

My name is Melissa Olive and I hold a doctorate in Educational Psychology. I am currently employed by the Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD, Inc). Prior to working at CARD, I was a professor at UT-Austin and UNR where I trained teachers to work with individuals with disabilities in a variety of capacities, including Early Childhood Intervention, Special Education Life Skills Classes, Special Education Autism Units, and inclusive classrooms.

Thank you for your efforts regarding children with disabilities. Several of you have long standing commitments to this population and I am continually grateful for that.

As you may already know, general education teachers do not necessarily receive specific training on teaching individuals with disabilities. This is not a fault to the Universities that train them but rather due to a system that limits the total hours an undergraduate may be required to complete while also requiring a certain number of hours in areas such as the Core Curriculum. This leaves approximately 3 semester hours devoted to teaching individuals with disabilities. In this course, often referred to as "disability of the week" undergraduate students are exposed to different types of disabilities but the depth of content is limited due to the time limitations of a one semester course.

I was pleased to see several components in the bill including disability specific training, techniques based on scientific research, and appropriate management of behaviors.

I was also pleased to see a priority for teachers who teach students with autism. Some individuals may question this priority; therefore, I would like to provide additional information to support this focus. First, the number of children with autism continues to be on the rise. This year, more children will be diagnosed with autism than AIDS, diabetes and cancer combined. Many of these children will be educated in general education settings and as such, teachers need appropriate training to effectively teach them.

Second, early detection and intervention for autism can lead to improved outcomes in individuals with autism. Thus, training early childhood teachers to use appropriate instructional methods would have long term cost savings in Education as well as in Human Service areas by decreasing the need for special education services and community living supports (For additional information on this research, please see my testimony to the Senate Finance Committee dated 2/12/09).

Third, a number of studies have shown that specific instructional techniques are effective for children with autism. The most recent review (Eikeseth, 2009) noted that children who received a teaching technique known as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) made significantly more gains than control group children in a variety of outcome measures. Similarly, in their review of autism treatment research, Rogers and Vismara (2008) concluded that early intensive ABA is the only "well-established" treatment. Reichow and Wolery (2009) recently completed a meta-analysis of early intensive behavior intervention for children with autism. They reported that on average, ABA is an effective treatment for children. In summary, research has demonstrated that intensive ABA can produce substantial gains in children with autism. Thus, teachers need to learn how to use this scientifically proven instructional strategy.

Finally, research has shown that instructional techniques that are effective for children with autism are also effective for children with other disabilities. For example, Fisher and colleagues (2000) demonstrated that a behavior intervention plan based on ABA was effective for an individual with cerebral palsy (CP) and mental retardation (MR). Hasazi, & Hasazi (1972) used ABA techniques to successfully address math skills for a child with digit reversals. Rasmussen & O'Neill (2006) used ABA techniques to successfully address the problem behavior of 3 students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders.

The remaining point that I would like to make is that behavior management strategies based on ABA have been shown repeatedly to have positive effects on behavior. Specifically, classrooms who utilize a 3-tier approach to problem behavior are more likely to prevent problem behaviors and are more likely to have time to focus on academic instruction. In this approach, teachers learn to modify antecedents to prevent problem behavior while identifying skills to teach students to use in lieu of challenging behavior. In this approach, teachers are also taught to use reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviors resulting in more positive student and teacher interactions.

Again, I thank you for your commitment to individuals with disabilities. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have questions regarding the instruction of students with disabilities.

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