

Dear Sen. Gaffey, Rep. Fleischmann, and Members of the Education Committee,

I am the President of WE BELONG! Inclusion in Fairfield County. We are a grassroots, non-profit organization of parents, teachers, administrators and service providers from all over Fairfield County who are dedicated to the full inclusion of children with disabilities.

I am writing to object to the provision in Proposed Bill #HB 5425 that establishes that the burden of proof lies with the party requesting a special education hearing. The current law states that the burden of proof is the responsibility of the school district to prove it has provided a "Free, Appropriate, Public Education" (FAPE) through the Individual Education Plan (IEP). The current law reflects well-settled Connecticut policy. The current law makes good sense because the school districts are in control of the records, staff, the experts, and have unlimited access to all the information about the program they are providing. They can use their own staff as expert witnesses. Compare the schools to the parents, who often can't even understand the jargon used at the IEP meetings. This is a huge imbalance of power; the districts are in a far better position to defend the programs they deliver, as opposed to the parent to prove that the program is inappropriate. How would the proposed change affect parents who have children with disabilities in Connecticut? It stacks the deck more heavily in favor of school districts.

Historically, the majority of hearings reviewing the delivery of special education services to students with disabilities, our most vulnerable population, are already decided in favor of the school districts. This bill proposes a drastic 180 degree change of the burden of proof in special education due process cases. It would make due process hearings excessively costly and would be an insurmountable challenge for parents, creating a situation in which the families could not have a fair hearing with any reasonable chance of prevailing.

Please feel free to contact me at : 203- 454-9602

Best,

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