



1007 Mumma Road
Suite 100
Lemoyne, Pennsylvania 17043
(717) 234-2621
www.thearcpa.org

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The Arc of Pennsylvania is affiliated with The Arc of the United States and 33 local chapters of The Arc across PA.

RE: Comments for Hearing on COVID-19 Impact on Pennsylvania Schools

The Arc of Pennsylvania

Senate Education and Health & Human Services Committee

March 3, 2021

The Arc of Pennsylvania submits the following comments regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Pennsylvania schools and our concerns for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD).

The Arc of Pennsylvania, which is a member of The Arc US, is the state's leading advocacy organization promoting the human rights of Individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disability (I/DD). For the past 70 years, The Arc of Pennsylvania, our local chapters, and 8,000+ members, have worked to ensure that children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities receive the support and services they need, are included in their community, and have control over their own lives.

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent move to online instruction in March of 2020 saw a massive shift in our education system. While all students saw massive change. Students receiving special education services are experiencing major disruption in their learning. Many students find online learning difficult and related services such as therapies and individualized instruction nonexistent. Students with medical complexities, behavioral and mental health concerns, and students with significant impact of disability, are faced with the difficult decision to return to school for in-person learning, when available, and if all their services will be available, as well as safety concerns.

In order for schools and school districts to ensure that students with I/DD receive the fullest educational supports and services possible, The Arc of Pennsylvania makes the following recommendations:

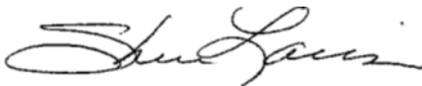
- 1. Allow students with disabilities who are aging out of educational supports and services in June 2021, to access an additional year of school.** The final years of school are integral for accessing and utilizing transitional services into adulthood. These transition supports enable students with disabilities the opportunity to gain independence through the learning of everyday tasks and access to skills and connections for community integrated employment. Throughout COVID-19, transition services have been nearly non-existent for these students due to social distancing restrictions and lack of staff. There are approximately 1,600 students with disabilities in Pennsylvania who are aging out of services at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. By allowing these students to access an additional year if they wish, their transition to adulthood and independence will be strengthened and more likely to result in employment and less dependence on social service programs.
- 2. Ensure that students with disabilities continue to receive instruction with their non-disabled classmates.** The opportunity for students with disabilities to access inclusive education is imperative for their future. Studies have shown that students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers both benefit when classrooms are inclusive and not needlessly segregated. While families recognize that schools must take every precaution necessary to



ensure the health and safety of all students, health and safety precautions should not restrict students with disabilities from interacting with non-disabled students or receiving an inclusive education. Even remote learning offers opportunities for students to participate in small groups with their school age peers and social gatherings that are managed remotely.

3. **Support students with disabilities with in-person supports and services where able.** The educational supports and services students with disabilities receive in school support their ability to gain independence, live in the community, and access integrated employment; however, most of these supports do not transition well into remote learning/online platforms. We understand that school districts are working to ensure the health and safety of all students when deciding whether to remain fully virtual, in a hybrid system, or fully in-person. These decisions must account for the direct impact to students with disabilities and work to provide a free and appropriate public education for students with I/DD.
4. **End the digital divide and address broadband connectivity inconsistencies across the State.** The shift to virtual learnings through online platforms has become the norm since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; however, many students, parents, families, and educators face issues accessing reliable internet or broadband. This is especially problematic for students with disabilities as many of their supports and services have shifted from in-person to online formats. If a student cannot access reliable broadband their ability to access a free and public education is diminished. By increasing accessibility and broadband connectivity across the state, we can ensure students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are able to receive the essential supports and services to transition them into adulthood and independence.
5. **Support Governor Wolf's proposal to increase Special Education funding by \$200 million.** Governor Wolf's budget proposal for a \$200 million investment into Special Education is essential to support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities receive the essential supports and services. When the State passed the interim budget in June 2020, special education received flat-funding for the full year; however, many students with disabilities continue to face educational regression and loss of supports and services due to COVID-19. An increase in funding for Special Education will not only alleviate rising costs but provide better inclusive outcomes for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
6. **Address concerns on rising levels of truancy.** Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, rising levels of truancy were occurring; however, the pandemic has exacerbated the issue with more students using virtual learning and online platforms and the breakdown of communication between schools and families. School districts have continued to move forward with truancy enforcement across the state, but many parents have indicated they are not being notified of any truancy issue with their child until a case worker comes to their home. Many of these truancy cases arise from issues with connectivity, the online platform, and students not logging into their classes correctly. Rather than moving into a punitive action, schools should increase communication and support for families and students to address attendance.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the impact of COVID-19 on schools and students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



Sherri Landis
Executive Director
The Arc of Pennsylvania