

**Testimony to the Senate Committee on Education
Presented by Judith Moening, Ph.D.
North East ISD, San Antonio
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5 minutes

Good morning. I am Judith Moening, executive director of Special Education for North East Independent School District in San Antonio. I am here representing the 7,200 children with special needs in our district.

NEISD has a long tradition of excellence. We currently have the most exemplary schools in our county and project that we will be a Recognized school district when TEA announces the results this fall. Our district has been able to maintain this excellence by adapting to the needs of our students. In particular, NEISD has embraced several unique programs to help transition students with disabilities. But we still have many challenges to overcome before we can fully prepare students for life after school.

I would like to start with those challenges, since they are not unique to our district but are seen statewide.

**CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT SYSTEM TO SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITION
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS TO LIFE AFTER SCHOOL**

1. Beginning transition activities early in the student's educational program:
 - a. Students with significant disabilities may require many years to get all necessary supports in place and community connections established
 - b. Both teachers and parents believe that transition is an activity which can wait until HS.

2. Limitation of community resources for families and the changing nature of those resources.
 - a. Group homes, day habilitation centers, residence centers providing specific training, job coaching, positive behavior support consultation, public transportation, funds for private care attendants, and semi-independent living arrangements are all examples of limited community resources which must often be in place to support successful transitions. Resources in these categories may shift from year to year and many have a long waiting list for limited slots and funds.
 - b. Resources described in 2.a are very limited for specific populations of students, particularly those who have severe emotional disturbance.
 - c. Special education teachers often do not have the knowledge of available community resources and may not have the skills needed to

convince parents of the need to get their student on waiting lists at an early age.

3. Parents of young children with disabilities are often not ready to discuss long term planning for their student
 - a. Parents are focused on short term educational interventions and believe that such interventions are their child's best hope for improved outcomes
 - b. Parents often do not believe that their child will need specific types of community services
 - c. Once the parent has said no to establishing community connections the schools hesitate to put the issues back on the table for discussion in subsequent years.

4. Meaningful inclusion into the general education classroom and curriculum as early as possible is an ongoing struggle
 - a. Significant teacher and administrator professional development is required to make inclusion successful
 - b. On site follow-up to professional development is necessary to help campuses problem solve and fine tune inclusion plans
 - c. Supporting classroom teachers at understanding and implementing principals of differentiated instruction is a complex and ongoing requirement for successful inclusion

UNIQUE APPROACHES NORTH EAST ISD HAS ADOPTED TO MEET THESE CHALLENGES

1. Develop a program that focuses on transition activities for the 18-21 year old population, which is not aligned with or located on any high school campus
 - a. North East Transition School offered to any student age 18 and over who has earned sufficient HS credits for graduation and whose family wants to work toward transition objectives
 - b. All services are delivered within the community and may include travel training on public transportation, job coaching, support for volunteer work at the local food bank, teaching self-help and daily living skills in a community apartment, support in accessing community college or job training, etc.
 - c. Expansion for 2008-09 to students with more severe disabilities by leasing a community apartment and establishing a collaborative relationship with the ARC of San Antonio. Students will have the experience of furnishing an apartment and will host dinners for their families. Our staff will coteach alongside ARC staff in one of their classrooms at their day habilitation facility.

2. Provide support for families
 - a. Person centered planning meetings are held in student homes to assist families in developing long range plans for their student prior to having them enter the NETS program.
 - b. Employ master's level social worker to counsel one on one with families to explore possible community connections which will benefit the student. We are focusing now on elementary age students with more significant disabilities.
 - c. Special education family specialist established parent to parent networks through evening meetings, breakfast meetings, parent newsletters, etc.
 - d. Provided leadership training to students who lead their own ARD meetings and who act as trainers/coaches for other students who will also learn to lead their ARD meetings
3. Foster community partnerships
 - a. Community based classroom done collaboratively with the ARC of San Antonio.
 - b. Established collaborative relationships with local community colleges so that students with more significant disabilities can access post-secondary instruction with support from district staff. Students may take developmental courses or simply participate in physical education or technology courses. School staff provide organizational support and help the student connect with appropriate services on the community college campus.
 - c. Provided office space for counselors from Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services on all high school campuses.
 - d. Outreach efforts with businesses and community groups such as Women in Construction, Chamber of Commerce, City Parks and Recreation, local foodbank, and a temporary employment agency. Camp Mickey D's is a collaborative summer effort with McDonald's to allow students to gain work experiences.
4. Develop a focused professional development plan to build knowledge of transition requirements in teachers at all levels
 - a. Trained transition teams on each campus at all levels which include an appraisal person, several special education teachers and an administrator or counselor. Teams work with other staff to disseminate transition information.
 - b. Identify specific transition related tasks to be accomplished at each level (elementary, MS, HS)
5. Established a culture in which the general education classroom is the setting of choice for students with disabilities. Eighty-seven percent of our

students with special needs spend over ½ the school day in a general education classroom.

- a. Eliminated clustering of programs for students with severe disabilities, which allows all but a very few students to receive services on their home campus
- b. Provide data reports to principals on a regular basis that indicates the status of inclusion on their campus
- c. Provide training to campus leaders on strategies for using special education staff to support students with disabilities in inclusive settings. The focus is on efficiently using staff to provide support to both general education teachers as well as students with special needs.
- d. Provide ongoing training through a coaching model to campus staff on strategies for inclusion support and differentiated instructional methods

SUGGESTIONS FOR LEGISLATIVE CONSIDERATION

1. Provide funding to increase availability of community resources and to decrease wait time for families to begin accessing services.
2. Enhance community services through some type of accountability. Example, there are no standards for day habilitation programs and quality of staff and services varies widely.
3. TEA to allow some flexibility in administering compliance requirements, particularly to districts who are attempting innovative programming.
4. Allow community colleges more flexibility in administering requirements which would encourage students with disabilities to consider dual enrollment in the community college and the school district for more than one semester. Currently dual enrollment for the purpose of taking developmental courses is only allowed for one semester.
5. Continue and expand tax credits to businesses that provide employment to individuals with disabilities.