



VERMONT PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION
MEMO
From the Desk of Jay Nichols

To: House Education Committee

Subject: Testimony: UVM Special Education Report

Date: January 12, 2018

Dear House Education Committee Members,

Please accept the following as my testimony in response to the Vermont Special Education Funding Study and recommendations within that document submitted by Tammy Kolbe and Kieran Killeen from the University of Vermont. Additionally, I share a few concepts that I believe have merit related to the Report, Special Education in Vermont overall, and also the recent report from the District Management Group.

Additionally, the Vermont Principals' Association Executive Council has not met on this report and issue so testimony is mine alone, although it is informed by conversations with principals, special educators, superintendents and special education administrators.

Need to change current special education funding system

- The current system has limitations such as:

- A built-in incentive to “find” kids eligible for special education that may not actually need an Individualized Education Plan(IEP)
- A fiscal model that is increasingly consuming a larger share of local and state resources within available education funds
- A cyclical reinforcement of outdated and unsound instructional techniques (e.g. special education students being taught mathematics by a special educator with little math content expertise as opposed to an individual with strong math content.)
- **Recommendation: I strongly agree that the funding mechanism for special education should change.**

What should a new funding system look like?

- It should provide maximize flexibility for principals, special educators, and central office leadership to provide services in a manner that makes sense at the local context for ALL children
- It should allow for better sharing of staff and resources and eliminate unnecessary administrative functions that are time-consuming and do not forward student learning
- It should be a funding mechanism that allows for movement toward educational best practice as opposed to serving as a barrier in many instances as our current model often does (Please see District Management Group report and recommendations)
- **Recommendation: Implement a census-based model of special education funding as recommended by the authors of the report.** Exactly what that model should look like I think warrants great discussion. The new funding mechanism would need to have a transition period and we should move conservatively in implementing it. The goals should be better outcomes for all kids by giving locals more flexibility to provide the educational supports students need. Any “savings” should be used to strengthen instruction overall. I believe in the long-term an improved funding model with improved instructional practices for struggling students will help to better contain growth in education spending and save money but that should not be an initial primary goal

Key Considerations for a census-based model

- Make sure the base amount per child makes sense – do not underfund this, if anything, “overfund” the first few years to make sure our most vulnerable students and schools are able to meet their obligations to provide a Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) for ALL students
- Provide more financial support to systems with higher levels of poverty
- Provide schools with maximum flexibility in the model so that they can use resources in the manner that makes the most sense for the students they serve
- Continue to provide an Extraordinary Cost protection. Consider following changes:
 - Add a yearly inflationary amount that reflects rising costs - \$50,000 is too low to have 90% reimbursement

- Considered phased system: e.g. If a program costs \$50,000 the state reimburses 75%; if a program costs \$60,000 the state reimburses 80%
- Develop scale that incentivizes keeping students as close to home school as possible when students need high cost programs
- The incredible increase in the percentage of student programming that qualifies for this extraordinary cost is a function of the \$50,000 threshold not changing for a very long period of time AND the greater needs students are regularly bringing to the school house
- Make sure the switch to a Census Model is coupled with instructional practice change at the school-level as recommended in the UVM report (pg. 5)
- Make sure any action doesn't take away from Federal funds provided to VT for special education. Although this may be a small percentage overall, we do not want to leave these resources on the table
- The predictability of funding in a census model will be beneficial in budget development processes
- Providing increased funding for mental health services for families and children will take pressure off schools who are currently providing services and levels of mental health support that takes away from their primary mission of education

Finally, go slow. Proceed with caution. Remember, the other two states that have this type of model (New Jersey and California) have millions of students across their states. With our small school systems, we need to make sure we buffer our lack of scale in terms of student numbers with sound public policy that is thoughtful and cautious.

Respectfully submitted,

Jay Nichols