

February 2, 2015

Dear Representative:

Gov. Bryant and Lt. Governor Reeves have promoted special education to the forefront of this year's legislative session. I am grateful for their attention to this issue. My two sons attend public schools and both receive special education services: one has an Individualized Education Plan and Behavior Intervention Plan, and the other participates in gifted programming. Based on our family's experience, I would like to share with you my thoughts on several bills that are currently being considered by lawmakers.

First, I fully support the Special Education Improvement Act of 2015, HB 814, which includes *meaningful changes for special education in Mississippi*. The bill requires funding for special education to be distributed as a separate line item in the K-12 appropriations. Currently funds for special education teacher units are lumped into the full MAEP allotment and therefore underfunded every year at the same level that MAEP is underfunded (about 10% each year for the past seven years). This bill will ensure transparency about resources available for and dedicated to special education, and it will help to secure full funding of teacher units that are so desperately needed to ensure student outcomes.

Positive outcomes for all children are what public educators and schools are charged to accomplish. Period. And while I know that the system is not perfect, I do know from personal experience that, with very few exceptions, the teachers and administrators in our public schools go to admirable lengths to stretch dollars, time, and resources to provide as much as is humanly and fiscally possible for all the children in their care, including the ones who need special services. As a single, working mom, I rely heavily on the willingness and ability of the schools here to fulfill this charge in regard to my children. Nonetheless, because resources are limited, I still have to be a strong advocate for my children to ensure their needs are met (in fact, I'm writing this letter when I should be preparing for an IEP meeting later this week). Consequently, I am intimately aware of the frustration for all parties that can arise from trying to secure services.

Can you imagine, then, the worry and concern it generates for me and other parents as, year after year, our leaders continue to underfund education in general and, as it stands now, special education in particular?

The financial handcuffs of inadequately funded education put such strain on the schools and teachers to provide what my children—and all other children—need. That strain filters through to the parents and even worse to the children themselves, who are shortchanged every day due to inadequate investment in their futures. I personally think it misses the mark to blame the schools, to insist that they “shape up.” Tasked as they are to provide education to *all students at all levels of ability*, what else can they do without proper funding? They can't pick and choose their students to guarantee high test scores, nor can they deny services to a child who qualifies for them. Just how far can they stretch continually limited resources, which grow even more limited as the special needs and general education populations continue to expand?

For this reason, separating out funding for special education in the hopes that it receives the full resources needed is a critical step for improving special education across the state.

The bill also will require a state coordinator for autism services at MDE. This staff person would develop and oversee policies that would improve autism services in the public school system at large. This position is one that autism-awareness advocates around the state have been recommending for years.

Finally, the bill establishes the Children with Special Needs Fund for the purpose of providing financial assistance to families of children with disabilities. Many children have medical and therapeutic needs beyond the scope of the public school system, and this fund will help defray some of the costs for therapy, technology, equipment, and other services needed outside the school setting. Accordingly, families will benefit from

accommodations and services offered in the public school setting *and* get the help they need in their day-to-day lives.

I urge lawmakers to *support real help for families of children with disabilities*. The public education system will always be the life line that the vast majority of children with disabilities depend on for a free and appropriate education. Lawmakers should work to improve this system, and they have a chance to do so this session by supporting HB 814.

Any changes to special education in Mississippi will invariably bring up a question about the concurrent bills being considered to provide vouchers to private schools for students with IEPs.

These bills (SB 2695 and HB 394), if passed, will NOT provide tangible, practical, results-oriented solutions for families of children with disabilities for a fundamental reason: *Most private schools in Mississippi offer no or very limited special education services*. Private schools in general, whether they are for-profit or religion-based or otherwise operated, do not have trained, certified special education teachers or other professionals on their faculties, nor do they have space and equipment resources dedicated to providing essential accommodations. In my area, for example, *the limited special education services in the local private schools are paid for and provided by Starkville School District*. This arrangement is mandated because our district is required by the state to allot part of its budget to cover the cost of special education services in the private schools.

The Department of Education would provide oversight of the proposed voucher program. Even with biannual PEER Committee reviews, however, neither the MDE nor that committee has the person-hours or resources to monitor even just the 500 elected voucher recipients to ensure that the services those children need are provided every school day. Meanwhile, in the public schools, both state and federal legislation already govern special education implementation and accountability according to best practice standards. In addition, a due process system is available to parents and guardians who feel their children are not receiving necessary services. The means to address and rectify issues is not an option for parents/guardians of children who attend private schools, which are under no legal obligation to provide services to children with special needs or, for that matter, to any of their students.

So, I ask you to consider, even if I qualified for and received a voucher for my son to enroll in a private school (never mind that the amount of the voucher will not cover full tuition), what services would the private schools in my area be able to provide them? The answer is few to none. The bottom line is this: *The voucher legislation, devised on the premise that it would help special education students gain access to services at private schools, is misleading and misguided*.

Considering the state of special education services in private schools, it is evident to me that *SB 2695 and HB 394 are both a maneuver to privatize public education to the benefit of for-profit businesses and a diversionary tactic to avoid restoring MAEP funding to statutory levels* (like the Rainy Day Fund has achieved). Furthermore, this partisan, high-dollar, lobby-funded campaign to privatize education is taking a disturbing step further to ensure its success, i.e., attempting to capitalize on the desperation of parents like me who are trying to find and/or maintain adequate care and services for their special needs children. Please do not prey on the vulnerability of families who have children with special needs; oppose SB 2695 and HB 394.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Heather Wainwright
Starkville Parent