

**TESTIMONY OF THE ALLIANCE OF APPROVED PRIVATE  
SCHOOLS**

**BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

**ON SCHOOL REOPENING**

**BY DONNA WESTBROOKS-MARTIN**

**August 4, 2020**

Good morning Chairmen Sonney, Roebuck and members of the House Education Committee. Thank you for inviting the Alliance of Approved Private Schools to speak to the Committee today. We appreciate your efforts to understand the issues schools are having with reopening this year.

My name is Donna Westbrooks-Martin. I am the Executive Director of the ACLD Tillotson School and the Vice-President of the Alliance of Approved Private Schools. ACLD Tillotson is an Approved Private School (APS) in the western part of the state, in the Pittsburgh area. We are one of 33 APSs. (Attached is a full list of APS)

APSs serve students who are unable to receive an appropriate education in their regular public school. They were created by an act of legislation in the early 1960's. Pennsylvania's 33 APSs are located across the Commonwealth educating more than 4,000 children between the ages of 2-21. This act of legislation formed a unique partnership with the state, school districts and the APSs and made the APSs an integral part of the continuum of special education programs and services, which is mandated by federal and state law to ensure that all eligible students receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

APSs serve a historically underserved population, reduce years of educational placement failure, and reduce truancy, dropout rates and graduate students with disabilities.

These schools are unique in the populations served. We serve students with severe cognitive disorders, autism spectrum disorders, students who are medically fragile, students with severe behavior disorders. But we are schools and we educate children living in our communities and living in families like all children. And like all schools educating children, we are planning the re-opening of our schools.

I want to make this point, first. We are not school districts or LEA's or school entities. We are also not just non-public schools.

We are schools that partner with school districts. School districts refer students to our schools when they feel they are unable to provide an appropriate education. Tuition for the student is paid through public monies. The state pays 60% of a student's tuition and the school district pays 40%. So, we are a hybrid. We are Approved Private Schools.

I stress this point, because during the pandemic our schools, like all schools, have had to shift time and resources to meet the challenging needs of our children. We stepped up to the task, but it required our schools to be creative to make sure our children were able to access learning material and resources plus stay connected with their teachers. APSs utilized technology to provide a continuity of education for students, often times providing families with Chromebooks, laptops and iPads with which to access their education. We mailed educational material to families who didn't have access to technology and/or the internet. We created unique ways in which students and families stayed connected to school personnel, in an effort to support them during this very difficult time. It was new and it was hard, but we did it!

Like traditional schools, we are also looking at additional cost and needs to reopen. We have appreciated the state acknowledging our partnership with the public schools and including us in some grant opportunities to assist with such things as the purchase of personal protective equipment. It would be helpful if the grant notices spelled out in more specificity who can apply, so there is no confusion whether or not Approved Private Schools can apply.

As APSs continue to grapple with the challenges of re-opening our schools for the 2020-21 school year, I want to share some of the areas of concern that the Directors of the Alliance member schools brought to my attention:

- School directors are concerned about best manner in which to re-open schools safely and still serve the educational needs of the students with severe disabilities for whom hands on education is required.
- There is concern about students and staff having appropriate technology and internet connectivity for a blended model of instruction (student in-person some days and remote some days of the week to reduce the numbers of students in the buildings). This is also a concern if we must transition to a full remote model of teaching for periods of time when necessary. All students and staff need to have proper technology and connectivity.
- Safety is a major concern for families of students and staff. Directors are concerned about the ability to purchase the appropriate amount of PPE for staff and student protection (most of our students need full assistance with feeding, toileting and behavior support). Schools need masks, shields, gloves, clothes coverings and need to change them many times per day.
- Students in our programs will have difficulty understanding the importance of the precautions needed to keep them safe. Directors, families and staff are concerned about the student's ability to follow any of the necessary procedures for extended periods of time based on their cognitive level and mental health disorders.
- Directors are concerned about cleaning supplies: Can they find them? Do they have the funds to purchase the amount they need?
- Directors are also concerned about liability issues if a staff person or a student becomes ill with the virus.
- Directors are concerned about the capacity to support changing staffing patterns as the COVID19 pandemic changes.

Thank you again, for the invitation to meet with you this morning.

# Alliance of Approved Private Schools

- *ACLD Tillotson School*
- *Camphill School*
- *Centennial School of Lehigh University*
- *Clarke Schools for Hearing and Speech*
- *Community Country Day School*
- *Davidson School*
- *Delta School/ Buttonwood Farms*
- *DePaul School for Hearing and Speech*
- *Devereux*
- *Easterseals of Southeastern Pennsylvania*
- *Easterseals of Western and Central Pennsylvania*
- *Elizabeth Lee Black School @ Barber National Institute*
- *Fairwold Academy*
- *George Crothers Memorial School*
- *Green Tree School*
- *HMS School for Children with Cerebral Palsy*
- *Martin Luther School*
- *Melmark School*
- *Pace School*
- *Pathway School*
- *Pressley Ridge Day School of Pittsburgh*
- *Pressley Ridge School for the Deaf*
- *Royer-Greaves School for Blind*
- *The Day School at The Children's Institute*
- *The School at McGuire Memorial*
- *Timothy School*
- *Valley Day School*
- *The Vanguard School*
- *The Vista School*
- *The Watson Institute*
- *Wesley Spectrum Schools*
- *Woods Services*