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Special Education Services for Autistic Children in San Mateo County

Issue

Are the preschool and school age youth identified as autistic adequately served by the San Mateo County Office of Education and local school districts under the current funding levels?

Summary

Autism is aptly named; it means “alone.” Autism can range from a milder disability, such as the inability to understand social functions, to a profoundly severe behavioral disorder marked by an inability to handle social relations and a lack of connection to the world. California reported that from 1987 to 2002 the rate of autism increased 633%, a higher rate than any other state, and since 2000, the number of autistic children in San Mateo County doubled to more than 500 in 2005. The early identification of autism and increased parental and medical awareness affects the need to add educational facilities, mental health assistance, and occupational and physical therapies. Early identification can lead to early treatment, a best practice mandated by the federal law that states “...all children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate education.”

The San Mateo County Office of Education and the local school districts serve these children from ages three to 22 by providing early identification; at-home child and parent training; specialized preschool and kindergarten classes; special education classes at district schools throughout the county; resource teachers who work with individual and small groups of autistic youngsters; and integrated programs with mainstreamed youth receiving speech and language therapy. The public education system also places students in nonpublic schools and agencies, paid with federal, state, and district funds. The county spends about \$16,000 per student, ranging from \$5000 to \$146,000 a year. Special education can encroach on the general fund and jeopardize districts’ financial stability. A survey of special educators showed that legal costs have also increased due to parents’ demands for particular placements or therapies for their autistic children.

The Grand Jury was impressed by the dedication and professionalism of the staff working with autistic children. Programs such as Building Bridges, an early intervention option, to

the pilot effort at San Bruno District's Palos Verdes School, show the dedication to improving and increasing opportunities for the autistic despite funding constraints. The Grand Jury recommends that the Office of Education hire a coordinator to implement the Palos Verdes model, where appropriate, in other districts, and to expand the use of existing social and mental health agencies to help train special education staff and parents of autistic children. A Blue Ribbon Panel, representing parents, educators, legal mediators, business owners, etc., should be convened to explore ways to integrate services and funding sources that support "seamless" programs, from early identification in infancy to entry into independent living as adults.



Special Education Services for Autistic Children in San Mateo County

Issue

Are the preschool and school age youth identified as autistic adequately served by the San Mateo County Office of Education and local school districts under the current school funding levels?

Background

Autism is a spectrum disorder ranging from a milder disability, such as the inability to understand social functions, to a profoundly severe physical and behavioral disorder. This disorder is marked by poor language skills, an inability to handle social relations, and a lack of connection to the world. Autism is aptly named; it means “alone.”

Professional journals, educational and scientific reports, and the general media are paying increasing attention to the growing numbers of autistic children nationwide. California reported that from 1987 to 2002 the rate of autism alone, not developmental disabilities in general, increased 633%. The United States has a higher rate than any other developed country, and California has a higher rate than any other state. As yet, there is no definitive answer as to the causes of autism, and researchers are examining both genetic and environmental correlations.

Diagnoses are not always easy to make. Whereas some infants can be identified as autistic, sometimes symptoms are not manifested until pre-school age. Early identification can lead to early treatment, which has proved most effective. However, the early identification of autism and increased parental and medical awareness have also resulted in a growing need to add educational facilities, mental health assistance, and occupational and physical therapies. These “best practices” follow the mandate of the federal law that states “...all children with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate education.”

In San Mateo County, autistic children are treated by school systems from ages three to twenty-two. Since 2000, the total number of autistic children, including language and speech impaired, has doubled to more than 500 in 2005. At the same time that there is a need to find services for the growing number of autistic and special education children, there are budget cuts for education in general. These significant financial needs could jeopardize the district's financial stability.

Since autism includes a wide range of disabilities, the San Mateo County Office of Education (COE) and district schools must provide services that include early identification; at-home child and parent training; specialized preschool and kindergarten classes; special education classes at several district schools throughout the county; resource teachers who work with individual autistic youngsters and in small groups; and fully integrated programs with mainstreamed youth receiving services such as speech and language therapy. Depending on the severity of a child's impairment, the public education system may place students in nonpublic schools and agencies, paid for by federal, state, and local special education funds.

Investigation Plan. The Grand Jury sent every San Mateo County school district a questionnaire asking such questions as: total numbers of students including those identified as special education; use of non-public schools and agencies; costs to districts and costs reimbursed by the state; the chain of referrals from initial diagnosis to treatment options; and common problems facing districts and parents. The Grand Jury also interviewed personnel in the Early Childhood Education Services of the COE, met with directors of a non-public school and a treatment center, and visited a public preschool and kindergarten whose primary focus is the education of autistic youth.

