



## MADISON PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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*Superintendent*

March 16, 2017

Good morning esteemed members of the Education Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony. We have come here today to raise questions and concerns about H.B. 7255. Currently, we serve as the Superintendent (Thomas Scarice) and Director of Special Education (Dr. Elizabeth Battaglia) for the Madison Public Schools.

As district administrators, we confront the challenges facing our entire school district on a daily basis. Among many of the problems we seek to solve, school funding, in these fiscally challenging times, rises to the top of the list. Special education funding, in particular, presents consistent challenges as costs continue to rise. The establishment of a task force to conduct a feasibility study to create a predictable cost cooperative for special education falls short of the mark and needs significant reconsideration for a number of reasons.

- The charge of the proposed task force identifies only one alternative, one that is the creation of the Connecticut School Finance Project, a special interest group lacking renowned experts in the field of school finance. In fact, the composition of the proposed task force neglects the inclusion of established school finance experts. The problems of school finance are so complex that any task force ought to mandate established national experts in the field. Even more concerning, the task force does include representatives from the Connecticut School Finance Project. Even the least intellectually honest among us would see a clear conflict of interest. We ask that if enacted, the Education Committee revisit the composition of the task force to address these shortcomings.
- The proposed “predictable cost cooperative” fails to solve the primary problem. Although district administrators would agree that predictability is a concern, it is not the primary concern. The primary concern to address is the rate of steadily rising costs in special education. If a district could predict that their costs would predictably rise 8% each year, the goal of the cooperative does not solve the primary problem of ever increasing costs. Knowing that costs will increase 8% each year does not help any school district. In fact, the proposed cooperative does not include a cost control mechanism.
- No other state in the nation has implemented a statewide intermediary to pay for all special education costs for school districts. In short, this is a grand experiment with only theoretical assurances. A comprehensive analysis by a task force, one that considers alternatives beyond the proposed cooperative, is necessary to address the complex problems facing districts. An experiment is not a solution. In fact, after a simple Google search, one can find the results of a somewhat similar model that was implemented on a regional basis in California through Special Education Local Planning Areas (SELPA). Over 100 of these models were implemented in California. An analysis of these models by the Public Policy Institute of California found that they reduced

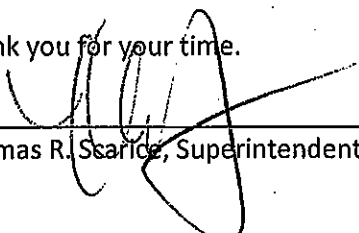
transparency, accountability, and local control. Even more disturbing, they were consistently underfunded and failed to distribute aid in an equitable manner. Additionally, the only somewhat analogous model in the nation (SELPAs) did not solve the primary problem facing districts, that is, rising special education costs.

- In the California study, when local control for funding was taken away, it impacted preventative services and early intervention programs. In Madison, we utilize an external provider, Effective School Solutions, to deliver a clinical program of school-based therapeutic supports for students with and without disabilities. The program not only reduces the number of students who attend costly outplacement programs, but it also provides preventative services for students who have mental health needs prior to them being referred to special education. Would I be able to use my special education funds for programs to provide preventative services in the Co-op proposal? If a dollar amount is simply put on each of my special education students, it will impact my ability to provide preventative services which is not good for kids.
- The proposed plan from the Connecticut School Finance Project will calculate the community contribution of the district based on: the number of students with disabilities, the school districts past special education costs, and an equity adjustment made based on the municipality's ability to pay. What does it mean the equity of the town to pay? Honestly, for Madison the most unpredictable factor in the budget is the amount of money provided to the district through excess cost. The state could simply make this matter predictable by fully funding excess cost each year. The Connecticut School Finance Project proposed funding system has a Board which will determine budgeting decisions. The organization states that: "If the decision was made to include governance and oversight structure in legislation, the board of directors responsible for fiscal oversight could be defined in statute with key stakeholders and stakeholder groups identified. A policy and review board could also be created with statutorily defined membership requirements and appointments then made by elected officials. However, this method would be inflexible, as legislation would have to be changed if it were found that additional or alternate membership would be beneficial. In addition, creating the governance and oversight structure within statute reduces direct involvement in Co-op management by Co-op members (i.e. Connecticut's operations and governance)."

The organization would like complete control of all special education funding and how to handle issues that would arise. It is concerning that the governance board would be given so much power without oversight.

It is reassuring to know that the Education Committee is confronting the same challenges we face in local school districts and is exploring potential solutions. However, we ask that the Education Committee consider a clearer and more accurate definition of the primary problem we need to solve, namely cost control, to protect the public school systems across the state from the impulses of special interest groups, and to marshal the wide breadth of expertise in the area of school finance from experts across the nation that currently serve to solve the same problem in countless states.

Thank you for your time.

  
Thomas R. Scarice, Superintendent

  
Dr. Elizabeth Battaglia, Director of Special Education