



Spring 2017 Parent/Guardian Mini Survey Report

October 2017

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Introduction

The Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council routinely surveys parents and guardians of children with special education needs to identify issues of concern to the families we represent and to help prioritize organizational goals. In the spring of 2015, we published a long-form parent/guardian survey. This mini survey was conducted to follow up on specific issues noted by respondents in 2015, including transparency and trust in communications from and with the district, overall satisfaction, and Extended School Year programming. We hope our findings will be helpful in the continuous effort to improve special education programs and services in the Acton-Boxborough regional schools. We thank the Student Services department and Special Education Director Pamela Smith for their collaboration in electronically distributing the survey to families of students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Methodology

The 2017 mini survey consisted of seven questions and an open response option. All seven questions, including the two demographics questions, mirrored the long-form 2015 parent/guardian survey.¹ The survey utilized skip logic to allow participants to answer for multiple children. For example, there were 309 respondents to the first question in the survey resulting in responses regarding 362 students with special education needs. The 362 responses received represent approximately 39% of Students with Disabilities (SWD) in ABRSD based on the 933 headcount from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as of October 1, 2016. By comparison, there were 135 responses to the 2015 survey representing just under 14% of the DESE October 1, 2014 count of SWD.

Most of the questions use a five-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. One question was phrased so respondents could indicate “More Satisfied,” “About the Same,” or “Less Satisfied” year over year. All of the five-choice questions were phrased so that an “Agree” answer indicated satisfaction and a “Disagree” response indicated dissatisfaction. Unless otherwise defined, references to agreement herein relate to the percentage of respondents selecting “Strongly Agree” or “Agree Somewhat” while references to disagreement relate to “Disagree Somewhat” and “Strongly Disagree” responses. In this report, as in previous years’ reports, when we refer to the number of parents or guardians answering a question, we are actually referring to the total responses or number of children represented by individual survey respondents for each question.

The survey was distributed online from May 1 through May 26. All responses were confidential by survey design. The survey was shared via the Student Services email list, which includes almost all families of children with IEPs in the district, through the PAC’s email list, social media (Facebook pages or groups for Acton parents, the PAC, and the Carol Huebner Early Childhood Program), and the Acton Boxborough Family Network listserv. Partnership with Student Services to access their list, along with a reduced number of questions and a shorter estimated time allotment for completion, allowed us to greatly increase survey response rate. Periodic survey reminders were sent to families by Student

¹ Many questions were carried over from the 2008 to 2011 and 2015 surveys in order to track responses over time. Please see the *2015 Parent/Guardian Survey Report* for more details.

Services and the PAC through our respective lists. We did not use any sampling methodologies to ensure that survey results reflected the entire special education community; our results are consequently subject to sampling bias.

Summary of Findings

Home-School Communications

The communication questions selected for inclusion in this survey focused on issues identified with transparency and trust from our 2015 and 2011 parent/guardian surveys. While we did not include other communication questions, we received a number of open responses mentioning the desire for increased communication with and from special education teams and providers. For a sampling, please see the selected open-ended responses on page 14.

Question 1 asked for a response to the statement, “I feel that communications from special education administrators to parents are open, honest and transparent.” An 83% majority agreed with this statement in 2017, a substantial improvement from 79% in 2015 and only 67% in 2011. With the number of changes at the administrative level and restructuring of the special education leadership in the last few years, the PAC is pleased to note the increased sense of trust and transparency while continuing to emphasize the critical importance of proactive, direct communication from Student Services and its administrators to families.

Question 2 asked for a response to the statement, “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 2008 or 2011, a positive trend. The PAC was troubled, however, that one in five respondents in 2015 expressed concern about negative consequences if they disagreed with staff about their child’s needs. Parents of children in Out of District placements and the preschool were significantly less likely to agree with this statement than the rest of the respondent populations. We are very pleased to report this year’s survey found the percentage of parents and guardians who disagree with the statement decreased to 14%. There was an increase among those who neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement, and the percentage who somewhat or strongly agreed held steady at 75%. For further discussion and analysis on these survey items, please see the evidence section.

Positive Trend Continues

Given the number of changes in special education administration and department structure in the last three years, the PAC is interested in tracking families’ perceptions of services as well as overall satisfaction over time. Question 3 asked, “How satisfied are you with the special education services your child is receiving (school year 2016-2017)?” We have seen a positive long-term trend in response to this question from the 2008 survey through the 2015 survey. That trend held in 2017, with the percentage agreeing with this statement increasing from 74% in 2015 to 79%.

