

April 9, 2021

TO: Pennsylvania General Assembly

FROM: Statewide Child Advocates (see pages 2-5 for full list of names)

Re: **Education Funding for Students with Disabilities**

We are writing on behalf of parents, students, and community members across Pennsylvania to ask for your support to address the critical educational needs of students with disabilities. While these needs have been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, the gap between adequate and actual special education funding is longstanding. Students with disabilities need your support now.

**We strongly urge you to support the proposed additional \$200 million in special education funding to be distributed through the special education formula in the FY 2021-22 budget.**

Current state funding of special education is inadequate. Since 2008, the costs of educating students with disabilities in Pennsylvania public schools grew by a full \$2 billion, yet state aid for special education climbed by only \$110M.<sup>1</sup> Local districts have borne nearly all of the increased costs of special education services, and many districts have had to cut critical resources, staff, and services that students need to make educational progress.

For the over 300,000 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 2008-2009 level of 32%.** This commitment will require significant multiyear increases in investment in state funding for special education services and the proposed \$200M is a meaningful, positive step. Such increases are needed to prevent the allocation of funding from becoming more inequitable and unsustainable. These dollars would allow districts to provide the high-quality, inclusive education, including transition supports for career and life readiness, that children with disabilities need and to which they are legally entitled.

The educational needs of these students have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has resulted in profound learning losses as many students were unable to meaningfully participate in online learning due to their disabilities. School closures due to COVID-19 have also resulted in an increased need for Extended School Year programs and long waiting lists for in-person evaluations and re-evaluations.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Decade of Shortchanging Students with Disabilities*, December, 2020, available at <http://bit.ly/spec-ed-report-2020>.

Funding deficits in basic education also impact students with disabilities. While schools will receive much needed federal funds to recover from the pandemic, this one-time infusion of emergency aid will not solve our longstanding, multi-billion underfunding of Pennsylvania's schools. The Governor's proposed boost in basic education funding is the kind of investment that school district administrators, educators, and parents desperately need. It would provide significant relief to the most underfunded districts with the greatest need, without taking away funding from any other district.

**We urge you to take steps to close the more than \$4.6 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. A one-time infusion of federal funds does not remedy these shortfalls in recurring expenses.

Finally, we hope you will join us in supporting the recent bipartisan efforts to ensure that all public schools serving children with disabilities, including charter schools, receive tiered funding based on the needs of the students they serve. We look forward to working with you to address special education funding as part of charter reforms so that all students have equitable access to and inclusive opportunities in Pennsylvania public schools. When adequate basic and special education state funding is not available, poorer districts — the communities least able to compensate for state underfunding through local tax increases — and the students within them are acutely harmed. We know that this has a harsh impact on Black and Brown students in Pennsylvania, who are concentrated in the state's lowest-wealth districts.

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.

#### **STATEWIDE & REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

**The Arc of Pennsylvania**, Sherri Landis, Executive Director  
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**The Arc of Philadelphia**, Shane Janick, Executive Director  
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