
CONNECTICUT AGENDA



**for Improving Education
Services to All Students,
Particularly Students Eligible for
Special Education
and Related Services**

State of Connecticut

John G. Rowland, Governor

State Board of Education

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INTRODUCTION



Connecticut has a long tradition of providing special education and related services to children and adults with disabilities. In fact, it was one of the first states to enact legislation that provided procedural safeguards and ensured appropriate services to children and adults with disabilities, as early as 1967. When the federal legislation, Public Law 94-142, was passed in 1975, the state already had identified and was providing services to more than 9.4% of the K-12 student population. Through the years, the federal legislation has been reauthorized and the system for providing special education and related services in Connecticut has been expanded to serve a growing population with increasing needs. In 1997, nearly 72,000 students were identified within 13 categories of disability.

In the spirit of continuous improvement and with the desire to ensure quality programs for students eligible for special education and related services, the State Department of Education initiated a study of special education in the spring of 1996. Stakeholders participated in a survey and a series of focus groups designed to delineate the strengths of the current system and to pinpoint areas that needed strengthening. Data about current trends in student demographics, costs, programming, placement options, certification, etc. were analyzed, and staff researched alternate methods for providing quality programs. The timing of this study coincided with the reauthorization of the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments**, which were signed into law on June 4, 1997. A draft *Report on Special Education and Pupil Services* was presented to the State Board of Education for discussion in September 1997, containing a series of recommendations in the following areas: prevalence rates; legislative mandates; litigation; out-of-district placements; costs; and instruction. The public again was invited to comment and the final report was

presented in February 1998. It is summarized in this document as a plan of action, which was adopted by the State Board of Education on February 3, 1998. *The Connecticut Agenda for Improving Educational Services to Students Eligible for Special Education and Related Services* outlines goals and strategies that will be implemented by the State Department of Education and providers of special education and related services statewide.

It is widely recognized that, for more than 30 years, special education programs in Connecticut have helped thousands of young people become productive adults. The goals, objectives and strategies outlined in this strategic plan represent an attempt to take a good system and make it even better — now and in the future.

When Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), it recognized the need to displace low expectations, strengthen the role of parents and families, apply replicable research on proven methods of teaching and learning for children with disabilities, support high quality professional development, address issues related to identification, and coordinate efforts between responsible agencies. The State Board of Education believes that implementation of this strategic plan will further these goals.

Every student, including those with disabilities, is entitled to an education that prepares him or her to enter the workforce and to live a productive, satisfying life. It is our responsibility to provide the necessary accommodations and specially designed instruction to enable student learning. This report provides a blueprint for doing so; it is hoped that, collectively, state and local educators, parents, legislators and the community will make this blueprint a reality.

POSITION STATEMENT

on Educating Students with Disabilities

June 5, 1996

The Connecticut State Board of Education believes that all students are unique and are influenced by cultural, linguistic, intellectual, psychological, social and economic factors. These factors create a need for a varied educational environment that provides for, and accommodates, each child's strengths and areas of improvement. The Board also believes that a unified and coordinated continuum of educational opportunities and supports, designed to address individual needs, serves and benefits all students. The Board encourages the implementation of educational models that promote multiple instructional strategies which encourage and accommodate students in the general environment to the maximum extent appropriate. It is the responsibility and obligation of educators to design and provide teaching strategies, methods and materials that are suitable for each individual learner. Only after exhausting a continuum of these strategies should a child be referred to special education for further evaluation.

The Connecticut State Board of Education supports the principle that Connecticut's Common Core of Learning defines common goals for all students, including those with disabilities. Connecticut's public education system has the duty to provide opportunities for all students to achieve the statewide student goals (motivation to learn, mastery of the basic skills, acquisition of knowledge, competence in life skills, and understanding society's values). The demonstrated performance of these skills, knowledge and attributes must become a greater focus and the acknowledged responsibility of all professionals in the greater education community. The Board presumes that these goals are best achieved in the child's local school, although it recognizes that some children would benefit from alternate settings. Furthermore, the Board believes in the continuous monitoring of student growth and achievement.

