

**TO: General Assembly Government Administration and Elections  
Committee**  
**RE: Raised House Bill 7144**  
**AN ACT ESTABLISHING A BOARD OF EDUCATION AND  
SERVICES FOR CITIZENS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM  
DISORDERS**  
**DATE: March 16, 2007**

Senator Slossberg, Representative Caruso, and Members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee:

I have been a special education teacher for the DOC for the past 13 years. I was previously employed for 5 years as a behavior specialist for a local ARC but the main reason that I am here is because I'm a dad of a child who is severely autistic.

Rocco's signs and symptoms of autism were not apparent to me and my wife in the first year of his life. When Rocco was about a year and a half we noticed that his language was not developing. We addressed this concern with Rocco's pediatrician who simply dismissed our concern and stated that this speech delay often occurred with toddler boys.

When Rocco's speech delay continued my wife Maria contacted Birth to 3 and they had us contact a private provider who was unable to provide adequate services. We dropped this agency and turned to a local Birth to 3 program in Watertown. This agency was more equipped to provide services for Rocco; however, they did not have a Speech Pathologist on Staff so Rocco was unable to receive speech therapy. During this time Rocco was first diagnosed with autism.

When Rocco turned three in July his educational services transferred to our local school district however, he did not start receiving educational services until late August of that year.

During that first school year Rocco was retested and we learned that his condition had gotten much more serious. Over the next few years with my experience as a special education teacher and my wives' experience as social worker we worked hard to develop an effective educational program for Rocco. We even paid for expensive psychological/educational testing that would help guide our school district in the development of a quality program for him.

As Rocco condition got more severe I started to get a little desperate and called various agencies and professionals for help with Rocco's condition. One agency director recommended that I visit a chiropractor who had his practice in the next town over. During the first visit this doctor waved his hands over Rocco while he was holding different snacks. The doctor would then tell me what was ok and not ok for Rocco to eat. He also hooked Rocco up to a special machine by placing clips on his ears. The kicker to this story was after the second visit to the doctor I walked out into the waiting room with Rocco and saw two or three senior citizens with their pets in their laps. When I asked the receptionist what was this all about she stated that the pets were going to receive treatment from the doctor too!

In school Rocco continued to regress and failed to grasp some basic necessary life skills such as toileting, communication, and safety issues. Further testing after Rocco turned 6 year of age showed the gap in his educational development had widen significantly on all of the tests that he had been completed three years earlier.

Rocco continues to be severely autistic but since his transfer to CREC's Riverstreet Autism Program at Coltsville two years ago he has made significant progress in many important skills pertaining to communication and socialization along with major improvements in his basic life skills and academic development. This legislation is an opportunity to make real progress in providing children and

adults with autism consistent, stable, and cost-effective care. I urge you to make this initiative a priority not for just my family but for all of Connecticut's families.

Thank you.

Matt Parenti  
State School Teacher, School District #1, Connecticut Department of Correction  
Steward, CSEA/SEIU Local 2001  
149 Inverary Dr.  
Watertown, CT 06795  
Home: (860) 417-3128  
Work: (203) 270-2897

# The Newtown Bee

Commentary—

## Programs To Benefit Autistic Children Lack Funding, Expertise, And Oversight

BY MATT PARENTI

With Congress passing legislation to fund federal research into the causes of autism earlier last month, we have an opportunity to shine the light on how poorly equipped Connecticut's public education system is to deal with this growing crisis. Unfortunately, the "Combating Autism Act" provides few additional resources to our local and state schools for special needs development, and state special education teachers are joining together to assure a client-driven services model for afflicted families and taxpayers here in Connecticut.

As the parent of an autistic child who struggles every day at school to stay focused and learn, I know how critical it is to diagnose the disorder and begin a tailored education plan at an early age. I have learned that effective treatment of autism requires a comprehensive approach because the demands remain constant throughout the child's education and development.

As a state schoolteacher instructing youths in the Department of Correction, I see firsthand how critical resources are not being made available for students with special needs in our state and local public schools. I believe that every district in Connecticut must be able to assure children with disabilities the oversight of a special education professional to provide critical early evaluation and assessment, as well as follow-up testing throughout their development.

State education professionals who are members of The Connecticut State

Employees Association / Service Employees International Union (CSEA/SEIU) Local 2001 have proposed a model plan where we fulfill this role, ensuring the client-driven services families facing this tremendous challenge deserve. More importantly, we have the education and the expertise needed to deal with the autism epidemic.

Everyday I see the impact of underfunding the state's Birth-to-Three program and understaffing the state agencies where our union's members can make a difference in reaching the children who need early diagnosis and effective treatment in our correctional system. Unfortunately, for many of the adolescents that are enrolled in the DOC's schools, a great deal of damage has already been done.

My wife and I experienced tremendous frustration while our son received services from Birth-to-Three and our local public school system. Both programs had many dedicated education professionals working with my son; however they often lacked funding, expertise, oversight, and a year-round commitment, which severely hindered Rocco's development and even lead to his regression.

As a behavior specialist for a private, non-profit provider of vocational and educational services for five years before coming to work for the state, I witnessed firsthand that services are lacking for families in the private sector as well. I believe that private provider options must be made viable to families who rely on these services, as well, and that a client-driven services model with state oversight is the way forward

For the last two and a half years, after a hard fought battle with our local school district, we had Rocco placed at the River Street Autism Program at Coltsville in Hartford. The program, which is part of the Capitol Region Education Council, is internationally renowned, and recently hosted a group of educators from Japan who are looking to develop similar school models for specializing in development for their country's growing population of children with autism.

Rocco has made significant gains in his development at Coltsville because of their ability to function seamlessly without the constraints previous education programs he has been enrolled in suffered from. Schools like Coltsville are the exception in Connecticut because our political and administrative leaders have been unwilling to provide school districts and private providers with the oversight our state education professionals in CSEA/SEIU Local 2001 would be able to provide.

We are reaching out to parents and advocates to demand that our elected officials invest the needed resources into developing a client-driven services model with oversight of all public, as well as private, providers of special needs development by qualified state education professionals. What's at stake is the health and safety of thousands of children suffering from autism spectrum disorders today and tomorrow.

*(Matt Parenti works with special needs students as a state schoolteacher in the Department of Correction's Garner facility in Newtown.)*