

Joint Council of County Special Services School Districts

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Position Statement on Property Tax Reform

Submitted to:

The Joint Committee on Public School Funding Reform

October 2006

The eight county-based public school districts serving approximately 4,500 students with multiple disabilities—autism, behavioral disorders and severe cognitive and physical impairments—have previously testified before the Joint Committee. A copy of the testimony is attached. It outlines the broad dimensions of the work done by the Special Services School Districts on behalf of local districts. We now focus on issues that currently contribute to the high overall cost of special education. The issues are as follows:

The high level of services currently provided in New Jersey which, in too many cases, outstrip the federal requirements. This follows in the long tradition of leadership, held nationally by New Jersey, in the effort to provide for our special education students. Our reputation is such that families move to New Jersey for the benefits that their children would not receive in other states. And, of course, federal aid does not approach the cost of providing services.

State mandates which push the cost of services even higher.

Recently the State Board of Education passed a new mandate to be effective in 2007 which will raise the cost of placing students in classrooms by decreasing the age span permitted in elementary classrooms. No funds were provided for this increased cost and the new Special Education Code exceeded the federal requirement at the time of the passage. (Testimony to the State Board attached.)

Guaranteed, timely State funding for extraordinary special education costs.

This is a critical issue for all local districts when new, high-cost special education students enroll.

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Another critical issue is the fact that **New Jersey is penalized in federal reports because placements in county-based classrooms are considered outside the local district placement.** With the multitude of varied public school districts across New Jersey, K-3; K-5/6; K-8; K-12; regional districts; sending-receiving districts and other configurations—all considered local, it is illogical to separate county-level districts and have them considered a non-local placement. County special services school districts were initiated by the Legislature as one of the first types of shared services in the State. To have New Jersey penalized for its foresight is contrary to reason.

In any new legislation, county-wide districts should be specifically defined as a local placement just as they are in New York (Boards of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES)) and Pennsylvania (Intermediate Units). This could help level the playing field when New Jersey is ranked nationally.

(Note: All counties, except Cumberland and Hudson have either a special services district, jointure or an educational services commission providing county-wide services.)

To maximize the effect of shared services, the widest possible range of services should be provided in the most expansive setting, or in the least restrictive environment. Private schools for the educationally disabled are usually narrowly focused and would find it difficult to meet this worthy goal. Placements in private schools should only be as a last resort when a public placement is not possible.

New legislation should clearly state that past court decisions should not be the basis for future placements or rulings under the newly formatted goals for special education services. New Jersey should get out of the business of serving as a desired destination for special education students coming from out of state.

One special caution. Starting from scratch is the most expensive way to reduce costs. Set long-term goals for cost reduction utilizing current resources and provide the legislative means to reach the goal.

Attachments:

Testimony before the Joint Committee on Public School Funding Reform, September 5, 2006.

Testimony before the State Board of Education on new age span code requirements (NJAC 6A:14-4.7).