

M.O.R.E. Commission
Special Education Select Working Group

MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, June 12, 2014

10:00 AM in LOB Room 2E

The meeting was called to order by Rep. Becker (Co-Chair) at 10:05 AM.

The following select working group members were present: Rep. Brian Becker (Co-Chair), Rep. Terrie Wood (Co-Chair), Rep. Michelle Cook (Co-Chair), George Rafael, Robert Namnoum, Shelley Davis, John Filchak, Betsy Gara, Kimberley Planas, Rep. Catherine Abercrombie, Rep. Jay Case, Mike Regan, Deborah Richards, and Atty. Howard Klebanoff

Rep. Becker announced that Superintendent Wheeler was resigning her position on the working group to pursue a new career opportunity and he thanked her for her service.

The working group approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Rep. Becker invited the Regional Educational Service Centers (RESCs) to begin their presentation. Ms. Deborah Richards from the Capitol Region Educational Council (CREC) took the lead during the presentation, supported by comments from Mike Regan of Cooperative Educational Services (CES), Bridgette Gordon Hickey of LEARN, Vanessa Taragowski of Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES), Jonathan Costa of Education Connection, and Tom Cronin of EastCONN. All six RESCs were represented.

Ms. Richards (CREC) gave a presentation on the role of the RESCs in special education. A recording of the entire meeting, including her presentation, is available on the M.O.R.E. Commission Special Education Select Working Group website, along with copies of documents used during the presentation. The website may be accessed here:

<http://www.housedems.ct.gov/MORE/SPED/meetings.asp> .

Rep. Becker drew the working group's attention to the sources of funding for the RESCs, and, in particular, the fact that the line item in the state budget for the RESCs was only listed as \$800,000. He then asked how much funding the RESCs received from other grants.

Ms. Richards (CREC) stated that she did not have that information on hand, but that should would provide it to the working group at a later date.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) stated that even the funds for magnet schools run by the RESCs are considered grants, so money allocated just for special education would be difficult to break-out.

Mr. Costa (Education connection) stated that the federal money received by his RESC is a much greater number (and the state money received is much lower), than the averages that were presented during the presentation. He also said that the \$800,000 discussed during the presentation was split amongst all RESCs.

Ms. Richards (CREC) stated that she would provide the group with a line by line summary of the RESC funding sources and amounts.

Rep. Becker asked the RESCs to reconcile their claims that they provide a cost effective option to school districts (by grouping students with similar challenges together from across multiple districts) with their assertion that students are truly unique.

Ms. Richards (CREC) stated that the RESCs still are able to provide more cost effective services because they draw students from across an entire region, rather than a single district.

Rep. Becker asked how programs were tailored to each student while still being able to realize savings by grouping students together.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered by giving an example. She said that each individual student is unique, but that some students at CREC stay in school until 7:00 PM. She continued that each student has their own program, but CREC is able to pool the cost of having a nurse and educational staff on duty, rather than having each district hire their own nurses and staff.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) stated that it would be impossible for small districts to maintain the level of expertise needed to deal with children with intensive special needs, since students like this may only come through a district once every few years.

Mr. Costa stated that, if the RESCs cannot run a program more efficiently than a district, they will spin that program off for a district to administer. He said RESCs could then re-initiate a program if it is needed in the future.

Rep. Becker asked if the transition services provided by the RESCs and referenced in the presentation were for student still in the K-12 system.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that students could stay in the K-12 system through age 21, when most will transition to Department of Disability Services (DDS) or Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) programs.

Rep. Becker noted that the RESCs employed 6 transition specialists and asked if one specialist was assigned to each RESC.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that the transition specialists are not each assigned to a different RESC but are spread out across the state. She noted that districts must request transition personnel and that these specialists function almost as district employees.

Rep. Becker stated that parents often do not have the training to reinforce special education lessons at home, which can be frustrating. He asked to hear more about training opportunities that the RESCs provide for parents.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that parent training is potentially a related service on par with occupational therapy and speech therapy because it has to do with ensuring students make significant progress. Often districts turn to the RESCs for help when they have a student with such extraordinary needs that it is difficult for the district to provide adequate services. In these cases, the parent might not even have a specific plan to help the child, who might ultimately need to be placed out of the home. She said that parent training should be part of the PPT discussion.

