

Education Law Center – The Arc of Pennsylvania

August 8, 2012

Honorable Tom Corbett
Governor of Pennsylvania
225 Main Capitol Building
Harrisburg, PA 17120

RE: Special Education Funding and Accountability: SB 1115 and HB 704

Dear Governor Corbett:

The 25 organizations listed below write to express concern about the approach your Administration has taken to the important reforms proposed for special education funding and accountability.

We appreciate your willingness to discuss the issues involved with Senate Bill 1115 and House Bill 704 with the lead sponsors of this important legislation, Senator Pat Browne and Representative Bernie O'Neill. However, it took far too long for your Administration to engage in serious conversations about special education reforms. We believe the amendments demanded by your Administration in June come close to gutting the legislation. And the actions taken to sideline SB 1115 by adding unrelated and controversial charter school provisions indicate a potential disposition to prioritize other issues above the needs of students with disabilities.

We have asked to meet with you in person during the next few weeks. Perhaps the roadblocks placed in front of SB 1115 resulted from overzealous actions that do not represent your own wishes. At this point, we seek your complete support for the benefit of children with disabilities throughout the Commonwealth.

It is our hope and expectation that you will work with Senator Browne, Representative O'Neill, and legislative leaders to quickly move the special education provisions of SB 1115 for final passage when the General Assembly reconvenes in September. Despite amendments required by your Administration that we believe go too far in watering down the bill, the Special Education Commission formed by SB 1115 remains the best hope for enacting meaningful reforms consistent with the original provisions of the legislation.

The bottom line of our organizations is that Pennsylvania needs a state system for special education funding and accountability that distributes funding based on the real needs of students with disabilities and their schools and that holds these schools accountable for effective use of resources to improve special education programs, services, and supports. We hope that you share these objectives and that you will act to ensure the passage of the special education provisions of SB 1115 without further delay. We also hope that you will work collaboratively and openly with legislators and with our organizations to ensure that the Special Education Commission formed by SB 1115 will work in line with these basic principles to enact a new distribution formula for use in the 2013-14 budget.

As you know, the Commonwealth and school districts have a duty to provide supports and services needed by children with disabilities to succeed in school. Students with disabilities are struggling in most Pennsylvania schools and need special education reforms to have a fair chance for achievement in school and in life. We see this clearly

in many school districts, where children with disabilities often do not receive necessary supports and services. Special education services are not luxuries, but are mandated federal and state requirements for learning in the general education curriculum.

Put simply, Pennsylvania's special education funding and accountability systems are broken and irrational. The broken systems contribute to the poor academic outcomes and the high unemployment rate after leaving school for the 270,000 students receiving special education services in Pennsylvania public schools. The broken systems also affect financially strapped school districts and contribute to property tax increases.

Senate Bill 1115 provides an effective solution to these problems. The Commission formed by the legislation will fix the state systems for special education funding and accountability. Following the guidelines in the bill, the Commission will provide for the establishment of an efficient formula for distributing special education dollars for the first time in years, with funding remaining at current levels until the economy recovers. The bill also strengthens and streamlines the accountability system so that schools will more effectively invest state resources and improve outcomes for students, without adding burdensome paperwork mandates.

Children with disabilities, all children, and all communities throughout Pennsylvania will benefit from your leadership in fixing this broken and irrational system for special education funding and accountability. Please take no additional actions to delay adoption of SB 1115, further water down its provisions, or hijack the bill with unrelated and controversial provisions. Let this legislation and the resulting work of the Special Education Commission focus on the needs of children with disabilities, without the imposition of competing political agendas.

Thank you for your consideration. Please let us know how our organizations can support your efforts to pass Senate Bill 1115. We hope to meet with you soon.

Sincerely,



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cc: Secretary Tomalis
Secretary Zogby

Supporting Organizations for Special Education Funding and Accountability Reforms

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Center for Independent Living of North Central PA
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