

Testimony on SB 840
Senate Education Committee
March 27, 2007

SB 840 represents a joint effort by teachers and parents of students with disabilities to address a critical need – the need for teachers who work with students with disabilities to have the training they need to make the classroom experience a positive one for the student, for the teacher, and for the others in the class.

One of the most frequent complaints our agency hears from families is that their children have been put in classrooms with teachers who know nothing about their child's particular disability, have not been trained in how to make basic modifications to the curriculum so their child can learn the material, and/or do not know how to respond to their child's behavior in a way that minimizes rather than escalates that behavior. This is not fair to anyone involved.

The majority of students with disabilities are in general education classes for most or all of the school day. Under the requirements of NCLB for access to "highly qualified teachers" in the core subject areas, these numbers will be increasing. In addition, an even greater percentage of students with disabilities will be taking the state required assessments. Requirements that students with disabilities receive instruction based on scientifically-based research create a need for more and better training for teachers. It is in the best interest of all parties to increase the quality and quantity of training being provided to teachers. Though there is some good training available now, it is not enough. **SB 840** will supplement, not replace, the current offerings.

There are several components of **SB 840** which are especially compelling:

- It requires TEA to develop "professional development institutes," a model that has been successful in the areas of math and reading;
- The institutes will also train paraprofessionals, who are very involved in providing direct instruction and supports to many students with disabilities;
- There will be stipends paid to those who attend, which should increase participation; and
- The training will be based on good current research and designed to be effective in teaching the required curriculum, rather than just generic training on disabilities.

Though the institutes will cover all disabilities, the emphasis in the bill on autism and autism spectrum disorders is justified because:

- There is more current research on how to successfully educate a student with autism than perhaps any of the other disabilities represented in special education;
- Even among trained special education teachers, there is a need to update what they were taught. There are still places in this state operating autism programs on outdated models that we know now don't work;
- Because of some of the unique behaviors exhibited by students with an autism spectrum disorder, it is imperative that all the adults who work with that student understand those behaviors and how to respond. The way untrained adults tend to respond to certain behaviors is frequently in a way that makes the situation for a student with autism worse rather than better; and
- Almost all students with an autism spectrum disorder who are included in a general education class are provided supports and assistance from a paraprofessional. These individuals, who are a very important component of a good program, cannot be effective if they do not understand autism.

I hope that you will show your support of students with disabilities and their families by passing **SB 840**.

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