

**The Connecticut State Advisory Council
for Special Education**

Annual Report

2025



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MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

— Helen Keller

The Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education (SAC) 2025 Annual Report provides a comprehensive overview of the discussions, priorities, and recommendations that emerged from our work throughout the year. Serving as a collaborative platform in support of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the SAC unites legislators, agencies, students, teachers, parents, advocates, and administrators in addressing the unmet needs of Connecticut’s students receiving special education services.

Through thoughtful dialogue and collaboration, the Council establishes its annual Focus Areas and Recommendations for the Connecticut State Board of Education (CSBE), the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), and the Connecticut General Assembly. Our legislative members, Representative Comey and Representative Gaiowski, have been vital contributors in identifying the areas most critical to supporting students with disabilities. However, to fully meet our legislative mandate, the SAC continues to seek additional legislative representation. The success of special education depends on strong partnerships with policymakers—active legislative engagement empowers the Council to more effectively advocate for the needs of all students.

This Annual Report reaffirms our ongoing commitment to fostering inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for students with disabilities. The identified Focus Areas and Recommendations highlight the continued need for comprehensive supports addressing students’ social, emotional, mental health, and behavioral development. Two additional factors that directly influence student well-being are ensuring a full continuum of placement options and addressing the persistent shortage of qualified special education personnel.

Parent engagement forms the cornerstone of effective special education. Through their insight, advocacy, and collaboration, families help ensure that each student’s unique needs are understood and every strength is recognized. Accordingly, our final focus area emphasizes enhancing meaningful family and caregiver participation in the Planning and Placement Team (PPT) process.

As a final thought, I would like to thank all SAC members for their dedication and collaboration throughout the year—meeting, discussing, and developing recommendations that strengthen outcomes for students with disabilities and better prepare them for life after high school. I also extend my sincere appreciation to the Connecticut Department of Education, legislators, educators, administrators, school staff, state agencies, parents, and most importantly, to our students with disabilities, whose resilience and determination continue to inspire our work to create an education system that benefits all learners.

Sincerely,

Missy Wrigley, Chair, Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education.

For Additional information, including agendas and meetings scheduled, go to the [State Department of Education website](#).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Connecticut State Advisory Council for Special Education ("SAC" or "Council") has established authority under Section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004), Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), 34 CFR Section 300.169. The Council's purpose is to advise the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) of unmet needs in educating students with disabilities and to recommend to the General Assembly any changes to the law, regulations, standards and guidelines pertaining to Special Education in the state. The Council is to report to the General Assembly by February 15 in even-numbered years and January 15 in odd-numbered years.

This annual report reflects Council activity from January 2025 through December 2025. The Council has worked collaboratively with the Bureau of Special Education to address the statutory requirements of the Council. The Council reports to the General Assembly, CSDE, State Board of Education (SBE), Office of Labor Relations, and the State Library.

COUNCIL LEADERSHIP

Susan Yankee served as Chairperson and Jennifer Lussier served in the role of Vice-Chairperson from January 2025 through June 2025. Missy Wrigley and Brandalyn Fulton Williams were elected Chair and Vice-Chairperson as of July 1, 2025. The State Advisory Council would like to thank these individuals for their leadership and commitment to this work. The current status of Committee participation is listed below.

Committee members are appointed by Susan Yankee or Missy Wrigley as Chairperson to conduct Committee work.

Executive Committee: Chair: Missy Wrigley, Vice-Chair: Brandalyn Fulton Williams, Secretary: Jennifer Lussier, Susan Yankee, Nachi Bhatt, M. Jeffry Spahr, and Catherine Summ

Liaison (non-voting): CSDE: Bryan Klimkiewicz and Sean P. Cronin

Legislative Committee: Chair: M. Jeffry Spahr, Vice-Chair: Tom Cosker, Brandalyn Fulton Williams, Jennifer Lussier, Ana Wittig, Representative Robin Comey, Goviana Morales, Joshua Martin and Missy Wrigley, Susan Yankee

Membership Committee: Chair: Catherine Summ, Denise Drummond, Missy Wrigley, Ana Wittig, Brian Smith, Jennifer Lussier, Goviana Morales, and Susan Yankee

Nominating Committee: Chair: Brian Smith, Denise Drummond, Ana Wittig

The chairperson established a By-Laws and Operational Procedures Workgroup this year. This work group has been working to update the Advisory Council By-Laws which will be presented to the Full Council for adoption in January 2026.

