

Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities

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OCECD FY 2014-2015 Special Education System Improvement Recommendations December 2012

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The Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities' (OCECD) ongoing *Special Education Redesign Project* identifies special education system design problems and related reforms that can improve educational outcomes. FY 2014-2015 state budget related policy redesign recommendations are outlined below.

Special Education System Improvement Recommendations

Listed below are special education system redesign policy recommendations that emerged from OCECD's *Special Education Redesign Project*, which began in 2011 and remains committed to the experience-based perspective that Ohio's special education service delivery system can and should get better results for students with disabilities. More funding is therefore not the only answer to our problems. This means that the Coalition favors both results-focused system reforms and full funding of an updated, cost-based, six-weight special education funding formula. Each system redesign option is designed to improve system productivity by improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

These *low cost, high-impact* system design changes should be funded through the creation of a *Special Education Innovation Fund*. The Fund would provide planning and implementation grants as an initial strategy to enhance educational outcomes for students with disabilities who represent approximately one in seven public school students in Ohio. OCECD proposes that this Fund total \$3 million in FY 2014 and \$7 million in FY 2015. *The Coalition believes that system change is critical to getting better outcomes and that it should be funded first as the state gives consideration to the development of a FY 2014-2015 state budget for special education.* The Coalition is prepared to assist policy makers and staff in the drafting of legislative language as necessary and appropriate. Recommended system design changes include the following:

1. **Improve Ohio's IEP Process.** Require Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to include: regular progress reporting which is based on actual student data, curriculum based data. Require each IEP to include meaningful, measurable goal statements and require regular progress monitoring of curriculum-based data related to each goal. Based on assessed need, IEPs shall include social skills development in their goals, objectives and implementation requirements. *(Requires administrative rule, policy changes and statutory change.)*

Work will be staged by using FY 2014 to create an IEP Improvement Project team to make more specific recommendations that will be implemented in select schools on a pilot project basis beginning in FY 2015. Pilot projects, which will involve appropriate staff training, will include regional special education technical assistance and evaluation via State Support Teams (SSTs), educational service centers and local school districts as appropriate. Additionally, the state should improve and fund IEP monitoring with results shared while strictly protecting individual student confidentiality.

2. **Include Reading Improvement in IEPs.** Stipulate that reading improvement will be a part of all elementary grade level IEPs. Additionally, support the requirement of the ongoing collection of relevant K-3 student literacy outcome data coupled with regular intervals of progress monitoring of the student outcomes. The student outcome data should be based on standards focused classroom instruction and designed interventions. Benchmark data should first be collected through screening instruments designed for this purpose. This concept should be field tested before it is implemented statewide. *(Requires statutory and related rule changes.)*
3. **Enhance Training and Capacity of Special Education Staff.** Require all pre-service teachers and all related service personnel to take a one-half semester credit course devoted to special education, including best practice teaching techniques, and the construction of effective IEPs. Require an additional one-hour credit field experience that focuses on writing an actual IEP under the guidance and direction of a mentor with at least five years field experience. Additionally, require in-service professional development to include at least one hour of special education coursework every two years. *(Requires administrative rule and policy changes, but not statutory change.)*
4. **Require Certification of Special Education Administrators.** Change current Ohio law to stipulate that all special education directors (administrators) must be certified in special education. This would include school psychologists and related services personnel, as well as intervention specialists. *(Requires rule and related policy changes, but not statutory change.)*
5. **Assess Staffing Levels and Shortages.** Require state of Ohio to assess and report biennially special education teaching staff (including aides) and related service staff shortages relative to identified needs and devise a strategy to address these shortages. The plan to address shortages must be transmitted to the General Assembly biennially. *(This could be done voluntarily as a matter of ODE or Board of Regents policy or it could be required statutorily of either agency or others including the Auditor of State.)*
6. **Develop Education Technology Strategy for Students with Disabilities.** Support state development of a strategic plan in FY 2014 to advance educational technology

