

**Testimony for the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education
Commission Working Group 4: More Resources for At-Risk Students
Thursday, August 9, 2018 in Annapolis, Maryland
By Paul Geller, Community Advocate**

Commission Members,

On a cold day in November 2014, I took a tour of a Special Education (SE) public school. What I found shocked me. The school was showing its age. The cafeteria was antiquated. The heat was not functioning properly. One scene was indelibly etched in my mind: a student in a cold classroom wearing a short sleeved, collared shirt who was unable to wear a sweater due to sensory issues.

Yet all this paled in comparison to what two parents shared after the tour.

Two brave moms addressed the gathered group of Board of Education members, elected officials, and PTA leaders, like I was at the time, with one plea: help our SE kids. They shared with us the struggles and joys of what it meant to be a parent of a student with challenges. They shared how tired they were after a long day. And they wanted the advocacy strength of having a PTA on their side. That is where folks like me decided to step in.

In the spirit of those two marvelous moms, I ask as nicely and emphatically as possible, please make sure our SE students are being intellectually challenged, and encourage your fellow Commission Members to expand the financial pie for SE students statewide. Next to providing funding to either defray, or fully pay, for early childhood educational opportunities for students ages 2-5, nothing will improve our state's future more than making sure we focus on increasing our investment in these two areas.

Why is Special Education (SE) funding so important? It is a simple matter of doing the right thing, and the significant cost savings it will bring to all of our residents of Maryland.

It was interesting reading about the detailed work you are doing to create ratios and funding percentages for our students. And as your particularly helpful four page "Working notes" document pointed out, "We know, however, that SE is grossly underfunded and students in SE perform far below their cognitive capacity." Having spoken to Special Educators, I have been told the quality of the education our students are given in our SE public schools is superior to that one could receive in a similar private school in many circumstances. Furthermore, the cost is far less to educate SE students in public schools, than for us to pay for enrollment in private ones. If we had first rate public school buildings for our SE students, along with expanded educational opportunities for SE teachers and those working with SE students to help get SE kids into mainstream public schools, many more families would be willing to enroll their SE kids in public schools. In the long run, this would save taxpayers a significant amount of money in the high tuition we pay to privately run SE schools.

As President of my countywide 43,000+ member PTA, one of my responsibilities was to work with my school district to help create the budget. Two items regarding SE jumped out at me right away: the incredibly high cost to enroll kids in private SE schools, and the legal fees spent on SE, most of which were incurred because the school system and family of a SE student had a difference of opinion over services. Imagine if we could roll out a group of SE ombudspersons to address these difference at the earliest stages, and do so in a convivial manner? The legal savings alone would justify such a program. More importantly, imagine the goodwill that would be fostered by SE families no longer having to fight the system? Instead, they would work with the school system to figure out the right course for each student in a complimentary way, not a litigious one.

Thank you for this opportunity to address you this morning, and for your work on this most important commission.

All the best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Paul Geller". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "P" and "G".

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