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Testimony on the New Jersey Department of Education's Plan for the Reopening of Public Schools

Assembly Education Committee Hearing August 10, 2020

Good morning, Chairwoman Lampitt, Vice Chairwoman Jasey, and committee members. My name is Dr. Suzanne Buchanan. I am a licensed psychologist, Board Certified Behavior Analyst, and the Executive Director of Autism New Jersey, a nonprofit organization that represents thousands of individuals with autism and their families. Thank you for the invitation to provide testimony on this critical issue.

I will highlight how this pandemic has devastated children with autism over the last five months. Then, I will comment on the Department of Education's actions to date. Finally, I will make recommendations to help students with autism.

Impact on Children with Autism

Pandemic-related school closures have been acutely detrimentally for many children with autism. Children with autism and profound intellectual disability require specialized education and support services that are now severely curtailed and, most often, ineffective in a virtual model. So, when all educational services justifiably went virtual, the children in our schools who need the most support, ended up with the least.

During the first "stay-at-home" order, children lost months of valuable educational time. The result has been a loss of skills that took years to learn and maintain and, for some, pain and injury caused by severe challenging behavior.

Families are watching their children lose essential safety and life skills and worrying if/how they will regain them and if this delay in essential services will worsen their long-term prognosis. Families are also concerned about the immeasurable frustration experienced by children who truly don't understand why their world has changed so dramatically. Sometimes, this frustration results in severe challenging behavior. Behavior such as aggression (e.g., repeated hitting, kicking) and self-injury (e.g., banging their head on hard surfaces, biting themselves) can occur without notice and place the child and their families in grave danger. In some situations, their child's severe challenging behavior has become so dangerous that families grapple with the grim choice of their family's safety or exposure to the coronavirus that comes with seeking help.

Department of Education's Actions to Date

In short, Autism New Jersey supports the Department's plan, "*The Road Back: Restart and Recovery Plan for Education*." Over the last five months, the Department has offered a series of thoughtful guidances that balance both 1) structure designed to limit the spread of the coronavirus, and 2) flexibility to address the many local and individualized complexities of delivering educational services during a public health crisis.

Autism New Jersey commends the Department's recognition of students with special needs as evidenced by policies that give families flexibility to decide what is best for their child and entire family (e.g., unconditional eligibility for full-time remote learning with accommodations for specific services to be delivered in a hybrid or in-person model) and give schools flexibility on the use of funds for technology and professional development.

Recommendations

Students with Disabilities and Severe Challenging Behavior

While all students are unfortunately experiencing some regression, children with autism and severe challenging behavior are at the greatest risk for hurting themselves and others and should be prioritized accordingly.

1. **Avoid Blanket School Closures** – Much like closing hospitals would deny access to critical medical treatment, blanket school closures deny access to critical therapeutic services. Fortunately, we have seen examples of small private schools or classrooms successfully re-opening to accommodate children's acute behavioral needs. In the event of another stay-at-home order and with public health requirements in mind, we recommend that schools determine which of their students will not derive meaningful educational benefit from virtual instruction and be given the opportunity to seek approval of a plan to safely provide specialized services in the home or school setting.
2. **Prioritize PPE** - Prioritize personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff who work with children with severe challenging behavior.

Learning at Home

Despite our hopes and plans, remote learning is likely to be a staple of educational services for the foreseeable future. Given the difficulty that students with autism experience in this model, we respectfully suggest they would be better served if the following recommendations were implemented.

3. **Prepare to Deliver IEP-mandated Services in the Home** – To prevent even more regression, it is vital that districts have a plan in place to avoid any further disruption of the services. Thus, we recommend that plans for the 2020-2021 school year include preparations for the delivery of IEP-mandated services in the homes of some children. These can be provided through any combination of virtual or in-home instruction depending on the needs of the child.
4. **Support Staff in the Home** – Many children with autism and intellectual disability have highly trained teachers, therapists, behavior analysts, and 1:1 support staff in their classrooms to ensure that they receive individualized attention to make progress toward their IEP goals and meaningfully participate in therapeutic services. Unless it is their choice, parents should not be expected to serve any of these professional roles. Thus, whenever possible, schools should provide the same level of support staff in the home and offer parent education opportunities so they can support their child's educational activities as desired.

Private Schools

When the complex needs of students with disabilities exceed the capacity of their own school district, an Approved Private School for Students with Disabilities (APSSD) may be in a student's best interest. Without these specialized schools, students with autism would be in a far worse position. And while the focus of today's hearing and our current efforts is rightfully on the most immediate needs, we should also take a long-term view of how private schools can remain financial stable. When the time is right, we recommend taking a thoughtful look at the fiscal realities and uncertainties as well as the administrative expectations that could make or break these schools.

Thank you again for this opportunity, and we look forward to working together to make these and other recommendations a reality on behalf of students with autism.

Sincerely,



Suzanne Buchanan, Psy.D., BCBA-D
Executive Director