

Ms. Evelyn Langlieb Greer, Board Member

**SUBJECT: AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER TASK FORCE**

**COMMITTEE: INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**LINK TO DISTRICT**

**STRATEGIC PLAN: IMPROVE AND EXPAND CURRENT CURRICULUM**

Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that typically lasts throughout a person's lifetime. It is part of a group of disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups and is four times more likely to strike boys than girls. Autism impairs a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. It is also associated with rigid routines and repetitive behaviors, such as obsessively arranging objects or following very specific routines. Symptoms can range from very mild to quite severe. It is estimated that up to 70% of children with ASD will also present with co-morbid cognitive disabilities. The cognitive disabilities can also vary from mild to quite profound. Autism is complicated by this very nature: individuals can vary in terms of their autistic symptoms (from mild to severe) and in terms of intellectual ability (from gifted to profoundly mentally handicapped).

Autism was first identified in 1943 by Dr. Leo Kanner of Johns Hopkins Hospital. At the same time, an Austrian child psychiatrist, Dr. Hans Asperger, described a milder form of the disorder that is now known as Asperger Syndrome. These two disorders are listed in the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as two of the five developmental disorders that fall under the Autism Spectrum Disorders. The others are Rett Syndrome, PDD NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder), and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. All of these disorders are characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills and social abilities, and also by repetitive behaviors.

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990, which mentions autistic children specifically, autism spectrum children are entitled to a "free and appropriate" education funded by the government, whether it be in a mainstream or special education classroom. According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than a half-million individuals in the United States have ASD and government statistics suggest the rate of autism is rising annually. The number of students in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) with ASD has risen from 1,571 for the 2005-2006 school year to 1,700 for the 2006-2007 school year, an increase of .49%. Autistic students represent 4.15% of the special education population in M-DCPS. According to the Centers for Disease Control, of the approximately 4 million babies born every year, 24,000 of them will eventually be identified as autistic.

In light of the predicted growth in the number of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, and the need to have comprehensive procedures in place for early identification and appropriate programs to respond to the myriad of educational, developmental and social issues of ASD children, it is appropriate to create an Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force to review the programs offered by the M-DCPS and make recommendations for changes, if necessary.

The Task Force should undertake a review of the current programs offered by M-DCPS, and a review of the best practices around the country at other public and private educational institutions, and then make recommendations for changes in M-DCPS programs and practices, as may be necessary or advisable. In addition, the Task Force should oversee the preparation of a roadmap for parents, to be posted on the M-DCPS website, setting forth clearly the steps the federal and state guidelines the District implements in identifying ASD children, offering programs for ASD children, developing criteria used to establish Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and placement options, and providing the Summary of Procedural safeguards for Parents of Students with Disabilities which outlines the procedures for resolving conflicts.

**ACTION PROPOSED BY**

**EVELYN LANGLIEB GREER:** That the School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida:

1. Establish an Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force comprised of the following persons:
  - An Administrative Director, Division of Special Education;
  - An Instructional Supervisor, Programs for Students with Autism;
  - A Regional Instructional Supervisor appointed by the Superintendent;
  - Two staff members, including one principal, involved in autism education, appointed by the Superintendent;
  - Two teachers involved in autism education, appointed by the Superintendent;
  - A staff person knowledgeable about Special Education funding, appointed by the Superintendent;
  - Dr. Michael Alessandri, Director, University of Miami Center for Autism & Related Disabilities;
  - Ms. Teresa Becerra, Parent & President, Autism Society of Miami-Dade, or an appointee from that organization;

- Ms. Jackie Merens, South Florida Regional Director, Autism Speaks, or an appointee from that organization;
  - Two parents of children with ASD who has been active in M-DCPS, appointed by the Board Chair; and
  - Two Board members appointed by the Chair.
2. That such Task Force should:
- review the current programs offered by M-DCPS; and
  - review best practices around the country at other public and private educational institutions;
  - make recommendations for changes in M-DCPS programs and practices, as may be necessary or advisable;
  - prepare a roadmap for parents, to be posted on the M-DCPS website, setting forth clearly the steps the federal and state guidelines the District implements in identifying ASD children, offering programs ASD children, developing criteria used to establish Individual Educational Plans (IEPs) and placement options, and providing the Summary of Procedural safeguards for Parents of Students with Disabilities which outlines the procedures for resolving conflicts.
3. That the Report of such Task Force be presented to the Board at the December 2007 Board meeting.