

M.O.R.E. Commission
Special Education Select Working Group
MEETING MINUTES
Thursday, July 24, 2014
6:00 PM in Council Chambers, West Harford Town Hall

The meeting was called to order by Rep. Brian Becker at 6:06 PM.

The following select working group members were present: Shelley Davis, John Filchak, Betsy Gara, Jody Harkins, George Rafael, Mike Regan, Rep. Brian Becker (Co-Chair), Rep. Jay Case, Rep. Michelle Cook (Co-Chair), Rep. Terrie Wood (Co-Chair), Deborah Richards, Robert Namnoum and Julie Swanson.

Rep. Becker began by stating that the working group is seeking ways for the special education system to operate more efficiently and effectively. He continued that eight speakers were scheduled for this meeting and said that each would be given 5 minutes to present their comments and recommendations. He stated that, after the scheduled speakers, anyone in attendance would be given the opportunity to speak for 3 minutes on the same topic.

The minutes of the June 10, 2014 meeting were approved.

Scheduled Speakers:

Ms. Mary Hardy, a parent of a 17-year-old special education student and a founding member of the West Hartford Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA), gave her presentation. She made clear that she was not representing SEPTA.

Ms. Hardy stated that the development of the whole child is the real issue. She continued that funding is the number one problem in special education. She said that services are underfunded and that, as a consequence, districts must maximize whatever funding they have.

Ms. Hardy also stated that not enough attention was given to teaching special education students basic life skills. She added that more occupational therapy was needed for many special education students. Currently, there is an exclusive focus on academic achievement and the academic goals are often vaguely written so that any progress can be considered mastery.

Ms. Hardy continued that problem behavior in a student is often a cry for help and stated that it was important to find the cause. There needs to be more emphasis on the causes of a disability rather than solely on the disability.

She also said that more centralized special education programs are needed and that mixed environments for both children with special needs and regular students are needed.

Rep. Cook asked Ms. Hardy to speak further on the need for more occupational therapy.

Ms. Hardy explained how critical occupational therapy is to prepare a student to cope with the real world. Occupational therapy should be a stand-alone service rather than a special service.

Ms. Hardy commented that one of the best things and one of the worst things about special education is confidentiality. She continued that some parents are embarrassed to attend special education meetings, preventing them from forming a parent's community.

Rep. Case agreed there is a need for more assistance for special education students. Every student counts.

Dr. Perri Murdica presented next, commending the working group for reaching out to stakeholders.

She stated that there must be better coordination of mental health needs. Parents look to schools seeking how to navigate the mental health system and are often panic stricken. She continued that there is a need for more and better early intervention and also a need for further training for parents and school staff.

State and local government must coordinate to address the increased costs of special education. There is also a need for a more cohesive educational environment for all students in both special and general education programs. She added that both special education and many general education students could benefit from individualized education plans that include the teaching of social skills and study skills.

Rep. Becker asked how it might be possible to reconcile the "least restrictive environment" language found in federal law with a more centralized special education system.

Dr. Murdica responded that districts are required to provide a continuum of services to address the "least restrictive environment" requirement that are dependent on the individual needs of their students.

Rep. Becker thanked Dr. Murdica for her presentation.

Carrie Berman, a West Hartford parent of a teen-age son with special education needs, spoke next. She has worked with and founded organizations that provide training for parents with special education needs. Mrs. Berman also works with children who have special needs and who are under DCF (Department of Children and Families) care. She stated that too many parents do not understand the basic components of the special education system and do not know their children's legal rights.

She continued that there is a need for better education and training for parents so they can advocate for their children. Currently parents need to hire expensive lawyers or other advocates to help them navigate the special education maze. This expense often comes out-of-pocket and is unaffordable to most people.

She said that the state has many underfunded advocacy organizations that provide training to parents, but schools need to do a better job of informing parents about these

training opportunities rather than relying on parent volunteer groups for this function. She continued that parents often do not realize that parent education is identified as a “related service” under the current IDEA laws. She said that too many schools view educated and empowered parents as adversaries rather than teammates in the educational process. Her suggestion is for the state to be more proactive with contacting, training, and educating parents as well as holding schools accountable for doing the same. Schools should have a designated person tasked with communicating with parents about training opportunities.

Rep. Becker and Rep. Wood praised Mrs. Berman’s presentation.

Rep. Case suggested that there should be a handbook for parents to explain the basics of the special education system.

Mrs. Berman responded that there are handbooks available in print and online, but schools do not usually provide these.

Rep. Cook said that the legislature has required schools to provide information sessions to parents before a PPT occurs and asked if schools were providing this service and if parents were taking advantage of it.

Mrs. Berman responded that some schools are doing this, but not a majority. She said that most schools do hand out the state mandated special education handbooks. She continued that the best thing for parents was to sit with other special education parents to obtain and share information. She said that many parents do not know how to access information about special education, so a more proactive approach by schools would be helpful.

