

Ms. Evelyn Langlieb Greer, Board Member

**SUBJECT:           REPORT TO THE SCHOOL BOARD OF MIAMI-DADE COUNTY,  
FLORIDA, *AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER TASK FORCE***

**COMMITTEE:       INSTRUCTIONAL EXCELLENCE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

**LINK TO DISTRICT**

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

At the School Board Meeting of July 11, 2007, the School Board approved Item H-6, proffered by Evelyn Langlieb Greer, which directed The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, to establish an Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force (ASD) to review the current programs offered by M-DCPS; 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; and 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 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. Item H-6 requested that the report of such Task Force be presented to the Board at the December 19, 2007 meeting.

In order to keep the Board advised as to the discussions and progress of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force, minutes of the Task Force meetings were presented in item H-21 at the October 17, 2007, Board meeting and in item H-8 at the November 20, 2007, Board meeting  
by Evelyn Langlieb Greer.

The following information and recommendations are contained in the report:

1. An overview of the continuum of services for the prekindergarten and K-12 ASD programs including curriculum and classroom design; parent education and involvement; professional development; and community collaboration with UM/CARD for case consultation, professional and program development/research.

**H-3**

2. A review of best practices that include:

- interventions beginning at the earliest possible age because the symptoms of autism are often measurable by 18 months and outcomes are reported to be more favorable for those benefiting from early intervention; interventions that are intensive; and interventions that involve families as active partners.
- educational programs directed and implemented by teams of professionals with extensive training and specialized experience in autism interventions.
- ongoing objective assessment of student progress and programs utilizing a curriculum that allows for systematic, planned instruction.
- programs addressing communication, social, sensory and motor, and cognitive development; adaptive functioning; and positive behavior supports.

3. The Task Force priority recommendations focus on:

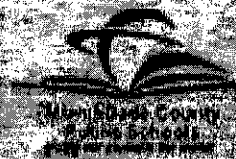
- adopting the best practices guidelines/checklists and the mission statement;
- establishing an ASD parent liaison in every school with an ASD class;
- establishing a M-DCPS ASD committee of the Superintendent's Advisory Panel for Special Education;
- planning, monitoring, and supporting transition programming at all schools; increasing the number of staffing specialists;
- establishing a pilot kindergarten program in each region for students transitioning from the Learning Experiences Alternative Program for Preschoolers and Parents (LEAP) Pre-K program to focus on the continued support for the development of social skills;
- developing a mentoring program for teachers;
- enhancing and expanding professional development through the use of online and alternate models of delivery;
- utilizing video recording during classes to allow teachers and parents, to more closely monitor student progress, evaluate instructional effectiveness, and share useful information between families and teachers;
- creating parent/guardian and educator surveys; and
- adopting a comprehensive ASD planning model.

Copies of the *Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force* Report will be forwarded to the Board members under separate cover and will be available for inspection by the public in the Office of Board Recording Secretary, Room 924, and the Citizen Information Center, Room 158, 1450 N.E. Second Avenue, Miami, Florida 33132.

**ACTION PROPOSED BY**

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

1. Request that the Superintendent receive the *Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force* Report; and
2. Request that the Superintendent direct staff to review the report and recommendations, develop a budget, determine the feasibility of implementing the recommendations and transmit a plan of action to the Board.



**Autism  
Task Force**

Report to the School Board:

# **Autism Task Force Report**



H-3

December 19, 2007

**School Board of Miami-Dade County Public Schools**

Mr. Agustin J. Barrera, Chair

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Ms. Evelyn Langlieb Greer

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Deputy Superintendent

Curriculum and Instruction

Dr. Lourdes C. Rovira

Associate Superintendent

Curriculum and Instructional Support

Mr. Will Gordillo, Interim Assistant Superintendent

Office of Special Education and Psychological Services

This product is funded by the State of Florida, Department of Education, Division of Public Schools and Community Education, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services, through federal assistance under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), Part B, Special Projects, and state general revenue funds. It is developed by the Office of Special Education and Psychological Services, Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

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## M-DCPS AUTISM TASK FORCE Executive Summary

### Mission of M-DCPS Autism Task Force

The purpose of the Autism Spectrum Disorder Task Force was to review programs offered by Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) and make recommendations for changes, if necessary.

The Task Force was charged with undertaking the following:

- A review of the current programs offered by M-DCPS;
- A review of the best practices around the country at other public and private educational institutions;
- Making recommendations for changes in M-DCPS programs and practices, as may be necessary or advisable.
- Overseeing the preparation of a roadmap for parents, to be posted on the M-DCPS website.

### M-DCPS Task Force Members

CODE	REPRESENTATIVE	DEPARTMENT/AGENCY
(B)	Ms. Evelyn Greer Board Member	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(B)	Mr. Renier Diaz de la Portilla Board Member	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(B/D)	Mr. Will Gordillo Administrative Director Division of Special Education	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(B/D)	Dr. Ann Marie Sasseville Instructional Supervisor Programs for Students with Autism Division of Special Education	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(S/R)	Ms. Kathy Maguire Regional Instructional Supervisor Regional Center V	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(S)	Ms. Aida Marrero, Principal Blue Lakes Elementary School	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(D)	Ms. Adrienne Green Staff Member Instructional Systemwide	Miami-Dade County Public Schools

