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The Arc of Pennsylvania is affiliated with The Arc of the United States and 33 local chapters of The Arc across PA.

Testimony of Sherri Landis, Executive Director
The Arc of Pennsylvania
House Education Committee
Safely Re-Opening Schools
August 4, 2020

Thank you Chairman Sonney and Chairman Roebuck for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding Reopening Schools Safely in the Commonwealth. I am honored to speak before you today.

My name is Sherri Landis, and I am the Executive Director of The Arc of Pennsylvania, a member of The Arc of the United States, the largest disability rights organization in the nation, advocating for and serving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) and their families. In addition, we are part of a Special Education Coalition, made up of organizations from across the state representing families of children with disabilities who are receiving special education services. The purpose of the Coalition is to connect families with the information and resources they need for their child as they look at the upcoming school year. Families are desperately seeking information on what their school district will do, and how it will impact their child with disabilities.

My testimony today addresses the high level issues these families have raised as they seek to learn more about their school districts reopening plans and the impact on the special education services their children will be receiving in the 2020-2021 school year. The outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent move to online instruction in March of 2020 saw a massive shift in the format of education services to all students. While all students saw massive changes as schools moved to online instruction, for students receiving special education services this disruption caused many setbacks in their learning and caused major disruption in their individual education plans. Many students found online learning difficult and related services such as therapies and individualized instruction nonexistent. For students with medical complexities, behavioral and mental health concerns, and students with significant impact of disability, the reopening of school in the fall brings fear and trepidation.



Following PDE's guidance on Health & Safety and the PA School Reopening Task Force Report, school officials began to discuss and formulate how to provide education services while ensuring the health and safety of students and staff. We commend the school districts who sought community input on their proposed Health and Safety Plans, especially those who targeted input from parents/families of students with I/DD and other disabilities. However, our work with the Special Education Coalition has shown that parents/families across the Commonwealth still have not received clear guidance on how their district's reopening plan will specifically address the needs and concerns of their child with disabilities.

To ensure that school districts account for the unique needs of students who receive special education services, we recommend the following:

1. Assure that students with disabilities continue to receive instruction with their non-disabled classmates. Purposeful steps need to be taken by school officials to ensure that students with disabilities are not needlessly segregated from their non-disabled peers in the name of social distancing. While families recognize that schools must take every precaution necessary to ensure the health and safety of all students, recommendations should not restrict students with disabilities from interacting with non-disabled students or receiving an inclusive education. Even remote learning offers opportunities for students to participate in small groups with their school age peers and social gatherings that are managed remotely.
2. Establish positive communication and engagement with families PRIOR to the start of school. Schools must provide clear methods for communicating with families and in ways that meet the needs of families/family schedules and ensure that families know how to request interpretation and translation of those communications. Key issues schools need to provide clear information on are: virtual and in class attendance policies, social distancing practices, and what will happen in the case of a second outbreak prior to or during the school year. Families understand the uncertainty that School Districts are navigating, and it is okay to say, "We don't know yet". By being honest and upfront with families, school districts will build trust that is imperative as we begin this "new normal" of education. It is evident that engaging parents and students (when appropriate) in the discussion often offers greater insight into resolutions and solutions, beyond what the school might have thought possible. Clear communication between school districts and parents/families ensures that parents/families can prepare themselves and their student for what may come, alleviating stress and undue trauma. We recommend school districts periodically survey families/youth to identify needs and gather feedback on how the current system is working.
3. Assure that safety practices and policies will be followed consistently. Particularly for students with medical complexities, families need to know that schools will follow the health & safety measures they have designed on a

consistent basis. We recommend school districts gather input from the families, particularly of those students with medical complexities as they understand the implications to their child's health the best. Without consistency, these policies and mitigation efforts could lead to concern among parents/families of students with disabilities that their child's health and well-being are not supported. By considering the full range of needs of students with disabilities and their families in relation to reopening schools, school districts can ensure they continue to provide a free and appropriate public education for students with I/DD.

4. Assure effective instruction by providing teachers and other school personnel with the information they need and the opportunity to develop the skills needed to provide adequate instruction. Teachers and support staff must account for the unique learning needs of students who receive special education services when formulating their plans on delivery of instruction during the different phases, specifically remote learning. As school districts plan to re-open in the fall, they must be prepared to fully offer students with disabilities the education supports and services in their Individual Education Program (IEP) which is guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Teachers must be assured that they have the skills to provide online instruction and to practice Universal Design for Learning Principles. They must fully understand the COVID-19 Compensatory Services guidance offered by the Bureau of Special Education, and they must collaborate with families to design instruction that meets the needs of the child. Most importantly, establish a shared understanding of how progress will be monitored and how often in order to make changes to assure that all children are learning. It should be the priority that services offered in a remote learning format are delivered online with consistency and follows the student's IEP.

5. School districts should assure that all federal and state funding opportunities are explored to bring the necessary resources to their district, as well as explore collaborations with local community services to meet the needs of teachers, families, and students. Utilizing new, innovative ways of providing education services are often expensive, particularly when so many measures must be taken to ensure the safety of all students. Administrations must explore all funding opportunities to meet the financial needs of schools. In addition, partnering with service organizations in the local community would be beneficial for school district. Local communities, faith communities, and social services organizations are often ready to assist children and families. By exploring local options for families that might be faced with a need for before-and-after school care, mental health support, or food security, school districts will respond to the full needs of families and build meaningful relationships.

As schools begin to return to the classroom in different ways, it is essential that Administrators consider the recommendations detailed above. We also call on you, the State Legislature, to support schools, teachers, and students

and advocate for a significant investment in funding for Education in the next COVID-19 relief package. School districts are facing difficult financial decisions as they must purchase Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and invest in new educational resources and technologies as their local revenue resources shrink. Without receiving more funding from the federal level, the Commonwealth's schools, teachers, and students will all feel the impact.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony to you today and share the concerns of the families of students with disabilities across Pennsylvania.