Mr. Namnoum asked if Mrs. Berman could recommend a simple and straightforward dispute resolution process that parents and schools could use to come to an agreement with regard to special education decisions.

Mrs. Berman answered that she did not know of such a system off the top of her head, but stated that both sides being respectful and attempting to preserve a constructive working relationship would help. She continued that mutual respect and having both parties understand the process would improve dispute resolution. She said that PPT facilitators are available.

Ms. Hardy stated that, in West Hartford, a new parent of a special education child is referred to the special education PTA.

Mr. Regan said that the RESCs would be making PPT management training available to special education administrators across the state.

Clare Kennedy, the Executive Director of Special Education for Hartford Public Schools, spoke next. She stated that there are currently 3,653 special education students in Hartford. She

continued that she would focus her comments on transportation, accountability and excess cost issues.

She started with transportation, stating that, during the 2013-2014 school year, \$14.8 million was spent on transportation for special education students, compared with a total district transportation budget of \$23.3 million. She said that the regionalization of transportation services, possibly under the RESCs, would save millions of dollars.

She continued that local education agencies (LEAs) are overburdened with their responsibility over special education students placed in charter, magnet or choice schools not managed by the LEA. She said that Hartford had 498 students that fit into this category. She stated that, while the district was not responsible for overseeing the programming for these students, the district was responsible for paying the educational costs and was held liable for any complaints related to the educational programming for these students. She said that the entity delivering services should become the actual LEA, not the sending district.

She also suggested that the 72% state cap on excess cost funding be lifted so LEAs could receive 100% of the grant amount.

Rep. Becker asked if federal law would allow charter and magnet schools to become the LEAs for special education students sent from their home districts.

Ms. Kennedy answered that she believed it might be possible but stated that an attorney would likely need to be consulted in order to obtain a definitive answer.

Rep. Cook asked if the Hartford school system had considered the effectiveness of regional special education centers.

Ms. Kennedy responded that the Hartford school system had not considered this but does outpace a number of students at private schools and does have a number of district-wide programs for students with similar disabilities. She also noted that she would be skeptical of a regional system, since every student with special needs is unique and requires specialized and individualized care.

Ms. Gara asked how Hartford dealt with the fact that they were liable for complaints lodged concerning students who were actually placed in magnet or charter schools.

Ms. Kennedy answered that district staff are assigned to each magnet and charter school and work closely with their staff.

Rep. Case commented that a town in his part of the state has recently saved money by purchasing vans to transport special education children instead of using busses. He continued that state law requires schools to have enough transportation available in order to evacuate everyone in case of an emergency. He stated that this was the reason that large buses can sometimes be seen carrying only a small number of children.

Ms. Gara stated that the federal law is silent on the definition of an LEA, so there is room for the state to define when a RESC, for example, is or is not an LEA.

Rep. Wood asked if Hartford had a greater percentage than surrounding towns of special education students who qualified for an excess cost grant.

Ms. Kennedy said that she expected the proportion to be similar to that of surrounding towns.

Mr. Namnoum asked about the roadblocks to coordination of transportation in the Hartford area, since three towns in his area had already coordinated their transportation.

Ms. Kennedy stated that coordination and liability were the two major roadblocks.

Rep. Becker thanked Ms. Kennedy for her presentation.

Bruce Putterman, the chairman of the West Hartford Board of Education spoke next. He stated that the volatility of school funding for special education was a major problem during the budgeting process.

He also stated that schools seem to be oriented towards academics but that some special education students really need more work on their social skills. He said that schools should not give social skill development short shrift.

He continued that the PJ case settlement needed to be re-evaluated because it was an overreaction. He said that there should be exemptions for students who are not benefitting from being in regular education classrooms and need special classes to get the skills they require.

He also said that many special education staff, including psychologists and social workers, pay out of their own pockets for training. He thinks these staff members should not have to pay this cost. He also said that districts should have supervisors for the psychologists and social work staff.

He concluded his statement by saying that he would love to see more job training and job opportunities for special education students. He said various state agencies that undertake job training and placement should coordinate better. Specifically, he mentioned "Project Search," which is a national program assisting high school students by providing job opportunities. He said there is an effort to bring this program into the state and added that the West Hartford school district employed two people whose responsibility it is to seek out job opportunities for students.

Rep. Wood questioned why districts do not pay for social workers and psychologist training opportunities.

Mr. Putterman responded that school districts could make this a priority, but it is difficult without dedicated funding.

Rep. Cook stated that, since the state is sending the district money to make sure that special education students receive an effective education, it is concerning that none of this is used to pay for educator training. She then asked how much the West Hartford school district spent on outplacements for special education students.

