



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council

Business Meeting

February 25, 2015

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. Will Barker from Friends of AB SpEd PAC, Out of District Coordinator Matt Kidder, School Committee liaison to the PAC Paul Murphy, and six others were also in attendance.

II. Approval of Minutes

Meeting minutes from October 22, 2014, were reviewed. A motion was made to approve the minutes as written which was seconded and then passed unanimously.

III. Organizational/Business Issues

A. 2016 School Budget Updates and Meeting with Superintendent, ABRSC Chair, and Pupil Services

- The school budget has been voted on by the School Committee and is ready to go to the towns. Amanda reported that the process for developing the budget differed from past years when conversations between Pupil Services and the PAC over several months gave the PAC a firm understanding of priorities as well as opportunities to provide input. The PAC therefore provided feedback in the form of a letter respectfully submitted to the School Committee and district officials with questions about the district's proposed budget priorities for FY16. We also took the opportunity to clear up misconceptions regarding special education expenses and recent budgets. The complete letter is found online at abspedpac.org. Parent concerns about the relatively weak performance of special education students on the 4th and 7th grade ELA MCAS exams were also outlined.
- In the letter, the PAC also addressed perceived resentment toward special education costs with a discussion of population trends affecting the budget. Despite declining enrollment in the general student population, increases in three High Needs student populations (Students with Disabilities, Low Income students, and English Language Learners) will result in a larger percentage of our resources being directed toward Pupil Services. However, in absolute dollars, the increase in the Pupil Services portion of the budget is half the increase in instructional spending for all students, and considerably less than increases in spending for athletics and other student activities.
- Amanda outlined the Pupil Services budget components that passed the School Committee vote, among which were a 1.0 Junior High School Educational Team Leader position, a .6 Elementary Special Educator, and a 19-hour Occupational Development Program Assistant. Nancy added that Pupil Services has reorganized and creatively reallocated responsibilities to ease the burden of Pupil Services coordinators (particularly at the elementary school level because of the

addition of Blanchard) and to focus more on direct services to students. A special educator was transferred from Blanchard to Douglas, for instance.

- Amanda reported on a meeting PAC leadership had with the Superintendent, the ABRSC Chair, and the Acting Director of Pupil Services. In addition to addressing the PAC's budget concerns letter, the September 2014 BSEA-#14-05736 decision was discussed. The district feels the decision is not precedent-setting. There are no plans for programmatic changes as a result of the decision; the ruling applies only to the student involved. However, Pupil Services is looking into ways to enhance social integration of students with Autism in after school clubs and activities, such as integrated classes in the summer program shared with Community Education.
- Nancy added that the issue of responsibility in meeting social and emotional as well as academic needs is a topic that could benefit from further education. However, the ruling is in some ways particular to the individual student involved and it can be difficult for the school to establish effective peer groups given the small numbers of students impacted. The PAC and district will continue to examine how to build community for the students.
- The Elementary Coordinator is looking into ways to enhance social integration of students with Autism. In particular, the Extended School Year program was discussed. It is run in tandem with Community Education and provides special educator support for selected classes using an integrated model. Training of aides to support integration in the classroom was raised; however, historically money and training times are not allocated for professional development of aides.
- Parent concerns regarding the continuity of programs K-6 were raised. A specialized program does not continue past third grade at Gates, for instance. Pupil Services reports that only 1 or 2 students are impacted by this and that most students don't require services past 3rd grade. Parents voiced that some families are pushed to transfer their children to other schools (which can be difficult for this vulnerable population) and some students are possibly in limbo once the Developmental Delay category ends at age 9. Nancy cited successful collaboration between the PAC and Liza Huber over a number of years on this issue in a few programs.
- Also at this meeting was discussed a state requirement that districts with more than 4000 students must have a full-time Administrator of Special Education. With regionalization we now fall into this category. The Superintendent said he would designate a person and fill the position internally through a reorganization of roles. This person will oversee all special education in the district, pre-K through age 22.
- Paul added to the budget discussion that there was considerable discussion at the school budget meeting about how to fund the budget more fully. To protect direct services, the District is reducing indirect services such as technical support and security improvements. The district also needs to balance managing capital costs as building age.
- In summary, with the tiered cuts, this budget represented a reduction in services rather than a level budget. This raises the prospect of potentially needing to present voters with a choice of how they wish their taxes to support the education system. Paul raised consideration as well of encouraging promoting the business

base in Acton, which is currently only 20% of the tax revenue. The town has also held back budget increases to 2% rather than the allotted 2.5%.

- Paul will be attending a Chapter 70 workshop to discuss updating the formula by which the state reimburses schools to reflect the true costs of education and he has invited the Selectmen.
- Bill added that Chapter 70 aside, there is a shortfall in the state budget and a new governor, which may affect things in unpredicted ways. Further considerations are that per pupil spending is below average in Acton and we will either need to take more out of the ALG formula or ask tax payers directly.
- Paul informed us that State Representative Jen Benson will be speaking with the School Committee about Chapter 70 tomorrow. He also commented it's more cost effective to invest in training than to deal with crises.

B. The Role of the PAC and State Guidelines

Given how the budget development process unfolded, there is ongoing discussion about the PAC's legal mandate of meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of special education programs as outlined in the DESE PAC guidelines.

