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# Alabama school board member under fire for special education comments

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MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - Alabama State Board of Education member Ella Bell has come under fire for comments she made about special education students in Alabama classrooms.

The controversy ignited after video surfaced of her statements from a school board work session on June 21.

"In some schools we have no special ed children in the classrooms i.e. the magnet schools. Is it against the law for us to establish perhaps an academy on special education or something in that order, so that our scores that already are not that good would not be further cut down by special ed test scores," Bell said.

That's when another board member and Superintendent Michael Sentance brought up Least Restrictive Environment, which is a requirement under federal law that, to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities attending public schools be educated with students without disabilities.

"It doesn't matter about that. You can make it the least restrictive environment, now. I'm trying to see if you can move them out so they won't have to be included in the testing because if you don't do that, it's almost not fair for LAMP and them not to have special ed folk to bring them down," Bell said in the work session.

Bell was referring to Loveless Academic Magnet Program High School in Montgomery, which U.S. News & World Report ranked the No. 1 high school in the state this year.

On Thursday, a petition calling for Bell's removal from the board was posted on [Change.org](#).

"She has NO business being on the BOE when she has no clue about the laws that govern our schools. These laws are set in place to protect ALL children. What she is suggesting will set the education system back in time at least 20 years," the petition states.

Within eight hours of being posted Thursday, the petition had more than 14,000 signatures.

Thursday evening, the State Board of Education released a statement from Bell clarifying her comments:

*“My thinking during that June 21, 2017, work session was to make sure all students are assessed on an even playing field. In that regard, I asked a question about the legality of creating an academy that focuses squarely on the needs of students with intellectual disabilities. In retrospect, I understand how insensitive what I said must have sounded,” Bell stated. “My record supporting special education is well stated. From policies that support dyslexia and special education, to my 25-year history working with the Alabama Department of Mental Health, and retiring as Director of the Alabama Family Trust. I have always been a champion for individuals with special needs and will continue to advocate for our champions who succeed regardless of the circumstances encountered.”*

She went on to apologize to anyone who was offended by her comments.

Bell, a Montgomery resident, has served on the state school board since 2001.

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