

Autism Awareness: Recommendations for Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

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STATE OF WASHINGTON
PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR
 STANDARDS BOARD



Joint Report by The Professional Educator Standards Board
and The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Acknowledgements

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Vision

The vision of the Washington Professional Educator Standards Board is educator quality, recognizing that the highest possible standards for all educators are essential to ensuring attainment of high standards for all students.

Mission

Establish state policies and requirements for the preparation and certification of education professionals, ensuring that they:

- Are competent in the professional knowledge and practice for which they are certified;
- Have a foundation of skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to help students with diverse needs, abilities, cultural experiences, and learning styles meet or exceed the state learning goals; and
- Are committed to research-based practice and career-long professional development.

The PESB also serves as an advisory body to the Superintendent of Public Instruction on issues related to educator recruitment, hiring, mentoring and support, professional growth, retention, evaluation, and revocation and suspension of licensure.

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Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction's (OSPI) is the state agency which is responsible for the oversight of public education provided by local school districts. The primary role of the agency is to (1) appropriate federal and state funds to school districts, (2) regulate school districts to ensure federal and state laws are implemented, and (3) facilitate professional development, training, and technical assistance to local school districts and their personnel to improve the provision of education to children and youth enrolled in public schools and to improve students' educational performance.

The OSPI special education department is responsible for ensuring districts provide a free appropriate public education to children and youth who are eligible for special education services. The Department monitors local school districts to ensure implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and special education Washington Administrative Code (WAC) requirements. The special education department responds to questions from districts and parents as well as providing training and technical assistance to local school districts.

Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

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SUMMARY: Autism Awareness Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Washington State should have a central point for comprehensive information and resources on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) accessible by all educators, parents and the public.

Recommendation #2: Teacher preparation programs should include experiences with parents of children with ASD, such as parent panels, as a component of their teacher preparation programs.

Recommendation #3: All educator preparation programs for teachers, principals and educational staff associates should provide ASD awareness training on characteristics, strategies and resources as a component of their course content.

Recommendation #4: Washington State should provide financial incentives to institutions of higher education in order to attract special education faculty to prepare pre-service special education personnel. In addition, incentives should be available to individuals completing special education and related services programs to address school district personnel shortages.

Recommendation #5: The Professional Educator Standards Board should modify the teacher knowledge and skills standards in teacher preparation programs (also known as Standard V) to address pre-service teachers who work with students with diverse disabilities including students with significant disabilities, such as autism.

Recommendation #6: Washington State should fund at least four regional autism centers which support a continuum of services for children and youth with ASD, as recommended by the Governor's Caring for Washington Individuals with Autism Task Force.

Recommendation #7: Washington State should establish a technical assistance program for all educators and school personnel to access assistance in furthering their expertise in working with students with ASD. In addition, mentoring, coaching and other support services would also be available. See Recommendation #1.

Background and Introduction:

After the 2008 session, Governor Gregoire requested the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) develop recommendations regarding pre-service and in-service training for teachers in autism awareness and report back to her and the legislature by December 1, 2008.

This excerpt is directly from the Governor's message in Substitute Senate Bill 6743: *"I have asked the Professional Educator Standards Board and the OSPI to develop recommendations for autism awareness instruction and methods of teaching students with autism that will strengthen learning for students. The recommendations will address appropriate content in teacher preparation and professional development. These reports will be completed by December 1, 2008."*