In addition, the Grand Jury investigated how many children identified as autistic are enrolled in the county's public school systems; what the functions of the County Office of Education are in serving these students, their families, and their teachers; and how the current national, state, and local fiscal problems affect the overall treatment of autism in the county.

Findings

Pre-school Children. Most diagnoses of severe autism occur before age three because parents seek help for children who exhibit difficult behavior. However, professionals in treating autism reported that although physicians may make the initial diagnoses, they are usually not current with the most effective methods of treating the symptoms. The state-funded Golden Gate Regional Center diagnoses many of the children as young as six months, and refers parents to treatment provided by the Center, or to programs in their own county or district. Recently, the Golden Gate Regional Center reduced its assistance, and no longer funds behavior services for autistic children after age three, shifting the responsibility and financial burden for treatment to the local school districts.

The Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) of San Mateo County, one of 100 in the state, sets policy and distributes state and federal money to school districts for the treatment of autistic children. The SELPA operates a program called Child Find that publishes notices in local papers to inform parents about the types of help available for autistic children. Child Find also alerts pediatricians, hospitals, and other doctors, often the first to identify autistic infants, about school district programs.

The COE provides Early Childhood Education (ECE) services for disabled children ages three to five, including those with autism diagnoses. Preschool and kindergarten classes for children with disabilities are located at the ECE Center at Tower Road and in classrooms at district schools throughout the county. In a visit to the ECE Center, the Grand Jury observed the dedication and professionalism of the staff who provided individualized attention, given with consistency and positive expectations. Some of the treatments the Grand Jury observed are: changing routine behaviors; developing neurological skills; teaching social skills; and training through activity charts and picture icons. The child to adult ratio was approximately two to one.

“Building Bridges... from home to school,” an early intervention option in the ECE program, is a three-stage program beginning with intensive in-home services for children who do not yet exhibit school readiness behaviors. A training assistant, specially trained to work with children with autism spectrum disorder, provides services under the supervision of a certified teacher depending on the needs of the children in each classroom. The Building Bridges program bills local districts specifically for its services.

At age five, the children transition from the ECE program to kindergarten-level county, district general education, or district special day classes.

School-age Children. The San Mateo County SELPA sets policy and distributes state and federal money to school districts for the treatment of autistic children as well as for children with other special education needs. About 10 to 14 percent of the general student K-12 population in San Mateo County is identified as needing these special education services. Of that number, about 10 percent is identified under the autism spectrum umbrella.

As youngsters move into local district or county (COE) schools, a team of specialists reevaluates them for the most appropriate educational plan. Every special needs child is entitled to an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that specifies the educational, emotional, social, and/or physical goals and objectives for the school year. Some of the less disabled students may function well in a general education classroom, and need as little as one consultation session per week by a speech and language therapist or with special education teachers trained specifically to treat the range of autism disorders. Students on the severe side of the spectrum, particularly those who exhibit mental retardation and aggressive behavior, may require a specialized school or classroom to address safety and self-injurious behavior.

All of the methodologies proven effective for most autistic children are labor-intensive and, therefore, costly. Without exception, survey respondents commented that special education funding at the state and federal levels continues to be insufficient. In San Mateo County, from 0.5% to 1.0% of the student population has autistic spectrum syndrome, with costs for individual students ranging from \$5,500 to \$146,000 per year. Students receiving intensive, one-on-one therapy average approximately \$50,000 per year; multiple-handicapped autistic children requiring special placement out of the county can cost over \$100,000 per year. There is no funding specifically earmarked for students with autism; rather, dollars from the federal and state funds for special education are based on the numbers of children identified as having low-incidence (severely handicapped) to high-incidence (dyslexia, milder autism) disabilities. A majority of special education (i.e., high-incidence) children are mainstreamed into regular classrooms with special help in speech and language skills. Some respondents to the school district survey expressed alarm at the increase in the number of children diagnosed with autism and, concurrently, the increase in the costs for the intensive behavior intervention programs for these students. Concerning the increase in numbers and costs of autism, one respondent called the rise “a runaway train” about which the public should be informed.

Recently, there has been a marked increase in legal challenges to public education programs offered to autistic children. Parents sometimes bring an attorney to their first educational meeting with school staff. Some parents demand that the intensive in-home therapies their toddlers received continue after the child enrolls in pre-school or kindergarten. District legal costs have increased substantially for due process hearings, mediations, and district representation at meetings with opposing attorneys. Legal proceedings force districts to expend energy and resources, further depleting dollars needed for the many therapies autism and other special education children require.

