



CENTRAL BUCKS SCHOOL DISTRICT

LEADING THE WAY

The Central Bucks Schools will provide all students with the academic and problem-solving skills essential for personal development, responsible citizenship, and life long learning.

Pennsylvania Special Education Funding Commission of 2013

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Dale Scafuro

Director of Student Services

Good morning Chairman O'Neill, Chairman Browne, and members of the Commission. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Dale Scafuro, and I am Director of Student Services for the Central Bucks School District. I have been in the this position for 8 years and previously I was an elementary principal, a Supervisor of Special Education and a special education teacher. I have seen significant changes in the field of special education over my 30 years in education. On the positive side, we know much more about how to educate children with disabilities and our students are meeting goals that years ago we could never imagine. However, the financial issues we currently face are making it more and more difficult to meet our obligations and provide high quality programs to our students with disabilities.

Before I address the fiscal challenges we now face, I think it is important to give you a grounding in the process involved in the evaluation and the development of a student's individualized educational program (IEP) as well as an understanding of the legal requirements we are obligated to follow.

Child Find is the requirement to conduct ongoing activities for the purpose of identifying students who may be in need of special education and related services. Additionally, we are required to have a system in place to screen students to insure they are making progress on grade level standards. In Central Bucks, like many districts in PA, we have adopted the Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTII) model to track student progress and to provide interventions early in a child's school career in hopes of remediating academic difficulties. If the child does not respond to the interventions in general education or anytime we suspect a child is in need of special education services we request permission from the parent to begin the evaluation process.

At Central Bucks, we have 12% of our total student population identified as special education; this is about 20% less than the state average. Our lower numbers are in part attributable to the fact our families have access to high quality health care, our parents take advantage of early intervention services and our students have high quality preschool experiences. However, I also believe that our lower numbers are also the result of the early intervention services we provide, especially in the primary grades. These services are costly and though not part of our special education budget, they certainly have a budgetary impact.

The cost of our evaluations is not included in our special education budget lines; however, it is a costly process. Typically, an evaluation will involve the psychologist, guidance counselor, general education teacher,

reading specialist and speech therapist. Depending on the complexity of the learning and behavioral issues an occupational and/or physical therapist, psychiatrist, hearing therapist and behavior analyst will be involved. The typical evaluation in Central Bucks costs about \$3,000 in staff time. Last year in Central Bucks, we completed 267 initial evaluations. In addition, we completed 175 reevaluations for students with existing IEPs. Our psychologists also evaluate students for eligibility for the gifted program and last year we conducted over 300 gifted evaluations.

Parents can disagree with our evaluation and request an Independent Evaluation. The regulations are written in such a way that the district must either agree to fund the evaluation or immediately file a due process complaint to request a hearing to show that our evaluation is appropriate. The district is faced with the choice of agreeing to spend another \$3,500-\$5,000 for a private evaluation or spend money on an attorney and staff costs to litigate. It is often the case that the cost of funding another evaluation is less expensive than going to a hearing even if we know that our evaluation is appropriate. Fortunately, this does not happen frequently but each year we have an average of 4-5 cases where this occurs.

Another factor impacting costs is a change in the last reauthorization of Chapter 14 requiring that testing be completed within 60 days of the receipt of parent permission (not including the summer months). Previously it was 60 school days. Weekends, holidays, staff development days, snow days, etc. now count toward that 60-day timeline. If we issue Permission to Evaluate on November 4th of this coming school year, the evaluation would be due January 3rd even though during that time school is not in session for 28 out of the 60 days. The financial implication is the need for more school psychologists to meet this deadline or contracting with outside providers to get the testing completed.

Once testing is completed and the student is eligible for special education services, the district and parents meet to develop the Individualized Educational Program (IEP). This document is based on the needs identified from the evaluation report and districts are required to consider programs and services without consideration of costs. The foundation of special education is the provision of a free appropriate public education delivered in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Students with disabilities cannot be removed from the regular education environment unless the nature and severity of the disability is such that the student is not successful even with the use of supplementary aids and services education. For children with severe disabilities the cost of providing services in the least restrictive environment (which in many cases is the general education setting) is very expensive. For example, In Central Bucks we now have over 100 personal care assistants (PCA) included in individual student's IEPs. These support staff provide one-to-one individualized service to specific students so they can remain in the least restrictive setting and the cost to the district for PCAs alone is \$1.6 million.

The law also states that services and programs must be appropriate, not necessarily optimal. Because the development of an IEP is a collaborative processes with parents an equal participant, there can be disagreement over what constitutes appropriate and what is a "need" rather than a "want". In districts like Central Bucks, parents are resourceful and will often seek the counsel of advocates and attorneys when the district is not in agreement with their requests. Again the district is put in the position of agreeing to provide a service (often at great cost) we do not feel is necessary to meet our mandate but it is not worth the cost of litigation or possibly the long-term damage to the relationship with the parent.