## Autism Task Force (ATF) Report

(T/S)	Ms. Lidia Carbonell Teacher Campbell Drive Middle School	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(T/S)	Mr. Joselin Cabrera Teacher	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(S)	Mr. Edward Brown Executive Director	Miami-Dade County Public Schools
(C)	Dr. Michael Alessandri Director & Clinical Professor of Psychology Center for Autism and Related Disabilities	Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD)
(C)	Ms. Teresa Becerra President and Parent Autism Society of Miami	Autism Society of Miami
(C)	Ms Jaclyn Merens South Florida Regional Director Autism Speaks	Autism Speaks
(B/P)	Mr. Angel Zayon Parent	Parent
(B/P)	Ms. Yolanda Gonzalez Parent	Parent

### CODES:

- (B) = Appointed by School Board
- (C) = Community Based Organization
- (D) = District Staff/Special Education
- (P) = Parent of Student with ASD
- (R) = Region Staff/Special Education
- (S) = Appointed by Superintendent
- (T) = Teacher of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

### M-DCPS Task Force Meeting Dates

August 27, 2007

September 18, 2007

September 25, 2007

October 9, 2007

October 23 2007

November 13, 2007

## M-DCPS Autism Student Count 1999-2000 to 2007-2008



<u>Academic Year</u>	<u>#ASD</u>
1999-2000	899
2000-01	1,011
2001-02	1,118
2002-03	1,239
2003-04	1,327
2004-05	1,464
2005-06	1,610
2006-07	1,700
2007-08	1,846

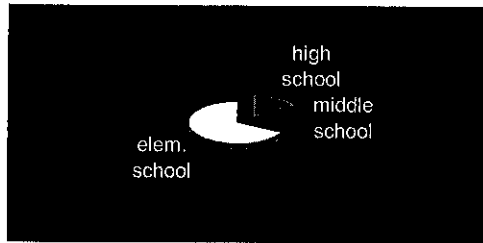
### Current Students with ASD Eligibility by Grade Level

Pre K	TBA	Grade 6	114
Kindergarten	169	Grade 7	114
Grade 1	203	Grade 8	86
Grade 2	194	Grade 9	110
Grade 3	180	Grade 10	81
Grade 4	163	Grade 11	86
Grade 5	142	Grade 12	153

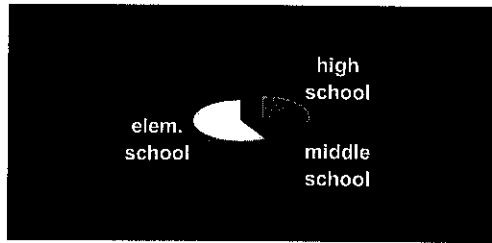
*This information does not include students with secondary and tertiary autism eligibility which increases the total amount by an additional 30%.*

*Note: ASD Eligibility Rule changed July 1, 2007 and now includes a broader spectrum of students with ASD. Increases are highly likely after July 1, 2007.*

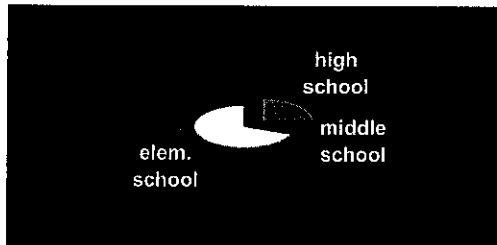


**Current Students with ASD Eligibility by Region*****Region 1***

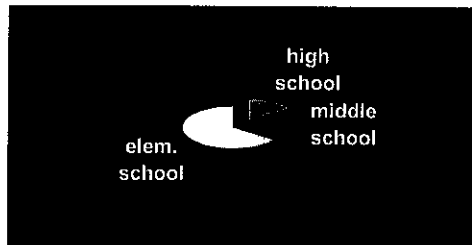
Elementary	230
Middle	56
High School	<u>56</u>
Total	342

***Region 2***

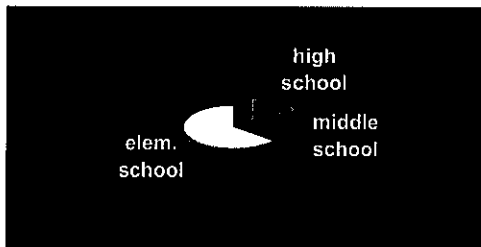
Elementary	144
Middle	31
High School	<u>72</u>
Total	247

***Region 3***

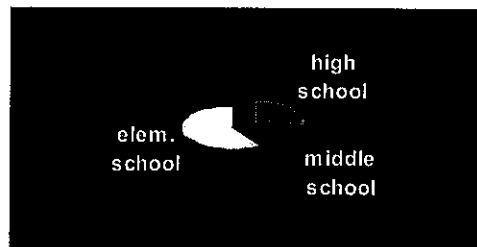
Elementary	139
Middle	12
High School	<u>51</u>
Total	202

***Region 4***

Elementary	128
Middle	38
High School	<u>38</u>
Total	204

***Region 5***

Elementary	280
Middle	80
High School	<u>72</u>
Total	432

***Region 6***

Elementary	218
Middle	54
High School	<u>99</u>
Total	371

**Autism Data Sources**

District autism data:

Region autism data:

Grade level autism data:

M-DCPS Survey 9, M-DCPS Survey 2

Unduplicated Exceptionality Count, September 9, 2007

PARIS (Pupil Ad Hoc Retrieval Information System) October 1, 2007

## **OVERVIEW OF MIAMI-DADE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS CURRENT M-DCPS AUTISM PROGRAMS**

### **Overview of Pre-kindergarten Programs**

Pre-kindergarten students between the ages of three and five years old who have been identified with Autism Spectrum Disorder may receive services in a variety of programs dependent on the recommendations of the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) Team. Some students who are identified as Developmentally Delayed may also be placed in one of these settings as determined by need and the IEP Team.

