



2022-2023 ANNUAL REPORT

It has been a great privilege and learning experience to serve as the chairperson for the Wyoming Advisory Panel for Students with Disabilities (WAPSD) for 2022-2023. While it can feel a bit intimidating at first as a parent to try to keep up with all the acronyms and understand the broader picture of the challenges facing our state, serving on this panel has been a very rewarding experience. Our panel's greatest strength is its members - the diversity and wealth of knowledge our stakeholders bring to the table allows for in-depth and thoughtful discussions of the issues surrounding special education in Wyoming. We have a strong and respectful relationship with the state special education program leadership and I feel our panel provides valuable feedback and advice that is carefully considered and put into practice as appropriate.

The last few years we have faced definite disruption as Wyoming, along with the rest of the world, has dealt with the effects of the Covid pandemic. Services for students with disabilities were greatly hindered as was our ability to hold meetings in person. But as ever, students, families, teachers and others, rose to the challenge and over-all worked diligently to mitigate the negatives and do their best to still meet the needs of the students. Many creative and innovative strategies were born through this time period. However, Covid has had and continues to have negative ripple effects on our educational system that will be felt for years to come. Our panel chose to focus on two priorities that have come front and center due to the pandemic: Mental Health and Family Engagement. In order to be effective in addressing these priorities, this past year we formed committees for each priority and have scheduled time during our quarterly meetings for committee work in addition to the work being done between meetings. Every panel member served on one of the two committees. Please see the attached committee reports to see the progress each committee has made.

Another focus this past year was to pass the By-law changes that have been in the works for quite awhile. As a panel we recognized the importance of the point of view and contribution each member and agency representative brings to our discussions and that having actively engaged participants is critical. Part of our by-law changes regarded changes in attendance policy and that virtual options to participate were largely eliminated. We also added that two or more of the meetings would be held throughout the state in locations where panel members would be able to tour or visit with programs relevant to our panel's purpose. These added field trips have been eye-opening and very valuable in learning where our state's strengths are and finding areas that need attention regarding special education services. We were able to tour places such as the Wyoming Girls School in Sheridan and the Life Resource Center in Lander. On the flip side, these changes in meeting structure have led to resignations of those whose schedules and responsibilities no longer allow for participation. We are especially grateful to their service and contributions and hope that their schedules may allow them to join us again in the future. This has also paved the way for some new members which we are excited to welcome aboard with their enthusiasm to dive in and contribute to our panel each in their own unique way. I am also encouraged that we finally got a parent stipend approved to help with the expenses parents face when attending meetings such as lost income or extra child care costs. We are hoping this helps with parent recruitment by removing some of the additional obstacles parents may face when desiring to serve on this panel.

Other areas of note for the year include the letter received from the Office of Special Education Programs indicating that the Wyoming Department of Education did not properly fund special education because of how the state distributed all education funds and that the state owes the federal government about \$11 million back. The waiver the state filed was rejected and negotiations were in progress on what happens next. We will continue to look for more effective ways to help educate legislators regarding special education funds and the extra laws that govern its allocation to try to avoid similar situations in the future.

The Panel was invited to participate in the data drill down last fall. This led to the choice to monitor specific areas in all districts rather than the traditional monitoring of all areas of a few districts. The student group deemed most at risk of not receiving free and appropriate public education (FAPE) was out of district placements. Depending on the type of placement - parental/court/medical - the responsibility of providing FAPE falls either on the district or on the institution where the student is placed. Several IEP's in this category were found to be out of compliance and Wyoming Department of Education is working to provide guidance to all as well as professional development and technical assistance as needed. On a positive note, the Department of Education, Department of Family Services and the Department of Behavioral Health are working together in new and better partnerships to meet the needs of challenging kids and get them into the most appropriate setting for help.

Additionally, many Panel members, along with many others, have been involved in the process to update sections of the Chapter 7 Rules and Regulations regarding Special Education. It was decided to review and make recommendations for Section 3 regarding the definition of Timely Manner and Student with a Significant Cognitive Disability for the Alternative Assessment. In Section 4 Eligibility in the areas of Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Developmental Disability, Specific Learning Disability, and Vision were considered. In Section 5 Residential Placements, Communication Plan and IEP teams complete Alternative Assessment Checklist were the areas focused on. The proposed rule changes should address many of the issues the current wording struggles with and ultimately improve services for students in our state.

It has been a busy year, full of challenges and changes. However, I feel our Panel is stronger than ever coming out of the Covid era and is moving forward with direction and purpose. It has been an honor to serve on this panel and get to know the members better, learn of all the great programs and services happening around our great state and see the progress we are making in our vision to help all students with disabilities have opportunities to become compassionate, productive and contributing citizens of their communities. Thank you for this opportunity to serve.

Christine Bulllinger

Chairperson,
Wyoming Advisory Panel for Students with Disabilities