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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PARENTS AND ADVOCATES DECRY NEW RULES THAT CURTAIL SPECIAL EDUCATION FUNDING

Services at Specialized Schools at Risk

Trenton, NJ - Parents of students with autism and other severe disabilities, non-profit groups and school leaders have expressed shock and disappointment that the New Jersey State Board of Education has voted to adopt new rules that cut back on funding for services to children and teens in private special education schools.

The New Jersey Department of Education, which sets the tuition rates for more than 170 such schools, proposed 80 pages of new rules that severely limit the expenses that can be included in tuition. The rules affect areas such as staff training; food services for disabled children; employee salaries, pensions, and healthcare; debt that occurs when public schools fail to pay tuition; and school websites and brochures, to name a few. The rules also restrict the use of funds raised through private donations.

More than 11,000 children with complex disabilities are placed by their local school district in private special education schools when the public school is not able to provide an appropriate effective program.

The rules will require many non-profit schools to further engage in private fund raising simply to maintain services to children, or curtail services.

Eight hundred seventy two parents, advocates and school providers have shared comments with the State Board of Education through testimony and letter writing, nearly all opposing the rules. Nearly 2,100 parents sent a petition to the Department of Education and the Governor's office to stop the rules from moving forward.

One of those parents is Maria Gesualdi of Cliffside Park, NJ. Her 15-year-old daughter, Teresa, has a rare genetic disorder and attends CTC Academy, a state-approved private special education school.

"The state should be working on helping provide better and more services to schools and their families that need help, not threatening them with regulations which limit sources for good and skilled teachers," she said.

Parents have called the new rules on staff training particularly cruel, as it severely limits the amount schools can spend to send staff to vital specialized training programs. The Board also

adopted rules that would consider a school website and a phone number in a phone book as “advertising,” and cap those costs at low levels.

“I use the school website to check the lunch menu, download forms, and see what is happening at school. That is not advertising,” added Gesualdi.

Scores of advocates, including former New Jersey Department of Education Commissioner Dr. Vito Gagliardi, Sr., and Autism New Jersey’s Executive Director, Dr. Suzanne Buchanan, have asked that rules be delayed to allow more time for consideration and implementation.

Buchanan’s group also called for a special “fiscal code advisory council” comprised of DOE officials, accounting firms and leaders at approved private schools to hear implementation concerns and ensure clarity and consistency among stakeholders.

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ABOUT ASAH: 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.

ABOUT PRIVATE SPECIAL EDUCATION: 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. Under Federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA), students are placed at no cost to families. The local school districts use a combination of state, federal and local funds to pay tuition, which is set annually by the New Jersey Department of Education based on a private school’s actual costs.

When all costs to taxpayers are considered, private special education schools in New Jersey are 20-30% less costly than comparable public programs.

Private special education 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.

For more information:

- Visit ASAH.org
- Interview a school director: Call (973) 772-2600 to speak to Dr. William Weiss, Director of North Jersey Elks Developmental Disabilities Agency.
- Interview a parent of a child with disabilities: Call (609) 890-1400 to make arrangements.