

Parents threaten suit to keep children in center for autistic

CLIFTON PARK, N.Y. (AP) — Parents of 14 autistic children may start a court battle to keep New York state from removing the youngsters from a special school in Providence, R.I.

John Sartoris of this Albany suburb said Tuesday the parents are skeptical that a planned New York state program would be as good as the one at the Behavior Research Institute in Providence. He said they were giving "very, very serious consideration" to a lawsuit to block New York from cutting off funds for the residents in the Rhode Island center.

"We have some real concerns that a good program could be developed in such a short period of time," he said.

The state Education Department recently announced plans to begin programs for such children at three such sites in the state, including the Oswald D. Heck Developmental Center near Schenectady.

The department objects to so-called "aversive" conditioning at the Rhode Island center, which includes spanking and pinching to control behavior.

Lou Grumet, an associate commissioner of the department, said it was hoped a greater staff ratio and limited use of drugs in New York facilities would avert the need for such punishment.

"Staffing ratios aren't important," Sartoris said. "You can have two staff for every child, but if the staff doesn't know the

techniques, all they can do is sit there and watch the kids hit each other over the head."

The state has been paying \$38,000 a year a piece to keep the youths in Rhode Island, because no comparable in-state facilities were available. The new program will cost \$54,000 a piece, but half will be paid by the federal government.

Autistic children often cannot communicate by normal means and relate to everyday life.