

August 18, 2008

Honorable Florence Shapiro, Chair, Education Committee
Honorable Kip Averitt, Member, Education Committee
Honorable Leticia Van de Putte, Member, Education Committee
Honorable Tommy Williams, Member, Education Committee
Honorable Steve Ogden, Member, Education Committee
Honorable Dan Patrick, Member, Education Committee
Honorable Royce West, Member, Education Committee
Honorable Judith Zaffirini, Education Committee

Dear Senators,

First I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak in front of you today. Next, I would like to challenge you to imagine getting closed in a room with 20 other people because you have to be there every day. You see them, and you know they see you, but for the most part, you are invisible. They don't speak at you, they speak around you. Your life is in slow motion there; a lot of movement, a lot of talk, but you can't seem to connect with it, to catch on. It's like they're speaking another language. What do they expect of you? Your heart starts racing. Maybe if I'm just quiet, they'll just leave me alone. I don't know what to do. This lady is in front of the room is talking. She's asking us to get into groups. No one wants to be in my group. They're making fun of me now. How do I fit in? What do I say?

Day after day you are thrown into that situation because you are a child with Asperger's. It is on the Autistic spectrum and is a neurological disorder that is rare and hard to diagnose. Unlike Autistic children, Asperger's kids are typically verbal at a young age. They have an average to above average intelligence and are often called "little professors." They are generally not athletic, are clumsy, have attention problems, and their social skills are poor. They are often unable to read social cues. What we consider conversational common sense is a mystery to them. Their worlds are bogged down by trying to fit in, being bullied, feeling invisible, longing for friends and having none, depression, and isolation; in other words, they view their worlds as a threatening place. The difference between Asperger's children is that they look and appear like "normal" children. Children with Asperger's are not learning disabled; thus, the educational system will not accommodate them.

My child goes to school and they teach around him because he is able to pass a standardized test, and he does not act out in the classroom; they ascertain that although he has a form of Autism he has no educational need. What, therefore, is an educational need? Since every child is guaranteed a Free and Appropriate Education according to IDEA, Autistic children, as with other children with disabilities are eligible for special education services in accordance with their individualized education programs; the fact that he is passing academically or looks normal should have nothing to do with it. As much as I love my son, I know that there are others like him; indeed, I looked at the testimony of those who were present at the June 23rd hearing. For them, for my son, for all the Asperger's children I know who won't and cannot speak on their own behalf, I would like to make the following recommendations:

- Schools should not be allowed to deny services because a child has a medical diagnosis and not an educational diagnosis. As it stands now, I could get my son services under OHI (Other Health Impaired), the school's "preferred plan", but that would not service him. That would not provide the level of services that special education can afford him such as social skills training (which is offered through the speech pathologist), counseling, and a special education bus.
- IDEA states that, "...all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate education that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living." Because the Asperger's child is unable to interact with others in a social environment that he/she does not understand, he becomes labeled by his peers (and teachers), depressed, isolated, frustrated, angry, extremely anxious and despondent. The neurological component makes it impossible for her to improve her situation. Direct intervention in the form of social skills training is mandatory. The social component is an educational need every bit as important as his core classes, for without it, he cannot succeed in the real world and thrive; he cannot speak the same language that we all speak, nor provide a simple handshake or eye contact. At my son's school, they have "Social Skills Training" for their Emotionally Disturbed population; however, what this ends up being is a study hall for academics. It is a place for them to catch up on their work. I can catch my son up on his work, but I

can't provide him with the school environment conducive for social skills. Consequently, the social skills class that I am speaking about should be a curriculum that the schools and teacher must follow and implement. It must be as important for these children as their core subjects for indeed, he should be able to speak the non-verbal and verbal language we all speak in.