San Mateo County special education administrators and school district directors recognize the immensity of the problem and are exploring collaborative ways to meet the growing challenge that autism presents to the districts – educationally, financially and legally. A pilot project at the Palos Verdes School in San Bruno, based on the North Carolina Training and Educating Autistic and Communicatively Handicapped Children (TEACCH) program, uses small classes with four aides and one teacher, rather than the costly one-on-one model. These elementary and high school-age children learn skills, such as how to communicate with pictures and computers, and how to accept changes in their surroundings. The TEACCH program would require a county coordinator to help implement the model in classes throughout the county.

Several respondents also noted the high quality of the Systematic Utilization of Comprehensive Strategies for Ensuring Student Success project of Orange County, CA. This project is a continuum of programs designed to meet the varied educational needs of students with autism spectrum disorders as they progress from 18 months to transition from high school. High school students, particularly those aged 18 to 21, need programs that focus on the skills leading to more independent living.

Conclusions

The Early Childhood Education Services and its associated Building Bridges program appear to do an excellent job, despite the funding constraints.

Almost half of the students diagnosed as having milder symptoms of autism are “mainstreamed” in public school. Most of these students continue to receive speech or language therapy. Early identification and treatment appear to be effective for this group.

The continuing increase in the number of autistic children and associated legal challenges poses a serious financial problem for San Mateo County residents and its schools. In general, the county spends about \$16,000 per autistic student, with the range from \$5000 to \$146,000 a year. Special education programs continue to encroach on the general fund at such a rapid rate that it is jeopardizing districts’ financial security and stability.

School districts are looking at ways to maximize program effectiveness while holding costs constant. The Palos Verdes School in San Bruno has implemented a model that addresses the problem of increased demand for services and reduced funding.

Recommendations

- 1.0 The San Mateo County Superintendent of Schools and the County Board of Education should:
 - 1.1 Publicize, through existing media, service organizations, and public and private social agencies, the need for early identification (0-3) and early childhood education for children with autism spectrum disorder.
 - 1.2 Evaluate programs used in Orange County and described in the research literature to determine how to integrate their pre-school and school programs in San Mateo County .
 - 1.3 Develop a strong liaison with public and private social agencies and schools in the county to increase knowledge of effective techniques for special education teachers working with autistic youth.
 - 1.4 Explore sharing of costs of educating autistic children with other social, mental health, medical, and educational agencies. Consider the use of low or no-cost assistance, such as special education interns working towards certification requirements; pro bono legal aid; retired educators, etc.

- 1.5 Expand high school programs to focus on older students requiring mental health therapy, life skills training, independent living, or vocational training, connecting with small businesses for part-time work to foster independence.
- 1.6 Work with school district administrators and special education directors to implement ways to reduce the potential costs of litigation for districts and parents by using mediation and/or parent training (e.g., informative meetings prior to an IEP meeting).
- 1.7 Set up countywide teams to collaborate in program planning and expansion of programs that work, such as the San Bruno Palos Verdes School program and hire a COE program coordinator to help districts implement the model.
- 1.8 Establish a Blue Ribbon Committee, such as those used effectively to solve other education funding problems, to address the rapidly expanding costs of special education.

September 12, 2005

The Honorable Norman J. Gatzert
Judge of the Superior Court
Hall of Justice
400 County Center, 2nd Floor
Redwood City, CA 94063-1655

Dear Judge Gatzert,

Please find enclosed the response of the San Mateo County Board of Education and the County Superintendent of Schools to the recommendation pertaining to the County Office of Education in the Grand Jury's report of June 30, 2005. An informational copy of this document is also being sent to the Board of Supervisors.

If you have any questions regarding this document, please do not hesitate to contact us through the County Office of Education at 802-5550.

Sincerely,

John Mehl, Ph.D.
County Superintendent of Schools
San Mateo County Office of Education

c: San Mateo County Board of Supervisors
San Mateo County Office of Education Clerk

JM/msg

San Mateo County Office of Education Responses to the 2005 Grand Jury Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1.0

THE COUNTY BOARD OF EDUCATION AND COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS SHOULD:

1.1 PUBLICIZE, THROUGH EXISTING MEDIA, SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS, AND PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SOCIAL AGENCIES, THE NEED FOR EARLY IDENTIFICATION (0-3) AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER.

Each year, the San Mateo County Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA), representing the 23 school districts and 3 charter schools, publishes a “Child Find” notice in the local newspapers. This “Child Find” notice is also posted on the SELPA website. The notice informs the public of services and resources in San Mateo County for children with special needs.

