

COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE HEARING
SPECIAL EDUCATION SUBCOMMITTEE

STATE CAPITOL
523 IRVIS OFFICE BUILDING AND VIRTUAL
HARRISBURG, PENNSYLVANIA

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2022

IN RE: HOUSE BILL 726

BEFORE:

HONORABLE JASON ORTITAY, MAJORITY CHAIRMAN
HONORABLE CAROL HILL-EVANS, MINORITY CHAIRWOMAN
HONORABLE MARK GILLEN
HONORABLE ROBERT MERCURI (V)
HONORABLE CURT SONNEY
HONORABLE MICHAEL ZABEL (V)
HONORABLE MARK LONGIETTI

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

HONORABLE JOE HOHENSTEIN
HONORABLE NAPOLEON NELSON (V)

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STAFF MEMBERS ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

**CHRISTINE SEITZ, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, REPUBLICAN CAUCUS
DANIEL GLATFELTER, RESEARCH ANALYST, REPUBLICAN CAUCUS
CHRISTINE CRONE, LEGISLATIVE ADMINISTRATIVE
ASSISTANT II, REPUBLICAN CAUCUS
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DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS (V)
MARLENA MILLER, LEGISLATIVE ASSISTANT,
DEMOCRATIC CAUCUS**

**JEAN M. DAVIS, REPORTER
NOTARY PUBLIC**

I N D E X
T E S T I F I E R S

NAME	PAGE
DR. JOSIE BADGER, DIRECTOR, RAISE	7
AMBER LOGAN, FORMER SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT (V)	10
NEIL McDEVITT, DIRECTOR, DEAF-HEARING COMMUNICATION CENTRE	13
SHERRI SMITH, DEPUTY SECRETARY, ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY EDUCATION, PA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (V)	26
CAROLE CLANCY, DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EDUCATION, PA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (V)	32
KATHRYN SMALL, K-12 INCLUSIVE PRACTICES INSTRUCTIONAL COACH, NORTH PENN SCHOOL DISTRICT	48
DR. CHRISTA BIALKA, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, SPECIAL EDUCATION & DIRECTOR OF UNDERGRADUATE TEACHER PROGRAMS, VILLANOVA UNIVERSITY (V)	50
TANYA CONTOS, CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTIONAL COORDINATOR, PA DISTANCE LEARNING CHARTER SCHOOL (V)	54
DR. RACHEL ANDLER, DIRECTOR, STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES, SOUTH FAYETTE TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT (V)	57

1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 * * *

3 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Good morning,
4 everyone.

5 Welcome to this hearing of the House Special
6 Education Subcommittee.

7 I'm going to go through some housekeeping and
8 then we'll do some introductions and then get started.

9 I'd like to remind everyone that this hearing is
10 being recorded and live-streamed so the public may watch.
11 If we experience any technical difficulties, we will recess
12 the hearing until those technical difficulties can be
13 addressed.

14 For the testifiers participating virtually,
15 please mute your microphones until it's your turn. Each
16 testifier has been asked to limit their testimony to around
17 three minutes or less. And please do not read your
18 submitted testimony verbatim.

19 Following, the presenter may be questioned by
20 members of the Committee, which we'll do questions after
21 each panel is completed. And we have three panels today.
22 So with that said, we'll move to member introductions.

23 I am Representative Jason Ortitay of the 46th
24 District in Allegheny and Washington Counties.

25 I'll move to my left here.

1 MINORITY CHAIRWOMAN HILL-EVANS: Good morning. I
2 am Representative Carol Hill-Evans out of the 95th District
3 in York County.

4 REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: Good morning. Mark
5 Longietti. I represent the 7th District in Mercer County
6 and I serve as the Minority Chairman of the House Education
7 Committee.

8 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Mark Gillen, representing
9 Berks and Lancaster Counties.

10 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: Good morning.
11 Representative Curt Sonney. I represent the 4th Legislative
12 District in Erie County. And I am the Majority Chairman of
13 the House Education Committee.

14 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Joe Hohenstein from
15 the 177th District in Philadelphia. And I am a proud
16 cosponsor on this bill with Representative Ortitay.

17 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Representative Zabel.

18 REPRESENTATIVE ZABEL: Good morning, everyone.
19 Representative Zabel, Mike Zabel, from Delaware County,
20 163rd District.

21 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Representative
22 Nelson.

23 REPRESENTATIVE NELSON: Good morning. This is
24 Representative Napoleon Nelson. I am here in Montgomery
25 County in the 154th Legislative District.

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MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: All right.

Thank you, everyone.

I think we got everyone who is online.

The House Special Education Subcommittee will hear from high school personnel, the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and advocates regarding the proposed House Bill 726, which establishes a pilot program to implement disability inclusive curriculum in various school entities.

As the Special Education Subcommittee, it is important for us to hear from stakeholders from those tasked with curriculum development, instructors, and school personnel who would be tasked with implementing this curriculum and the individuals who would be most impacted by our schools utilizing this curriculum.

I'm very happy to be holding this hearing on House Bill 726, which I'm a prime sponsor with Representative Hohenstein.

With that, I will ask Chairwoman Hill-Evans if she has any opening remarks.

MINORITY CHAIRWOMAN HILL-EVANS: I do not.

Well, actually, I do because I'm anxious to hear what everybody has to say. I look forward to the testimony and I will hold any questions until after the panels.

Thank you so much.

MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Perfect. Thank you

1 very much.

2 Well, we'll get started right here with our first
3 panel. We have Dr. Josie Badger, who is the Director of
4 RAISE; Amber Logan, who is a former Special Education
5 student; and Neil McDevitt, who is the Director of
6 Deaf-Hearing and Communication Centre.

7 Thank you all for being here today. For those of
8 you who are able, would you please stand and raise your
9 right hand to be sworn in.

10 (Witnesses sworn en masse.)

11 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

12 All right. We're going to start with you,
13 Dr. Badger. You may begin when you are ready.

14 DR. JOSIE BADGER: Great. Thank you so much.

15 And it is such a privilege and an honor to be
16 here today with all of you. Most of you know me from
17 working on employment legislation. But today I want to take
18 it a step back because we know that education leads to
19 employment and so much of my work has dealt around those two
20 topics. And so I want to talk about this bill and what this
21 can mean for people with disabilities throughout the state.

22 Growing up, your common talk is there are three
23 Rs that are related to education: Reading, writing,
24 arithmetic. But I want to bring out maybe four. And that's
25 relational. Somewhere in the middle between learning the

1 alphabet and calculus, we learn a lot about ourselves, our
2 world, and our place in it. But what happens when we cannot
3 find our place in this world from looking around at role
4 models, curriculum, and our peers? And this is something
5 that is very common for youth and students with
6 disabilities.

7 Many of us, as I am part of that community, grew
8 up without members of our families or community members who
9 have disabilities. And so we are often not exposed to role
10 models with disabilities. So I want to take you way back,
11 back just a couple years ago when I was in high school. And
12 I really didn't know anyone else with a disability.

13 I'm from rural Pennsylvania. I didn't really
14 have anyone to look up to. Without having positive
15 experiences or knowledge about disabilities, I thought being
16 disabled was wrong, that I was broken, and that I needed to
17 try to hide as much of my disability as possible. But if
18 you've met me -- or if you have not, let me give you a
19 picture of myself. I use a power wheelchair. I have a
20 service dog. I use a ventilator and I have a nurse. So you
21 can only imagine how hard it was to pretend to be somebody
22 who was not disabled so that I'd fit in or looked, quote,
23 unquote, normal.

24 I spent so much time trying to be someone that I
25 wasn't that I had little time to be able to be myself, to be

1 okay with having a disability. And that is true for people
2 across the country who have disabilities. We have made
3 great strides in working towards inclusion of culturally
4 diverse education materials. We are still working on it.
5 It's a work in progress. But this is not true for the
6 disability community.

7 When I speak to groups of people without and with
8 disabilities, they can tell me about the civil rights
9 movement and talk about Malcolm X and Martin Luther King,
10 who are wonderful role models. But they don't realize that
11 we, the disability community, are also a culture of
12 communities and the largest minority group in the state.

13 They have also never heard about the fact that we
14 have our own history, our humor, our history of experiences
15 of stigma. And it's often shocking that we have those role
16 models as well to them. Integration of disability education
17 in General Ed is not only vital to the disability community
18 but to non-disabled students as well. We know that a
19 rareness can lead to acceptance, which can lead to
20 integration and inclusion.

21 We need to combat the negative adult life
22 outcomes of people with disabilities through education. And
23 by teaching disability culture and inclusion, we can start
24 to chip away at those issues that have really caused the
25 disability communities to stumble after leaving high school.

1 Similar bills have been passed all over the
2 country for the past 20 years. And so there is a lot of
3 information and curriculum that is already available. And
4 so these will be able to be taken and adapted to our
5 classrooms today that can improve all of our students'
6 inclusion and rid us of the negative stereotypes that are
7 often embedded into disabled and non-disabled students'
8 minds.

9 The classroom is one space where we can start to
10 chip away at the oppression and set our eyes on more hopeful
11 inclusive tomorrows. So I fully encourage all of you to
12 consider the integration of this bill, of passage, of making
13 sure that all students understand disability, not just in
14 health class, but throughout all areas of disability,
15 because we are not just the model of disability but this
16 bill affects all areas of our lives.

