

June 22, 2008

The Honorable Florence Shapiro  
P.O. Box 12068  
Capitol Station  
Austin, Texas 78711

Senator Shapiro,

I thank Senator Shapiro and others for this Public Hearing in regards to Special Education and adult services. I am a father to a 20 year old Asperger son in the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

We have been surprised that there is little to help young adults as they come out of high school. I do not want to complain about our difficulties, but to quickly present some ideas that I believe would greatly help children and young adults with ASD in our State.

Recommendation 1 - I am giving credit to the California Blue Ribbon Autism Commission Report of 2007 that emphasizes a whole chapter (Ch 7) to improving opportunities for ASD young adults. To summarize their report, here are some of their ideas:

- a. Direct California (Texas) Community Colleges, in collaboration with other appropriate public and nonpublic partners, to expand community college-based "programs" designed for career training of people with ASD across levels of functioning.
- b. Direct California (Texas) State universities and the University of California (Texas) systems to promote multiple educational pathways for person with ASD.
- c. Direct California (Texas) Department of Education, in collaboration with other appropriate public and nonpublic partners, to establish demonstration projects at multiple sites ...

I would like to add that my son is going to a first of its kind program for Autism at Midwestern State University in Fall 2008. It is a Pilot Program by Dr. Millie Gore and its purpose is to provide Autism Support to young adults with ASD. This program uses the strengths of ASD students, but also supports the students in areas where they may struggle such as developmental delays, processing, organizing of task, social interaction, executive function, sensory issues and development of life skills.

We, my family and son, are very fortunate and thankful to have received this opportunity. This program is for only 4 ASD young adults and there are some 20000 ASD students in our present public school system. We have a huge number difference

and a great need to provide more opportunities in Texas.

The State of Texas needs to encourage educational programs like Midwestern State University and also needs to create programs in its public schools specifically to address ASD children.

Recommendation 2 - It is very troubling that the local schools battle families over diagnosis and related educational services to address ASD. I request that "educational labels" be eliminated. This idea is from the Missouri Autism Blue Ribbon Commission, Recommendation Number 30.

Copied from the report:

"... that the term "educational diagnosis" be eliminated in addition to any distinction made between a medical diagnosis and "educational diagnosis". A medical diagnosis, if one has been completed, should be allowed to establish eligibility for services."

I also think Recommendation 29 from the Missouri Blue Ribbon Commission Report is also important in that Texas change the existing IDEA law to allow "automatic eligibility for children who have received a medical diagnosis of ASD".

Recommendation 3 - This topic is very troubling to me, because it shows how difficult it is for ASD families to move ahead. Our present system allows for Due Process and the use of attorneys by ISDs (paid by our taxes) against our families. It is tragic that ISDs would use attorneys to deny services to ASD families, but this occurs throughout the State and in most, if not all local districts. I believe that this is fundamentally wrong. Our families are dealing with Autism and its varied effects upon our children, but yet the Texas Educational Agency will pay attorneys to shut us down if parents believe with their heart that enough is not being done for their child. This incredible burden is too much and I ask that this Hearing consider stopping the use of attorneys against Special Need families. As a minimum, I request that a State-wide investigation be made into the use of educational funds for litigation against Special Need families in the State of Texas and that this report be made public to Texans.

Recommendation 4 - Independent or community living ideas are being pursued even now by "Helping Hands" Autism Act Bill (HR 6282) in a three-part legislative package designed to support families dealing with autism spectrum disorders. It was introduced by Reps. Kay Granger (R-TX), Jim McGovern (D-MA), Chris Smith (R-NJ), Mike Doyle (D-PA), Dan Burton (R-IN) and Ruben Hinojosa (D-TX) in the US House of Representatives this year.

I request that the State of Texas pursue similar efforts to provide housing as best suited to the individuals and functioning of ASD adults. An example is that having an apartment is viewed as a hallmark of independence by many young adults. Many ASD students are intelligent, but struggle in various areas of independent living, such as transportation, fixing or repairing items, maintaining employment, paying bills, etc., but yet are capable of living with minimum or specific supervision. Housing that creates independence and opportunities to grow as an adult should be created in Texas, because ASD adults can contribute to our communities if given housing opportunities that do not lead to isolation or dependency.

In closing, I gratefully thank all Senators who are helping our ASD families in Texas. Without you there will be no to little improvement for our families. We know that you have the best interest for our families.

Sincerely

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Senator Shapiro,

I urge the State of Texas and the Texas Education Agency to create a program specifically to address the cognitive social impairments of ASD children in public schools.

Under IDEA 2004 Section U.S.C. 1400 part (d), it states "The purposes of this title are to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living." Children with the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have unique needs to be taught social skills to prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. The classroom is just one of many social environments that ASD children need urgent intervention.

The impact of social interactions for a child in school occurs all day as he/she participates in groups and interacts individually with others. The ability of ASD children to successfully make friends on the playground, assist other peers in homework, and interact in group activities will be determined by their grasp or lack of social cognitive skills.

Unfortunately, ASD children are at a huge disadvantage as many struggle or lack ability to play with others (alone on the playground), respond with an appropriate comment to peers, and participate in simple sharing of feelings on an experience. The ASD children are soon isolated and considered by others within a short period of time as ONE who is either incapable of interacting normally or extremely odd. This can soon lead to behavioral issues, depression, despondency and even failing of classes as the child finds that he is unable to interact with others and frustrated in coping with the intense social environment which he does not understand. The neurological difference of ASD children greatly limits their ability to improve their situation. Direct intervention must be provided with a social skill curriculum in order for improvement to occur socially and educationally.

Truly, ASD children do not even know that others are having "little" thoughts about him all day. Every day in school only reinforces and builds in the minds of other children

as they gather knowledge on him. There is often one predictable outcome .... that the ASD boy will be rejected as peculiar and odd, because Autism has so firmly obstructed his ability to interact in an acceptable social manner.

This outcome though can be changed and addressed over time with a deliberate focus on social skills. It may take time to increase ASD children social skills, but with a proven curriculum, such as Michelle Garcia Winner, progress can be made to help the child navigate social situations and develop social skills as they move up into the middle and high school years.

The importance of providing social cognitive skills in public schools must be addressed. Michelle Garcia Winner has provided presentations throughout the United States as a leading expert on social cognitive skills. Recent studies indicate that the prevalence of autism is 1 in 150 children and most practitioners and educators are faced with meeting the social needs of children with ASD on a daily basis. A report was recently published on the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders that clearly indicates that intervention can be greatly influenced with a curriculum and lessons to address deficits in social cognitive skills (Brief Report: Measuring the Effectiveness of Teaching Social Thinking to Children with Asperger Syndrome (AS) and High Functioning Autism (HFA)).

I urge the State of Texas to provide social skills curriculum in all public schools, beginning with an intense curriculum in the elementary school years and continued through the Middle and High School years. The development of social skills does not begin and end on a certain day. Every year ASD children mature and face different social skills and must gain abilities to interact to increasing complex social and academic tasks. I recommend that a Social Skill Program should be adapted from a professional, leading expert such as Michelle Garcia Winner, and considered as a "Best Practice" Curriculum/Program throughout the State of Texas.

Sincerely

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