

Special Education Task Force Minutes

September 13, 2023

9:30 AM -11:30 AM

1. The Task Force Meeting was delayed, one of the panelists is caught in traffic due to bad weather.
2. Introduction of all in attendance (both in-person and on Zoom) took place.
3. Superintendent Panel on Recommendations for Special Education – Maureen Brummett – Newington Public Schools, Christine Carver – Bethel Public Schools, Leslie Torres-Rodriguez – Hartford Public Schools
 - a. Introduction of the Superintendents took place:
 - i. Christine Carver
 1. Currently the superintendent for the Bethel Public Schools.
 2. Christine started her career as a special education teacher. And did it for 12 years. She then progressed into the supervisor of special education and then a director of special education.
 3. Most importantly, Christine is also a parent of an adult child with a disability who was educated in the Connecticut public school system. Christine has a son who is now 27, with an intellectual disability and autism.
 4. Christine feels like she has a different perspective because she has experienced special education services as a parent and also as an educator.
 - ii. Maureen Brummett
 1. Superintendent of the Newington Public Schools
 2. Also has a Special Education teaching background. She has taught in Waterbury, New York, Washington, and California in various capacities.
 3. She served as a special education supervisor and director in Plainville for eight years.
 4. Maureen has a nephew who is now an adult with autism. His trajectory is an important reminder for her about what both parents and professionals go through.
 - iii. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez
 1. Superintendent of the Hartford Public Schools
 2. Leslie has a social work background and has taught social and behavioral sciences at the local community college for seven years. Those two are a great mix in forming what she does daily as a superintendent.
 3. Both of Leslie's boys are neurodivergent young men, and she brings a different lens to the work.

iv. Questions:

1. In your day-to-day work, how do you think about special education? Is it a totally separate thing or is it just a part of the continuum of educational services?
 - a. Leslie - It is a continual; however, sometimes it feels like we are managing. It is part of a continuum of service, and we have to make sure that our multi-tiered system of support is clearly defined and that there are processes and structures so that we can be responsive based on data across the entire continuum.
 - b. Maureen - It is part of a continuum. It is a very important part of any board of education programming. It is one of the bigger budget line items. It is something that we pay a lot of attention to. It is important that we invest resources into special education so that our kids are well served. Overall, she feels it is an important component for any school district to do well.
 - c. Christine - I agree with what Leslie and Maureen stated. Ensuring students with disabilities receive quality, appropriate public education is a major priority of our district.
 - d. It has been said in the Task Force that you can't have a good Special Education program unless you have a good general education program.
 - i. Christine - It starts with what we call Tier 1 instruction in terms of all the core content areas and elective programs. What programs and services are we providing to children from age three to ensure we meet kids' needs? What are our interventions? How are we responding to children's needs as they start to experience difficulties, whether it's academic, behavioral, or neuroatypical? When we start to see patterns where they may have challenges within the regular classroom, what is our response to that? Then, ultimately, a referral system and child find practices that, when necessary, we are providing those services into Special Education.

- ii. Maureen - Received a call from the State Department stating that the achievement gap between special education and regular education had diminished significantly. They wanted to see what she was doing. What happened was Tier 1 had gotten way more consistent in the curriculum, and there was more predictability. When you went from Class A to Class B, you saw very similar instruction, which hadn't happened before. Maureen brought regular education teachers and curriculum teachers to that meeting because it was more function of once Tier 1 is stable and productive, your special education needs become less intense.
 - iii. Leslie - It exists within a larger ecosystem of programming and operations, and so making sure that the structures, the processes, and then the elements of the instructional core, the curricula, the pedagogy, all of those things have to be true and implemented with fidelity.
- 2. Budgetary discipline is, obviously, a critical part of your job. Yet, a free, appropriate public education for students with disabilities is a federal entitlement. Are you able to control special education spending in the same way as you can control general education spending?
 - a. Christine - Yes, I believe you are. The best way to curb costs in terms of placement of students is by developing the capacity of the district to meet its needs. The quality of programming has to be there. You must build up the capacity of your own staff. Make sure your special education teachers are cross-trained and can provide a plethora of services, whether it's for students with autism or students with social-emotional behavior challenges etc.
 - b. Maureen - Having high-quality district programs is your best way to contain costs. We struggle with escalating costs because some parents expect a higher level of service than maybe is necessary for their child, and a lot of times, we agree with this because of the due process situation and burden of proof issue. It has become harder to retain teachers to teach in our ESY program, and we have had to raise the pay.

