

MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the Senate Appropriations Committee
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Secretary, Agency of Education 
SUBJECT: Recommendation on H.859, Section 3. APPROPRIATION FOR
EDUCATION SERVICES
DATE: April 27, 2016

Purpose:

This language appropriates up to \$200,000 from the Education Fund to support management consulting services related to best practices for investing special education dollars in special education service delivery. The purpose of these dollars is to purchase technical expertise for a sample of Supervisory Unions and Districts, so they can more effectively and efficiently and equitably target their special education dollars. Any improvements they make will be documented and shared with the rest of the state as models.

Rationale:

Our internal analysis of data at the SU level suggests that a strong driver of differences in costs may actually be differences in local practices and circumstances. Some districts are more likely than others to rely on outside placements. Some districts are more likely to have their more costly students end up in state placements, for which the costs are born by the state. Some districts use services like those provided by SLPs in ways that are more costly and not supported by research on best practices. Some districts rely heavily on paraprofessionals and others do not. The kinds of consulting services addressed in the current proposed special education language could address some of these underlying cost drivers.

Several SUs and districts have received outside consulting and in the process, identified substantial opportunities to reduce costs and improve services, and developed an improved understanding of best practices. The proposed grant would provide for more systematic improvement in Special Education costs and services. We have heard strong interest already from several systems about this opportunity. They realize we have room for improvement with respect to the design and delivery

of Special Education services, and they are hungry for access to high quality technical expertise and opportunities to redesign their strategies.

The work with a consultant would generate some model strategies that can be disseminated and implemented statewide. In addition, the report required in the proposed language would satisfy an unfunded reporting mandate in Act 46 of 2015.

Note: This purpose is distinct from the purpose of Section 2, which funds a study of possible benefits and risks of alternative special education funding models.

Proposed change:

We suggest the committee delete this current language:

In no event shall the Agency include a district or supervisory union that does not provide an equivalent match equal to 50 percent of the value of the consulting firm's services to the district or supervisory union; the other 50 percent being funded by the appropriation provided in this section.

And replace it with the following language:

The appropriation provided in this section shall fund up to 50% of the work in each SU, however to the extent the Agency finds additional funding it can increase the state funded percentage for districts or supervisory unions the Secretary deems in need.

Rationale:

The power of a matching grant is that it enhances the commitment of a participating SU or District in the product of the grant, which in turn enhances the likelihood that local leaders will implement any suggestions that come out of the consulting process. Some members of the legislature have expressed concern that some districts may struggle to make the matching grant. Having the language be a little less specific gives us flexibility to implement a sliding scale if warranted. In addition, we are exploring ways districts might be able to tap federal dollars to support this work, and need language flexibility in order to be able to access any available dollars, if and when they are identified.