



Testimony on HB 136 to the Ohio Senate Finance Committee

May 18, 2011

Chairman Widener, Ranking Member Skindell, and members of the committee. My name is Marla Root; I am the Director of Community Affairs and Advocacy for Step By Step Academy. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony on HB 136 Special Needs Scholarship and Expanded EdChoice Scholarships.

Proposed HB 136 builds on the success of the current autism scholarship program which started in 2003. I am a provider of autism scholarship services and a parent of a child receiving autism scholarship services. Through my advocacy efforts I speak to hundreds of families each year looking for alternative educational placements for their child because they want a more disability specific curriculum or a program that is able to meet their child's needs. Parents of special needs students with all disabilities who are dissatisfied with the services being provided in a traditional educational option have been forced to either accept things as they are or engage in an often cumbersome, adversarial, and expensive administrative process.

I also speak to many school districts throughout the state that are interested in placing their students in programs outside their district either because they do not have enough students or professionals to create an appropriate program. Having an approved provider listing of scholarship programs from the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) helps districts locate placement opportunities.

The special education proposal, as does the current autism scholarship program, provides choices and supports to both the parents and school districts.

Our organization Step By Step Academy as an approved autism scholarship program has had excellent audits and program reviews from the Office of Exceptional Children from ODE. Our staff meets with parents quarterly and reviews their child's progress. Our parents rank their satisfaction with our services as a 4.3 out of a 5 point rating scale. Our top priority is to provide an individualized educational plan service that best supports the student's needs and prepares the student for returning to their school district or a placement of their choice.

The key here is providing a student with a disability educational, emotional, social, behavioral, vocational and related services to allow the student to succeed and be prepared for transitioning into adulthood either that be college, community living or a vocational placement. When individuals with disabilities have access to appropriate educational and treatment services they will require less public funding supports after they exit educational services.

Step By Step Academy and the 120 families we serve representing nine different Ohio counties are in support of the special education proposal HB 136 because it gives parents of children with all types of disabilities a choice in their child's educational placement. HB 136 will allow the opportunity for the student and scholarship providers to strive for improved educational and life outcomes for the student while building and developing appropriate educational programs throughout our state to meet needs of the disability community. Thank you for allowing me to come and testify in support of HB 136. Marla Root, Step By Step Academy, Inc., mroot@stepbystepacademy.org, 614-565-5765