

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

MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, August 21, 2014

6:00 P.M. in the Auditorium of Hamden Middle School

The meeting was called to order by Rep. Brian Becker at 6:10 PM.

The following select working group members were present: Speaker J. Brendan Sharkey, Patrice McCarthy, Kimberley Planas, John Filchak, Jody Harkins, George Rafael, Rep. Brian Becker (Co-Chair), Rep. Mike D'Agostino, Rep. Michelle Cook (Co-Chair), Rep. Terrie Wood (Co-Chair), and Julie Swanson.

Rep. Becker welcomed everyone to the meeting and informed all those present that the meeting would be televised by CTN. He then announced that each invited presenter would be given the opportunity to speak for 5 minutes, and that, afterwards, each member of the public would be given the opportunity to speak for 3 minutes on the systemic challenges to special education and possible solutions. Rep. Becker introduced Speaker of the House Rep. Brendan Sharkey.

Speaker Sharkey thanked the working group members for coming to his district in Hamden. He stated that the legislature, through the MORE Commission, is looking to facilitate the creation regional opportunities and efficiencies with the ultimate goal of lowering property taxes. He continued that special education has a huge impact on local education budgets, pointing out that special education costs are often unpredictable from year to year, putting an extra strain on towns. He also stated that towns had an obligation to provide the best special education programs possible. He said that this is a very complicated issue and that the group needs to find ways to create efficiencies while improving programming. He stated that, in order to do this effectively, the group would need to hear from interested parties around the state and he commended the group members for dedicating themselves to that task. He said that the ultimate goal of this group was to compile recommendations for legislative action during the upcoming 2015 General Assembly session.

Rep. Becker thanked Speaker Sharkey for his comments.

The minutes of the previous meeting on July 24, 2014 were approved pending minor changes submitted to the working group administrator.

Scheduled Speakers:

Mr. Jody Goeler, the Superintendent of Hamden Public Schools, started working in Hamden six weeks prior to this meeting. He spoke of his experience as a superintendent in two other

districts, as an assistant superintendent for curriculum instruction, as a middle school principal, as a district director of language arts, and as a teacher. As a middle school principal, he worked with a PPT to put together a program for children with similar cognitive delays that are similar to one another. By grouping these children together, it was efficient to bring in experts to work with these students and ultimately provide them with a better program than they would have otherwise been able to access. He was recognized by the CT Down Syndrome Congress for developing this program.

He said that the current way special education is funded and the variation in cost from year to year makes it difficult to provide services to special education students. He also said that the increasing costs of special education, without a corresponding rise in special education funding from the state and federal governments, require school systems to look at dedicating less funding to other programs, such as arts and athletics programs. He is open to considering regional special education programs that address the cost to districts, but made clear that these programs must be of high quality to be successful.

He continued that, in Hamden, the state excess cost grant for special education students does not kick in until over \$69,000 have been spent on that student by the home district. He also said that Hamden is then only reimbursed at a 75% rate. He recommended that the state fund 100% of the excess cost grant and said that this would make a significant difference for the local district.

Rep. Wood asked Mr. Goeler if he had any thoughts about regionalizing some special education services.

Mr. Goeler responded that, while he was a middle school principal in Avon, schools in that area did partner with each other to provide services in some cases. He again cited the program for middle school-aged children with cognitive delays as an example. He said that this program led to the phased-in creation (as the middle school students grew older) of a program for students with cognitive delays in the high school as well. He continued that these programs were not inter-district but did work with sister programs in neighboring school districts to find efficiencies with regard to field trips and sports.

Mr. Filchak asked if there were any particular barriers to regionalism from Mr. Goeler's middle school principal experience.

Mr. Goeler stated that he was not aware of what the barriers might have been, since his focus at that time was just on his middle school.

Rep. Becker stated that regionalism could happen if high quality regional programs to which parents would agree were created. He thanked Mr. Goeler for his presentation.

Ann Sagnella is a Hamden kindergarten teacher and a parent of a child with special needs who attends Hamden public schools. She stated that Alice Peck Learning Center, the Hamden public school her daughter attended for pre-k, did a great job working with students with special needs and of helping parents work with their children at home. She said that her daughter will

be starting kindergarten in a regular classroom this year, where expectations will be high, but she is not sure that teachers are ready and properly trained to work with special education students. She continued that it would be phenomenal to have a special education teacher in each classroom where there are special education students so the special education and regular teachers could co-teach lessons. She also stated that there is a need for after school programs for special education students, such as unified sports, so they can feel as though they are part of a community with other students. She closed by saying that it is amazing how typical children and special education children work together when placed in the same environment.

Kimberly Planas, Director of Pupil Personnel Services for Hamden Public Schools, explained the innovative program in place at the Alice Peck Learning center. She said that the school includes special education students from grades pre-k to three, and includes programs such as special education pre-k, an autism/ASD class, a social/behavioral class, and general education pre-school classes. The learning center also includes regular education students, although all the teachers are special education teachers. She continued that these programs provide the intensive special instruction that the most vulnerable students need in order to be able to attend school in their home community. She said that the services provided and expert staff are on a par with many private school placements, allowing students to get the quality education they deserve without having to leave the district.

