

***Testimony from Mark D. Benigni, Ed.D.  
Superintendent, Meriden Public Schools  
Chair, Board of Directors, State Education Resource Center (SERC)  
Before the Education Committee, CT General Assembly  
March 19, 2015***

Representative Fleischmann, Senator Slossberg, Representative Lavielle, Senator Boucher, and other distinguished members of the Education Committee:

My name is Mark Benigni. I am Superintendent of the Meriden Public Schools, as well as the chair of the Board of Directors of the State Education Resource Center, or SERC. It is my privilege to submit this testimony on behalf of all members of the SERC Board, representing teachers, administrators and policy makers, nonprofit and business leaders, and advocates for children and families. Today, I would like to request that SERC has a seat at the table in developing recommendations, actions, and future vision regarding special education in Connecticut. Given SERC's extensive record of leading and facilitating statewide systems change efforts in schools, reaffirmed repeatedly by the General Assembly, SERC's unique perspective would inform the work of supporting our children with special needs in Connecticut.

SERC's Board of Directors is very concerned with Raised Bill No. 7016, "An Act Implementing the Recommendations of the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group." As written, the bill tackles the state's special education system with no mention of SERC, an entity specifically created to support the State of Connecticut to meet its responsibilities to students with disabilities.

This exclusion is incompatible with current law. The General Assembly, recognizing SERC's central function in the state, has expanded SERC's statutory authority throughout the years. Just last year it passed Public Act (P.A.) 14-212, establishing SERC as a quasi-public agency and continuing SERC's operation of the statewide Special Education Resource Center under federal funds. These funds currently flow from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Under the direction and guidance from the State Department of Education, SERC has been granted the responsibility to provide a comprehensive systematic approach to ensuring consistency across the state in meeting both state and federal special education requirements. SERC provides assistance and support to educators and administrators in their efforts to meet these requirements. To assist families that have questions or challenges related to their students with disabilities, SERC offers resources and parent support groups, and serves as a liaison between the families and the CT State Department

of Education (CSDE). SERC's position in the state as a centralized resource that provides a conduit of support, professional learning, and advocacy between the state and local level education systems has allowed it to provide these services efficiently while leading systems change throughout Connecticut.

The bill overlooks this role entirely. Some of its obvious omissions include:

- Section 5, on the establishment of an Individualized Education Program Advisory Council to develop a new IEP form. The committee should be aware that SERC worked in close collaboration with the CT State Department of Education (CSDE) in the research and facilitation of the current IEP form. SERC holds institutional history and knowledge that can be very helpful for the future development of the next version of the IEP form.
- Section 11, requiring RESCs to “develop a regional model for the provision of special education services” and “a regional educator training plan.” As stipulated under IDEA, Connecticut already has a statewide structure for this. The regional model proposed by the bill would include instruction on “classroom techniques to improve the provision of special education and related services to children and the implementation of scientific research-based interventions,” known as SRBI. This is already incorporated into SERC, which had a lead role in developing the SRBI framework and oversees its implementation across the state. While many of our partners across the state, including RESCs, provide direct services on a local level, this proposal does not show how dispersing oversight of special education across different regions is more efficient or cost-effective—or even allowable under centralized IDEA funding.

We welcome efforts to improve the delivery of special education services in the state—in fact, that is one of our primary functions. So it is critical for the Committee to have the input and expertise of SERC, and include SERC in the legislation itself, before deciding to move forward with this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration.