

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

MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, July 10, 2014

1:00 PM in LOB Room 1A

The meeting was called to order by Rep. Becker at 1:05 PM.

The following select working group members were present: Rep. Brian Becker (Co-Chair), Rep. Michelle Cook (Co-Chair), George Rafael, Robert Namnoum, John Filchak, Rep. Catherine Abercrombie, Rep. Michael D'Agostino, and Rep. Jonathan Steinberg

The minutes of the June 12, 2014 meeting were approved.

Kathleen Romania an Occupational Therapist for Meriden Public Schools and Heather McDonnell, a Physical Therapist for Meriden Public Schools, delivered their presentation on innovative programs they have employed to improve student outcomes. Their presentation slide show, as well as an agenda, minutes, other documents, and a video recording of the meeting are all available on the MORE Commission website which may be accessed through the following link: <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/MORE/SPED/meetings.asp> .

Rep. Becker asked if the savings shown during the presentation were a result of this program allowing Meriden to keep children out of costly outplacements.

Ms. Romania stated that was at least partly correct. She stated that part of her job is to perform assessments for students who are placed out of the district. She continued that, while present in some of these facilities, she realized that her district could do much of the same programming. She also said that all the students with a particular disability go to a particular school within district, which is not necessarily their home school. She stated that not every district is as proactive as Meriden is in getting students into the community in preparation for their transition out of the system.

Rep. Becker asked how long this program has operated.

Ms. Romania answered that the program has been operational since May of 2013.

Rep. Becker stated that he was glad to hear the presenters thinking about transition planning very early in the careers of their students.

Ms. Romania stated that she and Ms. McDonnell have been part of the Meriden school district for 19 and 20 years respectively, so even though their program is new, they were able to bring their considerable experience to bear in developing the new program.

Ms. McDonnell stated that some portions of their program have been in place before this past year, such as many of the activities at the YMCA, but they are trying to grow and develop these activities even further. She continued that she and Ms. Romania are now training their staff so that service can be delivered in the same way in schools across the district.

Rep. Abercrombie asked for the percentage of special education students who stayed in the education system until they reached age 21.

Ms. Romania answered that she was not sure of the exact percentage, but said that it was very high.

Rep. Abercrombie asked if parents knew they could keep their children in the education system for that long.

Ms. McDonnell answered that she and Ms. Romania participate in most transition meetings. She said that these meetings can last 4 hours and are thorough, with the participants going through each sphere of the student's life to discuss goals and programs. She continued that the district does have a transition coordinator who helps during the process. She also said that, during the transition process, many students will leave the district for a few days each week, but this varies from student to student.

Rep. Abercrombie stated that the director of the Meriden YMCA and the superintendent of Meriden schools are brothers, which helps the coordination between the two entities with regard to the special education program. She said that school districts cannot provide a complete transition program on their own, so the YMCA has been an excellent partner. She then thanked the presenters for the excellent job they do with their students and for going above and beyond what is expected of them.

Ms. Romania stated that parent nights in the district are amazing because parents come in very nervous and throughout the night they open up and share with other parents. She said that, when their students go to the YMCA, they are accepted and it makes the parents feel at ease as well. She said that outside the box thinking is needed to develop these partnerships.

Rep. Cook asked how students move from school to school within the district.

Ms. McDonnell answered that all the support needed for students with a specific disability is located in one school in the district. She said that this allows for more specialized programming and equipment (an adaptive playground cannot exist at every school) and allows for the development of a parent and student community.

Ms. Romania stated that not all autism students are in the same program, it depends on their specific needs. She continued that their special education programs are incorporated throughout the day.

Rep. Cook asked if the majority of the funding for this program came from the district or from a public-private partnership.

Ms. Romania answered that she and Ms. McDonnell are not part of the funding decisions made by the district, but said that they both assist with grant writing for specific projects.

Ms. McDonnell said that the district does bill Medicaid every month, and that those funds are used for supplies.

Rep. Cook asked if Ms. Romania and Ms. McDonnell worked with regular classroom teachers to give them the skills to help special education students without pulling them out of class.

Ms. McDonnell answered yes. She said that sometimes she has an entire class do physical programs and no one sticks out. She also said that she and Ms. Romania do a significant amount of in-servicing to teach the Meriden teaching staff.

Rep. Cook stated that she could see the presenters had a passion for making something that could be scary into something that is very approachable.

Ms. McDonnell said that she hoped the working group would come away from this meeting knowing that the goal of this program was for all students and people to be together and for communities to not be as separate as they once were.

Mr. Namnoum asked if the district had selected teachers for the schools that serve as special education program centers. He also wanted to know what kind of inclusion there was for these students.

Ms. Romania answered that the teaching staff is constantly testing special education students in the mainstream to see if they will be successful. She said that special education students are not always placed in the mainstream during stressful academic times, but stated that the goal was to include them as much as possible.

Mr. Namnoum asked what some of the greater resistances were to change in the schools.

Ms. Romania answered that there were a few teachers who still resist and do not want a part in the new program.

Ms. McDonnell said that she agreed with Ms. Romania, but said that they needed to keep trying to get through to teachers and that word of their success was spreading. She said that they have a significant amount of support from paraprofessionals, which is a large help. She also

said that if cannot go into a class during structured time, she will go in during specials classes, recess or gym class.

Mr. Namnoum asked if there is any way to quantify the student to teacher ratio with these programs.

Ms. McDonnell stated that there were 26 students per teacher in most classes throughout the district, but said that the teaching staff has heavy support from paraprofessionals.

Mr. Namnoum asked how therapy professionals counted in the student to teacher ratio. He stated that physical and occupational therapists were hard to find in his part of the state.

Ms. McDonnell answered that a lot of what the therapists do is extra, but they do it because they want the program to be successful. She said that they sit down at end of each year to review the case loads of school therapists and assign staff based on the numbers and the need.

Ms. Romania said that nothing compares to the experience of working with a student from the times they enter the education system at age 3 until they leave the system successfully at 21.

Rep. Steinberg said that people often spend much time discussing program efficiency, so it is refreshing to talk about program effectiveness. He continued that the presenters had established best practices and said that it would be great for this program to spread across the state. He then asked if the presenters had connected with the State Department of Education in further developing this program.

Ms. Romania answered that she and Ms. McDonnell have not approached the State Department of Education, but said that they have modeled their program to other districts, such as New Britain, Hartford and New Haven in the hope that they will develop similar programs.

Rep. D'Agostino asked what the capacity was for the Meriden program, wanting to know specifically if students from other districts could be accepted.

Ms. Romania answered that she and Ms. McDonnell have had that discussion with their superintendent and would like to explore those possibilities.

Rep. D'Agostino asked if Meriden could increase capacity and accept students from other school districts if they received additional funds.

Ms. McDonnell replied affirmatively.

Ms. Romania and Ms. McDonnell presented a video of their students doing various activities at the YMCA.

Rep. Cook stated that it would be worth the working group's time to visit the Meriden facilities discussed during the presentation. She also stated that the working group should try to find a way for this program to branch out beyond the Meriden district.

Ms. McDonnell stated her willingness to share her program with other interested parties.

Rep. Cook adjourned the meeting at 2:35 PM

Submitted: Barbara Gordon and Dave Desjardins