1.2 EVALUATE PROGRAMS USED IN ORANGE COUNTY AND DESCRIBED IN THE RESEARCH LITERATURE TO DETERMINE HOW TO INTEGRATE THEIR PRE-SCHOOL AND SCHOOL PROGRAMS IN SAN MATEO COUNTY.

Representatives from the San Mateo County Office of Education Special Education Office and SELPA have visited and reviewed the programs offered by the Orange County Office of Education. We have worked closely with representatives from the Golden Gate Regional Center to implement an infant program so that students can transition easily from the infant program, to the pre-school program and to the school-age program for autism.

1.3 DEVELOP A STRONG LIAISON WITH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SOCIAL AGENCIES AND SCHOOLS IN THE COUNTY TO INCREASE KNOWLEDGE OF EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WORKING WITH AUTISTIC YOUTH.

A County-wide Autism committee was established in Spring 2005. The focus of this committee will be to bring agencies together to provide seamless services to students and families.

1.4 EXPLORE SHARING OF COSTS OF EDUCATING AUTISTIC CHILDREN WITH OTHER SOCIAL, MENTAL HEALTH, MEDICAL, AND EDUCATIONAL AGENCIES. CONSIDER THE USE OF LOW OR NO-COST ASSISTANCE, SUCH AS SPECIAL EDUCATION INTERNS WORKING TOWARDS CERTIFICATION REQUIREMENTS; PRO BONO LEGAL AID; RETIRED EDUCATORS, ETC.

Currently services for students on the Autism spectrum are provided by a variety of public and private agencies. Each agency funds its individual programs, including Mental Health, Health and Human Services Agency, but works collaboratively with education. Each agency actively recruits qualified and trained volunteers to support the delivery of quality services.

1.5 EXPAND HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS TO FOCUS ON OLDER STUDENTS REQUIRING MENTAL HEALTH THERAPY, LIFE SKILLS TRAINING, INDEPENDENT LIVING, OR VOCATIONAL TRAINING, CONNECTING WITH SMALL BUSINESSES FOR PART-TIME WORK TO FOSTER INDEPENDENCE.

All students at age 16 have transition planning as an integral part of the IEP. Students participate in the Workability Program which provides career planning and on the job training. The programs currently offered by the San Mateo County Office of Education and districts to high school students with special needs include life skills, independent living skills and vocational training.

1.6 WORK WITH SCHOOL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATORS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS TO IMPLEMENT WAYS TO REDUCE THE POTENTIAL COSTS OF LITIGATION FOR DISTRICTS AND PARENTS BY USING MEDIATION AND/OR PARENT TRAINING (E.G. INFORMATIVE MEETINGS PRIOR TO AN IEP MEETING).

The San Mateo County SELPA Alternative Dispute Resolution process is in place. ADR is an informal process for resolving conflicts. It is a process that respects the dignity of individuals while using communication, collaboration, negotiation and mediation to meet the interests of the parties involved.

San Mateo County SELPA has the following ADR Options:

EXPANDED IEP:

Parties come back together to an IEP with additional information to discuss issues that remain unresolved. A SELPA representative may be invited to attend.

FACILITATED IEP:

A trained, neutral third party, usually a SELPA staff member, works with disputing parties to structure the IEP and also facilitates the meeting.

CONFERENCE-STYLE MEDIATION:

The local mediation consists of two trained facilitators/mediators, the concerned parent and an administrative representative from the child's district. Mediators assist the parties in reaching a mutually acceptable agreement.

1.7 SET UP COUNTYWIDE TEAMS TO COLLABORATE IN PROGRAM PLANNING AND EXPANSION OF PROGRAMS THAT WORK, SUCH AS THE SAN BRUNO PALOS VERDES SCHOOL PROGRAM AND HIRE A COE PROGRAM COORDINATOR TO HELP DISTRICTS IMPLEMENT THE MODEL.

The Countywide Autism Committee will review and evaluate programs currently being implemented throughout the State. The Autism Team Program currently being implemented at Palos Verdes School completed a successful "pilot" year and the concept of developing highly trained classroom teams is being replicated on integrated school sites. A program specialist with an expertise in successful programs to meet the needs of students with autism is being hired to support these teams.

1.8 ESTABLISH A BLUE RIBBON COMMITTEE, SUCH AS THOSE USED EFFECTIVELY TO SOLVE OTHER EDUCATION FUNDING PROBLEMS, TO ADDRESS THE RAPIDLY EXPANDING COSTS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION.

The concept of a Blue Ribbon Panel will be discussed and evaluated by the Countywide Autism Committee.