

Meeting Notes

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations
<https://portal.ct.gov/acir>

Special Education, Education Governance & Workforce Development Subcommittee

Tuesday, July 9, 2024

Agenda: <https://egov.ct.gov/PMC/Agenda/Download/26031>

A recording is available at: https://ctvideo.ct.gov/opm/2024-07-09_ACIR_Education_Video.mp4

ACIR Members present: Troy Raccuia, Lon Seidman (Co-chair)

Other participants: David Abbey, Jennifer Benevento, Kathy Demsey, Sheila McKay, Betsy Paynter, Jan Perruccio (Co-chair), Eric Protulis, Louis Rosado Burch, Lindsay Seti

OPM staff: Christine Goupil, Bruce Wittchen

1. Call to order, overview of meeting procedures, agenda review

Jan Perruccio called the meeting to order at 9:03 and Betsy Paynter said she is filling in for ACIR member Francis Pickering, who is unable to attend.

2. If desired: review of draft notes of the [6/13/2024 meeting](#)

Jan Perruccio noted the reference in the notes to David Abbey's recommendation to look at what other states are doing and she agrees with that. Lon Seidman said each state does education differently, but pointed out that MA has a town-level educational system like CT's. Jan agreed but added that MA's state Department of Education is very different.

3. Work program, timeline, and membership

There was no discussion

4. Review:

- [2020 Report of the Task Force to Promote Municipal Shared Services](#)
- [MORE Commission BOE Spring Recommendations](#)
- [MORE Commission Regional Entities – Education Policy](#)

Jan Perruccio highlighted the report of the MORE Commission's Board of Education (BOE) subcommittee and explained that the subcommittee had working groups consider school transportation; common calendar; bifurcated tax bills; and the minimum budget requirement (MBR). She also pointed out the four recommendations on pg 2 of that subcommittee's report for which its members had been in agreement and the three recommendations it said required further review.

Jan referred to the 2020 task force report and described its origin in Sec. 366 of [PA 19-117](#) and noted the ACIR's role. She listed some of its relevant recommendations, including collaborative programs for special education, shared services to mitigate fiscal disparities among towns and districts, flexible school, and to pilot or incentivize shared services.

Eric Protulis asked who this group can ask at the state to learn which of the recommendations the state considers to be completed or in process. He knows of work underway regarding some recommended tasks, but it is important to get a sense of what the state or legislature believes has been done already. Kathy Demsey suggested asking Keith Norton, who represents the state Dept. of Education (SDE) on the ACIR, to check with SDE leadership to learn what has been done and what was never taken up.

Jennifer Benevento agreed with what others said but added that her first thought while reading the reports was to ask what has been done, but the better question is what have we not done and why? They probably are thoughtful solutions and we should consider what was not done. She added that she was interested in the 2020 Task Force report's discussions of communities and their unwillingness to work together. There are great ideas in the reports and she is interested in why some did or did not move forwards in the time since then.

Lon Seidman said this was the goal in bringing these documents to this group because a lot of ideas have been vetted and presented to the legislature but did not advance. Redirecting some of those ideas could be an efficient use of our time so we are not trying to recreate the wheel. Bruce Wittchen noted that the Task Force report seemed to be well-received at the meeting when it was presented to legislators, but COVID-19 shutdowns followed very soon after and the legislature did not act on the recommendations as expected. Jan Perruccio said it is important to have a common understanding of this information and for us to understand what has been done before what we want ahead.

5. Determine subcommittee's approach, including governance and workforce development aspects of special education

There was further discussion of the subcommittee's assignment and of time constraints. Lon Seidman recommended addressing the low-hanging fruit, the things that we have information for, and spend subsequent meetings on the things we have little material for today. He said workforce development is critical for education and a number of people here are working on that, but documentation must be developed. He recommended focusing today on the ACIR's previous work on school governance, seeing where we stand on this issue, and possibly revising the 2020's report's Priority Recommendation #4.