MEMBERSHIP COMMITTEE UPDATE

The Council, with the support of the Membership Committee, is pleased to report a minimum number of vacancies and consistent participation of Appointed and At-Large members throughout this reporting period. The Council remains extremely healthy in terms of participation, attendance, and activity. The dedicated individuals currently serving in the Council remain committed and have demonstrated consistent attendance despite their numerous personal and professional responsibilities. In addition to its legislatively required members pursuant to section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes, the Council included student member representatives through a by-law's revision in 2019 and a para-educator member representative through by-laws revision in 2023. The Council is committed to ensuring student voice is represented with up to four student members during a term.

At the time of this report, the Council has the following vacancies: one paraeducator representative, three student representatives, and three General Assembly Elected Representatives.

During the past year, Membership Committee has completed the following activities:

- Reviewed applications and presented prospective members to the Executive Committee and Council. Candidate recommendations were considered based upon role, level of interest, and representation of the state of Connecticut regarding racial/ethnic background, geographic residency/location, and the broadest range of representation of disability categories (parents of child/youth or individual with a disability).
- Recommended for appointment one student representative.
- Drafted and submitted proposed changes to membership policies and procedures, including suggested changes regarding the existing Membership by-laws, to the Executive Committee.

LEGISLATIVE COMMITTEE UPDATE

The Legislative Committee identifies, researches, and reviews proposed legislation that may impact the field of special education. It then summarizes the information to inform the Council of the proposed legislative initiatives that have impact on the broad special education community (including students, families, educators and service providers). The Committee may develop responses to proposed legislation, generate testimony, and propose legislative initiatives on its own that are then submitted to the General Assembly's Education Committee (or another appropriate Committee). The Legislative Committee will assist the full Council in developing priority areas and communication strategies to widely support these initiatives. This year the

Legislative Session was a 'Regular Session' and was scheduled to convene on January 8, 2025, and adjourn on June 4, 2025.

During this time the Special Education Division Director and others provided a list of proposed legislation that might be impactful to our community. These proposed bills were reviewed by the members of the Legislative Committee and discussed. After such review and discussion, those pieces of proposed legislation that were deemed worthy of further scrutiny were listed and monitored as they progressed (or not) through the system. On occasion a bill would progress to the point where it was presented to a committee for review and debate (and, possibly, further progress through the legislative process). The Legislative Committee would, when deemed appropriate, submit written testimony to the Committee expressing its support, points for consideration or observations to the committee.

This year, the Legislative Committee submitted written testimony to the Education Committee on a variety of issues. This included commenting on the following proposed legislation:

- Proposing that local Security and Safety Committees be required by statute to include a ‘special education department representative’.
- Proposed that the term ‘volunteer hours’ include the performance of internships or practicums for students seeking to receive their Master’s Degree so that they may become School Psychologists, Special Education teachers or other much needed school personnel thereby qualifying for participation in the State’s Student Loan Forgiveness Program. This suggestion was adopted and became law.
- We once more proposed that notification of when a child had been placed in restraint or seclusion be delivered within the “same day” of the incident and be delivered in the preferred language of the parent/guardian. We also sought to create a system of auditing the use of these techniques where appropriate.
- We supported the adoption of legislation that sought to repeat the provisions and protections of the Federal 504 Plan and have them made a part of the State statutes. In that way, should anything happen to remove or reduce the protections provided for at the Federal level, these could be enforced at the state level.
- We proposed that the security training delivered to SRO personnel at the schools also be provided to civilian security personnel, including de-escalation techniques.

Examples of the comments of the Legislative Committee of the SAC, submitted to the Education and other Committees of the CGA can be found here:

- [Protecting 504 Plan Accommodations](#)
- [Student Loan Reimbursement Program Eligibility](#)
- [Public School Security Personnel Training](#)
- [Crisis Response Team](#)

The foregoing is just an example of the involvement of the SAC, and the Legislative Committee, in the legislative process.

Going forward, the Legislative Committee will continue to monitor any relevant upcoming legislation and continue to comment on and support (or oppose as necessary) any such proposals. We shall remain watchful and active. An important point about the SAC’s involvement in this process is the fact that we have a diverse membership that includes parents and teachers, representatives from public and private institutions, as well as staff and administration members. This gives us the ability to consider any legislative proposals from several viewpoints that adds to our ability to assess and comment on these proposals.

