

Education Committee Hearing

April 23, 2021

10:00 am

Necessary Education Reforms for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

Written Comments Presented by Heidi Ondek, Ed.D.

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My sincere appreciation to the Senate Education Committee, Committee Chair, Senator Scott Martin, and Committee Member Senator Lindsey Williams for the invitation to present testimony regarding necessary education reforms. I am honored to do so on behalf of all our Commonwealth's school children, including those I serve directly as superintendent and executive director at the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children.

The COVID-19 Pandemic has brought to light many new needs in our schools, while reinforcing other long-standing needs, all of which present opportunities for reform that could significantly improve K-12 education for all our Commonwealth's school children.

The following are in my opinion the most pressing educational needs, all of which require reform and/or additional resources to enact.

1. Expanded Mental Health Services for Students and Staff

Superintendents have identified the provision of mental health services for students, their parents/caregivers, and school staff as the highest priority and greatest challenge throughout the past year. A long-standing need, exacerbated by COVID-19, schools need resources to provide for these most basic human needs.

2. Continued Flexibility and Expansion of Educational Options/Choices for Students and their Families/Smart Uses of Technology

Despite the many shortcomings we have realized, many students have benefited from the flexibility of remote or hybrid models of learning. Such models should be further explored and developed as cost effective and oftentimes superior options for learning. Student choice empowers learners to better prepare for lifelong learning, and life in general. Technology resources, including access, devices, and training/professional development for educators, parents, and care-givers are still lacking in some school communities, requiring additional resources.

3. One Additional Year of Education Provided for Students with IEP's

Students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP's) have in many cases been at a greater disadvantage in remote models of education. Related services such as physical and occupational therapies, for instance, are difficult if not impossible to deliver virtually. Offering an additional full year of specially designed instruction for students with IEP's compensates every child fairly for the free and appropriate public education many lost over the past year. Furthermore, doing so proactively may reduce the volume of compensatory education claims that may otherwise be brought forth to individual school districts at an even greater cost to tax payers than the provision of an additional year of education.

4. Further Explore and Incentivize Innovative, Research Based Practices in Compliance with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Pursue alternative, differentiated, equity-based approaches to Pennsylvania's Systems of Standardized Testing and funding thereof.

Advance equity by upholding critical protections for disadvantaged, minority, and high-need students.