February 2, 2017

For Immediate Release:

**STATE BOARD MOVES FORWARD WITH Fiscal Rules PUTTING Special Education Services in Jeopardy**

**Scores of Special Needs Parents and Advocates Demand Delay of Rules**

**Trenton, NJ** – More than 30 parents of children with severe disabilities – some pushing wheel chairs – squeezed into the public meeting of the New Jersey State Board of Education on Wednesday. Joined by nearly 80 other special education advocates and leaders from state organizations, they jammed the lobby of the New Jersey Department of Education in opposition to new state rules that would put special education services for the state’s most vulnerable students at risk.

New rules now being considered by the State Board of Education would affect tuition setting, hiring, salaries, and staff training–among other areas - at state approved private schools for students with disabilities. The board voted unanimously to move forward with the controversial proposal.

“Make no doubt about it – these rules *will* affect students with the most complex disabilities, and will force some private schools to close,” said Gerard Thiers, Executive Director of ASAH, a statewide nonprofit organization representing 150 private schools serving more than 10,000 students.

Susie LaChange, the mother of 15-year-old twins with special needs, said that one of her sons was severely bullied in the public school. He now attends a state-approved private school in Mercer County.

“The public school could not protect him from other students, who literally beat his head into a wall. He was on home instruction for five months until he was placed in a private school. If he had to go back, it could literally kill him,” she said.

Other parents and students echoed similar concerns.

“This school saved my life,” said Isaac Pilato, an 18-year old senior at Collier High School in Monmouth County. “Here, the teachers and staff know who you are, and they really care about you.”

Since 2007, leaders from ASAH have been working with the Christie administration and staff at the New Jersey Department of Education to develop rules that would enhance accountability and clarify fiscal practices at state approved private schools for students with disabilities. In 2013, ASAH expanded and reaffirmed a strong code of ethics to ensure high standards in all areas of operations.

“Our schools were shocked by these rules because they reach far beyond the scope of anything we discussed with the Department, and over regulate in areas where there have been no problems,” added Thiers.

Advocates expressed concern over a campaign of “misinformation” to the public and State Board members, and an unwillingness on the part of state decision makers to meet with stakeholders.

“Today, Board members and the public watched as NJDOE staff compared *maximum* private school salaries with *average* public school salaries. It leads to the false belief that our schools are paying more. We are not,” he concluded. ASAH schools, parents and other non-profit advocacy groups have been declined in their request for meetings to discuss the rules, or clarify the information.

Students at private special education schools are among the most complex–they have autism, medical and feeding issues, mental health challenges, and other multiple disabilities. Their local public school district enrolls them when public school educators have determined that they are unable to provide an appropriate educational program within the local district. Students are placed at no cost to families. Districts pay tuition, which is set annually by the New Jersey Department of Education based on a private school’s actual costs.

Private schools have had decades of positive results. Data show that students with disabilities who graduate from private schools are more likely to have jobs, be engaged in the community, or be enrolled in higher education than students with disabilities who graduate from public schools. And on the issue of costs - when ALL costs to taxpayers are considered, private special education schools in New Jersey are 20-30% less costly than comparable public programs.

“With positive results and lower costs, our members and the parents wonder: ***Why is the State of New Jersey trying to close private special education schools and narrow options for parents and school districts?”***concluded Thiers.

ABOUT: ASAH is a nonprofit statewide association representing 160 private schools for students with disabilities. The schools serve roughly 10,000 students with complex conditions, including those who are medically fragile, on the autism spectrum, exhibit challenging behavior, have a mental illness, and those with multiple disabilities.

For more information, call 609-890-1400

Parents of children with disabilities are available for interviews.

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