FUNCTIONS OF THE COUNCIL

The Council has been authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) since the Act's inception in 1975. The Council is one of 50 “state advisory panels” authorized by the IDEA of 2004 [see regulations in Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), 34 CFR Section 300.167]. The Council is also authorized under Section 10-76i of the Connecticut General Statutes (C.G.S.) with the express purpose to "advise the General Assembly, the State Board of Education (SBE) and the Commissioner of Education" on special education matters. The Council is specifically mandated by the IDEA and state statute to accomplish the following duties:

State Advisory Council Functional Advisory Areas – per Amendments to *C.G.S. Section 10-76i* (e.g., *P.A. 10-175*) and IDEA State Advisory Panel Duties (34 CFR Section 300.169)

- Advise the CSDE of unmet needs in educating children with disabilities and on the administration of the provisions of sections 10-94f to 10-94k, inclusive.
- Review periodically the laws, regulations, standards, and guidelines pertaining to special education and

recommend to the General Assembly, and the State Board of Education any changes which it finds necessary.

- Comment publicly on any new or revised regulations, standards and guidelines proposed for issuance.
- Advise the CSDE in developing corrective action plans to address findings identified in Federal monitoring reports under Part B of the Act.
- Advise the CSDE in developing and implementing policies relating to the coordination of services for children with disabilities.
- Participate with the State Board of Education in the development of any state plan for provision of special education.
- Comment publicly on any procedures necessary for distributing federal funds received pursuant to the Education of the Handicapped Act, 89 Statute 774, 1975, 20 U.S.C. Code § 1400 et seq., as from time to time amended.
- Assist the CSDE in developing and reporting such data and evaluations as may be conducted pursuant to the provisions of said act.
- Report to the General Assembly not later than January fifteenth in the odd-numbered years and not later than February fifteenth in the even-numbered years, concerning recommendations for effecting changes in the special education laws.
- Review Due Process Hearing data and discuss findings and decisions (34 CFR Section 300.513(d)) and (34 CFR Section 300.514(c)).
- Receive information regarding the provisions of a Free and Appropriate Public Education. Waiver of non-supplant requirement. (34 CFR Section 300.164(c)(4)).
- Advise the CSDE regarding the determination of risk ratio thresholds above which disproportionality is significant (34 CFR Section 600.647(b)(iii)(A)).

PROCESS for DETERMINING the “UNMET NEEDS” of STUDENTS with DISABILITIES

According to 34 CFR Section 300.169, one of the Council’s primary responsibilities is to identify the “unmet needs” in the education of children with disabilities across the state. To fulfill this mandate, the Council gathered data and feedback from a wide range of stakeholders to better understand the challenges facing students, families, and educators. This year, ongoing obstacles—including rising costs, staffing shortages, and increasing mental health needs—continued to affect the support and services available to students with disabilities. In response, the Council undertook the following activities to carry out this important responsibility:

- Council members shared input and provided reports from their representative stakeholder group during the Full Council meeting’s “Round Table.”
- Reports from the Parent Training Information center, CT Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC).
- Reports from students and the student/youth advisory groups.
- Reports from the Connecticut Council of Administrators of Special Education (ConnCASE) representative.
- Reports from the Approved Private Special Education Programs (APSEPs) representative.
- Reports from agency representatives, including Department of Developmental Services (DDS) and Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS)/ Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB).

- Reports from the Department of Children and Families (DCF).
- Reports from the juvenile justice system.
- Reports from the McKinney-Vento representative.
- Reports from parents and representatives from several local, regional, and statewide parent groups, including the CPAC English/Spanish Parent Leaders Roundtable.
- Reports from students and the student/youth forums (Leadership Training and Symposium).
- Reports from Legislative Council members.
- Public comment during meetings.
- State Department of Education presentations and reports:
 - Presentation on: “Indicator 17: State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP)”.
 - Presentation on: “FFY25/FF26, IDEA Part B, Section 611/619, State Application Process & Sub recipient Application Review”.
 - Dispute Resolution Update.
- Special Education Division Director presentations.
- Inclusion of paraeducator (by law revision) to gain perspective/reports from paraeducator representative.
- Report updates from Special Education Task Force SAC representative.
- Presentation by Tow Youth Justice Institute.

COUNCIL ACTIVITY

Meeting agendas and minutes are posted on the [CSDE website](#)

Full Council Meetings were held on:

- January 15, 2025
- February 26, 2025
- March 26, 2025
- April 23, 2025
- May 21, 2025
- July 9, 2025
- September 24, 2025
- October 15, 2025
- November 19, 2025

The Executive Committee: Reviews Council business and develops the full Council agendas. This committee acts for the Council in all matters requiring decision between full Council meetings.

