

Expanding autism help

■ State hopes to double capacity of residential schools, bringing more students back to Long Island

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Spurred by soaring numbers of students diagnosed with autism and other neurological disorders, the state is more than doubling the capacity of residential schools for such students on Long Island, while lifting a de facto 12-year freeze on expansion here.

A major state goal is to return to the Island many students now housed in out-of-state centers, by adding 162 new residential beds for the severely disabled at five local sites. One out-of-state facility, the Judge Rotenberg Center in Canton, Mass., drew widespread criticism last year after a parent complained of the center's use of skin-shock therapy.

The planned expansion includes the first residential, college-prep school in the state for teens with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism that afflicts many with high intelligence. The new facility for two dozen adolescents and young adults will be known as Westbrook Preparatory School and is to open next year, probably in Westbury.

"This would be a first, and we're hoping it will serve as a model," said Susan Moran, assistant executive director of SCO Family of Services, a nonprofit agency headquartered in Glen Cove. SCO, which already operates a home and a school for 73 students with more se-

vere impairments, will run the new academy as well.

Westbrook Prep would combine a strong academic program, including state Regents exams, with intensive instruction in social skills typically lacking in youths with Asperger's Syndrome. The residential school would be the first of its kind in the state to serve students ages 12 through 21. The only other residential facility of its type is located upstate, and enrolls students only through age 12.

Along with the new residential school, the Islandwide expansion also will add to existing centers 102 beds for youths with autism and other developmental disabilities. The Island currently has 65 beds at residential facilities for developmentally disabled youths.

Albany authorities say the expansion will go a long way toward silencing criticism that New York State ships too many students with disabilities to residential schools out of state. Currently, New York places about 600 students in other states — down from about 1,000 last year. Albany has already expanded some upstate and New York City facilities as


well.

"They're making every effort to bring these kids home, and that's positive," said Roger Tilles of Great Neck, Long Island's representative to the State Board of Regents, which sets education policy.

Expansion plans are applauded by parent advocates, who have long complained of a lack of school choices for children with autism, especially Asperger's Syndrome. The disability often is difficult to recognize, advocates say, because students may perform brilliantly in specific subjects such as math, while suffering quietly from a severe social awkwardness that makes them prey to bullies.

One group that has pushed for Westbrook is the Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism Association, headquartered in Bethpage.

The existing centers are run by three nonprofit organizations: AHRC Nassau, based in Brookville; Developmental Disabilities Institute, headquartered in Smithtown, and Maryhaven Center of Hope in Port Jefferson. In addition, 36 beds for youths with emotional disabilities will be added at a third

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SCO facility, according to the state.

Much of the funding for added beds will come from tuition paid by students' home school districts. Annual rates range from about \$100,000 to \$130,000 per student, which is comparable to average rates charged by out-of-state facilities. Some out-of-state charges run as high as \$200,000, however.

Albany also will provide financial aid for the expanded facilities, approved under a cooperative agreement by the State Education Department, the Office of Children and Family Services and the Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities.

Legislators urge dialogue on mandatory screening

Two state lawmakers from Long Island are pushing for statewide discussions of whether doctors should be required to check young children for signs of autism.

State Sen. Kemp Hannon (R-Garden City), chairman of the Senate Health Committee, and Assemb. Harvey Weisenberg (D-Long Beach) Friday announced the introduction of proposed legislation establishing discussion forums on the question of autism checkups. The "study bill" is described as a first step toward mandatory statewide screening.

Last week, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report recommending universal autism screening for children at ages 18 months and 24 months.

Autism is a disability affecting language and socialization skills, and diagnoses of the disorder are increasing rapidly, partly because autism is more broadly defined than in the past. Many students are being classified as autistic who might have been classified as something else, such as being learning disabled, in the past.

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