

Education Committee

JOINT FAVORABLE REPORT

Bill No.: HB-5001

AN ACT CONCERNING THE QUALITY AND DELIVERY OF SPECIAL

Title: EDUCATION SERVICES IN CONNECTICUT.

Vote Date: 3/24/2025

Vote Action: Joint Favorable Change of Reference to Appropriations

PH Date: 3/12/2025

File No.:

***Disclaimer:** The following JOINT FAVORABLE Report is prepared for the benefit of the members of the General Assembly, solely for purposes of information, summarization and explanation and does not represent the intent of the General Assembly or either chamber thereof for any purpose.*

SPONSORS OF BILL:

Education Committee

REASONS FOR BILL:

This bill would require the Commissioner of Education to conduct a study on special education and report their findings to the relevant select committee of the General Assembly. The purpose of this study is to compile updated information regarding the quality and delivery of special education services. This information is requested as there are prevailing concerns about the disparity of educational outcomes between special education students and their peers. It is intended that the study group will be able to provide recommendations on how to best address these issues and provide support for special education students and providers.

RESPONSE FROM ADMINISTRATION/AGENCY:

Connecticut Department of Education (DOE), Commissioner Charlene M. Russell-Tucker; opposes this bill due to uncertainty regarding the need and scope of the study. The Department has been involved in two prior Task Forces as established in Section 3 of Public Act 21-95 and Section 13 of Public Act 23-150, each with varying study issues related to special education. The Department of Education is, therefore, unsure of how the study detailed in House Bill 5001 would differ from the prior studies. Additionally, without further information, the Department cannot determine whether the study could be supported by the existing information the Department has or if it would need additional resources to conduct it.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

Connecticut Department of Education (DOE), Commissioner Charlene M. Russell-Tucker; opposes this bill due to uncertainty regarding the need and scope of the study. The

Department has been involved in two prior Task Forces as established in Section 3 of Public Act 21-95 and Section 13 of Public Act 23-150, each with varying study issues related to special education. The Department of Education is, therefore, unsure of how the study detailed in House Bill 5001 would differ from the prior studies. Additionally, without further information, the Department cannot determine whether the study could be supported by the existing information the Department has or if it would need additional resources to conduct it.

NATURE AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT:

CREC, Executive Director Dr. Greg J. Florio; supports this bill as it will continue the discussion on the quality and delivery of special education services. Additionally, they expressed their support for the increased funding to Birth to Three as it would help stabilize state agencies, increase staff recruitment and retention, and reduce future education costs due to its ability to proactively help special education students early on.

CREC Birth to Three, Director Susan Flanagan; requested that the Birth to Three program and CREC Soundbridge receive funding to help them continue rendering the services needed. Additionally, they support the Governor's proposal to increase Birth to Three rates, however, it is requested that this funding start in Fiscal Year 2026 instead of Fiscal Year 2027 as it is an emergent issue.

Special Education Equity for Kids in Connecticut (SEEK), Legislative Chair Andrew Feinstein; provided recommendations to consider when populating the contents of the bill. It is requested that the funding provided should not be directed towards excess cost reimbursement; instead, it should be granted to support the special education services more comprehensively. Moreover, a variety of different recommendations are provided to help reform the environment and educational outcomes of students receiving special education.

SEEK, Secretary Stacey Tie; urged the committee to consider the flaws of the Special Education Data System (CT-SEDS) in the development of this bill as it fails to timely and effectively assist applicants. A variety of recommendations were provided to help reform the current system, such as requiring the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) to provide additional training, increase transparency, and increase accountability. Moreover, it is recommended that the committee work to enforce Right to Read laws.

Disability Rights Connecticut, Disability Advocate Tom Cosker; supports this bill and provides recommendations to be used in the development of the bill, such as obtaining data on the extent to which special education students are being educated alongside their non-disabled peers and incentivizing CSDE to focus on improving such numbers. Additionally, it is proposed that there should be a focus on the outplacement of special education students to private programs and a collection of data on the restraint and seclusion practices of schools.

LEARN, Deputy Executive Director Bridgette Gordon-Hickey; supports this bill and urged the Committee to consider expanding collaborative programs and leveraging the expertise of Connecticut's Regional Educational Service Center (RESC). It is expressed that utilizing their expertise would be advantageous to developing cost-effective programs that will serve a multitude of districts. Moreover, it is requested that the RESCS receive additional funding to help expand its capacity and development.

