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Testimony Before the Assembly Education Committee

**State House Annex
Thursday, May 16, 2019**

By Joseph Meloche, EdD, Superintendent, Cherry Hill Public School District

Members of the committee, colleagues, and community members, my name is Joseph Meloche; I am the proud superintendent of the Cherry Hill Public School District in Camden County. Thank you to the members of the committee for allowing me time to address you, a special thank you to Assemblywoman Lampitt for her tireless advocacy for public education and for children throughout the state. I am grateful for the time to address the Assembly Education Committee on the Teacher Shortage issues that we face each year. It is an honor speak on behalf of my peers and to provide substance and context to the teacher shortage dilemma. During the course of these proceedings, I know that you will hear testimony on the shortage of minority and male teachers, on the shortage of ESL teachers, and on the overarching shortage of the current generation of college students choosing a career path as school teachers. My focus this morning, during this “Special Education Week” in New Jersey, is on the shortage of content area certified and highly qualified special education teachers.

Cherry Hill is an incredible community in which to live and work, and especially to raise a family. Cherry Hill, like most communities in our state, has changed dramatically during the past few decades and consequently our school district has changed the manner in which we deliver an education to our more than 11,000

students. The Cherry Hill School District is a wonderfully diverse tapestry of families of so many different cultural, familial, and religious backgrounds and economic means. Among our 11,000 children, more than 70 languages are spoken at home, more than 2,500 children are bilingual, and in our six Title I schools, nearly 1 in 3 children are on Free or Reduced Lunch. The children that we educate have varied backgrounds, come from diverse homes and many have developmental challenges that require specialized instruction and an adaptation of the process and approach for accessing the curricula. How we approach the education of these children, who have been identified as not typically developing, is a direct reflection upon our community and our educational system – at the local level and at the state level. While the physical structure of our facilities does not look dramatically different from when the newest school was opened in 1970, what goes on inside the walls, within the confines of the classrooms has been revolutionary to meet children’s needs.

Currently, Cherry Hill has approximately 2,400 students with identified disabilities who receive some type of specialized service during the academic day. Not only do the members of the Cherry Hill community support a top quality education, they demand it for each of our children. I am incredibly proud of our outcomes and our successes, and measured by the external validations that we receive. We are committed to serving all of our students, and a great deal of our effort and resources are dedicated to our children with disabilities. We serve the vast majority of these students in district, from our Barclay Early Childhood Center which receives children beginning at 3 years of age who are coming directly out of early interventions, to specialized programs in our 12 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 2 comprehensive high schools and our alternative high school. Currently, approximately 140 students are educated in alternative out of district settings because we are unable to meet their needs in district. We aim to include all students in the social emotional learning experiences, co-curricular and extra-curricular experiences, and athletics. We hosted our first Unified Sports track meet yesterday afternoon,

welcoming students with and without disabilities from 3 other South Jersey districts to compete at High School West. Our students with disabilities are in our classrooms, on our stages, and are representing our district and our community in local, regional, and national competitions. We have students with disabilities who have been homecoming kings and queens, concert soloists, and aspiring thespians. We have many children who come into district at 3 years of age and stay with us until after they turn 21 years of age. We have families who are passionately involved in our educational system, who are knowledgeable and who advocate to ensure we are meeting the needs of their children.

What we often do not have, are qualified and appropriately certified candidates to fill the instructional positions that are open in our district in these specialized programs. We must have highly qualified and knowledgeable staff to meet such diverse and specific needs.

Our areas of need, and the areas in which my peers have seen the greatest challenge in hiring staff, are:

- Dually certified teachers at the secondary level with content certification in mathematics and special education, in science (Biology, Chemistry & Physics) and special education, and in World Languages and special education.
 - o While there is a better pool of candidates with content area certification in English and special education and Social Studies and special education, the pool is still shallow.
- Qualified and experienced teachers who are able to serve our most severely disabled students, those on the autism spectrum and those with behavioral and emotional disabilities.
 - o We currently have 10 classes at the elementary level that exclusively serve students on the autism spectrum.
- Teachers who are ESL certified and special education certified.

- Our ESL population is one of our fastest growing populations in the district.

This is a difficult challenge for us every year, to fill these positions and to maintain and support the staff members who are in the positions. During the past 10 years we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of students with comorbid conditions that are extremely difficult to treat and to manage as there are psychiatric diagnosis that complicate learning disabilities and autism diagnosis. The increase in the number of children with psychiatric diagnosis has been dramatic, especially at the elementary level.

As a district we have added layers of support through the past decade. We have counselors in all of our schools, Student Assistance Counselors at all 6 of our secondary schools, a therapeutic wrap around services contracted provider at all 3 high schools, 1 middle school, and 1 elementary school, we contract with a psychiatrist who is in district one full day per week. We provide training to our certificated and support staff as well as to our campus police in meeting the special needs of our children. The greatest resource that our district has, that any district has, is the human resource. Research informs us that it is the relationship between the teacher and the student, in the classroom, that has such a profound effect on the learning experience. But our struggle still remains, in finding qualified candidates.

The shortage of appropriately trained and certificated candidates to work with our neediest population is real, it is dramatic, and it must be addressed. As superintendent I am incredibly proud of our program and of our work district wide, and yet we could do so much better for our children. We must work together, all of us, to benefit our children. You, our elected officials, the Department of Education, our colleges and universities, must work together to address this need. It is time not just to thrust this discussion into a more public arena but to develop a formal plan to address it moving forward. This is the time to act. This is the time to commit to our children, not just in word but in deed.

We must move forward and we will be stronger and more effective when we move forward together.

Esteemed members of the New Jersey State Assembly, you have the ability to make a real difference in children's lives, you have the power to drive this forward. We need you and we are counting on you to hear our voice and to act on behalf of our children. Thank you for your time and your willingness to support our children.

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Date