. I look to you all now as lawmakers to change this and ensure children with disabilities are not punished for their disability.

Autism, as you know, is a developmental disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate, social skills, as well as sensory and behavior regulation. Children with autism are often rigid in their routines and have a hard time when change happens. For example, my son does not tolerate if we have to take a different route home when there is construction on the road, especially during the summer.

On May 2nd, my son's teacher Kelly Morris disrupted his daily routine of getting his jacket and school bag from his locker by having his para bring it to the classroom. Well – he did not understand this change nor did he tolerate it and tried to go to his locker. But his teacher instead of giving him his communication device so he can tell her what he wanted, decided to call security and the principal to block him from going to his locker.

This caused him great anxiety and stress and he had a behavior. The very next day, Thursday, May 3rd at 5:18 pm, the principal sent me that life-changing email suspending my kid whom he knew did not understand what suspension is. The principal also told me that he knew the suspension had no educational value for my kid, yet he did it anyway. Imagine that.

I never took my child back to Jefferson high school because what is next – call the police the next time he has a behavior due to his disability. In light of my experience along with thousands of other parents with similar experiences, I support this policy change being proposed by Gov Walz with the help of the Minnesota Department of Education. Clearly, I don't think it goes far enough, but it is a step in the right direction.

We must ensure our children irrespective of disability, color, race, or ethnicity are nurtured and treated with equity and fairly in all school districts. And we must have laws and policies that hold teachers and administrators accountable for creating disparity and inequality in the education system.

I thank you for your time

Idil Abdull