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Testimony of the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit

Hearing of the House Education Committee on Recommendations for State Policymakers on Pennsylvania's Education System Education Tour

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Good afternoon, Chairman Schweyer, Harris, Topper, and Grove and the Honorable members of the Appropriations and Education Committees. My name is Dr. Brittany Lourea-Waddell. I am the ExplorationsPHP Partial Hospitalization Program Director of Treatment and the Director of Student Services at the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit (MCIU). I am a licensed psychologist, certified school psychologist; I am the Pennsylvania Association of Intermediate Units Mental Health group lead as well as statewide lead for social emotional wellness. I am here this afternoon representing the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on making educational improvements to help Intermediate Units provide education and services to the children in Pennsylvania.

Montgomery County IU 23 is one of the 29 regional education service agencies in Pennsylvania. The system of intermediate units was created by the General Assembly in 1971, designed to support public (school districts and charter schools) and private schools across the commonwealth, as well as assist the Pennsylvania Department of Education's efforts to provide a thorough and efficient system of education.

The Montgomery County Intermediate Unit provides a broad range of services including: special education services, nonpublic services, early intervention services, mental health supports, virtual learning opportunities, technology infrastructure, workforce development programs, professional learning, transportation, curriculum development, joint purchasing, health care consortiums, human resource and business office support, and alternative education.

MCIU has become the go-to resource for meeting the changing needs of students in Montgomery County in both public and nonpublic schools.



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The MCIU Office of Students Services provides supports for students in kindergarten through age 22 in the areas of:

- Support for students in our public schools through our specialized classroom-based programs for students identified with multiple disabilities support, autistic support, emotional support, hearing support and life skills support.
- Operating two school-based partial hospitalization programs for students in kindergarten through 12th grade (ages 5 - 18) who are struggling with mental and behavioral health challenges. We operate the only school-based partial hospitalization programs in Montgomery County.
- Support with hearing and vision teachers, behavior analysts, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech therapists and licensed mental health clinicians.
- Half day and full day transition programs for students ages 17-22 to assist them in identifying a career pathway, on the job training and employment.
- Support for adolescents and young adults ages 17-24, who are at risk to be successfully employed, through a federal grant as part of the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA).
- We provide services and supports for nonpublic schools in the areas of math and reading remediation, counseling, psychological evaluations, and speech and language services.

With the limited time today, I am compelled to cover some priority topics facing our students and I will focus my time on mental health and special education needs. Through my work, I have witnessed the growing demand for comprehensive mental health services and the pressing challenges and constraints within our mental health and special education programs.

Mental Health

Over the past twelve years, the demand for mental health services has steadily increased, and the last four years have further intensified this trend. To meet this growing need, MCIU recently opened a second school-based partial hospitalization program, and mobile clinician services, to provide crisis support and therapy for students in their schools. We are not alone in our expansion of programs and services to support our schools' mental health needs, as IUs statewide are confronting similar challenges in supporting the mental health challenges today's students and families face.

Despite these efforts, we have seen an increase in requests for what are called "risk assessments" or "threat assessments" for students who are struggling, and these assessments have strained our already limited staff resources. Additionally, a rise in truancy has necessitated the creation of a specialized program, incorporating licensed clinicians to evaluate and treat students struggling with significant anxiety and school-refusal behaviors.

Furthermore, we work within the unfortunate confines of limited funding to address these critical needs. Even though mental health has been identified as an area of extreme need both inside

and outside of schools, it is always challenging to find appropriate funding and timely access to available funding earmarked for these needs.

In addition to the demands of establishing new programs we are seeing:

- An increase in risk and threat assessments being conducted because of suicidal thoughts, and threatening statements made about others in both public and nonpublic schools.
- An increase in truancy, due to mental health and other related issues. Schools are already required by law to write truancy plans for students with chronic absences.
- An increased demand for licensed clinicians to evaluate and treat students struggling with anxiety and depression.
- An increased number of students being referred for intensive behavior and/or mental health supports. We opened our intensive emotional support program in 2018 with 2 classrooms and we currently have 7 intensive ES classrooms with a waiting list.
- Waiting lists for students in need of service because of staff and space shortages.
- Increased need for psychologists as there is a shortage across the State. This has been exacerbated by the fact that medical access reimbursements for psychological evaluations and services are increasingly difficult to obtain due to current restrictions which limits the ability for IU's and school districts to use this reimbursement to offset the cost of hiring psychologists.
- Over the last 4 years, school districts in Montgomery County have spent 20.15% more on mental health services for students. Source: PA Department of Education/Annual Financial Reports

Special Education Services:

There is an increasing need for additional funding as well as staff to meet the demands for special education services.

- From 2019-2023 Montgomery County saw a 5% increase in special education services, with 923 additional students identified with special needs.
- Across Pennsylvania, the state saw a 5.5% increase with 16,893 additional students identified with special needs.
- Staffing shortages remain a problem. The PA Department of Education reports that in 2011 there were 21,500 teacher certifications issued from state colleges and universities. In 2022, that number was down to 4,200. With an estimated 8,000 educators retiring in the past two years, this trend does not bode well for school districts trying to fill positions.
- The average cost to provide services to children with special needs in Montgomery County has increased nearly 10% the past three years rising from \$28,826 per student in 2020 to \$31,652 in 2022. MCIU only raised classroom-based program costs by 1.19% over 3 years. This is unsustainable over the long term. Source: MCIU Fee for Service Pricing

- While MCIU pricing has remained low, Montgomery County schools have increased the usage of MCIU services as they have more complex needs students in need of support. From 2018 to 2022, there was a 19.76% increase. Source: PA Department of Education/Annual Financial Reports.

Funding has not kept up with demand, and there are many shortcomings with the special education funding formula:

- Prior to 1993, school districts were able to submit to the PA Department of Education the excess costs for children requiring intensive, and expensive programs. That was eliminated as part of a state budget cut in the early 1990's.
- There is a limited number of reimbursement tuition placements from the state for students needing full-time mental health services.
- The federal law passed in 1975 included a 40% funding for special education services. Other than one year in 2009 when stimulus money increased funding to 33%, the Federal Department of Education is only funding about 13% annually. Ironically, November 29 marks the 48th anniversary of the passing of that federal law.

We appreciate the state's recognition of this rising need by allocating \$100 million in the budget to school-based mental health last year. However, IUs and schools continue to experience challenges. I offer the following recommendations:

- 1. *Simplify the process for mental health funding.*** The PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) administers mental health grants that have historically been complicated to complete. The restrictive nature of these grants has not been effective in giving school districts and IU's the necessary and immediate funding to meet the needs of the students. I urge the committee to consider eliminating the need for a grant. Instead, the funding should be a line item to remove current restrictions so that each district and IU would have the flexibility to determine how to spend the money to best support students with mental health needs.
- 2. *Offer incentives for young people to enter the field of education, especially in the areas of special education and mental health services.***

Ultimately, thousands of Pennsylvania's students are not being adequately served because of funding issues. Special education and mental health issues are challenges nationwide. Here in Pennsylvania, we must strive to better serve these children.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and we look forward to working together to improve the state of mental health and special education in Pennsylvania's schools and IUs. I would be happy to answer any questions.