

Connecticut



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Republic

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Youth
Since 1904*

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Residential Programs
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December 8, 2014

Dear Representatives Cook, Wood, and Becker:

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony to the M.O.R.E. Commission. I appreciate your generosity of time and spirit in facilitating these meetings across the state, thus enabling a greater number of your constituents to participate in the process.

I am the Director of Education & Student Services at the Connecticut Junior Republic, an approved private special education school serving male students between the ages of 9 and 21 years old. As a provider of education for students who require out of district services, the Connecticut Junior Republic has the opportunity to work with students who live at home, within foster homes, groups homes, and short term residential programs.

The question that you pose to us is: **What are the systemic challenges to special education and what are some of the solutions?**

Working with students with special needs is as rewarding as it is complex. There are several steps that we can take that will assist us to better meet the needs of students who require out of district educational placements.

One challenge that we face is accessing accurate educational records in a timely manner. Often times, students in foster care and the juvenile justice systems lack consistency in their educational placements. In order to meet their immediate needs (including safety, shelter, etc.), these students move several times throughout the course of their education- resulting in them attending many different schools. Despite the best of intentions, the schools that students attend do not receive accurate records including Individualized Education Programs (IEP) and transcripts when the student enrolls which makes their transition to the school less productive.

As you know, every student in Connecticut has a State Assigned Student Identifier (SASID) number. One solution to alleviate this problem is to have the aforementioned student records maintained on this database. If these records can be accessed by entering the student's SASID, it would enable teachers and related service providers to more effectively and efficiently develop and employ educational opportunities for our students. An example of a common problem with not receiving records in a timely manner is that students repeat the same course(s).

Another challenge that out of district providers face is providing students with effective and meaningful standardized assessments. Often times, students who do not successfully complete the Connecticut Academic Proficiency Test (CAPT) complete a portfolio in order to satisfy this graduation requirement. In order to be eligible to complete the portfolio, students must be unsuccessful at completing the CAPT. Again, these students often attend several different schools prior to completing the assessments and, therefore, may not complete them as well as their peers.

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In order to determine an accurate measure of achievement and ability, students should be given the opportunity to complete a portfolio without the connotation that they failed the more traditional assessment. Samples of student work could be maintained on the SASID database with educators, including members of the PPT, able to access and view the work samples in order to better determine a student's ability, strength, and areas of concern. Another viable solution may be to utilize assessment and evaluation data that is generated through the student's PPT.

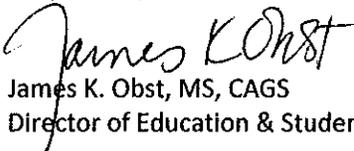
Recognizing that students who receive foster care and juvenile justice services are involved with many stakeholders including state and private social workers, probation and parole officers, and other professionals who are invested in education, we must develop a practical system that improves communication and collaboration between school personnel and state service providers. Often times, there are competing agendas between different organizations. These competing agendas impede student progress and create a culture of mistrust and an adversarial relationship between the schools and the provider. One solution is to create a Regional Educational Ombudsman office that can assist public schools, out of district private school providers, and State agencies including DCF, CSSD, and DMAS in identifying, addressing, monitoring, and evaluating policies and procedures that are practical, effective, and meet best practices.

All students in all schools require excellent teachers. Students who are enrolled in out of district placements are no exception. Educational professionals in these schools must be skilled at meeting the emotional and affective needs of our students in order to effectively address their academic needs. At times, it can be very difficult to attract and retain qualified staff because, although our staff must possess the same qualifications of our public school counterparts, we do not receive the same benefits as our colleagues in the state and local educational agencies. One solution to this problem is to permit the approved private special education schools to have flexibility in meeting the certification requirements of public schools.

In summary, I strongly believe that in order to successfully address the unique challenges that we face to ensure that every student in our state receives a meaningful education and is able to develop, maintain, and transfer skills, we must continue to identify and utilize practical, common sense approaches to meeting these needs.

Thank you for your time this evening and for your leadership on this topic.

Respectfully Submitted,


James K. Obst, MS, CAGS
Director of Education & Student Services

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