

January 19, 2015

Dear Interim Pupil Services Director, Administration, and Members of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee,

We are writing to you today for two reasons. First, we are concerned that the preliminary 2016 budget priorities presented at the January 8, 2015, School Committee meeting suggest that the voices and needs of special education families are not being heard. Second, we are concerned that there is growing resentment about the increasing resources necessary to educate the rising number of special education students in Acton and Boxborough.

Specific 2016 Budget Concerns

While we are pleased that the district is proposing to put resources toward special education needs in 2016, we think reprioritizing some budget items would better serve the immediate needs of our community.

FY '16 Preliminary District Personnel Priorities (from January 8, 2015, SC Budget Presentation)

- 0.6 FTE ELL Teacher (Elementary)
- 1.0 SpEd ETL, Transition & Academic Support (JHS)
- 0.6 Special Education Teacher (Elementary)
- 19 hour ODP Assistant (SHS)
- 0.4 School Psychologist (Elementary)
- 19 hour Office Support (Pupil Services)

From the SpEd PAC's perspective, allocating resources to target the entrenched 4th and 7th grade ELA weaknesses of special education students (as identified in our Fall 2014 MCAS analysis presentation to the School Committee on November 20th) is a higher priority than additional office support staff, for example. As part of the district's pre-K-12 regionalization last summer, an administrative assistant was transferred from Blanchard to join Acton staff at Pupil Services, increasing Pupil Services' administrative support across the district. Additionally, we don't fully understand the rationale for the high priority given a 1.0 SpEd ETL, Transition & Academic Support individual at the junior high or the addition of a 19-hour ODP assistant at the high school.

The lack of meaningful dialogue with parents around budget priorities this year has left us with many unanswered questions. Perhaps there have been staff discussions around these topics of which we're unaware. However, we would like to understand why resources to address 4th and 7th grade ELA weaknesses have not found their way onto the 2016 budget priority list or even onto the deferred priority list for subsequent years. In addition, we'd like to understand the district's thinking regarding the following important budget-related items:

- Addressing the impact on delivery of services to meet students' social and emotional needs identified by the September 2, 2014, BSEA decision #1405736, in which Acton Public Schools and Acton-Boxborough Regional Schools were found not to have provided social and emotional FAPE (Free Appropriate Public Education) for a student. This ruling is likely to be a landmark case in MA. It resulted in the district having to pay retroactive and ongoing out-of-district tuition expenses for a student. There are likely other children in the district who may be similarly impacted.
- Addressing the completion of 4th-6th grade specialized services to provide a K-6 continuum of special education programming at Gates, Douglas, and Blanchard—a district commitment we've been working toward over the last nine years so vulnerable students aren't required to change schools midway through their elementary education.
- Addressing the MA statutory requirement (Ch. 71B, Section 3A) for a district of our size to have a full-time dedicated special education director: "A school committee with four thousand or more children enrolled in its school system shall appoint a person to be its administrator of special

education. Such administrator shall devote full time to the duties involved in supervising the provision of all special education in the school system.”

- The need for a second Elementary Special Education Coordinator position as identified by Boxborough Superintendent Curtis Bates and Acton Pupil Services Coordinator Liza Huber during the regionalization planning process. Please see the attached letter to town boards dated March 28, 2014, for more information.

Concerns Regarding Special Education Misinformation

As previously mentioned, we are concerned that there is growing resentment around the increasing resources necessary to educate the rising number of special education students in Acton and Boxborough. We'd like to address some of the public misconceptions regarding special education expenses and recent school district budgets.

There's no question that demographic trends impact budgets. An increase in special education students coupled with a decrease in the overall student population will result in a larger percentage of our budget going toward special education expenses (please see the AB SpEd PAC's *Special Education Population Trends 2004-2014* report). The growing numbers of High Needs students in the English Language Learner and Low Income categories, not just Students with Disabilities, are further driving the need for additional resources.

The perception that Acton-Boxborough special education spending has been disproportionately large is a misconception. In-district special education instructional spending in school year 2013-2014 grew by less than 1% over the prior year. Instructional spending for all students increased by almost 2%, double the rate of special education students alone. A-B also increased spending on athletics by 6.3% and other student activities by 18.3% that year. To address this misconception once and for all, in 2013 Dr. Mills hired outside consulting firm Futures Education to evaluate the efficiency of our district's special education programs and services. They found our operations to be very lean—leaner in some areas than even they would recommend as a cost-cutting organization. The lingering notion that special education is overfunded in this district is simply not supported by fact.

In the approved 2015 budget, 4.1 of the 4.9 FTEs were general education related, including 3.0 assistant principals, a .6 psychologist at Merriam/McCarthy Towne, a .5 psychologist at ABRHS, and a \$75,000 increase in health insurance. There were two special education-related line items ultimately approved in the 2015 budget—a .4 speech/language chair and a .4 special education teacher at Merriam. The statement at the January 8, 2015, School Committee meeting that most of our recent budgets have gone to special education funding is not even close to the mark. When push came to shove at the end of last year's budget cycle, the additional 1.0 FTE special education coordinator identified by the regionalization committee as necessary to meet the expanded district's needs was the only position removed from the budget.

We recognize that fashioning our district's budget is a challenging task and that it is difficult to balance the needs of a diverse student population. We respectfully request that the Administration and the School Committee reconsider the preliminary budget recommendations to include resources specifically designed to ameliorate the long-standing underperformance of 4th and 7th grade special education students in ELA. Looking ahead to next year, we hope that the district will include parents in a budget-related dialogue much earlier in the process to meet our common objective of delivering the highest quality education possible to all students.

Sincerely,

Amanda Bailey & Bill Guthlein
Acton-Boxborough SpEd PAC Co-Chairs