



House Ways and Means Committee

**HB 737:** Alternative Education Options – Right to Learn and Broadening options and Opportunities for Students Today Programs (Right to Learn Act of 2023)

February 22, 2023

**Letter of Information**

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (Council), Disability Rights Maryland (DRM), and The Arc Maryland work to advance the inclusion, rights, and opportunities of people with developmental disabilities. **The Council, DRM, and The Arc provide this letter of information to explain our concerns for students with disabilities in Maryland relative to funding for the Broadening Options and Opportunities for Students Today (BOOST) Program.** We take no position regarding the value of private schools.

Our position is solely based on the lack of access for students with significant disabilities:

- This bill, among other things, requires public funding for “right to learn scholarships” for students to attend an “alternative education option” including nonpublic schools, and the BOOST Program. While often referred to as school choice because families can access state funds to pay tuition at private schools, **the reality for students with disabilities and their families is that this is not a choice at all.**

We are pleased that schools that explicitly discriminate against students with disabilities in their admissions policies no longer receive BOOST funds. However, schools receiving public funds are still able to engage in more subtle forms of discrimination in every aspect of the educational process - from admissions to classroom instruction to physical accessibility.

Parents who choose to send their children to private schools must be free to do so. However, public funds should not be used to assist attendance of children at those schools that do not provide equitable opportunities for children with and without disabilities to learn with and from each other.

**Why do scholarship programs not meet the needs of students with significant disabilities?**

- **Private schools do not have to accept everyone.**

**Private schools that do not receive federal funds are not required to comply with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.** Section 504 prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in programs or activities that receive Federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education.

**Private schools run by religious organizations are not required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).** The ADA ensures that students with disabilities have equal access and opportunity for participation in the programs, services and activities offered by the school.

- **Students with disabilities who attend private schools have to give up their rights and protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).** If parents of students with disabilities remove their children from the public school system to utilize the Program, their children would no longer be entitled to the special education and related services or procedural protections mandated by this federal special education law.

- **Scholarship programs divert funding from public schools.** Students with disabilities are entitled to a free, appropriate public education with the services and supports needed to learn alongside their peers without disabilities. In order to ensure every student receives a high- quality education, including students with disabilities, funding should not be diverted away from public schools.

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