Executive Committee meetings were held on:

- January 8, 2025

- February 19, 2025
- March 21, 2025
- April 16, 2025
- May 7, 2025
- September 10, 2025
- October 8, 2025
- November 12, 2025
- December 17, 2025

Nominating/Membership Committees: Prepare an annual slate of officers for the Council and monitor Council attendance and advise the Chair on activities related to the process of filling membership vacancies.

Membership Committee meetings were held on:

- March 12, 2025
- March 19, 2025
- December 12, 2025

Nominating Committee meetings were held on:

- March 12, 2025

The Legislative Committee: reviews proposed legislation and summarizes the information to inform the Council, generates testimony, responds to legislation, and assists the full Council in developing priority areas and communication strategies to widely disseminate these priorities. The Legislative Committee held 18 working group meetings through legislative session to review and discuss the proposed legislation.

COUNCIL PRIORITIES

From January through July, the Council was engaged in many critical issues and topics within special education including but not limited to Advisory activities related to the IDEA Part B 611 and 619 grant, The State Performance Plan / Annual Performance Report, State Systemic Improvement Plan, ESSER II and ARP ESSER funding initiatives, and the CT IEP and Special Education Data System (CT-SEDS). The Council also continued to support the established 2024-25 Priorities (see summary below):

PRIORITIES/FOCUS AREAS

The following priorities were identified and established in July 2024 through July 2025. New priorities were generated in July of 2025.

July 2024-July 2025 Priorities

- Individualized Programming.
- Special Education Staffing (Recruitment and Retention).
- Planning and Placement Team (PPT) Process / Partnership.
- Belonging / Least Restrictive Environment.
- Individualized Student Safety Plans for School Emergencies and Drills.
- Social Emotional Learning/ Mental Health and the Emergency use of Restraint and Seclusion.

July 2025-July 2026 Focus Areas

- Special Education and Social/Emotional Health.
- Meaningful Parent Participation in the PPT (Planning & Placement Team).
- Least Restrictive Environment (Placement Continuum).
- Special Education Staffing (Recruitment and Retention).

COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

Special Education and Social/Emotional Health

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported in 2024 that “Adolescent mental health in the U.S. was worsening prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our nation's youth are experiencing a mental health crisis. The percentage of high school students feeling sad and hopeless increased significantly over a 10-year period. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are increasing for many high school students putting them at risk of suicide. Schools play an important role in promoting student mental health. Feeling connected to others at school is a powerful strategy to protect students’ mental health.” For more details check out: [Youth Mental Health: The Numbers | Adolescent and School Health | CDC](#)

Being presented with this information, the council continues to recognize and advocate for the social emotional well-being of our students with disabilities. The mental health needs of Connecticut students is an ongoing concern for families, schools and their communities. These needs have symptomatically been exhibited through school avoidance, behavioral dysregulation that prompts exclusionary discipline and a myriad of behaviors that impede the learning of affected students and their peers.

The increased use, by our students, of the plethora of social media outlets is also known to be contributing to the social and emotional issues being experienced by our students. How to safely navigate the Internet inside and outside of school remains consequential for Connecticut students. In January 2020, CT State Department of Education adopted the [Digital Citizenship, Internet Safety, and Media Literacy Guidelines and Recommended Actions](#). The council firmly supports the adaptation of the Digital Citizenship curriculum to include a focus on Special Education and social-emotional learning (SEL), including gaming. Acknowledging that social-emotional skills are crucial for navigating digital spaces, especially for students with disabilities.

“A comprehensive solution involves a coordinated, participatory, and systemic community-wide response to these concerns, replacing the sole expert or professional authority-based approach that has traditionally been used to treat mental health concerns” (Herman, K. C., Reinke, W. M., Thompson, A. M., M. Hawley, K., Wallis, K., Stormont, M., & Peters, C. (2020). A Public Health Approach to Reducing the Societal Prevalence and Burden of Youth Mental Health Problems: Introduction to the Special Issue. *School Psychology Review*, 50(1), 8–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1827682>) This acuity of mental health concerns of school aged children need prompted the state of CT to connect with mental health providers in staffing model Urgent Crisis Centers across the state which offer crisis stabilization support, comprehensive mental health assessment, and direct linkages to community services for youth ages 4-18.

