

Adrienne DiLustro
7327 Hitchcock Lane
Windsor Mill, MD 21244

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Senator Craig Zucker
James Senate Office Building
11 Bladen Street
Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Mr. Zucker,

As an employee of a nonpublic special education school in Maryland, I urge you to vote YES to bill SB0311, the Nonpublic Education - Special Education Placements - Renaming and Teacher Salaries (Teacher Pay Parity Act) in order to support Maryland students with the greatest special needs and appropriately compensate special educators across our state. These schools serve more than 3,500 students in need of specialized services not available in public schools. Our schools, particularly members of the Maryland Association of Nonpublic Special Education Facilities (MANSEF), provide critical, high-quality services, customized to meet the needs of our students, and are an important part of the state's educational continuum.

I work at the Kennedy Krieger School, LEAP program, in Baltimore City, and we serve students ages 5-21 on the autism spectrum. The Kennedy Krieger School LEAP Program serves students on the severe end of the autism spectrum who struggle with behavioral challenges and additional learning difficulties. Our school is an intensive, 12-month program that focuses on providing a highly structured and safe environment that helps students to participate in and derive benefit from educational programming. Our program is successful when it is richly staffed with certified professionals and highly qualified paraprofessionals. We have a 1:1 staffing ratio and it is integral for our students to have high staffing numbers to remain safe and to make educational progress. But, I'd like to tell you more about the unique profiles of our students and staff.

Often, our students demonstrate challenging behaviors such as aggression/physical assault, self-injury, and property destruction at a crisis level, requiring multiple school staff members to respond. On a daily basis, the staff members in our schools must manage these crises directly and in a hands-on fashion while performing our educational roles, which is both physically and mentally strenuous. I have personally received multiple concussions and broken bones while working in my role as a certified special educator in recent years. On top of the already strenuous workload of the average teacher or school employee to meet and strive to go beyond MSDE educational standards, our staff members must manage these crises, along with healthcare and personal care management of our students each day. You will not meet more hardworking and dedicated personnel than those serving our students with significant special needs.

Teacher salary parity is critical to retaining employees and staff members who have dedicated their careers to serving students with such significant needs here in Maryland. Appropriately compensating these school staff members will not only benefit the academic experiences of the students we serve, by increasing teacher retention, but will also improve the livelihoods of these hard-working educators and their families. Following the pandemic and current recession, it has been challenging for special educators to manage rising costs of living with the decreasingly competitive wages in our field. A December, 2021 MSDE salary parity study revealed that teachers and employees in our MANSEF schools receive significantly lower pay (between 23% and 40% less) than that of our colleagues working in public school systems. It is a constant challenge to retain highly qualified and dedicated teachers, therapists, and administrators in this climate, and the potential for further disparity in compensation will almost certainly result in many more personnel leaving our schools or the educational field completely. If Maryland is unable to adequately retain special educators, it would be detrimental to the success of Maryland students with significant special needs, and would have drastic effects on the families of these educators.

I urge you consider the needs of students with disabilities and their families, as well as the most hardworking educators. Our schools give these young people the educational and therapeutic services they need to function as independent and productive adults. Teachers and school staff members in these schools deserve appropriate compensation for the important and challenging work that we perform.

Sincerely,

Adrienne DiLustro