

Dear Honorable Members of the House Education Committee,

My name is Dr. Deanna Conley, and I am a special educational advocate. I am providing testimony in support of Bill H7721. I have been working in the field of education for almost 25 years now, and in that time, I have taught in many states, to include Massachusetts and Virginia, both of which have state regulations that have many protections for families built into them. When I moved back to Rhode Island and began working as an advocate here, I was shocked by our state's special education regulations, specifically with how few safeguards and supports were offered to parents. It is imperative that we correct this by revising our state's special education regulations to create more equitable practices for our families.

Namely, it should be required by law that parents be provided drafts of proposed IEP's and Evaluation Reports prior to a team meeting. Currently, this is not a requirement in the state of Rhode Island, and while many districts will do this as a courtesy if asked, not all districts will, and more importantly, not all parents know to ask. Often, these team discussions are emotional for families, and the language and jargon used can be confusing. Receiving these documents ahead of time allows parents to prepare their thoughts and questions for the meeting so that they can be equal participants in the team discussions.

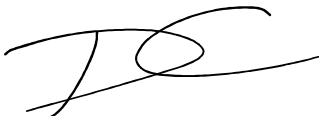
Secondly, as the regulations stand now, parents have no recourse besides mediation when they disagree with components of an IEP. In Rhode Island, the only IEP that parents sign their consent for is their child's Initial IEP. From that point on, they are no longer provided with the option to offer any form of consent regarding their child's IEP goals and services. While there are 10 days to make changes to an IEP after a meeting is held, all proposed changes go into effect after the 10 days whether the parent agrees to these changes or not during the meeting. For parents to be able to meaningfully participate in the IEP decision making process, they need to have the right to deny or provide this consent.

Finally, all parents should be provided with a clear and transparent process when making important placement decisions for their child. Touring a potential program allows parents to provide true informed consent; no parent should have to make such a vital decision blindly.

These proposed changes to the current special education regulations will prove to be a pivotal turning point for families in the state of Rhode Island as they work to navigate what can be a very complicated system. Allowing access to critical documents and providing parents opportunities to meaningfully participate in this process will foster deeper parent engagement, which will ultimately best serve the children with special needs in our state. Please consider passing Bill H7721 today.

Thank you for your time.

Very Sincerely,



Dr. Deanna Conley
PROSPER Special Education Advocacy Services
705 Middle Road
Portsmouth, RI 02817