What is autism?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are disabilities with many variations in symptoms and/or behaviors. Furthermore, people with autism spectrum disorders vary widely in abilities, intelligence, and behaviors across those indicators. In other words, characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorders may be observed in a range of mild to very severe forms. For example, some children do not speak; others have limited or even advanced language skills. Those with more advanced language skills tend to use a small range of topics, as well as have difficulty with abstract concepts and pragmatic language skills. Repetitive play skills, a limited range of interests, and impaired social skills are generally evident as well. Unusual responses to sensory information such as loud noises, lights, and certain textures or food or fabrics are also common. Because the three disability groups included in autism spectrum disorders are syndromes (i.e., a collection of symptoms), different children experience distinct characteristics with varying degrees of impairments. Each child is at different developmental levels from other children. Each child will be ready to learn certain skills at different ages.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) is used to classify disabilities and provides refined definitions of autism spectrum disorders. ASD are a set of disability groups that are identified under the heading of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). PDD are characterized by severe and pervasive impairment in several areas of development, including reciprocal social interaction skills, communication skills, or the presence of stereotyped behavior, interests, and activities. Autism is one of the disabilities specifically defined in IDEA and the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) 392-172A-01035.

WAC 392-172A-01035(2)(a)(i) Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, that adversely affects a student's educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in

repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences.

(ii) Autism does not apply if a student's education performance is adversely affected primarily because the student has an emotional behavioral disability as defined in this chapter.

(iii) A student who manifests the characteristics of autism after age three could be identified as having autism if the criteria in (a)(i) are satisfied.

Joint Report Format:

The PESB is the state policy board responsible for educator preparation and certification. OSPI is the state agency overseeing professional development of teachers. Together they recognize that highly qualified educators are essential to achieving high standards for all students. As such, the PESB's primary role in this report was focused on the recommendations for autism awareness in related to pre-service training for teacher candidates, and OSPI's role was focused on in-service training for existing teachers.

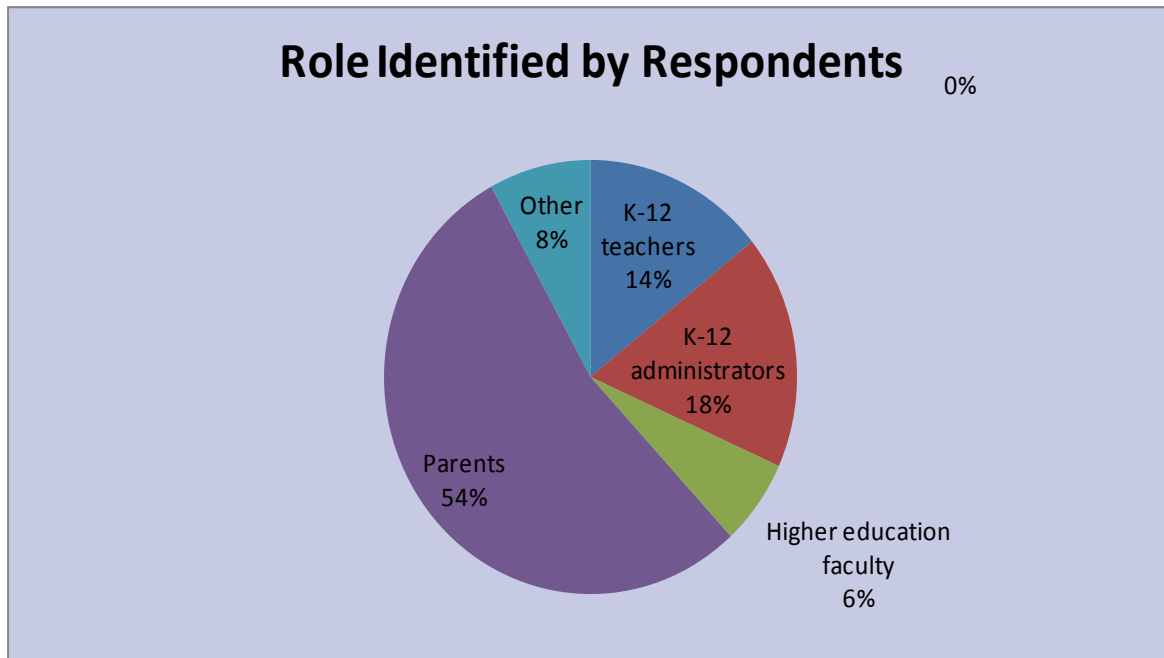
Method for Developing Recommendations:

The PESB and OSPI convened a cross-section of educators with expertise in autism and related disabilities on August 15, 2008, to develop draft recommendations. The work group consisted of K-12 special education teachers, a K-12 special education district director, higher education teacher preparation faculty, a parent of a child with autism, a representative from an Educational Service District and representatives from associations and organization, including the Washington Education Association and the University of Washington's Autism Center. Some work group members had also served on the State's Autism Task Force.

