

Good afternoon Senator Browne, Representative O'Neill and members of the Special Education Funding Commission. Thank you for your commitment to the education of Pennsylvania's students with disabilities and for inviting the testimony of parents and advocates on this issue. My name is Cindy Duch. I am here today as both a parent and as an advocate.

In my role as parent, I have been very actively involved in my son, Andrew's, education since we received his diagnosis of autism at the age of 3. From the beginning, I knew that his needs would be different than his peers and that in many cases, I would have to advocate for appropriate services for him. Knowing that his school career would span greater than 12 years, it made sense that I was fully committed to his education with typical peers in the school he would attend if he did not have a disability.

The district we were in when Andrew began kindergarten is a very diverse school district. According to Penn Data, greater than 50% of the students in that district are African-American. The disability population of students exceeds 16%. Andrew was included with his typical peers for most of his day in general education classes and had Autism Support available when he needed it. His socialization and behavior at that time was of great concern. In second grade, when his behavior escalated, it was suggested by the principal that Andrew be moved to a classroom in another school building that was not his home school. This would have made it easy for the school district, just to move him. But for Andrew, there would have been many negative consequences. After some research, which I was able to do on my home since I was a stay-at-home parent, I found that the Intermediate Unit, PaTTAN and even a contracted consultant would be able to assist Andrew's team in coming up with an appropriate behavior plan. It worked. By the end of elementary school, Andrew was going through his day with very little help from an aide and experiencing success with typical peers. In addition, the school had developed appropriate social skills instruction and afforded this to Andrew along with typical peers. This was important to us as his family because, as we were always thinking of Andrew's long-term goals, it was apparent that social skills acquisition was vital to his success. The staff in Andrew's elementary school was creative, they had to be. At a disability population that exceeded the 16% funding, they were working on a limited budget. They would form Lunch Bunch programs so that Andrew could learn appropriate language and communication skills from his peers—and his peers loved the attention they got during

the Lunch Bunch, along with the ability to form friendships with Andrew and with others outside of their regular circle of friends.

It was in Andrew's middle school years that we decided that we would move to a school district, not much further away, but that had an excellent reputation for academic excellence. Along with Andrew, I have another son, whose education is equally important to us.

This new school district, which does not have the diversity that our previous district has, 96% white, was a new experience for Andrew as well as for me. Despite a lower disability population--10%, there was no Autism Support. The district said that they could provide for Andrew's needs in Learning Support. As I am sure you are aware, the needs of children with autism are pretty unique and are oftentimes, specialized. With no autism support, and little besides workbook instruction in social skills, Andrew's needs related to autism, could not always be met. Despite my advocacy, this wealthier district could not provide the specialized instruction that Andrew, along with 10% of other children in the district with autism, needed. It was sometimes 1-2 years that Andrew's needs related to Autism (in this case, perseveration and anxiety) would go without appropriate support from a teacher who had the knowledge and experience to help him. In this school district, Andrew's social skills were taught, in a Life Skills classroom, via a workbook. Research indicates that social skills can not be effectively taught by use of a workbook because children with autism do not have the ability to easily generalize these skills and must use these skills in an active way in order to be successful.

Having walked graduation this past spring, Andrew is currently attending Project SEARCH at UPMC-Passavant Hospital and working part-time at a large supermarket as a bagger. He anticipates much success and independence in furthering his education, independent living and recreational activities.

Finally, as the Director of Parent Advising for the PEAL Center, I come across too many families who find their children are not getting appropriate supports and services. The PEAL Center is a federally-funded Parent Training and Information Center, with the mission to assist parents whose children receive special education services in getting the information and resources they need to make appropriate educational decisions for their children with disabilities. In the last fiscal year, we assisted over 7500 families who called, emailed and stopped in our office and attended trainings. These are families who know their children better than anyone else, and know that their

children are not getting what they need in school. These are parents who are at the end of their ropes in trying to get services from a school district who can not or will not provide services to children who need them.

Fair does not mean equal. I am very happy that this commission will be making some positive changes for districts across Pennsylvania. With an equitable funding formula, school districts will be able to provide appropriate supports and services for their students with disabilities so that they may experience success in academics and in all aspects of their life.