

TESTIMONY OF Annette Romualdo

Chair Tomassoni and members:

My name is Annette Romualdo and I am honored to testify in support of Senate File 3972, which expands inclusive higher education in the state of Minnesota.

I come before you today as the proud parent of a child with an intellectual disability. I also have the honor to prepare Minnesota's next generation of educators as an Assistant Professor of Special Education at University of Minnesota Duluth. Part of my role at the University of Minnesota Duluth is to start an inclusive higher education initiative.

Here's what we know in education: research overwhelmingly demonstrates teaching students in inclusive settings promotes significant academic and social growth. Higher education is a well-documented path to increased lifelong outcomes, yet persons with intellectual disabilities have the least access. Federal legislation in 2008 spurred a nationwide movement to increase such opportunities. In response, states grew tens of programs (such as 26 initiatives in Florida), yet Minnesota has only THREE such initiatives.

What made the difference? We know that legislative investment in and commitment to promoting equity in education is critical to improving the lives of all constituents. Florida's leaders passed legislation to provide funding to establish a technical assistance center and to support initiative start-ups and enhancements. Notably, the University of Central Florida,

where I recently completed my doctoral preparation, hosts a national model of inclusive postsecondary education. I had the opportunity to work directly within this model, and to gain experience with the national coordinating center in support of similar initiatives. I know that the technical assistance center and grant funding proposed in Senate File 3972 will provide necessary resources as I progress through the planning and starting up of an inclusive higher education initiative on the UMD campus.

Members of the committee: Let's take the lead in inclusive higher education. Let's lead by funding a technical assistance center to help guide Minnesota's evidence-based inclusive higher education practices. Let's lead with competitive grants for institutes of higher education to help support initial start-up costs or to enhance an existing initiative.

I am ready to join with colleagues across the state to promote comprehensive and inclusive postsecondary opportunities. With your support, let's prepare ALL Minnesotans for lives of inclusion, lifelong education, and independence. Please support Senate File 3972.