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Statewide Parent Advocacy Network, Inc.

STATEMENT OF SPAN ON THE PROPOSAL TO ESTABLISH SEPARATE “AUTISM SCHOOLS”

The Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) is New Jersey’s federally-designated Parent Training and Information Center and Family to Family Health Information Center for families of children with disabilities and special healthcare needs, including children with autism, and houses the federally-funded State Implementation Grant for Integrated Community-Based Systems for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other Developmental Disabilities. Each year, SPAN assists tens of thousands of families to access education, health, and other services for their children. It is based on this experience, our knowledge of the law, and our understanding of the research regarding effective services for children with ASD that SPAN strongly opposes the proposal to establish a segregated school for children with autism in every county, and the decision to authorize a charter for a segregated school for children with autism in Newark.

The Law: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and New Jersey special education code require that students with disabilities, including students with ASD, be educated to the maximum extent possible with their non-disabled peers in inclusive settings. *Segregation begets segregation*, and the establishment of more segregated schools for children with ASD sends a clear message to parents and schools that children with autism can’t be included.

The Data: New Jersey has a higher rate of out-of-district placement of students with disabilities than any other state: 8.7% compared to a national average of just 3%. But this disturbing data is dwarfed by the even greater rate of segregation of students with autism. Almost 30% of New Jersey students with autism are sent to out-of-district programs, compared to a national average of just 8%! SPAN operates a military family support project on the joint base in South Jersey. We frequently hear from military parents that their child with autism was included in every other state in which they lived, but was automatically segregated the minute they moved to New Jersey. Each year, the New Jersey Department of Education must establish goals to decrease the rate of out-of-district placements; establishing a segregated school for students with autism in every county, and opening a segregated charter school for children with autism in Newark, will make our current segregation problem worse. This proposal would reverse recent state efforts to encourage more inclusive services for students with autism, including the awarding of \$15 million in grants to 55 school districts in 2007 to establish or expand autism programs in-district. In New Jersey, it is the *habit of segregation* that is strong, and *it is a habit we have to break*.

The Educational Impact: Children with autism gain valuable academic and social skills from interacting with their peers without disabilities, as well as closer ties to their communities. Do we want our children with ASD to learn how to navigate and develop relationships with people in their own community, or in a community of strangers? A recent study published in the International Journal of Special Education compared students with autism who were included vs. those who were segregated. Students with autism were not placed in more segregated settings because of their intensive needs. Rather, students who lived in a district with an inclusive philosophy were included, while students who lived in districts with separate programs for students with disabilities were segregated, regardless of their level of need. That same study found that students educated in inclusive settings outperformed students educated in segregated settings in all academic areas.

The Fiscal Impact: As noted by the Coalition for Special Education Funding Reform, of which SPAN is a member, “At a time when the State of New Jersey has cut tens of millions of dollars for special education, we believe it is wholly inappropriate to create or expand public programs – especially those that segregate children. Our state cut so much aid to local districts for special education that the Department of Education had to ask Washington D.C. for a waiver of “maintenance of effort” federal requirements that protect funding for our students with disabilities... The Governor has suggested that creating the autism schools is a cost-saving measure, but there are no data to support this. Special education dollars can be better spent. Rather than promising to open expensive schools which are not needed in New Jersey, we urge improved coordination of services and improved public/private collaboration. The New Jersey Department of Education should facilitate shared special education services, but should not support the proliferation of new, segregated programs.”