

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2023 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE
First Reader

Senate Bill 926 (Senator A. Washington)
Education, Energy, and the Environment

**County Boards of Education - Due Process Proceedings for Children With
Disabilities - Burden of Proof**

This bill places the burden of proof on a local board of education in a due process hearing that is held to resolve disputes about the identification, evaluation, or educational placements of children with disabilities or the provision of a free appropriate public education. However, if a student otherwise would be required to enroll in a public school but a parent or guardian seeks tuition reimbursement for the unilateral placement of a student by the parent or guardian, the burden of proof in these hearings is on the parent or guardian. The bill states that it is not intended to change federal or State law regarding recordkeeping requirements or what constitutes a free appropriate public education. **The bill takes effect July 1, 2023, and terminates June 30, 2026.**

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: Reimbursable revenues and reimbursable and general fund expenditures may increase modestly through FY 2026 to the extent that the bill results in a substantial increase in due process hearings.

Local Effect: To the extent that the bill increases the number of due process complaints and due process hearings, local expenditures, including attorney fees, may increase through FY 2026. **This bill may impose a mandate on a unit of local government.**

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Current Law: Maryland statute does not specifically designate which party has the *burden* of proof in the due process hearings addressed by the bill. However, the State follows the ruling in *Schaffer v. Weast*, 546 U.S. 49 (2005). In *Schaffer v. Weast*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the “burden of persuasion in an administrative hearing challenging an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is properly placed with the party seeking relief, whether that is the disabled child or the school district”.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that a child with disabilities be provided a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment from birth through the end of the school year in which the student turns 21 years old, in accordance with an individualized family service plan (IFSP) or IEP specific to the individual needs of the child. An IFSP is for children with disabilities from birth up to age 3, and up to age 5 under Maryland’s Extended IFSP Option if a parent chooses the option. An IEP is for students with disabilities from age 3 through 21. Local school systems are required to make a free appropriate public education available to students with disabilities from age 3 through 21. However, the State, under its supervisory authority required by IDEA, has the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that this obligation is met.

Chapter 233 of 2006 established a Maryland process for resolution sessions that can be used to settle disputes about the identification, evaluation, and educational placements of children with disabilities, consistent with IDEA provisions for dispute resolution. Before conducting a due process hearing, the parent must have an opportunity to resolve a due process complaint at a resolution session. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) must make staff available to assist a parent in understanding the mediation process.

A parent of a child with a disability or a public agency may request mediation to resolve any disagreement regarding the child’s special education services or program, including mediation to resolve a due process complaint filed by a parent against a public agency. A parent of a child with disabilities may file a due process complaint with Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) and the public agency. Similarly, the public agency may file a due process complaint with OAH and the parent.

OAH appoints an administrative law judge to conduct a due process hearing. The decision of the administrative law judge must be made on substantive grounds based on whether a child has received a free appropriate public education. The *standard* of proof in the due process hearings addressed by the bill is the preponderance of evidence, as specified by the State’s Administrative Procedures Act, which governs resolutions of disputes through

administrative proceedings. (The party with the *burden* of proof must meet this standard to prevail.)

State and Local Expenditures: Parents of children with disabilities may believe that their chance of prevailing in a due process hearing is improved under the bill, which may result in a greater number of due process complaints and hearings. Further, some parents may be less likely to agree to a less costly resolution process, or to accept the results of such a process, if they sense a greater chance of prevailing in a due process hearing. However, a shift in the burden of proof will not change the evidence that each party must present in order to meet the preponderance of evidence standard.

Under legislation approved in January 2008 (Chapter 331), New Jersey shifted the burden of proof and burden of production in due process hearings from the party seeking relief back to the school districts, where it had been prior to the *Schaffer* decision. Based on data in New Jersey's annual performance report to the U.S. Department of Education, there was an initial surge in the number of due process hearings within the first year after enactment, but data for three subsequent years indicates that the number of due process hearings returned to a level at or below the level reached prior to the 2008 legislation. In 2007, New York passed legislation that shifted the burden from the party seeking relief by placing the burden of proof on the school district or relevant state agency, except the parent has the burden of proof in cases where a parent seeks tuition reimbursement for a unilateral parental placement of a child. The change in the law did not clearly alter the general downward trend in the number of due process hearings in New York.

According to data provided by MSDE, while statewide there are between 200 and 300 special education due process requests each year, the great majority are resolved through settlement, mediation and resolution sessions, or are withdrawn. Statewide, there were 16 fully adjudicated requests in fiscal 2021 and 9 in fiscal 2022. If the number of additional due process requests increases significantly, the equivalent of an additional administrative law judge and one clerk would need to be hired by OAH at a cost of \$206,400 in fiscal 2024 to cover salary, benefits, equipment, and travel, and assuming a 90-day start-up delay following the bill's July 1, 2023 effective date. Because of the bill's June 30, 2026 termination date, it is assumed that any such hires and costs will be temporary.

The Department of Legislative Services believes that the increase in due process complaints and hearings may be relatively modest, and based on New Jersey's experience, and given the bill's termination date, the bill is not expected to have a lasting significant effect on the number of due process hearings in the State.

Local school system expenditures also increase if due process complaints and hearings increase due to the bill.

To the extent that shifting the burden of proof to the State and local school systems results in additional final rulings that students did not receive a free appropriate public education, both State and local costs for special education increase since the State and local school systems share in the costs of providing free education to students with disabilities.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: Similar legislation has not been introduced within the last three years.

Designated Cross File: HB 294 (Delegates Atterbeary and Griffith) - Ways and Means.

Information Source(s): Baltimore City Public Schools; Anne Arundel County Public Schools; Baltimore County Public Schools, Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Maryland State Department of Education; Maryland School for the Deaf; Office of Administrative Hearings; Department of Legislative Services

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