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TESTIMONY TO THE SENATE EDUCATION COMMITTEE REGARDING  
THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL PROGRAMS SERVING  
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

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In November 2006, the Texas Council on Autism and Pervasive Development Disorders presented the legislature with a list of education recommendations that focus on the need for educator training. With recent developments in special education research and delivery of services, Texas AFT feels that is where the legislature should continue to focus, too.

During the 80th legislative session, some progress was made toward better meeting the needs of children with autism spectrum disorders, but much is left to be done. Sen. Eddie Lucio's SB 419 (enacted as part of another bill) requires health-insurance coverage for autism and autism spectrum disorders for children at ages three to five; passage of this measure was a major development for early intervention and treatment of autism spectrum disorders. However, other very important initiatives fell short of enactment. SB 840 by Sen. Lucio (which passed unanimously in the Senate) and SB 603 by Sen. Leticia Van de Putte would have ensured proper support and training for teachers and paraprofessionals who serve students with disabilities, including those who work primarily outside the area of special education but who are increasingly called upon to provide crucial services for special education students. Now, more than ever, this training is essential to the progress of students with autism spectrum disorders.

The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows state educational agencies to consider a student's responsiveness to intervention (or RtI) as one component of specific learning disability determination. This alternative is being actively promoted by the U.S. Department of Education and allows schools to use up to 15 percent of available IDEA funding for these services. The premise is that traditional methods have mistakenly identified many students as individuals with disabilities, without first determining whether their learning difficulties could have been overcome through interventions in the regular classroom. The switch to RtI has broad implications, extending far beyond the customary sphere of special education for students with disabilities. It holds the promise of more individually tailored instruction for many more students in the regular classroom. In addition, this approach can ensure early identification and appropriate interventions for those students who have an autism spectrum disorder.

AFT has been very active in the implementation of RtI at the federal and state levels. As part of our ongoing participation, we serve on the Texas Response to Intervention Coordination Council with TEA staff and other education associations. A consistent refrain we hear

among experts and practitioners in the field is the need for relevant, ongoing, job-embedded professional development for teachers as well as paraprofessionals. For an RtI component to be successful in addressing current challenges, personnel need to be properly trained to ensure proper delivery of services. If schools adopt new initiatives in name only, without providing the training that is essential for proper delivery, then students cannot advance to their potential.

Through our work on the RtI Coordination Council, we are working with TEA to develop a guidance document for school districts that will provide districts with clear and concise information to help identify funding sources for these essential programs. We expect this resource to be of considerable help for those districts that are either not aware of the availability of RtI or that are not already harnessing all available funding for these valuable programs.

In its 2006 report, the State Autism Council recommended the creation of a statewide autism resource and training center to coordinate and provide professional development and training for school, medical, health and law enforcement personnel involved in educating, diagnosing, and/or providing public safety for people with autism spectrum disorders. Although the legislature has not yet funded this recommendation, TEA has taken the important step of selecting ESC Region 13 to manage the Texas Initiative for Autism Training. According to the council's March 2008 update, ESC Region 13 will work in conjunction with TEA to create and maintain a Texas Autism Training Initiative, providing training, technical assistance, and support for educators who serve students with autism. Now that ESC 13 has served as a model, the legislature ought to expand these service centers to serve others throughout the state.

In the next session, Texas AFT will strongly support a proactive package of legislation that results in effective policy to improve educational services quickly for all students with disabilities, particularly those with autism spectrum disorders. Teachers and paraprofessionals are hungry for up-to-date training to help them meet these students' needs. Legislation to provide research-based training for both teachers and paraprofessionals responds to the number-one educational priority identified by special education experts in Texas and the nation, as well as by the U.S. Department of Education.