



The New Jersey Coalition for Special Education Funding Reform

Comments before the Joint Senate Budget & Education Committee

December 13, 2007

My name is Brenda Considine. I am here today on behalf of The New Jersey Coalition for Special Education Funding Reform. Organized in 1996, the Coalition is comprised of ten statewide organizations concerned with the welfare of students with disabilities.

This is an ambitious plan that seeks to address many longstanding problems with special education in our state – issues of inappropriate over-classification, inequity and under funding. We appreciate the Governor’s commitment to improving the welfare of ALL New Jersey school children. There are many aspects of the proposal that we support:

The Governor’s plan has placed a huge emphasis on kindergarten and preschool. This will not only help reduce the need for remedial services later on, it will create opportunities for preschoolers with disabilities. Publicly funded preschool is a win-win!

This plan preserves a mechanism to address ‘extraordinary costs’. It is a vital ‘safety valve’ to help districts with unusually high cost students. We support the fact that this provision is not subject to wealth-equalization.

And, this plan brings an additional \$470M to special education. We appreciate the Governor’s commitment to investing in these students, and his efforts to equalize access to appropriate special education services.

Unlike many people here today, our coalition was not waiting to see ‘the numbers.’ We know that over time, numbers change. For our coalition, it is formula driving the numbers that really matters. And this proposal advances a formula that would change every aspect of our state's special education funding formula at once.

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First- it changes the way aid is calculated. For the first time in New Jersey, there would be no relationship between a child's disability and the level of state special education aid a district receives for that child.

While certainly much simpler than our current system, we are concerned that a single statewide average cost for all students with disabilities cannot capture the broad variation in costs, or geographic cost differences. Over time districts with a higher proportion of high cost students could be hurt.

The Coalition recommends that a simplified pupil weighted system be preserved but modified based on a 'severity index' to better reflect the intensity of services provided, and the true cost of those services.

Second - it changes the way state aid for special education is distributed. For the first time in New Jersey, there would be no relationship between the number of children with disabilities identified by a district and the amount of state aid provided.

While we support efforts to make special education funding more predictable and reduce inappropriate classification, local district rates for classification in New Jersey vary widely.

Census models have been used in states with very large districts, but with more than 600 districts in our state – some very small - a single statewide average may actually discourage districts from identifying students who need services.

Third - in a major shift - a large portion of special education aid would be adjusted for local wealth. In all other parts of this plan, the money follows the child. Why not for special education?

The Coalition believes that wealth-adjusted state aid for education should be limited to general education.

Students with disabilities are students first. The fact of their disability adds to the cost of their education equally, regardless of where they live. We believe that wealth-based special education funding will discourage districts with resources from developing and accessing quality special education programs and services.

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We think it will have the unintended effect of punishing districts that are now appropriately serving – whether in district or out of district - higher cost students.

It may not happen this year, or even in three years – but soon - special education funding will become an ignition point for local budgets, creating a situation in which taxpayers are left to decide about whether to pay for required services for students with disabilities. Local boards of education should not be forced into a position in which they must cut general education services in order to pay for special education

Thoughtful decisions regarding such significant change require public information, input and debate that cannot be accomplished in the current session. On behalf of all of New Jersey's children, and in particular the 234,00 students with disabilities, we ask that this important effort not be rushed.

Respectfully,

Brenda Considine,

On Behalf of The Coalition for Special Education Funding Reform

Our members are:

- The Alliance for the Betterment of Citizens with Disabilities (ABCD);
- The Association for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ);
- The Arc of New Jersey;
- ASAH, formerly the Association of Schools and Agencies for the Handicapped;
- The New Jersey Coalition for Inclusive Education;
- The New Jersey Center for Outreach and Services for the Autism Community (COSAC);
- The New Jersey Council on Developmental Disabilities;
- The Education Law Center;
- New Jersey Protection and Advocacy, Inc. (NJP&A); and
- The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN).