



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council

Business Meeting September 24, 2014

I. Call to Order

Amanda Bailey called the meeting to order at 7:35 pm. The following AB SpEd PAC Board members attended the meeting: Amanda Bailey, Nancy Sherburne, Bill Guthlein, Carolyn Sprague, and Jeanne Hobbie. Fourteen other parents and community members also attended the meeting, including Mary Emmons representing Pupil Services.

II. Approval of Minutes

The June 2014 meeting minutes were reviewed. A motion was made to approve the minutes as written. The motion was seconded and passed unanimously.

III. Organizational/Business Issues

A. Meeting with Pupil Services in July

Amanda Bailey, Bill Guthlein and Nancy Sherburne met with Liza Huber and Julie Towell at Pupil Services in July. Pupil Services' budget priorities and concerns were discussed, as were areas of particular interest to the PAC.

Pupil Services' budget priorities and concerns:

- There's been a rapid increase in mental health issues (50% increase, among regular students).
- CASE tuition payment went up dramatically this year because the tuition formula changed and payment is now due in the current school year instead of following a two-year delay of actual costs. This caused a temporary but substantial bump in the budget.
- Colebrook staffing possibly decreasing from one staff member per three students to one staff member per four students. Unsure of sustainability of current program.
- Circuit Breaker reimbursements may be declining. The amount of circuit breaker funds and percentage of reimbursement from the state changes from year to year.
- The number of elementary school English Language Learners has increased dramatically in recent years and there are new staff training mandates.
- The impact of FY '15 budget reductions on special education service delivery, especially the elementary school special education coordinator position eliminated in favor of adding assistant principals. A second elementary coordinator is thought to be necessary given the challenges inherent in overseeing six schools at five locations in two towns. The role of the new assistant principals was discussed and how they are to support the current elementary coordinator.

Pupil Services was not asked to participate in the hiring process of the Assistant Principals, it would have been nice for there to be special education input to the selection process. The PAC discussed the value of attending school committee meetings and providing public comment. Meetings are posted on the PAC website and emails are sent out for meetings on topics of special interest. The town website posts town meetings and has a sign up for emails. The school Committee meets the first and third Thursday at RJ Gray Junior High School.

Main PAC concerns:

- The PAC continues to request mandatory special education training for all staff. Pupil Services shared that the principals and administrative staff will be receiving special education regulations training this year.
- The PAC raised concerns around the use of “take a break” rooms for students with special needs in some elementary schools. In at least one case that we’re aware of school administrators made the decision to use the break room for a child against the parents’ wishes and without any Team discussion of whether or not it was behaviorally appropriate based on the child’s disability and IEP. The PAC believes that any decisions regarding behavior strategies and consequences should be determined by the Team and documented in a child’s IEP through a behavior plan. The PAC has similar concerns regarding students with special needs being sent home from school because they’re unable to follow the code of conduct as a direct result of their developmental disability. The PAC contends that if parents are repeatedly being called to pick up their children from school, the children are not able to access the general curriculum in their current placement and the Team should reconvene to determine the supports or placement necessary to ensure access.
- Acton-Boxborough’s policy of not date-stamping hand-delivered documents from parents. Pupil Services agreed to look into this matter and discuss a solution with staff. Amanda will touch base with neighboring towns’ special education departments to gain insight into how widespread this courtesy practice is.

B. Special Education Population Trends

Bill spoke about a report he put together on special education and high need student population trends from 2004-2014. He compared the Acton-Boxborough District with the state and with peer districts Lexington, Westford, and Concord-Carlisle. This report provides useful information to voters and to policy and budget decision-makers given that special education and other high needs student costs are a significant proportion of the district’s budget. Some findings of this report are:

- While the overall student enrollment has declined, the number of students in the High Needs categories (Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners and Low Income students) have risen dramatically.
- These students typically cost more to educate than general education students.
- Additionally the composition of the High Needs student population is shifting, with increases in higher cost sub-groups such as autism, communication difficulties and English Language Learners. Therefore the shift is toward more

resource-intensive students and the town cannot anticipate a decrease in special education costs.

- State support will decrease because it is based on the number of students, so it is important to establish the truth of our situation early on in the budgeting process to avoid reductions based on incomplete information.

