



SOUTHTINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Testimony for the M.O.R.E. Commission
Special Education Select Working Group
December 18, 2014

TIMOTHY F. CONNELLAN
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

KAREN L. SMITH
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
FOR INSTRUCTION AND
LEARNING

BOARD OF EDUCATION

BRIAN S. GORALSKI
BOARD CHAIRPERSON

TERRI C. CARMODY
VICE CHAIRPERSON

JILL NOTAR-FRANCESCO
SECRETARY

COLLEEN W. CLARK

DAVID J. DERYNOSKI

PATRICIA P. JOHNSON

TERRY G. LOMBARDI

ZAYA G. OSHANA

PATRICIA A. QUEEN

200 NORTH MAIN ST
SOUTHTINGTON, CT
06489

WWW.SOUTHTINGTONSCHOOLS.ORG

OFFICE TELEPHONE
(860) 628-3202

FAX
(860) 628-3205

Good evening Co-Chairpersons, Commission members and others present,

It is my pleasure to address this Commission on behalf of the Southington Board of Education to share our ongoing concerns related to special education services and funding in Southington and other Connecticut communities. Southington has had a longstanding practice of yearly meetings with our legislative delegation so they can better understand and adequately represent our concerns. We are appreciative of their efforts on our behalf. I hope that the opportunity to address this commission will improve the chances of seeing real change to assist us in better serving the educational needs of all students in our community.

The invitation that I received to present testimony asked that I answer the fundamental question, "*What are the systematic challenges to special education and what are some possible solutions?*" I will do my best to briefly answer that question.

Systematic Challenges:

- The extreme high cost of providing appropriate special education services continues to gradually erode the ability of communities to provide services in other areas of the overall educational program.
- There is a lack of qualified candidates who are certified to provide special education services at all grade levels. The shortage creates gaps in the instructional program for school districts who are trying to meet the needs of their students.
- Out-of-district program placement costs are extremely high and place an additional burden on local communities.
- There is virtually no support from the State Department of Education in the area of assisting districts with professional development, program development or the acquisition of best practices.

Some Possible Solutions:

- The cost of special education services should be reimbursed separately as was done prior to the adoption of the Education Cost Sharing formula. The reimbursement should be applicable to the next fiscal year to allow for adequate planning rather than current year reimbursement. This proposal would allow for better planning, both locally and at the state level, during the budget process.
- State sponsored and funded incentive programs for all districts should be created to attract the best and brightest to this area of specialization. These incentives should be provided at all qualified institutions of higher education and at the employment level. They could range from student loan forgiveness to additional stipends for shortage area positions.

- The Excess Cost Reimbursement Grant formula must be changed to lower the per pupil threshold, above which, communities are eligible for reimbursement. More importantly, the grant must be fully funded and the State should assume one hundred percent of the cost of students placed by a state agency and one hundred percent of the cost of students who are considered no-nexus. In addition, funding incentives should be provided for districts that develop collaborative programs that show demonstrated savings.
- The mission of the State Department of Education, with respect to special education, must transform from one of “procedural oversight” to providing support and development. The department must hire qualified leaders in the Bureau of Special Education as it once did and must staff the Bureau at an appropriate level if it is to be effective in improving services for students with disabilities.
- The Due Process system must be addressed. Connecticut is among a minority of states in the country in its regulation of the “Burden of Proof” in special education hearings that places the responsibility on the Board of Education in essentially all cases. This process must be fixed to allow for funding to be better utilized for educating students rather than in litigation.

My final thought I wish to share this evening is a fundamental belief that all students deserve a quality education. The cost of special education is growing so rapidly that it is undermining the ability of local communities to be truly proactive with educational services and forcing a reactive approach. If some or all of the solutions I presented can be implemented, the opportunity for improved early intervention strategies and other SRBI plans could be expanded by local communities to better serve all students and possibly lower costs in the future.

I’d be happy to address any questions commission members have related to my testimony and make myself available in the future for additional questions that arise in your continued work. Thank you for your efforts to improve special education services which, I believe, translates to better educational services for all students.

Respectfully,



Brian S. Goralski
Southington Board of Education, Chairman