Subject: Favorable HB547

To: Ways & MeansCommittee

From: Derrick Day

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Hello. My name is Derrick Day, and I am in the tenth grade at Westminster High School. I also have a sister Meredith who is also blind and is in the eighth grade at West Middle School. By voting in favor of HB547, you will be providing my sister and I, as well as other blind students, the opportunity to have a more seamless and accessible education.

One of the most frustrating things as a blind student is that there is no change in the inaccessible programs that we are required to use year after year. Every class I take, it seems we use one or two websites, apps, or pieces of software that I can't use as a blind student. You always hope "Maybe next time it'll be fixed" but it never ends up changing.

For example, I was unable to practice math skills because the school system used an inaccessible program called Khan Academy when I was in middle school. Now, my sister currently has the same problem because they still use the same inaccessible program years later and the school system has done nothing to change the situation despite efforts to inform them of the issues. This bill would provide some incentive for companies to change these inaccessible and obsolete software practices in favor of more modern, accessible standards that will allow these programs to be used by all.

As a tenth-grade student, I am taking two computer science classes, AP computer science principles and AP computer science A. As a part of these classes, I am required to use programs such as the SNAP code builder and other tools that are not accessible to me as a blind screen reader user. I am still expected to do the work and I want to do it. However, I have to overcome additional barriers that my sighted peers do not have because of the lack of accessibility. For example, during AP computer science principles, I couldn't use the SNAP program, so I had to use a program called Python. I had to create a program that had the same basic components that the other students had, but it was often different which means I was missing out on instruction that my sighted peers had access to and ultimately getting less out of the class as a whole. As a result, I did get the credit and a grade of over 100% in that class but I had multiple hours of work every day changing the code just so I could have the same program in front of me as my sighted peers were looking at on the board.

I do have a teacher that can help me with classes like English and math when I run into accessibility barriers, but code is something you have to be able to look through so having someone read it to me is not advantageous. I feel like I am always playing catchup, and this can be stressful and draining especially when I am taking 3 AP classes in one year and trying to go through life as any highschooler does. If these programs were accessible, I could access the material at the same time as my sighted peers as well as eliminate a tremendous workload from me and my teachers.

I want to get a job in the computer science field. I was very excited that my school allows freshmen to take introductory computer courses. Unfortunately, I was denied the opportunity to study computer science in my 9th grade year. I could not write programs because the class was required to use an inaccessible coding website, code.org. I should have been able to participate in this course but instead, I had to petition for a waiver possibly denying me eligibility from the computer science completer program my school offers and denying me college credit.

I believe, given the advancements in technology and the ease of developing accessible materials offered by modern technology and computing innovations, vendors should not sell local school systems inaccessible programs. If I, a 15-year-old boy who learned coding myself, can make a website or app completely accessible to blind as well as sighted users, then, Salman Khan, owner of Khan academy, someone making about $37,000,000 and who is worth over $250,000,000 could do the same. Not to mention, these inaccessible websites are not up to modern web standards because the modern standards take into account things like screen reader and low vision accessibility.

I would greatly appreciate it if you would vote in favor of HB547. I need a good stable and accessible education to allow me to advance into a productive independent member of society and hopefully aid in the implementation of the changes mentioned above. I recognize that I am lucky because although I have experienced barriers, I have the technical knowledge to try to fix them but that is rare. By voting this bill into law, you will be helping push the blind community forward and making America a better place for all!