Rep. D'Agostino asked how teachers could free up more time to complete additional special education training.

Mrs. Sagnella stated that collaboration between regular education and special education teachers (having regular education teachers observe and work with special education teachers to learn how to be more effective) from pre-k on would benefit students significantly. She also said that Hamden public school resource teachers often have very large caseloads.

Speaker Sharkey asked how Mrs. Sagnella would feel about opening the Alice Peck Learning Center up to children from other school districts.

Mrs. Sagnella replied that she was fine with the school including students from other districts.

Rep. Cook asked if Mrs. Sagnella would have liked more teacher education in the area of special education.

Mrs. Sagnella replied that she would absolutely support additional special education training and believed that the state should double certify all incoming teachers as both regular and special education teachers. She said that the techniques that special education teachers use can be useful with regular students as well.

Rep. Wood asked if there were some courses that she was required to take to earn her teaching certification that she felt could be dispensed with.

Mrs. Sagnella answered that there were some courses that were not helpful. She said the one special education class she was required to take focused more on showing new teachers what special education students looked like than on showing them how to teach these students. She also stated that she wrote seventeen different papers on substance abuse as part of her certification, which may not have been an effective use of her time or the best way to prepare future teachers. She said the best way to teach teachers is to get teaching students into the classroom.

John Keegan, Chair of the Hamden Board of Education, spoke next. He reported that the number of special education students shift each year, stating that, this year (2014), there are 940 students with an IEP in the Hamden school system, compared with 869 students in 2013. He continued that finances are a big hurdle for boards of education because they are committed to providing the best services possible to all students in the school system, but they have limited resources. He stated that the school budget has recently increased about one percent each year, but that education expenses have increased at a greater rate. He also said that special education costs are unpredictable from year to year, making funding difficult to manage.

He stated that, in an effort to help manage education costs, Hamden created HCLC, the Hamden Collaborative Learning Center, which is an alternative school program for students from seventh to twelfth grade who have emotional difficulties. He said there are currently about sixty students in the program. He also stated that the school district would be paying much more to send these students to private placements if they had not created this high quality program to provide services in-house two years ago. He said that Hamden would be interested in opening up their program to students from other towns.

He said that private placements, although they may provide quality services to students, often increase in cost significantly from year to year, while the education budget increases much more slowly. He continued that providing special education programs in-house allows districts to control the costs and ensure that quality services are delivered. He said that special education costs account for a little over 20% of the annual Hamden education budget and that additional excess cost grant funds would assist the district in providing excellent services to students.

Rep. Becker asked to hear more information about the HCLC program.

Mr. Keegan answered that the program is located in an old private school building that the Board of Education leases for \$25,000 per month. He stated that the facility could accommodate double the amount of students than currently attend classes there.

Rep. Wood asked if the HCLC program included students with intellectual disabilities or if it was just for students with emotional disabilities.

Mr. Keegan deferred to Ms. Planas, who answered that the students who partake in the HCLC program have behavioral or social/emotional issues. She also said that the teachers in the program are a mix between special education certified teachers and subject area teachers and

that class sizes usually ranged from five to eleven. She added that the HCLC program will be open to students from other school districts starting this year.

Mr. Filchak questioned how towns should promote efficiency by creating innovative programs like HCLC to keep students in-house without every single town needing to create and staff its own programs.

Mr. Keegan answered that this type of efficiency works for Hamden because it is a larger district with enough students to fill a program like HCLC, but acknowledged that not every town could create such a program on its own.

Mr. Filchak asked if Mr. Keegan would like to see oversight from the state when it came to creating these regional programs or if he thought the free market should dictate where regional programs exist.

Mr. Keegan answered that if the HCLC program does not meet the demand of other towns, it will not continue to exist as a regional option.

Rep. D'Agostino stated that the \$25,000 per month cost of renting a building for the HCLC program, in the context of paying millions of dollars per year to have the same sixty students placed in a private educational setting, was cost efficient. He said that the HCLC program actually provides services cheaper than the RESCs do. He recommended that the state support programs like HCLC by offering state space to house these programs or by offering communities grants to create similar programs. He also stated that private providers do not ever have to disclose how they spent their money (paid by the state) or why they need to increase tuition.

Rep. Cook asked what Hamden charges other school districts, per student, to send their students to the HCLC program.

Michael Belden, Chief Operating Officer for Hamden Public Schools, stated that the pricing is a work in progress, since this is the first year the program will be available to students from other districts. He said that it costs approximately \$15,300 per year to educate students in the program, and that Hamden would charge slightly more than that for students coming in from other districts. He added that to place the same students in a private setting would likely cost between \$50,000-\$80,000 per student per year.

Rep. Cook asked how transportation for students attending the HCLC program would be handled.

