



ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) Programme

Remarks By:

The Hon. Dame Jennifer Smith, DBE, JP, DHumL, MP

Minister of Education

31 May 2012

Good Afternoon,

I come before you today to inform you of developments in Education with respect to provisions for students diagnosed with ASD (autism spectrum disorder) - in keeping with my commitment to regularly report on Ministry initiatives.

Last year, we launched a pilot programme for students on the spectrum at West Pembroke Primary School. Today, I am delighted to reveal that in the 2012/2013 school year, the pilot programme is being extended to a second ASD classroom at Prospect Primary School.

The general public should be aware that autism is a condition that impacts brain development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills.

Medically diagnosed cases of autism have increased dramatically internationally over the past several years and the same is true for Bermuda.

Traditionally, students diagnosed with ASD are assigned paraprofessionals who help to support their educational needs in the classroom, in consultation with classroom teachers.

However, many of these students require more intensive services, including therapies that cannot be adequately provided in the regular classroom setting.

The Ministry of Education knows of 35 medically-diagnosed cases of such students within the Bermuda Public School System; however, based on international figures and information gathered locally, we suspect that there may be even more cases of which we are unaware.

Training in sensitivity and understanding of autism spectrum disorders has already taken place for the entire West Pembroke Primary School staff, and training will now occur for the Prospect Primary staff.

This ASD expanded programme is in direct response to the need demonstrated by the pilot programme, to provide appropriate services and support for identified students. The programme is based on proven effective international models; and tailored to meet the specific needs of Bermuda's students.

Because the ASD classrooms are based on proven international best practices, they will serve as centres of excellence and teaching classrooms for parents, educators, paraprofessionals, and other support service providers.

Each classroom will be staffed by personnel trained and qualified in autism spectrum disorders, who will deliver educational and related services, such as applied behaviour analysis (ABA). While speech, occupational and physical therapy will be supplied by the Department of Health.

The support of the Ministry and Department of Health has been key to Education's ability to expand autism programming and services to meet the unique special education needs of these students at the primary level.

Enrollment in each ASD classroom (which are equipped to take 6 students each) will be based on stated criteria and parental input.

Yes, the programme has been designed with parental involvement in mind. Parents will be invited to participate as much as possible, and will be able to infuse into the classroom, strategies and techniques that work well for their child at home.

Conversely, strategies and techniques that have been shown to be effective in the classroom will be shared with the parents for them to use at home and in the community.

Each student will have an individual education plan (IEP) developed with parental participation and designed to bring the students' academic, social, speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy and behaviour goals together in one document. Parents will be invited to monthly meetings and regularly informed of student progress.

As with the pilot programme, students in the ASD classroom will each have an individualised timetable based on their specific needs and will spend part of the day with students in regular classrooms - in addition to lunch and recess.

I should emphasise, that this programme is transitional in nature. It is designed to prepare students to learn and practice alternate skills and strategies to manage successfully within this classroom setting until they are ready to be reintegrated into a regular classroom. So that - in the words of Peter Bell, Vice-President for Programmes and Services at Autism Speaks, we - *"give students on the ASD spectrum every opportunity to discover and nurture their talents for the transition to the larger community."*

This is an important investment in our students. And it was made possible with the help of a number of people -one as young as eleven years old - allow me to give the people who have been instrumental in launching this exciting programme the recognition they deserve.

I want to first thank the entire West Pembroke community, who have not only embraced the programme, but invested countless hours, time and funds.

In particular, I want to acknowledge the following persons:

1. Principal **Mrs. Opal Wilson**
2. Deputy Principal, **Mr. Wendell Smith**
3. P3 teacher, **Ms. Lara Ingham**
4. Educational Therapist, **Ms. Shacolbi Basden**
5. Paraprofessionals - **Ms. June Swan**
6. **Ms. Eual Douglas**
7. **Ms. Jerrydene Griffiths**
8. **Ms. Patricia O'Connor**
9. **Ms. Tory Corriea**

10. **Ms. Beverly Smith**
11. **Ms. Sophia Burch**
12. **Ms. Tinee Stewart**
13. **Ms. Janice Palmer**
14. PTA President, **Mr. Keino Furbert-Jacobs**
15. Grandparent, **Ms. Diana Corday**
16. **Mr. Godwin**
17. **Mr. Derek Flood**
18. **Mr. Eddie Corriea** of Electronic City
19. SAL – Devonshire
20. **Mr. Vivian Simons**

A special mention for **Ms. Freda Trimm** and **Ms. Tamisha Simons**, the learning support teachers at West Pembroke, who have sacrificed countless hours of personal time, and who sought and coordinated numerous donations. For them, this was truly a labour of love.

And now – our 11-year-old benefactor. **Ms. Harlee Purvey** opted to receive financial donations for the ASD classroom in lieu of gifts for her birthday. Special thanks to you Harlee!

I would also like to thank Principal **Dr. Shangri-La Durham Thompson** and the staff at Prospect Primary School for opening their arms to welcome the programme to be located there for the upcoming school year. From the Department of Health, I would like to thank:

1. **Ms. Sandra Thornhill**
2. **Ms. Susan Price Barrett**
3. **Ms. Marissa Wainwright**
4. **Ms. Kara Raic and**
5. **Ms. Gail Parker**

For their support and hard work which was instrumental in making the pilot programme successful. Special thanks to Mr. **George Emery** and Mr. **Craig Daniels** of the Ministry of Public Works, for helping to construct the physical space.

From the Ministry of Education I would like to thank the Acting Assistant Director of Student Services **Dr. Judith Bartley** and the entire Student Services team.

This programme was the brainchild of Mrs. **Donna Edge-Bean**, Education Officer for Special Education. She has been so passionate and committed that she made a personal sacrifice. I would like to thank her and her family for allowing her to take family time to make a difference in the lives of our students.

Last, but not least – I want to thank the parents, family members, Tomorrow's Voices, BASE and others in the community.

Ladies and gentlemen, **Dr. Kimberly Mills** of Tomorrow's Voices and **Ms. Susannah Cole** of BASE are here with us today. The staff and families of these two organisations are tireless advocates and supporters of children with special education needs. They deserve a very special tribute for their work in spreading understanding of the complexities and diverse needs of children diagnosed with ASD.

Our expanded programme will not only continue the work that they have done, but will stand as a testament and legacy to their tireless efforts.

- Thank you -