

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee

FROM: Meagan Roy, Director of Student Support Services for CSSU/President Elect, VCSEA

TOPIC: Proposed bill for Special Education Funding

DATE: February 24, 2016

Introduction:

As a special education administrator, I fully support the overall goal of creating a special education funding system that provides adequate flexibility for districts and supervisory unions to more fully implement evidence-based practices. A multi-tiered system of supports that provides intervention to prevent challenges requires a district to be able to use resources flexibly; our current reimbursement model limits our ability to be flexible. Further, as an SU who has worked with both the District Management Council and Michael Giangreco's Evolve project, I believe that providing an opportunity for more schools to benefit from the DMC work in a cohort model will be useful for schools as they move toward implementation of evidence-based practices.

The issues surrounding special education funding and evidence based staffing, however, are complex. I support the committee's efforts to thoughtfully engage in a process that will lead to more effective funding streams and provide support to districts, without rushing to sweeping changes without careful analysis of implications. The following comments are offered related to key provisions of the proposed bill:

Special Education Reimbursement Paid to Supervisory Unions rather than School Districts:

I support the proposed language that would require state special education funding to come through the Supervisory Union instead of individual member districts. The current model requires an accounting exercise in order to reflect the reimbursement as part of the SU/SD budget. Although the proposed language in this bill would not substantially change how we operate, it would serve to streamline the process of reporting revenue. With the implementation of Act 153/56 and the consolidation of special education at the Supervisory Union level, it is only logical for special education reimbursement to flow through the SU/SD.

That said, it is important that the language of the bill reflect all possible governance structures that exist now and may exist in the future, given Act 46.

UVM Study of a Census Block Model for Special Education Funding:

I fully support the appropriation to the University of Vermont to study the issue of special education funding in Vermont, including examination of a census block model. This study would help ensure that a thoughtful approach is taken in addressing the complexities of funding. The study, however, needs to be broad enough to encompass a number of possible funding models in addition to the census block model. It also requires input from supervisory-union level leadership in order to fully understand the implications for budgeting and programming. Therefore, I would ask the committee to consider the following:

Funding study should include a study of multiple funding options and should not be limited to a block grant model: In many ways, allocating special education funding by a block grant creates the kind of flexibility we need in order to fully implement the evidence-based practices that have been identified as most effective in terms of outcomes for students. However, there are possible limitations to the block grant model that should be addressed in the study. SU/SD's will be concerned with the level of funding we would draw down compared to what we currently receive in a reimbursement model. In addition, very small schools, rural schools and systems in high-poverty areas rely heavily on the extraordinary cost reimbursement. The UVM study should not be

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limited to investigating a single funding structure, and should instead include a number of models that are feasible in all types of Vermont communities (rural/urban/suburban; low and high-poverty areas).

In 2012, the Vermont Council of Special Education Administrators developed a White Paper on Special Education Funding. The recommendations generated from that report are highly aligned with elements of Nate Levenson's work as well as the proposals of this committee. I would encourage the committee to consider those recommendations in their proposed language:

- Fund special education services using a block grant formula that considers the total number of children served by the district in total (ADM) with a weighting factor for students with disabilities. The weighting would be different depending on the child's specific disability. Maintain funding mechanisms for residential students, state placed students, very high cost students, and continue existing processes for unexpected and unusual cost requests.
- Require a specific evaluation for the need for 1-to-1 paraeducators that considers 1). The student's capacity for independence; 2). Goals and objectives in the IEP designed to measure independence; and 3). A "fading plan" designed to gradually reduce adult support;
- Require all schools to implement:
 - Research or evidence based tiered interventions such as Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS); Universal Design for Learning; and Differentiated Instruction.
- Improve training and/or professional development for Principals and other administrators serving as the Local Education Agency (LEA) representative at Individual Education Program (IEP) team meetings.
- Increase technical assistance from the Department of Education for high cost school districts / supervisory unions.

Membership on the study committee: It is imperative that a committee of stakeholders be engaged by UVM as they undertake this study. At minimum, representation from both special education administrators and school business managers in Vermont is necessary (we would recommend at least two of each). These members should be ongoing members of the UVM team as they engage in the work.

Appropriation for 10 Supervisory Unions/Districts to Retain District Management Council:

As a Supervisory Union who has undertaken work with both the District Management Council as well as with Michael Giangreco's Project Evolve, I fully support any endeavor that will create tailored opportunities for districts to work together as they engage in the systems change necessary for the implementation of evidence-based practices. I believe districts benefit from collegial feedback and collaboration in order to learn from each other; developing a cohort of SU/SD's working together with DMC is one way to create that opportunity.

It will be important for the committee to carefully consider the financial resource dedicated to such an endeavor, though, especially given that a local "match" would be required for schools to participate. SU/SD's would need to be confident that the investment in the process would lead to the kind of support they'd hope to gain as they

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develop their own implementation plans. The committee should also consider how they would select the 10 schools to participate, and whether priority would be given to districts based on demographics.

Establishment of Agency of Education Position:

The scope and magnitude of systems change necessary to implement such sweeping changes (both in funding structure and in implementation of evidence-based practices) is significant. Given that, I fully support the development of an Agency position in support of this work. Most important, it will be critical for the Agency to recognize the interconnected nature of this work (funding, DMC) with existing foci (proficiency based learning, personalized learning, MTSS, etc). Research is clear that the most successful educational systems are those that are integrated, reforming and redefining instruction and intervention for *all* students without creating “silos.” The Agency needs to model that integration in their work; this integration should be a core focus of any new position created to oversee the effort.