

SB209- Special Education - Prolonged School Closure - Extension of Education Services
Assigned to: Education Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
January 27, 2021

Position: Favorable as Amended

Good afternoon, I'm a parent of an autistic child, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Howard County Autism Society (HCAS) and am pleased to submit testimony in favor of the SB209.

We've experienced first hand how difficult it has been to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education during the pandemic. Our daughter, like so many other special education students, relies on 1:1 supports like hand-over-hand prompting, facial cues and physical materials. Even with best efforts, these simply could not be replicated in the virtual environment. It's an extremely common concern expressed by parents in Howard County every day to HCAS.

While our child is young, the issue has additional difficult dimensions for older children. Many transitioning youth were scheduled to embark on vocational education/job training. The pandemic has forced many of these activities to be altered or canceled, making students less prepared for the transition to adulthood.

There is no doubt that the counties will need to deliver compensatory services to make up for major ground lost during the pandemic. But, the pandemic and the service interruption has gone on far too long to reasonably expect the counties to be able to catch up by time those students who are over the age of 17 catch up the time they must complete school (21). The most straightforward solution is to give students more time to receive services, continue their studies and prepare for an independent adult life in collaboration with the Developmental Disabilities Administration and the Department of Rehabilitation Services (under this bill students gain an additional year of services to coincide with the change in programming).

I also support amending section L. As written, this section could reduce the amount of compensatory services awarded to students if they choose to extend their educational services. Parents should not be forced to choose between compensatory services and the options provided by the bill. It's impossible to overstate the damage to many of our youth from being away from school buildings and the opportunities they provide. We need an all hands on deck approach -- additional compensatory services to make up for lost progress and additional time in special education to get students back on their original track. For example, if a student needs help to make up for declines in reading, that does not mean he or she does not also need to get 1 year of appropriate vocational training that they missed during the closure. Section L should be altered or struck from the bill.

I thank you for your time and consideration of the bill.

Sincerely,

Andrew Stettner <astettner.as@gmail.com>

On behalf of

Howard County Autism Society