

## **Delaware's Autism Respite Program Administered by Christina School District**

The Christina School District is the school district designated by the Department of Education with State Board approval as the administering agency for the statewide program for students with autism. Over the course of time the number of students identified with autism has grown significantly, and the need for supportive services has also increased. One of the supportive services provided through the Office of Statewide Director is In-Home Respite.

During last fiscal year, the District became aware of significant growth in utilization of this service. The District began a review of the program and operating practices. Last year, there was a 350% growth in hours of services provided. The unplanned growth of these services resulted in program costs increasing from ~\$203,000 to in excess of \$810,000. A review of the first quarter of this fiscal year reflects an increase of ~ 200%. Leadership of the program has stated that they do not have the resources to assess the degree of respite a family requires. As a result, any family, with a child enrolled in one of the state-approved affiliate programs of the Delaware Autism Program (Christina, Brandywine, Caesar Rodney, Capital, Seaford, or Cape Henlopen) is eligible to request services.

The program as operated provides respite services 24 hours per month and an additional 7 days every calendar year. The availability of the service, as currently designed is based exclusively on the availability of the provider. The program guidelines clearly state there is no obligation to ensure that respite is available.

Review of the program also raises questions regarding equitable compensation for providers, risk management concerns, and appropriate sources of funding. Respite services are support services for families, not educational services for students. State funding for supportive services of this nature have been limited, and a request has been made for inclusion of financial support for fiscal 2021.

In the meantime, we have been forced to hit "pause". This pause will likely remain while we put in place measures to more equitably utilize funding, both in the areas of family support as well as how we contract with specialized caregivers. We have committed to honor previously approved respite request.

The District will be meeting with representatives from the Department of Education, the Office of Management and Budget, the Department of Health and Social Services, the Controller General's Office, and members of legislature, to discuss immediate funding needs of the respite program, and other concerns. We anticipate engagement with all stakeholders on program modification.

The Christina School District is committed to serving the needs of families and children whose lives are impacted by Autism. And we are committed to resolving funding issues to be as fair and supportive as we possibly can.

Following is a list of questions and answers to help guide your concerns with the respite program.

Richard L. Gregg  
Superintendent, Christina School District



## FAQ's

- 1. Will parents who have scheduled respite, receive this service?**

Yes. All scheduled services will be honored.
- 2. How long has the district known about the respite program financial issues?**

The district office initially had some concerns after review of the financial reports that indicated some budget variance caused by respite services in early 2019. Since this time Christina School District (CSD) has worked with the Office of Statewide Director (OSD) seeking understanding of the significant growth in hours of the service provided and the cost.
- 3. When was DOE made aware of this problem?**

Delaware Department of Education was made aware of our concerns in early 2019.
- 4. Is there an MOU between DOE and CSD that provides a commitment to fund the respite program?**

The District and DOE have an agreement regarding the oversight of the Office of Statewide Director, which includes the respite program. However, the agreement states by use of tuition taxes. This section of Delaware code, Title 14, §3123a does not currently provide for costs to be tuition eligible, Respite services are intended to provide families with short planned break opportunities from the care of a child. Tuition Taxes are raised to assure that sufficient funds are generated to meet the needs of a student as identified within their IEP.
- 5. Who made the decision to suspend respite service?**

The decision to temporarily suspend services was done by Christina School District Administration.
- 6. When was a decision made to suspend services?**

After careful evaluation of the respite program and serious concerns with the steep increase in costs, the decision to suspend service was communicated to the Office of Statewide Director on September 18.
- 7. How were families notified and when?**

Program facilitators were notified on September 23, with the request to reach out to parents and providers.
- 8. Why weren't families given more notice?**

The Respite program requires advance planning. Parents are required to plan on 7 days in advance of short-term breaks, and 2 weeks in advance for medium term.
- 9. Is the respite program still viable?**

The program is viable, but as it is currently managed, it is not sustainable. The program currently operates without budgetary constraint, and with certain inequities and risks that must be addressed. Parents who have scheduled respite care are still scheduled to receive this service. However, the long-term sustainability of the program will likely require modifications.
- 10. Is Christina School District Required to provide respite care?**

No. Under Delaware Code; Title 14, supportive services is not a requirement.

## FAQ's

### 11. What are the funding sources for respite?

Funding for respite services is provided by the following financial entities:

1. **State:** From FY 2000 through 2020, the State has provided funds for the Christina Autistic Program to support both the Group Homes (Residence – Other Costs) and Contractual Services. The amount of State funding provided has ranged from \$11,400 to \$11,800 during this period.
2. **Local Funds:** Past practice has been to include the expenses associated with respite services in tuition billing. This practice is in alignment with agreement between DOE and Christina School District. However, this agreement stipulates that the respite program will be administered in accordance with Title 14 §3123(a). This section of code does not provide for costs to be tuition eligible.
3. **Private Funds:** The “Respite Guideline, issued by the OSD, states “Although the school district assumes most of the cost of respite, the Parent is responsible for a co-pay, which is determined by the Parent’s income. Funds received in FY 2019 ~ \$27,300 represented only 3% of the total respite cost.

### 12. What has your financial evaluation shown thus far?

Evaluation of FY 2019 compared to FY 2018.

- Growth in number of hours ~350% from 847 hours to 2,960.
- Growth in total cost of respite services ~400% from ~\$203,400 to ~\$815,300.

Review of First Quarter FY 2019

- Growth in services continue.
- Growth in hours for comparable period in FY 2019 ~ 208% from 3,015.75 to 6,270.25 hours

### 13. Can you share what are the inequities in pay practice?

Yes. Qualified providers of services are either Paraprofessionals or Teachers, appropriately trained in working with children with autism. Paraprofessionals are hourly employees; once they exceed 40 hours per week, they are paid overtime hours, based on a blended rate of the respite hourly rate and their normal hourly rate. Teachers are exempt professionals and are paid the hourly respite rate until they provide over 40 hours of respite services. Paraprofessionals who work for districts other than Christina are paid in a manner comparable to the Teachers. The program as currently designed requires all payroll to go through Christina School District regardless of the current district of employment.

### 14. Do families have access to respite services if they are enrolled in a district autism classroom?

In order to receive services under this program, the student must have a primary educational classification as autism and be enrolled in a state-approved affiliate of the Delaware Autism Program

### 15. Was a child in your respite program overlooked and not picked up because of the suspended service? No. This is not accurate. This incident is unrelated to the temporary suspension of services.

### 16. What critical information should the public know about the respite Guidelines?

1. Respite is not an educationally-related service, and therefore is independent of the IEP.”
2. Although the Respite program is developed for the benefit of the student with autism and their families, the OSD and the DAP-affiliated programs are not obligated to ensure that respite is available.”