He provided an overview of the recommendations but also described the push by some legislators to force school districts together and the resulting opposition. The ACIR has been looking at less-restrictive, voluntary approaches and he noted that some towns have been governing themselves the same way since before the Revolutionary War. He added that regionalization statutes basically require a town to give up checks and balances within its current budgetary process and described the differences. This is why most school districts have not regionalized, even if it made sense for them to do it.

Lon Seidman mentioned [CGS Sec. 10-158a](#), *Cooperative arrangements among towns. School building projects. Student transportation*, but listed issues that limit flexibility for school districts. He also pointed out that some districts are losing out on grant opportunities because of how this works and noted potential conflicts with regional school district statutes. Louis Rosado Burch recommended considering community schools, not schools that are called Community Schools, but a model of schools that address some of the challenges through partnerships to leverage other local services, such as social workers, mental health services, and after-hours educational services. It's a model that has proven to be effective. Lon Seidman asked if Louis was aware of any that involved multi-town collaboration and Louis said he was not but there might be opportunities.

Lon asked for the CT Education Association ([CEA](#)) and American Federation of Teachers CT ([AFT-CT](#)) perspectives on such collaboration. Louis highlighted the desire to maintain local collective bargaining rights even with regionalization. He also pointed out that starting salaries on opposite sides of municipal boundary can vary \$20,000 or more. Jennifer Benevento agreed about the importance of local autonomy, saying that districts have their own personality. People are in the place they want to be and she noted the impact of different administrators' approaches.

Jennifer agreed with Louis's mention of community schools, highlighting the importance of working and living in the community, of kids going to the same school as kids down the street. She also mentioned the relevance for special ed services, saying it is not just about least restrictive environment for education, it is also about being in the least restrictive environment. It is important to be known in your own community, regardless of what your needs are. She likes some of the ideas discussed so far but teachers are concerned about the negative impacts of change and she and Lon Seidman listed some concerns, including curriculum and other decisions, qualifications, and how staff are brought into a new structure. Lon said it can be a control issue and he mentioned he has many times seen proposals be opposed by an alliance of fiscal hawks and pro education people who oppose change due to the loss of control, but for different reasons.

Kathy Demsey said change would be necessary at the federal level to enable states to do what Lon has suggested. She described the accountability system but added that she believes regional opportunities will offer our best chance to deliver educational services in a way that meets students' needs. Smaller communities lack resources to serve special needs students, doing a disservice to the students and to the teachers and administrators who are trying to serve them.

Kathy said regional or cooperative arrangements are a way to provide all students, whether for special ed or other specialized services or activities for communities that cannot afford it on their own. Outplacement special ed programs are expensive and the least desirable. Regional cooperation amongst districts can allow those students to access services with peers from their community and other communities, keeping them in the system. It is a more holistic way to provide those services, probably more cost effective, and a teacher is still working for the same district. There was a discussion of options for cooperative arrangements within the federal [Local Education Authority](#) (LEA) framework and Lindsay Seti emphasized that there is local support for optional arrangements and not for mandated regionalization, whether it can save money or not.

Lon Seidman listed examples of challenges that cooperative arrangements have raised in his area, highlighting the layers of bureaucracy some entail and approaches for improving cooperation. Eric Protulis pointed out that regionalized education has existed for a long time in NE CT and a couple communities have discussed regionalizing for many years, but something gets in the way each time it is brought to a vote. He highlighted that each regional district is different and recommended telling the story of the benefits of such approaches and developing recommendations for governance structures. He also noted the relevance of shared services for the many towns experiencing declining enrollments. The extra space in building creates opportunities for expanding the continuum of services enabling special education students to stay in a more local school. You can do that regionally and kids are not feeling as though they're being kicked out of their community.

Lon Seidman said some schools are so small that they are hurting students' educational experiences. Eric Protulis agreed but pointed out that school can be the largest employer in a community and be part of its identity. There was a discussion of the significance of that in education system decisions. Jan Perruccio added that the concept of volatility must also be considered. Districts are combining football teams, courses taught online, and special ed programs. These are achievable goals but this approach adds volatility because a shared program can be ended at any time, with a big impact on the most vulnerable populations. We must think about the process going in and coming back out.