- c. Leslie - It plays out differently for Hartford. Hartford operates within an ecosystem of school choice, so we are responsible for those costs for all students. We are talking about $\frac{1}{3}$ of our budget. Leslie has a 450-million-dollar budget. Of that, 150 million dollars is used for special education, and about 20-22 million in transportation alone. If it were not for in-district programs, we would be responsible for about another 30 million dollars. We know that tier 1 instruction supports, to do it well with fidelity and sustain those programs also costs money. It is a collision every year for Hartford. Every year, Leslie has had to mitigate anywhere from 15 to 20 million dollars and ensure they maintain the integrity of the programming and the services for students at the center of that challenge.
 - d. ECS goes straight to the town. It offsets the overall budget in the tax base and the community but it doesn't go directly to the schools.
 - e. The variants in charges that districts get are outrageous. In Newington, the district is responsible for the students who are in magnet schools. They are responsible for their special education costs, and what Maureen gets billed for a paraprofessional is what a teacher costs in her district.
 - f. In terms of what the State can do, it would be nice to have some more offsets from the State because we all have now upwards of 15% of our population, and that is an average. Some districts are higher than that. It has a huge impact on the district.
3. We have heard of students made eligible for special education so they can get needed services that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Is this widespread?
- a. Christine - Just speaking for Bethel, there are a small number of kids. We have a comprehensive intervention program. Kids can get literacy, math, and intervention support with behavioral for all of the tiers. Where we need help is wanting to offer more intervention services. We are limited by the amount of interventionists we have or specialists that we have that can provide support.

- b. Maureen - I won't say that either for Newington because there has been the SRBI development or multi-disciplinary systems. Parents do trust that the child is getting those services without the need for an IEP. Where the costs start to escalate are existing special education students and the types of services are appropriate, and what might be more than is necessary to educate the child to make reasonable under the Federal law, making reasonable progress in light of their services.
 - c. Leslie - We have seen a few cases in which open-choice placement in which when we do a deep dive case review, we question at the district whether or not that would have been a referral for special education. Is it an issue of lack of culturally responsive programming for that student? Leslie does not have a data point, but she has had specific cases in which, when they have done a review, they would wonder.
4. Special education teacher shortages are severe. Why is this? What steps can we recommend to alleviate this problem?
- a. Maureen - Special education teachers need support. They are dealing with the most challenged populations in the districts. Special education teachers need to get trained, be part of teams, part of PLCs, In terms of paperwork, we are still determining how to rectify this. It is a historical issue. Typing up an evaluation or doing IEPs are very time-consuming components.
 - b. Christine - The job is way more difficult than when she was a Special Education teacher. The level of challenges, whether an academic issue you're trying to remediate or behavioral, is much different from 10-15 years ago. Christine is highly concerned about the birth to 3 population coming in. During Covid, they didn't get the services that they needed, and they weren't in preschool programs because a lot of parents felt uncomfortable putting their children in social settings. Mental health services for children in the State of Connecticut are deplorable. It takes so long to get an appointment for parents to address their child's needs. We have a legal, ethical, and moral responsibility to address those issues. But until the State takes the mental health of children seriously, outside of what the school can provide, we are going to struggle.

- c. Leslie - With regard to ensuring that our educators are supported, we have been doing that in the last two years, specifically through special education coaches. Those services will not be available a year from now because it lives in our ESSER funding. We currently have 37 vacancies in Special Education, which is better than last year but still a high number. There is workaround pipeline development taking place to make sure there are steps for our paraeducators to become certified educators, but it all takes time. There is no immediate fix. Besides making sure that we provide professional learning and create a culture in which special education teachers and paraeducators feel supported in multiple ways.
5. Currently, paraprofessionals are at the bottom of the pecking order in terms of pay and, often, respect. Yet, they are critical to making the special education system work. Should we be looking at some certification requirements for paras?
- a. Leslie - The lack of pay is significant for what we ask them to do. Hartford is at about \$30,000 for the higher level. What does that translate into in an hour-to-hour pay scale?
 - b. Christine - Bethel is at a similar cost. They provide full health insurance to paras as well. The overall cost to the district is about \$60,000 a para. We struggle to keep paraprofessionals. They are working very closely with very challenging students.
 - c. A question arose regarding the caseload of special education teachers.
 - i. Maureen Brummett responded that several teachers that they hired in Newington this year came from districts where their caseloads were exorbitant and they were burnt out. They were looking for a smaller caseload. Urban districts that have a 35 kids on caseload are just undoable. You can never feel like you are getting anywhere with the children.
 - ii. Christine - it has come up in negotiations. We did try to deal with it by hiring more special education teachers to lower caseloads. It didn't end up becoming a contract issue but we did agree that we were going to have regular conversations. Coming up with hard and fast regulations is not wise because it is very dependent on the student population that you are serving.