The continuum of services in M-DCPS – Pre-kindergarten is as follows:

- Walk-In Speech/Language – Children enrolled in other private programs at the choice of the parent
- VPK Pre-K Classroom – One slot reserved for a Pre-K student with disabilities, 18 students and two adults (8:30-2:00)
- Co-teaching classroom – 12 students with disabilities, 12 VPK students and three adults (8:30-2:00)
- Inclusion Reverse Mainstream – Eight students with disabilities, eight Role Model Students and two adults (8:30-2:00)
- Half-Day Learning Experience – An Alternative Program for Preschoolers and Parents (LEAP) – Four students with ASD, six to eight Role Model Students and three adults (8:15-10:45 or 11:30-2:00)
- Half-Day Reverse Mainstream – Eight students with disabilities, two to four Role Model Students and two adults (8:15-10:45 or 11:30-2:00)
- Full Day Reverse Mainstream – Eight to 12 students with disabilities, two to four Role Model Students and two adults (8:30-2:00)
- Full Day Autism Program – Six to eight children with ASD and three adults (8:30-2:00)

All pre-kindergarten classrooms in M-DCPS incorporate the following curriculum models: High/Scope, Building Early Language and Literacy (B.E.L.L.), Conscious Discipline, Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA), and LEAP Social Skills. In addition specific curriculum models used in classrooms for Autism include TEACCH – Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication – handicapped children, LEAP – Learning Experiences – An Alternative Program for Preschoolers and Parents, Incidental Teaching and PECS – Picture Exchange Communication System.

Parent education and involvement is a component of all pre-kindergarten programs. LEAP families receive 9 weeks of training in Positive Parenting Practices. All parents

are provided with a monthly parent/child Activities Calendar and monthly meeting calendar. Parent support groups are initiated through Parent to Parent. Printed materials are provided to parents and they are allowed to check out Media Library books and videos.

### **Overview of K-12 Programs**

M-DCPS also has a variety of programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder between the ages of five and 22 years old in the kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade placement. The placement is also dependent on the student's need and the IEP Team's determination.

The continuum of services for K-12 is as follows:

- Inclusion – All general education class with consultation, general education with in-class support
- MAPS – Moves to Academic and Personal Success – Inclusive model aligned with academics, wrap around support emphasizing social and organizational skills, safe place
- Resource Room (Elementary)/VE Class (Secondary) – General education with pull-out (resource) or VE classes as needed, classes consist of other students with disabilities (not exclusively students with Autism Spectrum Disorder)
- Separate Class – Eight to nine ASD students and two to three adults, small and large group instruction, one-to-one teaching, inclusion for Art, Music, PE, Lunch as determined at IEP meeting
- Center Schools – Serves students with co-morbid psychiatric diagnosis, similar to Self-Contained but offers additional intensive support (psychiatric, counseling, lower teacher-student ratio)
- Pre-Vocational Programs – 18-22 year olds, Project Victory, Project ACCEPT and Project Bridge

The curriculum and classroom design is based on the TEACCH Model and a principal of ABA (Discrete Trial Teaching) is being used in the Separate Classroom as well as the PECS – Picture Exchange Communication System. Classrooms also emphasize social and communication skills. Assistive Technology and sensory activities are provided.

Professional Development is a strong component to all teachers working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. All new teachers and new paraprofessionals in self-contained programs receive five full days of training. All inclusion teachers participate in a three-day training. Other training provided as needed or determined by the IEP Team includes Functional Assessment of Behavior, Social Communication for Students with Asperger's Syndrome, Individual Student Planning and Autism/Asperger's Awareness and Language and Literacy for Students with Cognitive Impairments.

M-DCPS has community collaboration with UM-NSU CARD for case consultation, professional development and Program Development/Research. Autism Speaks heads up the Annual Walk which increases community awareness. Additionally, the Autism Society of Miami-Dade and the YMCA are currently collaborating with M-DCPS Staff.

### **Current Professional Development Opportunities for Pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) Programs**

Professional development offered to new teachers and paraprofessionals in the Pre-kindergarten Program for Children with Disabilities is comprehensive and designed to give teachers and paraprofessionals the tools they need to be successful in their classrooms. All new Pre-K teachers receive the following professional development:

- High/Scope Curriculum (5 days)
- Building Early Language and Literacy (BELL) (4 Days)
- Classroom Assessment
- IEP/Matrix Training

Program specific professional development is also offered on topics that include data collection, reinforcement, behavior management, use of visual supports, PECS, assistive technology, social skills, communication, Conscious Discipline and content areas. Teachers and paraprofessionals in classrooms serving students with autism spectrum disorder and LEAP preschool classrooms additionally participate in monthly meetings from September to January in order to address specific needs in those settings.

The Pre-kindergarten Program for Children with Disabilities also has a Mentoring Program. All new teachers are assigned a mentor teacher for their first year of teaching. The mentor teacher visits the classroom once a month or more to assist the new teacher and team members in implementation of the curriculum, classroom organization, assessment, adaptations, lesson plans, room arrangement, and data collection. The mentor teacher guides the new teacher and team through the first year of teaching in the Pre-K program and is available to answer questions and assist the new teacher and team when needed.

