

HB 1595/SB853 Voluntary Ethical Special Education Advocate Certificate Program-Teresa I James-Support

Hello ,

I am writing in support of HB 1595 / SB 853. As a school psychologist with over 25 years of experience, as well as a parent of a student with an IDEA disability, another with a 504 condition and one who has acted as a special education advocate (gratis) to assist families go through the IEP process when not working in my school-based role, I see bill this as an urgent need. The majority of my career has been spent working in the Maryland public school system. Special education advocates with whom I have attended meetings with over the years have mainly presented as having a child's welfare in mind. However, not all of these well-meaning individuals possess the knowledge of school law and IDEA/504 disabilities that they require to be true advocates for families, or in all cases, represent the child's needs adequately. This causes confusion for parents and can create an adversarial opposed to advocacy relationship between families and schools.

It is sad to say that I have also witnessed far too many cases where "advocates" are seeking their own objectives, not necessarily what is in the best interest of a child. Such situations can greatly impact a child's educational life as well as to create unfortunate financial costs to families as they try to seek support for their children. This problem of unqualified and unethical advocates is one that is increasing markedly in my opinion. Advocates should enhance understanding and cooperation between parents and schools, not create unnecessary obstacles for children and families. Presently, there is no standard, no qualifications to be a special education advocate-paid or unpaid. There is no code of ethics guiding the actions of special education advocates. There is no continuing education requirement for advocates. This has created a situation where families are at the mercy of anyone who merely claims to be qualified to function as a special education advocate.

Parents and educators want to see the education and protection of rights for our children supported by the efforts highly qualified and ethical individuals inside and outside of our schools. A voluntary registry of qualified advocates would be a mechanism for families and caregivers to locate individuals who have committed to working on behalf of students in an ethical manner. While parents are entitled to bring anyone they would like to an IEP meeting according to IDEA and this would not change under this bill, it would allow them to have available a data base of support of those regarded as qualified advocates and not have to guess about the credentials or knowledge of individuals they may enlist to act as their advocate as they do now. As a parent, a qualified special education professional who advocates for children routinely in my role and has served as a special education advocate for families with great results, I wholeheartedly support HB 1595 / SB 853. This bill would provide a degree of consumer protection for families seeking special education advocates and serve to enhance relationships between families and school systems.

Thank you for your consideration on behalf of individuals with educational and/or developmental disabilities and their families. I hope that HB 1595 / SB 853 gains the support it needs to become another level of protection for children and families! I can be reached at (410) 474-1721, home address: 40755 Magee Drive, Leonardtown, MD 20650.

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