



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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

My name is Dr. Sherri Smith. I am Deputy Secretary of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE), and with me today is Carole Clancy, Director of our Bureau of Special Education. We appreciate you including us in the conversation today regarding House Bill 726 and importance of disability inclusiveness.

There were 307,594 students eligible for special education in Pennsylvania during the 2020-21 school year, representing 18.1 percent of the total public-school population. In Pennsylvania, 62 percent of students eligible under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) are educated in general education at least 80 percent of the day; 9.8 percent of eligible students are in general education settings less than 40 percent of the day; and 4.7 percent of eligible students are educated in other school settings. The majority of Pennsylvania students eligible under IDEA are enrolled in public schools and are educated in the general education classroom for at least part of each school day. Less than 5 percent of eligible students in other school settings attend a variety of private institutions including approved private schools and private residential rehabilitative institutions.

The Department believes every learner should have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential and that diverse talents and skills bring value to our educational system as well as our society. Everyone benefits when individuals with disabilities are recognized for their resiliency, acceptance, and exceptionality – which we believe is the intent of House Bill 726.

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

First and foremost, it is important to recognize that in Pennsylvania decisions regarding curriculum provided to students is made by local school boards. The Pennsylvania State Board of Education has statutory authority to develop the state academic standards for the K-12 public education system. Boards of local education agencies then develop and adopt curricula that teach those state academic standards to students. The Department supports schools with curriculum development and implementation through the PDE Standards Alignment System portal (www.pdesas.org/), professional development, and other resources. However, the Department is not responsible for developing curricula for schools, and there is no statewide curriculum that schools must use. Any curriculum developed by the Department would still need to be approved by an school entity's governing board before it could be used by their schools.

House Bill 726 provides the Department with three months to convene an advisory council, develop guidelines, determine a suggested curriculum, select participating school entities, and begin administering the proposed Disability Inclusive Curriculum Pilot Program. Participating schools then would have only three additional months to develop a curriculum aligned to the Department's guidance. Carrying out these provisions requires more time, especially if stakeholder input is to be considered as part of the process.