

M.O.R.E Commission Testimony

SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFFING IN THE URBAN DISTRICTS

Challenge: Lack of adequate numbers of special education teachers

Although we began hiring shortage area staff, including special education teachers, in April of the 2013-14 school year, some special education teachers received better offers over the summer and left for other districts. We were then forced to hire “last minute” choices for very challenging positions.

Possible Solutions:

1. This year, we began a district –based alternate route to special education certification administered by CREC for Bridgeport teachers already certified in elementary education or a content area at the middle/ high school level. We paid tuition to CREC for them to become certified as special education teachers. They have committed to working as special education teachers in Bridgeport for three years after becoming certified. Classes are held at night and on weekends and the practicum is done over the summer. They will be ready to work in our school as special education teachers beginning in the 2015- 2016 school year.
2. The salary and working conditions (i.e. caseloads, time, and space) for staff in urban districts must be improved.

PROACTIVE SERVICES

Challenge: Special Education Costs

In Bridgeport, special education costs encompass 29.8% of the budget and amount to \$74.5 million. We are projecting an increase in these costs for 2015-16 as more students are identified and require specialized services.

For some students who are significantly challenged, special education services are essential and must be provided but, in my estimation, there are many students who are referred to special education because their needs cannot be met in a regular education setting. These needs cannot be met in my district (Bridgeport) because of incredibly limited resources for the great needs we see in our children. Because of very limited resources, we cannot be proactive in meeting our students’ needs. Let me begin to explain:

1. Our classrooms have twenty-nine students in grades 2-12; in grades K-1, that number is twenty-four. A class of twenty-nine students is unheard of in the suburbs and it is next to impossible in these large classes to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of every student. Fewer than 40% are reading with proficiency at the end of grade three. In order to

secure additional assistance for these students, referrals are made to special education. I maintain and know from experience and research that if class size were significantly reduced, the literacy needs of these students could be met by the classroom teacher and referrals would be reduced. As you know, most referrals to special education are made for issues in reading.

2. There are no additional professional personnel in our schools whose job it is to intervene with struggling students. The concept of Scientifically Based Response to Intervention (SRBI) promoted by both the Federal and State Departments of Education is a sound approach. In my former position as Associate Commissioner, I chaired the SRBI Committee and formulated the strategies and policies for the implementation of this approach. The rationale for it was to reduce referrals to special education. If implemented with fidelity, I believe that it would do exactly that. Unfortunately, in my district and in many like mine, the staffing is not provided to make it work efficiently and effectively. The tiered approach cannot be implemented.
3. Behavior concerns are very often the reason for referrals to special education. We need to be proactive to prevent the referral. This necessitates the development of a school culture, which places importance on the social and emotional needs of our students. I believe this has fallen off the "radar screen" in many districts whose major concern is the achievement of standards – Common Core, Smarter Balanced Testing etc. While I believe academic achievement is our ultimate goal, getting there is definitely accelerated when students' emotional and social health is a priority. In addition, again because of limited resources, our ratios of social workers, psychologists, and guidance counselors are far higher than the nationally recommended number.
4. Only 62.1% of our students attend preschool

Possible Solutions:

1. Provide competitive grants at the state and federal level for strategies and policies related to the successful implementation of Scientifically Based Response to Intervention (SRBI). Use the data to demonstrate that these proactive practices will significantly lower special education referrals, testing and placements.
2. Advocate and provide funding for pilots to build district and school cultures, which foster social and emotional development of students.
3. Fund the present services for special education at 100% to allow districts to reallocate funding for proactive practices to significantly reduce special education referrals and placements.
4. Provide universal preschool access for students in urban districts

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