17 Thank you.

18 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you, Dr.
19 Badger. If you wouldn't mind sticking around until the end
20 of the panel for questions.

21 DR. JOSIE BADGER: No.

22 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

23 Next we'll move on to Ms. Logan, who is here with
24 us. You may begin when you are ready.

25 MS. AMBER LOGAN: Hi. My name is Amber Logan. I

1 thank you for having me here today to tell my story. And I
2 hope I can help those special education students in school
3 today.

4 Due to a traumatic brain injury from birth, I was
5 in special education for 12 years. And even though I had a
6 positive atmosphere at home, school was very hard for me.
7 For many of those, I always walked with my head down at
8 school and I had no self-esteem and I referred to myself as
9 a person with a diverse ability. I say a diverse ability,
10 not disability, because it's important that we all have
11 abilities.

12 During my transition meeting in high school, I
13 felt like everybody talked about me like I wasn't there.
14 They didn't talk much about my abilities and that was a
15 terrible feeling. They really didn't ask me at all what I
16 wanted to do with my life. I had no role model with a
17 diverse ability to lean on. While I had no confidence, I
18 always knew I had abilities.

19 After my transition fell apart, my mom started
20 taking me in the community. And that's when things got
21 better for me. I will shorten my story by telling you what
22 I am doing today. My mom and my sister and I started a
23 class at the Y called Superstars. This is a group fitness
24 class for individuals with diverse abilities.

25 I was able to fly to Rhode Island to get the

1 training to become certified in Drums Alive. This was
2 life-changing for me. I was the first person in the United
3 States with a diverse ability to be certified. The Y hired
4 me last spring to be an instructor and to help with the
5 socials. I love being a role model and a leader. I now
6 have confidence in myself and I am taking that into the
7 community. I also help teach the inclusion classes with the
8 members. And now they see me as a leader and they know that
9 they can be a leader, too.

10 I am also on our County Commissioners Diverse
11 Ability Board where we work on issues in our community.
12 With a team of leaders, I am helping to make changes for
13 others. I have also had the opportunity to share my story
14 at conferences and the ARC rally here at the Capitol and at
15 Bloomsburg University to students going into special
16 education.

17 I remind them to believe in their students and
18 encourage them to be the best that they can be. I don't
19 want these students to feel the way that I did when I was in
20 school. I am hoping that by sharing my story that it will
21 make a difference and that you will pass this important
22 bill. I would love to be a part of this and help encourage
23 these students to have a positive mind and positive
24 thoughts.

25 Now I am active working and serving in my

1 community and I love my everyday job. I no longer walk with
2 my head down. I walk with my head up and I'm proud to be
3 me. I want that for all students.

4 Thank you.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you, Ms. Logan.
6 I appreciate your testimony. I hope you will stick around
7 for questions after our last speaker here on the first
8 panel.

9 Also, I want to say a shoutout to your mom.
10 Thanks for reaching out to me. She's a big reason why we
11 were able to get you here today to testify. I thought you
12 did a fantastic job. Thank you.

13 MS. AMBER LOGAN: Thank you.

14 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Next up we have Mr.
15 McDevitt, who is the Director of Deaf-Hearing and
16 Communication Centre.

17 Mr. McDevitt, you may begin when you are ready.

18 (The following written testimony was submitted to
19 the Committee on behalf of Mr. Neil McDevitt:)

20 Representative Sonney,

21 I write this in support of House Bill 726,
22 "Disability Inclusive Curriculum Legislation." This
23 legislation promises to provide great strides forward in
24 ensuring that our communities are welcoming and accepting of
25 people with disabilities.

1 I am deaf and I am the second deaf Executive
2 Director for the Deaf-Hearing Communication Centre, a
3 501(c)3 nonprofit organization based in Swarthmore, PA,
4 providing a multitude of services for deaf individuals in
5 the Philadelphia region.

6 Growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, it was
7 challenging for me and many of my fellow community members.
8 We didn't have the civil rights that the Americans with
9 Disabilities Act later gave us. We were relegated to
10 second-class citizenship in our own communities.

11 There were times as a young deaf person that I
12 would hide my hearing aids, letting my hair grow long and
13 being painfully quiet as not to let people know that I
14 couldn't hear. The social isolation among my peers was far,
15 far more difficult than any other element of disability.

16 Even with the full civil rights afforded by the
17 ADA, we continue to fight for truly equal access. The ADA
18 is not a fully empowered Civil Rights Law, meaning that many
19 barriers exist for people with disabilities. As an example,
20 for the provision of sign language interpreting services,
21 entities pay for those services out of pocket. As a result,
22 many deaf individuals face uphill battles to get equal
23 access to critical services.

24 Education programs created by HB 726 are a
25 long-term approach to resolving these issues. When the

1 students of today fully understand how to create inclusive
2 communities and services, they will bring those perspectives
3 to their future jobs and fight toward that objective.

4 I thank you for your support of this bill.

5 Neil McDevitt, Executive Director, DHCC.

6 (Sign language communication - no audio.)

7 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: In other words, with
8 the Americans with Disabilities Act into law, we have state
9 law related to a disability and accessibility through
10 inclusion but society struggles with that.

11 I have also been an advocate myself. And one of
12 the challenges that I have, people often think that I
13 provide accommodation and access. It's more an act of
14 charity they think and not a civil rights thing.

15 And so we need to continue to educate our
16 society. And that starts with children in school and for
17 them to fully understand what inclusion means. I'm about
18 sharing the comments from the social media posts that a
19 younger deaf girl had written about her experience in her
20 school.

21 She talked about one of her teachers and how that
22 teacher treated her. And when she struggled with the test,
23 the teacher yelled at her because she was making her mad
24 because she had to make a new test. So she would make fun
25 of her hearing aids and just negative comments behind her

1 back in class.

2 She had said she's thankful to her classmates for
3 telling her about that situation. And so the challenge
4 really is that the teacher shouldn't be doing that, first of
5 all. And people need to be taught from a young age that
6 inclusion is not something special. It's not charitable.
7 But it is an act of civil rights.

8 And so House Bill 726 will go a long way to make
9 sure that happens.

10 Thank you.

11 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

12 We'll move to questions now for our first panel.

13 Representative Hohenstein.

14 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Thank you, Chair.

15 And I want to thank all of the presenters,
16 testifiers, today.

17 And, Mr. McDevitt, I want to ask you to go a
18 little further with one of the things that you said about
19 the things that we do with and for our different disabled
20 communities and students not being acts of charity but
21 rather recognizing those as civil rights.

22 What's the difference between something that we
23 do because we feel like it's a nice thing to do for somebody
24 versus what you were implying, which is at its most basic a
25 human right?

1 (Sign language communication)

2 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: Really we have to
3 look at -- there are two different perspectives.

4 (Sign language communication)

5 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: A person who
6 recognizes that a disabled person has a civil right --

7 (Sign language communication)

8 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- will always look
9 at the action --

10 (Sign language communication)

11 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- and the work that
12 person does --

13 (Sign language communication)

14 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- on their own
15 merits.

16 (Sign language communication)

17 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: So for example, I
18 recently, for Montgomery County, was recently elected as the
19 Mayor of my town in Montgomery County.

20 (Sign language communication)

21 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: And the challenge is
22 --

23 (Sign language communication)

24 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- sometimes I feel I
25 have to put aside my deafness --

1 (Sign language communication)

2 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- so people can pay
3 attention to what I'm actually doing for the community.

4 (Sign language communication)

5 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: Whereas if people
6 view me as an act of charity --

7 (Sign language communication)

8 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- they are only ever
9 going to look at it as --

10 (Sign language communication)

11 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- oh, look at that
12 poor person doing this thing, which is in itself not
13 special.

14 (Sign language communication)

15 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: Thank you.

16 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: I don't have any
17 further questions of the panel.

18 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

19 I have a few questions.

20 Dr. Badger, I will start with you. Can you talk
21 about some of the legislation that you reference in your
22 testimony? I see you specifically referenced West Virginia.
23 Is there any other similar legislation that you can touch
24 upon?

25 DR. JOSIE BADGER: Absolutely.

1 So, yes, about 20 years ago, I was involved in
2 the development of similar legislation in West Virginia.
3 And it's been scattered throughout the entire country, North
4 Carolina being one of them. There's something similar in
5 New York, Colorado.

6 These have been integrated thoroughly throughout
7 the state for obviously a couple decades. So this has
8 really embedded in the states a natural sense of inclusion
9 that's not disability awareness month but it's a part of our
10 student body and our basic population. And so it has
11 greatly improved the understanding of disability in those
12 states.

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you for that.

14 If you do have easy access to one of those pieces
15 of legislation, by all means, please send that over to us.
16 It makes life a little easier.

17 DR. JOSIE BADGER: Absolutely.

18 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

19 And, Ms. Logan, I have a question for you.

20 MS. AMBER LOGAN: Okay.

21 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: You had mentioned
22 that you serve on your County Commissioners Diverse Ability
23 Board. Can you talk about some of the issues that you work
24 on as part of that board?

25 (Sign language communication - no audio.)

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MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Do you work specifically with the schools in your area?

(Sign language communication - no audio.)

MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: But mainly with the businesses?

(Sign language communication - no audio.)

MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: It's okay. I've been doing this for a while and I still get the same way. It's very different when there's cameras and microphones in front of you.

