Growing up, I had the subtle impression that everyone could do something that I couldn’t and I didn’t know why. I was often the last student to finish the test; so I would compensate by rushing to avoid the impatient stares of my classmates. I daydreamed at random times and spaced out during lectures and conversations. I was not a good listener - often misinterpreting what was said and asking others to repeat themselves. However, my family and I just saw these as the harmless quirks of a slow learner since I was still academically successful. Although I envied the speed of others, I attributed my slowness to my attention to detail and strive for perfection - two qualities that made me proud. Because of them I got gold and silver honor roll in elementary school and straight A’s in middle school as well as in my freshman year of high school.

I still don't know how I got mostly As and some Bs during my sophomore and junior year. They were the lowest points in my life. I joined colorguard with the marching band because I realized that I wanted to do more than just go to school. But I was short on time and I couldn't keep up. I became someone that goes against everything I stand for. I was paralyzed with fear in math class. I couldn’t look at an equation without blanking out or feeling so instantly fatigued to the point of falling asleep. I was so pressed for time that I did homework during class. I became a compulsive liar to my family as I procrastinated. I was frustrated that I couldn't focus or begin tasks. I turned assignments late and my grades suffered a steep decline. Every day I told myself to get a grip but it was as if my hands were slicked with grease. No matter how tightly I held on, I was condemned to slip up. My mom would tell me: "If you’d put some effort in and try to get over your laziness you wouldn’t have such a hard time.” I told her in tears: "I'm trying to try but it's not working." The worst incident was in December 2016 when I skipped a midterm to finish a last minute paper using a teacher's classroom. I almost cost them their job and I had to speak with the vice principal to clear their name. I dodged a suspension but I got a zero on the midterm for an AP class.

My parents decided that enough was enough and took me to seek professional psychiatric help. In February 2017, I was diagnosed with ADHD and the three of us couldn't believe it. Up until that point, our mental image of a student with ADHD was the stereotypical: “that hyperactive kid who jumps off the walls.” I wasn't a troublemaker and I behaved in school. School was easy to manage my whole life until sophomore year; I was an AP student since freshman year with a 3.6 unweighted GPA who was still at the top 10% of the class. That night I looked up ADHD symptoms and it felt like they fit me like a glove. I couldn’t believe that I had not known about the severity of ADHD. But that’s the sad thing with mental disorders, if society doesn’t see your physical ailments then you don’t have a disability.

I soon lost a lot of weight since my newly prescribed Aderall medication inhibited my appetite. When two of my teachers noticed I told them about my recent diagnosis. It wasn't until then that I first heard heard the phrase: “504 accommodations.” Using government resources very much like the Dear Colleague Letter and Resource Guide on Students with ADHD, I learned that with 504 I could get help by getting more time on tests and even on the annual AP exam! I submitted a request to my school’s ESE specialist straight away with an attachment of my psychiatric evaluation.

Two months went by and I had still not been contacted by her at all. I sent her emails that weren’t replied and her office was always empty. It was only after my dad complained to the principal that she finally responded. Two days before AP exam week she told me that she didn’t even submit my request to the college board because she put my request away and didn’t get back to it. The ESE Specialist had also told my father that 5 APs were too much for the average student and that I am expected to struggle. Since I was not failing school, she did not see the need for my 504 accommodation request. It was a huge blow.

I felt a deep sense of injustice. The ESE Specialist undermined my situation because I still did well in school and did not meet the prejudiced stereotype of the ADHD student who flunks and gets in trouble with teachers. College Board denied the request that the ESE Specialist begrudgingly sent out at the end of the school year because I did not provide evidence of having ADHD since before the age of 12. Alternatively, I could undergo an expensive official psychiatric ADHD examination that would cost thousands of dollars and try again. I did not know of this extra evidence required by College Board because my ESE Specialist did not tell me.

ADHD is very misunderstood despite the fact that it is the most well versed mental disability in the psychological community. It is a shame I was not educated about this in any of the public schools I’ve attended. In regards to mental health, my schools addressed the signs of depression as well as anxiety by offering suicide hotlines and the occasional visit to the guidance counselor or - depending on the school - a school psychologist (if they had one). However, not once have any of my schools addressed the potential signs of ADHD to the student body. It took a two year depression for me to go to a psychologist to seek professional help. How about those who don’t have the means to get diagnosed? How will they get helped? ADHD doesn’t have to be a problem. It doesn’t have to be a weakness or evolve into a graver issue. How many more students will have to struggle in their school work as well as their personal lives before their ADHD is legitimized, taken care of and in some cases, even diagnosed? How many more students will take their own lives before the Department of Education properly addresses mental health?

I am among the countless of ADHD students in the United States who have not been properly assisted by our schools. The Dear Colleague Letter and Resource Guide on Students with ADHD was made to combat this. It attempts to clear the misconceptions of ADHD and increase the efficiency of protocol involving ADHD students.

As I hope you saw with me, untreated ADHD can take a huge toll on one’s life. But I am one of the lucky ones. After being diagnosed and given the proper medication, I now understand how it feels to work more efficiently and stay on task. One expert compared ADHD medication with prescription glasses. Without them you can’t see. When I don’t take my medication, I cannot focus and I cannot have a productive day. Despite all of this, I’m grateful I was diagnosed at 17 and not in my adulthood as so many others have. Imagine if the American school system had better ADHD protocol. What would that mean for America’s future? As more Americans with ADHD unlock their true potential, the economy would gain a new demographic of creative, solution seeking workers. I strongly encourage the Department of Education to preserve the current ADHD guide so more students have to go through what I did. By the way, after my junior year, I passed every single of the 8 AP exams I took without a single accommodation from Collegeboard.