



2015 PARENT/GUARDIAN SURVEY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Background – In the late spring and early summer of 2015 (Survey open from May 4-July 12) the Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council conducted a follow-up survey to its 2011 and 2008 Parent/Guardian Surveys. The 2015 survey consisted of 49 questions of which 38 mirrored the 2011 survey and 27 mirrored the 2008 survey. This allowed us to compare parent responses across the three surveys to identify changes in parent perception over seven years. In terms of survey response rate in 2015, 112 parents representing 144 special education students responded to the survey, an increase in respondents from 2011. This number represents more than 14% of the 979 special education students in the district at that time. Note: In this report, as in previous years, when we refer to the number of parents answering a question, we are actually referring to the total responses or number of children represented by individual survey respondents for each question.

Purpose –The AB Special Education Parent Advisory Council performed this parent/guardian survey to identify issues of concern to special education families and to help prioritize future goals for the organization. As a result the report focuses on potential areas of improvement. It is important to note that overall parents who took the survey reported moderate satisfaction with the programs and services provided by the district. Parent responses in 2015 were moderately more positive than those received in 2011, continuing the positive trend from 2008. We hope that our findings will be helpful to the district in its continuous effort to improve special education programs and services in the Acton-Boxborough regional schools. This executive summary is provided ahead of the full final report to help begin those discussions.

Survey Methodology

The 2015 AB Special Education Parent Advisory Council Parent/Guardian survey is very similar to the survey conducted in 2011 and the original survey conducted in 2008. Thirty-eight of forty-nine questions were the same or substantially similar to the 2011 survey. Most of the questions use a 5 choice Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” with “Agree Somewhat,” “Neither Agree/Disagree,” and “Disagree Somewhat” in between. Respondents could also answer “Not Applicable” or leave the question blank. Almost all the questions were phrased so that an “Agree” answer indicated satisfaction and a “Disagree” response indicated dissatisfaction. Questions phrased in the opposite manner are noted in this report by a change in the color of the Likert scale answers.

The survey was distributed online and in limited hard copy and all responses were confidential by survey design. The survey was shared with families via the Student [then Pupil] Services email list, which includes almost all special education families in the school district. Survey reminders were sent to families periodically both by Student Services and the AB Special Education Parent Advisory Council through our respective email lists. We did not use any sampling methodologies to ensure that survey results reflected the entire special education community; consequently our survey results are subject to sampling bias.

The 2015 Parent/Guardian survey was divided into six main sections:

1. **School and Parent Partnership** (3 questions) – This section generally focused on communication among parents, the child’s special education Team, and school administrators.
2. **Initial Assessment & the IEP** (9 questions) – This section probed parents’ experiences with initial special education assessment and the IEP development process.
3. **IEP Services & Progress Reporting** (9 questions) – This section focused on the scheduling and delivery of special education services outside the classroom and the effectiveness of progress reporting.
4. **Teachers and Administrators** (5 questions) – This section asked questions about parents’ experiences with special education administration, principals, regular classroom teachers, special education assistants, communication with those persons, and parents’ access to the classroom.
5. **Quality & Provision of Services** (17 questions) – This section focused on communication with special education staff, the classroom environment, and the scheduling and delivery of special education services outside the classroom.
6. **Bullying** (6 questions) – This section asked questions about the schools’ bullying prevention programs.

In 2015 questions were scored and ranked in two different ways:

First, consistent with the 2011 and 2008 surveys, we used a scoring system which gave two points for a “Strongly Agree” answer, one point for an “Agree Somewhat” answer, no points for a “Neither” answer, negative one point for a “Disagree Somewhat” answer, and negative two points for a “Strongly Disagree” answer. Thus a positive average score indicates satisfaction and a negative score indicates dissatisfaction. Questions phrased so that an “Agree” answer indicated dissatisfaction were scored in reverse when calculating averages for consistency.

Second, as in 2011, the 2015 survey questions were also scored using a “Net” number, which is the sum of the Agrees (somewhat and strongly) minus the sum of the Disagrees (somewhat and strongly). By providing total Agrees, Disagrees, and Net numbers, the reader has more information about the distribution of the answers and the total number of question respondents. While the first scoring system discussed has the benefit of brevity – one number – it provides no information about distribution. For example, a “0” average could consist of all “Neither Agree or Disagree” answers or an equal number of “Strongly Agree” and “Strongly Disagree” answers, which would be an important distribution of answers to identify.

A review of survey respondents in 2015 and 2011 indicates the makeup of the two groups is similar. However, the number of responses that did not disclose the child’s school and primary disability more than doubled, which is unusual. A detailed comparison of survey respondents is included at the end of the full report.

Highlighted Observations

Positive Trend Continues – We are pleased to share that in most areas surveyed special education parents expressed a more positive perception of special education programs and services than they did in 2011. This is a trend that has continued and strengthened from 2008. Specifically, parents indicated material increased satisfaction with (a) the Team giving equal weight and consideration to outside specialists’ testing, reports, and recommendations, (b) the district explaining in writing why certain proposals discussed in the IEP Team meeting were rejected (though this is still a net negative response overall), (c) parents being given sufficient information to understand how their child’s progress and grades relate to regular education peer standards/grade level performance, (d) the sufficiency of special education programs and services for their child to achieve academic and social proficiency, and (e) staff ensuring that skills taught in pullout sessions are effectively generalized to the regular education classroom and across the child’s day.

Having said that, we believe the survey also identified some areas of concern within special education as perceived by parents. After review and discussion, the AB SpEd PAC leadership has identified three particularly interesting findings where the survey data points to possible areas of program improvement.

Key Observation #1 – Extended School Year & Before- and After-School Programming – Survey Question 36 asked, “If my child is at risk of regression over the summer due to his/her disability, my child was offered appropriate extended year programming.” In 2015, this survey question had the largest overall decrease from 2011 of any survey question asked, dropping -.45 points. A breakout by disability showed that parents of students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) (n=14) had the most negative response to this question (-.50 for SLD, +.43 for all) of all disability categories with five or more respondents, whereas in 2011 parents of students with SLD were substantially more positive (+1.33, n=9). There appears to have been a significant change in satisfaction with extended year programming for this subgroup of students.

While the overall survey question score of +.43 indicates that more parents agree than disagree with this statement, almost 40% of respondents disagreed either somewhat or strongly. This is a significant change from 2011 and one that causes concern for the Special Education Parent Advisory Council as students at risk of regression over the summer need academic and social support to maintain their skills. This survey data seems to support anecdotal evidence. We have heard from parents over the last two years that their children were not offered/provided adequate extended year programming despite being at risk for regression. This finding may also indicate that the qualification criteria or process for determining who is eligible for extended school year programming has changed in recent years. Regardless, a significant percentage of parents do not believe the district is providing extended school year services to all of the students who require

it. (See www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/ta/esyp_qa.html for additional information regarding extended school year programs.)

Survey Question 34 stated, “The school ensures that after-school and extracurricular activities are accessible to students with disabilities by providing needed supports.” While the net positive responses increased in 2015 by +.16 from 2011, the aggregate response is still barely above neutral at +.05, which is the fourth lowest aggregate score of all the survey questions asked. Note: a response rate of 0 would indicate that parents neither agree nor disagree with the statement. When we analyzed the data by disability, it appears that some families of students with Specific Learning Disabilities disagreed with this statement; however, parents of students with Autism expressed the highest level of disagreement regarding access to after-school and extracurricular activities (-.78, n=18).

The issues of extended year and before- and after-school programming were raised in both our 2011 and 2008 survey reports as highlighted observations. In 2015, parent satisfaction in these areas is still below the average parent satisfaction reported on other survey topics. However, satisfaction has improved versus 2011 in three of the four questions related to these topics even though the overall question scores are still quite modest. That being said, it does not appear that enough progress has been made to resolve parents’ ongoing concerns regarding children’s access to before- and after-school programs and extended year programming. Consistent with prior surveys, the number of responses to these questions is lower than many survey questions, presumably because not all students with disabilities are at risk of substantial regression around IEP goals and objectives/benchmarks over the summer nor do they choose to participate in before- and after-school activities.

