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Dear Chairwoman Pena-Melnyk,

I am Alita-Geri Carter, the mother of two disabled children, a pediatric nurse practitioner, and the owner of Qualequity Access, LLC a consultancy that advocates for quality, equity, access, and accessibility in healthcare and education. I am writing to express my strong opposition to Senate Bill 555/ HB 821, which seeks to allow state agencies and their employees to deny access to public records under the Public Information Act (PIA) when litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated. This bill threatens transparency, limits accountability, and places an undue financial burden on families.

The tax payers in Maryland deserve to be able to hold their public service systems accountable. This school year there have been substantial challenges with gaining access to information that should be readily available. For example, this year I submitted PIAs for the training requirements for educators employed by Prince George's County Public Schools that interact with special education students, information pertaining to Synergy, ParentVue, StopFinder, Bus Transportation and any related systems, contracts pertaining to Jeffrey Krew LLC. To my dismay I had to escalate to mediation and the Public Information Compliance Board. These requests were submitted in September of 2024 and to date remain unanswered. While oversight and governing bodies have a duty to protect the students and families, they are often understaffed and overworked leading to vast opportunities for exploitation. As parents of students, we have the right and I believe the duty to support our leaders by ensuring the policies and procedures are being followed. None of this would be possible if this law is enacted. Last week I received an order from the Office of the Attorney General ordering Prince George's County Public Schools to release information for one of my many requests. This same system has accused me of filing for due process (litigation) without any grounds. On a recorded meeting on 7/22/2024 a school psychologist informed me that my daughter's IEP team asked him to attend because "I had filed for due process". During the meeting I clarified that I had not filed for due process. Before that time and since that time I was treated as if I was litigating the school system. Parents are demonized for advocating for their students and accused of intending to litigate without any true reason for that belief.

In Maryland, families of children with disabilities already bear the burden of proof in disputes with school systems, an uphill battle that often requires expensive legal representation. The costs of attorneys and advocates frequently reach tens of thousands



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or even hundreds of thousands of dollars, making due process an inaccessible option for many families. The Public Information Act is a critical tool that allows parents to gather necessary information about their child's situations without the prohibitive costs of legal discovery. Families may decide not to pursue litigation after receiving the requested information. Ultimately it should be their choice. Restricting access to these records would further stack the deck against families who are simply trying to secure appropriate educational services and understand information they feel is vital to their student's situation.

According to the Department of Education's Dispute Resolution Dashboard, Maryland ranks **9th in the nation** for the highest number of special education-related **litigation, state complaints, and requests for mediation**. According to a press release by Maryland Matters dated 1/29/2025, **Maryland ranked 20th in the nation for reading**. Maryland has work to do that requires transparency. The data demonstrates that systemic issues exist within the state's handling of special education and general education services. Rather than addressing these issues with greater transparency and oversight, SB 555 would further shield public agencies from scrutiny. By removing PIA access, this bill emboldens bad actors who choose not to hold their own accountable for violations of federal laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), numerous COMAR articles, and administrative policies and procedures.

As a parent who has personally navigated these challenges, my family has spent over **\$10,000** in advocacy efforts while making difficult financial sacrifices—choosing between paying for legal support, medical care, and basic child care. Families like mine should not be forced to deplete their savings simply to obtain the information necessary to advocate for their children. The passage of SB 555 would further erode trust in public institutions and make it even harder for parents to make informed decisions.

I urge you to **prioritize the rights of students and families over the convenience of government agencies. Additionally, the local educational agencies budget millions of dollars each fiscal year for their litigating contracted attorneys and offices of general counsel**. These roles often invest time in depriving families of vital information and work to prolong legal decisions that support the best interest of the students. Transparency and accountability should not be optional, particularly when the well-being of innocent children is at stake. I respectfully ask you to vote against SB 555 and instead support measures that strengthen—not weaken—public access to information.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I ask for an unfavorable disposition for this bill. I welcome the opportunity to discuss this matter further and urge you to stand with



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Maryland families by opposing this harmful legislation.

Kind regards,

Alita-Geri Carter, RN, MSN, CPNP-PC, BCPA