

Education Cost Sharing Task Force
MEETING MINUTES
June 7, 2012

The meeting was called to order at approximately 10:15 a.m.

In attendance: Rep. Mike Molgano, Elsa Nunez, Len Miller, Bill Davenport, Sen. Toni Harp, Ben Barnes, Sen. Stillman, Dr. Mark Benigni, Dudley Williams, Mary Loftus-Levine.

Co-Chair Sen. Stillman convened meeting, stating that it would be a short meeting to decide on next steps. She stated that October is not far away, and it is good to have set deadlines.

Co-Chair Ben Barnes summarized the progress made in changes made to ECS. There is not currently a functioning ECS formula in the statute, however, funds have been directed toward communities with the greatest achievement challenge. There is room to chart the direction of the ECS grant.

Subcommittees Reported:

Special Education Subcommittee:

Dr. Mark Benigni stated that while there is no June interim report, he will be giving a verbal update. Special Ed is a sometimes uncontrollable cost driver that is 22% of the net current expenses. He reports that while Special Ed costs are going up, identification rates are going down (12%).

Dudley Williams asked if Benigni could isolate the numbers between out of district placements and dollars for services.

Dr. Mark Benigni stated that he could get those numbers, and that large districts are investing in programs while smaller districts send out of the area for programs due to cost effectiveness.

Sen. Toni Harp inquired as to whether students using Special Ed resources may be students with early literacy.

Dr. Mark Benigni explained that students with literacy issues or even specific, identified special needs was less the focus of the discussion than the cost of a program being started within district for any given need and what would the district be paying for the use of services outside of district.

Elsa Nunez said that she has spent a lot of time with staff and met with Ann Louise Connelly looking at ethical standards being used. She felt the standards were there but needed to be consistent across the state.

Mary Loftus-Levine asked Dr. Benigni if there were plans to meet with Special Ed teachers in these schools to discuss the most involved cases to understand what is happening on the ground.

Dr. Mark Benigni replied that he does work regularly with Special Ed teachers, and also with ACES and Craig Edmondson. The processes that are currently in place need to be examined.

Secretary Barnes would also like the subcommittee to look at what is driving the cost of Special Ed – is it medical costs, transportation costs, supplies? What is making Special Ed. So expensive?

Dr. Mark Benigni replied that he would like for Craig Edmondson to be invited to the next meeting to break down the costs. Transportation is a big part of the cost. He feels that we need to entice districts to add the programs in district if possible and sensible to budgets.

Sen. Toni Harp and Sen. Stillman asked if there is any evidence that one model is better than another and if a higher priced program is necessarily addressing the needs of the child in a more meaningful way.

Dr. Nunez stated that there are national standards that give a clear idea of what good Special Ed. Programs should look like. They need to look at why things are being added to these programs over time.

William Davenport believes that schools in a region should work together to provide quality programs.

Judith Lohman from OLR stated that the federal government requires extensive reporting and monitoring of programs when it was asked if there was any oversight of Special Ed. Programs.

Mark Benigni recapped by recommending a meeting with Craig Edmondson, and breaking out information as Senator Harp requested. He explained that comparisons between districts are not “apples to apples”, as some may have summer programs or extended day programs and others may not. He also noted that he sees that his legal accounts are largely devoted to Special Ed.

Sen. Stillman asked for a breakdown of Special Ed. Costs by district to look at which districts may require more funding.

Sen. Harp asked why one district would have a greater Special Education population than another.

Sen. Stillman stated that there is a possibility that families move to communities reputed to have exceptional Special Ed. Programs if they have a Special Ed. Child.

Formula Subcommittee:

Len Miller stated that the members of this subcommittee decided to gather as much information as possible from knowledgeable sources including Michael Griffith with whom he met 11 times. They plan to have a report available in the next couple of weeks including their findings, suggestions and recommendations. They will submit this report to the ECS taskforce. Mr. Miller also thanked all of the people that have met with this subcommittee for their commitment to providing quality education, and for sharing their knowledge in working with this enormously complicated issue.

School Choice Subcommittee:

William Davenport highlighted the similarity in the operation of regional magnet and regional Ag schools. He explained the information that he handed out to the group that show the equity issues between these to programs and breakdown the costs per student and recommended 1/3 sending town plus 2/3 state costs sharing proposal that this committee is looking at. He explained that Sheff and other interdistrict magnets function the same way, and this was something that he discussed with Bill Magnonta of the SDE.

Secretary Barnes thanked Mr. Davenport for carrying the majority of the work on this subcommittee while his colleagues (Ben Barnes and Andrea Stillman) were in session.

Ben Barnes also stated that he felt that the Formulary Subcommittee should look at these programs. He feels that a more generous magnet program may attract more students. Money for those students should be allocated in either ECS or the per pupil magnet program, not both.

Sen. Stillman also thanked Mr. Davenport for his work. She feels that there are students that want to be involved in the Agriscience programs, but resources are not being provided.

Senator Harp agreed with Co-Chair Barnes that the funding in major towns should be examined as to what is being funded now.

Mary Loftus-Levine- asked what the cost of treating the agriscience schools as if they were magnets.

Secretary Barnes estimated that 20-25 million dollars would be the cost just for the kids currently enrolled. It could go to as much 35 million if all programs were at capacity.

Mary Loftus- Levine suggested that one of the drivers is that urban schools are not as attractive. She feels that if this is addressed in the formulary it may alleviate some of the pressure of choice.

Dr. Mark Benigni asked about the charge to municipalities in addition to state support.

Secretary Barnes explained that there is a tuition component to the Ag. Schools, but that the total amount per pupil is capped below the average cost.

Dr. Mark Benigni stated that the choice should be made more equitable, and that there are not entry requirements that only pull in the best and brightest and should include populations similar to the sending communities.

Sen. Stillman agrees with this suggestion.

Sen. Harp asked if host magnet schools could be added to the Formulary chart.

William Davenport said that other magnets can be added, and that he only included the most polarized schools.

Dr. Mark Benigni reiterated the need to equalize the populations that are being sent to the magnet and choice schools.

Sen. Stillman suggests a meeting in Bridgeport on an evening or two in July.

Upcoming meetings:

Tuesday, June 26th at 9:30 a.m. – Full Task Force Meeting.

Formulary Subcommittee report should be on the agenda, and perhaps CAPS or ACES should be invited. They should discuss other Road Show meetings and finalize the Bridgeport meeting agenda.

Wednesday, July 11th in Bridgeport-time is to be determined.

The superintendent must be called, but meeting should be in the evening. There should be a Presentation and discussion on what the community would like the task force to consider.

Sen. Stillman states that meetings in Hartford and another section of the state should be held on an evening sometime in the future. She recommends that Judith and John know when so that they can attend.