### **Current Professional Development Opportunities for K-12 Programs**

The focus on professional development for K-12 programs is primarily on new teachers and paraprofessionals as the department supports approximately 30-40 new teachers each year. New teachers are encouraged to attend a five day training (spread out over 4-5 weeks) in order to learn the basics for success in their classrooms. This professional development covers classroom organization, designing and using visual supports, communication, social skills, social stories, behavior management, toilet training, and curriculum. The professional development for paraprofessionals new to

self-contained classrooms for students with autism is also a five day training (spread out over 4-5 weeks) and includes many of the same topics covered in the teacher training. The department is also involved in providing IEP driven "Autism Awareness Training" and IEP Implementation or Individualized Student Planning at the beginning of each school year, primarily for teachers in inclusive settings. M-DCPS has successfully collaborated with UM-NSU CARD to provide the awareness trainings, typically to 60-100 schools each year.

Additional Professional Development offered:

- Autism Strategies for Teachers in Inclusive Settings (3 days)
- Language and Literacy for Teachers of Students with Cognitive Impairments, Autism, and Dual Sensory Impairments (5 days)
- Functional Assessment of Behavior for Teachers of Students with Cognitive Impairments, Autism, and Dual Sensory Impairments (2 days)
- Social-Communication Skills
- Alternate Assessment
- Paraprofessionals New to Inclusion
- Autism 101 for Administrators
- SPED for School Police
- Advanced Strategies in Autism

## **Review of Best Practices in Educating Students with ASD & Related**

### **Recommendations from the Autism Task Force**

In 2001, the National Academy of Sciences published Educating Children with Autism, a project undertaken by the National Research Council to evaluate the evidence-base for educational interventions for students with autism spectrum disorders. Leading experts from multiple disciplines comprised the Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism and set forth in an effort to outline “best practices” in autism spectrum education. Some of the essential best practices include: (1) identification and intervention should start as soon as possible; (2) intervention should be intensive with large numbers of meaningful, developmentally-appropriate learning opportunities in a school day; (3) programs/classrooms should have highly supportive physical (including sensory), temporal and staffing environments; and (4) teaching procedures should be highly individualized, carefully planned, research-based, and allow for generalization and maintenance of skills. Additional best practices with specific Task Force recommendations are noted below:

#### **BEST PRACTICE: Ongoing Program Assessment**

While the Autism Task Force heard a presentation of the existing programs for students with autism spectrum disorders within the M-DCPS, there was not sufficient time to systematically review these programs to determine if “best practices” are or are not in place and to what extent they are being implemented effectively throughout the district. It is recommended that the district consider the following recommendations related to ongoing program assessment.

#### **RECOMMENDATION: Adopt Best Practices Guidelines/Checklists**

It is recommended that M-DCPS adopt an autism best practices checklist. Several options already exist and are available. For example, the statewide CARD program, as part of its Florida Department of Education grant activities, has developed a checklist for self-contained autism programs and one for general education programs serving students with autism. In addition, a checklist developed by the Professional Development in Autism Center (<http://depts.washington.edu/pdacent/index.html>) is also available. Each of these tools parallels the National Research Council’s best practice parameters. These practice parameter guidelines can and should be used as an autism-specific complement to the comprehensive Special Education SPED Program Standards Review which covers administrative structures (procedures, LEA functions), records review (IEP, cumulative record folder, Matrix of Services), learning environment standards (teacher and paraprofessional functions; learning areas, instruction, and materials; assessment; behavior management), parental involvement, professional development, related services, and inclusive practices.

#### **RECOMMENDATION: Ongoing Autism Program Assessment**

A comprehensive evaluation of current district autism programs was beyond the scope of this task force, but ongoing programmatic assessment is recommended to ensure

best practices are being utilized with consistency and continuity. The purpose of this evaluation would not be to assess personnel but rather for the district to measure the extent to which its current autism programs are consistent with accepted standards of best practice.

There are a number of different strategies a district might employ to conduct ongoing program assessment but the strategy that is used by the Professional Development in Autism Program and likely yields the most sustained improvements is noted below:

**Program Assessment Strategy:** Use of Best Practices Checklist(s) by Teachers as Self-Evaluation Tool

*Checklists can be completed at two time points during the school year: early in the school year and toward the end of the school year as a follow-up. Based on the first assessment, teachers completing the form would identify areas needing improvement. Strategies to enhance target areas could include workshops, conferences, technical assistance from UM-NSU CARD, and/or support from District Autism Support Teachers.*

**RECOMMENDATION: Adopt Mission Statement for Autism Programs**

Proposed M-DCPS Mission Statement for Educating Students with ASD

- *M-DCPS aims to provide students with autism spectrum disorders an appropriate education by adopting the best practice guidelines outlined by the National Research Council, and by implementing these evidence-based practice parameters at a high level of treatment fidelity with consistency (throughout the district) and continuity (across grade levels).*

**BEST PRACTICE:** Families should be active partners in the intervention.

Parent/family involvement is an essential component to every child's educational experience. Parents/family members have long been known to play a critical role in enhancing developmental outcomes for children with autism spectrum disorders. The AFT recommends the following enhancements to increase, promote, and support parental involvement in M-DCPS. These recommendations should be used in conjunction with M-DCPS School Board Rule 6Gx13-1B-1.012 which addresses Parental Involvement – A Home School Partnership.

