

Written Testimony

MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group

8/21/14

Your presence here highlights the importance of the need for all of us to focus on special education, both in terms of practice and implementation. Like many of us, I have seen trends in education, especially special education, come and go. What hasn't changed is our need to comply with the law, despite the ever changing landscape and uncertain funding, but far more importantly, our moral and ethical obligation to individually design appropriate programs to meet the individual needs of our special education students. Individual...I repeat this because it is one of the greatest challenges that we, as Directors of Pupil Personnel and Special Education, struggle with the most.

Like many districts, we face many of the same challenges. A one size fits all, even if the "all" means only special education students, doesn't work. Even if we have just a handful of students with a particular need, we have an obligation to provide them with what they require by law, whether we have the resources or not. If we don't have the resources or capacity to provide what is required, this is when we need to look elsewhere. And, the reality is that the "elsewhere" can often be costly. As a result, we look to be innovative and build our own programming from the ground up. Again, this takes time, training, and funding up front. When we are faced with losing necessary funding, either through the budget process or through State and federal funding, it puts our ability to provide students with what they require at risk. It also puts our ability to invest in building our special education programming "in house," which will ultimately save the district money in the long term, in serious jeopardy.

Along with our dedicated staff, we are charged with assessing, diagnosing, planning for and designing programs that will meet the needs of each and every one of our unique students. These are students who have incredible strengths and some of the most difficult challenges that many of us would struggle to truly comprehend on a personal level. As with all students, no two students are alike, but in the case of our students, we need to provide educational benefit, a free appropriate public education, and all while ensuring that they are educated in the least restricted environment. These are all buzz phrases that should be familiar to many of you. We need to write measurable goals based on their needs identified through multiple forms of assessment and data collection, provide specialized instruction in order for them to make meaningful progress toward their goals, and never stop raising the bar. We do this while providing professional development to teachers in order to maximize the instruction and time our special education students have to LEARN along with their same age peers. We are far beyond the days of "participating" with same age peers. Our students have the right to learn along-side them.

Here in Hamden, we are fortunate to have talented educators, support staff, and a supportive administration, all committed to providing an appropriate education in order to prepare our students to be college and career ready. As those of us here know, students, whether general education students or special education students, will follow different paths in life, just like many of us did. Not all may be college bound, but we are charged with helping each and every one of them to be prepared to enter the world, after their years in Hamden, as ready as they can be, and to be as independent as possible.

Although I began my career in Hamden, I left for several years in order to gain more experience in another district. When I returned here, I was immediately faced with concerns regarding the extremely high number of students outplaced in private and public special education facilities and the understandable concern regarding the costs involved. My administrative team set to work at developing short and long term plans to address the needs of our students and programs, while also being mindful of what can often times be exorbitant costs related to special education, particularly when we are unable to meet the needs of our students in district and funding is decreased.

Our special education administrative team set to work at tackling the true underlying issue...What is the best strategy to ensure our special education students receive what they need and what they are entitled to receive? We looked at ways to build our own internal capacity, provide an appropriate education for our students, while at the same time, recognizing our responsibility to be mindful of tight budgets and finances.

As we underwent this process, we always considered that the bottom line and first word in the acronym "IEP" is the word "individual." We have a responsibility to meet the needs of each and every student, regardless of how divergent they are. While we look for ways to collaborate and share resources with other districts, there are times when we have to "figure it out." There will always be students who require more intensive services that require (at times) costly out of district placements. However, we truly believe that if we think out of the box, build our in-district resources and capacity, and collaborate with our local districts, we can work, not to just sustain, but help our students reach their potential in their home communities. This requires investment, support and understanding of the administration and community. It also requires the greatly needed funding from outside the borders of Hamden.

When we think of the challenges we face in special education, there are many. Besides the numerous issues touched upon earlier this evening, we need to constantly review, adapt, and change practice. In addition to the work we do with students, parents, and staff, we are responsible for collecting and submitting data frequently. It often feels like the requirements continue to increase while time and resources available seem to decrease. As all of us undoubtedly experience in our own lives at times, when we are seemingly faced with more to do, less time to do it, and at times, less to work with, it can feel daunting. However, I'm happy to say that in the world of special education, the reward is always worth it.

While it's not easy, it's a process we believe in for the sake of our kids. Over the last three years, great work has been underway to provide a quality program for students at Alice Peck Early Learning Center. This coming year, there will be students there from PK to grade 3, students who require intensive social, emotional, behavioral, academic and life skills instruction. Students, who in years past, we would have struggled to program for in district. Not only have we been able to meet the needs of these students in district and save costly tuitions for students who might have required out of district placements otherwise, we are already seeing the benefit of these students being able to transition to their home schools successfully. Many strides have already been made, but without additional funding, it will be extremely difficult to expand this model throughout the older grades, which is greatly needed.

For many years, I have had the privilege of working with Valarie Coppola. Her knowledge, professionalism, and dedication to meeting the needs of our most vulnerable students, always underscored the true difficulties we sometimes faced to program for individual students with extremely diverse needs. Largely because of her efforts, the program at Alice Peck is what is today. Because of Valarie and her staff, we have been able to meet the needs of students, IN district, who may have required programs out of district in the past.

When we think of systemic challenges to special education, they are often related to the difficulty of providing what's appropriate, while considering the law, and of course very real budgetary constraints. The reality of special education is that it is costly. These students require and are entitled to a free and appropriate education. Because of programs like those at Alice Peck, we have been able to provide what is necessary here in their home community.

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