Lon Seidman reiterated Jan's points and highlighted the lack of state incentives to help districts come together in such ways. He also recommended the state and education organizations develop an

information clearinghouse. Lon described how towns partnering can increase or decrease state reimbursement rates for construction and he and Kathy Demsey discussed the impacts of different state parameters. Eric Protulis agreed that the state can do more by clearly outlining responsibilities and cost structures. Lon offered to share his regional district's agreement, pointing out the reduced volatility resulting from the fact that the more you do together the harder it is to separate. If separate districts get together tightly enough, it's harder for one to unravel it.

Louis Rosado Burch spoke of coalition bargaining and potential state financial incentives, highlighting higher starting salaries for teachers and reduced class sizes. Lon Seidman noted that a cooperative agreement can employ people directly and staff moving into one keep their years of service going in, but the law does not enable them to keep those years going out. If a cooperative agreement were to end, teachers would lose their tenure going back to their previous district. We might need to look at that. He also explained the approach to collective bargaining for his regional district and its local districts, where there are five identical contracts.

Jennifer Benevento described the *community of interest* aspect to this, saying this is why we maintain separate bargaining units representing their different interests. She noted the growing proportion of students in special ed and said we have to be thoughtful about this. She also mentioned the competition between districts in what they can afford to pay staff and some are unable to outbid the districts next to them. She suggested reframing how we look at regionalization, at outplacement, and behavior issues. A lot of our kids need more support and resources and we need to fund the staff we need. Lon Seidman noted that it comes back to workforce development.

Jan Perruccio recommended people of this group think in the next month about the potential benefits and disadvantages of the approaches discussed today. To the other positives, she added that teachers can gain from working with a larger group of colleagues: there is less opportunity for professional development in a department of three than in a department of eight or nine. The growth possible when working with a larger number of colleagues is very attractive. More importantly, students need the programs they need and outplacement is incredibly expensive, can be difficult to find, and the loss of control over programming can become a problem.

Lon Seidman said that he, Jan, and Bruce will start integrating some of the things discussed today – community schools, wrap around services, autonomy, volatility, and incentives – with the recommendations in the [2020 Task Force report](#) discussed earlier. Jan Perruccio added that this group's focus should be on sustainable incentives, not one-time incentives. David Abbey asked if regionalization provides a fiscal benefit to the state and Lon said there can be fewer districts to support and less paperwork. There could also be less reimbursement for buildings and it could be easier to deliver services, but the benefit would be hard to quantify.

Lon added that the state benefits economically if there is a wide range of educational opportunities, noting that kids graduating from vocational programs SE CT are making \$80,000 a year at Electric Boat. It hurts the state economy if a school district cannot afford to provide those opportunities. He noted that when his district set up an apprenticeship program the state Department of Labor was begging for school districts to do more.

Jan Perruccio said this shows that we have to consider the interests of the state, not just interests of teachers, administrators, superintendents, kids, parents, and communities. There was further discussion of the need for this group to look at the broader benefits to the state, while recognizing that the focus of legislators is on their districts and communities. Lon Seidman noted that schools in NE CT have a greater focus on agriculture job training, due to its role in their economy. He also mentioned welding training at Westbrook High School to prepare kids for Electric Boat and that equipment is not cheap. A local district cannot provide that training if it cannot afford it.

Jan Perruccio asked people to think about the pros and cons of all the ideas discussed today and said we'll prepare a table for next meeting. She added that the full ACIR will meet on 8/2 and this group will meet 8/6. She noted that this group does not have a meeting scheduled in September, but we have the opportunity to meet with the chairs of the [Task Force to Study Special Education Services and Funding](#) that month. The tentative date is 9/10, at 9:00, and there was a discussion of having that meeting in-person, with remote access, and the CT Assoc. of Public School Superintendents (CAPSS) and the CT Education Assoc. (CEA) were suggested as possible locations. There was further discussion of preparations for the next meeting and of subcommittee members bringing the thoughts of their organizations' members.

The next meeting will be at 9:00 on 8/6/2024, by Teams.

The meeting adjourned at 10:17.

Notes prepared by Bruce Wittchen, OPM