(Sign language communication - no audio.)

MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: No. But when you're working with the businesses, you're working to educate them on some of the issues that you deal with and other people deal with as well; is that right?

(Sign language communication - no audio.)

MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: And you enjoy doing that?

(Sign language communication - no audio.)

MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Well, I think you do a great job. I think that you serve as a really good role model, not only for your own area but for the rest of the state and country as well. So please keep doing what you're doing. It's really appreciated in the community.

(Sign language communication - no audio.)

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MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Representative Longietti.

REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: Thank you.

I wanted to ask a couple questions, Ms. Logan, as well really just for me to gain some insight.

So I'm interested to hear, No. 1, what did it -- what does it feel like to have created a significant program like Superstars in your community that, you know, impacts people? And then also, what do you see when you look out on the faces of other members of the disability community?

(Sign language communication - no audio.)

REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: Thank you for sharing that. I think each of us up here appreciates how difficult it can be to start a program. And to sustain it and grow it for 11 years, that's impressive. You know, there's a lot of programs that start that don't really take off and grow.

I can see your dedication and your effort. Thank you for doing that.

MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Chairman Sonney.

REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I'd just like to thank all three testifiers. I think that, you know, all three of you are shining examples of individuals that do not dwell on your limitations but instead, you know, move forward with what you could do. So you didn't dwell on what you can't do. You know, you moved

1 ahead of what you were able to do. And, you know, those are
2 the absolute experiences that need to be shared.

3 I thank all of you for sharing those experiences.

4 Thank you.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

6 Representative Gillen.

7 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: This is sort of
8 open-ended. You've inspired me this morning hearing your
9 testimony, so thank you so much.

10 Who inspired you on the highway of life, maybe at
11 a very critical juncture where you needed encouragement or
12 in a macro sense? I look at one of our presidents, Franklin
13 Delano Roosevelt. Who inspired you? It can be a historical
14 figure. It could be somebody contemporary.

15 MS. AMBER LOGAN: Mostly my family because they
16 have always stuck by my side and they always believed in me.
17 And I had friends out there that always believed in me. And
18 there's one person that was very special to me but he now
19 passed away. He always believed in me and always believed
20 that I could persevere. He was a really great guy.

21 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Good.

22 Others?

23 DR. JOSIE BADGER: Hi. This is Josie.

24 So I think this comes back, you know, closely to
25 the bill because if I told you that my role model was Ed

1 Roberts, would you necessarily know who that was? Maybe
2 not. And yet he is a founding father of the Civil Rights
3 Movement of our independent living movement.

4 So, of course, I could say my parents. They are
5 obviously people. But when I come back to look at who can I
6 look up to and model my behavior as a disabled person, I
7 need to look at people who I understand where they were.
8 And that's where this bill comes into play, is making sure
9 that we are highlighting the amazing work that has been done
10 by people with disabilities.

11 And so, you know, yes, we can look at FDR, but
12 many people don't even know that he had a disability. And
13 that's why this legislation is so vital.

14 (Sign language communication)

15 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: And this is Neil
16 here. One thing that I wanted to impress is that we have so
17 many good, strong role models from our communities in the
18 past.

19 (Sign language communication)

20 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: Like, for example,
21 I. King Jordan --

22 (Sign language communication)

23 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- who led the deaf
24 president now --

25 (Sign language communication)

1 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: -- at Gallaudet
2 University who became the first deaf president of the
3 university there.

4 (Sign language communication)

5 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: And there are so many
6 advocates today, like Dr. Badger and Amber Logan, who are
7 continuously moving the needle.

8 (Sign language communication)

9 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: And really I think
10 the role model of the day are people the students had just
11 mentioned.

12 (Sign language communication)

13 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: They take all of
14 their current experiences and use them as a point of
15 advocacy in the future.

16 (Sign language communication)

17 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: And I think people
18 who speak today are an interesting group.

19 (Sign language communication)

20 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: And we receive our
21 civil rights in our lifetime.

22 (Sign language communication)

23 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: In other words, we
24 were born and we didn't have equal rights.

25 (Sign language communication)

1 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: Though people before
2 me had to lead that advocacy.

3 (Sign language communication)

4 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: And then for people
5 in the future to be able to continue with that.

6 (Sign language communication)

7 SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER: So this kind of bill
8 is really important because it recognizes not only where we
9 are coming from, but also where we are going.

10 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Thank you.

11 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

13 I don't see any other questions. I want to thank
14 our three panelists -- or three people on the first panel.
15 Thank you. You are welcome to stay for the rest of the
16 hearing. We have two more panels.

17 I want to recognize that Representative Mercuri
18 has joined us as well.

19 I would also be remiss if I didn't recognize
20 Brian, who is our ASL interpreter. I want to thank him for
21 being here as well. He's doing a great job.

22 We're going to take a brief five-minute recess
23 between panels and then we'll start back up around 10:45.

24 Thank you.

25 (Recess)

1 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: All right. All
2 right, everybody. We'll get started here.

3 We'll move to our second panel. We have Sherri
4 Smith, who is the Deputy Secretary of Elementary and
5 Secondary Education in the Pennsylvania Department of
6 Education. We also have Carole Clancy, who is the Director
7 of Special Education with PDE as well.

8 Thank you, both, for being here.

9 Would you please raise your right hand to be
10 sworn in?

11 (Witnesses sworn en masse.)

12 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: All right. Thank
13 you.

14 Sherri, may begin when you're ready.

15 MS. SHERRI SMITH: Awesome. Thank you very much.

16 Good morning, distinguished members of the House
17 Special Education Subcommittee.

18 My name is Dr. Sherri Smith. I am currently
19 serving as the Deputy Secretary of the Office of Elementary
20 and Secondary Education at the Pennsylvania Department of
21 Education. And with me today is Carole Clancy, who is the
22 Director of our Bureau of Special Education. We appreciate
23 you including us in this conversation today regarding House
24 Bill 726 and the importance of disability inclusiveness.

25 If I may, I would also like to express my

1 personal appreciation for the impactful testimony of the
2 first panel of presenters today.

3 There were 307,594 students eligible for special
4 education in Pennsylvania during the 2020-'21 school year,
5 representing 18.1 percent of the total public school
6 population. In Pennsylvania, 62 percent of students
7 eligible under the Federal Individuals with Disabilities
8 Education Act, as we commonly call it, IDEA, are educated in
9 general education at least 80 percent of the day; 9.8
10 percent of eligible students are in general education
11 settings less than 40 percent of the day; and 4.7 percent of
12 eligible students are educated in other school settings.

13 The majority of Pennsylvania students eligible
14 under IDEA are enrolled in public schools and are educated
15 in the general education classroom for at least part of each
16 school day. Less than 5 percent of eligible students in
17 other school settings attend a variety of private
18 institutions, including approved private schools and private
19 residential rehabilitative institutions.

20 The Department believes every learner should have
21 the opportunity to reach their fullest potential and that
22 diverse talents and skills bring value to our educational
23 system as well as our society. Everyone benefits when
24 individuals with disabilities are recognized for their
25 resiliency, acceptance, and exceptionality, which we believe

1 is the intent of House Bill 726.

2 That being said, there are a few key points we
3 would like to share on how to accomplish the goals set forth
4 in House Bill 726. We will begin with some of our concerns
5 and then offer recommendations for a path forward.

6 First and foremost, it is important to recognize
7 that in Pennsylvania decisions regarding curriculum provided
8 to students is made by local school boards. The
9 Pennsylvania State Board of Education has statutory
10 authority to develop the state academic standards for the
11 K-12 public education system.

12 Boards of local education agencies then develop
13 and adopt curricula that teach those state academic
14 standards to students. The Department supports schools with
15 curriculum development and implementation through the PDE
16 Standards Alignment System portal, professional development,
17 and other resources. However, the Department is not
18 responsible for developing curricula for schools, and there
19 is no statewide curriculum that schools must use.

20 Any curriculum developed by the Department would
21 still need to be approved by a school entity's governing
22 board before it could be used by their schools.

23 House Bill 726 provides the Department with three
24 months to convene an advisory council, develop guidelines,
25 determine a suggested curriculum, select participating

1 school entities, and begin administering the proposed
2 Disability Inclusive Curriculum Pilot Program.

3 Participating schools then would have only three additional
4 months to develop a curriculum aligned to the Department's
5 guidance. Carrying out these provisions requires more time,
6 especially if stakeholder input is to be considered as part
7 of the process.

8 Additionally, there is no financial support to
9 the Department or participating schools. It is difficult to
10 imagine any school being opposed to teaching all students
11 about the value and contribution of individuals with
12 disabilities. However, due to the pandemic, public and
13 non-public schools continue to be overwhelmed and
14 realistically may not have the time, resources, or
15 willingness to embark on a new three-year initiative
16 beginning in the 2022-2023 school year.

17 Finally, the lack of immediate and sustainable
18 funding will impact the Department's ability to administer
19 and schools' ability to participate in a pilot program like
20 that proposed in House Bill 726. The Department will need
21 to create a position within the Office of Elementary and
22 Secondary Education to manage the program, and this will not
23 be possible without a dedicated funding source at the time
24 of enactment.

