

Broad Coalition of Advocacy Groups Urges Georgia to Reform Educational Program for Children with Disabilities Found in Violation of Federal Law

Atlanta, Georgia, Nov. 22 -- A broad coalition of advocacy groups is urging the state of Georgia to transform its separate and unequal educational program serving thousands of children with behavioral disabilities into a system that provides needed services and supports to integrate students into their own local schools. The coalition formed after a July 15th letter from the U.S. Department of Justice finding the state's program illegally segregates children with behavioral disabilities and provides them with unequal educational opportunities in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The state launched the network of 24 centers known as the Georgia Network for Educational and Therapeutic Services, or GNETS, in 1970. Most of the centers are separate from neighborhood schools. Some are located in buildings that were used to teach African-American students under Jim Crow. GNETS serves about 5,000 children with behavioral disabilities, including autism, at a cost of at least \$70 million in state and federal funds.

GNETS deny students equal access to resources widely available in other public schools, such as physical education, art, music, gifted classes, electives – and even regular interactions with teachers, because much of the instruction, particularly at the high school level, is online. As a result, GNETS have among the worst graduation and drop-out rates in the state. Students do not have the opportunity to interact socially with other children in their communities and school systems, including at such events as football games, dances and other events important to all students. A state audit has found the GNETS program ineffective.

The diversity of the coalition's membership reflects the breadth of stakeholder support for addressing Georgia's illegal program. The coalition includes groups with expertise in education, mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, and developmental disabilities, as well as civil rights, parent, self-advocacy and youth groups.

“Our groups have joined together because we believe this findings letter creates an opportunity for the state to better educate students with behavioral disabilities,” said Leslie Lipson, attorney with the Georgia Advocacy Office, the independent, Protection and Advocacy Organization for People with Disabilities in Georgia and that is helping organize the effort.

The Justice Department sought to engage the state in addressing the issue within 10 days of the July 15 letter, but to date Georgia's only public response has come in an education industry publication, where a state spokeswoman said, “Georgia is complying with the law and acting in the best interest of its students.”

The coalition's letter (see attached) to Governor Nathan Deal and Attorney General Sam Olens seeks to end this inaction, and to bring the state to "address the unnecessary segregation and unequal education experienced by thousands of students."

"The longer we wait on reforming this outdated and illegal system, the more harm we are doing to our children," said Debi Tucker, executive director of Parent to Parent of Georgia, a nonprofit organization that helps parents advocate on behalf of their children. "The findings letter reflects the numerous calls we field from parents struggling to secure services and supports in their local school," she said.

As one child told DOJ investigators, under GNETS, "school is like a prison." A parent cited in the letter of findings said, "It's a warehouse for kids the school system doesn't want or know how to deal with." DOJ found that "the vast majority of students in the GNETS Program" could instead participate in general education classrooms in local schools if given appropriate services and supports.

"Segregating students with disabilities not only is illegal but also leads to poor results," said Alison Barkoff, director of advocacy for the Bazelon Center. "Decades of research and practice show that students with disabilities do best academically and socially when they learn alongside their peers without disabilities."

The coalition backing these findings also seeks in its letter to inform the substantive reforms needed to bring the state of Georgia in compliance with federal law, as many of its members "represent and interact with thousands of students with behavior-related disabilities."

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The DOJ's July 15 Letter of Finding can be found here:
http://www.ada.gov/olmstead/documents/gnets_lof.pdf