



Testimony of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units

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Good Morning, Chairman Sonney and members of the House Education Committee. My name is Dr. Jill Hackman, Executive Director of the Berks County Intermediate Unit. I am here this morning in my capacity as Co-Chair of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU) Government Relations Committee. Joining me today is Dr. John George, Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units (PAIU). We thank you for this opportunity to appear in front of you to share how the 29 intermediate units across the Commonwealth are educating children and supporting the efforts of public, charter, and private schools in their efforts to provide education to the 1.7 million children in Pennsylvania.

The system of intermediate units was created by the General Assembly in 1970 and was originally designed to play a critical role in supporting public and private schools across the Commonwealth, as well as assisting the Department of Education's effort to provide a thorough and efficient system of education. In the 50 years since 1970, intermediate units have transformed from a system that predominately served children with disabilities and provided instructional materials to schools to an ever-evolving, complex system that provides a broad range of services such as virtual learning opportunities, special education, early intervention services, technology infrastructure, workforce development programs, professional learning, transportation, curriculum development, joint purchasing, health care consortiums, human

resource and business office support, alternative education, and a host of other programs and services. At one time, intermediate units relied heavily on state budget appropriations. Today, intermediate units receive no direct funding from the legislature; rather, intermediate units rely upon entrepreneurial activities to meet the needs of the schools we serve. Intermediate units have become so adept at creating programs and services, that today, some people erroneously identify intermediate units as private vendors, which of course we are not. Intermediate units are governmental agencies designed by the General Assembly to be a critical part of the education system, and to provide expertise and economies of scale on both the instructional and operational sides of schools.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, intermediate units have taken on many new responsibilities that were not envisioned just one year ago. For 50 years, intermediate units have provided instruction to students with disabilities. Throughout this pandemic, intermediate units continued to provide both in-person instruction and virtual instruction. Many intermediate units continue to deliver in-home instruction to preschool children, including medically fragile children who require intensive educational services. Intermediate units also deliver in-person instruction to school-aged children with disabilities even when the school building is shut-down for general education instruction.

As we know, many schools were unable to open safely because of COVID-19. For these schools, intermediate units immediately shifted instructional practice from in-person instruction to virtual instruction. While some instruction was asynchronous, many intermediate units delivered synchronous on-line instruction to students with disabilities. In addition to delivering in-person instruction and virtual instruction, intermediate units became adept at providing virtual hearing and vision services, and providing teletherapy for physical therapy, occupational therapy, psychological services, and counseling. With COVID-19, we have seen a spike in mental health needs. Intermediate units responded by increasing virtual mental health crisis supports.

In addition to locally provided in-person and virtual instruction and related services to students with disabilities, intermediate units exerted leadership by assisting schools in their deliver of virtual instruction. At the beginning of the pandemic, intermediate units, in partnership with the Department of Education, launched an initiative to make on-line content available to every school district whose students had access to internet and devices. Over 385,000 children in grades K-12 in approximately 150 Local Education Agencies (LEAs) benefited from this project. Building upon this success, intermediate units have continued to provide cyber options for schools and have provided significant infrastructure support to enable students' learning in virtual and hybrid models. These supports include technical support for on-line platforms, distribution and management of technological devices, and network administration.

As we look forward to the coming months, policy makers and educators will need to analyze the content that we want students to learn to bridge any potential learning gaps. To address potential learning gaps, intermediate units, in partnership with the Department of Education, will provide professional learning on an integrated system of support focused on accelerated learning. The accelerated learning model will provide equitable systems and processes that focus on three areas: system conditions, academics, and social / emotional wellness.

Therefore, it is recommended that continued support is provided to schools across the Commonwealth to address individual student needs.

In addition to local efforts to deliver instruction during the COVID pandemic. Intermediate units were engaged in state-wide efforts to create flexible learning environments. Unfortunately, there are many Pennsylvania students that do not have access to wifi. According to the most recently available U.S. Census Bureau, 21% of Pennsylvania households do not have access to broadband. Students with limited connectivity are not confined to rural areas, rather they live in all regions of Pennsylvania. Limited connectivity can also include households that are unable to afford internet access. In some households, children and parents share the same connection for the children's education and parents' work.

To address the technology access inequity, intermediate units, with the support of the Department of Education, launched initiatives to develop innovative methods to deliver instruction to students that lack access to broadband. I would like to highlight three of these initiatives.

What started as an idea in Harrisburg School District has now spread across the Commonwealth. The idea to use television to deliver instruction to children at home is proving to be an effective delivery mechanism. Intermediate units partnered with the seven public broadcasting stations (PBS) to support student learning regardless of their physical location. Intermediate units created digital lessons that were broadcasted over the PBS stations allowing children to access instruction through TV. Many of these lessons were taught by intermediate unit teachers and others by district teachers. Intermediate units also created “grab and go” activity bags aligned to PBS content that parents can use with their children at home.

Expanding upon the lessons delivered via PBS, intermediate units and PBS stations are producing televised programs known as “Family Nights.” Intermediate unit teachers assist PBS producers align educational content with Pennsylvania Department of Education’s standards and provide guidance on content relevancy. The first PBS/IU program focused on computer coding and it aired on all PBS stations in December. Additional programs are planned for the Spring.

In addition to delivering instruction over PBS TV, intermediate units experimented with technological devices known as Raspberry Pi, a miniature computer that is able to hold large amounts of digital content. These devices provide students without access to wifi, an online educational experience. While this technology has its limitations, it helped fill the gap between families with broadband access and those that do not.

The real solution however, is to make broadband more accessible to communities where it does not exist, and to make it and the devices needed to navigate the internet more affordable to

those families who have limited economic means. Therefore, we strongly urge the legislature to invest in technological infrastructure and help offset the cost of wifi and devices for students.

The projects that I just highlighted are only a few of the many examples of how intermediate units have supported students and schools during the pandemic. There are many more than we can cite. Intermediate units across the Commonwealth will continue to exert leadership, and will continue to create private/public partnerships to support public, charter, and private schools to transform the system of education in Pennsylvania. We are confident that with the support of the General Assembly and the Department of Education, intermediate units and schools can work together to overcome the havoc inflicted by the pandemic.

Thank you for allowing us this opportunity to testify before you today.