



PUBLIC INTEREST LAW  
CENTER OF PHILADELPHIA

AFFILIATED WITH THE LAWYERS COMMITTEE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS UNDER LAW

STAFF May 8, 2014

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Committee on Labor and Civil Service of the Council of the City of Philadelphia  
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**Re: Testimony of Sonja Kerr, Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia  
City Council Hearing on Resolution No. 130782**

Benjamin D. Geffen  
*Staff Attorney*

Sonja D. Kerr  
*Director, Disabilities Rights Project*

**Council Members:**

Edwin D. Wolf  
*Executive Director*  
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My name is Sonja Kerr, and I am Director of Disability Rights at the Public Interest Law Center. On behalf of the Law Center, thank you for the opportunity to speak to Resolution No. 130782. The Law Center sees as a critical issue in this endeavor: what is happening in our school district?

The School District of Philadelphia (“SDP”) includes a large number of students and parents who have language access needs. The SDP has an Multilingual Education Office, and a Translation and Interpretation Center and the folks in these offices want to do better. The SDP also has a number of programs, including English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and Bilingual Education. However, presently, the SDP has significant difficulties in providing each of these types of services.

- **Interpretation and Translation Services.** The SDP does not even know exactly how many families have ESL and need documents translated or need interpreters. The estimate is about 19,000. Yet, without more accurate numbers, there is no way to ensure that SDP has the resources to provide proper services. Further, the SDP recognizes eight “main” languages but there are actually many more languages within the District. Even with the “main” languages, such as Spanish, families are encountering difficulties. They do not receive paperwork in their language and they do not have someone available who is an adequate translator.
- **Bilingual Counseling Assistants [“BCA”].** The SDP uses BCAs to help provide interpretation and on-site translation help for families. But there has been a significant reduction in the number of BCAs this year.

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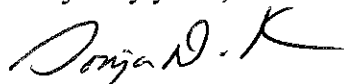
- **ESL Services.** The SDP's provision of ESL services is uneven throughout the District. Overall, there is a concern about the quality of programming, especially at the middle-school level. Children are spending sometimes as long as seven years in ESL types of programs, which is a much longer time frame than expected.

The Law Center appreciates the present resolution and urges Council, within the Resolution, to hold the hearings as the Resolution provides and to recognize that residents in Philadelphia who speak a language other than English have children who go to our schools and like all parents, need to interact with school staff. The parents need the interpretation, translation, and BCAs to do so and their children need quality ESL services. The District's general comment at this time about the services is that they are unable to provide or improve these services at current funding levels.

These children who access services are the future of Philadelphia. The Council may wish to hold a specific hearing on educational issues. But most of all, we urge Council to approve the funding request of the District because, as you have heard through this testimony, there are real impacts on real people, parents and children in our city, and denial of language access is one of those impacts.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 267-546-1319.

Very truly yours,



Sonja D. Kerr  
Director, Disability Rights

cc: Michael Churchill, Esq.