**RECOMMENDATION: Use of Ed Connect to Enhance School to Home Communication**

Efforts to improve school to home communication are recommended. Specifically, it is recommended that the Ed Connect system be used more widely to share important information with families of students with autism spectrum disorders about M-DCPS policy/program changes, community events, parent training opportunities, etc.

Currently, the system of communication is ineffective at ensuring that families receive information consistently and in a timely manner.

**RECOMMENDATION: Create and Maintain an M-DCPS Autism Program Website**

This website would centralize the information from the current K-12 and Pre-K websites and also serve as the source for information regarding any policy/program changes, community events, parent training opportunities, etc. A road map for parents of students with autism spectrum disorders should also be included on the site directing them, depending on their child's age and the family's residence, to appropriate school, region, and district supports and contacts.

**RECOMMENDATION: Establish Autism Parent Liaisons in Schools with Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders**

An Autism Parent Liaison would be a volunteer parent whose role would be to gather information from M-DCPS and community resources to bring back directly to their own child's school for distribution. A lead agency would need to be identified to recruit, train, and coordinate the liaisons or a new parent liaison coordinator position within M-DCPS could be created.

The Parent Liaisons would assist in welcoming new families to their schools and provide a "Where to Turn" kit with local resources and information (possibly developed by the M-DCPS ACE – see below). These "kits" would likely include school information (SAC meeting dates, special yearly event calendars, etc.), along with community resources (CARD, Parent to Parent, Autism Society of Miami-Dade, Autism Speaks, Agency for Persons with Disabilities), and a list of after-school programs or other services a family might need. It is recommended that these kits also be available online at the autism website noted above.

With the support of school administrators, Parent Liaisons could hold "night time meetings" at their assigned schools or "coffee chat" meetings during the day. Parent Liaisons could host one or more ESE parent/child school event(s) per year in order to give ESE parents, students and teachers an opportunity to celebrate successes. Some M-DCPS autism programs are already offering such events but a more consistent and systematic approach across the district and grade levels is recommended.

Contact information for identified Parent Liaisons should be posted on individual school websites so that families are able to identify and access them easily.

Parents Liaisons would be encouraged to join the PTSA at their child's school to represent the students with autism and related disabilities and their families.



**RECOMMENDATION: Increase Number of Staffing Specialists**

Staffing specialists represent an important resource for families of students with disabilities. It is recommended that the caseloads of staffing specialists be limited to allow for more personal involvement in cases and communication with families. Increased numbers of staffing specialists would further allow better coordination of family needs during IEP meetings (e.g., translation services).

**RECOMMENDATION: Increase Number of Autism Support Teachers**

Autism Support Teachers represent an important resource to teachers in both self-contained and inclusive settings. It is recommended that caseloads of Autism Support Teachers be reduced to allow for the provision of the necessary supports to teachers in an effort to provide high quality services to students with ASD. Additionally, it was reported that teachers in inclusive settings are particularly stressed when confronted with the challenges of addressing the needs of students and families with ASD; turnover and teacher retention has become a major issue. Autism Support Teachers play a vital role in providing support to these teachers.

**RECOMMENDATION: Parent/Guardian Survey**

Given that only a small number of family members were able to participate in this public discussion (approximately 40-50 participants at each meeting), it is clear that many important voices were not heard. In order to obtain a more representative and valid picture of parental experiences, it is recommended that M-DCPS conduct a direct survey of parents/guardians of students with ASD to assess their perceived needs relative to their children's education and their own personal experience as family members of M-DCPS students with autism spectrum disorders. This survey should be constructed in such a way as to allow parents/guardians to express successes as well as challenges faced in trying to meet their child's educational needs, while also giving them the opportunity to rate their current experience across a variety of relevant areas (i.e., school climate, administrative support, IEP process, etc.).

**RECOMMENDATION: Establish M-DCPS ACE (Autism Committee of ESE Advisory)**

The purpose of developing ACE would be to continue the work of the M-DCPS Autism Task Force. The ATF is recognized as an important first step in building awareness and enhancing the educational experience for our students with autism but an ongoing effort is seen as essential. ACE would be open to parents and professionals in the community interested in working positively and proactively to enhance the educational experience in M-DCPS for our students with autism. A board would be established and meetings/recommendations would follow in order to continue the initial recommendations and work of the Autism Task Force.

Broward County has an ACE. M-DCPS could and should look to them for ideas and format. Broward ACE produces an annual pamphlet outlining critical information for parents. M-DCPS ACE would be charged with a similar task for parents of students with autism spectrum disorders in Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

**BEST PRACTICE:** Educational programs should be directed and implemented by teams of professionals with extensive training and specialized experience in autism interventions.

Best practices regarding staff development suggest that professional training should be sustained and implemented over time. Whenever possible, training should occur and/or continue at the actual work site, thereby embedding the training within the actual job. Training should be interactive, involving and engaging the participants, and it should be collegial, building and supporting a community of learners. Whenever possible, training should integrate different training modes (for example, Web-based learning, online interactions, traditional actions, text formats, face-to-face instruction) in order to appeal to the diverse learning modes of the trainees. Training should include current theories, demonstrations based on these theories, practice, feedback, and on-site coaching.

