March 4, 2011

RE: Public Hearing Testimony re; HB6380 Proposal to Consolidate Board of Ed and Services for the Blind (BESB)

Good evening Senator Prague, Representative Hamm, Representative Villano and members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Kristen Giantonio, I live in Bristol and I am a mom of a child who was born with a rare disorder that has compromised her vision. She has been receiving services from BESB since she was three months old. She is now school aged and her assigned Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) has worked with us through her school transition and with the school on a weekly basis to ensure that the appropriate methods, accommodations, instructional material, Braille materials and accessibility measures are being met as a part of her educational program.

When I read this bill, on paper, it looks like BESB will simply be divided and the parts assimilated into other agencies. And nothing is supposed to change. The proposed cost savings of 4 administrative personnel comes to about $288,000 factoring out federal support dollars. **But in fact, there will be no cost savings; it will even cost the state more.**

By splitting the agency into two parts, very expensive resources will have to be divided up, resulting in the need to duplicate services, equipment and personnel. Highly specialized skill sets and training of the BESB staff will be fragmented across two organizations and there will be a loss of expertise in both places if they are split apart. There will be losses in purchasing function and the securing and allocating of federal dollars will be impacted. Continuity of service will be compromised. Needs of this community are like concentric overlapping circles depending on when the person is rendered blind – whether they are born with it or they acquire it through injury or disease. The cost of reproducing these services in two different agencies is huge and will easily deplete any expected savings by such a merger.

Since my child was born, I've had to become an advocate, a doctor, an educator, a lawyer, an insurance rep, and a master financial planner but most of all I've become an expert at "reading between the lines". It's clear to me that this is about putting forth the illusion that the Governor is "shrinking the government". Splitting the agency will result in reduced programming for their clients. Putting the TVIs under the State Department of Education (SDE) is really a deceptive short term plan. This is an agency that does not provide direct services of any kind or have any knowledge of the education of children who are blind. They are not prepared to implement the kind of programming that BESB clients' need. Under their own admission the last time a consolidation was proposed, the SDE said they would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services – this is the scenario I am reading between these lines. **Although the intent might not be to impact services, the result will.**

The implications of this are frightening to the BESB families and will cost the towns much more in the long run. Towns are not in a position to hire their own TVIs for 1 or 2 students in their community which will likely result in no services. And honestly, the current services are not enough due to cuts in funding to this agency during the Rell Administration. Caseloads are already stretched. Connecticut has no school for the blind. The public school systems have been relying on BESB services for TVI, O&M Instruction, Braille instruction, voc rehab, etc., for **decades**. There really is no other resource pool for these types of services in this state. For towns to take any of these responsibilities over is **unmanageable** and **cost ineffective**. Recent testimony by Phil Streiffer, Superintendent of Schools, Mayor Art Ward and Senator Jason Welch, all from Bristol have already appealed to the legislature for unfunded mandate relief and this is just where these services are headed under this plan.

May I remind this committee that the IDEA Amendments of 1997 include a specific provision with regard to safeguarding educational instruction in Braille. Braille has been a very effective reading and writing medium for many blind and visually impaired persons and can be the key to literacy and employment. Factors such as shortages of trained personnel, the availability of alternative reading media or the amount of time needed to provide a child with sufficient and regular instruction to attain proficiency in Braille **may NOT be used to deny Braille instruction. Timeliness** of implementation by trained personnel is also protected in these amendments. Jeopardizing these rights protected in the IDEA statute by impacting these services in any way will only open the door to more Due Process hearings for violations of a Free and Appropriate Public Education. I have attached details of the Student vs. Town of Fairfield case (06-134) as a stark reminder that these cases have been won – and won recently. To the tune of over $100,000 per year to send the aggrieved child to Perkins School for the Blind because the district failed to provide FAPE.

I feel that the shortsightedness in this legislation will cost the taxpayers far more in the long run and will compromise the learning, literacy and employability of children and adults with blindness. Please provide the Board of Education and Services for the Blind the opportunity to continue with its mission as a standalone agency. A mission that has endured and succeeded for the last 118 years – the mission of ensuring that my daughter and the blind community receive the education, supports and independence that are needed to lead full and independent lives before permanent mistakes are made and futures are jeopardized.

Respectfully,
Kristen Giantonio
Mom and Advocate for my 4 year old Superhero.....