



## **Testimony to the Special Education Funding Formula Commission**

**October 1, 2019**

Thank you to the PA Special Education Funding Commission for the opportunity to speak with you today about the needs of our children with disabilities, and for your commitment to students receiving special education services.

My name is Cindy Duch and I am the Director of Parent Advising at the PEAL Center.

I come to you today from a different viewpoint than you've heard today, that of the parent. A parent whose 24-year-old son has a job he has held for 7 years. Whose son was included in general education classrooms for his entire school career. Whose son, in second grade, was told by his school district that his behavior was too bad to be in classes with his peers. Whose son experienced and testified at his own due process hearing for travel instruction. A parent whose son---has autism.

Additionally, I come to you from the Parent Education and Advocacy Center, the PEAL Center. The PEAL Center is PA's federally funded Parent Training and Information (PTI) Center. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act-IDEA, every state must have at least one Parent Training and Information Center. PTIs assist parents and youth in understanding their rights to special education, effective practices in special education and to help them work together with their school districts, sometimes using creative solutions, to provide a free, appropriate public education to students, ALL STUDENTS, receiving special education services.

Parents call the PEAL Center when they have questions, when they are running out of hope for the education of their child with a disability, when there are disagreements within the IEP team. In the last 3 years, the PEAL Center has assisted 24,480 families and provided information to 35,816 parents, youth and professionals in the last year.

I'm here today to tell, to remind you, there are real CHILDREN behind all the numbers and statistics you have heard about today. That disability is a natural part of the human experience. And to keep in mind the achievements that our kids with disabilities make during their school career, ensure their success as taxpaying citizens in the future.

As the parent of an adult child with a disability I can tell you, this is the hardest job you'll ever love.

And as parents, we attend meeting after meeting to try to ensure that our children are being appropriately challenged, that they are provided the appropriate supports and services they need to make progress and that they are learning that---to live successfully in this world, they will need social skills which do not come by them easily.

We acknowledge, as you have heard here many times today, school districts need additional funds.

Despite current funding, families continue to receive pushback from schools when advocating for the needs of their children. I quote another parent who states, "People don't realize that education for children with disabilities is the ONE area of civil rights where people are expected to negotiate to have the law followed. Where most of the special education books written for non-lawyers and families are not just about IDEA and other laws, but how to \*advocate\* to have the law followed".

We know that, according to IDEA, cost can NOT be a factor when a parent makes a request at an IEP meeting for a needed service that has been denied by the Local Education Agency, but we are well aware of the reality—decisions are based on resources.

Parents do not call the PEAL Center to let us know they are satisfied with the services being provided to their child by the school district. They call when there are disagreements, when there are problems, when appropriate services may not be in place for their child.

As parents our focus, and the focus we expect from school districts, is on our children, the STUDENTS. This is why we need districts to have the funding they need to provide students the free, appropriate public education they are guaranteed in IDEA. This is why we advocate.

Yes, I am the only parent to provide testimony today, but I am far from the only one who needs to tell you about the experiences I have had. Families statewide have their own experiences and stories to tell. Some, you would hardly believe—I know because I hear them everyday. Thank you to the Commission for this opportunity to speak passionately about special education funding in PA.

I humbly ask the Commission to please, PLEASE, consider creating opportunity for other parents to tell you their story. To tell you their story so that they may explain the urgency with which we make the ask for additional funding for students, for our CHILDREN.

I can not conclude without mentioning equitable funding for ALL students. An effective Special Education Funding Formula must apply to ALL schools. I urge the Commission to consider how special education funding affects all students, including Charter and Cyber Charter school students.

In the words of local advocate and parent extraordinaire Audrey Rasmusson, "...disregarding the true financial needs of school districts only pushes them to disregard the true needs of their students".

Thank you for your time and for the commitment to providing our children the education they need to be successful in employment, in their communities and in living their best life.