

Testimony on Bill # 6380—An Act Concerning the Budget and the Consolidation of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind into the Dept. of Education and the Dept. of Social Services.

Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the committee. My name is John Reilly and I am here to testify in opposition of the planned division and consolidation of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) as outlined in Bill # 6380.

I am a certified teacher of children with visual impairments who has served children from Birth to age five at BESB for 28 years. I am also the Preschool Unit Coordinator for preschool teachers at the agency.

If you allow this division of our agency services, it will have an impact on the quality of services to blind and visually impaired children and their families. Dividing our agency will fragment the services as well as reduce the efficiency of service delivery to blind and visually impaired children and their families. Over time, I believe it will also cost the state more money than the anticipated savings.

Within a single, comprehensive agency, Children's Services is able to share efficiencies with all of the other divisions of BESB. Our shared services include:

- An assistive technology lab
- Low vision center
- Our Braille unit and library
- A shared data and intake process
- An agency embosser (\$50,000)
- Efficient and timely purchasing of specialized equipment
- In-service training for school district personnel
- A professional resource library
- And coordination of low vision services for our clients.

In addition to these operational efficiencies, we are able to share our expertise across divisions for planning and service provision including transitional services between divisions and in-service planning for school personnel across the state. The plan to divide our agency does not to foster program efficiencies.

In addition to operational and program efficiencies that will be impacted with this plan, there are questions that come to my mind as to the cost of implementing the division of BESB. It is my understanding that the cost savings calculated under the consolidation and division of BESB is about \$400,000 (4 salaries). But this appropriations bill does not consider the following expenses that would be incurred with the division of the agency.

1. Moving expenses for some or all of the agency personnel
2. A new Braille embosser(\$50,000) to produce Braille materials for children
3. The cost to set up a new client data system at the Dept. of Ed.
4. Lease expenses (a new 5 year lease was just signed). Do we break the lease and how much does it cost to do this?
5. Space and moving expenses for the 60,000 volume Braille and Large Print library
6. Space to conduct student programs including the use of a kitchen facility for Activities for Daily Living
7. Space for in-service training for district personnel
8. Space for the storage of specialized materials for loan to students
9. Space for our professional library
10. Office space for 43 current Children's Services staff

In addition, there are probably other miscellaneous expenses that will occur as a result of the division of our agency. It seems to me that it will cost the state more to divide our agency than to keep us as a stand alone agency.

Who at the State Dept of Ed. has the experience and training to administer the specialized educational services to the blind and visually impaired? Our acting Executive Director has had years of knowledge and expertise in working in the blindness field. He is an able administrator and has implemented extensive efficiencies and accountability procedures during his tenure.

The State Dept. of Ed. is responsible for distributing funds to the state's school districts and is not involved in delivering direct services for individual students. This merger does not fit in with the current role of the State Dept. of Ed. There are no detailed plans proposed to integrate educational services for the blind and visually impaired into the Dept of Ed and July 1, 2011 is fast approaching.

BESB has been in existence since 1893. It has demonstrated that it is a lean, accountable state agency that serves a low-incidence population with highly specialized needs. I am confident our acting Director can certainly find the additional \$400,000 savings in our budget without disrupting services to our clients in the state. Keep us together so we can continue to provide services to the children and families we serve and help the state to save money in these difficult fiscal times.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

John Reilly East Harford, CT