Rep. Cook drew the working group's attention to the slide about consultations on page 6 of the RESC presentation. She stated that the General Assembly had recently passed legislation concerning dyslexia and wanted to know why there were no RESC dyslexia consultants listed.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that the RESCs provide services when school districts ask for help meeting an unmet need. She said that the RESCs do not tell districts that they have a need to be filled, but rather rely on district requests to drive their operations.

Rep. Cook asked if a district decided that a RESC should provide a service, would the RESC then hire an expert.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered yes, continuing that the RESCs have a technical assistance service that includes 200 people who are on call to consult on various issues on a contractual basis.

Ms. Taragowski (ACES) stated that the RESCs send staff out to perform district evaluations which sometimes lead to the RESCs starting a program.

Rep. Cook said that the state is required to audit IEPs. She then asked, when the RESCs audit IEPs, if they were assisting the state in their audits or if they were performing audits under their own system.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that the state evaluation is based on federal government priorities. She continued that, occasionally, when the state goes out to monitor a district, the state might tell that district to contact their local RESC for the purposes of further evaluating the district's services. She said that, for the most part, evaluations performed by the RESC and those performed by the state are separate. She added that the State Department of Education

(SDE) will complete their evaluation within a few days, whereas the RESCs can take months to complete a more thorough review.

Rep. Cook asked what the protocol was if a RESC found that there were issues within a district during an IEP review. She also asked if it would be possible for the RESCs and SDE to partner during the evaluation process to do a more thorough job.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that, if a RESC finds a problem during an evaluation in a district, they do not notify SDE, but rather create a report for the district. She continued that local boards of education and directors of special education are usually the parties who commission the evaluations, so they are usually open to taking steps to respond to any deficiencies. She said that the RESCs could attempt to assist the state during their evaluation process, but this would put the RESCs in a difficult position, since the districts are their clients.

Mr. Costa (Education Connection) stated that the RESCs are primarily engaged in support and development with local districts, whereas SDE works primarily to enforce the law. He said that the RESCs would have to be very careful if they worked with SDE during an evaluation so as not to blur these functions.

Ms. Taragowski (ACES) stated that, when asked to perform an audit by one of the districts in their region, ACES will often ask a different RESC to perform the audit in order to maintain a good relationship between ACES and its constituent districts.

Rep. Becker asked if it would make a difference if a RESC from a different part of the state performed the audit, avoiding complications to the local RESC/school district relationship.

Ms. Taragowski (ACES) answered that it would be a fair thing to say that such a change would make a difference. She reiterated that ACES currently has a different RESC actually perform the audits on districts within their region and added that the role ACES plays is in assisting the districts to implement any recommended changes in response to the audit.

Mr. Regan (CES) stated that the greatest role the RESCs play is in building capacity. He continued that the RESCs can offer districts interesting solutions to problems, since they might have expertise that the districts do not, leading to a very productive collaborative relationship.

Rep. Wood thanked the RESCs for their presentation and stated her appreciation for being here at the end of a busy school year. She continued that she liked that the RESCs worked together and that there did not appear to be a bureaucratic culture in their administration. She then asked what SWD stands for.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that it stands for “students with a disability.”

Rep. Wood asked if specialists embedded within districts were paid by the state or by a RESC.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that it varies, sometimes the RESC pays and sometimes district pays.

Rep. Wood asked if the RESCs saw any particular educational need increasing.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that mental health behavioral needs and autism were increasing. She also added that the RESCs are hearing from much younger children now.

Mr. Costa (Education Connection) stated that his enrollment was steady but that there is more pressure to do more for students. He said the breadth and depth of each need is increasing.

Mr. Regan (CES) stated that there is a lack of programming in many areas, so the RESCs try to fill gaps by working with districts to meet these needs. The RESCs do not necessarily have a student in one of their programs all year, they have a revolving door as they help to get students over an emotional hump and back into a regular education classroom again.

