

To: Senate Education, Energy, and Environment Committee  
Re: SB926  
Position: Favorable

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony for this important legislation. I am a Maryland voter and the parent of a child with an IEP, and **I am urging you to vote favorably for SB926.**

My son is a gift. To know him is to love him. But our state and country's flawed systems make it very expensive and tiring to parent kids with disabilities. If a child needs lifesaving surgery, we don't ask parents to have a deep understanding of it, but for some reason society has determined that parents need to become special education experts for our children to receive the education to which they are entitled. This is the only way our children receive Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). When there is conflict between parents and schools, we parents will always be at a disadvantage: we don't have administrators and lawyers on our payroll, we don't have the specialized educational background, and we definitely aren't paid to do this.

Thanks to the pandemic, my son's year of virtual special education preschool went about as well as it sounds like it did – through no fault of his teachers, they were wonderful and did the best they could with an exceptionally challenging circumstance. We looked forward to kindergarten, my son's first year of school not substantially interrupted by the pandemic. Things seemed fine at first, but it became clear from his behavior that there were concerns about his school environment. Behavior is always communication, but my son has a speech delay, so for any specifics we were completely reliant upon the adults to tell us about his day. Yet, we even encountered high resistance when we wanted to make minor changes to his daily communication log.

We have always been very intentional about building a warm and collaborative relationship with both of our children's teachers - we have a lot of respect for their challenging job, and we see them as our partners rather than our adversaries. It was gutting to have multiple challenges so early in his school career. Even though it was difficult, the challenges we encountered felt surmountable until the day we discovered bruising on our *5-year-old* that compelled us to file a CPS report.

We subsequently hired an educational advocate, a financial stretch but surmountable for us, while acutely aware of the privilege of even having the option to hire expert assistance. It would be impossible for me to overstate how stressful this time period was. I assure you that I was not eager for a fight. I just wanted the issues to resolve, and if I stayed quiet, I could have pretended that was happening. But like any parent, I wanted my son to be safe in school. Also, my son is entitled to FAPE even though he has a disability, and he needs and deserves to be educated, just like any child.

With the help of our advocate, our son is now in a different school and is, thankfully, thriving. If this had not happened or if he was still expressing concerns through his behavior (or now even with his words!), I can assure you we would have kept advocating for him despite the stress on our family.

No parent reaches the point of due process lightly, particularly given how terrible Maryland's due process statistics are for families. By issuing a favorable report for SB926, you are not tipping the scales in favor of parents when there is conflict – school systems are still *always* going to have the upper hand. By issuing a favorable report, however, you can allow the scales to equalize just a little bit when there is conflict between schools and parents. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Rachel Doyle