

March 27, 2014

Dear Legislators:

In full disclosure, I have a vested interest in the issue of funding for public education, particularly special education, as I have two sons in public schools, one with an IEP and another who has participated in gifted programming, both of which fall under special education. Based on my experience, I would like to share with you my thoughts on the voucher bill.

It goes without saying that while education in our state is underfunded, special education has taken a hit, just as all other areas have. As I see it, each community and our entire state have much at stake and stand to continue losing ground if our legislators continue underfunding education (For instance, since 2009, Starkville School District has lost ~\$10M due to MAEP underfunding!).

Furthermore, the voucher bill, if passed, will not provide any remedy to this situation for families with special needs children who are seeking services. In my opinion, to fund vouchers for families who send their children to private schools (possibly out of state), and then to particularly direct those vouchers to families who seek services for children with special education needs, is misguided on several levels.

Aside from the possibility that our tax dollars may in fact leave the state, most private schools in Mississippi (and nationwide, for that matter) offer no or very limited special education services. That means they do not have trained special education teachers or professionals such as therapists on the faculty, nor do they have space and equipment resources dedicated to providing essential accommodations. And in my experience, private schools that do have even minimal services available are careful to not "advertise" their availability.

Therefore, to devise legislation on the premise that it would help special education students gain access to services at private schools--services that most likely do not exist--but to refuse to include any accountability process for guaranteeing that voucher schools provide such services and accommodations, suggests that this bill is indeed a maneuver to privatize public education, allowing state funding intended for our children's education to fill the coffers of for-profit businesses. And in the case of the HB 765, this attempt to privatize education is going a step further to ensure its success, i.e., attempting to capitalize on the desperation of parents who are trying to find and/or maintain adequate care and services for their special needs children.

What is even more perplexing to me is that if there is money to be put into vouchers, then there is money to spend on education, yet some legislators are intimating a vote against an increase in MAEP funding. Fully funding MAEP, however, would simply bring the financial support of public education back to what the state law requires and which legislators promised as an investment in the future of our children. Meanwhile, public schools are legally bound to and DO provide an impressive array of services to special education students, even with their inadequate budgets. With adequate funding, on the other hand, public schools could provide much more, including hiring more special education teachers and therapists and devoting more space and equipment resources to serving a growing population of special needs children.

In my opinion, to continue to underfund MAEP, and then to potentially divert available funds to private schools that may or may not have services nor any obligation to provide accommodations, truly fails our general and special education children alike. Fully funding MAEP, however, will provide public schools with the means to expand what they are capable of doing for all our children, including special education kids, which will help address some of our state's most critical problems: high dropout rates, illiteracy, teen pregnancy, and poverty. Fund public education according to MAEP, and we provide our kids with the opportunities to overcome such devastating issues; we give them the chance to become productive, independent, self-sustaining, and contributing members of our communities, state, and nation.

I hope you will vote to defeat the voucher bill (HB 765) that purports to--but in reality does not--support special education. And please make sure that all of public education is adequately supported: vote in support of significantly increasing MAEP funding in HB 1476 and strong teacher pay raises (HB 504).

Thank you for your time and consideration of this issue.

Best regards,

Heather R. Wainwright  
Starkville