The South Carolina Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities

April 24, 2017

SC Department of Education
Molly Spearman, State Superintendent of Education
1429 Senate Street
Columbia, South Carolina 29201

Dear Ms. Spearman:

Attached you will find the official recommendations from the Transition and Self Advocacy Committee of the South Carolina Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities (Advisory Council). The Advisory Council recognizes a clear need to celebrate diversity and promote greater acceptance and understanding of students with disabilities in our schools throughout South Carolina. Therefore, the Advisory Council is recommending that the State Department of Education create a task force charged with drafting legislation to designate October as Disability History & Awareness Month in schools throughout South Carolina. With the dedicated Disability History and Awareness Month, all students will learn about disability rights and history, successful people with disabilities, promote disability sensitivity, and encourage acceptance. Currently, there are 24 states across the country with approved legislation to implement disability awareness in public schools and we are hoping South Carolina will move forward with providing this crucial education throughout our schools.

We hope you will find our recommendations to the State Department of Education helpful. We look forward to improving the outcomes of students with disabilities in South Carolina, and we feel that this recommendation is an important step towards that goal. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best regards,

Kimberly A. Tissot

Kimberly A. Tissot, Chair
SC Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities

The South Carolina Advisory Council is a state and federally regulated organization pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004 and the SC State Board of Education Regulations at 43-243 and 59-36-10.

Proposal: Task Force to Develop a Proposal for the Designation of a Disability History & Awareness Month

The SC Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities recognizes a clear need to celebrate diversity and promote greater acceptance and understanding of individuals with disabilities in our schools throughout South Carolina. Currently, disability history and awareness is not taught in SC schools, even though people with disabilities represent the largest minority group. [As of the 2015-2016 school year, 13.51% of students enrolled in schools in South Carolina were reported to have disabilities (SC Department of Education, 2017). All students and school staff will benefit from education on disability history and awareness. For students with disabilities, disability awareness and inclusive 3K-12 environments have been shown to be predictors of successful adult outcomes (Test et al, 2009). They will also experience increased self-esteem and pride, while students without disabilities and school staff will gain an appreciation for diversity. This combination will promote meaningful inclusion of all students with disabilities in schools, which should extend to the larger community. Therefore, we specifically recommend:

1) The State Department of Education create a task force charged with drafting legislation to designate October as Disability History & Awareness Month in schools throughout South Carolina. During this month, all students will learn about disability rights and history, successful people with disabilities, promote disability sensitivity, and encourage acceptance. The draft legislation would be submitted to the State Board of Education and General Assembly to mandate all districts within South Carolina to participate.

2) After a month is designated, the Office of Special Education Services create a task force charged with drafting a resource curriculum guide for Disability History & Awareness Month to include sample curriculums and materials, a list of knowledgeable SC disability advocates that are available to assist in teaching the disability history and awareness curriculum, disability information resources, and sample activities for best practice. This guide will provide resources and ideas to help schools design their own celebration of Disability History & Awareness Month. This task force should include a representative from each of the following areas: SC Centers for Independent Living, special education and regular education school administrators/staff, youth with disabilities, and disability rights organizations/agencies. The final resource guide should be endorsed and disseminated by the SC Department of Education.

Across the nation, school districts celebrate Disability History & Awareness Month usually during the month of October to coincide with the National Disability Employment Awareness Month. We recommend South Carolina do the same. During this month, South Carolina schools will showcase the disability rights movement with historical accuracy, encourage awareness and sensitivity to disability related issues, highlight key disability rights advocates along with their contributions to society, and outline important federal and South Carolina laws passed in favor of

establishing equality for people with disabilities. Disability History & Awareness Month will emphasize the importance of inclusion of individuals with disabilities in society.

Rationale

Bullying/harassment

"Positive peer attitudes and social interaction are important to a child's well-being, quality of life, and social and academic development" (Cook & Semmel, 1999; Cutts & Sigafoos, 2001; as referenced in Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007).

There is a recognizable need in South Carolina to bring disability awareness and understanding to students to help alleviate bullying and harassment of students with disabilities. Children with disabilities are two to three time more likely to be bullied than their peers without disabilities. "One study shows that 60% of students with disabilities report being bullied regularly compared with 25% of all students" (PACER Center, Inc., 2012). Bullying has been linked to lowered self-esteem and ultimately found to be a causal factor in the reduced self-efficacy of bullied students leading to lower grades and graduation rates. Unfortunately, in the 2015-2016 school year students in South Carolina with disabilities had a 52.06% graduation rate as compared to a 86.42% graduation rate for students without disabilities (SC Department of Education, 2017). Suggestions from the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2000) to prevent disability harassment include: creating a campus environment that is aware of and sensitive to disability concerns and harassment, and weaving this issue into curriculum or extra-curricular programs. Additionally, "a disability history week or month encourages teachers to integrate disability topics into lessons and addresses stigmas and negative stereotypes" (Minarik, Lintner, 2013).

