January 6, 2020

TO: Governor Wolf

FROM: The Arc Alliance
The Arc of Greater Pittsburgh/ACHIEVA
The Arc of Lehigh and Northampton Counties
The Arc of Pennsylvania
The Arc of Philadelphia
Alliance for Philadelphia Public Schools
Autism Sharing and Parenting
Disability Rights Pennsylvania
Education Law Center
Education Rights Network
Juvenile Law Center
Local Special Education Task Force IU 20
Local Special Education Task Force IU 21
Mental Health Partnerships & Parents Involved Network
ONE PA
Parent Education & Advocacy Leadership Center (PEAL)
PARENT POWER
Parents Exchange
Parents United for Public Education
PEAC (Pennsylvania's Education for All Coalition)
Penn TASH
Philadelphia HUNE
Pittsburgh Local Task Force on the Right to Education
Public Interest Law Center
SPEAK Unlimited Inc.
Vision for Equality

Special Education Attorneys and Advocates:

Re: Education Funding for Students with Disabilities

We are writing to you on behalf of parents, students, and community members across Pennsylvania to ask for your urgent attention and support to address the critical educational needs of students with disabilities.
We thank you for your efforts in advocating successfully for a $50 million increase in state special education funding increase for this budget year. While this increase is vitally important to providing necessary educational supports to students with disabilities, significant additional investment is needed to address the widening gap between adequate and actual special education funding. **We strongly urge you to propose $100 million in special education funding to be distributed through the special education formula in your FY 20-21 budget proposal.**

Current state funding of special education is inadequate. Since 2008, local districts have borne roughly 90% of the increased costs of special education services, the equivalent of $1.6 billion that local districts have had to be make available through local taxes or other general education sources. Over this same period, the state share of special education funding has declined from roughly one-third to less than a quarter. Even with significant local funding increases, most districts still lack sufficient resources to ensure that students with disabilities are provided the services they are legally entitled to receive.

For the over 270,000 students with disabilities across Pennsylvania, the need for significant state investment in special education is urgent. **We strongly urge you to commit to restoring the state’s share of special education funding back to its 2008-09 level of 32%.** This commitment will require significant ongoing investments in state funding for special education services. Such increases are needed to prevent the allocation of funding between state and local sources from becoming increasingly more inequitable and unsustainable and to ensure that children with disabilities receive the high-quality, inclusive education they need and to which they are legally entitled.

Inadequate special education funding has resulted in an insufficient number of staff to support our students as well as deep cuts to critical resources and services that these students need to make educational progress. Relatedly, funding deficits in basic education also impact students with disabilities. **We urge you to close the approximately $4 billion basic education funding adequacy gap that plagues our schools and children.** By using the bipartisan basic education funding formula to distribute the increased investment, dollars will be allocated based on actual district and student need. This investment is crucial because, due to past divestment and inequitable distribution of funding, students with disabilities—and their classmates across the Commonwealth—are not receiving an adequate or equitable education.

Finally, we hope you will join us in calling on the General Assembly to revise the state’s special education funding system to more equitably distribute funding to districts to support students with disabilities. The formula should be **updated to more accurately account for district poverty.** All public schools serving children with disabilities, including charter schools, also should receive tiered funding based on the needs of the students they serve. We thank you for your recent efforts to ensure that charter schools provide equitable access and inclusive opportunities for all students and look forward to working with you to ensure that addressing special education funding is part of upcoming charter reforms.
Both additional resources and the equitable distribution of those resources are needed to ensure that students with disabilities in all public schools receive the appropriate supports and services they desperately need to be successful in school and beyond. We thank you for your continued commitment to education and investing in the future of Pennsylvania’s children.

Thank you for your consideration.

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