



WESTMORELAND INTERMEDIATE UNIT
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Testimony Date: October 1, 2019
Special Education Funding Formula Commission
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Westmoreland Intermediate Unit 7

Good Afternoon. My name is Dr. Matthew Thomas, and I serve as the Student Services Director of the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit. Our Intermediate Unit serves over 45,000 students represented by 17 school districts, three Career and Technology Centers, and one Charter School in Westmoreland County. It is my honor to address the Commission and offer some perspective relative to Intermediate Unit based services that serve students with a disability and foster supportive relationships with families.

The WIU Student Services Division offers a variety of unique, individual-focused services for people with special needs, and supports research and development for those that work with people with special needs. Over the years, we have expanded our reach, using our expertise to provide products and services not only to Westmoreland County's seventeen (17) public school districts, but also to charter schools, non-public schools, education agencies, parents, preschools, and adult learners across Southwestern Pennsylvania. We serve learners as early as age 3, supporting our core mission to improve the quality of life and evolving the capacity of learners at any age. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) included provisions for students with healthcare-related issues to be provided with supports and services so that a student can fully participate in their educational program and ensure their access to a free and appropriate public education, often referred to as FAPE. According to an October 2018 Education Law Center report (Education Law Center, 2018), "In 2008-09, the state provided nearly one-third of total special education funding; by 2016-17, the state share had declined to less than one-quarter." (page 2). Intermediate Units share a concern about increased dependence on locally-designated school district funds to support students with disabilities, at some reaching a critical mass of non-sustainability. For this reason, Intermediate Units are continually evolving programs and services that implement expense-conscious and expense-shared programs and services across multiple school districts. Allow me to highlight a few services that are supported by our IU and other IUs across the Commonwealth.

Blind/Visually Impaired Support

Intermediate Units facilitate and provide any needed specially-designed instruction to local school districts and programs where a student's visual impairment adversely affects their educational performance. Vision support is vital to the Local Education Agencies providing basic education programs to students with visual impairments so that each student can function as independently as possible and meet their educational needs and requirements in the least restrictive environment.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Intermediate Units support students identified with hearing loss by collaborating with member school districts and educational programs. Teams typically consist of itinerant Deaf/Hard of Hearing teachers and an Educational Audiologist. Team members focus on each student's individual needs by providing consultative support to ensure student success in the educational



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Deaf and Hard of Hearing (cont.)

setting, as well as direct intervention and instruction. Teams work collaboratively to provide in-services to teachers, parents, and school administrators related to each student. By collaborating with district/program professionals and family, IUs strive to ensure all team members are familiar with the effects of a student's hearing loss on their education, as well as the technology required to support the student's ability to participate. Finally, Intermediate Units create opportunities for students with hearing or visual impairments to develop and refine the skills necessary for transitioning to higher education or employment after graduation cultivating friendships with students who have similar interests and needs.

Occupational Therapy and Physical Therapy

Intermediate Units provide OT/PT programs to support students with physical needs and rehabilitation.

Speech and Language Program

Intermediate Units provide Speech and Language programs to deliver a wide range of speech and language supports and services, by contracting with member school districts and educational programs to support students with communication disorders, inclusive of language, articulation, fluency, voice/resonance and swallowing disorders, to ensure educational benefit.

Safe Feeding Consultations

Intermediate Units support school districts who have the responsibility for ensuring that students can safely consume adequate nutrition and hydration during their mealtimes at school. In particular, the Westmoreland Intermediate Unit has an active Safe Feeding Team, providing consultation services at a district's request for students who demonstrate oral or pharyngeal dysphagia or have a behavioral concern that impacts their ability to eat while at school safely. Feeding consultant(s) specialize in dysphagia management. Safe Feeding consultations are an example of how a unique service, provided by an Intermediate Unit, save school districts money, as the service is offered strategically at an economy of scale.

Training and Consultation (TaC)

Training and Consultation staff provide technical assistance to Pennsylvania educators, parents, paraprofessionals, and agency personnel. TaC staff have specially designed training responsibilities based upon their training and expertise. The mission of TaC is to support Pennsylvania's special education regulations and initiatives by partnering with local education agencies to build their capacity to provide both preventive interventions and quality special education services and programs that promote student success.

Job Coaching, Discovery and Travel Instruction

Many Intermediate Units provide support for transitioning students in a school-aged environment into opportunities presented beyond the age of 21, further supporting independent working and living. Supports include instruction that enables individuals to develop an awareness of the



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Job Coaching, Discovery, and Travel Instruction (cont.)

context in which they live, and learn the skills necessary to move effectively and safely from place-to-place within the worlds of education, employment, and the community in which they live. In some Intermediate Units, job coaches support employment skills and experiences.

Again, it is an honor to provide testimony on this topic. As a member of the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units, we are ready and able to support children and young adults all across the Commonwealth. Thank you.

Reference

Education Law Center (October 2018). Shortchanging children with disabilities: state underfunding of special education in Pennsylvania [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Special-Education-Report-Online.pdf>