25 To address these concerns and broaden the scope

1 to include more than six schools, the Department offers the
2 following recommendations for your consideration:

3 First, embed the intent in PDE's already existing
4 Universal Design for Learning, UDL, Classroom Resources
5 Grant Inclusionary Program. Overseen by the Bureau of
6 Special Education, this yearly grant program equips
7 educators with resources to reduce inherent barriers to
8 learning so that all students may reach their full learning
9 potential independent of how instruction is delivered during
10 the school year. Fifteen school districts and charter
11 schools received grants for the '21-'22 school year.

12 Our second recommendation is to use the existing
13 Pennsylvania Special Education Advisory Panel's, known as
14 SEAP -- I know we have a lot of acronyms. Sorry, folks ---
15 Least Restrictive Environment, LRE, Committee to develop the
16 guidelines for schools to develop their lessons and/or
17 instruction on this topic.

18 IDEA requires states establish and maintain an
19 advisory panel to advise state special education staff
20 regarding the education of eligible students with
21 disabilities. That includes advising PDE on the education
22 of students with disabilities educated through the use of
23 public funds, including, but not limited to, children served
24 in public schools, private schools, hospitals, prisons, and
25 in the home. SEAP and the LRE Committee are comprised of

1 individuals with disabilities, their family members,
2 advocates, and special education professionals, and is
3 similar to the advisory council described in House Bill 726.

4 Finally, embed disability inclusiveness and
5 instruction on the political, economic, and social
6 contributions of individuals with disabilities into the
7 existing PDE equity roadmap to encourage all schools to
8 design and provide the opportunities of all students with
9 disabilities to be included in this conversation.

10 The Department developed the equity roadmap in
11 2021 to assist school leaders and educators to learn how to
12 make instruction more engaging and effective for all
13 students. The equity roadmap identifies six key processes
14 essential to ensuring systems and policies are flexible and
15 responsive to the needs of all students and school
16 communities.

17 We welcome the opportunity to work with lawmakers
18 to increase awareness of individuals with disabilities
19 statewide or, as stated by Amber earlier, students with
20 diverse abilities statewide and would be happy to answer any
21 questions.

22 Thank you.

23 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you, Dr. Smith.

24 We'll move on to Carole Clancy.

25 You may begin when you are ready.

1 MS. CAROLE CLANCY: So my testimony is included
2 in Dr. Smith's testimony. So I will turn over my remaining
3 time for questions.

4 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Representative
5 Hohenstein.

6 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Thank you, Chairman.

7 I very, very much appreciate both of you coming
8 today and letting us know how seriously you are taking these
9 issues of all of our kids and not just the focus on special
10 education. And that's one of the things that we have in the
11 bill that I would like to ask you about in the sense that
12 you're saying we can push some of these things into the SEAP
13 or potentially be able to utilize some of the funding
14 sources. And I agree with you. I think we probably do need
15 to provide some additional funding.

16 But I would like to ask, what is -- what is the
17 difference between what we proposed as an advisory council
18 and SEAP and is there a way for us to confirm the PDE's
19 dedication to the idea that all of our students ought to be
20 educated together in some way, shape, or form?

21 And I recognize that disabilities do mean that we
22 have to have kids in segmented and segregated bases in
23 certain places. But one of the aims of this legislation is
24 to find ways to break down those barriers of segregation and
25 be able to have all of our students recognize themselves and

1 their peers in ways that are more fully human.

2 So I'm a little concerned that some of the
3 proposals you have here, could it maintain that silo aspect?
4 And I'd like to have you speak to how you would help us to
5 make sure that that doesn't continue to be perpetuated.

6 And then the last piece of the question is, if
7 there is a funding need, is there an estimate as to how much
8 might need to be specifically set aside?

9 MS. SHERRI SMITH: So how about if I start,
10 Carole. And then we'll certainly turn it to her.

11 So, yes, the equity roadmap in the work that
12 we're doing there talks about students and all student
13 groups for inclusiveness in our schools. And certainly, you
14 know, our students with disabilities are an important group
15 for us to ensure that.

16 I think this legislation, what your idea is, is
17 really impactful and it's changing mindsets about how our
18 students with disabilities can be an important part of our
19 culture and leaders in our communities and such and not just
20 be empathetic, but really learning how to integrate them
21 into all that we do in opening opportunities for them so
22 they're not looking at themselves through their disabilities
23 but they're looking through themselves about how they can
24 contribute to our community. We get that. And I think all
25 of us would wholeheartedly agree with that.

1 So, yes, the equity roadmap would allow all
2 groups to include that. But I think what targets it, and
3 that's why we have Ms. Clancy with us today, is because we
4 do need, I think, to also look at it through the lens with
5 our students with disabilities. And that's what SEAP
6 concentrates on. It's on our students with disabilities and
7 how we're effectuating that.

8 So Carole can talk about who is on that committee
9 and including that.

10 Also, looking at one of the things that we're
11 really trying to do is as we're working with our schools, we
12 don't want them to look through their work through silos.
13 And we want them to look through their work as inclusive in
14 its own regard. So if we have an existing grant system that
15 the Bureau of Special Education has on inclusionary
16 practices, we could embed some of what you want here into
17 that as an expectation of those schools and effectuating 10
18 to 15 of our schools a year.

19 Additionally, putting it on the equity roadmap,
20 to me, to be honest with you, when I looked at six schools
21 being impacted in this for three years, that's not good
22 enough. I think we need to empower this conversation across
23 all of our schools. You know, three years is too much time
24 to wait to really bring that message forward. We have the
25 SASS Portal. We can put up lesson plans there. We can

1 build things out and folks can -- and then we can do
2 professional development across the Commonwealth to make
3 that happen.

4 So, Carole, I'm going to turn it over to you to
5 add to that.

6 MS. CAROLE CLANCY: Super.

7 Thank you so much once again. This is the second
8 time I've testified within a year to this Committee. And it
9 really just speaks volumes of how much you support students
10 with disabilities across the Commonwealth. And I can't tell
11 you how much we really appreciate your dedication to the
12 students that we share.

13 The first thing I wanted to talk about is the
14 concept of, how can we ensure that it's happening? And how
15 can we ensure that we're removing some of the barriers? And
16 I want to speak a little bit more specifically about some of
17 the initiatives that are occurring across the Commonwealth
18 with a very intentional focus.

19 So we intentionally shifted our Inclusive
20 Practices Grants to be universal design. And the reason we
21 did that is because the majority of our students are
22 educated in general education classrooms. And we want to
23 avoid those very terrible stories that were shared in the
24 prior testimony. We need to do a more adequate job of
25 preparing our regular education teachers to service all

1 students and through the grant of universal design, we are
2 able to do that. We are able to target at the classroom
3 level or the systemic at the district level.

4 And the intent is to create an environment in the
5 classroom that is designed to instruct all students and
6 ensure that all students are accepted and assumed to be
7 there from the get-go. So that was an intentional effort
8 from the Bureau and from PDE.

9 There are other intentional efforts across the
10 Commonwealth. There is Makayla's Voice. Makayla's Voice is
11 an entity that started many, many years ago but goes into
12 elementary schools and provides awareness and inclusive
13 assemblies about students with disabilities. And the
14 students with disabilities are the presenters. So it
15 provides an opportunity for them to be the lead and to
16 represent differences and similarities in how we all -- and
17 all the students at a very young age and the school together
18 to build that community.

19 Another event happening that creates this
20 authentic experience is the Unified Sports Program, which is
21 physically supported by the Bureau and a natural movement
22 out of Special Olympics. And if you ever want to see what
23 this bill is trying to create, you need to attend a Unified
24 Sports Banner Assembly. It was the first time I walked in
25 and I said, this is what we've been trying to do for so many

1 years. Those assemblies are built with every student in the
2 building. And they are cheering for their sports team,
3 which is made up of students with and without disabilities.
4 And they authentically participate in these activities
5 together.

6 And I mentioned these three things to assure you
7 that we are moving in this direction. And we share your
8 vision and we want to make it happen. And we have some of
9 these things happening.

10 So Dr. Smith's testimony is to say that, yes, we
11 are moving in this direction. We want to make it happen.
12 And here is how we think it can embed in the work that's
13 already done. So the reason she mentioned SEAP is because
14 the Special Education Advisory Panel is made up of over 30
15 people across the Commonwealth with and without
16 disabilities, advocates, agencies supporting, and
17 professions.

18 And they're broken up into different committees
19 of priority areas to focus on improving the education of
20 people with disabilities. And a least restrictive
21 environment is one of the committees. So embedding their
22 lens, that level of expertise on this work would just be a
23 natural way to ensure that it happens.

24 So they certainly could advise this initiative.
25 We could embed the intent into many of our grants that if a

1 school district receives the Universal Design Grant or
2 receives a Competitive Integrated Employment Grant or
3 receives a Transition Discovery Grant that part of receiving
4 that grant includes creating a mission within that school
5 district to educate the students about the Civil Rights
6 Movement of people with disabilities in a very natural and
7 authentic manner.

8 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Thank you.

9 Any estimate on if there's an additional
10 appropriation that might be needed on this? because you did
11 mention that.

12 MS. SHERRI SMITH: I don't want to misspeak on
13 that, so if I may get back to you on that, I appreciate
14 that. Let us talk about that and we can come back to you
15 with that number in the next day.

16 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Sure. Thank you.

17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

19 We'll go to Chairman Sonney.

20 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 Dr. Smith, good to see you.

