

**Testimony of Megan Allen
Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Democratic Steering and Policy Committee
February 21, 2013**

My name is Megan Allen. I am the 2010 Florida Teacher of the Year and a National Board Certified Teacher. But I am most proud of being a fifth grade teacher.

I teach at a Title 1 school in Tampa, Florida named Shaw Elementary School. We have about 600 students and more than 90 percent of them qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. I teach 2 language arts classes and have a total of 36 students. To them, I am Ms. A.

Let me paint a picture, showing you the faces of my students. Let's dive into what it means to be a student at a high needs schools because today I speak for them.

Of my 36 students, I have 10 with special needs, who work with the support of an exceptional education teacher. They have disabilities ranging from Emotional Behavioral Disorder to Schizophrenia.

I have two students who are Haitian, whose families show up to every school event dressed in their best, for their dreams and hopes are placed in their children.

I have five students who are English Language Learners, receiving daily support from a translator so they can better understand their academics and so I can communicate with their families.

I have two students with arrest records, one who is in a live-in program for troubled youth.

I have four 10 and 11 year-old boys in a special program for our most troubled boys, where they learn manners, wear coats and ties, and learn what it means to be a man.

I have five girls who receive extra support in a lunch group for girls with low self-esteem.

I have two young ladies who receive intense counseling at school, one because she is a rape victim, one because she is a ten-year-old with an ulcer due to anxiety about taking care of her siblings now that her mom has been deported.

Just yesterday morning, I had one of my girls act out and refuse to work. Upon a little prodding and a whole lot of love, she confided in me that she is a victim of violence, crying on my shoulder. Once she had told me, she returned to reading the day's Robert Louis Stevenson poem and interpreting the author's meaning. I don't know how she did that.

I have one student who is checked out of school every Thursday to visit her mother, who is in jail.

I have students who go to bed afraid because of violence in their neighborhood, who look to school as their place to call home. Who go home hungry on the weekends and look forward to two solid meals a day during the school week.

But most of all, I have 36 students who dream. Who have beautiful goals. Who see school as the lever to break the chains of poverty and achieve something amazing in life for themselves and their families. And

our school is working to make that happen. Our students are winning county science fairs, making great gains in their student learning, and shining in and out of the classroom. Our students are moving towards greatness.

So, *how* does that happen? Why is our school successful despite all of these challenges? And how do we help our students with these intense levels of emotional and academic needs?

We use Title 1 funding to provide our students with a lower teacher-to-student ratio, with additional teachers such as math resource teachers, reading coaches, and academic intervention specialists. These supports help lift our kids to their full potential, while helping me and other teachers make sure we are meeting the needs of every child.

We have more social supports so our students can then narrow in and focus on their academics. School psychologists, counselors, Title 1 teachers, and teacher aides work with our students in small groups, providing the care and academic support our students need.

Head Start and solid pre-kindergarten programs are vital to our success. We battle the achievement gap every day, and this academic and social instruction is one of our primary weapons. It is crucial to our students' success.

My students live in poverty and have special needs that federal funding helps meet — for example, keeping class sizes manageable so teachers can provide individual attention and support. For my students, a low student-to-teacher ratio is a dream lifter and life changer — essential if they are to realize their full potential.

To put one more human face on the looming cuts, I would like to tell you about one of my students. But remember that even though I share just his story, there are hundreds like him in my school alone and millions like him all across America.

My story is about a boy named Daniel. He was shy, started the school year with very low self-esteem, but blossomed into a writer I can only describe as “poetic.” One day, toward the end of the year, Daniel shuffled up to me after school and said: “Ms. Allen, I have something special for you. It’s one of my favorite things.”

I knew that Daniel didn’t have many material possessions, so I tried to decline the offer. I told him the thought was enough. But Daniel was having none of it. He stuck out a closed fist, slowly opened it, and unveiled ... a rock.

“Ms. A.,” he said, “I was thinking. School is my rock. I know I can always hold onto it, that it’s always there for me.”

That’s when I realized the power and importance of education, school, and teachers. Straight from the mouth of a child, the truth hit me like a ton of bricks. School is the rock in this child’s life, the one place he knows he can count on. For no matter what instabilities our students have, there is one thing they can depend on: school.

Daniel helped me realize that we are not there as teachers to only help our kids pass a test. This is an important, but that is not our main purpose for this child or for any child. We are there to be the rocks

for these children, to be the one stable force in many of their lives. We are there to help them see education as a vehicle to take them far in life, to help ignite a love of learning.

The looming cuts threaten all of that.

We may lose the momentum from the successes that our students are building upon due to massive across-the-board cuts — the “sequester.” Those cuts are scheduled to take effect on March 1, just a week and a day from now.

In my school district — Hillsborough County in Florida — 142 schools stand to lose \$3 million in Title I funding. On top of that, we’ll be getting \$2 million less for special education — the equivalent of shifting the entire cost of educating 1,500 students with disabilities from the federal government to Hillsborough County. Programs serving English-language learners — we have 25,000 — will be cut as well.

The impact will be harshest on students in Title I schools — like the one I teach in. Students like mine— my little learners, my Daniel—are the reason the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed in the first place, back in 1965. As Title I of the law says, the goal is “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education.”

Students like mine are the reason the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed in the first place, back in 1975. IDEA ensures that children with disabilities have the opportunity to receive a free and appropriate public education, just like other children. It governs early intervention, special education, and related services.

In the name of Daniel and my 36 students that I work to nurture and inspire every day, I urge you in the strongest possible terms to stop the sequester. Think of what it would mean to them — and to millions of students just like them all across America.

Some say we cannot afford to keep spending as much on education. I say we cannot afford to spend a cent less. In fact, we should be spending *more*. We owe it to our youngest dreamers. Our learners. Economic recovery begins in our classrooms. Investing in education is investing in the future of America. The children of today are the leaders of tomorrow — our living legacy.

Thank you for hearing my testimony today.