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To: Senator Luther Olsen, Chair  
Representative Paul Farrow, Vice-Chair

From: Lisa Pugh, Wisconsin Disability Policy Partnership  
Beth Swedeen, Wisconsin Board for People with Developmental Disabilities

cc: Rachel Letzing, Legislative Council Staff  
Jessica Karls-Ruplinger, Legislative Council Staff  
Sarah Archibald, Senator Luther Olsen's Staff

Special education advocates look forward to the work of the Special Committee on Improving Educational Opportunities in High School. As you embark on your first meeting on July 16, we hope you will ensure inclusion of concerns related to the unique needs of students with disabilities.

Specifically, we see evidence that youth with disabilities in Wisconsin are not being adequately supported to transition from our schools to the adult world in a way that focuses on gainful employment and meaningful community participation. The Wisconsin four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities is just 65% compared to 89% in the general student population and the employment rate for adults with disabilities is estimated to be less than a third of that for the general population. Less than 14% of all people with disabilities in Wisconsin's Long-Term Care System achieve integrated employment at minimum wage or above, considerably lagging behind other states. This lack of a focus on post-secondary success, particularly employment, for youth with disabilities translates into increased reliance on public supports for this population.

We hope the study committee, in addition to addressing challenges for all students, could be a vehicle for discussion on how public agencies (Department of Public Instruction, Department of Health Services, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation) can work more effectively and use public funds more efficiently to support youth with disabilities to be college and workforce ready and achieve successful employment.

Upon reviewing the Staff Brief provided for your July 16 meeting, we ask that you consider the following questions/comments:

- The Staff Brief does not reference the federal and state requirement for transition planning (IDEA - 20 U.S.C. Sections 1400-1485) for students with disabilities who

have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). This should be included as part of law that the committee considers in its discussion of policy options related to improving educational opportunities in high school.

- Wisconsin teachers who work with transition-age youth with disabilities need and are requesting support in their pre-service and professional development to better prepare students for post-secondary success. Other states have created a specific transition endorsement/certification for teachers. Can Wisconsin consider developing a transition-specific certification for teachers and paraprofessionals working with high school students who have disabilities, including those assigned to work with students who have significant disabilities? (This suggestion is based on research indicating that targeted transition coordination by one or more teachers with transition-specific training is critical to optimal outcomes.)
- In what ways can DPI and LEAs assure that students with disabilities have access to guidance and counseling support within their districts? What assurances are there that students with the most significant disabilities have developmentally appropriate assistance from guidance and counseling services? (Research indicates that guidance staff at high schools are underutilized by special educators – particularly with students who have severe disabilities. Special education case managers do not have the training to provide this counseling, although they are often the only guidance connection a student with a disability receives.)
- What steps, if any, can LEAs in Wisconsin take to ensure that students with disabilities have access to high school general education curriculum in support of the attainment of general education diplomas at the highest possible rates? (Research tells us that many special education students have limited access to general education curriculum at the high school level, even though it is one of the greatest predictors of post-school success.)
- For students identified as needing modified curriculum, are there plans to increase accountability for outcomes including: inclusion in technical education programming, education for employment programming, the youth options program, the youth apprenticeship program, attendance in PSE, and integrated employment?

Finally, in addition to these questions and comments, we invite the committee to consider a presentation by school district grantees from Wisconsin's successful ***Let's Get to Work*** Project (one of just six awarded nationally) which is using best practices in transition, including enhanced collaboration among multiple state agencies, as a model to promote competitive community integrated employment for youth with disabilities in their districts.

Please contact us for more information.

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