22 MS. SHERRI SMITH: Good to see you.

23 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: As you know, I have been
24 an advocate for digital content and the belief that the
25 Department can do much more in that area to be able to

1 supply information to all of our schools. You know, the
2 grant programs are terrific. But a grant program to an
3 individual school only makes a change in that school, not in
4 all of them. You know, we want to see change in all of
5 them.

6 And I think the Department has to play a much
7 larger role in this. And I want to say on the record that I
8 look forward to having talks about the money in
9 Appropriations so that we can work together to try and
10 advance issues that can affect all of our schools and not
11 just individual ones through grants. And I'm going to
12 continue on that path as long as I'm still here.

13 So I'm very much looking forward to having those
14 discussions with you.

15 MS. SHERRI SMITH: Back at you, Chairman.

16 I really appreciate that. And I can't agree
17 more. We want to affect all of our schools and all of our
18 children across the Commonwealth. So I appreciate your
19 perspective and your passion.

20 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

21 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

22 Representative Longietti.

23 REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: Thank you very much.

24 Maybe just to continue a little down that path
25 because I know your initial testimony talked about the

1 desire to get it out to all schools through different
2 processes.

3 But the legislation that we have in front of us
4 would be a pilot program for three years, as I understand
5 it. You referenced embedding it into another grant program,
6 UDL, which sounds like, I'm not sure, but it sounds like
7 it's an annual grant program, more school districts involved
8 in the legislation.

9 MS. SHERRI SMITH: That's correct.

10 REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: If we're going to
11 embed it, does that mean that we should make it a multi-year
12 grant program or should we not even be going down this path
13 and finding other ways to get it out to all schools? What
14 is your insight on that?

15 MS. SHERRI SMITH: My perspective would be that
16 we would look at it on dual levels to add it into the grants
17 so that people are being mindful of it and cull it out more.
18 You know, as a past superintendent, my students with
19 disabilities were among my favorites and they knew that.
20 So, you know, it's multiple levels, sir. It's looking at
21 professional development for our staff so they understand
22 some of the statements and things that they say in the
23 classroom and the impacts it has on our students. So that's
24 the professional development piece of it for all schools and
25 all educators.

1 It's part of building it into the grant so that
2 we're being very purposeful for those 10 to 15 schools every
3 year, and, you know, we always collect data and information
4 at the end of that. So we could be much more intentional
5 with those 10 to 15 schools as well as then developing the
6 resources and the materials on the SASS Portal. And then
7 through that professional development providing that to all
8 schools along the way.

9 So I see it as a multi-faceted way that we can
10 approach this. I think, you know, in three years -- I'm the
11 consummate optimist here -- that we can have all of our
12 schools addressing this with their staff and with the way
13 that we include our students of all types across the
14 Commonwealth. And that's really the intentionality of the
15 educational -- the equity roadmap is making sure all
16 students feel that they belong and have equal opportunities
17 and access as all students.

18 REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: Just to go down the
19 road a little bit more, it makes sense what you're saying.
20 Pilot programs, in my mind, are designed to give entities
21 enough time to make adjustments to see where things need to
22 be changed, to evaluate. So, you know, going back to the
23 UDL Grant, I mean, do you think that there's value in a
24 component of it being a multi-year grant to afford that or
25 do you think that's not wise?

1 MS. SHERRI SMITH: I'm going to defer that to
2 Carole who oversees those grants.

3 MS. CAROLE CLANCY: Yeah. We're already having
4 these conversations with how we want to continue the grants
5 moving forward. Many of our grants start off as a one year
6 and then there is an opportunity for the schools to reapply
7 for an extension time based on what they feel their needs
8 are. And I would imagine we would be doing the same with
9 these UDL Grants moving forward.

10 REPRESENTATIVE LONGIETTI: All right. Thank you
11 very much.

12 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: I just want to make a
14 comment before I go to Representative Gillen.

15 One of the reasons that we put the pilot program
16 in the bill was so that we could do an approved concept over
17 a few years. I think one of the things that I was concerned
18 about before rolling it out statewide was to make sure that
19 we weren't doing any harm to anybody. We wanted to make
20 sure that we put together a program and materials for all
21 the schools that actually worked and we could fine-tune
22 this, as Representative Longietti said, that part of that
23 three-year process is to figure out what works and what
24 doesn't and measure it to make sure that it's effective and
25 something that's useful.

1 I'm certainly not opposed to rolling something
2 like this out to every single school district in the state.
3 I just want to make sure that what we roll out is effective
4 and efficient and doesn't harm anyone.

5 So that's kind of what the intent was behind the
6 pilot program and the three-year process. And I know we're
7 going to have some talks as we move on from this hearing
8 with both of you. I look forward to those conversations and
9 working with both of you and the Department on ironing this
10 stuff out. But I certainly appreciate your suggestions and
11 your recommendations. I just wanted to provide some context
12 into why we did what we did with the bill.

13 With that, I'll move on to Representative Gillen.

14 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Thank you.

15 Thank you, testifiers. Good to see you,
16 Dr. Smith. It's been a little while since we've crossed
17 paths. I appreciate you making the field trip to my office
18 at one point.

19 And thank you, Carole, for your testimony.

20 A bit of a macro question here. For schools it's
21 been a stressful last couple years. How has this COVID
22 affected our training to educators, our efficacy and
23 delivery of service to special education students since the
24 continuity and delivery of services has certainly been
25 disrupted and how does it affect things moving forward?

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MS. SHERRI SMITH: That is a very good question.

And probably I would say the point that our team at the Department talks about daily and how we help to support and guide our schools and our school leaders moving forward. So you are absolutely correct. The last 21 months have been incredibly impactful to our school, to our school leaders, to our educators, to our parents, to our students most especially, and to our communities.

And so we have a lot of work to do to pull together. And that's, I guess, why my statement is about, to be honest with you, one vision focused for belonging and working with all instead of having all these separate things coming at our schools. We need to be very intentional through our accelerated learning roadmap and the equity roadmap, which is included within that, on how we help to guide our schools to look at what our students need moving forward.

Also, I think we have to be very intentional at the Department to educate our school leaders. You know, one of the tremendous impacts on COVID across the last few years is the tremendous turnover that we have had in our educators in the classroom, as well as our school leaders. And we absolutely know that we have an educator workforce shortage as well that we have to manage.

So we're turning our attention to be very

1 intentional and to educating our folks in the field who are
2 new to their positions moving forward so we can get them on
3 their feet as quickly as possible and support them moving
4 forward.

5 Know, though, however, we again will always be
6 optimistic about things. The one thing I think the last few
7 years can do is we can learn lessons from that and we can
8 move forward and be very intentional in how we get better at
9 how we educate our students across the Commonwealth. And
10 this is a part of it, right, taking a look at all the things
11 that we do for all of our different student groups, how we
12 embed them into all of the work that we do in moving forward
13 and improving our processes for everyone.

14 So this is a timely conversation. And it's a
15 perfect time because as we move forward with our plans for
16 our schools and working with our schools, we work with them.
17 It's a collaborative action between us and the Department,
18 our intermediate units, our partners, and certainly all of
19 our schools across the Commonwealth and how we work together
20 to overcome the last few years and get better at what we're
21 doing in education in Pennsylvania.

22 MS. CAROLE CLANCY: Sherri, could I just say one
23 thing on that same common theme? We have also been, on that
24 same thing, very mindful about what we roll out right now
25 because there are some good initiatives that we could roll

1 out right now and that might get lost in implementation
2 because of everything happening with the pandemic and all of
3 the needs that Dr. Smith just referenced on how we are
4 trying to support the school systems.

5 So I'll give you an example with the UDL Grants.
6 We have funded 15 different school districts up to five
7 different teachers. But one of the struggles that we're
8 having is there are teacher resignations. So not all of the
9 teachers that signed up for the grant early on are finishing
10 the program because of the impact of the pandemic. So there
11 is a timing issue of when we're trying to mission and
12 implement something that's going to have an impact on when
13 is the right time to do that. And right now during the
14 pandemic, we have to be very mindful of what and when we are
15 implementing new things.

16 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Thank you.

17 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: All right. Thank
19 you.

20 That concludes our second panel. I thank you
21 both for being here. Thank you for making the time to be at
22 this Subcommittee hearing. I look forward to having you
23 both back again hopefully when we're back in March.

24 MS. SHERRI SMITH: Thank you for the opportunity.

25 We appreciate the opportunity to have the

1 conversation with you.

2 MS. CAROLE CLANCY: Thank you.

3 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Absolutely.

4 You're welcome to join for our last panel.

5 We're going to take a brief five-minute pause.

6 We'll be back here around 11:20 to start with our final
7 panel.

8 Thank you.

9 (Recess)

10 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you, everyone.

11 We're going to move to our third panel. We have
12 Dr. Christa Bialka, who is the Associate Professor of
13 Special Education and Director of Undergraduate Teacher
14 Programs at Villanova University; Tanya Contos, who is the
15 Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator for PA Distance
16 Learning Charter School; Dr. Rachel Andler, who is the
17 Director of Student Support Services at South Fayette
18 Township School District; and we have Kathryn Small, K-12
19 Inclusive Practices Instructional Coach at North Penn School
20 District.

21 Thank you all for being here. If you're able,
22 please raise your right hand to be sworn in.

23 (Witnesses sworn en masse.)

