Montana Voices Amplified: A Parent Teacher’s Perspective: Exploring Disability and Navigating a New World

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By Elizabeth Cummings

Elizabeth is a middle school special education teacher and mother of two boys from Kalispell, Montana. She serves on the Rural Institute Consumer Advisory Council and advocates for individuals with disabilities and their families.

Montana Voices AMPLIFIED

The Montana Voices Amplified project offers people of all ages and abilities a stage to speak for themselves. The series is hosted by the Montana Family to Family Health Information Center (MT F2F), a program of the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities (RIIC) at the University of Montana.

A Parent Teacher’s Perspective: Exploring Disability and Navigating a New World

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I found myself unexpectedly entering the world of disability 13 years ago when my oldest son, Charlie, was born with complex health and developmental challenges. Later diagnosed with autism and a genetic disorder, Charlie led me through the new worlds of early intervention, case management, children’s hospitals, and intervention plans. It was an unanticipated and at times overwhelming process, but also filled with learning and many rewards.

As Charlie grew older, I shifted my professional focus to special education, hoping others in my community might benefit from the skills I am learning in raising a child of my own with special needs. I want to share with you a few of the amazing students I have the privilege to work with here in our state.

I’d like you to meet Dylan*, an intelligent and engaging young man with autism. Dylan’s favorite part of school is our Special Olympics ski season. For seven weeks our students work with an adaptive recreation program in Whitefish, Montana to learn to ski, snowboard, and snowshoe. Dylan comes alive on the ski slopes! His enthusiasm is contagious, and he models the perseverance and persistence these programs are about.

Inclusive recreation opportunities, which are rich in our state, have expanded Dylan’s world and shown others what he can achieve as well. We are a community with strong nonprofit support for my students, demonstrating the generosity and compassion I believe many Montanans inherently have for others.

I’d like to tell you about Jessica*, a sweet and social student who is quick to make you smile. Jessica works hard and remains positive despite significant learning challenges. With direct support and a curriculum that teaches to her learning strengths, Jessica is on the brink of truly learning to read, something her teachers might have thought impossible a few years ago. I marvel at the progress she has made and know that she can continue to grow. Her rate of learning differs due to her disability, but she continues to make measurable progress.

I believe that Jessica, and many others, would benefit from the opportunity to receive educational services to age 21 in Montana, the only state to deny such extension of services. It’s my belief that she would then be better prepared to enter the workforce and live independently in the future.

And I’d like you to know about Allison*. A student with multiple disabilities, Allison’s challenges include a complex behavior profile. Allison needs ongoing supervision and a comprehensive intervention program to increase the possibility of her living safely and successfully as an adult. Allison’s family has struggled to find community supports able to meet her behavioral needs, and budget cuts to direct support services in our area have reduced the few services they had. Like many others, Allison’s family worries about who will help support and care for their child in the future.

*Names and identities are changed to protect privacy.
I can understand and empathize with many of these challenges because my son has also been on our state waitlist for a Medicaid waiver for nine years. Last year my child with a disability will became a teenager with a disability, and despite my education and training, I still sometimes look at the coming phase into young adulthood with a sense of confusion and a little fear. Who will help me navigate a system that seems to become increasingly siloed and disjointed as my child grows older? Soon we’ll start the process of transition – who will help me understand, transition into what?

Raising a child with a disability has felt like a journey into new territory. Exciting, at times somewhat frightening, and yes, always rewarding. I’ve met many trailblazers on the way, and as a fourth generation Montanan, I feel prepared for the demands by the local culture of hard work and determination I was born into. But more than anything, I know I need guides, an organized system of parent mentors and leaders to help show me and my child the way, laugh and learn with us on the journey.

So, thank you to parents, teachers, and actively caring professionals - for advocating for my child, my students, and the bold new world we know they deserve.

### POSITIVE ACTION STEPS

#### Navigate

The following organizations offer support and resources:

- **The Montana Family to Family Health Information Center**  
  Facebook: [MTFamily2Family](http://MTFamily2Family)  
  email: [montanaf2f@umontana.edu](mailto:montanaf2f@umontana.edu)

- **Montana Parent Training and Information Center (Montana PTI)**  
  [MTEmpowermentCenter.org](http://MTEmpowermentCenter.org)  
  Facebook: [mtempowermentcenter.org](http://mtempowermentcenter.org)

- **The Montana Parent Partner Program**  
  [MontanaParentPartners.org](http://MontanaParentPartners.org)  
  Facebook: [montanaparentpartnerprogram](http://montanaparentpartnerprogram)

- **Circle of Parents**  
  [CircleOfParents.org](http://CircleOfParents.org)

#### Advocate

Here are some ideas on how you can advocate for your loved one:

- Refer to Montana Voices Amplified handout, *[A Parent’s Perspective: How to Advocate without Alienating](https://www.mt.gov/govt/congressional_delegation.aspx)*

- Join or create groups to share experiences and build support

- Identify community forums to share our experiences and discuss our kid’s needs

- Join or form a bipartisan political group that meets during the legislative season to raise awareness and share our stories with policy makers

To contact your Montana Congressional Delegation:  
[https://mt.gov/govt/congressional_delegation.aspx](https://mt.gov/govt/congressional_delegation.aspx)

Find a Montana Legislator  
[https://www.leg.mt.gov/legislator-lookup/](https://www.leg.mt.gov/legislator-lookup/)
Montana Voices Amplified provides a microphone and broad audience so the stories, lessons, causes, and advice of individuals with disabilities and their families are heard. No one tells your story better than you can. But life is busy, and time is precious. If you take the time to articulate your experience, we will share your message with people who will benefit from your wisdom, or influence change.

Montana Voices Amplified welcomes submissions of five-minute videos or 600-700-word essays on any topic related to your lived experience as a person with a disability or caring for someone with a disability. Authors of chosen submissions receive $100. Videos will be posted on the MT F2F web site and shared on social media. Essays will be posted on the web site and ScholarWorks, shared on social media, and printed in a professionally designed publication to distribute to families, schools, agencies, and legislators as appropriate.

Let us amplify YOUR voice!

Do you have a story, a lesson, advice or a message to share about life with a disability or diagnosis? Your experience can positively impact other Montanans.

Send your idea for an article or brief video to stacey.bliss@mso.umt.edu or shawna.hanson@mso.umt.edu.

If you prefer to talk through your idea, you can call Stacey at (406) 243-5760 or Shawna at (406) 243-4531.

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