

**Written Testimony of
Matthew S. Zabroski
Glastonbury Educator
Before the
Education Committee
Regarding**

March 8, 2021

S.B. No. 976 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING SPECIAL EDUCATION

Good afternoon, Representative Sanchez, Senator McCrory, Representative McCarty, Senator Berthel, Representative Barry, Senator Daugherty-Abrams, and distinguished members of the Education Committee.

I am writing to support the establishment of a special education task force and encourage the committee to ensure that the task force will look at imposing limits on how many students can be in one special education teacher's or school guidance counselor's caseload, as these numbers have an impact on the instruction of all members of the school community and long-term impacts on the community at-large.

I am in my seventeenth year of teaching, currently employed as a Special Educator in Glastonbury Public Schools (since 2008) and previously employed in Wallingford Public Schools, also as a Special Educator. My career experience has seen me work with students with a myriad of disabilities from significant emotional/behavioral disabilities and students with learning disabilities to students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, just to name a few. I have dedicated my professional life to the public service of educating students who are unable to access public education in the same manner as their peers, much as many of you have dedicated yours to the public service of lawmaking.

Throughout my career, each year I have been assigned a caseload of uniquely individual students, each with their own very specific needs, and each different from every student I had in previous years. While they may have similar diagnoses to their predecessors, they each have different learning profiles, different levels of family involvement/support, and different educational and personal experiences that they bring with them to school each day. In fact, when it comes to my students, there are only two constants year-in and year-out: Each student comes with incredible potential for growth - a true set of learning strengths and weaknesses - and each student comes closer to reaching that potential the more I can provide one-on-one, individualized attention to them. Thus, the size of my caseload directly affects the support I can provide, and the growth each child can experience.

It is important to understand that students who have disabilities will have their disability for life. Much like a person born without legs, one cannot "cure" someone who has a disability that impacts learning - you can't simply grow them new legs. Rather, much like providing a legless person with prosthetics and teaching them how to use those prosthetic devices, a person with a disability must be provided with tools to compensate for their disability and then taught how to manage their disability in a way that allows them equal access to everything their non-disabled peers can, including not only their learning environment, but eventually their adult lives. In schools we can accommodate, we can modify curriculum and adjust teaching methods to better incorporate these students' needs into the educational setting, but as they transition from public school life into adulthood, these accommodations and modifications become less and less available. In the end, the greater community is impacted by how well...or how poorly...students with disabilities are taught to manage their unique needs. Students receiving services through Special Education and 504 Plans, therefore, are a matter of great public concern and have a powerful influence on all communities in our state.

Considering all of this, we must examine what leads to the most positive outcomes for students with disabilities, and thus the impact on our communities over the long-term. The answer is quite simple, even

if the solution has escaped us to this point - more time for individual attention and more individual instruction.

In my time as a professional educator, I have been responsible for caseloads of anywhere from 12 students to 25, and while the numbers seem to grow each year, I am fortunate to teach in a district that has the resources and finances to provide a high level of support. My peers in other districts are not so fortunate. Many of them have caseloads of 35 and more. At the same time, recent changes to laws governing eligibility for 504 plans has caused those caseloads to increase exponentially.

This is leading to a terrible outcome for our communities. An increase in the size of caseload directly leads to a decrease in individual support for students. A decrease in individual support for students directly leads to an increase in students who are unable to manage their disabilities, and who remain in the system of special services. Students who do not learn to manage their disabilities become adults who cannot manage their disabilities, which leads to a greater need for community support services, costing our towns and our state valuable resources at a significant financial cost.

The size of Special Education and 504 Plan caseloads impacts non-special education students in schools as well. By law, Regular Education Teachers are required to be present during Planning and Placement Team meetings for students receiving special education and 504 services. This means that during those meetings, the regular education teachers in attendance are not in their classes, and not available to any of their students.

Suppose a team of middle school students has one Special Education Teacher, and one or two School Guidance Counselors. The class size for academic classes is 25 students, with 5 classes happening simultaneously. Suppose there are 10 students receiving Special Education services and 5 receiving 504 plan services. This requires a minimum of 15 meetings during that school year, for which at least one regular academic teacher must be present at each. During each meeting one group of 25 students will not be receiving instruction from an academic instructor. $25 \text{ students} \times 15 \text{ meetings} = 375$ non-special education students losing at least one class period of instruction due to these meetings. Look what happens when the numbers are moved closer to what they are in reality (and significantly higher in some districts): 25 special education students and 15 504 plans on one middle school team. $40 \text{ meetings} \times 25 \text{ students} = 1,000$ *non-special education* students losing *at least* one class of instruction. You can see how the size of Special Education and 504 Plan caseloads affects the entire school community. That will have a notable negative impact on *every* student.

I encourage you to seriously consider legislation that imposes a cap on how many students a Special Education Teacher or School Guidance Counselor can provide services to in a given year, or at least tie funding to these numbers to encourage lower numbers. Our communities, both school and civic, will only benefit.

Respectfully,

Matthew S. Zabroski
Special Educator