



**Submitted Testimony to the House Education Subcommittee on  
Special Education**

**Public Hearing on the Delivery of Special Education Services to  
Students in the Commonwealth**

**Wednesday, October 6, 2021**

**8:30AM**

**Room 515, Irvis Office Building**

**Steve Farmer, Ed.D.  
Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf**

**Heidi Ondek, Ed.D.  
Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children**

**Todd Reeves, Esq.  
Overbrook School for the Blind**

**Peter Bailey  
Pennsylvania School for the Deaf**

Subcommittee Chair Ortity, Subcommittee Chair Hill-Evans and the members of the House Education Subcommittee on Special Education, thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding our experience educating the Commonwealth's most vulnerable children.

The Chartered Schools for the Deaf and Blind have a long and storied relationship with Pennsylvania and the General Assembly. Our relationship dates back to 1821 with the passage of Act 25 which incorporated and endowed the Pennsylvania Institute for the Deaf and Dumb (now the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf) with an appropriation of \$8,000 to assist with the education of deaf pupils in the City of Philadelphia. Our relationship with the General Assembly continued to expand throughout the 1800's with the incorporation and endowment of the Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Blind (Overbrook School for the Blind) in 1834, the Western Pennsylvania Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb (Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf) in 1869 and the Western Pennsylvania Institution for the Blind (Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children) in 1887.

The four Chartered Schools for the Deaf and Blind are truly unique educational institutions in the Commonwealth that educate students from over 200 school districts and employ over 1,200 individuals. Each school traces its origins back to the education of children who were either blind or deaf. Over time, our student populations have shifted and are continuing to trend toward educating those students whose sensory losses are compounded by additional physical and intellectual disabilities.

Educating such a diverse population presents many challenges and requires a wide range of programs and services to meet the individual educational and therapeutic needs of our students. The specialized instruction offered by our schools span a wide range from occupational, physical and communication therapy to vocational and employment training to a college preparatory curriculum for those students seeking post-secondary education.

It is important to note that our schools are an extension of the public school system. No student can attend one of our schools solely based on parent or student choice. For a student to attend our schools, it must be agreed upon by all parties that the students' home school district cannot comply with federal law by providing that student a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and placement at one of our schools is the only way that student can receive FAPE. Because deafness and blindness are low incidence disabilities, there may only be one or two

deaf or blind students in each of your local school districts. Therefore, the financial burden of providing such highly specialized programs to these children is a heavy one for local school districts and in many cases, it is less expensive for the student to attend one of the four Chartered Schools than to remain in their home district.

The foundation to a successful special education experience is following and monitoring the progress of a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP is a living document that is developed collaboratively between the student's parents, home school district and teachers from our schools to map out a plan for educational success. It is important for the IEP team to continually monitor the progress of special education students and adjust the IEP according to areas of advancement and areas where more services should be provided.

To further enhance our students' educational experience, our schools consistently go beyond what is included in the IEP and offer additional services and therapies. Our schools have invested the time and resources to construct greenhouses to offer our students the experience of hands-on horticulture therapy, aquatics classes that are adapted to meet the physical needs of children for more productive physical therapies and sensory stimulation, and created adaptable STEM programming to offer students similar experiences as their peers in the traditional school setting. All this is done with the student in mind to create unique learning opportunities that will benefit the students going forward.

One program area of emphasis within special education, and one that our schools have fully embraced, is the need to provide strong post-school transition services. Sometimes referred to as secondary transition, these services seek to prepare students for life after high school for participation in post-secondary education/training, employment, or community living. Through collaboration with the student, family, and school we develop a transition plan that emphasizes the student's strengths, interests, preferences and needs with the goal of becoming as independent as possible. Graduating students have been placed in a wide array of post-school opportunities including employment at a car detailing service, childcare centers, local restaurants, retail sales positions and acceptance to a culinary arts program and other post-secondary opportunities. The goal of our transition services is to prepare our students to lead productive and satisfying adult lives to the best of their abilities upon graduation. We look forward to expanding the reach of our transition placements and continuing to serve our young people as they move from the school setting to independent living.

While the focus of this hearing is not intended to be budget related, we believe it is important to note the role private, philanthropic dollars play in the education of our students and children that will never attend our schools. For example, each of our schools subsidize the early intervention services provided to students in the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh regions, most of whom will not attend our schools as students; rather, the services provided at an early age will better prepare them for programming in their local school district. In addition, private funds allow our schools to provide support to the local community through integrated preschools, classes to parents of deaf and blind children and expanded extracurricular activities. The addition of philanthropic funds play a critical role at our schools and allows us to further invest in our students and surrounding community.

We would be remiss without extending our gratitude to the General Assembly for passing Act 66 of 2021 which gave students and parents the option of receiving an additional year of special education if they aged out of their special education program in the 2020-2021 school year. Collectively, we had over 20 students exercise their option for an additional year of special education. Related services such as physical and occupational therapies are difficult if not impossible to deliver virtually. Offering the additional year of specially designed instruction for special education students compensates the child fairly for the Free and Appropriate Public Education they lost over the past year. Furthermore, doing so proactively may reduce the volume of compensatory education claims brought forth to individual school districts. Those claims have the potential to be an even greater cost to taxpayers than the additional year of special education.

We again thank the subcommittee for this opportunity to describe the services we offer our students. Please feel free to contact us if you would like further details on any of the items discussed in our testimony.