Work group members drafted recommendations and solicited feedback from education networks with whom they were associated. The feedback and comment period occurred during the month of September using an online application. This allowed for efficient collection of anonymous feedback on the draft recommendations.

There were fifty-four people that responded to the draft recommendations. Of those, approximately fifty-four percent of respondents identified themselves as parents, thirty-two percent as teachers or administrators in K-12 education, seven percent from higher education and eight percent from other roles or organizations. Figure 1 demonstrates the breakdown of respondents according to identified roles.

Figure 1



Framework for recommendations:

The framework used for developing the recommendations was based on a continuum of understanding autism spectrum disorders.

Awareness is the initial level. In this level educators have a basic understanding of autism, and enough information that they are not surprised by a child’s behavior. They are equipped with basic strategies to motivate and provide consistency to students with autism, and know where to find more information.

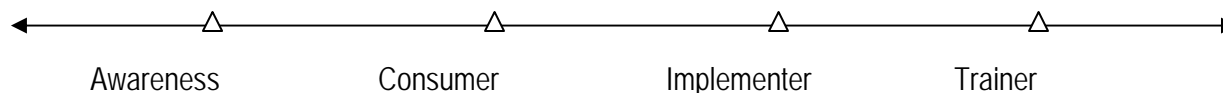
Consumers are the next level. Educators at this level use basic practices with support by other educational staff in working with children with autism. They have enough training to implement strategies and may have received specific training on working with children and youth with autism spectrum disorders.

Implementers are leader-educators, considered autism specialists and may be special education teachers. They lead education teams in a school district on working with students with autism.

Trainers are also autism specialists and could be special education teachers. They deeply understand how to work with autistic children and assist in coaching teachers as well as designing specific programs for individual or groups of children with autism. The continuum is displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Continuum of Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders



Governor Gregoire requested the PESB and OSPI address recommendations on autism awareness. Therefore, the recommendations are framed at the “awareness” level, but can also be bridged to the “consumer” point on the above continuum.

Work group members were asked to respond to three questions:

- (1) What current awareness training exists in the state?
- (2) What are the challenges to implementing awareness training?
- (3) What structure or activities are needed to implement awareness level training in Washington?

SECTION 1: WHAT WE HAVE - AUTISM AWARENESS TRAINING AND RESOURCES FOR PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Pre-service

There are two ways in which Washington addresses the knowledge and skills of teacher candidates in their pre-service training. First, all Washington-prepared teacher candidates funnel through teacher preparation programs that must incorporate five general program standards in order to be approved by the PESB to operate within the state. One of the standards is Standard V - the knowledge and skill standard for teachers. In 2007, the PESB approved new evidence-based knowledge and skill standards for teacher preparation programs. Standard V requires new teachers to demonstrate through student work and student voice what K-12 students know and are able to do as a result of the instruction provided by the teacher candidate (Standard V web link - <http://www.pesb.wa.gov/ProgramReview/documents/StandardV.pdf>). Specifically, Standard V requires teacher candidates to positively impact student learning so all students benefit from personalized instruction that addresses their ability levels. Teacher candidates must also provide evidence of practice, reflect planning, instruction, and communication that is learner centered; that is all students must be engaged in a variety of culturally responsive, developmentally and age appropriate strategies.