Professional development of autism staff should therefore use multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate impact, and it should prepare educators to apply research to decision making. Training should also provide educators with the knowledge and skills needed in order to collaborate when solving the typical problems encountered when dealing with children within the autism spectrum disorder.

M-DCPS faces several challenges as it plans professional development for teachers and paraprofessionals. These challenges include limited days available for professional development during the fall term due to moratoriums preventing access to teachers during the first month of school, during January through March (for FCAT), and on Mondays and Fridays due to difficulties schools have in obtaining substitute coverage. Additional challenges include finding and securing adequate training space, the voluntary nature of all training offered and limits on substitute funding.

With the best practices in mind, the following recommendations are offered:

<b>RECOMMENDATION:</b> <b>Educator Survey</b>
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M-DCPS should develop and implement a survey for teachers, administrators, therapists and paraprofessionals regarding their training needs, preferred formats, topics of interest, etc. M-DCPS has received this information from teachers in the past and has developed its current offerings based on staff input. A more comprehensive survey would be relatively easy to implement; however, it should be tied to real possibility for implementation. This would require a review of the resources available to expand professional development offerings and it would depend as well upon continued collaboration with UM-NSU CARD as a major professional development partner.

**RECOMMENDATION: Development of Teacher Mentoring Program**

M-DCPS should develop a Mentoring Program for K-12 teachers. Currently, teachers receive support through the District Autism Team and frequently through more experienced teachers at each site. Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) believes that a systematic structure of support for beginning teachers is crucial to their success. Accordingly, a three year comprehensive induction program, **Mentoring and Induction for New Teachers (MINT)** has been developed to support the varied levels of experience and education our new teachers possess. MINT has been designed to support the practice of new teachers, to create an awareness of professional responsibilities and ultimately, positively affect student learning. In addition to providing support to beginning teachers, the induction program provides opportunities for mentors and teachers to reflect upon practice in order to improve the quality of education, thus elevating the teaching profession and fostering a collaborative learning community for all educators. The goal of the District is to promote continual growth and success for all new teachers.

**RECOMMENDATION: Increase PEPSA Participation**

M-DCPS should encourage teachers to take advantage of the Partnership for Effective Programming (PEPSA) Program with UM-NSU CARD. The information is currently disseminated by email each year to every teacher of students with autism spectrum disorder. Additional efforts should be planned, coordinated, and implemented with UM-NSU CARD. UM-NSU CARD should offer an evening informational session at the beginning of each school year in order to make teachers aware of the program.

**RECOMMENDATION: Online Training**

M-DCPS should explore online resources and alternate delivery models to enhance or supplement current professional development offerings. Two online resources currently available free of charge to districts are The University Of Nebraska Lincoln Project PARA training modules (<http://para.unl.edu/index.lasso>) and The Ohio Center for Autism and Low Incidence (OCALI) Autism Internet Modules (<http://www.ocali.org/aim/>). M-DCPS also has avenues for providing professional development online and through pod casts. This recommendation would be relatively easy to implement as the resources are available and low-to-no cost. Staff time would be required to monitor the PARA program if used and the training may or may not duplicate current system offerings. The Autism Internet Modules are immediately accessible and can be integrated into new teacher training starting with the next school year.

**RECOMMENDATION: Specialized Professional Development for Kindergarten Teachers Receiving LEAP Students**

The Pre-kindergarten Program for Children with Disabilities in collaboration with the K-12 program should consider offering professional development aimed at those Kindergarten teachers serving former LEAP students. The purpose of this professional development would be to provide the new kindergarten teachers with the strategies

used to promote social interaction in the LEAP programs so that the same strategies can be used in kindergarten.

**BEST PRACTICE:** Ongoing, objective assessment of a student's progress is essential. Programs should utilize a curriculum that allows for systematic, planful instruction.

Curricula with comprehensive scope and sequence are necessary to address the pervasive deficits present in autism spectrum disorders. Data-based decision making about student progress, curricular modifications, and instructional methodologies are essential.

**RECOMMENDATION: Adopt Comprehensive Autism Planning Model**

In support of No Child Left Behind, system-wide efforts to increase student achievement have been adopted. Specifically, NCLB aims to increase the number of highly qualified teachers, enhance efforts to improve educational accountability utilizing data-based decision-making, and require the use of evidence-based educational practices to promote better student outcomes. Given the broad scope of these mandated changes, it has proven difficult for school systems to realize fully these objectives, while certainly districts nationwide are making progress. In order to enhance our efforts in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, it is recommended that the district consider adopting a comprehensive autism planning model. Two linked comprehensive planning models that appear to meet the demands of NCLB currently exist and are being adopted by other state autism programs; these should be considered. The Zigurra Model (Aspy & Grossman, 2007) and the Comprehensive Autism Planning System (Henry & Myles, 2007a, 2007b) are complementary models for designing and supporting comprehensive interventions for students with autism spectrum disorders. While an exhaustive discussion of both models is beyond the scope of this review, it is our view that these models are indeed worthy of consideration by the district. They appear to be complementary, comprehensive, individualized, evidence-based, data-driven, multidisciplinary, and user-friendly.

**RECOMMENDATION: Utilize Video Recording to Monitor Student Progress**

Video-monitoring of student progress, instructional strategies, and behavioral supports are widely used in the education of students with autism spectrum disorders in clinical settings.