Good practice requires:

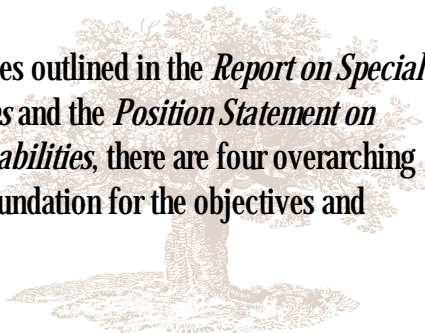
1. Provision of a continuum of teaching and learning options and settings that fosters high expectations, continuing improvement, and challenging curriculum for all students and that prepares students for eventual entry into higher education and the workplace;

2. Identification of student needs and the implementation of student and teacher accountability measures to assess growth and the impact of services;
3. A collaborative approach to service delivery that includes parental involvement, use of community-based resources, learning experiences that are both school-based and work-based, and pupil services and supports (psychology, guidance, counseling, social work, speech and language and health services);
4. Training of all educators that prepares them to teach children with varying abilities, interests and learning styles, and enables them to modify curriculum, deliver individually-designed instruction and implement inclusive education practices unless inappropriate;
5. Sufficient allocation and efficient utilization of resources to provide quality instruction that results in improved student outcomes and focuses on activities with clear educational benefit;
6. Delivery of support services based on early diagnosis of learning problems and early intervention strategies that accommodate different learning styles in the regular classroom, which results in fewer students being identified as requiring special education;
7. Alignment of special education programs and services with all state and federal and local reform efforts to ensure involvement in all school improvement activities;
8. Full participation in state and districtwide assessment opportunities, which are designed to assess the degree to which basic skills are mastered;
9. Use of current medical, educational and psychological research to inform best practices in teaching strategies;
10. Utilization of reliable and appropriately employed standard criteria to identify children with specific learning needs; and
11. Involvement of parents of students with disabilities in the planning and assessment of all aspects of the student's educational program.

The Board believes that implementation of these practices will encourage all students to value themselves as capable individuals who make successful transition(s) to further education and employment. As a result, students will be self-sufficient, productive and contributing members of society able to make informed personal choices and function successfully as family members, workers, learners, citizens, friends and consumers.

GOALS

In implementing the principles outlined in the *Report on Special Education and Pupil Services* and the *Position Statement on Educating Students with Disabilities*, there are four overarching themes which provide the foundation for the objectives and strategies contained herein:



A UNIFIED SYSTEM

General and special education must be reunited into a unified system of educational programs and supports that provide a range of opportunities and experiences based on each student's unique learning style, needs and interests.

ALTERNATIVES TO IDENTIFICATION

Early intervention and pre-referral strategies are critical elements that must be employed to identify and remediate, at their onset, learning difficulties that result from lack of instruction, language difficulty, and/or inadequate preschool experiences.

UNIFORM STANDARDS AND QUALITY PROGRAMMING

All students who require special education and related services must be properly evaluated, identified and placed in programs that will enable them to demonstrate mastery of the goals outlined in the Common Core of Learning and taught as part of the general curriculum.

SUPPORT MECHANISMS

Students who are not eligible for special education and related services but who are having difficulty mastering developmentally-appropriate curriculum goals must be provided with accommodations, supports and alternatives to instruction in the traditional manner.

OBJECTIVES

1. To implement a system of educational support services that provides an **early diagnosis** of learning problems and **early intervention** strategies in order to guarantee an optimum learning opportunity within the general classroom setting.
2. To **identify and evaluate** all children (ages 3 through 21) who require special education and related services using reliable and appropriately employed standard criteria, to identify student strengths, weaknesses, interests, aptitudes and learning style.
3. To provide (for each student requiring special education and related services) a **quality program** that reflects the general curriculum, incorporates alternate instructional strategies for learning, outlines a method for assessing the achievement of goals and the impact of services, provides an array of teaching and learning opportunities and fosters high expectations.
4. To develop a system of **measurement and accountability** that provides a means of assessing individual, collective and institutional outcomes, and to re-evaluate and adjust educational policies and programming in accordance with assessment results.
5. To use a **collaborative approach** to service delivery and educational programming that includes parents, community resources, the business community, pupil services and supports, and educators; and to provide **sufficient resources** to accommodate the needs of each learner.
6. To develop and implement procedural safeguards for children requiring special education and related services within an effective and efficient state and local **administrative and governance structure** that focuses on quality programming and increased instructional time, delineates roles and responsibilities of all involved partners, and reduces paperwork while ensuring accountability.
7. To continue to improve the quality of the **teaching workforce**, which can demonstrate the competencies necessary to provide individually-designed instruction in the areas outlined in the Common Core of Learning and measured on standardized state tests, to children with varying interests, abilities and learning styles.
8. To ensure that **students who** are not eligible for special education and related services, but who **require additional assistance** in order to learn, are provided with the necessary accommodations in order to master the goals of the general curriculum.

