

March 27, 2007

Senate Education Committee
440 Sam Houston Bldg.
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Chairman Shapiro and Committee Members:

My name is Ann Fendesack, and I have worked exclusively with students with autism for almost seven years. I have seen programming that has worked efficiently and successfully, and I have seen other models that pander to the "squeaky wheel" parent and will only intervene after student failure. My concern: If we continue to discuss funding rather than best practice programming, further fragmenting the conversation, more students without funds or activist parents will fall through the cracks. If we divert funds to vouchers to solve the problem of incoherent and inconsistent programming for students with autism, how can we improve the situation? With new federal funding and bills passed by this Legislature, this field is about to coalesce into one with standards and practices; why choose to undermine public education just at this time? I also have seen the results of unregulated private models and have spent years with those students in remediation, so my experience with private models has not been positive. Michele Garcia-Winner, considered an expert in the field of Social Skills, has said many times that she has observed outstanding intervention and instruction in the public schools, albeit inconsistently and sporadically, but has seen poor outcomes and questionable, if not downright harmful, practices in unregulated, overpriced, and questionably credentialed private models.

There ARE things to fix:

- Staff-to-student ratios should be mandated for all models: self-contained, blended models, Social Skills/Gen. Ed Inclusion.
- Best practice credentialing and training for Autism Specialists AND teachers.
- Expectations that all schools should have or share someone who is very experienced with the disability and can case-manage actively.
- Increase awareness that many students with Aspergers/High Functioning Autism are pushed to barely graduate without the skills that make them employable. In most cases, these students meet "at-risk" criteria.
- Increase funding for professional training.
- Develop TEKS and curriculum for Social Skills/Study Skills pre-K-12.
- Develop outcome-based criteria for graduation with regard to employability for ALL students in special education.

This field is characterized by many methods competing for the private dollar as well as a parent's hope. How can private models, for the SAME price, possibly provide and/or replace the sources of established institutional support that we all take for granted: administrative leadership and oversight; general education populations without which inclusion and "least restrictive" placements cannot happen; and other special education models with which to collaborate and cooperate (vocational, speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, dyslexia, life skills)? What about the physical plants of existing public schools?

This is a boondoggle, pure and simple; the cost of vouchers is greater than the loss to public school coffers. It is the student and his/her family, after all, who will suffer when they leave the accountability and resources of the public school model. With vouchers, accountability rests solely on the shoulders of the parent and civil courts. As an autism teacher, my concern is always about time ... time to remediate basic and functional skills, academics, Social Skills, and employability. Time lost in a poor private model can never be replaced, except in the form of compensatory services, which will fall to individual districts after they lose in court. Will the Legislature compensate those districts? What about the students without activist parents? What will happen to them?

Please add my voice to the protest against diverting tax dollars from public education to fix a system that is already on a consistent course of improvement.

Sincerely,

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