Mr. Putterman responded that he did not know the exact number but said that there were 56 students who were outplaced last year. He said he would provide the exact number later. He also continued that, while most school districts follow the "wait to fail" model of not providing special education services for a child until they fail in a general education environment, West Hartford has started to use research based intervention to identify when students need special education services before they fail. He claimed that this program was successful because students received preventative services much earlier on.

Ms. Davis asked how much money was spent on special education students each year.

Mr. Putterman responded about \$30 million.

Dr. Elizabeth Carabillo, the Director of Pupil Services For New Britain Public Schools, gave her presentation.

She stated that the issue of teacher preparation and certification should be addressed. She said that, specifically, all teachers need in-depth training in reading, differentiated instruction, social-emotional learning, and cultural competencies to be effective in the classroom. She continued that general education and special education teachers need to learn how to "team teach" and how to effectively interact with related services personnel and paraprofessionals. She stated that a year-long embedded coaching program for new teachers might help to improve the education system on this front. She also said that training in reading, differentiated instruction, social-emotional learning, and cultural competencies could be included as part of the teacher certification process.

Mr. Namnoum asked how embedded coaching for new teachers might look different than mentoring programs.

Dr. Carabillo responded that mentoring is not done consistently, but that coaching would encompass real-time feedback in the classroom.

Rep. Becker asked if experienced and effective teachers could serve as coaches.

Dr. Carabillo stated that the talent for coaching exists in the state, but the challenge is in figuring out how to organize and fund such a program.

Mr. Namnoum said that many teacher preparation programs do teach new teachers to team teach effectively.

Ms. Harkins asked if the coaching program would be in addition to the current mentoring program.

Dr. Carabillo stated that this program might be put in place before a teacher actually becomes certified.

Attorney Bet Gailor from CT Legal Services gave her presentation, a written copy of which may be found in the testimony section of the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group website July 24th meeting entry, accessible here: <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/MORE/SPED/meetings.asp> .

Rep. Becker asked if there were no interagency agreements between any of the state agencies involved in the special education system and if the state did not have a meaningful dispute resolution process for LEAs that want to challenge state agency decisions.

Attorney Gailor answered that, to the best of her knowledge, Rep. Becker was correct.

John Filchak asked if schools make parents aware that Connecticut Legal Services exists.

Attorney Gailor responded that Connecticut Legal Services does a lot of outreach. She said that many parents do not have access to computers and therefore cannot access all the information required to advocate effectively for their children.

Public Comment:

Colin Milne from the Connecticut Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities offered testimony, a written copy of which may be found in the testimony section of the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group website July 24th meeting entry, accessible here: <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/MORE/SPED/meetings.asp> .

Harriet Clark, a special education teacher for 28 years, offered testimony, a written copy of which may be found in the testimony section of the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group website July 24th meeting entry, accessible here: <http://www.housedems.ct.gov/MORE/SPED/meetings.asp> .

Dr. Michael Joseph, the father of an autistic child and the president of the board of directors of CT Families for Effective Autism Treatment (CT FEAT). CT FEAT is a parent organization (over 400 parents) that advocates for evidence-based research founded best practice intervention. He said that the group's concerns often revolve around the delivery of applied behavior analysis (ABA) services.

He continued that ABA is an effective way to address behavior issues and to teach, although it is a labor intensive approach. He said that, to deliver ABA services effectively, oversight from board certified behavior analysts (BCBAs) is required. BCBAs develop individual behavior plans that identify problem behaviors and steps to address those behaviors. They

then collect behavioral and educational data and interpret it for the purpose of making educational decisions for each student.

He asserted that the appropriate data is not being collected by school districts due to a lack of training (teachers and paraprofessionals need data collection training). He continued that paraprofessionals usually only receive two days or fewer of training and, as a result, they do not feel that they are effectively contributing to the educational process. He said that, even though each district is required to have a BCBA, additional BCBA's are needed to handle the workload (a ratio of 1 BCBA for 100 students will not work). He also stated that BCBA's should have the ability to modify programs based on data within a reasonable time.

He advocated for day-long summer programs for children with autism, saying that these students often have too much unstructured time to practice bad behaviors during the summer months. He added that training for parents would also help students with autism. He stated that regionalizing autism services could not only save districts money but also improve services for students.

Ms. Davis thanked Dr. Joseph for bringing the issue of paraprofessional training forward.

Rep. Cook asked whether parents would welcome regionalization into a specialized school.

Dr. Joseph responded that it would be a welcome conversation if it were shown that the quality of service could improve as a result. He said that it was not possible to create a regional school without access for students to neuro-typical peers.

Ms. Swanson said schools often resist including BCBA's, which are critical to an effective IEP. She said that, without BCBA's, students are not being supported the way they need to be.

Rep. Becker thanked all of the meeting participants. He then stated that the working group's next meeting would be held on August 21st in Hamden. He adjourned the meeting at 8:33 PM.

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