STRATEGIES



OBJECTIVE 1

To implement a system of educational support services that provides an early diagnosis of learning problems and early intervention strategies in order to guarantee an optimum learning opportunity within the general classroom setting.

- & Develop and publish a **specialized health care procedures manual**.
- & Develop and disseminate a State Board of Education **position statement on pupil and support services**.
- & Develop, disseminate and provide training in the use of **standards for providing effective pupil services programs**.
- & Develop, disseminate and provide training in the use of **a resource guide to early intervention strategies** that impact positively on student performance.
- & Improve and standardize **procedures for transitioning** children from the Birth-to-Three Program to preschool programs.
- & Provide training on **methodologies and program options** for children with autism.

OBJECTIVE 2

To identify and evaluate all children (ages 3 through 21) who require special education and related services, using reliable and appropriately employed standard criteria, to identify student strengths, weaknesses, interests, aptitudes and learning style.

- & Develop, disseminate, and provide training in the use of **eligibility guidelines** in the areas of serious emotional disturbance (SED), learning disabilities (LD), occupational/physical therapy (OT/PT), mental retardation (MR) and speech/language disorders, and eligibility criteria for special education for children ages 3, 4 and 5.
- & Assist school districts to adopt discipline-specific **evaluation standards** for pupil services using the State Department of Education competencies and indicators.
- & Expand the “**Early Intervention Project**” which trains teachers to reduce the inappropriate classification as disabled through curriculum-based assessment and instructional interventions.
- & Establish a network of state-approved **independent evaluators**.
- & Define and disseminate eligibility criteria for children ages 3, 4 and 5 with developmental delays.

OBJECTIVE 3

To provide (for each student requiring special education and related services) a quality program that reflects the general curriculum, incorporates alternate strategies for learning, outlines a method for assessing the achievement of goals and the impact of services, provides an array of teaching and learning opportunities, and fosters high expectations.

- & Provide technical assistance to enhance special education programs in priority school districts by assisting LEA staff in developing a **school improvement plan** that focuses on the areas of administration, pupil services and service delivery.
- & Develop a **standard individualized education program (IEP) form** that incorporates the general curriculum and the goals in the Common Core of Learning.
- & Develop and publish a directory of **successful practices** and programs for each disability area and for the gifted and talented area.
- & Provide information about **advanced placement courses and accelerated learning opportunities** within the general classroom setting.
- & Expand the “**Strategies Intervention Program**” which provides strategies for teachers of students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance, and those at-risk, to assist them to succeed in general education classrooms.
- & Expand the “**Enhancing Instructional Programs within Schools**” project which trains building administrators to develop and implement quality special education programs and assess their impact.
- & Develop guidelines for providing additional resources and developing plans for **transitioning students** from preschool to school, from high school to postsecondary education, and from school to employment.

- & Provide statewide training in using a **multi-strategy approach to teaching reading** in the elementary grades.
- & Develop **suggestions for reduced class size**, especially in kindergarten and grades 1, 2 and 3.

OBJECTIVE 4

To develop a system of measurement and accountability that provides a means of assessing individual, collective and institutional outcomes, and to reevaluate and adjust policies and programming in accordance with assessment results.

- & Provide an annual **special education profile** to each district and technical assistance in using the data to direct a school's improvement plan.
- & Identify all districts, on an annual basis, who have an overall **special education prevalence rate**, or a prevalence rate in any category of disability, or a rate of exemption from the standardized state test, that deviates significantly from the state average and provide technical assistance, if warranted, to correct the problem areas.
- & Develop a system for **evaluating student progress** which includes participation in the state testing system and an alternate assessment for students who meet the exemption criteria.

OBJECTIVE 5

To use a collaborative approach to service delivery and educational programming that includes parents, community resources, the business community, pupil services and supports, and educators; and to provide sufficient resources to accommodate the needs of each learner.

