

Senate Bill No. 2268

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Written testimony from Mari Bell, Director of Special Education West Fargo Schools

My name is Mari Bell and I am the Director of Special Education for the West Fargo School District and have been working in this capacity for the past 18 years. West Fargo School District is a rapidly growing district and currently has 7500 students enrolled in pre-school through high school. Of these students, over 900 have an identified disability. In our most recent Child Count we served over 80 students with a primary disability of Educational Autism, approximately 8% of the students in special education. The most recent reported prevalence in the population is estimated to be 1 in 88. Not only do we have a large number of students on the autism spectrum but we have a sizable population of 3-5 year olds who are initially referred or screened due to speech and language delays and social communication disorders, some of whom are ultimately diagnosed with Educational Autism. We are fortunate to have the North Dakota Autism Center within our school district boundaries and because of their ability to provide structured day services to young children on the autism spectrum, families are drawn to the area for child care and therapy settings that can meet their child's needs. Additional psychological and medical services in the Fargo/West Fargo/Moorhead community, and a strong economic climate have lead to our continued growth, particularly in the birth to 5 age group.

Within this age group, this is prime time when developmental milestones are observed and red flags for autism spectrum disorders are first recognized by parents, professionals and child care providers. For many parents, Well Baby Checks and Early Childhood Special Education screenings provide the first recognition that their child's development is not within normal limits and further assessment is needed to determine the nature of their disability. It is also a time of confusion, frustration and heartbreak as parents navigate the maze of professionals in search of answers to explain their child's behaviors and seek the best treatments/interventions during this brief window of opportunity to diagnose, identify and intensify the best evidence based practices that research supports to benefit their child. Costs for early intervention for the recommended minimum of 20 hours a week can be exorbitant and most insurance providers do not cover them. Even if a family can afford one-on-one interventions that have the greatest probability of positive outcomes, there is the continual challenge of finding qualified professionals and the supervision and expertise to deliver these interventions with fidelity and consistency.

Regional Autism Centers have the potential to provide a multidisciplinary team who can provide state of the art assessment and diagnostics, but perhaps more importantly, serve as a training center with consultative teams to work with families, educators and care providers

in the child's environment. Funding for early intervention is critical for altering the trajectory for young children on the autism spectrum. This funding does not come to schools, as the unfunded mandates of IDEA-2004 have failed to provide the necessary resources at the level and intensity needed to train, retain and provide the three prongs of evidence based practice of ABA- Discrete trials, Structured Teaching – TEACCH, and Picture Exchange Systems PECS.

In West Fargo we have yet to utilize the Regional Autism Center's services due to the proximity to the center and our own autism specialist, speech pathologists and special educator teams who assess and provide recommendations for programming. However, the added resources of a regional center in the area and the funding to support early intervention to offset costs of in-home interventions, school based services and family counseling and training to support the child in each environment is a worthy and necessary goal. With the increase in the identification and prevalence in the ASD population, it behooves us as educators and community agencies to consolidate our resources and continue to provide the needed supports and evidence based practices for our children in North Dakota.

Thank-you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the West Fargo School District and echo the voices of our children and families who depend on us to provide a free appropriate education. Early identification and intervention is our best investment in our children's future as we solve the puzzle that is autism.

Should the committee have any questions, I would be happy to entertain any you may have.