

Autism Focus Group Parent Priorities – Mar. 5. 2010

Multiple Autism Parent Focus Groups were conducted as a result of parent feedback from the 2008 AB SpEd PAC Parent/Guardian Survey, which indicated parents of Autism Spectrum students were significantly less satisfied with the special education programs and services provided by the district than parents of children with Specific Learning Disabilities. The Parent Focus Groups were a positive learning experience for parents and staff and a constructive collaboration between Pupil Services and the AB SpEd PAC.

This document is a summary of the top parent priorities (by category) that were shared during the multiple Autism Parent Focus Groups that Pupil Services conducted during January and February of 2010. A total of four Autism Parent Focus Groups were held – 1) for parents of children in Preschool to Grade 3, 2) for parents of children in Grades 4-6, 3) parents of children in Grades 7-12, and 4) parents of Out-of-District (OOD) students. Interestingly parent priorities were remarkably consistent across all grades.

Professional Development

1. **Lead classroom teachers (regular education) need special education background and/or special education training to support Spectrum kids** – Parents recommend that the district look for dual certified staff when hiring teachers and placing students with complex needs in classrooms. All school staff interacting with children (principals, teachers, therapists, classroom assistants, librarians, recess and lunch monitors, and bus drivers need regular, ongoing special education training around children with complex learning needs like Aspergers.
2. **Special education assistants and ABA trainers need more training to develop a uniform, specialized skill set.** Currently these staff members do not necessarily share a common special education skill set. Since these staff members act as the primary educators for many Spectrum students it would be beneficial for them to have a teaching certificate or previous teaching experience plus intensive, targeted special education training regarding the population of students they are supporting. There seems to be a particular need for special education assistants to receive social/pragmatic language training so they can support students peer interactions throughout the day. In addition, parents feel it would be beneficial for staff to accompany children to individual therapy sessions so they're aware of the particular skills children need to generalize. If properly trained, assistants are poised to facilitate social interactions and teach skills to students in the moment throughout the school day.
3. **It is essential that regular education and special education teachers work closely together to support students with complex learning needs.** Not all teachers embrace having special needs students in their classroom. Because it is a reality of today's mainstream teaching environment, all regular education teaching staff need ongoing mandatory professional development/special education training. In addition, close collaboration between regular and special education staff is required to support students and help them generalize skills across environments.
4. **All schools need staff trained to teach a variety of research-based reading programs like Wilson, Orton-Gillingham, Lindamood-Bell, etc.** While the district has a lot of different reading and math programs available, each school does not have access to trained staff in each of these research-based programs.

Communication

1. **There needs to be more time set aside for communication and skill sharing between therapists, teachers (regular and special education) and parents.** Communication between staff members and between school and home (home logs and clinics) is essential because so many therapies overlap and children need continuity of instruction across environments. These students need a cohesive “Spectrum Team” that includes all therapists and teachers working closely together. Responsibility for SpEd students and all student decisions need to be made jointly by regular and special education staff not in one world or the other.
2. **Parents would like a written description of the Spectrum programs and services available at each school and how programs differ between schools;** the resources available to families (such as the AB SpEd PAC and ABPCC support group); a list of steps in the transition process for moving into or out of the district as well as between OOD schools; instructions for 3-Year Re-Evaluation testing and high school transition planning for in district and OOD students.

Transitions

The success of student transitions between grades and schools continues to be a priority concern for Spectrum families. Sometimes they are handled well and other times not as well. Successful transitions require support for both parents and students.

1. **Parents believe a good teacher and assistant match is critical to the success of students on the Spectrum** as is carefully placing them in a class **with a peer group that gets/appreciates them** so they have a chance of achieving social success and acceptance/connection.
2. **Parents would like to meet with their child’s new teacher and staff prior to the start of each academic year** to get to know the new team working with their child and share parent concerns and insights regarding their child. If not prior to starting school, then very early in the fall.
3. **A parent priority is having all transitions mirror the successful transition processes in place for Pre-K to K and 6th to 7th grade students.** Significant concerns were voiced regarding the transitions of Spectrum students from EI to Pre-K, junior high school to high school, high school to post-graduate endeavors, as well as transitions into and out of district schools from OOD placements.

From the parent perspective a successful transition program includes:

- Provision of written descriptions of the Spectrum programs and services available at each school in the district and how programs differ between schools (such as Conant and Gates) as well as what district resources are available to families (such as the AB SpEd PAC and ABPCC support group).
- IEP Team discussion and determination of appropriate student placement (including parents) when more than one appropriate placement exists.
- The opportunity for parents to visit the new school to meet staff and observe proposed programs prior to student placement.
- The opportunity for the child to visit the new school to meet staff and familiarize themselves with the building and classrooms prior to transition.
- Additional transition planning time when siblings are involved.

- A written description or list of steps in the transition process for moving into or out of the district as well as between OOD schools.
- Social stories for younger students regarding the impending transition.

Program Design

1. **Students need a continuum of services available K–6 in elementary school** so that the most socially vulnerable students aren't forced to transition to a different school mid-elementary experience.
2. **Students placed out-of-district should have access to in-district guidance resources** and the district should coordinate the provision of services to ensure important services aren't overlooked by multiple service providers.
3. **Parents don't want their children pulled out of academic classes for therapy.** *They shouldn't have to choose between academics or S/L and OT. These children need both services – not pullout therapy in place of general education instruction.* Some pullouts could be accommodated during music or gym for students who find these classes to be over stimulating/sensory overload. Some pullout therapies could be provided before and/or after school if therapists work schedules were staggered to begin earlier or later than the regular school day. And some therapy (like pragmatic social skills) could be provided in natural settings like recess and/or lunch (as a complement to, not in place of, necessary pull-out therapy). This would provide an opportunity to generalize skills outside of the classroom. Spectrum students need assistance with social entrée and facilitation throughout the day to help them blend into and connect with other kids.
4. **Families need supported community based social and athletic opportunities for their children.** And Spectrum students need greater access to after school clubs/activities and extra-curricular programming – they don't have the same access that typical students do. Unfortunately, the teachers offering Community Education programs don't have the training necessary to support students on the Spectrum. Families (parents and students) of OOD students need ways to connect with their home community.
5. **Parents would like the extended year/summer programming to be an integrated learning environment,** not a segregated one so that students can learn and practice social skills with typically developing peers. Parents shouldn't have to choose between social regression or academic regression for their child over the summer months; however, that is the current reality.
6. **Spectrum students need to be taught study and organizational skills using a sequential study skills curriculum** beginning in the late elementary years up through JH and HS. These students need explicit instruction in how to use a planner, how to take notes, study for tests, etc.
7. **Spectrum students need to be taught how to type.** Many of these students have fine motor and motor planning issues that make manual writing laborious and inefficient. These students will need to learn how to type to be able to write independently.
8. **Establish a mentoring/buddy program using high school students** (for credit) or college interns that supports students' social pragmatic needs and facilitates Spectrum students' social entrée into peer groups.