The council believes that schools need to address social emotional functioning in proactive teaching methodologies. This can be operationalized through the evidence-based practices of Scientifically Research Based Instruction (SRBI). SRBI as a concept is grounded by data and its ceaseless utility in the identification of students with Specific Learning Disabilities and SRBI interventions were useful in supporting students with social emotional concerns in the school environment when it was implemented in 2007. The council advises that the SRBI be utilized in schools statewide in support of all students. This would not only address social emotional functioning for students in need but also scaffold general education while providing data and protecting the Least Restrictive Environment.

Recommendations for the CT State Department of Education/CT State Board of Education

- Conduct School Welcoming Walkthroughs to ensure a school atmosphere for all students and teachers that promotes social emotional stability and growth.
- Provide Trauma informed Care Training.
- BOE Training for SRBI – make this mandatory (develop strategy to fund).
- Provide Sensory Processing Training for all staff as a foundation for understanding social emotional health/behavior.
- Provide FBA / BIP training and support in maintaining the process.
- Develop and implement universal Statewide Dual-Capacity Training on Prevention and De-escalation of dysregulated students for general/special educators, families and relevant staff who work with students.
- CSDE should institute a study with relevant stakeholders to review the Restraint and Seclusion reporting form with the goal of ensuring the information assists teams in programming for student needs.
- Ensure training and resources are available to parents and educators regarding trauma informed best practices and de-escalation strategies.
- Require the forthcoming SRBI Guidance to be implemented throughout the districts.

Recommendations for State Legislators

- Require integration of the new forthcoming SRBI guidance to be implemented throughout all districts in Connecticut.
- Mandate the teaching of safe Digital Citizenship with all our special education staff and students.
- Ask Legislative Committee on SEL to provide updates on outcomes and future plans.
- Provide financial support for CSDE to institute Universal screening for SEL. (DESSA - Devereux Student Strengths Assessment)
- Change the current requirement for parent/guardian notification of R/S from within 24 hours to same day notification to parent/guardian in the language of the parent/guardians.
- Require CSDE increase the level of monitoring to include audits of districts, schools and students with high rates of restraint/seclusion incidents.

Meaningful Parent Participation in the PPT (Planning & Placement Team)

One of the foundational principles of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the [right of parents to meaningfully participate](#) in meetings concerning the evaluation, identification, and educational placement of their child, as well as in decisions regarding the provision of a free appropriate public education (FAPE). This principle ensures that families are active and informed partners in the special education process. Research consistently shows that strong [family-school partnerships lead to improved student outcomes](#), including higher achievement, better attendance, and increased engagement in learning. Connecticut defines family engagement as *[“a full, equal, and equitable partnership among families, educators, and community partners to promote children’s learning and development from birth through college and career.”](#)* Connecticut has led the nation in establishing this shared definition, which has served as a model for other states seeking to create a unified approach to family engagement. Aligning this vision with the principles of the IDEA ensures that all families,

particularly those of students with disabilities, are empowered to participate meaningfully in their child’s education and to advocate effectively for their success.

While the right of parents to participate in their child’s Planning and Placement Team (PPT) meeting is protected under law, the degree to which families can meaningfully participate varies widely across Connecticut. Common barriers include socioeconomic challenges, inadequate translation and interpretation services that hinder families from accessing information in their primary language, and inconsistent district interpretations of what constitute meaningful parent participation in PPT meetings. To address these inequities, the SAC has developed the following recommendations:

Recommendations for the CT State Department of Education/CT State Board of Education

- Develop Parent Guide to PPT (short videos, infographic) QR codes to locate the information.
- Create Special Education Parent Bill of Rights – define meaningful participation (mirror Transition Bill of Rights).
- Recommend that districts provide parent support assigned to all PPT meetings to support families along the process. Pre and post support, explain parents' guide to special education, procedural safeguards.
- Review Indicator 8 Parent Survey for possible revision.

Recommendations for the Connecticut Legislators

- It is essential that Connecticut establish a **Special Education Parents Bill of Rights** to ensure that every family understands and can exercise their rights guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), state law and regulations, and broader civil rights protections. The Bill of Rights should clearly articulate the components of *meaningful participation*, including but not limited to:
 - Explicitly affirming the right to receive appropriate interpretation and translation services, providing equal access to all of the information being discussed at a PPT meeting, 504 meeting, Manifestation Determination Review, disciplinary meetings.
 - Expanding the list of documents that must be translated (written) into the language of the parent to explicitly include, but not be limited to: IEP, 504 Plan, Prior Written Notice, Restraint and Seclusion Reports, Evaluation and Assessment Reports, Progress Reports, Report Cards, and any form requiring a signature for parental consent.
 - Expanding the right for parents to receive all evaluation reports and data upon request, at least three days prior to the PPT, rather than only for initial referrals to special education.
- Mandate a statement of justification on the IEP as to why the student was not in attendance at the PPT.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) - Placement Continuum

