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testimony outline

Dear Members of the Texas Senate Education Committee:

My name is Christine Gianadda. My husband, David, and I have three children, Gordon, Nora and Stella - all 10th generation Texans. Gordon, who is eight, was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome two years ago. Asperger's Syndrome is a high functioning form of autism.

While we are very fortunate that Gordon falls at the high end of the autism spectrum, the challenges he must overcome are tremendous if he is to grow into a productive tax-paying citizen. Unlike other disorders, intensive education of autistic children will enable many of these children to become productive, independent members of society. With appropriate treatment, 50% of people with autism will become indistinguishable from the mainstream population.

We are working hard at home with him on the nutritional aspects of this complex disorder, and we are having tremendous results. But education has been very difficult, and we found ourselves removing him from his third school in four years a few months ago.

The autism spectrum is extremely wide, but it's not as wide when you talk about Asperger's children. Without an appropriate education, we know what could happen with Gordon, who has such intelligence and great potential. It's not pretty.

Autism is a social communication disorder. If affects understanding of social concepts such as the ability to read motive, intent, nuance and implication. These are very smart children who are eager and anxious to learn, but they must be taught in their areas of deficit. They must show mastery as well as the ability to generalize social skills concepts outside of the classroom setting. Without this ability they will have great difficulty learning to drive a vehicle, succeeding in a job interview, understanding sexuality (which is almost entirely social), etc. In an age of sex offender lists, zero tolerance and political correctness, we are scared for his future. He can learn, but he must be taught!

My husband and I carry copies of a letter from Dr. Denise McCallon, a Developmental Psychologist at Dallas Children's Medical Center, explaining that Gordon is autistic. Since Gordon looks like a regular kid, the world has certain behavior expectations of him that he is not always able to meet. In the future, this could easily lead to trouble with the law. He will have to carry a card identifying himself as autistic, but will he remember he has it? Will he be able to present it to someone and disclose about his disorder when he is in a stressful high-anxiety situation? Not if no one teaches him about the importance of disclosure and the various levels of disclosure (i.e., Don't walk up to everyone you meet and say, "Hi, I'm autistic.").

Our experience with school for Gordon has been very difficult, and, to be frank, profoundly sad. We had him in a public Kindergarten before he was diagnosed, and he began having problems with sensory overload and resulting undesirable behaviors almost immediately. He was with a second-year teacher who did not yet know the system well. The principal and counselor, instead of working with us to find a solution for Gordon, conspired to get rid of him. We didn't know what to ask for or our rights, and I don't believe we should have to know this sort of thing to place a child in a public Kindergarten program. No one ever suggested an evaluation, and the principal had begun building a case for expulsion three months into this five-year-old child's first year of school. Our family, thankfully, has some options, and we were able to remove him from that environment. If this were to happen to a family that did not have options, I see a great potential for abuse. The adults in Gordon's school acted shamefully and threw my son away. Gordon is a fairly

inefficient for schools to hire and retain an autism-specific educator on staff capable of providing the intensive training needed to effectively teach autistic children.

SB1000 will allow parents to find effective solutions for their autistic children's needs. When parents have the option of moving their autistic children within the district, to another school district or to a private setting, the schools will no longer have to provide programs in every school for every functioning level on the autism spectrum. It will free up resources, and the children will have a chance to progress academically. This bill is good for the children. It is good for the families. And it is good for the schools.

Once Gordon is back in school receiving an appropriate autism education, I will be able to work. My income will be taxed, and I will spend that income. Our marriage will be less stressed, and our entire family dynamic will improve. Once Gordon is getting the appropriate training in the appropriate setting, no one will have to worry about the possibility of having to find a group home for him or having him collect disability checks, because he'll be working and spending his income.

SB1000 could be the difference between a generation of healthy, taxpaying citizens vs. institutionalized adults.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Christine Gianadda