

Greetings Members of The House Education Committee:

My name is Leah Grim. I am a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) from Derby, KS. I come to you today in an effort to elicit your support in my advocacy efforts to change the Special Education Eligibility Label: Emotional Disturbance.

For the past 7 years, I have worked as a School Social Worker in various elementary schools. In this role and as a member of the special education team, I have had the opportunity to meet and serve many families as they embark on the often overwhelming journey of special education eligibility determination.

One of the most controversial and burdensome eligibility labels to encounter, for the special education team and parents alike is Emotional Disturbance. Research shows that negative connotations are not only present in the public arena, but in the world of education as well (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Quite simply put, the stigma is far reaching and detrimental to our children. Children identified as having an Emotional Disturbance are treated differently (Stinnett, Bull, Koonce, & Aldridge, 1999). Administrators in the field of education, often more readily place children with the Emotional Disturbance label in more restrictive environments and compound that placement with a failure to provide access to appropriate related services like counseling and social work (Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley, 2005) (LaPoint, 2000).

Gender inequalities and bias are ubiquitous with the label Emotional Disturbance. “The majority of students classified with Emotional Disturbance are male” (Coutinho, Oswald, Best, & Forness, 2002; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Special education teams also demonstrate pronounced difficulty in identifying females with Emotional Disturbance, particularly those who appear withdrawn (Zahn-Waxler, 1993), as they worry about placing them in classes with aggressive males (Janz Rutledge & Banbury, 2009).

Regrettably, race also influences these outcomes. “For example, in 2006, while African Americans comprised roughly 15% of students aged 6-21 in the United States, they represented nearly 29% of those identified with the Emotional Disturbance label. Conversely, European Americans made up 61% of the general student population aged 6-21, but only 57% of those identified with an Emotional Disturbance label (Data Accountability Center, 2006). ‘This means that African Americans were two times more likely to be classified as having an Emotional Disturbance than their European American counterparts’ (Janz Rutledge & Banbury, 2009). And finally, socioeconomics... special education teams state ‘poverty, lack of supervision/support systems, and access to private therapy’ fast tracks a referral for a special education evaluation (Janz Rutledge & Banbury, 2009).

“In child-focused stigma research, we know that public stigma is condition specific--i.e., the general public reacts and responds differently according to the mental disorder (label) that the person/child is presumed to have” (Mukolo, Heflinger, Wallston, 2010). I have watched, firsthand as parents of children plagued with anxiety and depression weigh the consequences of labeling their child with an Emotional Disturbance and

securing supports for their child **OR** enduring continued academic failure for fear of stigmatization, isolation, and discrimination. I have supported parents as they share statements like: 'I will just never tell my child that they are now labeled with an emotional disturbance or more commonly stated: 'emotionally disturbed'. I have sat in a room with my special education team as we poured over countless testing results in an attempt to discover alternative eligibility criteria (to Emotional Disturbance) in an effort to avoid the pain of sharing those findings with parents.

We live in a time where information is at our fingertips, we are inundated with news briefs, social media, and countless search engines. A simple search of 'emotional disturbance' or 'emotionally disturbed' can warrant very unsettling findings. Special Education lawyer Lori E. Arons, ESQ, states on her personal website that "The root cause of school shootings is emotional disturbance" (Arons, 2018). A 2017 article in **The New York Times** declares "Shooting of an Emotionally Disturbed Man" in their headline for an article on an officer involved shooting (Mueller, 2017).

After only 2 of these examples, if you were a parent of a child with anxiety, would you be comfortable labeling your child with an emotional disturbance?

I come to you today as a staunch advocate for children and families navigating the special education process. With the support of State Representative Blake Carpenter, I have dedicated my time and energies to rallying support and feedback from agencies, parents, and stakeholders from around our state. Through these efforts, the majority proposed that the less objectionable and most transparent replacement term to be **Emotional Disability**.

As a licensed professional social worker, I adhere to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics which not only guides my professional scope of practice, it also encourages my passion for activism in both the political and social arenas. Compelled by my passion, I am proposing change to not only Kansas state rules and regulations, but Kansas state law to reflect the label Emotional Disturbance to be changed to **Emotional Disability**. It should be noted, that I am only proposing change to the label. The eligibility criteria will remain the same; assuring continued compliance with Federal regulations and statutes.

It is my hope that parents will never have to choose between garnering special education support for their children or a life changing label.

Please consider joining me on this grassroots advocacy effort and let's make a positive change for Kansas kids!

Respectfully,  
Leah Beth Grim, LMSW

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