

BILL: Senate Bill 797
TITLE: Education - Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for Special Education Program and Fund - Established
DATE: March 27, 2024
POSITION: SUPPORT
COMMITTEE: Ways and Means
CONTACT: John R. Woolums, Esq.

The Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE) supports Senate Bill 797, an innovative approach to utilizing the Maryland Volunteer Lawyers Service (MVLS) to train and facilitate the provision of attorney and non-attorney assistance for students and families engaging with local school systems on special education matters. MABE requested several amendments to this legislation as introduced and supports the passage of this amended version of Senate Bill 797.

MABE, on behalf of all local boards of education, assures the General Assembly that Maryland's professional educators and school administrators are working within a very comprehensive federal and state legal and educational framework to provide students with special education services and accommodations. Local boards of education place a very high priority on ensuring that students receive high quality special education programs and instruction to meet the unique needs of every disabled student.

Maryland's school systems are mandated to provide a wide array of special education services in accordance and compliance with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and corresponding federal and state regulations. IDEA requires that all eligible disabled students receive special education and related services if they are between the ages of 3 and 21, meet the definition of one or more of the categories of disabilities specified in IDEA, and are in need of special education and related services as a result of the disability.

MABE believes that Senate Bill 797, and the dedicated role of the Maryland Volunteer Layers Service (MVLS), should contribute to the informed engagement of school systems and families seeking optimal educational programs and services for their child. Again, MABE appreciates the adoption of amendments to provide clarity on definitions of key terms and the assurance that the program is intended to provide access to trained advocates and consultants in addition to attorneys to assist families in the crafting of special education plans and the resolution of disputes.

Local school systems also requested the consideration of amendments to remove any new reporting requirements from this bill; requirements that are duplicative of other special education recordkeeping and reporting requirements and not directly related to the services provided through the new MVLS program. Special education is a field that is continuously identified as deserving relief from paperwork requirements. Therefore, MABE urges the adoption of Senate Bill 797, as amended, to avoid adding to the already time consuming burdens on our special education teachers and other staff.

For these reasons, MABE requests a favorable report on Senate Bill 797.