

February 3, 2015

Dear Senator:

I am writing on behalf of directors of special education programming in public schools across the state.

We have several concerns with two proposed bills that would take tax dollars and send them to private schools in the name of helping children with special needs, HB 394 and SB 2695. Our concerns are as follows:

1. Families who use the special-needs vouchers would give up their child's rights and protections guaranteed by the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), including the right to a legally-enforceable Individualized Education Program (IEP).
2. Voucher schools are not required to employ special education teachers, therapists, or other related service providers and have no obligation to meet a student's specific needs. Voucher schools would not have to accept any given student with disabilities nor provide services as prescribed by the IDEA.
3. Special-needs vouchers will go to students with mild disabilities that are more easily accommodated. This will leave children with moderate and severe disabilities in neighborhood schools which have been drained of special education funding. Although each student generates the same level of state funding, students with moderate and severe disabilities require services that far exceed the per-student allotment.
4. Private schools are not accountable to resolve conflicts with parents. Families who become dissatisfied with the lack of specialized services and programs in a school where they may utilize a voucher could return their child to the public school at any time. The public school would receive no state-generated funding to support the child's needs, depending on when the child returns to the public school setting.
5. Voucher program proposals have limited accountability—either for fraud or for educational quality and outcomes. In other states, for-profit, fly-by-night schools have popped up to take advantage of children who receive a voucher but are not welcome at traditional private schools. Millions of dollars in taxpayer money have been wasted and just as importantly, children have been set back in their academic, social and emotional progress.

Special education in Mississippi is chronically underfunded, but this fact has been buried because the special education add-on is lumped in with the MAEP allotment that schools receive each year. The truth is, districts have to make tough decisions in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities and all other children in the current funding crisis. We desperately want to better serve all children, but our limited resources only go so far.

It is ironic that families eligible for a voucher would receive their full allotment of MAEP funding under the proposed bills, while students in public schools, where all children are welcome, will likely not receive the same level of funding this year. Supporters of voucher bills are disingenuous to claim that they want what is best for children with special needs if they do

not support full funding of our public school system which will remain the only option for the vast majority of children with disabilities.

For this reason, we support HB 814, The Special Education Improvement Act of 2015, which will separate the special education funding add-on from the full MAEP allotment in the appropriations bill. This will shine light on the commitment that lawmakers have to special education, and we will see for the first time in recent history if full funding is being dedicated to help our most vulnerable children in public schools or if it is only reserved for those who are accepted at unnamed private schools.

In addition to this measure, HB 814 would appoint a statewide autism coordinator at MDE, a position that has been needed for years to improve the delivery and coordination of services for our children who are on the autism spectrum.

And finally, this bill provides real relief to families in the form of the Children with Special Needs Fund, designed to help families pay for extended therapies and services that are necessary outside of the school setting.

We are obligated by federal law to provide a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities in the state of Mississippi. Instead of spending scarce taxpayer dollars on unregulated special-needs vouchers that have no evidence of improving outcomes for children, please support meaningful help for children with special needs, including full funding of MAEP and HB 814.

Sincerely,

Wendy Rogers
Special Services Director, Stone County School District
President, MS Council of Administrators of Special Education (MS-CASE)