C. Director of Pupil Services Search Committee

Amanda discussed the process by which the new Pupil Services Director is being selected. The School Committee does not vote on hiring this position. The Superintendent has explained that the condensed timeline for the search is due to the district's late start in looking for candidates for this kind of position. If the search fails to yield a candidate it can be resumed next year. Concern was expressed that the majority of the people on this committee will work for the hiree. There are also parent concerns that having subordinates so closely involved with the hiring process could distort the choice of candidate and inhibit change that might be needed.

D. Parent Concerns Regarding Proposed Changes at Integrated Preschool Sites

At the December 18th School Committee meeting, parents learned about programming changes slated to happen at the integrated preschool program next fall. Hours across both sites were to be aligned, reducing the Acton site day for both the half- and full-day programs and altering Boxborough's two five-hour classes into one full-day and two half-day sessions with hours to correspond with Acton's. These changes were linked to a School Committee vote about raising the tuition for typically-developing students at the Boxborough site. Parents are concerned about the lack of communication and opportunity for feedback about the proposed changes and the implications for their children. A petition was circulated in Acton and signed by 63 parents. The reduction to the Acton preschool site hours has been deferred to next year. Boxborough's preschool site, however, will see an increase in services for children in the preschool to match the Acton preschool schedule. Community students not on IEPs will experience a corresponding tuition increase. Tuition fees had not been increased at the program in some time. From a PAC point of view, there is a concern that so many parents have questions around the change and it is hard to sell a reduction in services when early intervention is the most helpful to children. Other news about the integrated preschool program is that Boxborough and Acton's

programs are slated to eventually merge at one site, but not to Blanchard in the near future as previously proposed. Review of possible locations is ongoing.

E. Chapter 70 Funding/Circuit Breaker Formula State Action

- Paul Murphy led a discussion of the Chapter 70 circuit breaker, which is a threshold for out of district costs beyond which the State is supposed to reimburse a percentage. The actual reimbursement ranges depending on State budgets. Students who are sent out of district cost more to educate per person, and so the circuit breaker does not allow the district to keep up with actual expenses. The Out of District Coordinator added that approximately 100 students are out of district with 90 projected for next year. The trend is down apart from a little growth with the addition of Boxborough, but from year to year it varies up and down by 5-10 students. Paul added that he recently met with State Representative Cory Atkins, who is interested in trends and grateful to have our data to support her work. Representative Jen Benson has advised placing attention on advancing changes to the Chapter 70 rules rather than 71B.
- Related to the discussion of out of district placements, it was commented that private schools offer cohort development. Pupil Services is looking at possible cohorts to develop programs to bring students back into the district and exploring what it would cost to accommodate them. Program sustainability is a key factor.
- As a footnote to the discussion, Nancy noted that the population of students with dyslexia at Douglas dwindled and so resources have been reallocated and there is now no language-based learning disability program in the district.
- A parent commented she wished the district could speak more openly and more transparently about programs in the junior high and high school so that parents can be more aware of the choices for their children. She was referred to the Parent Handbook online at the PAC website.

F. Parent/Guardian Support Group Update

The Parenting Challenging Children support group will meet on the following Tuesdays: March 10, April 14, May 12, and June 9, 2015, at 10:30 a.m. at the Fowler Branch of the Concord Free Library in West Concord. All are welcome.

G. Revised Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Policy RE: the AB SpEd PAC

Amanda reported that the PAC requested review of the ABRSD policy and procedure regarding the SpEd PAC. On January 8, 2015, the School Committee approved new policy language regarding the PAC which was made available to members at this meeting. Given all the changes ongoing for the district, the School Committee did not want to change the procedure regarding the SpEd PAC at this time to codify monthly rather than quarterly meetings with Pupil Services.

H. Dr. Jeff Bostic Presentation on Mental Health

This presentation has been rescheduled to April 7th in R.J. Grey auditorium at 7 p.m. Dr. Bostic is assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and director of psychiatry at Mass General Hospital. Dr. Bostic's focus is on mental health in children and teens in school settings, with a particular interest in anxiety and depression.

I. Updates on Other Topics, Goals & Priorities for 2014-2015

- The Parent/Guardian Survey Committee has met and finalized questions with input requested from Pupil Services. This is a high priority for the PAC because the survey provides key information so that the PAC and District can move forward on improving student outcomes.
- The Acting Pupil Services Director followed up with the Sharon School District regarding the proposed practice requiring all teachers to sign off on student IEPs and 504s within five days of receiving a signed IEP/504 and prior to the start of each school year. Concerns remain about implementation. The issue is still being discussed.
- Pupil Services has also spoken with Dr. Leslie Laud of “thinkSRSD,” a self-regulated strategy program for developing writing skills. This would be a course which special education teachers would teach in partnership with general education teachers in grades 4, 5, and 6. This program has evidence-based results and looks very promising. Boxborough uses the EmPOWER program, which is an executive function language-mediated systematic approach to developing writing skills.

IV. Adjournment – the meeting was adjourned at 9:07 pm.

V. Next Meeting – will be on March 25, 2015 at the R.J. Grey Junior High School.

Respectfully submitted by Carolyn Sprague