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**MEMORANDUM**

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**TO:** SUE ZAKE, Ph.D, DIRECTOR, OFFICE FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN, OHIO  
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**FROM:** DEBORAH ZIELINSKI, CHAIR, STATE ADVISORY PANEL FOR EXCEPTIONAL  
CHILDREN

**SUBJECT:** THE THOMAS B. FORDHAM INSTITUTE'S PUBLICATIONS – *BOOSTING THE QUALITY  
AND EFFICIENCY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION*, BY NATHAN LEVENSON, AND *APPLYING  
SYSTEMS THINKING TO IMPROVE SPECIAL EDUCATION IN OHIO*, BY NATHAN  
LEVENSON

**DATE:** DECEMBER 30, 2012

**CC:** SAPEC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

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**INTRODUCTION**

In September of 2012, The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (“Fordham”) released the following publications (collectively, the “Fordham Publications”):

- *Boosting the Quality and Efficiency of Special Education*, by Nathan Levenson (“Publication 1”); and
- *Applying Systems Thinking to Improve Special Education In Ohio*, by Nathan Levenson (“Publication 2”).

On September 12, 2012, the members of Ohio’s State Advisory Panel for Exceptional Children (“SAPEC”) reviewed the Fordham Publications. After review and discussion by SAPEC of the Fordham Publications, a smaller group, consisting of approximately five SAPEC members, met to summarize SAPEC members’ comments related to the Fordham Publications. The following section of this Memorandum sets forth that summary.

**SAPEC DISCUSSION SUMMARY**

SAPEC members agreed with some of the information set forth in the Fordham Publications. Specifically, SAPEC members indicated that they agreed with the following identified needs:

- Need for better training of general education teachers and paraprofessionals in special education;
- Need for more partnering with institutions of higher education to improve quality of special educators;
- Need for more collaboration and coordination of special education services in order to provide the best outcomes for students with disabilities and their families;

- Need for making reading more of a focus for students with disabilities;<sup>1</sup> and
- Need for providing high quality, cost-effective, performance and outcome-based special education services.

SAPEC members also had some concerns related to the information contained in the Fordham Publications. These concerns included the following:

- While members of SAPEC agreed that better training of educators and paraprofessionals is needed, the Fordham Publications de-emphasize the need for professional licensure in delivering services to students with disabilities;
- Some of the recommendations suggested within the Fordham Publications seem to be in conflict with the Federal law requirement that each child must be educated in the least restrictive environment;
- Recommendations appear to be based on systems that are not comparable to Ohio's diverse population and geographical differences;
- Several recommendations appear to conflict with Federal and/or state law related to the education of students with disabilities;
- Some suggested solutions pose challenges in providing for the health and safety of students who are medically fragile; and
- SAPEC members indicated that while efficiencies are needed, the efficiencies must be balanced so as not to compromise educational outcomes for students with disabilities.

#### **INTERVIEW WITH NATHAN LEVENSON**

After the September 12, 2012 meeting of SAPEC, Ms. Zielinski contacted Mr. Terry Ryan from Fordham to request he address SAPEC at one of their full panel meetings. During that telephone conversation, Mr. Ryan extended an invitation to SAPEC members to meet with Mr. Levenson during one of his visits to Ohio. On October 18, 2012, Vicki Clark, a member of SAPEC's Executive Committee met with Mr. Levenson in Columbus, Ohio. Ms. Clark made the following observations during her interview of Mr. Levenson:

- Mr. Levenson believes that competition among Ohio's Educational Service Centers ("ESCs") and State Support Teams (SSTs) would cause these agencies to provide better services to their clients. If the quality of services increases within these agencies (as a result of competition), he believes that more schools would seek out these services. He also believes that each of the ESCs and/or SSTs could specialize in a particular service, creating efficiencies; however, he does not appear to take into

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio has made efforts towards making reading for students with disabilities a priority. These efforts include the third grade reading guaranty and the recent legislation related to dyslexia.

account the remote rural areas within the State of Ohio and the difficulty for families and/or school districts within these areas to access these services.

- Mr. Levenson promotes using volunteer services throughout communities. Again, Mr. Levenson does not appear to consider the diverse geographic regions of the State of Ohio. Many rural communities within the State do not have the types of volunteer resources he is promoting.
- Mr. Levenson recommended that the vocational special education coordinator and intervention specialists receive more training in their academic areas so they could better serve the students. For example, although a particular teacher may meet the highly qualified standards set forth in legislation, that teacher may be instructing students in an academic area in which he/she has little to no experience. He gave an example of an intervention specialist working with students in math, science, and social studies. He said “we” do not require our general education teachers to be that knowledgeable (i.e., in multiple subjects), but we do expect that of the intervention specialist. He recommends having intervention specialists receive more training in a particular academic area and not have them do so much multi-tasking. This approach would change the licensure; however, the intervention specialist would not be expected to be as highly qualified as a general education science or social studies teacher.
- Mr. Levenson discussed the career center format throughout the State, and he believes the student tract should guide such student’s academic course. For example, does the student really need algebra 2 or calculus if he is going into the workforce instead of college? He needs math, but maybe a more relevant math course related to his field would be more profitable for the student in preparing him for the workforce or possibly a technical school.
- He admitted that his report related more to the higher functioning level student with disabilities (e.g., students with SLD). He would like to see these higher functioning students steered toward higher education because they do have the capabilities.
- Mr. Levenson indicated that he is not sure that mainstreaming is the best answer for placement of the majority of the students. He sees many of them sitting in the classroom but not really learning material to advance their knowledge.
- Mr. Levenson believes that the IEP is too structured and “we” are more concerned in meeting the number of minutes of services and making sure that all services are provided instead of examining outcomes for the student.
- Other comments shared by Mr. Levenson included: He believes if the para-professionals receive more training student outcomes would increase. He did not discuss the testing of students or his feeling that too many were on IEP’s. He was also open to hearing from SAPEC on providing further input.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The Executive Committee of SAPEC has invited Mr. Terry Ryan from Fordham to address all SAPEC members on January 17, 2012, at its regular panel meeting. Mr. Ryan will discuss Fordham's role in the Fordham Publications and some of the input Fordham has received since the release of the Fordham Publications.