



# Virginia Board for People with Disabilities

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Virginia Board for People with Disabilities**

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## **Editorial Response to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* regarding educating children with autism**

As Executive Director of the Virginia Board for Disabilities, I was disappointed and dismayed to read the Monday, November 26, *Richmond Times-Dispatch* editorial titled [\*Bring more light to decisions about autism and the classroom\*](#), which questioned whether students with autism should be educated in the general education classroom and implied that inclusion of these students detracts from the educational experience of their peers. In making its case, this editorial makes sweeping generalizations about students with an autism spectrum diagnosis and ignores decades of research on the benefits of inclusion for students with and without disabilities alike in order to paint students with an autism spectrum diagnosis as a burden to our schools and to our society. In truth, inclusion of students with an autism spectrum diagnosis in the general education classroom benefits students with disabilities, students without disabilities, and the Commonwealth as a whole.

Students with an autism spectrum diagnosis have a broad range of needs, strengths, and characteristics. In this respect, they are exactly like their peers without an autism spectrum diagnosis. The broad stereotyping of these children in the editorial demonstrates that, despite decades of effort to educate the public about people with disabilities, including those with an autism spectrum diagnosis, there is a continued need for improved education and awareness.

The authors of this editorial recognized that “in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America, we rarely institutionalize children with severe cognitive disabilities.” The editorial’s broad assumptions about students with an autism spectrum diagnosis and repeated characterization of this population as a financial and social “burden” on the rest of society are characteristic of the very types of biases that have resulted in the mass institutionalization of people with disabilities in the past. Thankfully, Virginia has made huge strides in improving the quality of life for all individuals with disabilities in the Commonwealth, and its efforts to end the institutionalization of people with disabilities have been one of the most important areas of improvement. Everyone, regardless of their disability status, has the right to live in their community and to be included in all facets of life with the supports they need to be successful.

There is significant research showing the benefits of inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classrooms for students with and without disabilities alike. Blaming students with an autism spectrum diagnosis for classroom disruptions and increased costs fails to account for the multitude of factors that contribute to an effective learning environment, school climate, and school culture. Students with an autism spectrum diagnosis have been, and continue to be, successfully integrated into regular education classrooms around the nation. All students should be presumed capable of learning and participating in the life of their school, and all students deserve opportunities to demonstrate their abilities, skills, and talents.

Classrooms that employ universal learning strategies, including positive behavioral supports, benefit all children, not just those with disabilities. Co-teaching and other collaborative learning strategies have also been proven effective at improving the learning environment for all students. Singling out students with a disability as being harmful to other learners is both irresponsible and counter to the law. Students with disabilities are entitled to a free appropriate public education under the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*, which requires that they receive instruction in the least-restrictive environment appropriate to implementing their Individualized Education Plan. The unnecessary exclusion of students with disabilities from regular education classrooms is discriminatory and can constitute a violation of the integration mandate of the *Americans with Disabilities Act*, which has governed the treatment and accommodation of individuals with disabilities for 28 years.

The purpose of education is to prepare our young people to move on to higher education, training, and a career. This does not apply only to some, select children. It applies to all children. Children and adults with an autism spectrum diagnosis have gifts, talents, and abilities from which we all can learn. With more and more students being diagnosed, decision-making and public policy must be focused on the future, not on the archaic models of the past. It must ensure that the rights of all students to receive a comprehensive education are not infringed.

The editorial concludes with the assertion that “we Virginians need to... have an open conversation about what is best for all.” I cannot agree with this statement more, and the views expressed in this editorial illustrate precisely why that conversation is needed.

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