- & Develop guidelines and provide **sample schedules for the school day** to accommodate planning and collaboration time among all providers.

- & Implement a series of **parent training sessions** to explain legislation, procedural safeguards, rights and responsibilities and the protocol at an IEP meeting.
- & Convert the complaint process to a **parent assistance hotline**.
- & Collaborate with the Parent Advisory Center to provide a **parent ombudsman** in each regional education service center area.

OBJECTIVE 6

To develop and implement procedural safeguards for children requiring special education and related services within an effective and efficient state and local governance structure that focuses on quality programming and increased instructional time, delineates roles and responsibilities of all involved partners, and reduces paperwork while ensuring accountability.

- & Upgrade the state **special education statute** to adopt the provisions of the federal IDEA, adjust the excess cost grant, and maintain state provisions that provide additional safeguards and surpass IDEA.
- & Revise and upgrade the **standards for approval of special education programs in private facilities** to ensure that the IEP of all students is implemented.
- & Revise the **program review system** by: developing and disseminating a standard procedures manual, forms and procedural safeguards; and providing regional follow-up, training and technical assistance to ensure implementation of procedures.
- & Develop and pilot an intermediate step in the **due process hearing system** which allows parties to seek an advisory opinion prior to a full hearing; develop a data bank of due process hearings and make hearing decisions available through the internet.
- & Develop an **interagency memorandum of agreement** which outlines the duties and educational/fiscal respon-

sibilities of all state agencies who are responsible to provide services to students eligible for special education and related services.

- & Develop a **common data system** between the Department of Children and Families and the State Department of Education in order to track students common to both agencies and ensure the provision of services.
- & Streamline the **surrogate parent system** by creating a common database with other state agencies that provides services to common clients, and appointing foster parents as surrogates, where appropriate.

OBJECTIVE 7

To continue to improve the quality of the teaching workforce, which can demonstrate the competencies necessary to provide individually-designed instruction in the areas outlined in the Common Core of Learning and measured on standardized state tests, to children with varying interests, abilities and learning styles.

- & Revise **elementary, middle, and secondary teacher license requirements** to include competencies in: applying theories of child development; implementing, evaluating and modifying behavior management techniques; teaching positive social skills; collaborating and consulting with other professionals; program planning using alternate models of instruction and creating adapted learning environments; and applying a variety of instructional methodologies to teach and assess student learning. These license requirements will also provide a well-planned sequence of field experiences with students of different ages, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and exceptionalities.
- & Revise **special education teacher license requirements** to:
 - provide an endorsement for elementary/special education that will allow the teacher to practice as a regular and special education professional;

- provide an endorsement for secondary (which includes middle and high school)/special education that will allow the teacher to teach a content discipline and practice as a special education instructor;
- include twelve competencies at the elementary level and fourteen competencies at the secondary level, related to the instruction of students eligible for special education and related services;
- provide (at the elementary level) student teaching in the public school setting which includes a minimum of 16 weeks of equivalent student teaching in an elementary special education experience and a self-contained elementary class; and
- provide (at the secondary level) student teaching which includes 16 weeks, divided into equal segments, in a public middle school setting and high school setting, one of which is teaching in the endorsement area of the regular classroom and one of which is delivering special education instruction.

& Provide **training to current** regular and special education **staff** in the above-named competencies.

& Provide **training for reading teachers, special education teachers, and kindergarten, first, second and third grade teachers** that will enable them to provide instruction in phonological awareness and a systemic code emphasis approach.

& Design and implement a **comprehensive system of personnel development** for educators statewide that is reflective of department goals and incorporates the principles in this document.

& Develop standards for the use of **paraprofessionals**.

OBJECTIVE 8

To ensure that students who are not eligible for special education and related services, but who require additional assistance in order to learn, are provided with the necessary accommodations in order to master the goals of the general curriculum.

- & Develop, disseminate and provide training in the use of a **best practices manual** of strategies and instructional supports which reduce reliance on special education, and use support staff and resources in effective ways to improve educational outcomes (i.e., classroom organization, school-based intervention assistance teams, curriculum-based assessment, differentiated instruction, and communication enrichment).
- & Develop a **comprehensive literacy protocol** for teachers to ensure that all children are taught to read by grade 3.

