

Good afternoon Honorable Chair Feldman, Honorable Vice Chair Kagan, and Esteemed Members of the Education Energy and Environment Committee. My name is Darlene Johnson, and I am here in support of HB1310.

When I was 17 years old and a senior in high school, my mother died suddenly just months before graduation, prom, finals, and all the milestones that are supposed to celebrate the end of childhood. She was my guide, my safe place, the person who had always believed in me—and suddenly she was gone.

One day I was a normal teenager preparing for my future, and the next day my entire world collapsed. I was devastated. My family was never the same.

I had never experienced loss before. I was still a vulnerable child—completely unprepared for grief of this magnitude. I felt confused, abnormal, and completely lost, while the world expected life to continue as if nothing had happened.

My mother dreamed of seeing me graduate from college. My brother attended Columbia University and my sister attended NYU. As the youngest child, I felt the weight of continuing that legacy and fulfilling the dreams my mother had for me.

But after her death, everything changed. I missed a tremendous amount of school because I simply could not function through the grief. My grades fell dramatically, and at one point I was told I might not graduate with my class.

I was told that I might have to return after graduation to attend summer school just to finish high school. I remember feeling robbed of all the years of hard work I had put in—my academics, extracurricular activities, leadership roles, volunteering, and late nights studying for my future.

At the same time, I was expected to apply to colleges and make life-defining decisions while trying to understand how to live in a world without my mother. The sudden loss of my mother changed the trajectory of my life.

While I ultimately got accepted to college I did not receive a college acceptance until mid-April, and it was not the school my family and I had hoped for. My choices were limited because the context of what I had endured was never fully understood.

A bill like HB1310 would allow colleges and decision-makers to see the human story behind a transcript.

A bill like HB1310 would give students facing unimaginable loss something I did not have— understanding. Grief should never be mistaken for failure. No child navigating devastating grief should have their future judged without context. I respectfully urge you to support HB1310. Thank you.