



**PA House Education Committee Public Hearing**  
**May 24, 2021**

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Good morning, Honorable Members of the House Education Committee. Thank you so much for holding this special hearing to focus on the social, emotional and mental health of our Commonwealth's children! Like you, our little school, Gillingham Charter School, agrees that it's essential to focus on the whole child when considering how best to educate our youth.

I'm Nicolle Hutchinson, one of the founders and the Executive Director of Gillingham. I've been an educator in public, private, and home schools for 30 years. I've worked in rural Maryland and urban South Florida. I've trained teachers across the nation and published curriculum. To prepare myself to lead a Charlotte Mason Charter School, I chose the University of Pennsylvania to earn my masters in educational leadership. One of the best decisions of my life.

Gillingham is the first and only public Charlotte Mason school in the United States. This type of education was only offered in private religious schools and in homeschools before Gillingham. We provide our students with a Relational Education, and we serve 250 students in Schuylkill County located in the anthracite coal region. We have been the only brick-and-mortar charter school in the county for 10 years, and over 70 percent of our students qualify for Free and Reduced Meals. We are extremely proud of our students' success, with 90 percent of our graduates who go off to college being the first generation in their families to do so.

Because we are located in a county that is known for having one of the highest alcoholism rates in the nation and because of the rising opioid epidemic, we have made it our mission to offer an education focused on the whole child. We believe that this approach will allow our students to break generational cycles and author free, full lives. They leave us being fully prepared for the workplace, whether that be blue or white collar, entrepreneurial or bureaucratic endeavors. Our aim is to raise up citizens who are magnanimous thinkers and doers.



Our core belief is that children are born full persons and complete individuals, so we have developed our relational program to engage all aspects of the young human being.....mental, social, emotional, spiritual and physical. And we have found that ALL students, no matter their IQ, background, race, religion, disability or diagnosis, FLOURISH and grow in our school.

We know from research that trauma, neglect, genetics, home life, substance abuse, poor diet, and lack of exercise are the causes of most mental health issues. And, recent research suggests that anxiety and depression in young people have spiked with the rise of screen time and social media. It has also been shown that those who suffer from depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses have low levels of serotonin and dopamine neurotransmitters.

What researchers are finding is that anxiety and mental illness affect the brain's capacity and functioning, most notably in the front part of the brain that supports our learning skills, or what is referred to as Executive Functioning Skills. Thus, like students with attention deficit disorder, these students are impulsive and disorganized. They are not inwardly motivated. They cannot hold much in their memory. They struggle to control their emotions. Unless they are interested, they struggle with attention.

Notice that ALL of those skills are REQUIRED for learning in a school and for learning with others!

Students who suffer from mental illness and Attention Deficit Disorder (or ADD) did not bring these issues upon themselves and cannot change the physical make-up of their Executive Functioning brain just like I didn't choose my poor eyesight and can't make myself see without these glasses. I'm not happy about it. Believe me, people with ADD and mental illness are not happy about the struggles they experience in learning and being with others.

And the result? They have very low self-esteem, experience failure (even though success is attainable), and often give up. These experiences lead to more depression and heightened mental illness.

Thus, educators need to understand the symptoms and provide the "glasses" to enable these "Smart but Scattered" human beings to learn and experience success in life!



At Gillingham we do that in 2 ways.

First, we have structured our school's systems, instruction, schedule, classes and physical building in ways that support the well-being of all our students.

We create a "relaxed alertness" in the brain. If students are stressed, worried, scared, hurried or scattered, then the amygdala part of the brain freezes, and the logical side of the brain cannot function properly. So, we want our students to be in a relaxed state so that they can be alert to learn the most that they can.

Also, our practices boost serotonin and dopamine, which affects a student's mood and motivation.

Some of those practices intentionally focus on our school's atmosphere to create a sense of home and belonging:

- We are intentionally a small school with small class sizes. Everyone knows your name!
- Our teachers loop, meaning that they teach the same students for 2-4 years.
- Teachers eat daily with their students.
- We constantly recognize our students' success using the Nurtured Heart Approach - - energizing the positive, not the negative, and using quick, unemotional resets to help students who behave poorly to reset and gain control to resume their greatness. They experience their positive selves.
- Teachers and students daily use Restorative Practices and circles to build community. Some students call their classes families. Little bullying occurs, but when it pops up, the community handles it and restores relationships.
  - Current research demonstrates how both of these approaches stimulate the amygdala in the brain, growing empathy and compassion. Thus, students become more empathetic and compassionate.
- Our school building is not institutional but beautiful and orderly, helping the brain to stay relaxed and positive.
- We have outdoor classrooms, and students spend time learning, eating, and playing outdoors. They go on nature walks. Thus, they boost their serotonin and dopamine levels.



- Phones are not allowed in classrooms, so they are not distracted, tempted, bullied or bullying others.

Our primary method of instruction, which is experienced by all our students, also strongly supports mental health:

- Interesting books and hands-on activities keep the mind highly engaged and thus attentive, which leads to student success.
- Students are taught to narrate, ask the questions and discuss ideas, so their ideas and their questions matter. They aren't interrogated by the teacher but taught to take risks.
- Student-led conferences and student-led portfolio assessments are driven by students, and they learn to be accountable for their own learning and experience adult support and accountability to live up to their potential!
- We don't have electives - - so art, Shakespeare, Spanish, Latin, physical education, sports, music, instrument lessons, nature study, and internships are REQUIRED. Thus, we are requiring all students to take risks and to experience success in areas they didn't know they could be successful in, which is an authentic self-esteem booster. It ALSO requires them to use the right side of the brain and their physical body, so they are boosting dopamine and serotonin.
- During the COVID pandemic, we used relief funds to purchase a Chromebook for every student and provided all the necessary internet services so that they could all experience our live lessons and eat lunch together, so that they would not be lonely and thus decreasing chances of depression.
- We also hired our first full-time IT Specialist, which is a big deal for a small school like ours, to help students and families that may not be well-versed in technology.