SUMMARY

It is recommended that this strategic plan be implemented as follows:

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION INITIATIVES

1. Develop a literacy training protocol for current kindergarten and grade 1 through 3 teachers.
2. Revise certification regulations for elementary, middle/high school and special education endorsements, provide training to current staff in the required competencies, and develop standards for use of para-professionals.
3. Publish guidelines for identifying students with serious emotional disturbance, learning disabilities, mental retardation, speech/language disorders, occupational/physical therapy, autism and developmental delays.
4. Revise program review activities by compiling a standard procedures manual, procedural safeguards and standard forms in conformance with IDEA 97.
5. Revise the standards for approval of special education programs in private facilities.
6. Implement program enhancement activities for priority school districts.
7. Compile student and fiscal data and disseminate to each local education agency in the form of the special education student profile.
8. Develop an alternate statewide assessment to be used to measure progress in mastering skills in the general curriculum for those students exempted from the mastery test.
9. Develop an interagency memorandum of understanding with all state agencies responsible for providing special education and related services, outlining roles and fiscal responsibilities.
10. Enhance the comprehensive system of personnel development for educators.
11. Improve the due process system by converting the complaint process to a parent assistance hotline, piloting an intermediate step in the hearing process and making hearing decisions available on the Internet.

12. Streamline the surrogate parent system by appointing foster parents as surrogates and by creating a common interagency database.
13. Develop guidelines and best practices resource guides on the topics of class size, transition, talented and gifted, alternate strategies and modifications to instruction acceleration and advanced placement, resource and staff allocation, school schedules, use of para-professionals, evaluation standards, pupil services standards, and health care.
14. Expand the parent resource network and provide awareness and training to parents regarding special education rights and responsibilities.

LOCAL EDUCATION AGENCY INITIATIVES

1. Provide school readiness programs to preschool children and expand kindergarten programs to full day.
2. Limit class size in grades 1, 2 and 3.
3. Use a combined approach to teaching reading and, when necessary, provide alternate instruction techniques.
4. Train regular classroom teachers in strategies for behavior management and curriculum modifications and provide resources and support services to teachers within the regular classroom, as warranted.
5. Provide an opportunity for a mediated settlement at the local level prior to the request for a hearing.
6. Employ a philosophy of differentiated instruction for all students and consider modifications to the general curriculum when developing an IEP and ensure appropriate measurement of mastery of skills and progress in meeting the goals outlined.
7. Provide supports to students in transition - from the birth to three program to the three- to five-year-old program; from preschool to kindergarten; from elementary school to middle school; from middle school to high school; and from high school to postsecondary education, employment or independent living.
8. Modify school improvement plans using data from the special education student profiles.
9. Develop individual education programs (IEPs) based on the general curriculum.
10. Use the state eligibility guidelines to identify students in need of special education and related services.

LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

1. Address the burden of catastrophic costs on local education agencies by providing additional state revenue to cover a greater portion of the costs of state-agency placed children.
2. Adopt the federal provisions in the state special education statute and provide assurance that Connecticut will participate in the federal entitlement program; revise the state statute to delete any duplicate language and include only those state specific provisions that are more rigorous than the federal statute and regulations; and repeal the regulations, except for those provisions that clarify or enhance the remaining statutes.
3. Adopt a series of technical amendments to insure that the revised components of the state statute conform to IDEA Amendments and that obsolete provisions are deleted.
4. Revise the standards for approval of special education programs in private facilities.
5. Delete the requirement that education funds for eligible special education students in the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services be passed through the State Department of Education budget.
6. Amend the State Advisory Panel for Special Education provision to conform with IDEA 97, and preserve the existing members through the end of their existing term.

Leslie M. Aversa
Associate Commissioner
Division of Educational Programs and Services

**BUREAU OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
AND PUPIL SERVICES STAFF**

Thomas Badway
Arthur Carey
Nancy Cappello
Theresa DeFrancis
Mary Ellen Fiorot
Paul Flinter
Roger Frant
Judith Halpern
Carolyn Isakson
Ann Kammerer
Susan Kennedy
Robert Lichtenstein
John Purdy
Nadine Schwab
Patrick Shaughnessy
Jerome Spears
Norma Sproul
Anne Louise Thompson

DATA

Lester Horvath

TYPISTS

Mitzy Vaninetti
Angela West

LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Deborah Koval