Atty. Klebanoff stated that he was pleased with the growth and depth of RESC programs over the years. He continued that local districts are under pressure to avoid costly private placements, yet there is a need for the services provided in private settings, so the consulting services and provision of experts by the RESCs are critical. He said that the RESCs help keep students in public schools and out of expensive private placements. He then said that he has heard parents say that they are waiting for RESC personnel in order for their child to receive appropriate services. He asked if the RESCs are spread too thin and if they need more money to keep up with demand.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) answered that most RESC services are fee for service. He also said that the RESCs try to “overbuild” their programs so they can be ramped up when money is available and when the need exists. He continued that the RESCs try not to accept students unless they know they can help them. As an example, he stated that the RESCs ramped up from 0 to 15 behavioral specialists within the last three years to respond to demand.

Mr. Regan (CES) stated that the RESCs do not act in a vacuum, noting that Connecticut Council of Administrators of Special Education (ConnCASE) has five regions and special education educators in each meet to discuss what is going on and what the current and future demands on the system are.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) suggested that it would be helpful to districts if they could apply for excess cost grant funds for support and training costs incurred to keep students in their home districts rather than in costly private placements.

Atty. Klebanoff asked if the excess cost grant Mr. Cronin was referring to was the excess cost for private placements.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) answered yes.

Mr. Filchak thanked the RESCs for their presentation and asked if the funding sources listed in the presentation were just those used for special education programs.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered no, stating that the total funding for the RESCs was represented in the presentation.

Mr. Filchak stated that the funding levels represented appeared to be very low and asked how the RESCs manage to pay for everything.

Ms. Richards (CREC) stated that the \$800,000 referenced by Mr. Filchak was a tiny component of their total funding. She added that they receive additional state grants.

Mr. Filchak asked if state grants still made up 43% of the total RESC budget.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that this was correct.

Mr. Filchak asked if this was enough funding.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered no.

Mr. Filchak asked how the RESC presenters would suggest changing the special education system we have, given that Connecticut's system is very fragmented.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that part of the challenge has to do with the fact that there are 169 different entities to deal with. Each district does business in their own way and is an entity unto itself.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) stated that every time there is budget pressure, one thing that comes up is how to save money without cutting from classroom resources. He said that the RESCs collaborate with local districts for health insurance and other administrative expenses in order to free up more money for classroom programs.

Rep. Abercrombie thanked the RESCs for their presentation and thanked ACES and EastCONN in particular for their autism centers. She then asked if the RESCs bill Medicaid.

Ms. Taragowski (ACES) answered that the RESCs do not bill Medicaid, but said that they do help support districts that bill Medicaid for RESC services.

Rep. Abercrombie said that she was working on creating a transition forum in the fall and asked if the RESCs would like to participate and if they already produce any forums on this topic. She said that there just is not enough information for families right now.

Ms. Taragowski (ACES) answered that the RESCs do work on transition issues and do hold various transition fairs that are very successful.

Ms. Richards (CREC) said that CREC conducts transition fairs quarterly, and that the frequency varies from RESC to RESC.

Rep. Abercrombie asked if the transition information is just sent to participating students, because she had not heard about these fairs.

Ms. Taragowski (ACES) answered that the districts notify students and the RESCs send information to the people on their contact lists.

Rep. Abercrombie stated that local districts do not always have experts to aid students with hearing impairments and asked what qualifications the RESC experts had.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that all RESC hearing impairment experts are certified teachers of the deaf/hearing impaired or are audiologists. She said that the RESCs also work with American school for deaf.

Mr. Regan (CES) said that CES has a full time audiologist serving 175 students.

Rep. Abercrombie said that Meriden has an autism center in an elementary school which helps to keep students in district programs. She continued that it is extremely expensive and not sustainable to place students in private programs. She then asked if the RESCs had heard of other school districts trying to create similar programs.

Mr. Regan (CES) answered yes. He said that districts were reaching out to the RESCs for help, working directly with staff, parents and students, in building programs at the district level.