Utilization of video recording during classes will allow teachers and parents, to more closely monitor student progress, evaluate instructional effectiveness, and share useful information between families and teachers. The video material will facilitate parental and school efforts to support student education. These videos also could be very useful tools to share information with the student's physicians.

Adoption of a comprehensive planning model and video recording will also significantly enhance our efforts to support seamless and effective school transitions for students with autism spectrum disorders.

<b>RECOMMENDATION:</b> <b>Revisit Florida Department of Education Grading Policy for Special Education Students</b>
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The Florida Department of Education issued a Technical Assistance Paper in 2006 requiring school districts to grade students with disabilities (including those with ASD) who are participating in the FCAT and pursuing Sunshine State Standards on grade level work regardless of the instructional level (often below grade level) the students may be pursuing on their Individual Education Plan (IEP). As a result, while ASD students may be successfully working at their instructional levels and mastering their IEP goals, they will likely receive failing grades on their report cards because they have not mastered grade level work. This is potentially devastating to ASD students who, like many students, use grades to evaluate their performance. In addition, low grades are likely to decrease an ASD student's engagement and motivation for school work. The ATF recommends that M-DCPS supplement the report card letter grade with a narrative that provides specific information on the student's mastery of instructional level work. The ATF also recommends that M-DCPS address this matter at a statewide level by adding it to their legislative platform for the next calendar year.

**BEST PRACTICE:** Transitions should be carefully planned in advance and well supported.

According to Florida Department of Education (FL DOE) disaggregated data on students with ASD, the number of students who had left school and were either employed, in higher education or both, one year after exiting school, was low relative to all ESE students. Of 178 exiting students with ASD (2004-2005 aggregate outcomes), 32 (18%) were reported to be employed; and 22 (12%) were in continuing education, for a total of 30%. SPP figures for all ESE students indicate 56% of exited students were either employed or in school.

The ATF recommends that successful transition planning should begin early and be carefully planned, supported and monitored until a student exits from the school system. The ATF also recommends that M-DCPS form community business partnerships to assist ASD students in identifying and obtaining post-secondary employment.

<b>RECOMMENDATION:</b> <b>Coordinate ATF Recommendations with M-DCPS Transition Task Force</b>
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The ATF transition recommendations should be coordinated with the ongoing efforts of the M-DCPS Transition Task Force.

<b>RECOMMENDATION:</b> <b>Early Transition Planning</b>
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The ATF recommends that all "in-school" transitions be appropriately planned, monitored, and supported by M-DCPS. Planning for in-school transitions should begin at least 9 months before the student exits from his/her current placement.

**RECOMMENDATION: Transition Implementation Plan (TIP)**

A Transition Implementation Plan (TIP) should be created for all articulations, including items requiring follow-up, contact information for M-DCPS position (not person) responsible for follow-up and target dates for implementation. The TIP should be created by the Local Education Agency (LEA) but the responsibility for implementation should be on the receiving school. The TIP should include an item for observing students in their current school settings and parent/child visit(s) to the receiving schools. Computerized tickler files should be developed for items requiring follow-up at the receiving schools (i.e., evaluations, special equipment, supports). Prepare autism support notes that are sent to the receiving schools with entries documenting strategies and reinforcers that have proven to be effective for each student.

**RECOMMENDATION: Develop and Implement "Parent Checklist" for Transitioning Students**

Create and distribute "Parent Checklist" for all transitioning students with a timeline for parents (timeline should begin in January for the upcoming September school year). Include the names and numbers of the ESE contacts (including summer contacts) at the receiving schools on the Parent Checklist. This document should also include contact information for scheduling visit(s) to the receiving schools.

**RECOMMENDATION: Increase Number of Transition Specialists**

Increase the number of transition support specialists/teachers and train those individuals on ASD. Currently, M-DCPS has only six transition support specialists and six transition support teachers (one each per Region) supporting the entire school district (approximately 5,000 transitions per year or 400 transitions per M-DCPS transition staff). We recommend at least one (ASD-trained) transition support specialist/teacher in each high school site. That would allow the region-based transition support specialists/teachers to provide support and training for in-school transitions as well as post-secondary transitions.

**RECOMMENDATION: Make ESE Student Teacher Assignments Earlier**

It is recommended that ESE teacher assignments for the following year be made earlier in the year (several months prior to the end of the school year) so that appropriate transitional supports and information can be shared effectively from teacher to teacher. Currently these assignments are made quite late and do not allow for proactive transition planning.

**RECOMMENDATION: Pilot Kindergarten Program Based on LEAP Model**

M-DCPS should explore ways to extend the support model provided by LEAP to kindergarten inclusive settings for students transitioning from LEAP preschool classrooms. A pilot program could focus on establishing a classroom in each region with identified clusters of transitioning preschool students.

**RECOMMENDATION: Support Development of a Model University School for Students with ASD**

Parents of students with autism spectrum disorders have expressed a desire to have a separate school site exclusively to meet the unique needs of students with ASD. As the recognized experts in ASD, UM/CARD should consider developing a university school program that would both serve to meet the student's needs and family preferences but could also serve as a center for professional preparation and development.

**RECOMMENDATION: Enhance Before- and After-School Programming Options and Access for Students with ASD**

Parents of students with autism spectrum disorders report limited before and after-care programs for their children in their community schools. It is recommended that this reported problem be assessed further by M-DCPS. For those programs that do offer before and after-care for students with ASD, it is recommended that specialized training be provided by agencies such as UM-NSU CARD to ensure meaningful social engagement and recreational activities.

