Dear Dr. Witherspoon and D202 School Board members:

I am writing to you as the Founding Director of Evanston CASE (Community, Advocacy, Support and Education). We represent the concerns of families impacted by special needs in the Evanston community.

As you engage in the important work of creating your Board Goals for the 2015-2020 period, CASE would like to provide you with some thoughts about the special needs community and how you might more effectively represent them in the development of your goals.

The CASE Board and some of our community partners have been discussing our concerns and ideas about the way in which students with special needs experience their journey through ETHS. As you develop your goals, it is important to include the special needs population through the development of targets and measures which would ensure their success as they navigate their education at ETHS and beyond.

Cultural change begins with employing deliberately inclusive language and making mindful decisions. It begins with active focus. This is much deeper than disability awareness. It means considering students with special needs at every level of conversation and in all decision-making. This need is not unique to the high school. This is an issue for the Evanston community and our society as a whole.

The place to start is with your overall vision that then informs and guides your goals. District 65 and District 202 are working hard to increase the “College and Career Readiness” of their students. Broadening this emphasis to, “Readiness for College, Career and Independence” would more fully reflect the goals and aspirations of students with special needs in our schools. We believe building off of this inclusive vision should guide the development of your Board goals.

When ETHS isevaluated through the lens of the external standards used by “top 100 lists” they leave out critical success metrics for a significant portion of the ETHS student body, specifically students with special needs. The high school is, and should be, proud of the increasing numbers of students taking AP classes, their high ACT and SAT scores, and the impressive number of students admitted to four-year colleges. These are important measures of the impact of an ETHS education. However, if this is the primary definition of student success, then we are sending the unintended message that a segment of the student population cannot and will not be successful. Students who have challenges that make it difficult to readily transition to college, career and independence after high school are effectively excluded from the culture of success at ETHS. We would like to offer some insight as to how ETHS can broaden its message to communicate a sense of pride and achievement for ALL students who encompass the ETHS family.

We want ETHS to be able to proudly report increasingly successful outcomes for students with disabilities. This can be achieved by rigorously focusing on the significant gap in achievement between students with disabilities and their typically developing peers, as well as evaluating the success of their post high school outcomes. Reporting on rising numbers who are meaningfully employed, are engaged in ongoing learning, are living independently to the degree possible and are social participants in their communities would make ETHS stand out among high schools in the nation.

There are impactful programs, staff and services currently provided for students with disabilities at ETHS. The Special Services Department’s successes should of course be included in the overall messaging and metrics of the D202 School Board and Administration. We hope you will consider the suggestions above to enhance the work already being done.

We look forward to participating in the District’s process as you develop Board goals for the coming five years.

Please accept this feedback in the collaborative spirit in which it is intended.

Cari Levin, LCSW

Founding Director, Evanston CASE

Special Education Advocate

Katie Smith

Assistant Director, Evanston CASE

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Jill Calian, Attny

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