

January 25, 2021

Maryland Senate
Miller Senate Office Bldg.
11 Bladen St.
Annapolis, MD. 21401

In OPPOSITION of SB 266 / HB 273: Education – Voluntary Ethical SPED Advocate Certificate Program.

Members of the Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee.

I am the parent of a child with multiple challenges and disabilities. He has been bounced between 504 plans and IEP plans over the course of his time in the local school system. IEP meetings, doctors' bills, therapy appointments, tutoring services the bills stack up quickly. As part of my education on how to navigate the special education system within Maryland I sought out free and reduced fee training from various family support organizations, as well as other SPED Advocate programs.

Many families of children with disabilities cannot afford to devote the time to advocate for their child. Many can't afford to pay an attorney to fight for their child's rights. Many of them cannot afford to pay for an advocate. But many of us within the advocacy community donate our time to these families. Unfortunately, there is just SO much need out there. It is overwhelming and heart wrenching to hear the stories of children being underserved, their civil rights violated and families being retaliated against by their local education agency. This does happen here in Maryland, every-single-day. That is what needs to change; equity in the education system needs to improve, special education services and funding need to improve, and access to quality parent training also needs to improve.

There is one (1), MSDE sanctioned PTI center serving all of AA County, and surrounding counties while none exist in many other parts of the state. This bill asks MSDE to start, track and manage an advocate training certificate program. Advocates that may be opposed to MSDE, and local systems employees at IEP meetings. That's a bit like the fox training the rooster on how to watch the hen house. NO. How can we rely on an overburdened state agency, that can't even be consistent with how to teach essential skills like reading?

Why not re-purpose any proposed funding toward improving services and access to the existing parent training centers? Why not open and staff more parent / advocate training centers within Maryland? We suggest using this money to partner with organizations like COPAA, The ARC, MD Bar Association and MD Coalition of Families to create advocacy training programs that are both fair and equitable for all Marylanders. And offer equal access to training programs across all stakeholders; families, school personnel and advocates alike.

We simply need to do better for our most vulnerable students and their families. Please ease our burdens and oppose SB 266, and the way it is written. Instead, we need to improve access to advocacy programs and parent training centers. Not task an already overburdened state agency with more tasks. We need to improve the delivery of special education services and improve education policies across the state of Maryland, and further enable access to community-based advocacy and parent training.

Thank you for your time, and consideration of my testimony today.

Richard Ceruolo, Parent and advocate for children with disabilities | Parent Advocacy Consortium