

**ARKANSAS LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON AUTISM
MEETING MINUTES
DECEMBER 20, 2013**

The Arkansas Legislative Task Force on Autism met Friday, December 20, 2013, at 1:00 p.m., in Room 151 of the State Capitol, Little Rock, Arkansas. Senator Uvalde Lindsey, Senate Co-Chair, presided.

Task Force members present were: Senator Uvalde Lindsey, Senate Co-Chair, Representative Mary Broadaway, Martha Kay Asti, Karan Burnette, Loretta Cochran, Tracy Harris (*for Dr. Charlie Green*), Camille Johnson (*for Glenda Higgs*), Dr. Steve Kahler, Dr. Connie Meeks (*for Dr. Michael Martin*), Eric Moxley, Suzie Baker (*for Linda Rogers*), and Dianna Varady.

Advisory members present were Representative Randy Alexander, Denise Ennett, Veronica Myers, and Tonya Williams.

Senator Lindsey called the meeting to order. The minutes from the November 15, 2013, Arkansas Legislative Task Force on Autism meeting were approved by acclamation.

Presentation on Special Education Report [Exhibit E]

Ms. Nell Smith, Administrator, Policy Analysis and Research Section, Bureau of Legislative Research, was recognized. Ms. Smith provided information regarding the number of disabled students enrolled in Arkansas public schools, student state and national performance tests, and school districts' use of state and federal funding.

Ms. Smith reviewed expenditures from special education funding and the current state funding system's two basic parts: foundation funding and catastrophic funding. Foundation funding provides approximately \$6,200 per enrolled student. The funding matrix provides funding for 2.9 special education teachers for every 500 students, or \$351.28 per student. Schools receive approximately \$4,000 for each student in Alternative Learning Environments (ALE) and \$160.6 million for special education teachers. Catastrophic funding provides reimbursement to school districts for the cost of providing services to a student that exceeds \$15,000 after Medicaid and federal funding have been applied. Total reimbursement is capped at \$100,000 per student. Ms. Smith stated 135 districts received catastrophic funding for 599 students. The state spent its total \$11 million appropriation, which equals \$18,364 per student. In FY2013, 239 school districts were allocated \$98.5 million in IDEA Part B funding, which equals \$1,831 per student enrolled in special education.

Ms. Burnette feels school districts receiving ALE funding are provided an incentive to place autistic children in ALE, in which they do not thrive academically. She is also concerned that school personnel are removing autistic students from the classroom and placing them in ALE without following the IEP process, notifying the parents, or documenting the change. Ms. Burnette would like to see data from each school district regarding the number of autistic students placed in ALE.

Ms. Asti explained there are specific regulations and guidelines that must be followed by school districts receiving ALE funding before placing a child in an ALE program. She added that ALE provides many services for children academically and emotionally struggling in the school environment. ALE's goal is to move the child back into the general education curriculum. She said parents should notify the ALE director regarding any concerns about the ALE process. Ms. Asti stated public school students in special education are tracked by the Arkansas Public School

Computer Network (APSCN). Ms. Asti will ask that the Arkansas Department of Education director send a commissioner's memorandum to school districts encouraging them to utilize an autism default category that tracks autistic children by school district.

Representative Broadway expressed concern that schools may be placing academically challenged students and students with a mental illness together in the same ALE classroom. She suggested that the Task Force examine ALE rules and regulations regarding ALE placement.

Ms. Cochran would like to see longitude data tracking the numbers for autistic students as follows: K-12 ALE, those who have an IEP, dropped out of public school to be homeschooled, have graduated college with a degree and where are they now. She explained issues her school district encounters when applying for catastrophic funding.

Ms. Varady discussed phone calls from parents upset over the school removing their autistic child from a regular classroom setting to an ALE classroom without going through the IEP "change of placement" process. She discussed the Department of Education developing better ALE placement regulations.

Representative Alexander suggested the Task Force recommend to the Education Committees that a K-12 student with a learning disability must have an IEP before being placed in an ALE.

Senator Lindsey suggested inviting the ALE director to speak at the next task force meeting.

Ms. Baker said K-12 students who struggle intellectually and do not meet IDEA requirements may qualify for services and support under Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Ms. Williams stated many preschool programs in the state are closing due to lack of funding but, regardless of a child's social status, all children deserve a high quality education. Reports indicate children below the poverty level lack reading and literacy skills when they begin Head Start. Early Childhood is working with literacy foundations and other resources around the state to ensure families below the poverty line with young children age 0-5 have access to books.

Subcommittee Reports

Ms. Suzie Baker, Chair, Evidence-Based Classroom Strategies Subcommittee, reported the subcommittee is developing a needs assessment as it relates to autism and how to implement a regional school-based autism model that school districts can use for providing scope and sequence for school teachers and school teams. The subcommittee will meet to discuss two autism models: University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, autism clinic and the Oregon Regional Program Autism Training Sites (ORPATS).

Ms. Karan Burnette, Chair, Educational Outreach to Underserved Minority Subcommittee, stated at its December 20 meeting, the subcommittee recommended they join the Arkansas Act Early team and report each meeting to the Autism Task Force meetings. The Act Early team is a broader group that meets to discuss the same issues as the subcommittee. Senator Lindsey approved the subcommittee's request. Ms. Burnette stated the Act Early materials have been disseminated to rural areas around the state where minority families with a developmentally delayed child may not be aware of available services.

Meeting adjourned at 2:50 p.m.