



NEW JERSEY ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

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Testimony Regarding Special Education Joint Committee on Public Schools March 22, 2017

Submitted by: Dr. Gerard Crisonino, NJASA Special Education Committee Chair

I am honored to speak before this esteemed committee on the matter of Special Education services in our New Jersey Public Schools. First, by way of introduction, let me tell you a little about myself. Currently, I am the proud Director of Special Education in the Jersey City Public Schools meeting the daily needs of 4000 plus Students with Disabilities (SWD). I am the recipient of the 2015 New Jersey Special Education Administrator of the Year Award, as well as a representative of special education on the NJSBA's special education committee and the Committee of Partners on the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Moreover, I Chair NJASA's subcommittee on special education, and it is in that capacity that I come before you today.

As you are cognizant, New Jersey currently has approximately 250,000 students who receive special education services on a daily basis. Despite learning, physical or behavioral challenges that often impede their school progress, they possess a myriad of strengths and talents that equal or oftentimes exceed their typical peers. However, for many, the realization of their dreams can only be met through the delivery of specialized programs that target their individualized needs while fostering their unique growth, and this is our challenge.

Today, I would like to address what I believe are three areas of concern to not only those students and families, but to the thousands of hardworking, dedicated professionals who toil each day in the quest to ready our students for a productive life. Specifically, I would like to discuss the funding of programs and services, the importance of preparing our students for post-secondary success in a very competitive world that oftentimes values uniformity over individuality, and finally the need for a more fair and educationally useful statewide assessment to drive instruction.

Having served on my local Board of Education for the past thirteen years, I am acutely aware of the financial burdens placed upon both the taxpayers and local educational agencies as escalating costs and unfunded mandates tax our fiscal resources even greater than ever. While the ever rising cost of delivering a free, appropriate, public education to Students with Disabilities can exhaust a significant amount of a District's budget, it can not be ignored that anecdotal evidence suggests that the complexity of the disability of our students has dramatically increased over the past years. Indeed, the need for individual aides for such issues as mobility, the need for in-school individualized nursing services, and the increased demands of occupational, physical and speech therapy to assist the student in his/her daily school functioning, when one can find such professionals, while enabling more and more students to receive their

instruction in the Least Restrictive Environment, has exponentially driven the cost of educating these students to new levels. Although, as professionals and advocates for our students, we welcome the ability to provide the necessary tools for most of our students to remain in inclusive settings, funding issues often complicate the provision of such services. I am aware of one particular District that expended over one million dollars in individualized nursing services last year, reflecting a seventy-five percent increase over the past few years, in order to maintain students within district settings.

Complicating this is the ever-increasing rise in Out of District (OOD) tuition rates, sometimes up to ten percent a year, for those students whose disabilities are so significant that providing an in-district education would be prohibitive. Thus, despite most school districts having created local program options that allow their Students with Disabilities to remain in their home districts, thus resulting in less students being enrolled in OOD schools, their budgets see no relief due to escalating OOD tuitions that far outpace the normal rate of cost increases. Hence, these spiraling tuition rates, coupled with the rapid rise in high-priced related services to meet many a student's physical and learning demands, necessitates the importance of maintaining an adequate funding formula that affords our most vulnerable children a parallel educational experience.

Secondarily, while the aforementioned allows for equitable educational options, one must examine whether our educational philosophy truly readies our students to become productive members of our community; which is our ultimate goal. Specifically, I call into question the frequently quoted education mantra of "preparing our students to be College and Career Ready". While none of us would argue that ultimately this does need to be the focus of our schools, I oftentimes wonder if the educational pundits do not really mean, "preparing our students for a Career in College". Indeed, for many of our SWD, as well as large numbers of their general education peers, a traditional college experience may not be in their immediate future. This begs to question if indeed we are properly focusing on the strengths of all students as we have reduced programs and funding for career pathways that historically helped us to provide our children the skills needed to engage in meaningful and successful careers in non-college related fields. When did it become unpopular to pursue employment in technical careers, many of which are the foundation of our great economy, whether it is in such fields as electricity or plumbing, computer technical science, or even culinary arts. Yes, most of our schools offer a few educational options in these areas, and indeed our County Technical Schools do exceptionally well training students in such fields, but robust training programs within most of our schools, of course coupled with traditional educational classes, have been decreased as budget constrictions occur. Thus, gone are many of the vocational training programs that so many of our children need, and, indeed, our rapidly changing economy demands.

So, as our great Country hopefully strengthens its position in the global marketplace, let us invest in our children, both those with and without disabilities, to take advantage of career options that better fit their unique capabilities.

Finally, in order to properly determine the efficacy of the instructional programs we offer in each of our Districts, one cannot argue that a common measure of learning readiness is not a useful tool. However, our current Statewide Assessment, the PARCC, places our SWD at a distinct disadvantage while providing little instructional usefulness to our

educational programming. For instance, as you are aware, students receive these assessments based on chronological measures that seek to determine how proficient a particular grade-level student is on his/her current chronological level. While for many this seems quite logical, as we need multiple sources of data to assess our instruction and curricula offerings, for those SWD it is oftentimes an exercise in futility. Indeed, by the very nature of many of our students, who require special educational instruction at their cognitive or functioning abilities as opposed to their chronological levels, would suggest that a large portion of these students would not meet proficiency levels. Take, for example, a thirteen year-old severe learning disabled student who is functioning not on the seventh grade level, but, say, a third grade level. While the quest of his/her Individualized Education Plan would be to enable him/her to approximate grade level learning as best he/she can, it is pretty clear that his/her proficiency on a seventh grade assessment would not be very realistic. Perhaps, due to splinter skills, he/she may be able to show some grade level knowledge, but in most instances, this assessment would yield no real diagnostic data that would assist the teacher in developing useful instructional programs. In fact, in most circumstances, such an assessment serves only to frustrate the student and further deflates his/her self-esteem that might already be fragile due to a learning disability. Hence, it would be much more logical to create a tool, perhaps adaptive in nature, that truly assesses if learning is occurring; for is that not the logic behind statewide assessments? Currently, for those students who exhibit significant cognitive delays, they receive their assessment through the use of the Dynamic Learning Maps. However, students with Mild Intellectual Impairments are expected to be assessed using the PARCC. This alternate tool allows for data to be gathered in an adaptive manner; thus, yielding more useful information that benefits the student and does not just meet a one-size-fits all criteria.

So, in summation, let me thank you for allowing me, as a representative of NJASA, to address the importance in considering the increased educational costs in meeting the needs of a significantly more disabled student population, while developing additional vocational options to better prepare our students for post-secondary success, in any school funding formula that you might consider. In addition, any consideration to a fairer, more educationally useful statewide assessment to drive instruction, perhaps adaptive in nature, would truly be time and money well spent.