



Testimony Regarding

H.B. No. 7255, An Act Establishing a Task Force to Conduct a Feasibility Study Regarding the Creation of a Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative

And

H.B. No. 7252, An Act Establishing an Adjudication Process for Special Education and the Right of Parents to Observe their Child at School

Daniel Long, Ph.D.

Education Committee

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Good Afternoon Senator Slossberg, Senator Boucher, Representative Fleischmann, Representative Lavielle and esteemed members of the Education Committee,

I am Dr. Daniel Long, the Research Director at Connecticut Voices for Children. Connecticut Voices for Children is a research-based child advocacy organization working to ensure that all Connecticut children have an equitable opportunity to achieve their full potential.

Today I will be testifying regarding H.B. 7255 and H.B. 7252.

H.B. No. 7255, An Act Establishing a Task Force to Conduct a Feasibility Study Regarding the Creation of a Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative

We applaud the intent of the bill to examine special education costs in Connecticut. However, we have concerns about the narrow focus of the study on a predictable cost cooperative as well as representation on the task force. We suggest expanding the focus of this taskforce to consider multiple ways to ensure adequate funding for special education. We also suggest expanding the task force to include representatives of children with disabilities; parents of children with disabilities; special education advocates; special education instructors; and academic experts in special education.

To examine the impact of this proposal, we have spoken to special education advocates in Connecticut in addition to reaching out to national and Connecticut-based education finance experts. Representatives from the Center for Children's Advocacy; the Education Law Center; Robert Cotto, a scholar from Trinity College; and other special education advocates argued that lack of adequate funding for special education—not variability in spending—appears to be the main challenge for school districts. These education finance experts and child advocates raise concerns that the proposed Special Education Predictable Cost Cooperative does not address issues of limited funding. Several advocates argue that the Cooperative could cost more than expected due to the proposed management structure and that the Cooperative could perpetuate inadequate funding of special education. Dianne Wilcots, a special education advocate, and Robert Cotto argue that this Cooperative could lead to a decline of \$50 million in special education funding in its first year.¹

Recent research notes the large the number of special education students served by the poorest towns in Connecticut.² Given the above concerns, as well as the fact that the Governor's proposed elimination of the Excess Cost Sharing grant would hurt the smallest towns in Connecticut, we are

concerned that the proposed Cooperative may not address issues facing special education funding in the state—and may in fact harm low-income students in the state’s smallest towns.

There is limited experience with this insurance model. We looked for national models of this insurance approach and found that no other state uses a statewide insurance model to fund special education. The closest model was a regional special education insurance model instituted in California called Special Education Local Planning Areas. However, a 2015 special education task force in California³ and a study by the Public Policy Institute of California⁴ found that the model tended to reduce transparency, accountability, and local control. Research in California⁵ recommended moving away from an insurance model and argued that the state should focus instead on policies that increase special education funding, promote early education practices (like Birth to Three in Connecticut), and promote more collaboration between regular and special education programs.

The limited research that exists suggests that using an insurance model to fund special education could have a negative impact on both the overall funding and quality of special education.

Therefore, we suggest that this taskforce be tasked with comparing an insurance model to other strategies to improve the quality and funding of special education.

Nearly all of the special education advocates we spoke with expressed concern that the current proposal lacks representation of special education students, parents, special education experts, and advocates. The taskforce could produce findings that are more compelling if it included student, parent, and practitioner voices. The task force could be strengthened if representatives of special education students, parents of special education students, special education advocates, special education instructors, and academics who study special education are included on the taskforce.

Additionally, we would suggest that all insurance experts be dropped from the panel and instead be consulted as expert witnesses. We are concerned that the inclusion of insurance experts will bias the panel too much towards a focus on an insurance model as opposed to other models for funding special education.

We also recommend that if this task force is created, it expand on the work of the MORE Commission Special Education Select Working Group from 2015 and consist of a broad based membership that will build on existing Special Education research in Connecticut conducted by the MORE commission.⁶

In sum, we recommend that the proposed taskforce examine a variety of strategies to ensure adequate and predictable special education funding, and include an expanded membership.. The main charge should change from studying a predictable cost cooperative to a broader study of the adequacy of special education funding for all towns in Connecticut.

H.B. No. 7252, An Act Establishing an Adjudication Process for Special Education and the Right of Parents to Observe their Child at School.

This bill gives parents the right to observe their children at school and establishes a process for parents to advocate for their children.

We support this bill because observation is an important part of advocating for children with special needs, especially children who have difficulty communicating with others. Recent media reports indicate that parents are unable to adequately advocate for their children due to the inability to have regular observations of their children at school⁷

Thank you for the opportunity to testify regarding House Bills 7255 and 7252. I can be reached at dlong@ctvoices.org and at 203-498-4240.

¹ <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2017/insdata/tmy/2017SB-00542-R000221-Willcutts,%20Diane,%20Special%20Education%20Advocate-TMY.PDF>

² <http://cepa.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/399/2017/03/Cotto-Comparing-Charter-School-and-Public-School-District-Funding-March-2017.pdf>

³ <http://www.smcoe.org/about-smcoe/statewide-special-education-task-force/>

⁴ <http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=873>

⁵ <http://www.smcoe.org/about-smcoe/statewide-special-education-task-force/>

⁶ http://www2.housedems.ct.gov/more/SPED/pubs/2015-02-18_Recommendations.pdf

⁷ <https://ctmirror.org/2017/02/02/state-orders-probe-of-special-ed-system-that-sounds-broken/>