

101 Apple Drive
Piedmont, South Carolina 29673

02 December 2016

The Honorable Nikki R. Haley
Governor of South Carolina
1205 Pendleton Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Dear Governor Haley:

We are writing you regarding our son Christopher R. Stephens and the negative impact that his occupational diploma has had on his ability to get and retain a job that will afford him the opportunity to experience independence and economic stability.

Chris has cerebral palsy. When he was born, 16 December 1985, three months premature, he weighed only one pound, eleven and a half ounces. When he was three days old, he had to have surgery to repair a heart valve. When he was in the ninth grade, he had to have a second heart surgery, this time on his aortic valve. In addition, doctors told us when he was born that he probably would never walk. He ended up having five surgeries on his legs over the course of his childhood—at Shriners in Greenville and at MUSC. So, you see, life has been a struggle for him from the beginning. Today he is thirty years old. Miraculously, he is able to walk now, but with a limp, and his movements are slow. When Chris was born, the doctors told us that he would be intellectually challenged because he experienced bleeding on the brain. Although we have tried several times to see if Chris qualified for disability benefits, all efforts were denied. One of the doctors who examined him rather callously said, "If he can sit, stand, walk, or crawl, he can work."

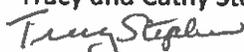
Chris wants to work. He is not looking for a handout. However, he has found it impossible to get a job that will allow him to afford even the basics of an independent lifestyle. All employers require a high school diploma or G.E.D. Chris has an occupational diploma, which not a single company he has approached will recognize as a valid South Carolina diploma.

Academic challenges began for Chris while he was in elementary school. We spent \$500.00 a month to have him tutored. My husband Tracy, who is a fireman, got a second job to make it possible for us to afford to do this. Yet, we got through it, and Chris did relatively well. In middle school, however, he started to fall behind in the seventh grade. We were not notified of these new struggles until the year was more than half over. His math teacher told us that he was unable to do simple math tasks such as counting money. She also said that if he had not "gotten it" by then, he was never going to "get it." Obviously, his difficulties mainly concerned math and recall. His teacher then told us that we should put him on course to receive an occupational diploma rather than a conventional diploma. We met with the principal and the special needs teachers from J. L. Mann High School. They explained to us the nature and the requirements of the occupational diploma. In hindsight, we realize that this route to an occupational diploma was not in our son's best interest. We never would have consented to do this if we had known that the diploma would not be recognized by employers as valid.

For the G.E.D., Chris has taken the placement evaluation to identify his strengths and the areas where he needs improvement. Because he has attention deficit disorder, his ability to focus and to recall material in the G.E.D. curriculum has hindered his progress in pursuing his G.E.D.

We think that a lot of students and families have been misled regarding the occupational diploma. Most of the kids who are in the path to receive such a diploma have been dealt hard and difficult lives. It is another unnecessary blow to be told that their diploma has no value in the workplace. We, as Chris's parents, have worked hard to get him to where he is now. He went to school twelve long years, and he completed everything he was told to do. We would just like to know if there is some kind of help that is available from the state to assist him in earning his G.E.D. or in reassessing his qualification for disability assistance.

Kind regards,


Tracy and Cathy Stephens


cc: The Honorable Henry McMaster, Lieutenant Governor for South Carolina
Mrs. Molly Spearman, Superintendent, South Carolina Department of Education
The Honorable Tim Scott, United States Senator for South Carolina
The Honorable Tray Gowdy, United States Representative for South Carolina
Doctor Beverly A. H. Buscemi, Director, South Carolina Department of Disabilities and Special Needs