

<https://www.nhregister.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>

New Haven Register

<https://www.ctpost.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>

CONNECTICUT POST

<https://www.thehour.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>

The Hour

<https://www.stamfordadvocate.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>



<https://www.greenwichtime.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>



<https://www.newstimes.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>

newstimes.com

<https://www.middletonpress.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>

TheMiddletownPress

<https://www.registercitizen.com/opinion/article/Opinion-Special-ed-issue-goes-far-beyond-Hamden-17407161.php>

THE REGISTER CITIZEN

Opinion: Special ed issue goes far beyond Hamden

Jeffrey L. Forte
Aug. 31, 2022



A partly set-up sensory room for students at Wintergreen School in Hamden.
File photo

Just six days before students were scheduled to return to school, Hearst Connecticut Media highlighted how special education teachers were blindsided when the Hamden school district relocated Wintergreen School's program for those with autism.

According to Hamden special education teachers, the program at Wintergreen is being relocated to ill-suited space that will not meet the needs of students with autism: no kitchen to teach life skills; no noise-proof walls for a quieter learning environment; distracting windows overlooking general education student hallways; and a lack of needed sensory equipment, among other deficiencies.

The relocation results from new lease negotiations and district cutbacks — penny wise, pound foolish. To be certain, members of Hamden's SEPTA applauded the special education teachers that came forth to further express their own parental concerns about the newly ill-suited space. Kudos to these special education teachers that came forth to serve as the voice of overlooked and marginalized students by Hamden school district bureaucrats. Across our state,

we need more special education teachers like Hamden's Liz Sasser and Lisa Monahan.

Unfortunately, Hamden's current crisis, pertaining to adequate special education programming, is just part of a much larger systemic problem facing many school districts in Connecticut, especially inner-city school districts where the problems are deeper and often unattended. Appropriate levels of teacher staffing has decreased, while the number of students requiring special education instruction has increased.

Take Norwalk, for example. Norwalk paid for a giant billboard along Interstate 95 to recruit special education teachers. This is the best way to recruit special education teachers? There needs to be a better way.

New Haven currently has more than 120 teaching vacancies, primarily consisting of special education, math and sciences teachers. Branford needs to fill at least 20 paraprofessional vacancies, critical for children with a disability. West Haven has six vacant teaching positions, including the need for bilingual tutors.

Even for positions that are filled, there is evidence that Connecticut's urban districts are being impacted the most. According to the president of the New Haven Federal of Teachers, Leslie Blatteau, "People are leaving urban districts for better-funded districts because those districts are able to pay more."

The Connecticut State Department of Education is well aware of our state's systemic staffing issues. The commissioner for the Connecticut State Department of Education issued a memo to all district superintendents and special education directors April 20 that identifies 10 certification shortage areas based on feedback received by all of Connecticut's 200 or so school districts. Five of the areas of shortage pertain to special education and English as a second language.

The memo highlights "statewide shortage areas" in bilingual education, math, special education, school librarians, school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, education technology, history and English as a second language. The statewide shortage covers all grades, from kindergarten through 12th grade. The data is derived from school staff vacancies and the disproportionate number of teachers that actually are not even certified in the fields they teach. Unfortunately, admitting there is a problem is not the same as solving the

problem. We must act now and resolve our teacher shortage crises statewide. Loosening up our state's teaching certification requirements, so that out of state teachers can teach in Connecticut with reciprocity, is simply not enough solve the problem.

For the past several years, there has also been an increase in the number of students receiving special education statewide. During the 2010-2011 school year, there were approximately 65,000 students receiving special education. That grew by 24 percent by the 2020-2021 school year when there are roughly 80,000 students receiving special education.

Fortunately, at least the 2022-2023 school year is not further challenged by COVID-19 distance learning mandates and mandatory mask requirements for our children, all of which has been proven to be even more detrimental. Though I am hopeful for a better tomorrow. But now, more than ever, we need to be not only supportive of our students but their teachers, as well — those teachers that are left.

Jeffrey L. Forte is the founding partner of Shelton-based Forte Law Group. He is a special education attorney and certified child advocate, representing families that have a child with a disability and in need of special education and can be reached at 203-257-7999.