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“Financing Special Education: Analyses and Challenges” Citizens Research Council of Michigan

MAASE Perspectives:

The Citizens Research Council of Michigan recently (March, 2012) published a report entitled “Financing Special Education: Analyses and Challenges.” MAASE commends the Council for taking up this endeavor and appreciates the reports thoroughness and depth of analysis. Overall, we believe that the report is a fair representation of many issues and that it begins to portray the complexities involved.

The Michigan Association of Administrators of Special Education (MAASE) is a professional organization of over 600 administrators serving local and intermediate school districts and who are responsible for coordinating the delivery of special education programs/services to students throughout the State of Michigan. The Mission of MAASE is to provide leadership for the development and implementation of quality programs and services for students with disabilities within the total education community. Financial issues are a central focus in the provision of our strategic priorities of technical assistance, professional development, networking, political action, encouragement and support for educational innovation and communication and collaboration with all educators and community partners.

The purpose of this document is to add additional perspective to the report data and its conclusions from the special education administrator “point-of-view.” It is our sincere desire to increase the understanding of the education of individuals with disabilities and the concomitant financial issues involved.

1. Report Topic - The discussion of “special education students”

- Perspective - We believe it is an important concept, and one related to the accurate understanding of special education finance, to not distinguish students in this manner (i.e. “special” versus “regular”). Students with disabilities (SWD) receive a full continuum of programs and services. (Including from “no direct services” (e.g. accommodations/modifications) to “full-time” comprehensive programs and services). Nearly 70 percent of SWD receive educational programs in the regular classroom for at least 80 percent of the school day.

2. Report Topic - The discussion of “special education students”

- Perspective – Individual educational plans (IEP) that define *additional* programs and services required and provided by districts, actually and largely determine additional costs. The IEP determines everything including placement and therefore costs. Changing funding formulas and/or mechanisms, referred to in the report, may not actually impact costs to the degree suggested. Furthermore, the parent role in the IEP process is not mentioned nor are their rights, as defined by IDEA or case law, discussed.

3. Report Topic – The increased enrollment in special education

- Perspective – The report leads one to believe that regular school classrooms are relatively “uniform” in terms of instruction and curriculum delivery. Many students are

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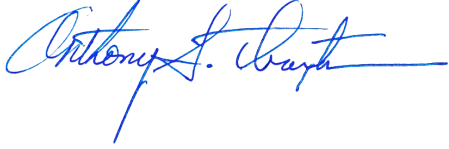
referred for special education when it is determined that their instructional and curricular needs do not match the classroom in which they are placed. The more regular classrooms differentiate instruction and curriculum to meet the needs of students who may learn differently or at a different pace the fewer numbers of students will be referred to special education. Different does not indicate a disability.

- 4. Report Topic – The rising costs of special education programs and services**
 - Perspective – Apart from the overall number of students with IEPs in Michigan, the population of SWD has changed dramatically in the last 15 years. These facts have not been addressed in the report and MAASE believes it has played a very significant role. For example, an increasing number of students with severe and complex disabilities (e.g. Severe Multiple Impairments) versus those with mild to moderate disabilities including students with specific learning disabilities have a major impact on rising costs.
- 5. Report Topic – District comparative data**
 - Perspective – The report identifies specific districts wherein the percent of SWD differs significantly with other districts without directly mentioning that these students may not actually be residents of the higher percent district. This data would likely lead one to believe that identification rates among districts may be reflective of a cavalier approach to the identification process. The report does not address the fact that some districts send many SWD to other districts or to ISD programs or that some districts operate “center” or regional programs that provide for non-resident students.
- 6. Report Topic – Statement: “Under this system, there is no incentive to control costs at the local level” (Page 14).**
 - Perspective – It needs to be clearer that the report is referring to “State Aid.” Local district funds pay such a large share of the costs in proportion to state funds, that there is actually a huge incentive to control costs. Clearly this statement reflects a serious misunderstanding of funding at the local level. Given the current state of education funding in Michigan there are significant incentives to control special education costs while also addressing the issues of “Maintenance-of-effort” (MOE).
- 7. Report Topic – Statement: “The study also calculated an average cost per student by disability type” (Page 15).**
 - Perspective – This information is actually unavailable and is not collected nor analyzed. There are no data available by “student disability type.” There are throughout this section references to costs by “types of disability” and they should be described as “costs by types of programs” (EI Programs, SLD Programs, ASD Programs, etc.). Virtually all Special Education programs are categorically defined but serve students with a myriad of disability labels.
- 8. Report Topic – Statement: “Spending on Transportation” (Page 21).**
 - Perspective – The report goes on to state, “If a district provides transportation services (directly or through contract) to non-disabled students, it must do so for students with IEPs. Although these services are not mandatory under state law, districts cannot discriminate in their provision.” It is our view that this statement (and other statements in this section) may lead one to believe that transportation is not mandatory for “any” SWD while federal law (IDEA) does make it mandatory if its provision is necessary for access to a free & appropriate public education (FAPE) and is thus included in the students IEP. Therefore, if a district eliminates transportation for students it may still be required to provide it for some students with IEPs that include that special (i.e. costly) transportation is necessary.

In closing MAASE again commends the Citizens Research Council for their willingness to spend the time necessary to deal with the complex information and the number of funding systems involved.

We sincerely hope that the Council and other readers find this information helpful and that it serves to add clarity for improved programs and services for all students in Michigan. Furthermore, please feel free to contact us at anytime for further discussion about these, or any other related issues. Thank you.

For the Executive Board,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Anthony S. Thaxton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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4/30/2012