As part of the IEP process, a decision for program and placement is made. Again, the first consideration is implementing the program in the least restrictive environment, which is the home school and home district.

Central Bucks is the third largest district in the Commonwealth and because of our size, we are able to manage and organize our special education programs and services somewhat differently than many other smaller school districts. We currently provide service to over 97% of our students within the district. Our classroom-based staff (teachers, paraprofessionals) are district employees as are our speech therapists, behavior specialists, and hearing therapists. We contract directly with private providers for OT, PT, board certified behavior analysts, group counseling, social skills instruction and a psychiatrist. This has allowed us to better control costs and we are better able to coordinate services.

The table below outlines the costs associated with our in house classroom programs. Not included are the following costs, which are very student specific:

- Special transportation
- Assistive technology: Average cost \$2,500-3,000 per student
- Personal Care Assistants: Average cost up to \$16,000 per student
- Individual nursing services: Average cost up to \$29,000 per student
- Work based Learning teacher/Paraprofessional: Average cost \$4,000 per student

	Teacher	EA	Nurse	OT*	PT*	Speech*	Behavior Support*	Counseling*	Total annual cost per student
Autistic Support	1	2		1.0 hr/wk	.3 hr/wk	1.0 hr/wk	.5 hr/wk		\$48,896
Emotional Support	1	1					.5 hr/wk	1.0 hr/wk	\$21,793
Learning Support (resource)	1	1		.3 hr/wk		.3 hr/wk			\$18,220
Learning Support (full time)	1	1.5		.5 hr/wk	.3 hr/wk	1.0 hr/wk	.3 hr/wk		\$37,675
Multiple Disabilities Support	1	2	1	1.5 hr/wk	1.5 hr/wk	1.0 hr/wk			\$56,205
Life Skills Support	1	2	1	1.5 hr/wk	1.0 hr/wk	1.0 hr/wk	.5 hr/wk		\$43,710

*Average time per service for each student

Only when we believe that a student is not able to be educated in a public school do we look to place the student outside the district. We spend considerable time, effort, and energy with a student and their family before making the decision to pursue a private placement. Often the student is unable to manage the large environment of a public school and placement is often made because the behavior of the student requires a setting where all staff is trained to manage aggressive behavior. We are seeing more students with significant anxiety issues. In these cases, parents may keep their child out of school making a return very difficult. It is not unusual in these cases for a parent to place their child in a private setting, retain the services of an attorney, and request due process for the district to pay the tuition. Again, the district is faced with the decision of whether or not to litigate. Litigation is also the driving our insurance costs up. In 2008-09, we paid \$102,000 for our School Leaders

policy; today that same policy costs \$138,000. This is not only a 35% increase, but our deductibles have also doubled.

When a student is placed in a private setting, all cost control is lost. Of the students we place outside the district most attend an approved private school, alternative school, or private special education school. Less than 10 students each year typically attend IU program. Because of the staffing ratios and intensive services these students require, these placements are very expensive. During the 12-13 school year, we had 75 students in out of district placements and the total cost for these students was approximately \$2.5 million.

These are some additional factors we see as significantly impacting our budget now and in the future.

- Reduced reimbursement for ACCESS due to changes in reimbursable expenses and the lack of reimbursement received since the change in program administration from Leader to PCG. We anticipate a reduction of 30% from past years in ACCESS dollars, but to date Central Bucks has received only \$260,000; in the past two years, during this same time-period, we received about \$1.4 million.
- The threshold for contingency funds for students with extraordinary needs and high costs has increased each year and the result is a decrease in state reimbursement. This year we needed to spend \$92,841 of district funds on a child before we could apply for reimbursement. We had seven students who qualified for consideration. The total costs to the district for these 7 seven students was \$728,780 or \$104,000 per student; the district received \$85,439 in contingency funds (11.7% of our costs).
- We are unable to anticipate costs of new students. In the past, we have had students move in who were residentially placed with program costs exceeding \$100,000. We are required to continue the IEP from the sending school district including the residential placement. When students in general education move into the district you can reasonably budget for this increase, this is not the case in special education. We also know that because of the quality of our programs parents move to our district to take advantage of our programs and services. In the last five years we have seen a 30% increase in the number of children with autism. These students often require intensive services and the state limits the number of students we can place in an autistic support classroom to 8, even for students who may spend almost 80% of their time in general education.

As a special educator I am proud of the work our staff does every day, I am proud of the relationships we have built with our families, I am proud of the accomplishments of our students. I hope that the Commission can find a way to insure that we have the financial resources necessary to do what we do best, which is work with children with special needs and their families, and perhaps even reduce the burden of some of the legal and paperwork requirements that impact our ability to provide special education services.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. We are happy to answer any questions you may have.