

# **Joint Council of County Special Services School Districts**

Testimony before:

**The Joint Committee on Public School Funding Reform**

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Joint Council of County Special Services School Districts. The eight county-based public school districts serve approximately 4,500 students with multiple disabilities, autism, behavioral disorders and severe cognitive and physical impairments.

With the authorization of the State Legislature, freeholders in eight counties established special services school districts. As countywide receiving school districts, one of the first countywide shared services systems in New Jersey, the districts were designed to meet the specialized needs of students with severe and “low-incidence” disabilities requiring highly specialized services not usually provided by local school districts. Providing these services at the county level helps to eliminate duplication and ultimately reduce the cost to taxpayers. Service commissions provide similar services in counties without SSSD’s.

Although most of the SSSD’s provide a school building or buildings for the services provided, it is not true of all eight counties. There are many different arrangements for delivering services. Salem CSSSD has two facilities and also uses sites in local school districts. Warren CSSSD provides all its services in local host school district facilities.

Bergen County has a long history of providing special education services within its technical schools and in local host schools. In Gloucester and Mercer Counties, freeholders recently made the decision to combine the administration of the SSSD’s with the administration of their county vocational schools.

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In addition to providing direct services to students, SSSD's provide special education services to local school districts for their students on a contractual basis. This also reduces duplication of services and saves local tax dollars. A prime example is the coordination of transportation routes and services.

Also:

- Staff training/consultation/shared employment
- Transition planning for students moving from one level of services to another
- Crisis intervention education
- Career centers/vocational assessments/coaching
- Occupational therapy services/evaluations
- Speech therapy services/evaluations
- Physical therapy services/evaluations
- Counseling
- Home instruction
- Preschool programs
- Non-public school services
- Assistive technology
- Business services/grant writing
- Educational programs for incarcerated juveniles

As everyone involved in education is keenly aware, special education is a high cost item. Many of the high costs are dictated in the form of mandates established by the federal government, court decisions or by New Jersey's administrative code. An examination of existing mandates and careful consideration before establishing new mandates would help greatly in holding the line on the growth of special education costs.

Utilizing existing countywide public structures to deliver services whenever possible would also help in that regard. Perhaps a state policy similar to the one that currently requires the use of generic drugs first on pharmacy prescription forms would be helpful in holding down costs. If all local districts were required to explore public placement of special education students before a private placement could be considered, it could help to stem the growth of special education costs.

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