**Autism Commission**

**September 18, 2023**

**Carolyn J. Kain**

**Executive Director**

**Birth-14 Subcommittee**

**Recommendations**

***Co Chairs***

*Russell Johnston (DESE)*

*Michele Brait*

* **DESE IEP Improvement Project**

That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will collaborate with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education on its development of a new IEP to address issues related to students with autism spectrum disorder focusing on considerations of culture, race, linguistics, gender identity, and socio-economic status.

* **Age of Diagnosis**

That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will review all available data about the amount of services provided to toddlers diagnosed with autism and enrolled in the Part C/early intervention system, disaggregated by race/ethnicity, primary spoken language, and funding source (e.g., MassHealth, private insurance).

* **Transition from Early Intervention to Special Education**

That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will examine available information related to the transition of children with autism spectrum disorder from early intervention to special education, with a focus on the timeliness of this transition and the continuity of supports.

* **Supporting the Influx of Migrant Families and Students**

That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will examine the needs of families and children with autism spectrum disorder who are unhoused, living in shelters, and/or newly relocated by reviewing available information from available sources such as the Department of Public Health, MassHealth and their partner agencies to find ways to offer support.

* **Child Safety**

That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will investigate resources that might be available for communities, schools and individual households to improve safety for students with autism spectrum disorder, particularly aimed at addressing concerns such as wandering, bolting and accidental drowning.

* **School Discipline and Behavior Management**

That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will examine the use of discipline and behavior management strategies in schools that particularly impact students with autism spectrum disorder, such as the use of directed time out, suspension, etc., focusing on considerations of culture, race, linguistics, gender identity, and socio-economic status.

**School-Aged (14 – 22) Employment**

**Subcommittee**

**Recommendations**

***Co Chairs***

*Toni Wolf (MRC)*

*Sacha Stadhard (EOL)*

***Recommendation 1: Promoting Equity in IEP Placement Decisions***

Recognizing that all student placement decisions are based on individual team decisions, the 14-22+/Employment Committee recommends that DESE (1) share with all Massachusetts school districts and families data on the IEP placement of students whose primary disability is autism - disaggregated by race, gender, English proficiency, and economic status; (2) continue collecting, analyzing and widely disseminating this data on at least an annual basis; and (3) continue and increase its professional development and support to school districts regarding equity for autistic students who are students of color, have limited English proficiency, and/or are low income for all educational decisions, including decisions affecting initial special education evaluations, student placement, graduation rates, attendance, discipline, seclusion, and physical restraint.

The goal of this recommendation is to raise awareness of potential inequities in student placements and to promote equity in all educational decisions affecting autistic students of color, low income autistic students, and autistic students who have limited English proficiency.

In March 2023 DESE’s Office of Public School Monitoring presented our committee with IEP placement data for autistic students for the 2022 school year, disaggregated by race, gender, English proficiency and income level.  Three important data points from the presentation are:

* 26% of white autistic students were placed in substantially separate classrooms, while 54% of Black autistic students, 44% of Hispanic autistic students & 40% of Asian autistic students were placed in such classrooms.
* 32% of autistic students who were proficient in English were placed in substantially separate classrooms, while 50% of autistic students who were learning English were placed in those classrooms.
* 23% of autistic students who were not low income were placed in substantially separate classrooms, while 43% of autistic students who were low income were placed in such classrooms.

While some autistic students learn better in substantially separate classrooms, it is concerning that higher percentages of students of color, students with limited English proficiency, and low income students were placed in such classrooms as compared to their white, English proficient, non-low income counterparts.  Students placed in substantially separate classrooms do not receive the benefit of frequent interactions with non-disabled peers, do not have access to the general education curriculum, and generally have lower short-term and long-term expectations set for them.  This recommendation will help promote equity for autistic students from marginalized communities by identifying data trends and increasing professional development to address inequities.

***Recommendation 2: Strengthening School Transition Programming***

In order to strengthen school transition programming for students with disabilities ages 14 and older, the 14-22+/Employment Subcommittee recommends that Massachusetts school districts and families be provided information regarding potentially available programming that works with students on strengthening transition skills and provides employment and independence skills.  These programs would include, but not limited to, information about the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission’s Pre-Employment Transition Services (Pre-ETS) and the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative (MAICEI).  The Subcommittee recommends that this information be developed by DESE and the Federation for Children with Special Needs, with input from this Subcommittee, as part of the Federation’s Parent Training programs and materials. The subcommittee will work with DESE and the Federation for Children with Special Needs to update the list annually.

**Adult Subcommittee**

**Recommendations**

**Co Chairs**

*Christine Hubbard*

*Kathy Sanders (DMH)*

The adult subcommittee will work with DDS, EOEA and other appropriate stakeholders, on the issue of aging autistic adults, who have been cared for throughout their lives exclusively by their parents/guardians and who have no current connections with state agencies for future support, once their current aging caregivers are no longer able to care for them. This identified need of older individuals with autism has been handled, thus far, on a case-by-case basis without any opportunity for advanced planning because they were unknown to our state agencies. The goal of this collaborative work is to identify these individuals and their needs, and to make recommendations for a system of supports and services that is responsive to their specific needs.

**Healthcare Subcommittee**

**Recommendations**

***Co Chairs***

*Mi-Haita James (EHS)*

*Amy Weinstock*

**Autism Treatment Access and Coverage**

* Expand access to diagnostic resources for families.
  + Work with Early Intervention programs to ensure that children receive diagnostic evaluations for ASD prior to graduating from EI.
  + Expand ASD diagnostic training for general pediatricians to increase capacity and reduce waitlists
  + Coordinate efforts with Autism clinics to ensure that patients with more complex needs and profiles are able to be evaluated sooner.
  + Explore the feasibility of statutory changes to recognize ASD diagnoses by a wider range of professionals beyond the physicians and psychologists currently mandated.
* The Healthcare Subcommittee recommends that MassHealth extend coverage of medically necessary treatments for persons over the age of 21 who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder by a licensed physician or a licensed psychologist, said coverage shall include but not limited to, applied behavior analysis supervised by a licensed applied behavior analyst.

**Expand Training of Healthcare Professionals**

* The Healthcare Subcommittee will continue to explore the expansion of training on autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and appropriate strategies for assisting individuals with ASD focusing on considerations of culture, race, linguistics, gender identity and socio-economic status.
  + Mental Health Mobile Crisis/Emergency Service providers
  + Community Behavioral Health Center staff
  + Helpline/Hotline personnel
  + Emergency room personnel and residents
  + Hospital personnel and residents

**Housing Subcommittee**

**Recommendations**

***Co Chairs***

*Bronia Clifton (EOHLC)*

*Laurie Anastopoulos*

To assist with the development of additional design guidelines that will meet the needs of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to obtain and sustain tenancy in supportive affordable state funded housing units, the Housing Subcommittee recommends that the Autism Commission engage an architect to assist the subcommittee with the review and submission of additional design guidelines to support individuals with ASD in accessing affordable supportive housing.