- iii. Leslie- the pay scales are initially the first trigger that we hear from staff that causes the move. That is not something that Leslie can control at the moment. We currently have a teacher who went to another district, received their increase in steps, and is now back at our doorstep saying I know I left in June, but I'm ready to come back. So now we have to determine whether or not to welcome this teacher back with a \$14,000 pay increase while everyone else has stayed with us right along with the same salary. It is hard for us to get there without also thinking about how we leverage some more equity.
 - iv. Lisa Hammersley - When the General Assembly thinks that they're providing full funding for excess costs because of the timing of when claims come into the State of Connecticut. It could result in increased claims and, therefore, reduction across the board for excess cost payments. So, in the statute, there's language that states that when the State appropriation isn't sufficient, all grants will be reduced to equal the appropriation. We could recommend eliminating that language, so it'll force the State to fund up to the percentage they intend. Or now, according to the tiers, have the State create a deficiency in that account that would need to be addressed later on.
 - v. In the future, Andy would like to get a teacher from Hartford, Newington, West Hartford, etc. to talk about how their jobs are different.
 - vi. Christine Carver suggested that Andy or the Task Force come and visit the district. She would be happy to set up some focus groups for the Task Force so they can see the programs that are offered, talk to the staff, and talk to paraprofessionals to see what they're going through on a day-to-day basis.
6. Would a more robust system of Response to Intervention reduce the need for special education?
7. Equipping students with disabilities to live and work as independently as possible is one of the key goals of the IDEA. Yet, these sorts of transition services are not an area that schools have traditionally provided. Should we be doing transition to adulthood in a different way?

- a. As a parent - when you leave the school system, you fall off a cliff. The state needs to look at adult services. It feels like they put it back on the district. Once they leave the school districts, there is almost nothing for adults with disabilities.
8. There is a considerable amount of scholarly work on the benefits of early interventions. Yet, most districts provide less than full-time preschool. What do you think about moving towards universal preschool?
- a. Christine Carver - philosophically, it is huge. It would be a game-changer. Enrollment is increasing drastically. We just wouldn't have space.
 - b. Maureen - Structurally, we tried to do a lot of shifts. Maureen was able to do universal pre-K in Plainville with a smart start grant and another grant that she was able to leverage, but those have all dried up. I just opened two full-day, full-week Pre-K's in Newington. Hopefully, next year, with the change in the Kindergarten eligibility age where you looked at my kindergarten teachers that are Pre-K certified to see if we can leverage that, but that might not be sustainable. Pre-K is essential to the well-being of our kids and for equity purposes because if kids have access to PreK, those gaps often do not form.
 - c. Leslie - We have a unique challenge also in Hartford. We have 10 PreK classrooms across our district. About 330 slots which are not full. We have magnet schools that offer Pre-K programming. The challenge is that we charge our neighborhood school families a sliding scale fee. And, even if it is a \$3 to \$5 charge, that might be a challenge for some of our families whose income is \$20,000 a year. There are barriers at play when you look close. The other piece is in the City of Hartford, we have many community-based centers, and while there are slots there, those experiences are also different. There is an internal competition in the city where we are recruiting, and the community-based centers lose their staff to us in our schools. It is a challenge in multiple ways. But PreK is a foundation.
9. If you had your dream, what would you want this Task Force
- v. Funding (has a huge impact)
 - vi. Burden of Proof
 - vii. Don't lose sight of the implications of marginalized communities.

