

## Human Services Committee-Study of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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I am Rebecca Hoffman from the Bismarck Early Childhood Education Program (BECEP). I am an Early Childhood Special Education teacher who completes the referral process for incoming children whose parents have concerns regarding their development. In addition, I teach an afternoon session of preschool four afternoons per week where I instruct children who are Head Start Eligible or have an Individual Education Program. I have 15 years experiences teaching Early Childhood Special Education in North Dakota. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education and Special Education, a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Special Education and a certification in Autism Spectrum Disorders.

BECEP is a Bismarck Public Schools Program consisting of: Head Start, Early Childhood Special Education, Early Intervention, and Right Track. BECEP was established to meet the needs of preschool children and their families. BECEP follows a developmental sequence in teaching children skills in all developmental areas of thinking skills, motor, language, self-help, and social/emotional development. A child/family plan is written for each child or family based on identified strengths and needs, and updated throughout the year as needed. The overall goal of the BECEP curriculum is to promote school readiness and to enhance each child's ability to develop to his or her potential. Our curriculum is "curiosity-oriented", giving the child an opportunity through discovery. . . by doing, to develop an understanding and the concepts needed to become competent throughout school and in life. The teacher's role is to provide opportunities for learning and discovery, and to help the child talk and think as he or she processes these experiences and discoveries.

In the preschool setting, we have seen an influx of children with and ASD diagnosis. We currently have about 20 students with a diagnosis on the spectrum (autism or PDD-NOS) in the 3-5 age range at BECEP. We also have several children who do not have a diagnosis, but have characteristics consistent with an ASD diagnosis. It is observed that there are more children being diagnosed as young as age two due to the autism waiver.

The feedback about the Autism waiver has been mixed. There is frustration expressed from parents regarding: the implementation of the program, lack of behavior specialist for programming, length of time to complete the process and lack of training for professionals in the community realm outside of school. Parents are more openly speaking about autism, asking about autism and seeking services for their children. Additionally, the parents are appreciative of the material resources that have been purchased for their children from Autism Waiver funds.

Children ages 3-5 are served in integrated classrooms at BECEP. Class sizes range from 10 to 14 at this time. There are at least two adults in every classroom with some having up to four adults depending on the classroom needs. The challenges that this service delivery model presents include the need for more help in the classroom. As we serve children with ASD we are presented with a diverse level of skills and needs. In my classroom alone, I have three children on the spectrum, each one uniquely different. One with no language and learning skills that are very low to the other extreme of verbal skills and very high learning skills. This diversity is seen in all the classrooms at BECEP and varies from year to

year. It is important to have classrooms staffed appropriately so that proactive interventions can be done versus reactive interventions. As social interactions are an area of need, this proactivity at the young age levels can set the stage for that social growth. Many staff in our building have expressed that training is also an area of need. We have two people in the building who carry a certificate in Autism Spectrum Disorders, but their duties are designated to other tasks not to serving children with ASD. We do have two part time ASD consultants in the district who some of the teachers access for help. We have several other teachers who have participated in multiple trainings. Not only do the teachers want training for themselves, but also their aides.

In visiting with staff at BECEP, many report that funding is the biggest issue. As we are faced with more kids being diagnosed with Autism, more services and staff are needed to meet the needs of the student. With specific programs and regiments that many of our children with ASD need, time and money are needed. Overall, we all agree that the earlier the diagnosis, the better. Also important is educating parents so they access all services available to them, especially BECEP as that is their entitlement. As we know, children with ASD need multiple opportunities to practice new skills in order to obtain them, practice to generalize skills across multiple settings, and consistency in order to grow. BECEP can help them with getting these services to their child early!

Respectfully,

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