



VCSEA Testimony to House Education Committee - Special Education Funding, February 23, 2017
Jo-Anne Unruh, Executive Director

VCSEA appreciates the opportunity to testify about potential special education budget adjustments. We acknowledge this committee's dedication to equity in education as well as the pressures placed on this committee to commit resources in the most efficient and cost effective manner possible. VCSEA agrees with the goal Governor Scott reiterated in his inaugural address of the importance of attending to our most vulnerable children, and we fully support the commitment to all children to close achievement gaps and provide the "first class education" for all.

We agree with the statement in Executive Summary in the Picus Report of 2016. "Policy-makers should proceed cautiously in attempting to achieve savings because the complexities of school finance may lead to unintended consequences." As school finance is complex the impact on other parts of systems must be taken into account when changes to one component, such as special education, are considered. Reductions to the special education budgets within the overall educational finance structure in Vermont is both premature and too narrow a target for overall positive system change for reasons addressed as follows.

- **Both the Special Education Funding Study and the District Management Council's work in ten supervisory district pilot sites has just begun. This important work, championed by House Education, is in its early stages of operation.** These are both critical foundational components for assessing and implementing future structural and funding changes. Findings from these valuable initiatives are anticipated to contribute meaningfully to greater accountability within each district's system of support and to an informed road-map for addressing overall school, including special education, funding.
- **Act 46 work across Vermont in consolidating supervisory unions into larger school structures is in process but not yet complete.** Resulting efficiencies of scale and improvements to distributed leadership structures and instruction across the system cannot yet be meaningfully assessed as to financial consequences. To recommend cuts to special education funding now would obscure the assessment of financial and achievement results of this major educational system initiative.
- **The addition of universal high quality Pre-Kindergarten education to the overall public educational system and the requirements of the collaborative work with community providers has had significant implications for deploying special education resources across districts and private community providers.** Assessment of the results of this major initiative is very much in progress. Given the mix of rural and urban, large and small districts and economic variability of the communities involved the analysis of data is critical. The Picus Report model "... assumes a full day Pre-K Programs located in a public elementary school and available to all children currently enrolled in Vermont school districts." Vermont's voucher model is very different from what is recommended in the Picus Report and adds tremendous complexity to the Pre-K system.
- **Equalizing the financial playing field for communities remains a powerful goal of education in Vermont.** Arbitrary cuts to special education throughout the system would have highly disproportionate impact depending on size of the community and would create further inequities in funding streams. The appropriate level of care for small districts would be compromised where transportation cost decreases and economies of scale in delivering appropriate services remain difficult to realize. Tax rate pressures are not helpful in this regard.
- **The universal level of instruction must be improved throughout the education system.** The quality of first instruction is the primary driver of achievement for all students including students with disabilities. While

continued discussion about special education services is necessary, the numbers of students identified, and the cost and level of service needed is directly correlated to the quality of first instruction. The DMC study is anticipated to show this correlation and must be considered as we address funding for special education.

- **A lack of a comprehensive interagency strategy for addressing severe emotional and behavior issues beyond the use of individual paraprofessionals and individual behavior interventionists is persistent.** The school and community lack of capacity in meeting the mental health needs of students disproportionately impacts special education costs. A concerted effort around support to Vermonters and Vermont's children specific to mental health and wellness is an essential component and is directly tied to the cost of special education in Vermont. This is a larger interagency issue that needs addressing through interagency commitment and careful design. The Report on Act 68 of 2013 regarding school-based mental health and substance abuse services study sheds light on how greatly schools and special education absorb the costs of mental health children's services.
- **Special Education Service Plans are required of every Supervisory District and Supervisory Union by October 15 of the year prior to implementation and may be overestimating the need for funds necessary when compared to actual expenditures in Special Education.** These often reflect over budgeting due to local concerns about having sufficient resources in the following year. Guessing about what children will move in and out of the district a year ahead of time may be a more accurate exercise in larger educational system than in small districts where the enrollment or move of a single student with multiple and complex needs can cause dramatic upward or downward swings in the special education budgets. Special education funding projections based on actual special education expenditures are more likely to yield realistic budget estimates. The confirmed year end Special Education Expenditure Report, particularly if compared and equalized over several years, would yield more accurate budgeting trends. This would also eliminate the need for the submission on Service Plans which are not only an inaccurate projection of expenditures but are also administratively very time-consuming.

The Picus Report recommends a number of strategies in the Evidence Based School Improvement Model; each of these is a strategy built on the recognition of the interconnectedness of all components of the schools' function. Although the implementation of these ten strategies can be predicted to yield large gains in student performance, none of these strategies focus on special education services or funding alone. These strategies include: analysis of all students' data, setting higher goals, good instruction and effective curriculum, investment in teacher training, providing help for struggling students within the regular education environment, restructuring the school day to provide more effective ways to deliver instruction, providing strong leadership that is "dense" and "distributed" and creating professional school cultures where school professionals "...accept responsibility for student achievement results."

The Community High School (CHS) of Vermont is a program that is life-saving to young adults who need a last chance at education and realistic transition into adult life with qualified teachers and community supports. These are struggling and vulnerable students; success within the Community High School saves dollars that will otherwise very likely be spent in prisons, mental health services and welfare costs. The concept of reduction of funds to this population seems counterintuitive to the statements of our Governor as well as our mission to underserved populations in the state of Vermont.

Additionally, we believe it is important that the capacity of the AOE be increased and not decreased. The implementation of Act 46, Act 77 including Flexible Pathways, Personalized Learning Plans, Dual Enrollment, and the Community High School of Vermont, and the Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS) and Act 166 -Pre-K program have stretched the AOE resources beyond its current capacity.

Altering the funding structure of special education now would be premature and very concerning. The good work that has been done by the Vermont Legislature to study special education funding would be derailed by a sudden change in the present funding structure. Careful steps are recommended by the Picus Report with regard to funding changes.