Key Observation #2 – Home-School Communications – Two survey Questions (Q2 and Q3) focused on home-school communications. Question 2 stated, “I feel I can speak freely with district staff and disagree with my child’s special education program or services without negative consequences for me or my child.” In 2015 more parents strongly agreed with this statement than in 2011 or 2008, which is a positive trend. The aggregate score on this question was +.99 (n=135), up +.25 from our 2011 survey. However, 21% of the survey respondents (28) still disagreed with this statement somewhat or strongly. While this percentage is down from 24% in 2011, it is exactly the same proportion of respondents who felt this way in 2008. The Special Education Parent Advisory Council continues to be troubled that one in five parents surveyed expressed concerns about negative consequences to their child or themselves if they disagree with the administration regarding their child’s special education needs. Open, honest communication is the cornerstone of true partnership, which both parents and administrators strongly desire. In light of this group’s fear of reprisal, it is difficult to know how to reach parent members to better understand their concerns.

Survey Question 3 stated, “I feel that communications from special education administrators to parents are open, honest and transparent.” In 2015 more parents strongly agreed with this statement than in 2011, which is a positive trend. The aggregate score on this question was +.81 (n=135), up +.35 from our 2011 survey. However, like the question above, 21% of survey respondents still disagreed with this statement somewhat or strongly. This percentage is down from 33% in 2011. While the numbers have improved since 2011, the Special Education Parent Advisory Council continues to be concerned that one in five parents surveyed questions the honesty and transparency of communications to parents from special education administrators.

When analyzing the data by age/school, the Out of District (OOD) and preschool parents reported the lowest levels of satisfaction with both Question 2 and 3. On survey Question 2, parents of OOD students answered this question with a modestly positive response just above neutral (+.19), which was significantly lower than all parents together (+.99). Preschool parents were in moderate agreement with the statement (+.44), though still measurably lower than all parents (+.99). On survey Question 3, parents of OOD students answered this question with a negative response (-.19), which was significantly lower than all parents together (+.81). Preschool parents were neutral on this question (+.00), which was significantly below all parents (+.81).

When examining the data by disability, parents of students with Autism reported the lowest level of satisfaction on both questions when averaged together, followed closely by parents of students with a Neurological disability. On Question 2, parents of students with Autism answered with a moderately positive score (+.62) and parents of students with a Neurological disability answered similarly (+.64); however this is lower than all parents together (+.99). On Question 3, parents of students with Autism responded in a modestly positive manner (+.34), as did parents of students with a Neurological disability (+.45); however, parents of students with Developmental Disabilities answered negatively (-.14), in contrast to all parents together (+.81). Note: children who have not yet been diagnosed with Autism may be classified by the school as having Other Neurological disabilities or Developmental Delay, so there is likely overlap in disabilities represented by these three categories of students.

In the Open Response section of the 2015 survey parents commented quite often on communication related topics, both positively and negatively. The large number of comments on this topic suggests that parents place a high value on timely and effective communication. Please see the selection of open-ended parent comments in the final report to gain a fuller understanding of parents’ perspectives on home-school communication in the Acton-Boxborough school district.

Key Observation #3 – Out of District Parent Concerns – When analyzing the 2015 survey data by parent group, we discovered that parents of Out of District (OOD) students were significantly less satisfied than any other parent group (Q13), although their overall question score was modestly positive at +.41 (n=17). In contrast the overall question score of all other parents was

+1.08 (n=124). In addition, parents of OOD students expressed a lower level of satisfaction across a broad range of topics surveyed (40 out of 49 survey questions). At the time the survey was conducted there were 100 children in Out of District placements. Sixteen identified OOD students were reflected in the survey responses we received. This represents a 16% response rate for the OOD parent group, which was higher than the general survey response rate of 14%. However, we note that this percentage may not reflect all survey respondents with OOD students because we experienced an increased number of parents who declined to identify their child's school/placement in the 2015 Parent Survey.

As noted above in Key Observation 2, Out of District parents had the lowest confidence in their ability to speak freely with the district without negative consequences (Q2) and the lowest confidence that special education administrators' communications were open, honest, and transparent (Q3). It is difficult for families and the district to partner effectively on a child's behalf when fundamental trust is not in place. The difference in Out of District parents' experiences was also particularly pronounced in the areas of: responsiveness to parent contact/concerns (Q27), quick and effective problem resolution (Q22), provision of an IEP/Amendment within 5-10 days (Q9), inclusion of all Team recommendations/agreements in the IEP (Q10), and the offering of new/different strategies when a child's IEP goals were not met (Q19). The difference in OOD parent responses to these questions varied from -.91 to -1.43 compared to other parents' responses, so the difference in experience by this community was quite pronounced.