- viii. Culturally responsive pedagogy needs to be part of this discussion because if the education in tier one isn't such that it meets the needs of all of our cultures, we will only see these rates go up - not because of special education issues but pedagogy issues. There are cultural nuances that play out differently in a classroom: the pedagogy and the instruction to delivery. The adults in the classroom see students through one lens. That creates a very myopic response, whether in the intervention or the referral.
- ix. Teacher training - more teachers that look like the kids - policies - it is beyond teachers - all adults that the students deal with - the organization of culture

4. Where Are We Going with Moving Forward on Recommendations? Andrew Feinstein, Fran Rabinowitz

- a. Proposal for three days of hearings, to be held at the Legislative Office Building, where we will gather insights from various stakeholders within the special education system, such as Superintendents, School Board Members, Special Education Teachers, Paraprofessionals, Special Education Administrators, APSEP's, District Business Officers, Parent Advocates, Students, Board Lawyers, Parent Lawyers, Private Evaluators, and Related Service Personnel.
- b. What are your bold, realistic recommendations moving forward?
 - i. Patrice McCarthy - The subcommittee met last week. Lisa, Jason, Mike, Patrice, ? Came up with a list of recommendations (Andy suggested in writing)
 - 1. Support for the continuation of full funding ECS - removing the cap on that grant
 - 2. Look at establishing a weight in the ECS formula specifically because we lost that. The theory is that the ECS grant is 20% of that compensation for Special Ed cost, but that's only a theoretical idea that is now 15 years old.
 - 3. Establishing a model state contract for private special education services
 - 4. We are looking at establishing a recommended service charge for various services. We hear a lot about the variation in terms of costs that a district might be paid to the same provider for different students, receiving very comparable services, and certainly are differences among districts, what they are being charged,
 - ii. By November, we would like to have all the recommendations on the table. Get into the legislature in February
 - iii. Fran recommends looking for smaller class sizes - 15 kids in a class - individual programming for each child.
 - iv. Tara - the intensity of services that some students require should change the teacher's caseload.
 - v. Stay interviews - make more positive rather than why you are leaving.

- vi. Andy - how can we propose class size without incorporating the intensity of services?
- vii. We are opening ourselves up for liability - forcing them while we still have staff shortages
- viii. We need to start thinking forward. There are immediate needs, but we need to start thinking forward also.
- ix. What is a case manager, and what does a case manager do?
 - x. What is the purpose? Tara Flaherty - attracting and retaining teachers.
 - xi. Andrew asked Ajit for data
 - xii. Susan Yankee - school districts ask regular substitutes to handle special education classrooms. Substitutes don't want to take those assignments. Some toolbox is needed if you want substitutes to handle special education classrooms.
 - xiii. Alicia Bowman - it is a different time - now we look for a body that will keep kids safe.
 - xiv. A review of caseload policies - will be emailed to Fran and Andy to share with the group.
 - xv. Structurally what is the problem with Special Education (Big Areas)?
 - 1. Funding
 - 2. Kids in Poverty and kids of color do not get the same services.
 - 3. Town-to-town and district-to-district services are different.

5. Next Meeting- Tuesday, October 10, 2023 – 9:30 AM @ CAPSS

- a. Will bring some recommendations to the table by the October 10th meeting.
- b. Would like to do three hearings in October to hear how the system could improve. Partially to get the information and partially to get the evidence.
- c. Fran - have done feedback sessions - have done on Zoom - Recommendation times for different groups.
- d. Andy would like it to be covered by CTN and would like the information out there
- e. Listening tours and access are much greater via Zoom.
- f. Charter Schools are not reimbursed for special education - Bigger issue - level of reimbursement for charter schools.
- g. 23,000 for students outside the district versus 19,000 for students in the district.
- h. An intern from Andy's office will be asking you the names of stakeholders that should be involved.
- i. We will need some help from some different groups.

In Attendance:

1. Adler, Jason
2. Bowman, Alicia
3. Brummett, Maureen
4. Carver, Christine
5. CT-N
6. Cole, Dawn
7. Ditrio, Tony
8. Feinstein, Andrew
9. Flaherty, Tara
10. Flippone, Rosalie
11. Grove, Mike
12. Hammersley, Lisa
13. Helene, Karen
14. Klimkiewicz, Bryan
15. Lussier, Jennifer
16. McCarthy, Patrice
17. McKay, Sheila
18. Rabinowitz, Fran
19. Tartaglia, Heather
20. Torres Rodriguez, Leslie
21. Turner, Amy
22. Wanzer, Stephanie
23. Yankee, Susan