



Autism Society  
Texas



TEXAS COUNCIL for  
DEVELOPMENTAL  
DISABILITIES



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **Students Return from Winter Break Facing Omicron Plus Another Critical Safety Issue**

*Increase in Arrest of School Staff for Violence Against Students Heightens Concern*

**AUSTIN**—As students returned to school after the holidays last week, the spread of a new COVID variant wasn't the only thing causing great concern for their safety.

A recent rash of school staff arrests for violence against Texas children with disabilities has increased the existing concerns of parents and advocates. Several groups are calling on state leaders for an immediate response to the ongoing problem.

The Arc of Texas, the Autism Society of Texas, the Coalition of Texans with Disabilities, Disability Rights Texas, Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities, and Texas Parent to Parent denounce the violent incidents which they say are representative of many other unreported cases of harm caused to students with disabilities. Some of the incidents reported last year include:

- Fort Worth ISD staff restrained student with disability who subsequently died (March 2021)
- Killeen ISD teacher assaulted student with disability (April 2021)
- Manor ISD teacher hit student with Autism (November 2021)
- Burleson ISD teacher and aide acted inappropriately with nonverbal students (November 2021)
- Weslaco ISD teacher hit a student with Autism (December 2021)

Leah is a 15-year-old girl with Autism and limited verbal skills who is in a self-contained school room. In February 2020, her mother Jeanna started seeing unusual things with her daughter such as a meltdown on the bus, scratches and bruises, and more. The final red flag was when she learned school staff had improperly used prone restraint with two adults holding both arms behind Leah's back. After asking for camera footage and getting resistance from the school, she was finally able to view the video and was devastated to see how her daughter was being physically and verbally abused.

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"I really felt like I totally failed my kid," said Jeanna. "And even a year later, just driving into the school parking lot causes my daughter to get upset."

"The violence committed by school staff against these students is unconscionable," said Jacquie Benestante, Executive Director of the Autism Society of Texas. "The life-threatening physical harm caused is criminal, and the detrimental emotional toll on the student can linger for years."

A law passed in 2015 requires schools to place cameras in self-contained classrooms upon the request of parents or school districts. One way parents can help protect their children is requesting a camera in their child's room. "[Requesting a Camera in Your Child's Classroom](#)," an online resource from Disability Rights Texas, explains how to submit a request and includes sample letters.

"We are calling on state leaders to quickly respond to the needs of students with disabilities who are being endangered," said Steven Aleman of DRTx, one of the disability groups calling for immediate action. He says advocacy and partner groups want to see the following measures taken:

1. Require Texas to track and make public the number of incidents referred for prosecution and where those cases are being referred
2. Require schools to notify parents of cameras in classroom law.
3. Require schools to keep the footage on file for longer periods of time.
4. Ease restrictions/challenges many parents face when trying to access the recordings from the school, such as having to provide specific date and time and specific reason.
5. Require Education Service Centers to provide school staff training to interact appropriately and safely with students with disabilities.
6. Expand the Texas Do Not Hire Registry to include all educators, certified and non-certified, who abuse students with disabilities so they cannot move from district to district, whether terminated or resigned in lieu of termination.
7. Close loopholes that shield school staff from criminal responsibility for assault, abuse, excessive use of force, and maltreatment of students with disabilities.
8. Require districts to reallocate resources from policing to counselors, social workers, and behavior and wraparound specialists.

For parents whose children have experienced abuse and mistreatment by school staff, Project LEAH (Leaders Ending Abuse and Harm) provides support, promotes prevention strategies, and pursues policy change. Get involved by joining the [Project LEAH Facebook group](#) or emailing [projectleah@tx@gmail.com](mailto:projectleah@tx@gmail.com).

Parents can also call Disability Rights Texas at 1-800-252-9108 to apply for legal services to help investigate and resolve cases of abuse and mistreatment.

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**The Arc of Texas** promotes, protects, and advocates for the human rights and self-determination of Texans with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Follow The Arc of Texas on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#), and learn more at [thearcoftexas.org](http://thearcoftexas.org).

**Autism Society of Texas** works to support individuals with Autism as well as their loved ones in Texas through free information and referrals, education, support and enrichment groups, and state & national advocacy. It provides community inclusion events, recreation, and support groups across Texas. Visit [texasautismsociety.org](http://texasautismsociety.org) for more information.

**The Coalition of Texans with Disabilities** was founded in 1978 and is a statewide cross-disability advocacy organization with a mission to ensure that people with disabilities may live, learn, work, play and participate fully in their community of choice.

**Disability Rights Texas** is the federally designated legal protection and advocacy agency (P&A) for people with disabilities in Texas established in 1977. Its mission is to help people with disabilities understand and exercise their rights under the law, ensuring their full and equal participation in society. Visit [www.DRTx.org](http://www.DRTx.org) for more information.

**Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities** is one of 56 state councils on developmental disabilities in the U.S. and its territories created through the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act (DD Act). Its mission is to create change so that all people with disabilities are fully included in their communities and exercise control over their own lives.

**Texas Parent to Parent** is a parent-led organization committed to improving the lives of Texas children and adults with disabilities, chronic and mental health conditions and other health care needs. It empowers families to be strong advocates through parent-to-parent support, resource referral, and education and educates professionals about the unique needs of their children with the goal of improving care and opportunities for their children.