**RECOMMENDATION: Create Specialized Extended School Year and Summer School Programming Options for Students with ASD**

It is recommended that M-DCPS create ASD-specific Extended School Year (ESY) and summer school programs that target social, recreational, and other important skills. This type of programming reflects our understanding that the social deficit in autism spectrum disorders is a fundamental disturbance requiring specialized intervention. We further recognize that generalization and maintenance of skills is compromised in many students with ASD, thus, ESY and summer school programming is often essential to maintain and transfer gains realized during the school year.

**RECOMMENDATION: Increase Access to Existing Schools of Choice and Summer School Programs**

The ATF requests that M-DCPS report on the number of ASD students accessing existing "Schools of Choice" and/or "Summer School Programs" within the District. We recommended creating a specific implementation plan to increase the number of eligible ASD students accessing those programs and providing the necessary supports for known or perceived barriers to access.

**RECOMMENDATION: Enhance Use of Assistive Technology for Students with ASD**

Many students with ASD benefit from the use of assistive technology for communication and access to the curriculum. Furthermore, assistive technology also enhances student

independence. M-DCPS should consider additional professional development and piloting the use of emerging technology to support student development. Additionally, M-DCPS should develop a "resource catalog" of technology currently owned by M-DCPS to include the following information: location, number of units/licenses actively being used or available for transfer to another student, etc.

**RECOMMENDATION: Implement Transition Pilot Program in Each Region**

The ATF recognizes that several specialized transition programs already exist in M-DCPS, such as Project Victory, Project ACCEPT, and Project Bridge. Nonetheless, the ATF recommends implementing a pilot program in each region modeled after the Post Graduate Alternatives for Secondary Students ("PASS") program at Broward County Public Schools. The PASS program services students with disabilities, ages 18-22, many of whom are students with ASD. The goal of this program is to provide on-the-job training, community-based instruction, supported employment, and vocational opportunities for students with ASD in collaboration with community-based organizations with the ultimate goal of assisting students in obtaining post-secondary employment. The PASS program reports a 60% success rate on post-school employment. Some important components of the PASS delivery model include school-based instruction, utilization of the TEACCH Structured Teaching Model, trained transition specialists/teachers at PASS sites, low student-teacher ratios (8 to 10 students per teacher plus teacher assistant), job coaching services, and coordinated planning related to the Transition IEP.

**RECOMMENDATION: Establish M-DCPS Community Business Partnerships**

M-DCPS Community Business Partnerships are necessary to identify and recruit employment for ASD Students. The ATF recommends that M-DCPS assist in creating community business partnerships to identify and recruit employment opportunities for students with ASD.

**RECOMMENDATION: Expand Education Outreach Efforts to Business Community**

Local employers should be educated on the advantages of and strongly encouraged to accept ASD students as part of their ongoing high school internship programs. Local employers who accept ASD students for employment or internships should be publicly commended for their efforts as a way to get other employers to follow suit (i.e., awards, public service campaigns, etc.).



## References

- Aspy, R., & Grossman, B.G. (2007). *The Zigurat model: A framework for designing comprehensive interventions for individuals with high functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome*. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.
- Lord, C., McGee, J.P., ed. (2001) *Educating Children with Autism*. Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism, Division of Behavior and Social Sciences and Education, National Academy Press: Washington, D.C.
- Henry, S.A., & Myles, B.S. (2007a). *The Comprehensive Autism Planning System (CAPS) for individuals with Asperger Syndrome, autism and related disabilities: Integrating best practices throughout the student's day*. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.
- Henry, S.A., & Myles, B.S. (2007b). *Parents' guide to the Comprehensive Autism Planning System (CAPS) for individuals with Asperger Syndrome, autism and related disabilities*. Shawnee Mission, Kansas: Autism Asperger Publishing Company.

## **Autism Task Force (ATF) Report**

The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida adheres to a policy of nondiscrimination in employment and educational programs/activities and strives affirmatively to provide equal opportunity for all as required by:

**Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964** - prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin.

**Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964** as amended - prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, or national origin.

**Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972** - prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender.

**Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 (ADEA)** as amended - prohibits discrimination on the basis of age with respect to individuals who are at least 40.

**The Equal Pay Act of 1963** as amended - prohibits gender discrimination in payment of wages to women and men performing substantially equal work in the same establishment.

**Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973** - prohibits discrimination against the disabled.

**Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)** - prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in employment, public service, public accommodations and telecommunications.

**The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA)** - requires covered employers to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave to "eligible" employees for certain family and medical reasons.

**The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978** - prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions.

**Florida Educational Equity Act (FEEA)** - prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin, marital status, or handicap against a student or employee.

**Florida Civil Rights Act of 1992** - secures for all individuals within the state freedom from discrimination because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, handicap, or marital status.

**School Board Rules 6Gx13- 4A-1.01, 6Gx13- 4A-1.32, and 6Gx13- 5D-1.10** – prohibit harassment and/or discrimination against a student or employee on the basis of gender, race, color, religion, ethnic or national origin, political beliefs, marital status, age, sexual orientation, social and family background, linguistic preference, pregnancy, or disability.

*Veterans are provided re-employment rights in accordance with P.L. 93-508 (Federal Law) and Section 205.07 (Florida Statutes), which stipulate categorical preferences for employment.*