

Dear Chair Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Special Education Community Advisory Council (SECAC), I write to express our strong opposition to SB554, which would eliminate the community panel responsible for nominating school board commissioners.

The Community Advisory Panel is not symbolic. It is a vital accountability mechanism that ensures diverse community representation in the governance of our public schools — including representation from special education advocates, parents of students with disabilities, and individuals with lived experience navigating special education systems.

Eliminating this panel would remove one of the only structured avenues through which the voices of students with disabilities and their families are meaningfully included in the school board selection process.

Students receiving special education services are among the most legally protected — and historically underserved — populations in our education system. Their rights are safeguarded under federal and state law, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), precisely because of a long history of exclusion and harm. School board commissioners make decisions that directly affect special education funding and staffing levels, inclusion practices and least restrictive environment implementation, and disciplinary policies that disproportionately impact students with disabilities.

When the nominating process includes advocates who understand these issues, it increases the likelihood that commissioners will have the knowledge, commitment, and lived perspective necessary to protect vulnerable students.

Removing the community panel risks consolidating power in a process that may not prioritize disability rights, equity, or compliance with special education law. Without guaranteed representation from special education advocates, there is a real danger that decisions will be made without adequate understanding of how they affect students with disabilities. History shows us that when these voices are excluded, students are placed at risk of educational neglect, inappropriate discipline, segregation, and denial of services.

The Community Advisory Panel ensures transparency, accountability, and community trust. It strengthens, rather than weakens, governance. Eliminating it reduces public participation at a time when collaboration is most needed.

Students with disabilities cannot advocate for themselves in legislative chambers. Their families and community representatives must be at the table. This bill removes those seats.

We respectfully urge the Committee to reject SB554 and preserve the Community Advisory Panel to ensure that the governance of our schools reflects the needs of all students — including those who require special education services.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,
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