

February 13, 2023

Dear Legislators,

I am submitting this written testimony to ask you to join my family and all of the special needs community in supporting HB469. My daughter, Emma, attends the Maryland School for the Blind. Her birthday is August 12, 2002. As the current guidelines regarding age eligibility dictate, this is slated to be her last year of educational services. The first day of school for the 2023-24 school year at MSB is at the end of August, after her 21st birthday on August 12th. Yet students with the same exact birthday who attend Maryland State funded schools with start dates of July 1st will be eligible for the 2023-24 school year. In addition, a student whose birthday is two weeks after Emma's, but born in the same year, will be provided with another year of educational services. How is this possible?

This is a glaring inequity among special needs students. One that needs to be remedied. As it stands now, some special needs students are receiving 16 years of educational services and others only 15. It just doesn't make any sense. Emma is one of the students who will only receive 15 years of Special Education unless this bill becomes a law.

It is amazing, and disheartening, this discrimination towards children with disabilities in special education has occurred for so long in the State of Maryland with no one bringing it to light. I can only imagine the uproar if some general education students in Maryland went up to 12th grade while others had to stop at 11th. If this type of inequity was occurring in the general education population, it would be resolved immediately.

When I contemplate why this inequity has gone undetected by Maryland legislators, I feel frustrated and unnoticed. Families with special needs children have difficult lives. All parents face challenges, but parents of children with disabilities are constantly navigating, advocating and fighting so their children have what they need and deserve. We are often overwhelmed, worried and exhausted; trying to create the best lives possible for our kids. Most families don't have the time, support or resources to question or push against the many injustices our children endure. This discrepancy in years of education provided to children in special education is one of those injustices.

Emma is a very social young woman and has several friends effected by this inequity. Some of her friends will have 16 years of education, some only 15 years. Emma has already lost out on critical transition time and meaningful educational experiences due to the pandemic. She should not be denied the 2023-24 school year when others of her age are able to receive services. She has the cognitive ability to understand she is not being treated fairly and has asked on several occasions why some of her friends get an extra year of school. Emma has said, "I hope this bill comes true." What will you tell her?

I urge you to support HB469 to promote equity among a vulnerable population in Maryland. When this bill becomes a law, it will be a positive outcome and proof Maryland believes in educational equity for ALL students. The passing of this law is justifiable and the right thing to do.

I look forward to celebrating the passing of HB469 when it is signed by Governor Moore.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Lara Wynne

Timonium, Maryland