Second, the PESB adopted more rigorous and relevant content knowledge standards, called endorsement competencies, for Washington’s 33 teaching endorsement areas. Special education was one of the endorsement areas that was reviewed and revised by a committee of expert educators from Washington (special ed competencies web link - <http://www.k12.wa.us/certification/profed/2007Standards/SpecialEducation.pdf>).

Currently, there are eighteen institutions that offer special education endorsement programs.

In-service

OSPI provides funding to the Northwest Educational Service District 189 to administer the Autism Outreach Project (AOP). The project is a statewide clearinghouse for information and resources regarding diagnosis, educational strategies, family support, parent-school collaborations, and training opportunities. All school districts in the state are made aware of the AOP and its services. In addition, the project provides technical assistance through resources and referrals to districts upon request.

AOP conducts an annual training needs assessment to determine district and family training priorities. Training and information data are collected by surveys, workshops and summer institute evaluations, telephone calls, emails and other means. As a result of the data analysis, AOP structures its information resources (lending library), training (workshops delivered by interactive videoconferencing, summer institutes) and technical assistance (consultation) to meet the demands of district personnel and families.

Demand for information has steadily increased since the inception of the project. The information requests are generated from many different individuals and come in from around the state. The following demonstrates the amount of information and the format in which it was provided this past year (September 1, 2007 to August 31, 2008):

- 878 materials were loaned from the AOP lending library to 382 individuals (teachers, parents, administrators, paraeducators, community members)
- 1,396 telephone calls responded to information requests by districts, families, and others
- 4,870 emails were received and responses provided to families, districts and others.

AOP works closely with the Autism Center at the University of Washington, the Professional Development in Autism Center (PDA), and other institutions of higher education in developing training and competency-based personnel preparation models for autism spectrum disorders. AOP collaborates with personnel from the various universities, as well as national and local experts such as the ESD 112 Autism Cadre and ESD 105's autism specialist, to provide training in areas of identified need. In the past year, 819 individuals in 160 locations both on-site and through videoconferencing were trained, including general education and special education teachers, paraeducators, administrators, related services personnel, school nurses, counselors and psychologists, and parents. Thirteen courses were made available. Topics included:

- Creating a User-Friendly IEP
- ABC “All Behavior is Communication”
- 10 Things Kids with Autism Really Want You to Know
- How to Lose the “Velcro” Aide
- Components of an Effective Program
- Meeting the Academic and Social Needs of Students
- Understanding the Unspoken, Unwritten Rules
- What to Do When ... Dealing with Challenging Behavior
- Accommodations in General Education Classrooms
- Visual Teaching Strategies: Encouraging Independence
- How to Teach So that Kids Will Talk
- Promoting Independence Through Structured TEACCH
- Transition: More than a Service Component

This year AOP is exploring different training delivery models such as online training modules to address requests for more flexible training options. In addition, the increased demand for implementing quality programs based on research-based practices, early identification and intervention for young children and improved post-school transition planning will be a continued focus of the project. The Autism Outreach Project is also responsible for distributing the OSPI manual, “The Educational Aspects of Autism Spectrum Disorders (Revised October, 2008)”. More information about AOP can be found at www.nwesd.org/autism.

SECTION 2: THE CHALLENGES – THE GAPS AND SHORTCOMINGS FOR SERVING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Given the increasing number of children and youth identified with autism spectrum disorders – approximately 183 percent increase in five years – K-12 education has its challenges in addressing the educational needs of these students. Training was the resounding issue identified by Washington educators and parents in a recent needs assessment conducted by Washington’s Autism Outreach Project. Training needs to be more targeted and deeper in its content, beyond “introduction to autism” training. In addition to training needs and time, there are shortages of qualified teachers to work, in general, with students with disabilities, and autism specialists, coaches and trainers are essential to build and grow the existing teaching corps.

SECTION 3: WHAT WE NEED – RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROVIDING AUTISM AWARENESS FOR PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Each of the following recommendations had a majority, and often overwhelming majority, of individuals responding in favor of them.