The following testimony was provided in support of the bill and recommended the involvement of RESC's expertise:

EASTCONN, Executive Director Eric Protulis

CREC, Chief Program Officer Heather Tartaglia

Cooperative Educational Services (CES), Executive Director Dr. Charles Dumais

Area Cooperative Educational Services, Executive Director Dr. Thomas Danehy

CT Association of Private Special Education Facilities, President Karen Helene; The CT Community Nonprofit Alliance, President & CEO Gian-Carl Casa; Children's League of Connecticut, President Alyssa Goduti; supports this bill and recommends that the study address the rising costs of special education using a holistic approach that includes RESCs, transportation services, predictable tuition rates, and the evaluation of non-profit vs. for-profit providers and approved vs. non-approved providers.

Center for Children's Advocacy, Executive Director Sarah Healy Eagan and Medical Legal Partnership Project at Yale Child Study Center Director Kathryn Meyer; supports this bill and recommends that the Commissioner of the DOE consider studying the current means of oversight at various kinds of educational institutions. Additionally, they request that the legislature consider policy regarding the functioning of the CSDE, tools to increase the accountability of schools, and to increase funding for both ECS grants and providing food for low-income students.

Effective School Solutions (ESS), CEO Duncan Young; supports this bill as it proactively addresses the problems in special education. It is recommended that the bill be amended to additionally provide for mental health as it often intertwines with special education; with 70% of students receiving ESS' clinical mental health services also receiving special education. This amendment is expressed to help establish both seed-funding for new high acuity mental health school programs and bridge-funding for existing programs of the same regard.

The CT State Advisory Council for Special Education, Chair Member Susan Yankee; provides the Council's 2024 Annual Report Recommendations to be considered in the development of the bill. Among these recommendations are means to help retain and recruit special education staff and teachers, improve feelings of student belonging, change restraint and seclusion policies, and enhance IEP and Emergency planning.

Thomaston Public Schools, Superintendent Francine Coss; supports this bill as it will ensure state accountability and will work to help fund special education programs. Concerns were brought forth, however, regarding potential unfunded mandates and financial strain on small districts that may result from the bill.

The following testimony was provided in support of the bill and implementing the recommendations of the Special Education Task Force:

The Commission on Women, Children, Seniors, Equity and Opportunity, Children's Policy Analyst Thomas Nuccio

The Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST), Executive Director Betsy Gara

Connecticut Voices for Children, Research & Policy Associate Ruchi Sheth and Executive Director Emily Byrne; supports this bill because the state needs to gain a better understanding of the problems in special education. It is noted that the Education Cost Sharing

(ECS) grant and the Excess Cost grant are disproportionately allocated, resulting in a lack of resources and a shift to student outplacements to for-profit facilities.

School and State Finance Project, Executive Director Lisa Hammersley; expressed support for the intent of the bill and offered information regarding the problems currently facing special education. Specifically, the ECS grant has not been able to match the needs of school districts, resulting in financial instability and inequities across the state.

Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, Inc., Area Director Sara Kelley; supports this bill as it would provide more information on how to implement policy prudently. This would benefit initiatives such as the reduction of tuition rates for special education programs, which, if done too low, could result in private providers discontinuing certain programs. Additionally, the study would provide more information on the need for better transportation services.

School Psychologist Christopher Latka; supports this bill and requests an increase in minimum salaries for all educators in the state, including non-classroom specialists and para-educators. Due to the current pay, the school system where he works has experienced significant shortages, which has resulted in an increased caseload and, consequently, a decreased ability to provide the needed services.

Goviana Morales; supports this bill because the current funding for special education is negatively impacting high-need and vulnerable students who need adequate resources. They propose that the ECS grant should include additional weight for special education to ensure equitable support.

Jacqueline Cabrera
Iris Ortiz Sanchez
Benjamin Schwartz

Ledyard Highschool, Student Raegan Stam; supports this bill because it would help improve the quality and delivery of special education services. They shared their experience of having a sister who is dyslexic and who struggled in the school system, having to advocate numerous times to receive the support and accommodations needed. Moreover, this problem is discussed to extend to many other families and is worsened by understaffing and inadequate training. As a result, young children with dyslexia develop low self-esteem and lack the motivation to learn because they do not feel like they are getting the help they need.

Lesley Lema; supports this bill as it will help reform a system that allowed for children such as her sister to fall far behind her peers due to inadequacies of special education.

The following testimony was submitted in general support for the bill:

Connecticut Education Association (CEA), President Kate Dias and Vice President Joslyn Delancey
New Haven Federation of Teachers, President Leslie Blatteau
The Arc of Connecticut, Inc., Director of Advocacy Carol Scully
Area Cooperative Educational Services, Director of Pupil Services Kevin Keating
Connecticut Association of Superintendents (CAPSS), Executive Director Fran Rabinowitz

NATURE AND SOURCES OF OPPOSITION:

None expressed.

Reported by: Danielle Colbath

Date: 4/14/2025