



October 19, 2021

SPAN Parent Advocacy Network Comments to the Joint Committee on Public Schools

The SPAN Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is a 33-year-old non-profit organization focused on empowering families and engaging professionals to ensure that all children and families receive the services and support they need to flourish and thrive. We serve as New Jersey's federally designated Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC), Family to Family Health Information Center, Parent to Parent program, and Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health State Organization and are also funded by the US Departments of Education and Health and Human Services to provide technical assistance and support to the network of almost 100 parent centers and 59 Family to Family Health Information Centers around the country.

In our role as the PTIC we receive thousands of calls and contacts for technical assistance, information, resources and training from both parents and the professionals that support them. We are here today to share some of what we are hearing from the field.

First, there still seems to be a lot of confusion and mixed messages with parents' understanding of the legislation that required the consideration of expanded eligibility for students with disabilities who were transitioning out of their education entitlement. Equally difficult have been families' attempts to secure compensatory education for inadequate or undelivered services.

We have received multiple calls regarding transportation issues for both general and special education students. This issue calls for a systemic approach versus each school district trying to figure it out on their own. There was a shortage of bus drivers before the pandemic, and COVID has only exacerbated the problem. Districts have tried different approaches, but they do not always work for all families. Aid in lieu of transportation is great if you have the ability to provide that transportation, but we are hearing from some families who are also being required to obtain an umbrella insurance policy if they are going to transport their student and be reimbursed for it. Bus passes or other mass transit where it is available is fine if that student can travel independently. But that is not the case for younger students or many students with disabilities. Besides the issue of affordability, how many parents can spend an hour or two taking their child to school and then returning to pick them up each day? It is not conducive to most work schedules. For students with disabilities who are not educated in their neighborhood school, the trip back and forth to an out of district school could involve hours of travel for the parent.

We agree that most students need to be in classrooms with their peers for the most successful learning experience. The announcement that all schools and all students had to be in person all day has caused a great deal of consternation for families across the state, especially for families of children with mental health issues, anxiety, school phobia, bullying, and safety concerns, not to mention those students or family members with compromised immune systems. Many families requested that a virtual or hybrid learning experience continue for this year. Some were just flatly denied, saying their hands were tied and they could not offer it. Other families reported information being relayed on how to obtain home instruction if they did not want their student to attend school in person. Let me note some barriers requiring documentation from doctors and then approval from the school physician. Some calls were about refusal for home instruction requests without any avenue for appealing the decision. The minimum requirement for students with IEPs is ten hours of home instruction per week; for students without IEPs it is only 5 hours. Even though that is explained as the floor or minimum requirement, the fact is that is what most schools deliver to these students. We have also heard from families concerned about sending their children to school that they could dis-enroll their students and home school them if they wished, or

they were threatened with being reported to child protective services or truancy officer for absence from school.

We are also hearing about shortages of both teaching and support staff, and students not always being in typical classroom settings but relegated to larger rooms where they can be supervised by fewer staff – and not with certified staff and not participating in a direct instruction model.

We continue to be concerned about the lack of transition planning for students returning to school. This again is especially difficult for many students with disabilities. Many of the students, and staff for that matter, have experienced loss, isolation, socioeconomic concerns and countless other traumas. Trauma informed practices in schools as well as promised social emotional and mental health programs or supports are either not accessible or not apparent to families. These programs cannot be sporadic across the state but need to be an investment in children across the board.

Although it is impossible to address all of the calls we get in 3 minutes of testimony, I include in these written comments some of what we have received from parents with the personally-identifying information redacted. We do understand that this public health emergency has created huge issues, but we remain confident that they can be addressed with robust partnership including all stakeholders. We emphasize that the calls we are receiving cover all types of students, but disproportionately those students and families who were already hurt most by the pandemic – students with disabilities and special healthcare needs, students of color, immigrant and English language learning students, low income students, and others who have the most to lose if we do not provide what they need to recover and thrive.

We very much appreciate the invitation to share our experiences and we look forward to assisting in any way we can. Thank you for your commitment to New Jersey's students and families.

[Excerpts and quotes from families were included.]

Thank you for this opportunity to share the concerns of families regarding reopening schools. Please reach out to me if you have any questions or would like additional information.

35 Halsey Street, 4th
Floor Newark, NJ 07102
973-642-8100
www.spanadvocacy.org