Recommendation #1: Washington State should have a central point for comprehensive information and resources on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) accessible by all educators, parents and the public.

Currently, there are a multitude of resources and informational materials on ASD, but no systematic way for a general education teacher or parent to locate information and/or determine the quality of the resources provided. Washington's central point would be a one-stop-shop with an online and physical presence that would assist in determining the quality and credibility of materials and resources available to the public.

Recommendation #2: Teacher preparation programs should include experiences with parents of children with ASD, such as parent panels, as part of their teacher preparation programs.

While teacher candidates are prepared under a set of broad standards that prepare them to work with a variety of students, only those that seek a special education endorsement would likely be exposed to actual experiences with students with ASD. This recommendation seeks to provide a broader array of experiences for teacher candidates, such as parent panels, to expose all teacher candidates in their preparation to the children and families of students with ASD.

Recommendation #3: All educator preparation programs for teachers, principals and educational staff associates should provide ASD awareness training on characteristics, strategies and resources as a component of their course content.

Teachers are not the only ones that need to better understand and be aware of how to work with children with ASD. Principals and superintendents must also understand ASD to better provide services for these children. Therefore, all educator preparation programs should incorporate and integrate autism awareness training components in their courses.

Recommendation #4: Washington State should provide financial incentives to institutions of higher education in order to attract special education faculty to prepare pre-service special education personnel. In addition, incentives should be available to individuals completing special education and related services programs to address school district personnel shortages.

According to OSPI's 2006 Educator Supply and Demand Report, special education is a shortage teaching area as identified by responding school districts. Anecdotally, we know this is also an area of shortage for qualified faculty in the colleges of education that prepare beginning teachers. Incentives and other promising practices to recruit special education faculty to higher education institutions should be provided.

Recommendation #5: The Professional Educator Standards Board should modify the teacher knowledge and skills standards in teacher preparation programs (also known as Standard V) to address pre-service teachers who work with students with diverse disabilities including students with significant disabilities such as autism.

As the numbers of children with ASD increases, we need a stronger way of addressing this in teacher preparation programs. Standard V – teacher knowledge and skills - should be modified to explicitly address teacher candidate’s awareness of working with students with ASDs.

Recommendation #6: Washington should fund at least four regional autism centers which support a continuum of services for children and youth with ASD, as recommended by the Governor’s Caring for Washington Individuals with Autism Task Force.

The Governor-appointed Caring for Washington Individuals with Autism Task Force provided recommendations for providing lifelong supports to individuals with ASD and their families. The following recommendation as stated in the final report to the Governor was one of several recommendations made:

It is the recommendation of the Task Force that Washington State create a minimum of four regional autism centers to provide community based diagnostic services, comprehensive, coordinated, multidisciplinary health care services, appropriate evidence based therapies such as speech, occupational therapy, ABA (applied behavior analysis) and coordinated training initiatives for individuals with ASD across the lifespan.

It is believed that many individuals with ASD and their families are unable to access appropriate evaluation and diagnosis, necessary services or locate resources to support them. Regional centers would be the first step in alleviating the access issue and allow all individuals with ASD and their families’ access to quality services. The complete report is available at http://www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/mch/Autism/documents/Autism_report/ExecSum1-11-07.pdf. The work group supported the Governor’s Task Force’s recommendation.

Recommendation #7: Washington State should establish a technical assistance program for all educators and school personnel to access at any time in their careers for assistance in furthering their expertise in working with students with ASD. In addition, mentoring, coaching and other support services would also be available. See Recommendation #1.

Work group members expressed a desire to address the ongoing training and technical assistance needs of educators and other school personnel throughout their careers. Even if all school staff were required to have training in ASD, it would depend on when they would need this knowledge and how current their training was to implement an appropriate program. Therefore, the work group strongly believed an ongoing technical assistance program which would be available for new and seasoned educators, in addition to mentoring and coaching, would build a critical network and provide sustainability at the local level.