The council strongly supports ensuring that Students with Disabilities (SWD) have access to the full range of placement options outlined in IDEA—from the least to the most restrictive. These options include general education classrooms, general education with support, special classes, separate schools, and home or hospital instruction. To make this possible, school districts need guidance and support to maintain as many of these options as they can within their own communities, reducing the need for students to be placed outside their district. The council also believes that nearby districts should be encouraged to work together and share resources. By regionalizing certain special education services, schools can expand their ability to offer appropriate placements and better support students in the least restrictive environment.

LRE is an important tenant within the IDEA and the Council is committed to supporting districts and schools to ensure students are educated alongside their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible in an inclusive setting. Connecticut had the highest percentage of Students with Disabilities, ages 5 through 21, served in separate schools in the country according to [OSEP data for the School Year 2020-2021](#). During the 2023-24 reporting period, CT reduced the percentage of Students with Disabilities served in separate schools to 5.81% (from 6.40% the previous reporting period). Practices that foster a culture of belonging, operationally defined by students feeling welcomed, invited, supported, accepted, known and cared for are important factors that strengthen a student's connections to their school environment affording them the resilience to thrive in their least restrictive programs. Staffing shortages continue to be an on-going threat to LRE, and the personnel required to support and build positive school climate.

Recommendations for the CT State Department of Education/CT State Board of Education

- Establish student success indicators for students placed in more restrictive settings.
- Develop a new, more comprehensive LRE decision-making process to replace the LRE Checklist. This process should involve careful consideration and documentation of all supports, including supplemental aids.
- Develop a graphic outlining a formalized plan/progress for out-placement process.
- Provide training for general education leaders on the meaning of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), distinguishing it from inclusion and belonging, as well as outlining their responsibilities towards all students. Promote the regionalization of services to expand and enhance service models throughout the state.
- Continue to monitor the high percentage of students who attend programs in separate schools.
- Promote and expand Unified Sports Programming and the concept of Unified Programs to other academic areas and study halls. CSDE should work in conjunction with communities to provide Unified Program experiences in the home school district.
- Train staff on Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deafblind Guidance Document that is in the process of being published by the CSDE.

Recommendations for the CT Legislators

- Provide additional funding and training to support districts to provide a continuum of placements and supplementary aids and services for students with high needs.
- Provide additional funding/resources (i.e., stipends and competitive grants) to support Unified Programs in districts.

Special Education Staffing (Recruitment and Retention)

The council understands that hiring and keeping special education teachers is very important because it affects many other areas. The number of open positions for special education teachers, support staff, and paraeducators in our state is concerning, especially how it affects the implementation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Since this is a problem nationwide, the council suggests the following actions:

Recommendations for the CT State Department of Education/CT State Board of Education

- Establish a fast-track training program for emergency certification that ensures high-quality preparation for educators. This program should be developed and implemented as quickly as possible.

- Recommend that the Teacher Retirement Board (TRB) provide credit for years of service for paraeducators prior to becoming a certified teacher.
- CSDE Talent office will promote current information on the current alternative route programs.
- Create Paraeducator career path to for all special education areas, including Teachers of Visual impairment.
- Research use of Micro credentials in Connecticut as compared to other states.
- Establish Unified programming across the state and use it as a strategy to encourage high school students to pursue careers as special education teachers.
- Continue to collaborate with Higher Education Preparation Programs.
- Create program that will hire Juniors and Seniors in college as Paraeducators. Provide them with reduced tuition/ credit towards classes.
- Provide college credits for high school students in Early Education/Special Education.
- Expand Interstate Reciprocity while still maintaining high quality standards for educators.
- Monitor temporary Durational Shortage Area Permits (DSAPs) and long-term substitutes in alignment with the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) guidance document.

Recommendations for the CT Legislators

- Provide increase benefits for support staff (OT, PT, SLP, etc.) & special education paraeducators.
- Offer financial rewards, such as scholarships or stipends, to college students studying education to encourage them to pursue careers in special education.
- Increase compensation for Special Educators (certified and non-certified staff) to increase retention of certified and non-certified staff (special education teachers, related service providers, paraeducators).
- Support and implement a new law that offers grants, scholarships and stipends to students planning to become special education teachers. This initiative aims to boost the number of students enrolling in teacher preparation programs.
- Consider new and creative incentives for future special education professionals (i.e., school psychologists, social workers, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, school nurses, special education teachers, Board Certified Behavioral Analysts (BCBAs), and paraeducators).

