

## SB 853 VOLUNTARY ETHICAL SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVOCATE CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

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To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Dawn Trotter and I am a veteran Speech-Language Pathologist with 21 years' experience in public education. I am writing to voice my support for SB 853 Voluntary Ethical Special Education Advocate Certificate Program.

During my career partnering with families, I have witnessed how challenging and frightening it can be for parents to navigate the special education process. Often parents and guardians are overwhelmed by meetings, testing/results, education plans, and professional opinions, all while dealing with their own emotions surrounding an educational disability diagnosis. Despite local educational agencies and providers' best efforts, parents can feel confused, lost, and alone. This is when a well-trained, ethical, special education advocate can be a lifeline for families. These professionals help parents and guardians maneuver a complicated system to insure their children receive appropriate educational services. I have had the pleasure of collaborating with many skilled special education advocates to best meet the needs of my students.

Unfortunately, there are also bad actors working as special education advocates and educational consultants that take advantage of families in a vulnerable state. I have personally interacted with individuals that have clearly not understood IDEA or COMAR regulations, demanded changes that were not appropriate, deliverable, or ethical, all while keeping families on the hook for thousands of dollars. Others have engaged as advocates and then funneled the parents to other arms of their business for additional private therapies and educational services. SB 1016 would provide a degree of consumer protection for families seeking special education advocates by creating a list of skilled professionals that have sought out this voluntary MSDE certification with an emphasis on ethical practices.

Often families rely on word-of-mouth recommendations from others when seeking an educational advocate. While this can be helpful, there is often no way a parent can vet professionals marketing their services. At this time, there are no minimum requirements for an individual to be considered a special education advocate. There is no code of ethics guiding the actions of special education advocates.

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There is no continuing education requirement for advocates. Anyone can print business cards and get to work charging families thousands of dollars.

Passage of this bill could result in creating a list in which parents and caregivers seek out more qualified advocates while providing protection for the families and caregivers who are raising some of our most vulnerable citizens. The voluntary registry would also be a mechanism for families and caregivers to locate individuals who have committed to working on behalf of students in an ethical manner.

Thank you for your consideration on behalf of individuals with educational or developmental disabilities and their families. I hope that you will give SB 853 a favorable report.

Sincerely,

*Dawn L. Trotter*

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