

Hello Members of the Education, Energy, and Environment Committee,

I am writing to you to request your favorable report for SB797 "Access to Attorneys, Advocates, and Consultants for Special Education Program and Fund - Established." There is frequently conflict between parents and school systems during the provision of special education services, and parents deserve to have outside support, regardless of their financial situation, when there is conflict that cannot be more amicably resolved.

I am writing to you as the parent of an autistic 7-year-old boy who was in a self-contained classroom in kindergarten. Special education rules are opaque, cumbersome, and challenging for the average parent to understand well. **When there is conflict between parents and schools, we parents are always at a disadvantage:** we don't have administrators and lawyers on our payroll, we don't have the educational background, and we definitely aren't paid to do this.

My son has a speech delay, he couldn't tell me about his day, and it became clear from his behavior that there were concerns about his kindergarten school environment. The challenges felt surmountable until we discovered bruising on him that compelled us to file a CPS report. I am a social worker - cutting through bureaucratic red tape and building relationships with challenging people are right up my alley. But the CPS report - that the school would have undoubtedly made if they had discovered the bruising first - destroyed the school's willingness to collaborate with us.

It was a financial stretch, but we subsequently hired an educational advocate when our own efforts went nowhere. It would be impossible for me to overstate how stressful this time period was. I was not eager for a fight. I just wanted the issues to resolve. I wanted my son to be safe in school, and I wanted him to receive the Free and Appropriate Public Education he is entitled to. With the help of our advocate, he changed schools and is now *thriving*. I feel confident that my spouse and I could not have accomplished this on our own, or in the best-case scenario, it would have taken us years where it took her only months to successfully facilitate his transfer. **I am not overstating when I say that our advocate changed the trajectory of my son's life for the better.** He is doing so well that he is not in a self-contained classroom anymore, and he is now testing well above grade level in math and reading.

We live in northern Prince George's County. Most of the schools in our area are high poverty, whether they are officially Title I or not. The cost of an advocate is prohibitive for so many families. It was hard to sit with the privilege of being able to make sure our son had every opportunity to thrive while so many of my fellow parents, and their equally deserving kids, would not be afforded the same opportunity solely due to financial constraints. This bill would make an enormous difference in closing the gap between children equally deserving of every educational opportunity, but divided only by their family's ability to pay for assistance.

**Educational advocates make a huge difference and are a wise investment in Maryland's future.** Please pass this bill so that every family has the opportunity for their child to have the best education possible.

Sincerely,  
Rachel Doyle  
District 21  
College Park, MD