The Bill  

H. 4040: An Act creating higher education opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and other developmental disabilities

Elevator Speech  

Our names are Chantal Tepper and Melanie Kaplan-Cohen and we are students at Brandeis University who are very fortunate to have many incredible academic resources available to us. However, too many students do not have the same opportunity to participate in the higher education experience. We want to ensure that all students who would like to extend their academic endeavors past high school should have the opportunity to do so. The great state of Massachusetts is known for its excellent school system and dedication to helping students achieve their educational goals. Our state is currently ranked number one in the nation for best K-12 public school system. (This does not take into account inequalities among districts.) However, Massachusetts is currently lacking programs to enable students with disabilities to participate in the higher education experience, which limits their future opportunities and prevents them from reaching their full potential. In response to this issue, Bill H4040, aims to remove barriers that prevent students with disabilities from attending college and creates support services to enable the maximum possible integration and success of these students taking classes with non-disabled peers. Furthermore, the bill will monitor participants’ educational achievements and
assist these individuals in obtaining jobs that will make them feel more empowered and independent in the long run. This will decrease the number of limited public tax dollars that will be spent on their well-being. Bill H.4040 was recently reported favorably out of the Higher Education Committee and is currently being reviewed by the Ways and Means Committee. Please show your support for students with disabilities by speaking to members of this committee and urging them to vote it favorably out of committee!

■ Letter to the Legislator

We are students at Brandeis University who are very fortunate to attend a college that provides many academic resources and opportunities. We advocate on behalf of social justice issues and want to ensure that all students have the same opportunities as we do to participate in higher education. However, many students in the state of Massachusetts unfortunately are unable to attend college because of factors outside of their control. Bill H.4040, which creates higher education opportunities for students with disabilities, is of paramount interest to us because we strongly believe that these students deserve the right to take classes at state universities with the supports necessary to help them succeed. As you were named one of nine commissioners on the National Education Commission on Time and Learning, we imagine that you can understand the importance of this issue as it contributes to expanding educational opportunities for all.

By not supporting this bill, the government of Massachusetts would be closing the door on future opportunities for these students. For example, a friend of ours from Weymouth, MA, who has a severe learning disability, is stuck in a bad situation because he has finished high school but does not have any resources available to assist him with further academic endeavors. He wants to do something productive with his life, but says he doesn't know where to start - he feels lost and neglected by the state that provided him so much support in kindergarten through twelfth grade but then left him on his own after he graduated.

Massachusetts is known for its excellent school system and dedication to helping students achieve their educational goals; however, inclusive programs dry up for disabled students after they complete twelfth grade. The great educational resources that this state has worked so hard to create should be available to all, and the fact they are not available for disabled individuals is shameful and unjust. Many of these students are working as hard as they possibly can, but they are set back by their disability. Individuals with disabilities are willing and able to pursue higher education, and can prosper given the opportunity and the right support. Bill 4040 will have a largely beneficial impact on society; but to achieve this, it costs money. These grants will come from state funds, which will inevitably create some public opposition. However, the tax money being used will create a more productive society by adding workers to the labor force and expanding education. Furthermore, these new educational opportunities will help disabled people become financially independent in the long run, which will actually save a significant amount of public tax dollars that would have otherwise been spent on their living needs. Not only can they productively hold positions in the labor force, but also they can also support themselves and will not rely as much on government assistance.

We strongly urge you to support bill H.4040—a bill that will change lives like our friend's. Please talk to members of the House Ways and Means Committee and ask them to vote it favorably out of committee.

Thank you for your consideration of our viewpoint on this matter.

■ House Ways and Means Script

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us. As college students at Brandeis University, we are here to talk to you about an issue that is very important to us: ensuring that all students in the state have the opportunity to achieve to their full potential. As you may know, Massachusetts is celebrated for its excellent school system and commitment to helping students excel in education, making the state a national leader. However, there is a lot more work that needs to be done so that all students continue to have the opportunities and resources to enable them to achieve a brighter future. In particular, we would like to guarantee that students with disabilities – who benefit greatly from educational accommodations in grades K-12 – don't lose this support after high school if they are willing and able to pursue higher education. And they are. Our friend from Weymouth, MA, who has a severe learning disability, is currently stuck in academic “limbo” because he has finished high school but does not have any resources available to assist him with further academic endeavors. He wants to do something productive with his life, but says he doesn't know where to start. He feels lost and neglected by the state that supported him through high school but then left him on his own after he graduated, even though he worked hard to overcome the challenges caused by his disability.

