February 24, 2014

Dear Honorable Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee Members of the Appropriations Committee:

I am honored to be here today to be able to urge you to increase state funding to local school districts in the area of special education services. Students receiving these services are spread throughout the state. They are located in large urban districts, as well as mid-size and small districts. Their instructional needs are not driven by levels of poverty or wealth but by varying levels of individual learning disabilities. As educators we have an ethical and moral obligation to provide appropriate and adequate instruction for each and every one of these children. Beyond that, there are Federal and State laws, regulations and guidelines which lay out very specific requirements in the area of special education.

As a school district Superintendent, I represent the children and citizens in the small town of Union. We are proud to be an excelling school district that serves our students in a relatively new school built in 2010. Up until the current 2013-14 school year, our per pupil cost was just below the state average. With several high need special education students at the pre-school and secondary levels moving into the district in the latter half of the 2012-13 school year, we were brought to within $3,000 of over-expending that year's budget. Providing for the needs of these students in the current year resulted in a 9% budget increase. Additional move-ins during the summer has us facing a potential $75,000 budget shortfall. Our budget proposal for 2014-15 is presenting a 19% increase largely driven by mandatory special education services.

To qualify for special education excess cost reimbursement, our per pupil special education costs must exceed $66,000. While some of our individual student costs approach the $50,000 level, none cross the excess cost line and even if one or more did, all we would realize is 75% of the few thousand dollars spent in excess of the $66,000.

We work diligently to control special education costs by entering into tuition arrangements with neighboring school districts for our pre-school and secondary students. In order to control the cost of permanent employee benefits we purchase support services by the hour as needed from our RESC, EASTCONN.

We also work to control costs in other areas. We purchase our health insurance at a considerable savings through the Connecticut Partnership. We contract for our financial office services at a cost of $12,500 from EASTCONN as well. This includes using the MUNIS system for accounting along with support and guidance from the EASTCONN business manager, accountants and bookkeepers. Our transportation contract, also with EASTCONN, gives us the ability to continuously alter routes and vehicles to achieve maximum economy.

We take advantage of as many grant opportunities as we can. We receive a small REAP grant in the amount of $16,000. Our IDEA part B grant has is small at $10,900. Both grants have continued to decline over the past several years. We applied for and received a modest technology grant from the State. We do not meet the poverty or poor performance levels that drive most grants at the Federal and State levels. The Connecticut Education Cost Sharing Grant to Union has remained flat for the past several years.

Union is far from wealthy. While rich in land (square miles), half of it is under a land conservancy controlled by Yale University and the bulk of the rest of it is Connecticut Park and Forest land thereby eliminating most land from the tax rolls. Union's small population consists of hard working folks who live in modest homes.

The success of our district is demonstrated by its "Excelling School" rating and the daily accomplishments of our students, dedicated staff and supportive parents. The community has risen to support the district by providing a new school, a full-day kindergarten program and consistently passing adequate budgets.

In summary, today we face a situation that strains the limits of reason. We cannot continue to ask a community to support a 9% budget increase followed by a 5% cost overrun and then present them with a 19% budget increase for the next year. We are not the only district facing this. Other districts, both large and small, are left to fund the majority of special education costs on their own.

You, acting on behalf of all of us in Connecticut, must step up and do something. You can start by reducing the Excess Cost level from 4.5 times per pupil cost to 2 times the per pupil cost and then increase the funding level to 100% instead of 75%. Adjustments to the Education Cost Sharing formula must be made to benefit all of Connecticut's school district. Finally, consider eliminating the 40% poverty level for state support of pre-school programs (this would allow us to cut special education costs by servicing our own pre-school students).

These are not requests that haven't been asked for before. They have appeared before the legislature in one form or another for the past several years. Unfortunately, they have been pushed aside to allow other agendas to be served. These reforms cannot be pushed off any longer. Now is the time to broaden the focus of State spending to all of Connecticut's students. Up to this point, that has not happened. The time is now for our legislators to take serious and thoughtful action towards addressing these inequities.

Respectfully submitted,

Joseph J. Reardon
Superintendent
Union School District