



Guidelines: Identifying, Serving, and Educating Children and Youth with Autism  
A Review in 2007

1 in 150 children are identified as having an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) every year.<sup>1</sup> Based on that figure, there are likely to be at least 4000 residents in North Dakota with some form of autism, and 700 students on the Autism Spectrum in ND public schools. The Autism Society of North Dakota and the Red River Valley Asperger Network have undertaken an evaluation of the document “Guidelines for Identifying, Serving, and Educating Children and Youth with Autism” (henceforth: ND Guidelines.) We acknowledge the effort put forth in the 2002 guidelines, yet much has changed since then. Autism Spectrum Disorders have become a national research topic, garnering considerable research funding and national coverage in television and print media. With these new issues in mind, we offer the following suggestions for updating the 2002 guidelines and make ourselves available as a resource for any future revisions to the ND Guidelines.

For this project, our team consulted the most current, well-regarded and professional materials available, in order to make informed recommendations to update the ND Guidelines. We consulted professionals who have worked extensively with individuals whose identifications fall under the diagnostic umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD), or who are diagnosed as having an Autism Spectrum Disorder. Finally, we reviewed comparable guidelines currently being used in Minnesota, Colorado and other states.

Our team found the most pronounced limitations in the current guidelines in two areas:

1. Use of the term “Autism” in the guidelines as the “official disability category” for students to receive support services is outdated, incomplete, and inadequate. We recommend the ND Guidelines be revised to use the more current eligibility category: Autism Spectrum Disorder.
2. The criteria for what constitutes an “autism expert” are unclear. Teachers need additional, up-to-date training in autism spectrum disorders.

### **The Term “Autism” vs. “Autism Spectrum Disorder”**

According to the ND Guidelines, the term “autism” was chosen to denote the official disability category, because the Task Force “was concerned about creating confusion with the variations in terminology and wanted to use terms consistently in [the] document.”<sup>2</sup> The guideline adds:

ASD has not been included as a disability classification for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Therefore, ASD does not appear as a disability category for eligibility under IDEA in North Dakota.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorders --- Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 14 Sites, United States, 2002”. Center for Disease Control, February 9, 2007 / 56(SS01);12-28.

<sup>2</sup> Guidelines: Identifying, Serving, and Educating Children and Youth With Autism. Pg. 5.

However, in the Amendments to IDEA, 2004, the term “autism spectrum disorders” is used when outlining special education objectives.

Developing and improving programs to train special education teachers to develop an expertise in *autism spectrum disorders*. (emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

Certainly “IDEA, 2004” considers ASDs to be a valid disability classification since it uses the term in its amended Act. Similarly, the Combating Autism Act, signed by President Bush in 2006, states:

The Act authorizes Research under NIH to address the entire scope of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Autism, sometimes called “classic autism” is the most common condition among developmental disorders known as the autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). Other ASDs include Aspergers Syndrome, Rett Syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified (usually referred to as PDD-NOS.)<sup>5</sup>

In addition to use of the term in governmental documents, corresponding guidelines used in other states have also adopted the more correct terminology. The Minnesota guideline states:

In 1999 the Minnesota Legislature directed DCFL to “amend Minnesota Rules, part 3525.1325, to revise eligibility standards criteria for autism to reflect professional standards.” The Autism Criteria Work Group was convened to draft a proposal for revision of the criteria reflecting current research. That research asserts that autism is now more accurately described and understood as including a range or spectrum of related pervasive developmental disorders....The work of all [of the] groups contributed to the development of the eligibility criteria for the category of Autism Spectrum Disorders. The current criteria were adopted June 12, 2000.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, we recommend the ND Guidelines be revised to use the more current eligibility category: Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### **Developing Expertise in Autism Spectrum Disorders**

The second shortcoming we identified is a need for more specific guidelines for training special education teachers in autism spectrum disorders. In the text of IDEA 2004, section 662, “Personnel Development To Improve Services And Results For Children With Disabilities”, the following objective is outlined: “Developing and improving programs to train special education teachers to develop an expertise in autism spectrum disorders.”<sup>7</sup> It is not clear in the ND guidelines what criterion must be met for an educator to be considered an expert in the area of ASDs.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, Pg. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Sec.662, (G)

<sup>5</sup> Fact Sheet: Combating Autism Act of 2006

<sup>6</sup> Minnesota Rules, Chapter 3525.1325-Adopted June 12, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Sec.662, (G)

Because ASDs are complex and because there is a great deal of variation in both learning ability and behavioral issues, our team has outlined three minimum requirements which should be met for an educator to have “expertise in ASDs.”

1. Educators, should have professional training in ASDs, with a minimum level of training to be defined.
2. Educators should have experience working successfully with individuals on the autism spectrum.
3. Educators should be willing and able to communicate their knowledge and expertise with other professionals throughout the school system.

### **Summary**

Following the change in terminology, to include the constellation of Autism Spectrum Disorders, and better training for educators, we hope that the above changes will lead to more accurate assessments, appropriate interventions, and accommodations for all ASD students.

It is clear that the existing guidelines for identifying, serving, and educating children and youth with autism do not address the needs of children throughout the autistic spectrum. Students who have any of the pervasive developmental disorders, besides autistic, are simply falling through the cracks in the education system. School districts must be given the proper tools they need to provide appropriate education to all children with autism spectrum disorders. Guidelines should be adopted to include every child with an autism spectrum disorder.

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