

## IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Rep. Thomson, DD Planning Council introduce legislation to advocate for students with disabilities and their families**

SANTA FE – Today, Rep. Elizabeth “Liz” Thomson and the New Mexico Developmental Disabilities Planning Council [DDPC] will present House Bill 222, a Governor’s priority bill, before the House Education Committee. HB 222 establishes the Office of the State Special Education Ombud. The Ombud will advocate on behalf of public school students seeking special education services and provide comprehensive support for families navigating the special education system. Additional sponsors for the bill include Rep. Joanne Ferrary, Sen. Linda Lopez, and Sen. Siah Hemphill.

“For too long, students with disabilities and special education services have been forgotten or, at best, an afterthought in the public school system,” Rep. Thomson said. “Students with disabilities need access to individualized, student-centered education services to reach their academic goals. But the students who require the most assistance often receive the least attention. We refuse to allow New Mexico students of any ability—especially students with disabilities—fall through the cracks any longer.”

The Special Education Ombud identifies, investigates, and assists students and families in resolving special education concerns; informs students and families about special education resources in their community; and works with local, state, and federal governments to ensure quality special education services are provided statewide. The Ombud will analyze, monitor, and recommend changes to law, rules, and policies relating to special education, and publish an annual report outlining the state of the special education system.

“It is imperative that we transform the special education system here in New Mexico,” said DDPC Chair John Arango. “Parents and families of students with disabilities face countless barriers in virtually every aspect of their lives. Yet we expect these families to teach themselves a complex area of law, advocate for their student’s rights, and somehow hold schools accountable if they fail to serve the student. The Special Education Ombud will provide critical support to overwhelmed and underserved students and families.”

The Act establishes the Office of the State Special Education Ombud within the DDPC. The Act requires the Ombud to ensure that its staff, contractors, and volunteers are trained and certified to provide Ombud services, requires schools to notify students of the Ombud, and authorizes the Ombud to take corrective action when schools or districts do not work with the Ombud to address special education concerns.

“Providing a quality public education for every child in New Mexico is a top priority of this administration, from early childhood through high school graduation and beyond,” said Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham. “The Special Education Ombud will ensure that students with disabilities and their families receive the support they need to succeed. Developing this innovative measure to meaningfully improve services across the state would not have been possible without the ongoing work and extensive cross-agency collaboration between the Governor’s office, PED, ECECD, CYFD, UNM CDD, DDPC, and special education advocates.”

Schools and governmental bodies will also benefit from the Ombud’s expertise and recommendations. When students with disabilities are provided with adequate educational services, their educational outcomes

significantly improve—reducing dependence on social services, stemming the flow of students into the school to jail pipeline, and preparing more students to enter the workforce and lead healthy, productive lives. The Ombud program will ultimately reduce costs to the state and contribute to a stronger New Mexico economy.

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