

TESTIMONY PROVIDED TO: House Education Committee
FROM: Elaine Pinckney, Superintendent CSSU/President, VSA
TOPIC: Proposed bill for Special Education Funding
DATE: March 10, 2016

Introduction:

I am in support of creating a funding system for the provision of special education services that provides flexibility for supervisory unions/districts to more fully and equitably implement evidence-based practices and focus on early interventions as singularly as we focus on eligibility decisions. Our current model limits our flexibility in significant ways, including limiting our ability to provide interventions prior to special education eligibility. We are in a fix-it model rather than a prevent-it model. If special education dollars could be targeted to our multi-tiered system of supports, we could intervene before costly and intensive services were required.

In the past few years, CSSU has worked with the District Management Council and Michael Giangreco's Evolve project in an effort to more effectively and efficiently provide educational services to all of our students. This work points us toward a different funding model – one that allows for flexibility and targeted interventions.

However, I understand that funding issues are complex and it is important to understand impacts surrounding a change in funding mechanism prior to making wholesale changes. A thoughtful review will help ensure that there are not unintended consequences.

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 having state special education funding go directly to the Supervisory Union instead of individual member districts. This is a reasonable and logical outcome of the implementation of Act 153/156. This eliminates the need to do a separate accounting exercise to reflect reimbursement.

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

I support the appropriation to the University of Vermont to study and evaluate the feasibility of implementing the census block model of funding for special education in Vermont – including a focus on the advantages, disadvantages, and policy considerations. I would hope that the study would not be limited to census block model funding but would also consider other possible funding models that may exist regionally and throughout the country. I think it would be very important to include supervisory-union level leadership (Superintendents, Student Services Directors, and Business Managers) - in the development of the study and in the analysis of the results - to ensure that the implications of particular recommendations on actual school districts is understood. An understanding of the level of funding each Supervisory Union would receive in a block grant model compared to current funding would be a critical piece.

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

I support providing this support for 10 SU/SDs. The results of this work could be transformational for Vermont. Having worked with DMC in 2014 as part of a comprehensive systems analysis of CSSU general and special education service delivery model, I can attest to the depth with which the work is done and the seriousness with which the results are received. The systems change necessary for the implementation of evidence-based practices requires a deep understanding of what it is we are doing currently, how it can be done differently, and understanding the advantages both in terms of supports for students and cost containment of the choices we make. I believe that the districts fortunate enough to participate in this work will benefit from the cross- SU collaboration and problem-solving that will naturally develop.

Establishment of Agency of Education Position:

This will be a significant undertaking for the Agency of Education. If we are to expect the implementation to be well designed and coordinated, it seems evident that an agency level position would be required. We are in the midst of many important systems changes. It will be important for the agency to connect this work in a coherent and cohesive way with current initiatives – proficiency-based learning, personalized learning, MTSS, etc. Our best work will occur when we implement best practices for all students rather than separating them into fundable “silos”.