



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council

Business Meeting

November 19, 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, Bill Guthlein, Nancy Sherburne, Jeanne Hobbie, and Carolyn Sprague. Also in attendance were Elementary Coordinator Lynne Laramie, School Committee liaison to the PAC Paul Murphy, and six others.

II. Approval of Minutes

Approval of the meeting minutes from October was postponed until our next meeting.

III. Organizational/Business Issues

A. Meeting with Superintendent Brand as Part of Entry Plan

PAC leadership met with the new Superintendent as part of his Entry Plan as a community stakeholder organization. This two-hour meeting focused on areas the PAC sees as strengths for the district and those which are concerns or areas for improvement both within special education and in general. Issues raised included the divide between general and special education, budget concerns from last year, general ed staff not knowing students are on IEPs, staffing levels, school autonomy, MCAS scores for Students with Disabilities, and confusion surrounding report cards and IEP progress reports.

Other conversation and information exchanged included:

- The formative and benchmark testing which informs report card grading, especially reading for first and other early grades and math, was discussed. They are not standardized like MCAS or normed to standard performances, but do provide guidance for teachers. Parents can ask for these test findings but often don't know to.
- There is no timeline for resolving current leaves of absence within Pupil Services.
- The Superintendent's recent survey was well-received. In response to feedback, the Superintendent followed up with a visit to the integrated preschool Acton site where he was shown the program and needs by staff.

B. Special Education MCAS Performance

Tomorrow's PAC MCAS presentation to the School Committee was reviewed. The Director of Curriculum had previously reported on MCAS results at the School Committee meeting on November 6th. The main concern is that the achievement gap is not on target to close by 2017 as mandated by the State. The PAC has tracked dips in fourth and seventh grade ELA scores which place special education student performance below the state average. Over the last few years, changes in curriculum and practices have been put in place, with the result that the aggregate student population has shown a very good response.

Several schools were discussed in more detail because of one or more concerns or anomalies compared with previous years. Among them were Douglas, Gates, and Merriam. This led to a side discussion of Gates's new Special Educator.

A parent asked whether students could be excused from MCAS on medical grounds (such as anxiety). This can be done by team decision, with the alternative being a portfolio test with a different scoring system. Three elementary students are doing portfolios this year per the Elementary Coordinator.

C. New Date Stamping Procedure for Hand-Delivered Documents to Pupil Services

In response to a PAC request, Pupil Services now has a date stamp parents can ask for when hand delivering documents. Parents may also request photocopies of the date-stamped documents for their records.

D. Special Education Budget Priorities

Pupil Services budget priorities from the monthly meeting with PAC include:

- More support (special educators) and more collaborative planning at the elementary school level.
- Increased transition support at the Junior High School, both in district and out of district.
- A building-based team leader to chair meetings at the junior high school; one already exists at the high school.

A parent asked a question about how students with disabilities fare with transitions across schools. Certain transitions are considered very well supported in the district, particularly those around the junior high.

The Acting Pupil Services Director reported there's been a large increase in hospitalizations, more than half of which were among general education, not special education students. Consequently, professional development will focus on social emotional disorders next year.

A parent asked about recent changes to mental health staff and it was reported that staff has been increased by one full time counselor and one part time psychologist. The Superintendent regards student mental health a high priority.

E. PAC Potential Signatory to Chapter 71B Letter to State Representatives

School Committee member Paul Murphy took Bill Guthlein's "2014 Special Education Population Trends Report" and data to State Representative Cory Atkins. She was especially appreciative of the data because of its potential to persuade legislators. This data shows a trend toward increased numbers of High Needs special education students and therefore increased special education costs, with a decrease in overall population which decreases state funding in accordance with the formula used by the state to determine the average cost/student. We hope the School Committee members will sign a Letter to State Representatives requesting an adjustment to the formula for state reimbursement to account for this reality.

The SpEd PAC is encouraged to write its own letter and reach out to neighboring PACs for their involvement. The PAC needs to consult with MassPAC about political activity and endorsement of laws or proposed legislation before doing so. Such a letter could be shared among MassPAC, Mass Advocates for Children, and the Federation for Children with Special Needs. Other districts are collecting data for their own studies.

F. Parent/Guardian Support Group Subcommittee Update

The PAC members planning the parent support group have been meeting approximately once a month. A Parent-to-Parent peer support training is planned for a morning in mid-December and all parents interested in participation in the support group or the PAC are invited to attend. The Parent-to-Parent network is a program run by Family Ties of Massachusetts, which is contracted under the Federation for Children with Special Needs. Five people have committed to attending.

G. Potential PAC Presence on Social Media

Currently, using Constant Contact, the PAC sends out one, sometimes two e-mails per month. However, a lot of information comes across PAC leaderships' desks in any given week. Amanda subsequently asked us to consider possibilities for making that information more available to families. The Sudbury SEPAC sends out weekly e-mails and has a Facebook page. Given the tendency of people to drop off the list when there are frequent e-mails, we probably don't want to do a weekly e-mail, but we are considering Facebook and Twitter. Alternatively, we could list event and resource information on our website. This raises questions about

searchable aggregate information and having a static list versus an ongoing events list. Facebook has a lot of presence and we could tag and connect to other organizations, forming a network of information sharing. If we proceed with Facebook, a consideration would be how we want Facebook to relate to the website both in content and in the ability to go from one to the other. We decided to begin with choosing one social media avenue (either Facebook or Twitter).

This led to a discussion about how parents can find out about the PAC. The general feeling is that people find us when they need us. A more proactive approach might generate more participation. We considered options ranging from posting in libraries (both school and community), having an annual presence at Back-to-School nights, and reaching out to the PTOs. Blanchard's PTF has been receptive as we look to try to bring in more Boxborough parent participation.

H. Updates on Other Goals & Priorities for 2014-2015

The PAC continues to pursue a new practice requiring all teachers to sign off on IEPs and 504s within five days of receiving a signed IEP/504 and prior to the start of each year. This is to address ongoing reports from parents about staff not knowing students are on special education plans.

The PAC is requesting review of and changes to the School Committee Procedures regarding the PAC to codify our standing monthly meeting with Pupil Services leadership. As the PAC and Pupil Services have developed a collaborative working partnership over the last eight years, both parties have found monthly meetings to be beneficial in keeping strong, open channels of communication.

IV. Adjournment – the meeting was adjourned at 8:52 pm.

V. Next Meeting – will be the PAC holiday potluck on December 17, 2014, at 7:30 pm in the R.J. Grey Library.

Respectfully submitted by Carolyn Sprague