

Testimony to the House Committee on Education  
Chair Kate Webb  
Submitted by Miriam Stoll  
February 15, 2019

Good Morning Chair Webb and Committee Members,

Thank you for inviting me to testify regarding H. 140. My name is Miriam Stoll. I am the parent of two children -- actually now young adults -- who are served by IEP and 504 Plans here in Vermont. I also am a member of the Vermont Developmental Disabilities Council (VTDDC) and currently serve as Chair. I mention this because in many ways the VTDDC is similar to the Advisory Council on Special Education, and my experiences with the VTDDC inform much of what I will say today.

I will start with a heartfelt thank you to this committee for putting forth H. 140. At first glance it is important because of the compliance issues with the current system. However, a closer look shows it to be much more than that. H. 140 assures that the Agency of Education and the State Board of Education will have access to the voices of those who know best and care most about special education, the students themselves, their families and dedicated professionals in the field. This is particularly critical right now because of the census based funding bill passed last session and the accompanying shift to a multi-tiered system of support in all Vermont schools. While the census bill was comprehensive, it is a sea change and in the next few years difficult decisions and unforeseen challenges will arise; as specialists and experts in special education and the needs of children with disabilities the advisory council can provide crucial guidance.

A second reason that I am thankful and hopeful about H.140 is more subtle but perhaps even more important. While the current IEP process can work well, and many kids get what they need and are entitled to, there are examples throughout the State in which an IEP team is divided; often the system itself sets up parents and school personnel to be at odds with one another. Currently, there is not a forum for parents and students to work alongside school and agency personnel to make the system better for all. H. 140 provides a way for all stakeholders to listen, communicate and create together. Not only will this result in higher quality services for all children but it is an opportunity for collaboration and mutual respect.

I truly believe that the impact of H.140 could be very positive for Vermont's schools. In order for this to come to fruition, however, the advisory council has to operate in an effective and productive manner, and to meet the guidelines and goals specified in H. 140 and the Federal guidelines (300.167) that underlie it. I would like to highlight a few issues that merit discussion by this committee.

By statute a majority of the advisory council must be individuals with disabilities and their families. There are a range of other mandated members and the result will be a large working group. The VTDDC, which I chair, has a similar make up.

Having such a large, diverse membership results in rich discussions and better outcomes but challenges as well, most notably to ensure that all members have the opportunity and feel able to participate and be heard. The VTDDC has adopted *inclusive practices* regarding how we run our meetings, structure discussions and distribute materials, among other things. These practices are codified in our Council bylaws. It is imperative that the advisory council take the same approach. **To ensure that this happens I suggest that this committee add to H. 140 explicit direction that accessible and inclusive practices be mandatory.**

Another challenge that arises is to ensure that all positions are filled, especially those for self-advocates and family members. The VTDDC has a dedicated membership committee and allocates staff time to recruit and vet new members, and to ensure that our membership reflects our charge. We also do not allow members to fill two roles (i.e., parent and administrator) as this dual allegiance introduces competing priorities for those members, potentially reducing the strength of self-advocate and family voices. **I urge this committee to include in H.140 a budget to fund member outreach, and also ask that H.140 state explicitly that dual roles are prohibited.**

Another lesson that I have learned from serving on an advisory body is that the structure of the organization matters. H. 140 specifies that the membership will elect its Chair, and this is also true of the VTDDC. To ensure that the self-advocate and parent voice are front and center, VTDDC bylaws specify that the Chair must be a self-advocate or family member. Further the VTDDC has an Executive Committee appointed by the Chair that meets regularly to maintain momentum, set agendas and ensure smooth operation. **I ask that this body stipulate in H. 140 that the Chair be a family member or self advocate and that the advisory board be required to have an Executive Committee with a membership that mirrors the council (that is, a majority of self advocate and parent members). Also, to further increase the effectiveness of the advisory council I request that H. 140 increase the minimum yearly meetings from 1 to 3.**

My last point today has to do with the specific goals of the advisory council, which are far reaching. Both H. 140 and the underlying Federal regulations identify that the new body has an advisory role for both the Agency of Education and the State Board of Education, and in this role will identify unmet needs, review rules, regulations, standards and guidelines, as well as comment publicly on these, and provide advice on the State plan and coordination of services. To be able accomplish this charge a robust flow of two-way communication from the panel to the AOE and the State Board is imperative. **I strongly urge you to add to H. 140 an expectation that members of the AOE and State Board will meet with the Chair and/or Executive Committee of the advisory council several times a year outside the regularly scheduled meetings.** This will ensure that the advisory council will not be a reactive body or miss the opportunity to bring good ideas forward, and it will be able to offer guidance when and where the policymakers need it most.