



**TESTIMONY OF RUTH GABIG AULD, EdD -
DEPAUL SCHOOL FOR HEARING AND SPEECH
BEFORE THE HOUSE EDUCATION COMMITTEE
ON THE TEACHER SHORTAGE**

March 15th, 2022

Good morning, Chairmen Sonney, Longetti and members of the House Education Committee.

My name is Dr. Ruth Auld, Executive Director at the DePaul School for Hearing and Speech based in Pittsburgh. I greatly appreciate the Committee's interest in trying to better understand the significant teacher shortage that our Commonwealth is facing.

The DePaul School for Hearing and Speech is a member of the Alliance of Approved Private Schools, which consists of 31 Approved Private Schools (APS), reaching all corners of the Commonwealth. Our schools were created by an act of legislation in the early 1960's that formed a distinctive educational partnership among the State, school districts, and families. The APSs are an integral part of the continuum of special education programs and services constituting a free appropriate public education (FAPE) mandated by federal and state law as stated in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (2004). Our schools serve some of the most complex and challenging students in the Commonwealth, including those with severe exceptionalities, social, emotional and behavioral deficits, historic school failure, as well as sensory impairments and physical disabilities. **APS collectively educate over 4,200 special education students between the ages of 3-21 who experience these challenges every day.**

While the teacher shortage across the Commonwealth is drastically impacting the education services provided across the state, I would like to take this opportunity to expand on how this shortage has had a profound impact on the state's special education population and the students I have the privilege to educate on a daily basis. In addition to my role as Executive Director at DePaul School, I have been invited to participate in PDE's Steering Committee addressing the current Teacher Shortage in Pennsylvania over the next five years.

The Approved Private Schools provides an individualized publicly-funded education to Pennsylvania's most severe and complex students, for whom a traditional educational placement is not effective. APS have been facing the same teacher shortage as every school across the state and the nation. During the pandemic, the population of students served through APS has increased, due to the in-person individualized nature of our programs. Act 171A outlines the requirements for APS to ensure high quality services for Pennsylvania's students.

The teachers who work at APSs have very high-level of training specific to the type of school in which they teach. Yet APS salary range is considerably lower than most public schools offer, and the added benefit of PSERS often lure teachers away from the APS system and to the public schools. **The shortage of special education teachers was erupting prior to the pandemic.** In the face of quarantines and in effort to keep classrooms open for students, many school administrators have spent many hours in the



classrooms to step in for absent or open teacher positions, to ensure that student learning continued throughout the school year. We are committed to ensuring that our students' educational needs are being met, and for most students, online learning is simply not effective. Administrators returned to the classrooms to address these shortages and forestall their administrative duties to the weekends, just to ensure that students learning priorities occurred.

The decline in teachers across the nation has been growing over the last decade. The pandemic,-related teaching conditions, low wages, long hours and uncertainty have caused many teachers to decide that this profession is no longer a personal match for them. **Last year, Pennsylvania experienced a 65% decrease in special education teachers in our schools. At DePaul School, we lost 35% of our teaching staff and 50% of our speech therapists in 2020-21.**

The past twenty years have pushed the limits on how public education functions. Technology integration and infrastructure have redesigned the classroom in many ways, even before the pandemic. With changes in the structure of the home, and technological integrated there as well, expectation of the teachers' roles have changed in the classroom. In addition to teachers' efficacy to provide the core content, they are now facing challenges of extending their role to nurture citizenship education into entirely new realms of social and emotional learning, supporting student's mental health, teaching self-management skills and organizational skills, self-awareness and accountability to ensure student success. These "ancillary" skills often come with great cost to the teacher, as the staffing shortages include not only teachers, but teaching assistants, school psychologists and support staff as well. Teachers chose to work at an APS for the promise of making a difference in the lives of individual children. They accept all of the challenges that come with that hope.

We are so grateful for the support of Pennsylvania's legislators, through the increases to the Special Education line item over the past few years and the added revenue from the American Rescue Plan have had a significant impact on what APS are able to do. We value the manner in which legislators recognize the important role that public education plays in cultivating civic responsibilities in the upcoming generations. Today, the teacher's role is facing a challenge. **Pennsylvania has long been considered a state in which we were "exporting" outstanding teachers because the preparation they received in Pennsylvania's universities has been held to an extremely high standard.** Given the recent trend toward falling population in Pennsylvania, coupled with the reduction in enrollment in teacher preparation programs, we need to take actions to retain our high-quality teacher in the schools in Pennsylvania. This is particularly relevant because the low-enrollment in teacher preparation programs has resulted in universities' closure of many education programs.

In partnership with the Bureau of Special Education, members of APS are participating in a Steering Committee to study and discuss solutions to the teacher shortage in Pennsylvania. This Steering Committee is proactively pursuing many pathways to resolve the teacher shortage, offering incentives, encouraging a "grow-your-own" alternate pathway, seeking diversity initiatives, cultivating interest in teaching as a career pathway beginning with high school students. **The Attract, Prepare, Retain (A-P-R) Steering Committee has set up a repository for ideas and solutions to serve as an incubator of**



ideas. Loan forgiveness opportunities to assist young teachers in their pursuit of this career path to be able to afford to stay in the field. Collaborations between K-12 schools and institutions of higher education can forge new pathways for teacher certification. Perhaps the biggest challenge faced by all teachers in the majority of schools is the salary gap between teachers' salaries and other industries. Education is a not-for-profit endeavor, but the impact of publicly funded education effects the entire Commonwealth. Employers are seeking well-educated employees who can use critical thinking skills and demonstrate accountability. These are standardized skills which every student learns as part of their core education. This is the gritty work of teachers. If we want to stop the population-reduction in Pennsylvania, we need to continue to invest in Pennsylvania's by supporting our publicly funded schools. This work begins with attracting our best and brightest teachers, preparing them for the important work they do and retaining them with a livable wage. We are grateful for the work that you have been doing to support Pennsylvania's education systems.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony. I would be happy to provide additional information or address any questions regarding my testimony. I am also happy to host all or some of you on our campus.

Writing on behalf of my APS colleagues around the state, we are grateful for your support and look forward to sharing our stories with you.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ruth Gabig Auld EdD".

Ruth Gabig Auld, EdD
DePaul School for Hearing and Speech
6202 Alder Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15206