Special Education Retention

- Provide programs, incentives and support to increase retention of existing special education personnel.
- Review current administrative requirements for special educators, identify additional resources and consider recommendations to alleviate redundant tasks.
- A positive culture within the school district administration fosters strong relationships and open communication, creating an environment where teachers feel valued and supported. This encourages retention by promoting professional growth, collaboration, and a sense of community, ultimately enhancing job satisfaction and helping to attract and keep talented educators. Reinforcement of Section 13, **Public Act No. 19-184**, which explicitly created legal protections for school staff, including special education teachers, who speak up about a student's appropriate educational program without fear of reprisal. <https://www.cga.ct.gov/2019/act/pa/pdf/2019PA-00184-R00HB-07353-PA.pdf>

Additional Legislative Recommendations

As a statewide advisory body comprised of 37 members, half of whom are parents of students with disabilities or individuals with disabilities themselves, the State Advisory Council is charged with advising the Connecticut State Department of Education on unmet needs in the education of students with disabilities and with recommending to the General Assembly changes to laws, regulations, standards, and guidelines related to special education. In light of this role, it is appropriate and advisable for a member of the Council to be invited to participate in any newly established or existing legislative task forces or work groups related to special education.

Restraint/Seclusion Notification

CGS Sec. 10-236b sets forth the rules regarding the use of restraint and seclusion techniques in the schools. At present, Subsection (h) provides as follows:

“(h) Each local or regional board of education shall notify a parent or guardian of a student who is placed in physical restraint or seclusion not later than twenty-four hours after the student was placed in physical restraint or seclusion and shall make a reasonable effort to provide such notification immediately after such physical restraint or seclusion is initiated.”

It has been the Council’s aim to require that the notification provided to the parent/guardian “the day of” the incident (instead of just within 24 hours). We also seek to have this notification delivered in the language of the parent or guardian (wherever possible).

School Security and Safety Committee Composition

Per Sec. 10-222m(b)(1), each school building is to include specific members in their mandated School Security and Safety Committee (e.g. “local first responder” or “mental health professional”). Our goal is to amend this law to require that this Committee includes a member of the Special Education department or faculty.

We previously suggested this inclusion in connection with proposed Bill 7077 (‘As Act Concerning Crisis Response Drills’).

Public School Security Personnel Training

Goal – To amend Sec. 7-294x to mandate required training for public school (civilian) Security Personnel. Specific training was previously proposed last year as Bill No. 1374. This proposed to mandate specific areas of training for any armed security personnel that included such things as ‘use of force’, ‘stopping blood loss’ and ‘safe firearm handling’.

We wish to propose that this statute be amended to require that all security personnel (armed or unarmed) receive training in interacting with special ed students or those with disabilities including de-escalation techniques.

In this regard, we recommended that this training include “techniques and strategies (including de-escalation) for incidents involving and for interacting with persons with physical or mental disabilities or other special needs”.

Police Training

Goal – to expand the areas of concentration for the training of officers to include interacting with individuals with developmental disabilities, including autism, intellectual disabilities and cognitive impairments. This training should also include de-escalation techniques.

Last year, HB 7202 (s. 5) included the suggestion that the following be provided:

“Such training curriculum shall include, but need not be limited to, the following topics: (A) The nature of mental illness and mental or physical disabilities, including, but not limited to, autism spectrum disorder, cognitive impairment and nonverbal learning disorder; (B) how to identify persons with mental illness or mental or physical disabilities; and (C) strategies and techniques for handling incidents that involve persons with mental illness or

mental or physical disabilities, including, but not limited to, crisis intervention strategies and de-escalation techniques”.

CLOSING

Helen Keller’s reminder that “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much” captures the spirit guiding the Special Education Advisory Council’s work. The Council remains firmly committed to offering meaningful collaboration and recommendations to the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), legislators, and the State Board of Education to address the unmet needs of students with disabilities across Connecticut.

Our efforts—and the Focus Areas we have identified—reflect our shared commitment to strengthening supports for students with disabilities across Connecticut. By prioritizing social–emotional well-being, enhancing meaningful parent participation in the PPT process, ensuring access to the full continuum of placement options, and addressing ongoing challenges in special education staffing, we aim to advance equitable, effective opportunities for every learner.