Ms. Richards (CREC) stated that the RESCs could use more certified behavior analysts. She said that, in response, the RESCs have partnered with colleges to provide certification classes taught by certified behavioral analysts.

Rep. Abercrombie stated that part of problem is that not everyone doing this work is certified.

Ms. Davis thanked the RESCs for their presentation and asked, on page six of the presentation slides, if it was correct that there were 42 students listed as participating in programs at RESC head start centers.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered yes and stated that this figure came from EastCONN.

Ms. Davis asked how many students in RESC programs within the correctional system were in special education programs.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that many of the students in the correctional system were in special education programs.

Rep. Case thanked the RESCs for a great, readable and understandable presentation. He then stated that money following each student tends to be the biggest funding issue with regard to special education. He asked if the RESCs saw this as an issue.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that it is an issue for our districts and for the RESCs themselves. She continued that the unpredictability of having a very high needs student move into a district is difficult.

Rep. Case said that there was another issue related to billing Medicaid for services, which is the restrictive minimum budget requirement (MBR). He stated that he was concerned about cost but also the quality of programming provided to students. He continued that there is also a significant need to deal with transitioning students to post-special education life and parent education about this process.

Ms. Gara stated that, as it currently stands, districts can exceed the MBR, but cannot, except under limited circumstances, budget less than they did during the previous year.

Mr. Namnoum thanked the RESCs for their presentation and stated that the teachers he works with always speak highly of RESC programs. He then asked what the caseloads were for RESC special education staff.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) answered that this was a difficult question to answer because it depends on how many children are in a classroom.

Mr. Namnoum asked if it would be easier to put this together by class or category.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) answered that, for students with emotional issues, a typical caseload might be six children per staff member, but working with each one of these children is very time intensive.

Mr. Namnoum asked if the RESCs offered residential programs.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that CREC has two group homes for children with autism. She said that each facility has capacity for 6 children.

Mr. Namnoum asked how the RESCs budget for unanticipated issues that come up across the school year.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) answered that the RESCs are different from school districts because districts will always need to teach a certain grade level, while the RESCs need to change based

on the need for programming at any given moment. He said that RESC budgets are more anticipated enrollment projections than anything else.

Mr. Costa (Education Connection) said that the RESCs have more budgeting flexibility than districts because they can budget like a nonprofit and take a loss if meeting the need requires it.

Ms. Taragowski (ACES) added that the RESCs look at data from year to year and look for trends.

Mr. Namnoum asked what role the RESCs play with regard to out-of-district placements. He also asked if the RESCs were the last resort for districts before sending a student to an out-of-district program.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that the RESCs like to think they can help prevent outplacements. She continued that districts know about RESC programs and turn to them when they think the RESCs can help. She added that parents play a large role through the IEP process in determining the appropriate educational program. She then said that if a parent falls in love with an out-of-district program, that parent will often do their best to get their child into that program, whether or not the RESCs can replicate it.

Mr. Namnoum asked if the RESCs would be the place to look for efficiencies of economy in providing special education services.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that she was concerned about grouping students together solely for the sake of efficiency sake because efficiency must be balanced with providing individualized services. She said that federal law required a balance.

Mr. Rafael asked if the RESCs saw significant changes in the percentages of funds they received from various sources.

Mr. Costa (Education Connection) stated that Education Connection's funding sources are fairly stable.

Mr. Cronin (EastCONN) answered that EastCONN had recently seen an increase in local funding.

Mr. Rafael asked if RESC governing councils were entirely made up of local board of education members.

Ms. Richards (CREC) answered that voting members of the RESC councils are district board of education members.

Ms. Planas stated that ACES had been extremely helpful in her area of the state and did a great job tailoring programs to student's particular needs and ultimately, when appropriate, getting

them back into regular education programs. She continued that the RESCs help districts manage when special education students unexpectedly move into their area.

Rep. Becker thanked the panelists for an excellent presentation, stated that the working group's next meeting was scheduled for the evening of June 26th in Norwalk, and adjourned the meeting at 11:51 AM.

Submitted: Dave Desjardins