

As I reflect on this most recent Christmas holiday, filled with countless festive movies, one timeless classic stands out: "It's a Wonderful Life." If you're not acquainted with this film, it chronicles a man navigating life's trials, revealing the profound impact of his existence and the lives that would be adversely altered without him. Yearly, I revisit this movie for its philosophical insights, a poignant reminder to value every person we encounter. This time, it triggered contemplation about my son, Everett, and the indispensable special education faculty and services provided by Leavenworth USD 453. Without which, my son's life would be dramatically and adversely altered.

Everett, my exuberant seven-year-old, radiates joy, intelligence, and an affinity for laughter. However, he faces unique challenges as a level-two autistic child who is non-speaking, relying primarily on an augmentative and alternative communication/speech-generating device (AAC/SGD). His autism, language processing disorder, verbal apraxia, and oral apraxia significantly impact both receptive and expressive communication. A fact vividly illustrated by an eloping incident that occurred before his IEP granted him more time with a paraprofessional.

Picture this: your seven-year-old son, unable to speak, suddenly slips away from the playground without anyone noticing. It's autumn and it's cold outside. His talking device is back at the playground where he left it before going down the slide, minutes before. As he ventures into the road, away from the school grounds, he narrowly avoids being hit by oncoming traffic. A Good Samaritan stops him and asks his name. He can't answer. She asks him where he's trying to get to. He can't answer. She attempts to take his hand to lead him to safety, but his disability makes him uncomfortable around people he's unfamiliar with and he attempts to pull away. She persists, to keep him safe, and his anxiety manifests as aggression towards her and himself. She panics, uncertain what to do, and momentarily releases his hand. He runs, maybe into traffic again, or perhaps, this time into the arms of a stranger with less honorable intentions. He's lost and has no way to find his way home or back to school.

Thankfully, Everett's teacher, always so diligent and observant, caught him before he got to the road. But imagine if she had turned her head at the moment Everett bolted to attend to one of her other 20 students.

This incident intensified my daily worries about Everett's well-being. Fortunately, increased paraprofessional support mitigated such risks, especially during critical times like arrival, lunch, recess, and pick-up. These dedicated individuals play a vital role in safeguarding our children.

Moreover, Everett benefits from special education classroom instruction, speech therapy, and occupational therapy. In just four months, he has adapted to new environments, formed friendships, communicated beyond home, improved motor skills, and shown eagerness for learning. These achievements, unimaginable without special education services, underscore their indispensable role in enabling every child to fulfill their potential.

Human nature often steers us toward "out of sight, out of mind." Yet, these children, the literal future of Kansas and the world beyond, require our unwavering support. The \$2.7mm deficit in special education funding for USD 453 in the 2023/2024 school year is alarming. The district, despite its commendable efforts, grapples with 35 unfilled positions to support 18.5% of its

students with disabilities. That's nearly 1/5 of the entire student body! Imagine what they could accomplish if fully funded. I suspect more people would have an interest in becoming classified and certified employees of the school district and our children would be better supported and protected from physical and academic perils. Frankly, our kids could afford to dream bigger dreams.

Let's challenge the "out of sight, out of mind" mentality. Every child, including those with special needs, deserves a path to reach their full potential. The deficit jeopardizes this, impacting their education, integration into a neurotypical world, and physical safety. As representatives, remember the parents of disabled students voted for you. Advocate for full funding, envision a district with fulfilled positions, and empower our children to dream beyond limitations. Put yourself in the shoes of the student body with disabilities and champion their cause – they deserve nothing less.

Thank you for your attention and commitment to ensuring that every child, regardless of ability, receives the support and resources they need to thrive.