



*Testimony of Ingrid M. Canady
Interim Executive Director, State Education Resource Center
Before the M.O.R.E. Commission Special Education Select Working Group
December 18, 2014*

Representative Becker, Representative Cook, Representative Wood, and other distinguished members of the Special Education Select Working Group:

My name is Ingrid M. Canady, and I am the newly appointed Interim Executive Director of the State Education Resource Center (SERC).

I am here today to provide background information about SERC, share our perspective on the systemic challenges to special education, and describe what we have learned about effective approaches to overcoming these challenges.

SERC provides services, programs, and resources—including professional development and a centralized library—to Connecticut’s educators, families, and community members. SERC was established in 1969 as the Special Education Resource Center, when just one in five children with disabilities nationwide was provided an education in public schools. While many other states actually had laws excluding children with disabilities, Connecticut policymakers intended for SERC to support the state’s pioneering efforts in special education.

In 2005, the legislative statute that established SERC was amended, and SERC was renamed the State Education Resource Center, signaling Connecticut’s belief in the meaningful integration of special and general education. Special education remained at the core of SERC’s activities, and we continued to partner with educators and policy makers in large systems change initiatives to better serve students with disabilities. Last year, over a quarter million educators, service providers, families, and community members benefitted from SERC’s professional development, technical assistance, library resources, and website.

Systemic and ongoing challenges impact Connecticut public schools as they work to meet federal and state mandates while increasing the capacity of their educators to provide effective instruction and support services to students with special education needs. Specifically, students with the most significant needs often require supports and services that lead school teams to recommend costly out-of-district placements. SERC’s strategy for meeting this challenge has been to promote the integration of special and general education to provide the Least Restrictive Environment for students with even the most significant disabilities.

This strategy is exemplified in our training and technical assistance in support of P.J. v. State of Connecticut. In 2002, the U.S. District Court, District of Connecticut, approved a settlement agreement regarding high-quality inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities. SERC created a tiered system of professional development in which Connecticut school districts were supported in meeting the mandates of the Settlement Agreement by integrating their special education systems within the broader general education system, while simultaneously addressing the individualized academic and therapeutic needs of students. At the conclusion of the case in 2012, the presiding judge noted that SERC's efforts were effective in increasing the number of regular class placements for students with intellectual disabilities, which reduced the need for out-of-district placements.

Another challenge facing special education is the over-identification of students with disabilities in specific exceptionality categories. This can lead to delivery of unnecessary and costly supports and services. Such was the case in one of Connecticut's school districts, which was initially identified as a Focused Monitoring district, and was then subsequently supported by SERC in its efforts to reduce a six-year pattern of over-identification of students as speech-language impaired (SLI). Using the strategy of a tiered system of supports, educators became aware that they were routinely responding to teacher requests for assistance in addressing students' communication needs with a special education solution, instead of first collaborating with each other to support students via general education prevention and early intervening services. As a result of this professional development, the need for costly special education speech and language evaluations and services decreased. The district's SLI rates have stabilized below statewide rates for the past three consecutive school years.

SERC's approach to systemic challenges is grounded in strengthening existing general and special education programming. Through the years, SERC has collaborated with districts and schools to serve students with special needs within the least restrictive environment, thus supporting districts in examining placement decisions and in-district services that are more efficient and effective.

Thank you for your time this evening.

Ingrid M. Canady, Interim Executive Director