

Ms. Maria Teresa Rojas, Board Member

SUBJECT: AUTHORIZE THE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS TO REVIEW, ANALYZE, CONSIDER POLICY ISSUES, AND REPORT TO THE BOARD THE FEASIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING THE SCHOOL CHOICE CONCEPT OF A DISTRICTWIDE CENTER FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

COMMITTEE: ACADEMICS, EVALUATION AND TECHNOLOGY

LINK TO STRATEGIC BLUEPRINT: INFORMED, ENGAGED AND EMPOWERED STAKEHOLDERS

Autism is not a single disorder, but a spectrum of closely related disorders with a common core of symptoms. The level of disability and the combination of symptoms fluctuate tremendously from person to person. In fact, two children with similar diagnosis may seem very different when it comes to their actions and aptitudes.

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association combined the pervasive developmental disorders into one diagnostic classification, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Autism Spectrum Disorder is diagnosed based on the existence of numerous symptoms that disrupt a person's ability to communicate, form relationships, explore, play, and learn. The pathway to an ASD diagnosis is at times difficult and consuming. It is frequently two to three years after the first symptoms are observed before a formal diagnosis is made. This is due in large part to worries about labeling or an erroneously diagnosis in the child. It is also clear that early intervention throughout the preschool years will advance a child's chance for overcoming his or her developmental delays.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) is at the forefront of providing services and support to students and parents facing a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder. In 2009, the Superintendent of Schools established the concept of the Autism Intensive Communication Academies. Currently, these seven academies are located throughout the school district offering a choice program for students who are eligible under ASD and Intellectual Disabilities. Additionally, there are ASD self-contained programs in 25 elementary schools, eight K-8 Centers, ten middle schools, and 16 high schools.

This agenda item requests the Board's authorization for the Superintendent of Schools to review, analyze, consider policy issues, and report back to the Board the feasibility of expanding on the success of the ASD programs in Miami-Dade County Public Schools by establishing the concept of a school choice program for a districtwide Center for Autism Spectrum Disorder. Some ideas the Superintendent may consider include the following:

- house the Center(s) at the current academy sites, or other school sites with low student enrollment;

- address specific issues at the Center(s) which may include social behavior and understanding, speech and language development, emotional difficulties, cognitive abilities, and sensory problems, among others;
- provide a rigorous comprehensive program with the latest educational techniques and research developments;
- expand and/or develop a strong parental component which may include professional development activities for parents and legal guardians during the day, after school hours, and/or on Saturdays;
- review and recommend staffing allocations which may include a child psychologist, a speech pathologist, an audiologist, a physical therapist, certified and trained counselor(s), certified special education teachers, specially trained paraprofessionals, both full time and/or part time;
- expand technology programs to address students' needs and parental involvement;
- determine if the concept can be implemented by redirecting resources or if additional funds may be necessary;
- consider and seek out collaborations with local colleges and universities; and
- recommend other strategies as deemed appropriate by the Superintendent.

While many of these activities may already be occurring in our schools, the concept of centralizing these services in one educational facility within a school will provide one more venue for full access to students and parents as a choice program.

This item has been reviewed and approved by the School Board Attorney's office as to form and legal sufficiency.

ACTION PROPOSED BY

MS. MARIA TERESA ROJAS:

That The School Board of Miami-Dade County, Florida, authorize the Superintendent of Schools to:

1. review and analyze the feasibility of establishing the school choice concept of a Districtwide Center for Autism Spectrum Disorder;
2. determine if the concept can be implemented within existing resources or if additional funds may be necessary;
3. recommend any Board policy changes and/or amendments, if needed; and
4. provide a report to the Board by October 11, 2017.