

March 15, 2021

I am writing in support of HB1355 Primary and Secondary Education – Repeating Previous Grade Level – Authorization (Education Recovery Act of 2021). The pandemic-related school closures and the necessary reliance on virtual learning have taken a particular toll on students with disabilities. And for many students with disabilities these education challenges have been exacerbated by poverty, food scarcity, and other socioeconomic issues, underfunded school systems, lack of high-speed Internet access and technology, and lack of home support for schooling because of parents or guardians who are working, have been personally impacted by covid-19, or have struggled for any reason during this time. It is critical that parents be able to make decisions about the promotion or retention of their children as they have had a front row seat for the last year of lost schooling. Particularly for students who are at transition years – moving from Kindergarten to 1st, shifting from 3rd grade to 4th grade (when students move from “learning to read” to “reading to learn”), moving into middle school, or starting high school – repeating their current grade will allow them to consolidate skills and prepare for the additional independence and maturity required for the next level.

As the parent of a 10-year- old fourth grader with Down syndrome, I have seen the incredible challenges for her in this environment. She is a strong visual learner forced to learn in the extremely auditory virtual format. She is a hands-on learner who has had to contend with limited physical materials and a reliance on digital formats. She is powerfully motivated by her typically developing peers who provide models for rituals of the classroom, attention, stamina, and other behaviors that promote learning, but has been unable to access these peer models via Zoom.

One thing I have heard a thousand times from parents of kids with significant disabilities during virtual learning is that they finally understand how their child learns, and they are giving everything they have to support their children in school. Parents who have been intimately involved in their children’s education for the last year in unprecedented ways should be able to make the decision about retention if they feel it would best serve their child’s education and mental and emotional well-being. Retention is not failure – not for students and not for schools. We should allow families to make the best decisions for their children and to ensure that every student is met where they are as we emerge from this challenging year.

Sincerely,

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