

M.O.R.E.

Special Education Select Working Group

MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, December 5, 2013

11:00 A.M. IN LOB ROOM 2A

The meeting was called to order by Representative Larson at 11:03 A.M.

The following select working group members were present: Rep. Michelle Cook (Working Group Co-Chair), Rep. Brian Becker (Working Group Co-Chair), Rep. Terrie Wood (Working Group Co-Chair), Rep. Tim Larson (M.O.R.E Commission Chair), Rep. Chris Davis (M.O.R.E Commission Raking Member), Rep. Mae Flexer (M.O.R.E. Commission Vice-Chair)

NOTE: Members of the select working group (other than Co-Chairs) had not yet been appointed. Many potential members attended in the audience.

Rep. Larson (M.O.R.E. Commission Chair) welcomed everyone and introduced the Special Education Working Group leadership team (Co-Chairs Rep. Cook, Rep. Becker, and Rep. Wood). He then gave a brief overview of the M.O.R.E. Commission, a bi-partisan and bi-cameral group formed by Speaker J. Brendan Sharkey to explore efficiencies and opportunities for regionalization amongst Connecticut's municipalities. Rep. Larson continued that municipalities are impacted by special education costs, particularly when a family with a child requiring special education moves into a district, causing a spike in that district's budget. He said that it should be the goal of this select working group to mitigate this spike, especially given a special education budget in this state of somewhere between 1.7 and 2 billion dollars annually. He concluded by stating that the group will have to reach out to people across the state to effectively address this topic that affects so many lives.

Rep. Davis (M.O.R.E Commission Raking Member) welcomed everyone for attending and thanked the Speaker and Rep. Larson for creating this Special Education Select Working Group. He also thanked everyone who applied to become a member or to present in front of the working group.

Rep. Becker (Working Group Co-Chair) welcomed everyone and recognized the other legislators present at the meeting (Rep. Steinberg, Rep. D'Agostino, Rep. Case, Rep. Fritz). He then began to discuss the origins of this working group, saying that he heard from parents at an Autism Speaks meeting this past summer and from members of the West Hartford Special Education PTA about special education issues. He further stated that legislators hear about these

issues all the time and they need to be addressed. Rep. Becker then thanked Speaker Sharkey and Rep. Larson for creating this select working group, the goal of which will be to find the most effective way to deliver special education to children in Connecticut. He further stated that he wanted to take a hard look at the deep and complex special education issues facing the working group today, but that this will not be a quick process. The working group will aim to create an initial list of recommendations by the end of the coming legislative session, and legislative action will not likely be taken on these items until the 2015 session at the earliest. He continued that this will be a deliberative process, so he hopes that even those applicants who are not selected to serve as members of the working group stay involved.

Rep. Cook (Working Group Co-Chair) introduced herself as the parent of a special education child and echoed that the working group's policy making process could take months or years. She stated the chairs' intention to hear from everyone, not just working group members, from across the state about special education issues. She also emphasized the breadth of special education issues to be examined, calling them wide and deep. The working group will address as many special education topics as it can, relying on non-working group members with diverse perspectives to educate those serving on the group. She stated that the working group would meet at least twice each month, with the goal of having at least three meetings outside the LOB: one in western Connecticut, one in central Connecticut, and one in coastal Connecticut. These off-site meetings will be held in the evening to ensure that everyone who is interested in the group's work will have a chance to be heard. She then introduced Dave Desjardins, the working group's administrator, and directed anyone looking to sign-up for the working group mailing list, suggest topics for the next agenda, or receive a copy of any handouts used in a particular meeting to see him. She also pointed out that the Special Education Select Working Group will have an online presence on the M.O.R.E. Commission website where meeting agendas, minutes, and handouts will be available digitally. The M.O.R.E. Commission website may currently be accessed through a link on the House Democrats site.

Rep. Wood (Working Group Co-Chair) welcomed everyone and introduced herself as a parent of a special education child. She also thanked Jesse Hubbard, chief administrator of the M.O.R.E. Commission, for his efforts in preparing the working group to meet its charge. She also echoed that the working group would be open to everyone's thoughts and voices as it proceeds to examine special education issues. Rep. Wood then thanked everyone who applied to become a member of the working group but stated that it would be a small group and not every applicant would be selected to serve in this capacity. She wants to ensure that members have a broad perspective, are fair minded, and come to meetings ready to work.

Rep. Becker (Working Group Co-Chair) asked other legislators who were present at the meeting to introduce themselves.

Rep. Steinberg stated that special education is often very individualized, so aggregating any functions at the district or regional level will be difficult. He pointed out that the working group will likely struggle with these issues and will need the help of those experts in attendance to grasp the commonalities between the needs of different students. He stated that his goal was not to reduce services, but to find efficiencies in the system.

Rep. D'Agostino introduced himself as someone with twelve years of experience as a board of education member. He stated that he is aware that special education is a very emotional issue. He also strongly urged the working group to listen to boards of education and special education directors to learn about the incredible breadth and depth of services offered by districts in-house. He stated that these offerings have become much more robust over the last fifteen years, and that this group should not seek to reduce any of these services.

Rep. Case stated that special education was near and dear to his heart because his brother has special needs. He would like everyone in society to work together and to have the same quality of life. To this end, he advocates for mainstreaming policies and for keeping special education in the public schools. He does not like outsourcing special education to private providers. He wants to ensure that funding issues do not trump the rights of individuals with regard to special education

Rep. Fritz stated that she has two daughters who work with special education children: one is an occupational therapist and one is a physical therapist. She stated that they have both volunteered to share their ideas with the group. She has served on the General Assembly's Education Committee for over twenty years during her legislative career and is grateful that this new working group has been formed to address special education.

Rep. Flexer (M.O.R.E. Commission Vice-Chair) stated her pride in how well the northeastern region of governments regionalizes various services in her part of the state. However, she says that school districts have yet to regionalize appropriate services effectively. She knows that some school districts specialize in some areas, while others specialize in different areas, so they should look to collaborate to create a better experience for all students in the region.

Rep. Cook (Working Group Co-Chair) stated the great passion of the legislators present was evident and that everyone involved with this working group wanted to make the special education system better. She also stated that the group's goal would be to ultimately make significant changes. Rep. Cook then pointed out that the working group's next meeting would be held at 11:00 A.M. on December 19th in LOB Room 2D. She continued that all applicants would be notified as to their commitment to the working group prior to the next meeting and asked those applicants who are selected to notify the Co-Chairs if they would

have trouble meeting that commitment. She then thanked everyone for attending and moved to adjourn the meeting at 11:31 A.M. on a motion seconded by Rep. Becker (Working Group Co-Chair).