Many students like him do not even consider applying to college because they do not believe they would get accepted and would not be able to integrate successfully into student life. Thus, they do not go to college, and their future opportunities are severely limited as a result. According to
a “report of the Joint Task Force on Higher Education for Students with ID and ASD, ‘[…] many individuals with ID/ASD have been relegated to a lifetime of sheltered work, day habilitation, or languishing at home – living in poverty and dependent on government care.’” [Massachusetts Advocates for Children. “Fact Sheet.”]

In the 21st century, having a college degree is necessary to have a good-paying job and to be successful in life; however, many disabled individuals in Massachusetts are currently unable to take this step due to a lack of inclusive programs to participate in higher education. They are further disabled by Massachusetts’s higher education system.

To address this issue, the Massachusetts State House is working on passing Bill H.4040, which aims to remove barriers that prevent students with disabilities from attending college and create support services to enable the maximum possible integration and success of these students in taking classes with non-disabled peers. Furthermore, the bill will monitor these students’ educational achievements and assist these individuals in obtaining jobs that will make them more empowered and independent in the long run. In order to fund the grant programs created by this bill, Massachusetts will need to allocate money from the state budget. However, these programs will actually benefit the state financially because more students with disabilities will be able to join the workforce and become productive members of society who can contribute to the state’s economy, instead of being dependent on the government. While the program costs money, the opportunities it creates will help disabled people become financially independent, which will actually save a significant amount of public tax dollars that would have otherwise been spent on their living needs. In this case, not only can they productively hold positions in the labor force, but also they can also support themselves and will not rely as much on government assistance.

We strongly support this bill and the positive impacts it will have on students with disabilities; the possibilities for the future successes of disabled students are endless if given the right support. Please vote bill H.4040 favorably out of your committee to allow these students to go to college, which will create a more sustainable and educated society for all.

■ Excerpts from Campaign Journals

Melanie

Chantal and I attended a meeting with Mark Phillips, Legislative Director for Representative Thomas Stanley, which took place in Stanley’s office at the State House in Boston. This was our first scheduled meeting during our first lobbying session so we were a bit nervous walking into the office. We scheduled this meeting because as Brandeis students, we are residents of Waltham, and thus constituents of Representative Stanley’s district. He is also a member of the House Ways and Means Committee, where our bill currently is located. When we arrived at the office, Mr. Phillips met us and we went into Stanley’s office. Chantal and I talked about the importance of education, the needs of disabled students, and how this legislation addresses those issues, and that we would like the Representative to push this bill forward in the Ways and Means Committee. He asked us a few questions, which we were able to answer, and then at the end told us that he would talk to Representative Stanley about the bill. …

Chantal and I went to the MAC office in Boston to meet with Johanne, who we had been in contact with via email for about a month. Massachusetts Advocates for Children is an organization that works to help children who face barriers to education and life opportunities, especially those with intellectual disabilities and autism. We chose to work with this coalition because they have been strong supporters of the bill and other related legislation. …We talked to her about our interest in the bill, some of our past advocacy efforts, and what we were planning to do in the future. She was very helpful and able to answer our questions about the bill, talked to us about the organization’s advocacy work, and she reviewed our storybook draft that we showed her. Johanne also provided us with some useful documents, including the Task Force Report, fact sheets, and bill summary, and added us to the email campaign list which we could use to ask supporters to send letters to their legislators advocating for the bill. Overall, the meeting went very well and it helped us to develop a connection with Johanne and the organization. Something that contributed to the success of the meeting was our level of preparation (e.g. we had the storybook to show her) and previous communications with Johanne via email, so we were a bit more comfortable going to talk with her in person.

Chantal

I met with Johanne Pino who is the project coordinator at MAC. She was eager to meet with Melanie and me, and was enthusiastic about our project. Prior to this meeting, I had arranged a list of questions I had for her, one of which was “who are the biggest opponents of Bill H1064, and how does MAC respond to legislative negativity?” Johanne was pleased to tell us that she does not know of any person or organization that openly opposes this bill, and that MAC does not get any complaints or negative publicity.

The coalition also helps students with disabilities find jobs and attempts to create partnerships with educational institutions for inclusive learning. We spoke about [a] mutual friend who has a learning disability, and Johanne gave us the contact information of other special education students who we could talk to, including [someone] who we communicated with via e-mail.
Update

On July 31, 2016, the bill was submitted under a new draft, H.4561. As of this publication, this bill is in its third reading for the House Ways and Means Committee.

For more information

View the Bill:
malegislature.gov/Bills/189/House/H4040

Massachusetts Advocates for Children:
massadvocates.org