

Good morning distinguished Committee members. My name is Marsha Hurda, and I'm the Superintendent of the Spring-Ford Area School District. Our Montgomery County school district has a student population of approximately 7,700 students. We have been one of the fastest growing districts in the state, and are now the second-largest school district in Montgomery County. We have seven elementary schools, a 5/6/7 building, an 8th Grade Center, a 9th Grade Center and a 10-12 Center. Over the last 10 years, we have built or renovated eight buildings to accommodate growing enrollment at various levels.

You have invited me today to speak about special education, and I welcome this opportunity. Spring-Ford, as you just heard, is a growing district. While much of our growth can be attributed to new homes being built in the area, we know at least a portion of this growth is due to families who move to our district specifically because they have heard of our special education programs. They want the best for their children, and they know that they can find it here at Spring-Ford.

We provide a broad range of services – learning support, emotional support, autistic support, life skills support, and speech and language support. Related services include physical therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, nursing services and social skills, to name a few. Spring-Ford also has several Sensory Rooms to assist children with autism, and Independent Living Centers, which are used to teach students with special needs how to cook, clean, do laundry and carry out many other daily tasks. We put in place early intervening services using the Response to Intervention model at the elementary school level to help identify students who are struggling with reading. The goal is to provide remediation for these students early, thereby reducing the need for special education services in the future. We currently utilize the co-teaching model for grades 5 through 11 so that more of our special education students can be included into regular education classes. We provide Extended School Year programs, as well as early intervention and post-secondary transition programs. Our services for special needs students can begin before they even enter public school, and can continue until the student turns 21.

We have a total of 1,619 special education students, 113 special education teachers and 130 assistants. In almost every one of the past seven years, our number of special education students has gone up. To give you a feel for the increases we are seeing, here are some interesting statistics:

- In our district in 2002-03, the number of children on the autism spectrum was 26. This year, that number is 106.
- In 2007-08, 29 students entered the school district having had early intervention services. In only two years, that number has nearly doubled to 51.
- In 2000-01, we had one student whose services cost over \$75,000. Last year, we had 27.

As diagnoses improve and parents continue to advocate for their children's needs, these numbers will most likely continue to increase. At the same time that we are seeing increases to our special education population, we are also seeing significant changes with regard to state and federal laws governing public education of these students. The first Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed in 1990, but there have been two subsequent reauthorizations of this federal law – one in 1997 and one in 2004. Each time the act was reauthorized, additional protections and rights for students and their parents were added. Instead of focusing on equal

access for students as earlier laws did, these pieces of legislation now address the quality of special education programs and have led to changes in the way public schools must serve special needs children. Another federal law, No Child Left Behind, has had a tremendous impact on special education. Because the law requires students of all abilities to reach proficiency benchmarks in reading and math, school districts have had to initiate special programs and services to make sure special education students are prepared for and can perform well on standardized tests that have not been adapted to their needs.

State laws governing special education include Chapter 14 and Chapter 16 of the school code. These chapters continue to evolve as well. The PARC Consent Decree of 1972 gave additional rights to students with mental retardation, and the Gaskin settlement agreement of 2005 is changing the way in which school districts approach the inclusion of special education students. We must pay careful attention to the amount of time special education children are spending in regular classrooms versus the time they spend in other settings.

No one here at Spring-Ford would debate the importance of the laws that govern special education and protect the rights of students with special needs. Every child does indeed deserve access to a free, appropriate public education, regardless of his or her disabilities. We are committed to upholding these laws and providing Spring-Ford children with the services they need to learn and grow.

However, it cannot be denied that these services – and the related paperwork, materials, equipment and transportation needed to carry them out – can require significant amounts of personnel and funding. For example, if we want to create a “least restrictive environment” for a life skills student, we might need to hire a one-to-one assistant to accompany that child while he or she is in the regular education classroom. That same assistant might need to be paid to stay after school if the child is involved in extra-curricular activities and then special transportation home may be necessary. In addition, the child may need speech, occupational therapy and physical therapy services.

Assistive technology is also important in helping students access education in the least restrictive environment. This can include augmentative communication devices for students who are nonverbal, Soundfield FM systems for students with cochlear implants and other hearing impairments, or text to speech and speech to text software to support students with reading or written expression disabilities.

When you consider that this scenario applies to multiple students across our district, the costs do begin to add up. The anticipated total cost of providing special education services at Spring-Ford Area School District for next year exceeds \$21.3 million. This total includes the salaries of the teachers and assistants, the costs of programs and services, and the cost of special needs transportation.

Federal and state funding for special education has not kept pace with the increases we are experiencing. Federal funding went from \$1,073,521 in 04-05 to \$1,321,453 in 08-09 and State funding went from \$2,055,282 in 04-05 to \$2,345,428 in 08-09. In real dollars, federal funds increased by \$247,932, and state funds by \$290,146 for a grand total increase in funding of

\$538,078. Unfortunately, during the exact same time period, the actual expenses to the District increased by \$5,077,906 over that same period.

To defray some of the costs, we have made use of state programs like ACCESS, where we are reimbursed by the state for some services we provide to students. However, what we have found over time is that the requirements for receiving funding have become more and more stringent as the pool of money available declines. Spring-Ford also makes use of contingency funds, which are provided to districts to defray costs for students with the most needs. However, with a cap of \$150,000 per school district, this does little to help – Spring-Ford has 5 students this year costing more than \$150,000. (\$150,000 will pay for the services of just two of our 27 special education students that require services over \$75,000.) We have also made use of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act to pay for special education costs, but these funds are temporary and will no longer be available in another year. As a result, Spring-Ford has been forced to use local tax revenue to make up the difference. We estimate that the cost to our taxpayers will be in excess of \$17,000,000 for special education for the upcoming school year.

These costs, of course, are entirely necessary if we are to help our special education students be successful. No one is advocating that we cut programs or services to special education students. The question becomes who should ultimately bear the costs?

It has now become overwhelmingly obvious that Spring-Ford simply will not be able to continue to provide these necessary services to our neediest students without your help. The projected increase for next year's state special education budget is zero dollars. We need you to advocate on our school district's behalf for more funding. We realize that times are tough, but our children should not have to pay the price for the current economic crisis. If the state budget needs to be reduced, I urge you to do what we do every year at budget time – make cuts to the areas of your budget that will not adversely affect the future of our children.

There is no better investment, I feel, than funding education. By providing our special needs students now with the teachers, services, equipment and transportation they need to receive the best public education possible, I guarantee we will see a return on the investment we make today. When these children grow up to become contributing members of our society, we will be glad we took the time – spent the money and made the investment – to help them learn.