utilization with students with disabilities. The plan should include support for competency-based (including mastery learning) approaches to allowing students to progress at their own speed facilitated by educational technology, such as iPads and developmentally appropriate educational software. This approach can be facilitated in important ways via digital learning, including blended or hybrid (Internet and classroom-based) learning. The Ohio Department of Education should work with key stakeholders, including e-Tech, school districts and educational service centers, public charter schools, knowledgeable private nonprofit organizations and Ohio's 22 Information Technology Centers to develop this plan no later than June 30, 2014. The strategic planning process should determine if project implementation funding could be provided using applicable federal special education related funds. In any case, provide \$5 million in FY 2015 to districts to support innovative pilot projects for enhanced use of educational technology for students with disabilities. *(This requires statutory and related rule changes.)*

7. ***Streamline Special Education Appeals Process.*** Change the overly complex and cumbersome special education appeals process by using a one-tier system as 32 other states use, saving both time and money. Create a state bureau of special education appeals, which would include an Impartial Hearing Officer training institute, where trainers would include both the parent bar and the school law bar equally.
8. ***Special Education Best Practice Implementation Project.*** Provide funding for demonstration projects to begin training about and implementation of evidence-based special education best practices. These practices will be identified through an ongoing Ohio Department of Education funded research project the results of which will be provided in Summer 2013.

Special Education Base Funding Recommendations

In addition to the special education redesign options outlined above, the Coalition also supports the following special education funding recommendations which, to the degree appropriate, could be addressed in a staged, no more than four year transition period with a focus on full funding, adjusted for inflation, over a reasonable period of time.

1. ***Phase-in Full Funding of Ohio's six-weight, cost-based special education funding system.*** OCECD continues to support an updated, fully funded, cost-based special education funding methodology based on the personnel and related costs required to fulfill the requirements of state and federal law. This formula should reflect the true costs of delivering mandated services, including related services. Though underfunded, this funding methodology was in place through FY 2009 when the "evidence-based model" – a formula that was never fully implemented or funded, replaced it, in part. This reality and subsequent policy decisions mean that Ohio now has a de facto version of the six-weight special education funding formula; however, this formula is effectively overridden by what amounts to a statewide funding guarantee that provides continuation funding for ODE in FY 2012-2013.
2. ***Phase-in Full Funding for Required Preschool Special Education Units Based on Updated Personnel Costs Thereby Providing State Funding to Over 1,000***

Preschool Units Currently Receiving Only Local Financial Support. OCECD supports fully funding existing preschool special education units (3,000) and additional units as necessary to meet the needs of all preschool special education students and the districts that serve them. OCECD supports basing preschool special education unit funding on updated personnel costs. The special education unit funding formula should provide state funding for the approximately 1,000 units that currently only receive local funding. The Coalition also supports ongoing evaluation of preschool special education, and associated programs such as Help Me Grow, to assure that quality programming is in place and producing results, including effective reading readiness, and that it is well aligned with K-12 curricula.

3. **Fully Fund Catastrophic Special Education.** Under catastrophic special education funding, districts are reimbursed for more than 50 percent of the costs above \$27,375 per student for students in special education categories 2 through 5. The special education category 6 cost threshold per student is \$32,850.
4. **Fully Fund Special Education Enhancements.** OCECD recommends that the Special Education Enhancements Line Item, 200-540, be fully funded to adequately support key support programs, including parent-mentors, school psychologist interns, and preschool special education.
5. **Support workable and effective shared services strategies.** This approach should include a careful study of special education related organizational efficiencies, including greater use of inter-district special education related transportation services. The enhanced use of shared services should take into consideration, and be aligned to, all applicable state rules and regulations including caseload ratios.

As appropriate, the Coalition is prepared to assist policy makers and staff in addressing these and related policy issues, including the drafting of statutory language for inclusion in the FY 2014-2015.