

March 2, 2011

Dear Legislative Members:

Please do not pass House Bill #6380!

It has come to my attention that House Bill #6380 proposes eliminating BESB and dividing it between the Department of Education for Children's Services and Department of Social Services for voc-rehab teaching, adult services, mobility, purchasing, etc. Although this bill proposes monetary savings through the elimination of four positions at the administrative level, in the long run, this proposal will cost the state money due to duplicated services - not to mention the significant and serious threat to client services.

My son, this past Wednesday, March 2nd, had his 4th birthday. He was born with congenital glaucoma is blind in his right eye and 20/400 or worse in his good eye. He has had 5 surgeries since birth. We have received services from BESB since Pierluca was a year old and without the expertise and dedication of his assigned BESB teacher and the support of the rest of BESB, he would not be who he is today...and he is only 4 years old. To split up BESB as we know it would seriously affect how our children will do in life!!

BESB has participated in all transitions for Pierluca to date, taught me to teach him to navigate playgrounds, be able to use all of his other senses to compensate for his poor vision, have made my little 4 year old a confident independent little boy! His BESB teacher attends his gym classes, preschool classes, provided insight and training to the school teachers onsite and also through BESBE workshops. Mobility experts have assisted us in training and positioning the environment for the highest independence and success. All of these services are individually based and as such require individually tailored services as have been provided by BESB to date.

Pierluca performed in all areas (fine & gross motor skills, verbal, etc. in the 3-5 year old levels when he was 2!) This was due to the support and training to me and him from our assigned BESB teacher, workshops, BESB support networks and home visits from BESB for my son.

I have yet to visit a school that is prepared to have a visually impaired child in its classrooms; BESB is the link for success here. The thought of having Pierluca start grammar school without that support is very scary, indeed. In a year, he will need to learn to read, he will need resources, technology, focused care. Without the specific focused and individual services provided by BESB, a little boy who is now so advanced can easily fall into the cracks and fail.

Being blind or visually impaired does not mean that you are limited in life - it just means you are blind or visually impaired. BESB has strived to assist the individuals it serves to be all they can be. Please, for the sake of my son's future and all those others children and adults that are serviced/or to be serviced by BESB, do not pass this bill.

Though written with the best of intentions, this bill will eliminate the high quality, continuous "birth to death" services that have benefitted the people of Connecticut since 1893 - the oldest continually operating state agency for people with vision impairments in the United States. Let's not change something that obviously is working for the CT community!

Below are some implications of the proposed bill:

- Eliminating BESB and splitting it between the Department of Education for Children's Services and Department of Social Services for voc-rehab teaching, adult services, mobility, purchasing, etc. By splitting the agency into two parts, resources and assets will have to be divided, resulting in the need to duplicate services, equipment and personnel at the two sites. Right now, BESB shares a braille unit, which produces braille for both children and adults and a professional library. BESB also shares a low vision center and an assistive technology lab. The cost of reproducing these services is huge. For example, just the cost of one braille embosser (the machine that prints documents generated in print on a computer in braille), which is currently shared by all of BESBE is \$50,000. Duplicating this in another location is just one of multiple expenses. The low vision center is filled with closed circuit tvs and other adaptive equipment. One CCTV can cost \$3000, while specialized software costs around \$1000. Braille note takers cost approximately \$6000. To set up both locations with this equipment and hire the personnel to support it would cost far more than what is projected to be saved.
- Eliminating BESB and dividing the agency (as described above) will result in reduced programming for it's clients. Currently teachers, technologists, vocational counselors, mobility instructors and others employed at BESB often work together to provide high quality programs for agency clients, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and school district personnel. These programs include parent programs, vocational, technology, student daily living skills, sports, weekend programs, summer programs, transition programs, teacher in-services, OT, PT and PE teacher trainings, paraprofessional in-services, CEU trainings and deaf-blind/multiple disabilities workshops. BESB personnel are able to provide these programs because we work closely together and share our resources and expertise.
- Moving the Children's Services division of BESB (the teachers) to the State Department of Education (SDE) This is a serious concern! SDE is an agency which provides monitoring and evaluative services. They provide no direct services and have no experience with the needs of children who are blind or visually impaired. Moving Children's Services to SDE has been proposed in the past and, at the time, the commissioner of the SDE told legislators that SDE had no desire to be in the business of direct service - and that if they were asked to administer the TVIs, they would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services.

This is a frightening scenario for BESB families - for my family -for my little boy Pierluca, as well as for towns, who cannot afford to employ a TVI for 1-2 students. There is also NO plan for how appropriate TVI services would be provided for children under the age of three.

- Space is an issue/concern. The braille and large print library at BESB currently includes over 60,000 volumes, which are loaned out to students, as needed. Does the SDE have the facilities to house these? Volunteer braillists also produce braille for children and adults within the braille unit at BESB. Could SDE provide space for these dedicated volunteers, who save the state countless dollars by producing braille volumes in-house? There would also need to be space for 43 current Children's services staff, as well as a plan for providing all of the daily living skills programs currently provided for both children and adults at BESB. Would SDE install kitchen facilities for daily living skills training - or would those programs be deemed "too expensive"???

- In the currently proposed consolidation plan, purchasing services of BESB go with the adult services division to DDS - but no provision is made for purchasing essential equipment and materials for children, including brailers, CCTVs, braille notetakers, etc. How would the timely provision of these essential materials be funded and ensured?

These are just a few scary implications for this proposed legislation. I've only touched on a few. As a citizen of Connecticut and the mother of a child who is part blind and visually impaired, I beg you to find a better way. My son and all of the other children BESB services are part of Connecticut's future and they can grow to become independent, self sufficient individuals with the continued support of BESB as it exists today. The adults that are currently serviced by BESB are part of Connecticut's present and can continue to be/become the best they can be with the continued services from BESB as it exists today.

I thank you for your consideration and attention to this important plea and hope that you have a better understanding of how this bill would harm my little boy and those that receive/will receive the wonderful support of our existing BESB.

Attached is a picture of my beautiful little boy. BESB is in large part responsible for that great big smile on his face...

Sincerely,

Mabel Arteaga Balestra
Pierluca's mom

