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M.O.R.E. Commission/Special Education Select Working Group
Testimony- January 8, 2015

My name is Courtney Darby and I am a Darien resident and have been a co-chair of Darien SEPAC for the past year and a half. Although this is a bit of a daunting task, thank you for inviting me to present testimony.

Darien background/ Burden of Proof

As many of you may know, Darien has had a challenging time in special education stemming from the 2012-13 school year, in which the district was found to be noncompliant in 32 different areas. During this one-year, approximately 10% of the children with IEPs were exited from receiving special education services. In addition, many more children had services reduced or discontinued.

Even in a clear case like Darien where laws were broken, it was always up to the parents to insure that their child's program was appropriate or even being delivered. I believe this is an important point as you consider Burden of Proof.

Parents have a significant responsibility already. Very few parents are --reading or ABA specialists...AT experts... or speech or occupational therapists--many of us need to hire outside help to assess a child's needs or in Darien's case, demonstrate what was lost.

As families in our town know too well, it is the school district that controls the timing regarding IEP meetings, has access to information and the ability to provide or reinstate services. Parents must have considerable perseverance to ensure an appropriate program for their child.

Many children in Darien lost services for over two years. That is time that compensatory services -- if you are even able to get them -- really can't fix. If your child lost services at the beginning of 5th grade and didn't get them reinstated until 7th grade--- that is time that that child and their family will never get back. I strongly urge you not to change the burden of proof in CT. Our children do not have any more time to waste.

Special Education Manual

The BOE hired a special investigator, Sue Gamm, to review the non-compliance issues in Darien. She researched a comprehensive 160-page report that outlines in detail the 32 areas of non-compliance, as well as 8 areas with recommendations and additional 26 areas of concern that the state did not identify. One of the most startling revelations of Gamm's report is that the town did not have a 504, SRBI or special education manual.

Without state-approved manuals it was really a little like the Wild Wild West. It is well documented that memos and PowerPoint presentations were provided to Darien staff that had extensive non-compliant guidelines. One of the worse illustrations of these abuses

was a memo that informed staff to create a “united front” prior to and during a PPT. Clearly this directive is tantamount to putting a wall up in front of parents, -- leaving them out of decisions being made about their own child.

We need to have ground rules. I believe the state should insure that every district has a manual to address the very complicated special education procedures that parents and educators must follow. The state guidelines should be clear and easily accessible.

Professional Development

Another significant issue that has come up repeatedly in our town is the lack of professional expertise. You can imagine if we were operating without a manual we were also not terribly concerned about the level of background and training of our teachers.

But of course an appropriate program requires expertise and training, often in many specific areas. Many times it is our regular and special education teachers on the frontlines who want this important training, but are limited by time and resources.

My sister-in-law who has worked as a special education paraprofessional in the public school system made a startling revelation to me this holiday break. She explained that while volunteering recently in an animal shelter, she was required to complete 6 hours of training before she could walk a dog. She said that was more training than she ever received working with children as a para in the public schools.

To address this issue, I urge you to look at the professional development program in Massachusetts.

The Massachusetts FOCUS Academy (MFA), a statewide professional development system of the Massachusetts Department of Education, specifically states that its mission is to have “qualified educators in every public school classroom, improve student outcomes, and reduce achievement gaps”

The MFA includes cost-free, online, three (3) credit graduate courses that provide participants with the skills, knowledge and instructional strategies to improve the outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities, in safe and supportive inclusive environments.

If you look at the classes being offered, they are incredibly relevant and critically important for today’s educational environment. They include:

- Collaborative Co-Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms
- Creating and Sustaining Positive School-Wide Learning Environments
- Mathematics for General and Special Educators: Content and Pedagogy
- Partnering with Families of Middle and High School Students with Disabilities
- 3 Courses on Universal Design for Learning

And that brings me to my next point.

Universal Design for Learning

Given the challenges facing contemporary education, practitioners and policymakers are increasingly looking into Universal Design for Learning for guidance on how to improve education.

The National Universal Design Task Force is comprised of more than 40 organizations, and advocates for UDL in federal, state, and district education policy. It includes groups such as the American Federation of Teachers, National Association of State Boards of Education, Autism National Committee, and National Down Syndrome Congress.

Again in Massachusetts, there is a single system of supports that follow Universal Design for Learning principles (multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expressions, and multiple means of engagement). I urge you to support a state education system that embraces these principals.

Literacy

In my view, learning to read is the most critical aspect of a child's education. In the last year, one of the reoccurring concerns we have heard from Darien parents is that are children struggling to read and are often well-below at grade level.

Darien SEPAC was honored to have two leading literacy experts, Dr. Sally Shaywitz from Yale and Dr. Margie Gillis from LiteracyHow, come to our community talk to parents and educators.

What we learned from these meetings was the following:

--Throughout CT children have significant reading delays at every age level: early and late elementary parent, middle school and high school.

--If a child can't read well, problems quickly materialized in every academic area including science, social studies and math.

--There is a significant social and emotional toll on children with reading deficits. Struggling for years, can cause have lasting anxiety and mental health concerns.

LiteracyHow affirms that 95% of all children can learn to read. However, when it comes children with disabilities our reading expectations often get watered down.

All of a sudden, a child is no longer one grade behind but three grades behind. I know we tend to blame this on the disability---but if in 6th grade a child is only reading at a 3rd

grade level how can ever expect them to close the gap. We need to stop justifying the lack of progress -- start working earlier and work harder.

I don't want to pretend that there are any easy solutions when it comes to teaching reading but some possible suggestions are:

--Establish Grade Level Reading Benchmarks for All Districts—that go beyond 3rd grade

--We need to give SRBI some teeth. We need to insist it is based on a data-driven model in all of our school districts. Right now it is very apparent that SRBI is not mandated.

-- As cited by the National Council on Teacher Quality, most teachers have not been taught how to teach reading effectively. We need to make sure teachers are providing individualized instruction. As LiteracyHow explains, “uncover the right *“something different”* for every child who needs to turn a learning curve to catch up—because this is learning to read.

External Evaluation

My last point is that if we have learned anything from the Sue Gamm report, we learned that is important to have unbiased experts review our work and investment in education.

In order to really improve the state of special education in CT, I believe it would be helpful to have knowledgeable experts evaluate the state's initiatives and effectiveness.

Since 2012, MA has generated a publicly available report by national experts in special education and universal design for learning.

Dr. Thomas Hehir, a Harvard University professor, and his associates prepared several reports on the status of special education in the Commonwealth. Dr. Hehir is a former Director of the Office of Special Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education, and the former director of special education for the Boston and Chicago Public Schools.

Without having experts carefully reviewing state initiatives on a regular basis, it will be difficult to really improve our system moving forward.

Thank you.