

testimony in support of SB 1000

Mark Lewis

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

In July 1997, I left the Navy and moved to Austin with my wife, Leah. We purchased our first home one year, later. Our son, [REDACTED], was born in May 2000.

[REDACTED] was 4 when he started Pre-K at our church school. He struggled in the classroom, as did the school staff with his behavior and class participation. A friend suggested we have him evaluated for Autism. An Occupational Therapist noted sensory and social issues consistent with Autism, and suspected Asperger's Syndrome:

No eye contact

Fixations

Sensory overloads

We continued weekly occupational therapy sessions and Leah began her Autism research, specifically regarding Asperger's. The church school staff told us they would not recommend him for Kindergarten and one suggested we "fix him" and bring him back. We sought to the services of Austin ISD.

[REDACTED] was observed twice and evaluated by Austin ISD staff. They concurred with the high-function Autism diagnosis, specifically Asperger's Syndrome. Preparations for his enrollment in Kindergarten at an Austin ISD began, including the draft of appropriate Admission, Review and Dismissal (ARD) and Individualized Education Program (IEP) proposals.

In the summer before starting Kindergarten, we began two weekly sessions with a Child Behavior Specialist. One session was to observe [REDACTED] and the other for learning new parenting techniques.

Leah's research and due diligence steered her towards requesting [REDACTED] be admitted in an elementary school with an established program for special needs children and a proven track record. Austin ISD denied the request over their insistence on implementing a "pilot" program at our neighborhood school. The program included two newly hired, first year educators as the school's Special Education Coordinator and a Special Education Assistant. [REDACTED] Kindergarten teacher had no training or experience with an Autistic student.

We had our concerns over the school's ability to deliver appropriate services to [REDACTED] but gave them a chance, setting goals we hoped they'd achieve. We attended ARD reviews monthly, and Leah attended weekly meetings with the school staff to discuss the challenges and issues they faced in delivering education services to [REDACTED]. Leah also engaged in daily email exchanges with the school staff and Austin ISD senior staff as part of her advocacy. Frustrations were evident in a meeting chaired by the school principal when he asked Leah to ease up on her advocacy because he was "concerned for my staff." When does school staff needs emerge above the needs of a student in Texas' public education? We decided it was time to seek other educational opportunities.

Parents of special needs children support groups gave glowing reports of success and satisfaction with Plano ISD. One school, of particular interest to us, has a track record for success with high-function Autistic children. In January 2006, we decided to move from Austin and purchase a home in the

Harrington Elementary School neighborhood in Plano.

At Harrington, they "get it." Within ten weeks of carefully monitoring [REDACTED] environmental issues, they devised a curriculum delivery plan suited for [REDACTED] success. Not only is he completing tasks, the staff also teaches him valuable coping skills for difficult and challenging situations. He is meeting or exceeding all the core requirements for advancement, and his social skills have improved to where they project he may be self-sustaining by the third grade. As parents, our goal is for [REDACTED] to become an asset to society, independent of publicly funded social programs. Early intervention is paramount to that success.

We were deeply involved in the Austin community. Leah was in our church choir and often performed solos at ours and other churches. I was on the Men's Ministry Council at our church and served as a Precinct Chairman. Leah gave up her small business to advocate for our son. We incurred lost wages and income. We've spent over \$30,000 dollars in the past three years for professional services, material and training, specialized home resources, and moving expenses. We're fortunate. I'm blessed to have a job that affords me the option to work from home. What if personnel or policies change at Harrington and the services my son benefits from, now, are removed? We'll be forced into seeking a new school for our son, just as we did 14 months ago. Will you help us if we are faced with that decision? What about all the parents and guardians of Autistic children who are not as fortunate as us? Will you help them? Senate Bill 1000 is the tool we seek for securing appropriate educational services for our Autistic children. Will you help us?