24 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: I'm going to throw a
25 little curve ball. Since Kathryn is here in person, I'm

1 going to let you start.

2 Whenever you're ready, you may begin.

3 MS. KATHRYN SMALL: Thank you.

4 First and foremost, thank you for the opportunity
5 to address the Committee today.

6 My name is Kate Small and I have been in the
7 field of public education for over ten years now. And my
8 role has varied a bit in my time in education. And I'm
9 currently employed as an Instructional coach with the North
10 Penn School District in Lansdale, Pennsylvania.

11 In my work as an instructional coach, my key
12 focus is on supporting inclusive practices in kindergarten
13 through 12th grade classrooms. So one of my main
14 responsibilities in that role is to build capacity amongst
15 general and special education staff to really understand
16 learner variability and to be able to employ instructional
17 strategies that meet the needs of all learners.

18 So when I read about House Bill 726, Disability
19 Inclusive Curriculum, I was compelled to advocate for its
20 passing, as I can absolutely see the parallel between the
21 components of that bill and the work that I do on a daily
22 basis.

23 As all of you know, we are facing a challenging
24 time in education. We are part of a field that is
25 attempting to keep up with the needs and the interests of

1 the world as they are continuing to change and evolve. And
2 as Dr. Smith mentioned, as a result of that, a lot of our
3 local school districts are going through the process of
4 curriculum audits. And that's a typical practice within a
5 school district, a curriculum committee that's comprised of
6 a variety of stakeholders works closely with the school
7 board to review programs that help to meet the needs of our
8 state standards that we are responsible for teaching to
9 students.

10 So as part of that process right now, school
11 districts are really looking to diversify the materials that
12 they have available to students on a daily basis. A lot of
13 times that results in adapting resources or learning
14 experiences that have a greater variety of perspective as it
15 relates to race or religion, cultural identity, age, gender,
16 sexual orientation, etc., but oftentimes disability is left
17 out of that conversation.

18 So this bill really sets an expectation that
19 school districts would be creating learning experiences for
20 students where they are learning about the social, the
21 economic, and the political contributions of people with
22 disabilities.

23 I personally feel that this will help to create
24 learning environments where we are reflective of all the
25 students that we serve. Census data indicates that one in

1 four Americans identifies as having some form of disability.
2 So when we think about that statistically, that's a large
3 percentage of our population. And we haven't always
4 considered them in the conversation when we're looking at
5 the curriculum resources that we are using in our
6 classrooms.

7 So I was happy to be able to share my insight
8 with all of you today. I truly believe that disability is
9 something that should be celebrated and recognized as a
10 natural form of diversity. So I look forward to the passing
11 of this bill and supporting its efforts across the state.

12 Thank you.

13 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you, Ms. Small.

14 Please stick around for the end and we'll do
15 questions at the end of the panel.

16 We'll move on to Dr. Christa Bialka. You may
17 begin when you are ready. I apologize if I butchered your
18 name.

19 DR. CHRISTA BIALKA: No. Spot on.

20 Thank you all for having me here today. As you
21 said, my name is Dr. Christa Bialka. I'm the Associate
22 Professor of Special Education at Villanova University. And
23 I direct our Undergraduate Teacher Education Program. So I
24 have the opportunity to work with teachers, inservice
25 teachers, and pre-service teachers.

1 In addition to that, I was a former high school
2 and middle school educator. I am the parent of a child with
3 a disability and I identify as disabled. So all of that
4 together forms my perspective today.

5 So as Kate mentioned, disability is one of the
6 largest minoritized populations in the United States but it
7 is not discussed in that way. And disabled students, as a
8 result, can be left in the margins.

9 Research shows that not out of any fault but a
10 lot of times kids, especially non-disabled kids, are
11 hesitant to engage with peers with disabilities because they
12 haven't had the opportunity to really talk about it, to
13 think about it. And that can affect not just their peers
14 who are disabled, but can also affect them and their growth
15 and understanding.

16 In addition to that, students with invisible
17 disabilities in the classroom and are part of the classroom
18 can face issues related to legitimacy. So for these
19 reasons, disabilities should be positively represented in
20 the school environment rather than added as a special focus
21 during one or two days of the academic year.

22 So in addition to teaching, one of my hats, I am
23 a researcher. And I have had the opportunity to conduct a
24 pilot study with colleagues at Fairleigh Dickinson. And we
25 sent a survey to folks who identified as disabled just

1 asking them, what was your experience like in school? And
2 out of that -- it was a small sample. But out of that
3 sample, 43 percent of them said they never had the
4 opportunity to talk about disability in their schools.

5 And to clarify kind of that statistic, of the
6 remaining population, only one person said that disability
7 was talked about positively during their elementary
8 schooling. One person said it was talked about positively
9 during their middle school years. And only three people
10 said it was talked about positively when they were in high
11 school. Again, this is a small sample. It's only 50 folks.
12 But I think that it speaks to a lot larger issue about why
13 we need to be having these conversations with kids in
14 schools.

15 And I think the other note that I wanted to add
16 is that the majority of this population graduated within the
17 last ten years. So as one of the participants said,
18 everyone will meet a disabled person in their lives at some
19 point. So it's better to start talking about it and raising
20 awareness about it now.

21 I'm going to end with a personal story that gets
22 to the heart of why this matters. Earlier this month, my
23 11-year-old was waiting for his after school bus and two
24 peers unprompted came up to him and they called him autistic
25 and they called him retarded.

1 So I want to state for the record that there is
2 nothing wrong with being autistic. And there is nothing
3 wrong with having an intellectual disability. What was
4 wrong is that these words were used as negatives and they
5 were used as insults. And my son came home in tears and
6 said, like, why are these kids thinking it's okay to be
7 talking about disability in this way? Because his father
8 and I are both educators, he gets a lot of
9 disability-related conversation at home.

10 So while this hit home for me personally, it's
11 not uncommon to hear children use disability-based language
12 to try to belittle others. Again, there's nothing wrong
13 with being disabled. But if we continue to leave disability
14 out of the picture, we're never going to get to a place
15 where children can ask genuine questions and learn about
16 people who may talk or look or act differently than they do.

17 And it's also been said that you can't be what
18 you can't see. Disabled kids need to be able to see
19 themselves positively represented in the classroom so that
20 they understand that they're capable of great things.

21 Thank you so much.

22 **MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY:** Thank you.

23 Thank you for sharing your story with us.

24 Next we'll move on to Tanya Contos.

25 Tanya, you may begin when you're ready.

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MS. TANYA CONTOS: Good morning.

And thank you to the honorable members of the House Education Subcommittee on Special Education for inviting me to testify before you today and also to the amazing testifiers before me.

My name is Tanya Contos and I am the Curriculum and Instruction Coordinator at the Pennsylvania Distance Learning Charter School, a public cyber charter school. I am a Pennsylvania certified supervisor of curriculum and an experienced teacher.

I do appreciate the opportunity to share my reflections regarding the proposed bill. One point that I want to highlight in my testimony is that curriculum is only as quality as the individuals delivering it. And this involves professional learning.

Josie and many of the other testifiers before talked about these opportunities to possibly examine inclusive practices and also culturally responsive education. There's a lot of definitions about culturally responsive practices. There's also a lot of names for it. But one of my definitions of it is that we maintain an inclusive curriculum that is not only respectful of differences in our learning community and the classroom, but it also highlights the accomplishments of all diverse individuals.

1 And my favorite analogy to explain this practice
2 is providing the window and mirror opportunities for our
3 students. Window opportunities allow students to learn
4 about those who are different than themselves and offers a
5 view into their experience. When you use this practice in
6 the classroom, all students get to experience exposure to
7 diversity, whether it be culture, religion, lifestyle,
8 disability, or skin color.

9 The mirror opportunities allow students to see
10 themselves or a part of themselves in others. This is an
11 empowering experience because students can see a reflection
12 of who they are. These opportunities help build empathy,
13 resilience, and inclusivity for all of our students.

14 As outlined in the memorandum for House Bill 726,
15 the goal of this proposal is for students to feel safe and
16 supported in their learning environment. And this is
17 accomplished organically when these teaching methods are
18 used in the classroom.

19 An additional area that I would like to address
20 is in our current standards. There are currently six
21 standards in the area of the social studies and there are
22 four sets of academic standards, which the biggest of our
23 social studies instruction are approaching 20 years old.

24 Many of these standards list individuals who have
25 disabilities. But the problem is that there is no

1 connection in providing these window mirror opportunities
2 without that culturally responsive teaching and those
3 practices.

4 Various surrounding states have updated their
5 standards in the past two years to encompass a more
6 inquiry-based learning model and culturally responsive
7 practices fit well within those frameworks.

8 I did outline some additional considerations in
9 my written testimony. But I would like to express support
10 on behalf of PA Distance Learning for the Disability
11 Inclusive Curriculum instruction and the goal of this
12 legislation. I would like to highlight that I feel like
13 professional learning on culturally responsive teaching can
14 affect practice and teacher efficacy in instruction for
15 diverse learners.

16 Thank you to the Subcommittee for allowing me to
17 discuss a topic that I'm passionate about. And thank you to
18 Representative Ortitay for sponsoring this legislation. I
19 appreciate the work of our leaders in wanting to create a
20 more inclusive community for our students.

21 Thank you.

22 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you, Tanya.