Empowerment for Students with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities who had recently exited high school presented at the SC Advisory Council meeting on October 30, 2015 that the lack of education in this area presents a current barrier and a present need in our state. It is important for students with disabilities to learn about the disability rights movement and awareness, as well as important laws that impact their rights. Students with disabilities need to feel a sense of emotional and social support to better perceive themselves as members of the classroom community (Konecni-Upton, 2010 p. 6). Students with disabilities are less likely to experience negative self-esteem when a teacher provides an atmosphere that is more inclusive, thus, allowing for positive social interactions and a positive classroom climate (Konecni-Upton, 2010). Disability awareness encourages the development of optimistic attitudes and social skills while decreasing the possibility of stereotyping (Williamson, 2014 p. 6). Education through Disability History & Awareness Month will encourage students with disabilities to overcome stereotypes and perceptions, as well as foster self-advocacy and self-determination skills. This will also decrease the likelihood of negativity and isolation early on and will allow students with disabilities to have a greater opportunity to reach their academic goals and further their independence.

Negative perceptions and stereotypes of individuals with disabilities can affect their self- esteem and can influence performance. For instance, the National Disability Authority mentions that people with disabilities are perceived as lacking the ability to be effective employees. An

unfortunate effect of this is that people with disabilities can adopt the same belief, creating a barrier to their success (Metcalfe, 2008). This can be analogized to students in the classroom. The study, Stigma of a Label: Educational Expectations for High School Students Labeled with Learning Disabilities, shows the negative effect of poor perceptions and low expectations. The study found when students are labeled as having a learning disability that teachers are 82% less likely to expect them to achieve a Bachelor's degree. The study further found that students are seen to have "poorer academic behaviors and fewer positive attitudes toward learning" (Shifrer, 2013). Therefore, promoting disability awareness in the schools and introducing school communities to successful leaders with disabilities will raise expectations.

Awareness for Individuals without Disabilities

It is equally important for individuals without disabilities to learn about disability awareness and rights. There are many stereotypes and perceptions about individuals with disabilities that can be overcome with appropriate instruction. Education in this area should further increase sensitivity, acceptance, and awareness about individuals with disabilities. This will foster inclusion in schools. This can also have a positive impact in the greater community. For instance, people with disabilities face barriers in South Carolina, such as finding work. Increased awareness about individuals with disabilities and their abilities should help overcome this barrier.

Currently, over 24 states have either approved legislation implementing a disability awareness initiative for public schools or are in the process of passing such legislation (Museum of disABILITY History, 2014). West Virginia acted as the catalyst towards this movement in 2006. These programs instituted through the state's department of education, provide resources and curriculum, along with descriptions of best practices for executing a disability awareness month. Interestingly, in 2012-2013 the graduation rate for West Virginia students with disabilities was at 51.5% (US Department of Education, 2014). In comparison, in 2012-2013 the graduation rate for South Carolina students with disabilities was 43.2% (US Department of Education, 2014).

Capacity/Fiscal Impact

The Disability Rights Movement parallels the Civil Rights Movement, which is already taught in school districts across the United States, including South Carolina. To include the Disability Rights Movement into pre-existing curriculum would be an effective and easy way to integrate educational goals. Materials can be obtained from local organizations that support people with disabilities such as Centers for Independent Living, acquired online through national organizations, and from other states that have implemented awareness in schools. School professionals will not have an extra amount of work placed on them due to a large population of knowledgeable SC disability advocates that are available to teach disability history and awareness and from utilizing resources that have already been developed in other states. Appendix A contains links to what other states have created as their resource guides/guidelines that can be used as a starting point for South Carolina. Due to resources being educationally appropriated and shared via local disability institutions, there will be no fiscal impact on the state.

In conclusion, the above recommendations will not only promote inclusivity among students of all abilities, it will also educate students on important issues facing a large minority population.

Once implemented, the outcomes will help bridge the "gap" between students with disabilities and students without, and create a better, more inclusive environment in South Carolina schools.

References

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Appendix A

- Disability History and Awareness: A Resource Guide for Missouri: http://disability.mo.gov/files/HistoryAwareness.pdf
- Florida Department of Education. Disability History and Awareness: http://www.fldoe.org/academics/exceptional-student-edu/parent-info/disability-history-awareness.stml
- I'm Determined. Disability History and Awareness Month: http://www.imdetermined.org/quick_links/modules/module_two
- Kansas Youth Employment Academy. Disability Awareness bill examples websites, lessons plans: http://www.kyea.org/dahb.php
- Museum of disABILITY History. Highlights disability rights awareness bills and other helpful information: http://www.disabilityhistoryweek.org
- U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy: Establishing Disability History Awareness Initiatives – A Roadmap for States &Territories. http://www.dol.gov/odep/alliances/roadmap.pdf