Testimony for Raised Bill No 6501: An Act Concerning Delays in the Evaluation and Determination Process for Students Suspected of Requiring Special Education Services

3/4/11

For the esteemed Committee on Education:

I support the Raised Bill No. 6501 because I have personally witnessed delays with determining if a student is eligible for special education services in my role as a public school consultant for students struggling with reading and writing issues.

I am convinced that delays in recognizing special education needs of children are due to a misunderstanding of scientific research-based instruction and the SRBI process by many school districts. The Connecticut State Department of Education's document *Using Scientific Research-Based Interventions: Improving Education for all Students, Connecticut's Framework for RTI*, August 2008, provides viable criteria for scientific research-based instruction that should occur within core general education practices particularly in the early elementary grades, K through Grade 3. Scientific research-based reading instruction in the early grades consists of complying with the basic alphabetic principle that letters were designed to represent speech sounds. Therefore, instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and word structure, such as syllable types, are crucial components of early reading instruction for all children. Young students need to develop automatic use of these underlying reading skills to become automatic word readers that, in turn, facilitates comprehending text. Understanding the meaning of words that are read contributes to reading comprehension as well. Viable research confirms that reading and spelling support each other so that in the early phases of literacy instruction students should be working on the same word structure for both reading and spelling. The original intention of the authors of RTI, as well as Connecticut's SRBI, was to implement the above instruction in Tier 1, the general education instruction. Those that continue to have academic difficulty would work in small groups for additional instruction in the curriculum described above which is Tier 2 instruction. Finally, if a student still has reading and writing difficulties, more individualized and intense instruction would occur in Tier 3 instruction. If reading and spelling instruction followed the above stated curriculum in the early grades, the intention of SRBI would be followed, the prevention of reading difficulties could occur for many students causing fewer referrals to special education.

Instead of the reading and spelling curriculum and SRBI procedures explained above, it is typical for Connecticut school districts to provide "guided reading" or "balanced literacy" approaches in which students are prompted to "guess" what a word is by looking at pictures, the first letter of a word, or the teacher previewing the story. Without the direct teaching of speech sounds and word structure, scientific research-based reading is violated and SBRI is undermined. It is also rare for students to have spelling words that are consistent with their reading words. The result of these teaching practices is that many regular education students are more behind in literacy skills than they should be, and many learning disabled students are not referred for special education because they "get by" by listening. The delay of referral to special education denies disabled students the intense instruction that would teach them to read and spell within their appropriate developmental age. Furthermore, many students with learning disabilities have strong cognitive processes and can "guess" words very well given prior knowledge and information that has been previewed by the teacher, yet they are not able to read when they get to the end of third or fourth grade when the pictures and teacher previewing ends. Their academic work declines significantly because of the delay in identifying their reading disability when they were younger.

I heard staggering information recently that 60% of students entering Connecticut community colleges have to take anywhere from one to three remedial classes because they do not have reading, writing, or math abilities. Obviously, the determination for appropriate instruction for these students has been delayed during their entire public schooling.

Another common misunderstanding of SRBI in Connecticut public schools is that students need to be instructed in all three Tiers before he or she can be recommended for the process to determine eligibility for special education. This is a clear violation of the intention of RTI and SRBI that state students can be referred at any time in the Tier 3 process. By delaying referral to special education until the student has failed through all three Tiers substantially delays the student from receiving appropriate education.

Since my specialty is teaching reading and writing to disabled individuals, my testimony refers to reading and writing instruction and the delay of special education services for students with these disabilities. My testimony also states that delay is due to misconceptions about what scientifically research-based instruction is and teaching practices that do not identify these students until it is too late for them to catch up. A similar argument could be made for students with math and other disabilities.

For all the reasons stated above, not only do I support Bill No 6501, but I also recommend that it is amended to include that the SRBI Tier process does not delay evaluation and eligibility determination until a student has gone through all three Tiers. Although there are Connecticut special education laws that describe special education eligibility processes, the SRBI state mandate supersedes the law in practice and therefore needs to be clarified in the No 6501 bill.

I also advocate for appropriate scientifically research-based reading, writing, and math instruction in general education, Grades K-3, and that early intervention for children with disabilities is implemented in Connecticut public schools. Simple screening devices can identify students with reading disabilities as young as 4-5 years old. Early intervention would benefit our students, reduce Connecticut's achievement gap, comply with state directives, and reduce the expense of special education and provision of remedial classes in community colleges from 60% to 2-5%.

Respectfully,

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