- Because Asperger's children are commonly depressed and isolated, counseling services should be made available to them. Counseling services will help them in learning how to build trusting relationships (very difficult for them), and will assist them in coping skills.
- Since NCLB and the advent of inclusion, children are being placed in inclusive classrooms. Personally, my child would not want a "pull-out" environment, although some Asperger's children may. However, it would be prudent for general educators to be trained and certified in special education. Most educators do not know how to meet the needs of an Asperger's child in the classroom...academically or socially, nor do they have time, with the demands of all of the paperwork. If general educators are expected to teach the special education children, they should be trained in it. You can not realistically rely on a handful of special educators in the school to pass on all of their knowledge to the general educators; it hasn't worked thus far. General educators are still looking for the "cookie cutter" mold and lack compassion for those that are different, especially for those that look normal.
- Present at the ARD committees (and/or at the RTI (Response to Intervention Committee meeting) if the student continually fails to qualify, should be an objective third party, not paid for by the school district...such as a child's advocate. So many times when services are in question, the administration meets with the teachers and diagnostician before the parent comes to ensure they are all in agreement. One needs to be a special education attorney to know your special education rights. An education is the right of the child and should be in his best interests.
- ASD children can be over-stimulated. They should be afforded a place to go to "gather themselves" for 5 or 10 minutes without repercussion. This could be the counselor's office, the administrator's office, or a designated classroom with a teacher. Often I hear the school failing to make accommodations for children

middle school aged and above because, "this is the real world." Are you not entitled to re-group your thoughts during the day? And you, dear Senators, know how, and take that privilege for granted.

Should my son attempt, he will be written up because he is not being provided services through special education.

- Because of their poor social skills and accompanied bullying, children with Asperger's often have fear around people. Additionally, they have anxiety. If you found your environment to be threatening, wouldn't you be fearful too? Asperger's children should be allowed simple accommodations to afford them to be successful at school, such as walking through the hallways after passing periods. I wish life were so simple.
- Students with Autism, including Asperger's are not receiving proper related services. Our children cannot succeed on pure academics alone. For Asperger's children, the social component is a must. Some of them need speech, or physical therapy for their poor handwriting. All would benefit from counseling to deal with the depression and isolation that the disorder brings. Special education buses may be a comfort so that the Asperger's child is not already over-stimulated before he arrives to school. Statistics state that Autism is on the rise. We cannot ignore that our children need these services. School districts would have you think that schools are providing integrative and inclusive services that will prepare your child for the real world. Your child is being thrown into a class where they may or may not get to his individual needs that particular day, depending upon the circumstances; and, if he is like my child and not a disturbance, then good luck with that!
- Transition services for children with Asperger's are poor at best. If districts are denying services and teachers don't even know what it is, how can they be providing transition services? To deny these services would be to invite a higher "drop out" rate and a higher rate of "home schooling" which is a politically appropriate term for stating, "the school system is not meeting my child's needs and I can't get my kid to school anymore." If I could home school my child, I would. Statistics suggest that children follow in the same educational tradition as their parents. I am a very educated woman, and there was no indication that my son would not follow. Indeed, we started his life reading 30-40 books a day and challenging him in

every sense. The educational system has beaten him down. He goes into a classroom in the back, tries not to talk so that no one will make fun of him, and is not bothered by the teachers because he doesn't ask questions. My son wishes to drop out of school. Because he is not a disturbance, they choose not to stir the pot. They offer nothing to engage him in class, or outside of class. There are no mentoring programs. The only response from the school is that "he is getting better." There are no programs that he looks forward to in High School. School in and of itself is an effort.

Often one hears about how parents are not getting involved in their children's education, especially in these times in the dissolution of the family system in the United States. What I am here to tell you is that even when the family is fervently seeking help in the educational system, it is the system that is cutting corners and seeking loopholes. It has placed a hardship on my family not only that I have a child with a disability and we have to live adjust to that, but that I am forced to spend all my hours as a single parent when I am not working in search of special education law or researching my child's right to an education in the United States. This is when I can identify with my child's world.

In summary, I hope that you have not only listened to what I have had to say, but you have heard it. I have a son with Asperger's disorder. If he were here today, you wouldn't see him, for he would be invisible. He wouldn't make a sound, except for the heavy breathing of fear before he entered. He is not failing school. The school system is failing him. I believe that every child should receive an education in this fine state, regardless of his disability. I guess you believed it too, otherwise, we would have never had IDEA. Please let us send the clear message to our schools that we meant what we said. Disabilities take many forms, even when the child doesn't appear disabled.

Respectfully yours,

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