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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.

## Comments on COVID-19 Policies and Guidance for Schools

### The Arc of Pennsylvania

### Senate Education Informational Meeting

August 6, 2020

The Arc of Pennsylvania submits the following comments regarding the implementation of COVID-19 policies and the guidance for schools as they re-open this fall, and the necessity for any school plans to explicitly account for the impact to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD).

The Arc of Pennsylvania, which is a member of The Arc US, is the state's leading advocacy network for the human rights of Individuals with I/DD. For the past 71 years, The Arc of Pennsylvania, our local chapters which serve 50 of Pennsylvania's counties, and 12,000+ 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 the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to virtual learning significantly impacted the education of students with IDD. Students with IDD faced great challenges in this time of online learning as many of the supports and services they need to access learning and receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) do not readily adjust to a remote learning format. The most disproportionately impacted students were those set to turn 21 and graduate at the end of the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school year as they lost out on the key transition supports and services integral to their transition to adulthood and independence. The Arc of Pennsylvania commends the General Assembly's action in passing Act No. 66 (formerly Senate Bill 664), which allows students with IDD who turned 21 and set to graduate during the 2020-2021 school year the ability to opt-in to attend the 2021-2022 school year.

We ask that the following recommendations be considered as school districts, students, and families prepare for the start of the upcoming school year:

- 1. Account for the unique needs of students with IDD who have medical complexities.** While it is essential for students with IDD to have the ability to return to in-person learning to fully receive their supports and services, it is also essential that the PA Department of Education, school administrators, and school district leaderships specifically account for the health and safety of students with IDD in any re-opening plans or guidance. Many students with IDD have underlying medical complexities which leave them highly susceptible to illness. Any health and safety guidance put forward by schools as they return to the classroom this fall must account for the students with unique medical needs. By considering the full range of needs of students with disabilities and their families in relation to reopening schools, school districts can ensure they continue to provide a free and appropriate public education for students with IDD.



2. **Assure that students with disabilities continue to receive instruction with their non-disabled classmates.**  
Purposeful steps need to be taken by school officials to ensure that students with disabilities are not needlessly segregated from their non-disabled peers in the name of health and safety. While families recognize that schools must take every precaution necessary to ensure the health and safety of all students, recommendations should not restrict students with disabilities from interacting with non-disabled students or receiving an inclusive education.
3. **Establish positive and consistent communication with parents and families prior to the start of the school year.** Parents of students with disabilities want to ensure that the school district is considering the needs of their child in the development of any health and safety plans for the return of students. School districts should communicate with parents and families any proposed health and safety contingency plans for the 2021-2022 school year. This will ensure parents are able to prepare themselves as well as their child with a disability for what school will be like when returning, what changes may be in place as well as those that may occur. Early communication and clear guidance reduce the stress and/or trauma that may manifest as a result of sudden changes.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on COVID-19 policies and guidance for schools as they set to re-open this fall and their impact to students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.