

February 3, 2020

RE: HB 502
Maryland House of Delegates
Health and Government Operations Committee
6 Bladen St.
Annapolis, MD. 21401

Testimony, In Support - HB 502 – Public Information Act - Revisions

Good afternoon.

I am the parent of a child with multiple challenges and disabilities. He has been bounced between 504 plans and IEP plans over the course of 8 years within the AACPS system. Parents like myself often find ourselves left asking for documentation from our local school systems and the state's department of education. We are just one subset of MD citizens requesting improved transparency from our state and county agencies.

Trying to keep up with changes to school system policies, I very often I have found myself having to request documentation from our local school system by way of the Public Information Act.

As if the special education process is not difficult enough for families and students, factors like a lack of a reliable and consistent data set further complicates our ability to advocate for appropriate accommodations for our children during the school academic year, and year to year.

Very often the information being held by school systems is crucial and needed to track and measure student progress, school system policies or special education process procedures and guidelines in order to allow parents and advocates to students, programs and any policies that might affect them.

But the Maryland's current PIA process is very time consuming and frustrating in its current state. Delays, incomplete responses to requests, and lack of a robust appeal process along with stone walling tactics employed by some county agencies have made my job as a parent and advocate for children with disabilities hard, if not impossible to even the playing field. Agencies don't feel compelled to abide by response guidelines within the law, because the PIA process lacks much in the way of accountability.

The Ombudsman's office released a report this past December 2019 that outlined recommendations to improve the PIA process, to re-instate the appeal process and appoint an oversight board to help resolve disputes. Having been through the PIA process a number of times, I agree that these recommended changes are needed to improve the PIA process as a whole.

Please return a favorable report on HB 502 to help improve the transparency of county and state agencies and to help improve the PIA process within the state of Maryland.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony.

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