23 And last, but certainly not least, Dr. Rachel
24 Andler of one of my home school districts in South Fayette.

25 Dr. Andler, you may begin when you're ready.

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DR. RACHEL ANDLER: Thank you.

Thank you for the opportunity. My name is Dr. Rachel Andler. I have been the Director of Student Support Services here at South Fayette for the last two years. Prior to that, I have been a Director of Student Support Services in two other districts. So my work encompasses in this area for the last ten years.

Also, too, it's something I'm very passionate about. One thing I think of when we talk about disability representation, I think of the force now that we've seen. Think about two months ago when we saw that viral picture of the little boy, the little two-year-old boy seeing himself as Antonio from the movie. We saw that went viral. It was with the hashtag representation matters.

And when the mother spoke on Good Morning America about how impactful that representation and the power can be, I think about, now we need to take it a step further and look at disability representation and how important that power can be.

So bringing it into our schools has the ability to change established curriculum and change perceptions based on stereotyping at least previously in the media where, you know, disabilities can be viewed upon as less than. This is a change to normalize the lives of disabled individuals and build a sense of belonging, which is an

1 important factor of students learning success in school.

2 South Fayette Township School District recognizes
3 the importance of this by embedding diversity, equity
4 inclusion, and belonging to everything we do.

5 As Director Clancy mentioned, 66 percent of our
6 students that are identified as special education are in the
7 general education curriculum, 80 percent or more. We have
8 the full belief of inclusion. We have our best programs
9 such as Best Buddies and Shout. These are extracurricular
10 activities, of course, but, you know, we still have work to
11 do.

12 We are very -- I'm very proud that South Fayette
13 believes in inclusion and disability as part of that when we
14 talk about DEIB. But not every district has that ability to
15 do so. So here at South Fayette, we still have a lot of
16 work to do in building our curriculum and integrating it to
17 our day to day so that our students get that piece of that.
18 But as I mentioned to you, the history standards, they are
19 20 years old, so opting in that curriculum would be helpful.

20 Also, too, when you look at bringing that
21 awareness to our students, it sets the tone that we are all
22 equals regardless of who we are when we value and celebrate
23 our differences. The table that we all come to looks a
24 little bit richer. And we are better for that window of
25 opportunity as mentioned.

1 Dr. Smith mentioned previously 18 percent of our
2 students in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania identify with a
3 disability and receive special education services. Almost
4 half of these students are identified with a specific
5 learning disability, disabilities that you wouldn't see
6 unless identified. So we also need to make sure we are
7 celebrating our diverse students for those disabilities that
8 aren't seen with the naked eye.

9 Franklin Delano Roosevelt, we all talk about how
10 wonderful a President he was. And, you know, we always
11 caveat at the end, he was in a wheelchair. He had polio.
12 That oftentimes isn't addressed or isn't, you know, in light
13 of his circumstances or we talk about those things. We talk
14 about how wonderful a President he was. But thinking about
15 the challenges that he overcame, that's an important value
16 that students can then see that as role models. When they
17 see themselves in curriculum, when they see themselves in
18 their teaching materials, they then have a role model to
19 understand that I can. They have their own Me Too Movement
20 of I can.

21 We often talk about, you know, role models for
22 what we aspire to be. And I think back to when Dr. Badger,
23 just two panels ago, talked about what her role model was
24 and not many people know about that.

25 If you think about the government lawyer who was

1 turned away from 39 law firms because of his disability,
2 because he had a polio-related -- it ended up being muscular
3 dystrophy. He founded the Muscular Dystrophy Association.
4 He then took work at the FCC. He was removed from the FCC
5 of his position because of his disability needing a
6 wheelchair. He sued the FCC for discrimination in 1971,
7 which then led to the landmark legislation which took --
8 let's keep in mind from 1971 to 1990 for the Americans with
9 Disability Act, that act is what formulated all of our work
10 today.

11 But many of their students don't know that that's
12 why we do what we do. Our students that are non-disabled or
13 able students, they don't understand that that's why we
14 provide hearing impairment for students. We do the FM
15 systems. Or the need for wheelchair access or why we
16 provide those accommodations.

17 Having that knowledge base then brings in that
18 inclusive ability that fosters that connection for our
19 students that just because I have a disability doesn't mean
20 I am less than. I am equal just like you.

21 And 25 percent of the world population will
22 experience a disability in their lifetime. And you may or
23 may not know that person to have that disability but you
24 need to be respectful and honorable and understand what
25 everyone is experiencing. And providing an opportunity in

1 the curriculum for students gives that opportunity for those
2 learning experiences so that when they go on outside of K-12
3 education, they are then becoming a more tolerant world
4 outside.

5 Thank you for the opportunity.

6 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you. I
7 appreciate you all being here.

8 We'll move on to questions now.

9 Chairman Sonney.

10 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
11 This would be, I guess, mostly for Kathryn Small.
12 Could you just give us an example of some of the
13 successes that you believe that, you know, you have been
14 able to move forward in your position and also some of the
15 challenges?

16 MS. KATHRYN SMALL: So I would absolutely say
17 that one of the successes has been really supporting
18 teachers in understanding how to essentialize a curriculum.
19 So really being able to look at the state standards and then
20 our standards for the PASA eligible students, who are
21 Pennsylvania Alternate System of Assessment, our students
22 with the most significant disabilities and really finding
23 the ways that they can be included in the general education
24 classroom in more meaningful ways.

25 The goal ultimately for them being there is to

1 learn alongside their general education peers. So that work
2 has really increased our abilities to include students more
3 meaningfully in the classroom.

4 I would say one of the challenges is absolutely
5 mindset in terms of believing that students with
6 disabilities have the potential to meet the same
7 expectations that we hold for all students.

8 So seeing is believing. And I have experienced
9 that in my work. And the more that we increase our efforts
10 to include students that have significant disabilities, that
11 have learning disabilities, really any kind of disability,
12 is best for all.

13 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: And again, how long have
14 you been in this position?

15 MS. KATHRYN SMALL: This is my second year in an
16 instructional coaching position. And I have been in public
17 education for over ten years now.

18 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: And how many hearts and
19 minds within our school do you think that you have been
20 successful with so far?

21 MS. KATHRYN SMALL: Well, I would say that I
22 would wish that there was a team here to be able to speak to
23 that. Quite a few. We are a large district outside the
24 suburbs of Philadelphia. And over the past eight years,
25 we've really seen a significant transition in the way that

1 teachers understand disability and the skills that they have
2 to be able to support that in their classroom.

3 REPRESENTATIVE SONNEY: Thank you.

4 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

5 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Representative
6 Hohenstein.

7 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Thank you, Chair.

8 I just want to say thank you to all of you for
9 coming and providing your experiences with how curriculum
10 can be developed. One of the phrases that has been ringing
11 through as we've looked at this legislation is, nothing
12 about us without us. And that speaks to the idea that this
13 bill and curriculum implementation for this community needs
14 to be something that engages and involves the members of the
15 community.

16 And I know previous speakers have presented that
17 idea. And the Department of Education Deputy Secretary and
18 Director were also supportive of that idea. But from that
19 developmental standpoint, from the idea of the quality of
20 the curriculum that you're going to present, why is that
21 concept important?

22 DR. CHRISTA BIAKLA: I'm happy to start.

23 I think that it brings the perspective of someone
24 with lived experience. And I think that that is critical.
25 And I think that because disability is so varied, right, you

1 could have two people with the same disability who have very
2 different experiences. That's why it's really important to
3 include as many perspectives from disabled folks as possible
4 because they are the ones who have had these -- like as Dr.
5 Badger brought up before, like they have had these
6 educational experiences that are worthy of sharing and I
7 think help broaden an understanding, not just about
8 themselves personally, but even things around language and
9 about access and barriers. Because if you are a
10 non-disabled person, you might not consider some barriers
11 that folks with disabilities continuously encounter.

12 So that's why bringing in the voices of disabled
13 folks and forefronting them is something that I think is so
14 important.

15 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Thank you.

16 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

17 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Representative
18 Gillen.

19 REPRESENTATIVE GILLEN: Thank you, testifiers.

20 It's been very illuminating. I'm certainly glad
21 I took the drive to Harrisburg today.

22 How has working with special education needs
23 changed you personally as an individual? And perhaps if you
24 shed some light on that, it could help all of us.

25 MS. TANYA CONTOS: Just speaking of the various

1 examples of particular experiences my students had when I
2 was a teacher and I was just thinking about some literature
3 experiences from some of the students that were identified
4 as special education that text me or even e-mail me about a
5 book or something that we read. And I always think back to
6 those window and mirror opportunities because through
7 literature, they were able to have that connection. So it
8 may have been a character or an approach that we went
9 through maybe in one of the texts that we read.

10 And so I just always think back to I opened that
11 door for that student to be able to see a part of themselves
12 in somebody else. I think it's really about that connection
13 piece.

14 MS. KATHRYN SMALL: I can share, too.

15 Historically, the way that school systems
16 operate, we provide an evaluation to a student when they're
17 experiencing challenges in school. And then there's a
18 prescription, which is typically your special education
19 services that they might be eligible for.

20 And in my experience in working with people with
21 disabilities, I've learned truly that the intention should
22 never be to fix or to remediate the disability but to
23 embrace that and to build upon a child's strengths and to
24 make sure that we're providing them with the best set of
25 strategies and skills to be able to accomplish whatever

1 goals they have set for themselves personally and to be able
2 to navigate the world in a meaningful way.