Additionally, Gillingham has developed another layer of supports for our students with mental illness and the side effects of Executive Functioning Deficits, who need additional services:

- We hired an expert on Executive Functioning Deficits to train our entire faculty and to help us develop supportive, tailored strategies. For example, we learned to create Individualized Positive Point Systems for those who need extra outward motivation.



- We learned that these students struggle with narration or retelling, so we let them use “scribble notes” while they listen to the reading or watch the activity.
- We learned during the pandemic that these students do not work well alone, so we made sure to:
  - a. Keep live instruction in the morning for 3 hours.
  - b. Keep a Chat and Chew lunch on Fridays for community building.
  - c. Offer Study Group Cohorts with Coaches in the afternoon during the asynchronous time, since they’d need to be with people and not be alone all day. This also helped keep the depression and loneliness levels low!
- Additionally, instead of sending students with extreme needs to expensive alternative education programs, we have designed our own Self-Contained Classrooms. These Classrooms provide an alternative program that increases outward motivation, decreases class sizes, and tailors the books and schedules to promote more social and emotional learning and Executive Functioning Skill coaching.

In an effort to serve the whole child, Gillingham has developed supports for all our students.

- We have a social worker who works with all our students - with or without an Individualized Education Plan – and she hosted a weekly student support group during remote learning.
- We created the position of the “Student Coach” to support all students. They see him as a coach, not a disciplinarian. If they are emotional or highly agitated, they can leave the classroom and go to him immediately. Those without IEPs need consistent, stable support and accountability, too, and so he acts as a case manager to some.
- Both collaborate on our Student Assistance Program along with the nurse, teachers, and others volunteers who want to support students.
- And finally, our Reflection Room is a place to cool off and to reset. Students can get a break from everyone, they can talk through the restorative questions, and they can remember coping strategies and return when they and the class are ready.

We keep implementing and tweaking these strategies because we know that they are working. We read testimonies and listen to our students, parents, teachers and stakeholders who see the difference our programming is making in the lives of our young people with mental illness. Here are just a few examples of what we hear from our families, teachers and students:



- “My child would never have graduated.”
- “My child is no longer depressed.”
- “My child would not get up for school, but now she gets up every day with a smile.”
- “My child loves school again.”
- “I’m not depressed anymore.”
- “I’m not bullied anymore.”
- “I don’t bully others anymore.”
- “We learn together...it’s like family.”
- “I am more respected because I am respecting others now.”
- “These kids can talk to anyone and really listen, and even ask great questions!”
- “I have discovered what I want to do and I have a future.”

So, how can the legislature and the state help us in serving our students?

**First and foremost, on a very basic level...public charter schools need your help in ending the false narrative that we are profiting off the backs of students with special education needs or that we are overidentifying children with IEPs.** The truth is that families come to Gillingham with children who have struggled for years to get the services and supports they need and deserve from their local school district, or their child has never been able to achieve success at their local school district only to come to us and find that the student has a special education need that was never identified. In fact, for two years in a row, PA’s Secretary of Education has been asked during Appropriations hearings if the PA Department of Education has evidence that public charter schools mishandle the identification of special education students or the delivery of services. The answer continues to be NO. The vilification of PA’s public charter schools by politicians and school district leaders needs to stop. At Gillingham students are treated like people, not dollars signs, and it is time that everyone joins us in that mindset.

Second, most public charter schools do not have access to the mental health services and supports offered by PA’s intermediate units, so we often rely on the services offered by our counties to assist with keeping costs manageable. As I mentioned previously, Schuylkill County is struggling with high substance abuse rates, and we continue to be slow in bouncing back from the pandemic. At Gillingham, we have found that the mental health and social services available in our county are sparse



-- we recently learned that we don't have a therapist in the county who deals with Reactive Attachment Disorder, which adversely affects student learning. Due to this lack of access at the county level, our students rely on the services we provide to an even greater extent, but it also means that we have to spend additional funds to hire in-house professionals or pricey third-party providers. **I would encourage the PA Department of Human Services and the PA Department of Education to work together to ensure there are resources at the county level to assist schools with providing mental health services because we all need to be in this fight together.**

**Third, I would like to see the PA Department of Education approve more professional development opportunities that focus on preparing educators (not just special education teachers) to support students with mental health needs.** This topic is constantly evolving and even something like Executive Functioning Deficits, which is part of our mental health services at Gillingham, is not taught to many teachers, even those specializing in special education! Especially now, as we will welcome students back into the classroom in September, educators and school leaders need to be able to identify mental health indicators in all of their students.

Finally, as I mentioned previously, Gillingham and so many of PA's public charter schools provide mental health services to their students as part of their general budget expenditures, and these services are not just provided to students with identified IEPs, so we are getting no additional funding for these supports. **I would ask that the General Assembly continue to support ALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS in the 2021-22 state budget, including public charter schools.** No student or parent should have to fear that the school they love will be closed due to funding cuts from the state or the funding for their special education services will be slashed.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share the amazing work we are doing at Gillingham Charter School, and I warmly welcome any of you to our school for a visit next school year. I am happy to answer any of your questions.