Ms. Planas answered that the sending school districts would provide transportation for their students to the HCLC building this year. She continued that Hamden is looking to collaborate on transportation costs with surrounding districts.

Patricia Alvarez, the parent of a child with special needs who attended Alice Peck Learning Center for three years, addressed the working group next. She was anxious about her son moving into pre-school, especially because he could not communicate verbally at the time, but the extremely supportive and helpful staff helped to put her at ease. She said that attending Alice Peck also helped her son with his separation anxiety and improved his confidence and his language skills. She thanked the Alice Peck staff for going above and beyond to help her and her son.

Rep. Becker thanked Mrs. Alvarez for sharing her story.

Kimberley Planas, Director of Pupil Personal Service for Hamden spoke next. Her written testimony may be accessed on the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group website, available here: <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/MORE/SPED/meetings.asp> .

Speaker Sharkey praised Ms. Planas' passion for providing services for special education students. He said that, unfortunately, the cost of providing services must also be dealt with. He then asked if she could identify certain needs that usually require out-placement that might be more efficiently addressed by collaborative regional programs including other towns.

Ms. Planas said that some regional out-placement does happen already, and added that, if Hamden has a sufficient number of special education students with a particular need, the district will attempt to create a program to address that need effectively. She said that it is worth looking into regional program possibilities.

Rep. D'Agostino commented that each district creates its own programs or out-places students on its own. However, a regional center could share resources to provide excellent services at a lower cost.

Mrs. Valarie Coppola, the coordinator of the Alice Peck Learning Center and the coordinator of early childhood special education for Hamden, explained history of special needs programming in Hamden. She stated that she is also a trained speech pathologist. She said that the Alice Peck program was started in response to student needs within the district that could not be addressed in a regular classroom environment. She also said that some students who attend Alice Peck make so much progress that they are able to return to regular classrooms.

She continued that staff preparation and training are critical to the Alice Peck program because each day is different based on the behavior of students. She said staff training occurs once per week, three weeks a month. She continued that many teachers at Alice Peck arrange for home visits on Fridays so staff can meet with student's parents to discuss at-home coaching. She added that staff also visit other places in the community where students go after school to discuss strategies and coaching those staffs can use to work with the students as well.

She stated that more technology training is needed for both students and staff, especially training on assistive communication programs that help students to communicate.

In response to a question from Rep. Becker, she stated that there were 130 students in various programs at the Alice Peck Learning Center

Rep. Becker requested an organizational chart to explain how the Alice Peck staffing system works, the number of teacher and staff in each area and what responsibilities they have.

Rep. Wood asked whether the assistive technology training previously discussed was available but too expensive or if it was not available at all and needed to be created.

Mrs. Coppola answered that she first needs to decide what kind of training should be made available before the costs can be assessed. She said the training does likely exist.

Rep. Wood asked if training can be done regionally.

Mrs. Coppola said that it could be done that way, but the challenge is making sure that all districts in the area have the same time on the same day blocked out for training.

Julie Swanson, a professional special education advocate and member of CT parent special education attorneys and advocate, addressed the working group next. Her written testimony may be accessed on the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group website, available here: <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/MORE/SPED/meetings.asp>.

Rep. Becker asked, given federal inclusion requirements, what legislators might be allowed to do to regionalize special education programs.

Ms. Swanson answered by stating her understanding of inclusion versus the “least restrictive environment” language used in federal law. She said that the word “inclusion” does not appear in IDEA, the main federal special education law, and that the burden on school districts was to ensure that children were educated in the least restrictive environment. She continued that the least restrictive environment is different for each child, citing her son’s situation as an example. She stated that, since her son does not read or speak, sitting in a regular education classroom all day would be a restrictive environment for him. She said that the least restrictive environment for him is a private special education school (although she wished he could have been educated in his home district) where they teach to his abilities.

She said that some parents are very pro-inclusion to the point where they would rather have their child sit next to a typical student in a classroom rather than have that student receive the attention they need to develop skills. She continued that other parents will put an emphasis on skills development, it is just a difference of philosophy.

She said that the parents of a child do not need to approve a child’s placement, but when disagreement occurs between the school district and a student’s parents, either party may resort to mediation and due process.

Rep. Wood asked about the list of private special education schools that are not approved by SDE.

Ms. Swanson said that there are many private schools that exist that provide quality services and are appropriate placements for students but have, for whatever reason, decided not to apply for state approved status.

Public Comment:

Diane Purvin, the parent of a child who attended Alice Peck Learning Center spoke about how great that program was and how helpful that inclusion model was. She said that her daughter was still friends with other students that she met at Alice Peck. She echoed that additional special education training should be given to all teachers. She said that the school psychologist at her new elementary school provides the same program for all special and general education students and said that this will help to put all of the students on a more equal emotional footing.

Rep. Becker thanked her for speaking. He then entertained a motion to adjourn and adjourned the meeting at 7:59 PM.

Respectfully submitted: David Joseph Berardis, Barbara Gordon, David Desjardins