



**Maryland Developmental
Disabilities Council**

EMPOWERMENT • OPPORTUNITY • INCLUSION

Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee

SB 853: Education – Voluntary Ethical Special Education Advocate Certificate Program

February 18, 2020

Position: **Oppose**

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (DD Council), a statewide public policy organization led by people with developmental disabilities and their families, opposes SB 853, which would create a voluntary ethical special education advocate certificate program. **While the DD Council supports efforts to empower families with more information and resources, SB 853 does not do that.**

The DD Council, along with other stakeholders, met with the proponents of this bill and expressed our concerns. While some concerns were addressed, specifically by including the language on page 4, lines 13-17 that says “this section may not be construed to prohibit or prevent a parent or guardian from choosing a noncertified advocate,” the remaining concerns outlined below cannot be addressed.

It is our understanding that the intent of SB 853, as in previous years, is to promote the “good actors” – those advocates that “complete an online training module or webinar” and “pass an online examination”...; provide consumer protections by giving families with more information about qualified advocates; and equip parents with the tools they need to advocate for their children. However, SB 853 does none of these things.

- **Completing an online training module does not make someone a better, more qualified advocate.** Nor does having a certificate. There is no reason to assume that a person who completes this online training module would have reached any particular level of achievement or level of skill or knowledge. **This sort of recognition, even when voluntary, can lead to false hope for families.**
- In fact, there is no guarantee that the advocates who may be in need of the training envisioned by SB 853 would avail themselves of it.
- Instead of addressing consumer protection, SB 853 may result in the unintended consequence of dissuading a family from bringing an advocate at all. **Efforts to ensure quality should be centered on consumer education and ensuring families know about the different resources available to them to help them meaningfully participate in their child’s education.**
- **This bill is not supported by families – the group it is intended to help and protect. In fact, multiple organizations representing families across Maryland are also opposed.** (*See Opposition testimony of the Education Advocacy Coalition*).

For these reasons, the DD Council opposes SB 853.

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