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Notes for Testimony to House Education Committee regarding the District Management Group Findings and the recent UVM Study on Special Education Funding

Introduction

My name is Vicki Wells and I am the Associate Superintendent of Student Services at Addison Central Supervisory Union. I have been in the position now for 14 years. Prior to that, I worked for 10 years at the Agency of Education. I have been a classroom teacher, a special educator and a paraprofessional. I say this to give context to the many perspectives I have of our education system here in Vermont.

I was around in the 1990s when Act 230 was legislated. The goal at that time was to increase the capacity of the regular education system to work with a wider variety of students in the general education classroom, reducing the number of students requiring special education and thus reducing special education spending. While that shift did reduce both numbers and costs, we saw a significant rise in the number of paraprofessionals working in our systems.

Here we are almost 30 years later looking to shift practices in a system that has again developed and solidified over decades. Decisions made on a daily basis simply perpetuate our current system as trying to shift a system one decision at a time will not lead to change. For second order change to occur, we need to make multiple and complex changes throughout the system, providing the leadership and support necessary to allow the change to be sustainable.

The findings of the DMG Report, both at the local and state level, align with many of the ideas put forward in the UVM Funding Study. Together, they provide concrete suggestions for making second order change at the local and state level.

District Management Group

ACSD has been working to build a comprehensive system of support for all students over many years. We were a pilot 7 years ago for the Vermont Integrated Instruction Model Grant. VIIM focused on high quality first instruction, interventions that met the needs of the learner, differentiated instruction, and data-based decision making while incorporating the tenets of Response to Intervention and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support frameworks. We were part of this pilot for three years and then continued our work with the Agency of Education

for a few years under a broader MTSS model.

As a district, we still grapple with many of these issues. In addition, ACSD recently consolidated from seven towns and 9 schools to one district. As part of the consolidation effort, we have been working to develop more cohesive, consistent systems across ACSD. We received our preliminary DMG report in June of 2017. They reviewed and analyzed our current practice for each of 6 key questions:

1. Do elementary schools provide time outside of the literacy block for struggling readers with and without IEPs to receive additional support?
2. At the elementary level, do struggling readers with and without IEPs receive support from a teacher skilled in the teaching of reading?
3. Do the middle and high school grades provide extra time daily for struggling learners with and without IEPs, with a focus on reading and math skills?
4. Are teachers with deep content expertise in math and reading supporting struggling learners with and without IEPs at the secondary level?
5. Across all levels, is there a thoughtful and proactive approach to behavior support as it relates to both mild-to-moderate behaviors and severe needs behaviors?
6. Do the schools embrace inclusion practices?

The goal of the study was to create common knowledge of how struggling students were supported in ACSD. The DMG report places great emphasis on many of the same components as Vermont's Multi-Tiered System of Supports. DMG emphasizes the importance of high quality first instruction through the general education classroom, “in addition to” time for intervention from highly skilled teachers with deep content knowledge, a collaborative approach to social and emotional supports, and specialized instruction from highly skilled professionals for our most intensive needs students.

The report provided a depth of information, analysis of our current practices, and given our resources, areas for potential change, further discussion or consideration. The report indicated opportunities for improvement in each of the 6 areas. This will require a critical look at current practices and perspectives. We are excited about the opportunity to develop systems of supports that are aligned while at the same time shifting our system from one that is reactive to one that is proactive. We anticipate that the DMG report will be helpful in continuing to shift our systems moving forward.

The UVM Study aligns with and can help support some of the key findings in the DMG report.

UVM Study

Providing a census grant for funding based on the count of all students in a district, rather than on the number of special education students takes away any perceived incentive to over-identify students for special education.

In addition, this type of funding system lends itself to the flexibility needed for early intervention to prevent students from becoming identified for Special Education. However, the range and needs of special education eligible students vary significantly based on the identified disability, therefore considerations based on disability categories should be implemented to prevent significant disparities when providing services to students in different disability categories. Instituting a census model for special education based on ADM would require a weighted system regarding individual student services/disabilities to determine appropriate allocation.

Geographical location in the state is also a factor as some regions have more resources available to them than others.

A separate funding process for residential students would be vital along with the continuation of current funding mechanism for state placed students, the continuation of a funding mechanism for unexpected and unusually high cost requests, and acknowledgement that the varied costs for related services create difficulties in an LEAs abilities to contain costs.

The census model with flexibility could allow support for the Multi Tiered System of Supports thus deconstructing the current silos in service delivery models and could lead to more inclusive models.

However, a shift in our funding formula, will not, in and of itself, shift practices. The system we have were created over decades and will take time to deconstruct. Changes will need to occur in regular education to address underlying issues that place many students in special education.

High quality first instruction and high expectations for all students are at the foundation of an effective, responsive and sustainable MTSS system. Inclusive systems must be designed to promote student independence while building academic, social and emotional competence.

A commitment to high quality instruction requires instructional competence grounded in strong and deep content knowledge.

CLOSING

There has been a long-standing need to control special education spending. Along with the spending concerns is the effort to decrease the number of students identified as eligible for

special education.

We need to enhance regular education's ability to provide for all students and create a learning environment where, in the best of all worlds, there would be no need for a student to be “categorically eligible” or labeled in order to get the services and supports they need to succeed.

Years of tinkering and looking for accountability have not changed the paradigm of the “us (general education) versus them (special education)” education systems. A census based funding formula could move us toward a “universal and more inclusive education system”.

I believe that changes in the special education funding formula and accountability system will lead to all students receiving the services and supports they need to succeed. I would caution, however, that a shift in our funding system with the potential for a significant reduction of funds without attention to an enhanced general education system that provides high quality first instruction, interventions provided by skilled teachers, and a focus on social and emotional learning will be detrimental to an already stressed and struggling system.