3 DR. RACHEL ANDLER: I'll echo everyone's
4 responses to that.

5 You know, I've been doing this ten years now in
6 this field. I was a math teacher previously. But I can
7 just think of the different stories of the students that
8 have touched me versus me helping them. When I think I'm
9 advocating for them, but truly their experiences, what they
10 experience in listening to my students and what we have done
11 in the practice, each one of us here today, here in the
12 classrooms, out in the field, are there for the students
13 knowing that what we can do to help and benefit them and
14 focusing again on those strengths so that they can be
15 successful adults in that, you know, the post-K-12
16 environment.

17 We just get them for a moment of time. Then they
18 have their whole lives ahead of them. And so watching what
19 they become, their lives become after us. And when they
20 have called back to us and said, hey, look what I've been
21 doing, it's so great to know that you have been a part, just
22 a snippet of a part of that person's life.

23 REPRESENTATIVE HOHENSTEIN: Thank you.

24 Thank you, Mr. Chairman, unless somebody else
25 wanted to say something.

1 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: All right. Thank
2 you. I just have one final question and then we'll wrap up.

3 I think at the first break myself and Chair
4 Hill-Evans were discussing -- we were talking about
5 teachers. And since we have a group of people who work with
6 teachers and as teachers and train teachers, I thought it
7 relevant to ask those questions.

8 You know, we talk about what we're doing to help
9 students. But what are we doing to help teachers in this
10 space, help to train them, what resources are we giving
11 them, and where are we lacking at these days?

12 Ms. Small, if you want to start. Sorry to put
13 you on the spot.

14 MS. KATHRYN SMALL: No. That's okay. Thank you.

15 And I'm glad to have this platform to be able to
16 advocate for teachers specifically, because I'm sure most of
17 you are aware we absolutely are facing challenges right now.
18 And there's been a steady decline in the number of teachers
19 that are receiving a certification at the state level.

20 And this has been decreasing over the past couple
21 of years. But I think the pandemic has certainly thrown an
22 additional wrench into that. And I would say that we are
23 experiencing a time in education where we are no longer the
24 ones that are responsible for delivering facts, right. Kids
25 have technology at their fingertips. They are able to find

1 the answer to any question that they have within a split
2 second. And we're really working now to facilitate more of
3 those soft skills than ever before so that they can really
4 be successful in a world that we can't even predict what
5 it's going to look like years from now.

6 So I think teachers need to feel support from the
7 administrators, from the state, to be able to facilitate
8 some of these challenging conversations that we need to have
9 with students and these experiences that we need to provide
10 them. And they also need the resources to be able to do
11 that.

12 So what I think is fantastic about this House
13 Bill and specifically the pilot program of it is that I
14 think it would allow some of those pilot schools to scale
15 resources that could be utilized in more school districts
16 across the state so that we have a bank of things to go to
17 to be able to pull from to help facilitate some of these
18 conversations.

19 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

20 Dr. Bialka, I know you are ready to go, so
21 please, if you could.

22 DR. CHRISTA BIALKA: Can you tell I'm excited?
23 Yes. And it's making me think about honestly some of the
24 best conversations that I've had this year with teachers,
25 both teachers who weren't working in schools and teachers

1 who are at the pre-service level have been about how do we
2 have conversations about disability in the classroom?

3 And I don't think that there's any resistance or
4 any hesitation from teachers in terms of their interest and
5 in terms of their willingness. I think it's just a matter
6 of starting these conversations.

7 We had an entire class period where we talked
8 about, okay, so how does disability show up in these
9 different periods in time that you already talk about? And
10 they were surprised. They said, oh, my gosh. I never
11 realized. I'm definitely going to use this now in the
12 future.

13 So, I mean, teaching is the hardest and most
14 wonderful job in the world. Clearly I'm biased. But I
15 think it's entirely possible from a practical standpoint and
16 from my role as a teacher educator. I've been working with
17 other teachers, or teacher educators, across Pennsylvania.
18 We're trying to develop case studies that people can use to
19 have conversations with in-service teachers so that they
20 feel more comfortable.

21 So I think that we're all collectively working
22 together at the higher education level and the in-service
23 level to try and best support teachers because they can do
24 it. It's just a matter of giving them the materials and the
25 information so that they can do it in their classrooms.

1 DR. RACHEL ANDLER: I think for our teachers in
2 talking with them, you know, it is different times. And we
3 say that quite often. Teachers are under an innate amount
4 of stress and trying to find that balance of what is not
5 just one more thing and making sure that that one more thing
6 isn't the straw that does break the camel's back.

7 So here at South Fayette, we have been very
8 mindful and tactful of new programs or new things we are
9 doing to make sure that we are not doing one more thing but
10 also taking away some of those extra things so that they can
11 do at the end of the day what's right for students. At the
12 end of the day, the decision-making that we do day in and
13 day out instructionally in the classroom, in our
14 administrative meetings, has been what's best for students
15 and how do we build from that?

16 And so we look at -- you know, our teachers
17 really embrace our diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging.
18 Dr. Chuck Herring is our Director of Diversity, Equity,
19 Inclusion and is really working with our teachers in
20 building that diversity, equity, and inclusion piece. And
21 then we recently just added the belonging piece of that.

22 And our teachers are here for it, but also, too,
23 they know that time is a commodity that we can never give
24 enough of that to everybody. So if anybody would say what
25 do teachers need, they need time. They need time to be able

1 to take in the information that they're getting, take that
2 and translate that into their practice. Time for the
3 professional learning communities, building with our
4 colleagues, then sharing that information.

5 How do you get time? When you figure that out,
6 let me know. But that is definitely, I think, welcomed,
7 where everybody can find it, the time.

8 MS. TANYA CONTOS: You don't have to be proactive
9 with that time piece. One thing that we did this year is --
10 well, all of our new staff, we kind of take a proactive
11 approach so they do get education and culturally responsive
12 teacher practices in their induction year. And that would
13 be regardless of if they're a Level 1 teacher, a Level 2
14 teacher. Everybody gets it.

15 And then we also have continued professional
16 learning opportunities on Wednesday mornings. We have two
17 groups. One is having those conversations about inclusive
18 practices. And then another group is solely focused on
19 culturally responsive teaching practices. And then sharing
20 that with the rest of us.

21 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Well, thank you all.

22 I just want to say a big thank you to all the
23 panelists, especially our last group. You have been here
24 for the full two hours. I appreciate you. I know you're
25 all very busy during the day. So to take two hours out of

1 your schedule, I certainly appreciate it. And I know every
2 member of this Committee does as well. So thank you all.

3 Next we're going to move to making some closing
4 remarks and then we'll end this hearing.

5 I'll turn it over to Chair Hill-Evans.

6 MINORITY CHAIRWOMAN HILL-EVANS: Thank you.

7 Thank you, Chair. And thank you to you and to
8 Representative Hohenstein for this compelling piece of
9 legislation and to all of the testifiers for coming here
10 today. Just eye-opening, heart-opening, arm-opening. I
11 want to give hugs to everybody, but especially to the
12 teachers.

13 And as Representative Ortitay had mentioned,
14 yesterday we were talking about teachers. I myself had gone
15 through all of the steps to become one and to get an
16 emergency certification to be in the classroom. And I
17 lasted one day. It is so special and so specialized and it
18 really does take special people to be teachers.

19 So to all the teachers, I have 28 buildings and
20 schools in my district. And I try to get into all of them.
21 And I always make the students applaud for teacher s. So
22 all of the teachers today here get an applause because they
23 are so critical.

24 (Applause)

25 MINORITY CHAIRWOMAN HILL-EVANS: I had spoken

1 about possibly adding an amendment or having a separate bill
2 to provide for training for teachers because when you hear
3 the kind of horrible stories about teachers who are unaware
4 or uneducated in dealing with individuals with disabilities,
5 no one should have to go through those kinds of scenarios.
6 And so training for teachers is critically important. I
7 look forward to working with the makers of the bill to add
8 that piece in there.

9 So thank you all for being here.

10 Thank you, Chair.

11 MAJORITY CHAIRMAN ORTITAY: Thank you.

12 And again, I just want to thank the members of
13 this Committee and everyone who testified here today for
14 House Bill 726. I think, you know, one of the reasons why
15 it's important that we have hearings on bills is to flush
16 out the good, the bad, the things that need improvement. We
17 also learn things that we never really thought about, as
18 Chair Hill-Evans has alluded to.

19 I think we've laid out that we've got a lot of
20 work to do on this bill. And I look forward to working with
21 everyone, both in the Department. Everyone who testified
22 here today, I hope that everyone realizes that this is the
23 beginning of the conversation. There's a lot of work to be
24 done amongst the members of the Committee and the Education
25 Committee as a whole.

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But I'd also like to thank Chairman Sonney for giving me the flexibility to have this hearing on this bill with the Subcommittee. It's much appreciated.

But with that said, I thank everyone for their patience and for attending here today, especially on a non-session day. I know how hard it is. A lot of you have long drives home, especially the Chairman.

But with that said, this hearing is adjourned.

(Whereupon, the hearing concluded.)

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I hereby certify that the proceedings and
evidence are contained fully and accurately in the notes
taken by me on the within proceedings and that this is a
correct transcript of the same.

Jean M. Davis
Notary Public