

April 26, Testimony for DESE General Meeting

My name is Lisa Jeanne Graf, and I am a disability rights advocate.

This month is Autism Acceptance Month which is being celebrated by more school districts this year, including my daughter's school district, the Boston Public Schools. With that context, I request that DESE staff make improvements in disability justice for all Massachusetts schools.

This meeting you will review the document "[Action Steps to Support Schools, Students, and Families](#)."

A quote from this document reads "On March 24, the U.S. Department of Education issued a letter to educators and parents about schools' responsibilities to provide safe, in-person learning for students with disabilities. It also reminded districts of students with disabilities' right to receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. The letter summarizes strategies for keeping school communities healthy and for addressing the health needs of individual students with disabilities."

My request is that the staff from DESE include in their guidance to schools a ban on the use of aversives in MA schools, supporting language in MA Bill H.225 (malegislature.gov/Bills/192/H225).

It is currently legal to change the behavior of disabled students in Massachusetts educational facilities, through the use of aversives, including through hitting and pinching. The Judge Rotenberg Center in Canton, MA is the most extreme example of the use of aversives- they can administer high voltage electric shocks to change behavior, without consent. Currently the device, called the GED, that is used at this facility, is illegal to use on animals and individuals who are not disabled.

In addition, throughout the state, at schools, It is also legal to change a disabled student's behavior by withholding use of the bathroom or withholding food.

With more schools districts, and city councils supporting the words "autism acceptance" it is hopeful that actions like passing bill H.225 can happen next.

Next more school districts might take suggestions from the autistic community on how to best support autistic students. Organizations like "The Program for Inclusion and Neurodiversity Education" and "Autistics Unmasked" offer training to support students who are neurodiverse respectfully and with acceptance. Please start the work on making these changes today.

Resources:

The Program for Inclusion and Neurodiversity Education, based in New York

- Offers a school-based inclusion model that is developed through collaboration with neurodiverse individuals.

https://www.pineprogram.org/?fbclid=IwAR0bAloORvLosKjv_idRLrpwCewBONuV0u7qT7fnaEaoHA5mOISbKeRtNtE

Autistics Unmasked, based in Massachusetts

- A new Autistic led organization that is developing trainings for educators and schools

<https://autisticsunmasked.org/>