

October 13, 2006

The Honorable Florence Shapiro
Senator
Chair, Public Education Committee

TESTIMONY on the subject of SCHOOL VOUCHERS for Children with AUTISM

Arguing: AGAINST

Dear Senator Shapiro and Members of the Public Education Committee:

I would like to thank you for your work on this important issue because an educated populace is the foundation for a strong democratic republic like ours. I thank you for the opportunity to give my democratic input that vouchers for children with autism will only make matters worse instead of better because vouchers look at the wrong problem.

I currently homeschool my eight-year-old son with autism. I homeschool him because the Special Education Section of the **Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the State Board of Education have shown no meaningful leadership to prepare schools, teachers and administrators to address the educational needs of children with autism, the most rapidly growing disability.** The very first person that I spoke with five and a half years ago, after learning that my son's bizarre and uncontrollable behavior had a name associated with it was another parent of a child with autism. This parent was a certified special education teacher, and she told me something that has stayed with me to this day and continues to guide me as I make choices about what is best for my child. **The certified special education teacher said that nothing in her educational training as a teacher, as a special education teacher, had prepared her to teach her son with autism. Nothing.**

There is something wrong in a state when students are placed in classes where teachers can barely spell the name of the disability, much less know how to accomodate it. I attended a disability conference in the Houston area on Oct 7, 2006, and I overheard two different teachers at different times comment that they had no idea what to do with the children with autism in their classroom. No idea.

I know that the Senator and members of the Public Education Committee have been made aware of the difficult nature of the horrible condition that autism can be. I know that the Committee members have looked at *Educating Children with Autism* by the National Research Council where it clearly states that teachers **MUST** be specially trained to be successful teaching children with autism. **Yet Texas shows little to no interest in assuring that its teachers are properly trained.** The autism certification that used to exist was discontinued in 2003. Currently there is **no** autism certification. There are no classes that focus on autism in university training courses. The materials that the ESCs are putting out covers information so basic that I, as a non-professional parent, could have written them. The 65% rule of what schools can count as expenses related to education includes athletics but does not include teacher training. **Vouchers are not going to solve this problem.**

Most children with autism benefit from an environment with minimal distractions and instruction one on one with a teacher or therapist in the initial stages of learning. This is not education. This is medical therapy. The people who are trained to do this are not teachers, they are Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs). They have a specialized training that encompasses psychological, behavioral, and educational training. As a part of their certification they must receive hundreds of mentored clinical hours. This puts them on par with many therapeutic clinicians. **Children who need this level of teaching, need insurance to pay for this, not the school system.** Hopefully Texas will have the courage to stand up to the insurance industry and make them pay their share for the treatment these children need. **Vouchers will not solve this problem.**

What vouchers will do is create even less incentive for schools to do the right thing for their kids with autism. Vouchers will make it even harder to mandate the needed insurance coverage for children with autism because it gives weight that these children's needs are primarily education and not medical.

I urge the members of the Public Education Committee to look to Pennsylvania's Department of Education as a model for what can be accomplished with effective use of public funds designated for the purposes of educational programs of children with autism. Texas needs to look somewhere because what TEA is currently allowed to get away with in their misuse and misdirection of funds intended for special education programs borders on fraud. I had hoped that the legislature would examine this more closely in the 80th session when the TEA underwent their extended Sunset review, but that hope was extinguished in the third called session of the 79th.

Just remember, children with autism are not just their family's problem. At the rate autism is occurring, 1 out of 166 children born today, it may very well be the undoing of our society as we know it today. It will definitely bankrupt the schools. Just remember, these children coming through schools who aren't being taught will become adults about the time that the majority of the baby boomers begin retiring. There is not enough space in public institutions for all these people. There is not even enough jail space to hold them. Your grandchildren will be footing the bill for the bad policies of today that are allowed to continue. Additionally, people who have job mobility, i.e. computer programmers, medical doctors, and university professors, etc., are leaving Texas because the schools and services for children with autism are so abysmal.

I do not envy you in your task of sorting this out. I ask your forbearance with my blunt assessment of the situation, but the issues are too important to waste time on niceties. Vouchers are not the answer.

Sincerely,
Cynthia Singleton
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