Parent attendance at various town and school committee meetings is critical to disseminate this information.

C. Seeking Additional Officers

- There was a discussion of several open positions (Treasurer, Standing Committee Chair, Secretary) to see if individuals would be interested in filling them. No one stepped forward.

D. Meeting Announcements

- A Basic Rights Workshop was announced. It will be held on November 3rd at 7 pm in the Curtis Middle School Library, Sudbury, MA. This event is co-hosted by Sudbury, Maynard, and Acton-Boxborough Special Education Advisory Councils. The meeting announcement sparked a PAC discussion of Acton's policy of not date-stamping correspondence from parents. Amanda and Nancy asked Lisa to look at this. Amanda will touch base with the Special Education coordinators as a courtesy.
- Jessica Minihan, author of *The Behavior Code*, will speak about Anxiety Issues at the Fowler School in Maynard, MA on October 6, 2014 at 7 pm.

E. Priorities for 2014-2015

- Meeting with Superintendent Brand: tentatively scheduled for October.
- The PAC plans to continue promoting the new practice of requiring all general education teachers to sign off on student IEPs and 504s within five days of receiving a newly signed IEP/504 and prior to the start of the new year.
- Nancy is revising the Special Education Parent Handbook to reflect the preK-12 regionalization.
- Bill received the preliminary MCAS data the preceding Friday. The decline in student growth percentiles in each elementary school and in each grade was troubling. Gates' results show a significant decline in English Language growth for students with disabilities. Douglas had a decline in math growth percentile. The PARCC test could be a complicating factor, which is distorting the data (classes which piloted the PARCC test didn't do the MCAS test). The Junior High, which is historically problematic, showed progress in the ELA student growth percentiles, which is good considering how low that score is compared to the target value. The high school scored best of all for students with disabilities, with particularly improved math growth percentiles. Bill will undertake a complete analysis of the MCAS data.
- The Special Education parent and guardian survey is scheduled for release this year. Good returns are needed to know what's going on within the district. We are invited to review the questions before it's released to the public.

- Blossom and Jeanne are seeking to start a parent support group, although it will probably not be just for parents of children with special needs. They want to provide a forum for parents to meet face to face to discuss topics of interest and/or concern and share information and support for one another in a relaxed, cozy environment.
- We also briefly discussed that the parent-to-parent email group could be used to greater effect and that more research is needed for setting up a blog on our website.

IV. New Business – Other topics on people’s minds

- One parent asked whether the SpEd PAC is a town group, given the formality of how our meetings are run. It was clarified that we are a state mandated parent-run volunteer group. However, we’re required to abide by the state’s Open Meeting law so certain procedures have to be followed.
- Another parent asked how parents know that the SpEdPac resources exist? We shared that Pupil Services includes PAC fliers with every new IEP and their On Team newsletter has a link to our website. Unfortunately, people tend not to find the PAC until they encounter a problem. However, we have also promoted the PAC at Back to School nights with a table and fliers. Those who are PTO members are encouraged to become PAC liaisons to their PTO to help raise awareness and share special ed. related information and activities with the broader community. It would be ideal to have a designated PAC liaison for each school’s PTO. To further raise our profile among parents, we could request a couple of minutes to talk to the membership about the PAC. We can also have a presence at big community events. Carolyn volunteered to look into town requirements for tables at town elections.
- There was concern about a unilateral change in curriculum at Douglas that was announced privately to affected parents by letter. Pullouts and other changes were made, apparently without reference to the IEP’s. Nancy and Mary Emmons asked for a copy of the letter.
- Carolyn solicited the group for feedback on a book club. It was suggested that the book chosen appeal to a broad range of parents (i.e. not focus tightly on special needs). A poll was taken to find out generally good time slots for a book club.

V. Open Issues

We briefly touched on a few of the issues listed in the agenda – in particular, the frustration of some parents regarding the implementation of outside specialists’ recommendations. A specific question about withholding recess for a child who needs movement breaks was answered with a suggestion that the IEP include a plan for how to introduce movement breaks into the child’s day in the event of no recess.

VI. Adjournment – the meeting was adjourned at 9:06 pm.