Central to this work is the belief that *matter*ing is essential for all students. Mattering has two core components: feeling valued and adding value. Feeling valued assures students that they are seen, respected, and significant. Adding value affirms that their contributions and presence make a meaningful difference to others. When students experience both, their physical and mental health are strengthened, their ability to learn and engage grows, and their positive impact extends into their families, schools, and communities. Mattering brings together connection, belonging, and purpose—cornerstones of a thriving educational experience.

As we conclude this report, the Council remains steadfast in its commitment to collaboration, advocacy, and continuous improvement. Together, we can ensure that every student with a disability in Connecticut is valued, supported, and empowered to add their unique value to the world.

Respectfully Submitted,

Missy Wrigley, Chairperson

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State Advisory Council for Special Education

c/o Bryan Klimkiewicz, Special Education Division Director

Bureau of Special Education

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APPENDIX A

State Special Education Advisory Council (SAC) Membership Composition and Vacancies

Nine SAC Members Appointed by the Commissioner of Education

Number of Members	Legislative Reference	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
1	1	Lori Fortuna	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
2	1	Susan Yankee	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
3	1	Amy Messinger	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
4	1	Michael Scanlon IV	Person with a disability	Parent or Person with a Disability
5	1	Brandalyn Fulton Williams	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
6	1	Jake Shumbo	Person with a Disability	Parent or Person with a Disability
7	1	Bryan Klimkiewicz	Connecticut State Department of Education	Official of State Department of Education
8	1	Louis Tallarita	Connecticut State Department of Education	McKinney-Vento Official
9	1	Mary Beth Bruder	Central Connecticut State University	Higher Education Representative

Six Other Commissioner Appointments

Number of Members	Legislative Reference	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
10	2	Brian K. Smith	Department of Developmental Services (DDS)	Commissioner of DDS
11	3	Nachi Bhatt	Department of Children and	Commissioner of DCF

			Families (DCF)	
12	4	Rita Halkias	Department of Corrections (DOC)	Commissioner of DOC
13	5	Denise Drummond	Parent	Parent Leadership Training Institute within the Commission on Children
14	6	Jennifer Lussier	Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC)	Parent Training and Information (PTI) Center
15	4	Catherine Summ	Aging and Disability Services/Bureau of Education and Services for the Blind (ADS/BESB)	Commissioner of Rehabilitation Services

Five Elected General Assembly Representatives

Number of Members	Legislative Reference	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
16	8	Robin Comey	State Representative	Speaker of the House Appointee
17	8	Dan Gaiewski (joined March 2025)	State Representative	Majority Leader of the House of Representatives Appointee
18	8	Vacant		Minority Leader of the House of Representatives Appointee
19	8	Vacant		President pro tempore of Senate Appointee
20	8	Vacant		Minority Leader of the Senate Appointee

Seven Other Legislative Appointments

Number of Members	Legislative Reference	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
21	9	Kimberly Williamson	Member of CT Speech-Language-Hearing Association	President pro tempore of Senate Appointee
22	10	Tylar Young	Public School Teacher	Majority Leader of the Senate Appointee
23	11	Allison Kopie	ADS/Bureau of Rehabilitation Services (BRS) - works with Secondary Transition Services	Minority Leader of Senate Appointee
24	12	Joshua Martin (replaced by Eve Hurley June 2025)	Connecticut Council of Special Education Administrators (ConnCASE)	Speaker of the House of Representatives Appointee
25	13	Cassandra Reilly	Charter Schools	Majority Leader of House of Representatives Appointee
26	14	Ana Wittig	Oak Hill CT Association of Private Special Education Facilities (CAPSEF)	Minority Leader of House of Representatives Appointee
27	15	Nancy Decrescenzo	Judicial Department	Chief Court Administrator Appointee

Seven Members Appointed by the Governor

Number of Members	Legislative Reference	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
28	16	Jeffery Spahr	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
29	16	Stacey Palker	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
30	16	Jonathan Metcalf	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
31	16	Melissa Wrigley	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
32	16	Goviana Morales	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
33	16	Dimpy Malvania	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability
34	16	Lena Esposito	Parent	Parent or Person with a Disability

Three Other Appointments

Number of Members	Legislative Reference	SAC Member	Role	Appointment
35	17	Tom Cosker	CT Protection and Advocacy Center Disability Rights of Connecticut	CT Governor Appointee
36	18	Mia Giantonio till June 2025 (Evan Simlack joined in March 2025)	Student with a Disability	CT Special Education Advisory Council Appointee
37		Vacant	Paraeducator	CT Special Education Advisory Council Appointee