

Good morning,

My name is Jesse Krieger. I'm a Co-Director of Special Education and school psychologist for Oliver/Mercer Special Education, and a private practice speech/language pathologist. Our unit services the schools in Center, Hazen and Beulah, making us more representative of rural, smaller schools.

Our schools, like many in the state, have served students with autism in the past. However, that incidence has increased in our Unit similar to what other districts are experiencing. In the past, we would have 1 or no students identified as having autism, or being on the autism spectrum. Today, we have four (4) who are identified with Autism, four (4) who are identified as being on the autism spectrum (they have Asperger's syndrome) but are served under another disability category, and two students who are on the autism spectrum that do not qualify for special education services. We anticipate that in the future, the trend seen nationally will continue in the Oliver/Mercer schools as well.

How do we know what students have autism? Here is a brief discussion of the process in the Oliver/Mercer schools. The very young children, those ages birth to three, receive services from another agency (Part C), and before they turn three, the school has to make a determination if they are eligible for special education services, and most often try to determine why, or what is their handicapping condition. At that time, a multi-disciplinary team, including the child's parents, may conduct an assessment of the child. School teams often

include a school psychologist, a special education instructor, a speech/language pathologist, an occupational therapist, and sometimes a regular education instructor, along with the parents.

Using the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction guidelines (which are based on federal laws), they can determine if the child is eligible for services as a person with autism.

Another method for identification would be if this child has already been diagnosed by a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, or medical doctor in a clinic or hospital.

If a student who is older than three causes his parents or school to have a suspicion that he may be on the autism spectrum, a multi-disciplinary team consisting of the members described above will convene to determine if the child meets the federal and state eligibility requirements. Again, this student could also be identified by a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, or medical doctor in a clinic or hospital.

Oliver/Mercer Special Education also has the option to engage with the Great Plains Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment Program (GPAST) which is a part of the North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities for diagnostic services as well as program consultation.

In regard to identification, the biggest concern of me and many of our colleagues is the current state of diagnostic criteria, which is the task of the American Psychiatric Association in its endeavor to update the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-Revision IV. Given the latest figures on incidence in our country, we need to be able to meet the needs of a growing sub-population in our schools.

Regardless of her age, any student between the ages of three (3) and twenty-one (21) who is identified as being on the autism spectrum will receive services that are designed to meet her unique needs. With the students we have in our schools now, we are able to meet their educational needs, but our rural area lacks many other family support services that one might find in an area of greater population density.

In Oliver/Mercer Special Education, all of these services (diagnostic and instructional) are supported by federal, state and local dollars. If the child is eligible for ND Medicaid, costs for speech/language pathology, occupational therapy and physical therapy may be partially recouped. A particular area of cost that often becomes the responsibility of the local district is the additional help that is often required from a paraeducator. Either participating in the regular classroom or re-teaching is time that often requires one-to-one support for many individuals on the autism spectrum. Also at this time, the population of students with spectrum disorders in Oliver/Mercer is not very diverse, meaning we have no students who are profoundly impacted by autism. These students often require substantially more intervention than a smaller district would be ready to offer, particularly if the student is a preschooler. Finding those funds would be particularly difficult for our Unit.

There are also specialty instructors that barely exist in the state, much less in Western North Dakota. The availability of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst is almost non-existent, and would

be difficult to bring to Oliver/Mercer Special Education if we had a student who required those services.

Oliver/Mercer Special Education has been fortunate in that 3 of our instructors have taken the coursework offered from the University of North Dakota that results in a certificate of completion. Others have taken specific coursework that relates to the individual needs of our students with autism, including applied behavioral analysis, behavior management, instructional techniques and communication, so I feel our staff is well-prepared to engage with students on the autism spectrum, given the number of them we have, and the extent of the impact autism has on them. However, when, not if, the student who is severely impacted by autism comes to our school, we will have to examine the resources we have available and hope additional support can come from our state or federal agencies.

To supplement the expertise of all instructors in the districts, Oliver/Mercer Special Education has provided trainings on and off-site with the use of federal dollars from our Part-B IDEA annual allocation, which we will do again this summer. However, predictions for the federal allocation, or Part B grants, are that they will be less next year.

In conclusion, I would urge this committee to become familiar with the needs of persons who are impacted with autism, including those who are severely affected to those who are mildly affected and what kind of financial effect it may have on a school district of any size.

Thank you for your time in listening to me this morning.