Question 5 asked, “Are you more or less satisfied this year (school year 2016-2017) than last year (2015-2016)?” The preponderance of responses, over three-quarters, reported more overall satisfaction than in the prior school year. The percentage of More Satisfied parents was substantially greater in 2015 than in the mini-survey, offset by an increase in those who felt about the same year to year. The ideal result

is a high level of satisfaction with services with a modest increase in overall satisfaction each year. This would be indicative of consistently high and improving performance in conjunction with other student outcome measures. Please see the evidence section for further discussion and consideration of positive, proactive communication as a potential key to parent satisfaction.

Extended School Year Programming

Survey question 4 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 question had the largest overall decrease in agreement from 2011 of any question asked. The PAC repeated the question in this year’s mini survey because of the relatively low level of satisfaction expressed by parents and guardians in 2015 as well as to follow up on reports of parents being told their children had to demonstrate regression to qualify for ESY.

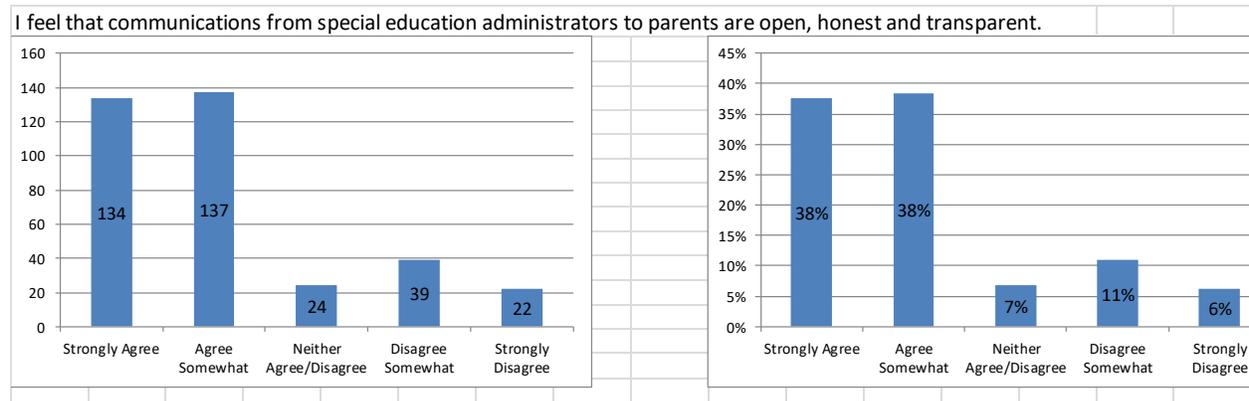
Only parents or guardians who have a child at risk of regression or who qualify for ESY answer this question. There were 228 responses, 63% of all responses to the 2017 mini survey. Of these, more than one in four disagreed that their child or children had been offered appropriate extended year programming if at risk for regression. Also of note was a decrease in the “Strongly Agree” response, offset by an increase in the “Somewhat Agree” response. The neutral response also increased dramatically. The PAC continues to stress the need for appropriate Extended School Year programming for all children at risk of regression and will continue to follow up with parent education efforts as well as with Student Services. Please see pages 9-12 in the evidence section for further discussion.

Evidence Supporting Findings

Home-School Communications

Communication issues were highlighted in our previous survey reports, prompting follow up in 2017. We repeated questions relevant to transparency and trust as these are the bedrock of collaboration and healthy communication. There have been a number of changes within Student Services administration, to building-based leadership and oversight, and to department structure, furthering a need to track perceptions over time. Question 1 asked survey participants to respond to the statement, “I feel that communications from special education administrators to parents are open, honest and transparent.” Almost three out of four parents surveyed this year agree with the statement and we celebrate that the number of parents disagreeing with this statement continues to decline, from 21% in 2015 to 17% in 2017.

Trust in Administrator Communications



The statement specified communications from administrators, which prompted commentary in the open response section:

“This survey asked about transparency on the administrative level, and I don’t feel I’ve had much contact on that level for the last few years. No administrator attends our meetings. I know of no issues with them but am wary after past contacts. I do feel that our contact with our liaison is honest and transparent.”

Others expressed concern about transparency and trust with their IEP teams and providers:

“When we communicate with staff casually, off the record, or in regular conferences, they are often quite candid, however, at IEP meetings they speak and respond as if they have been coached and aligned towards a specific end, primarily to reduce or deny services.”

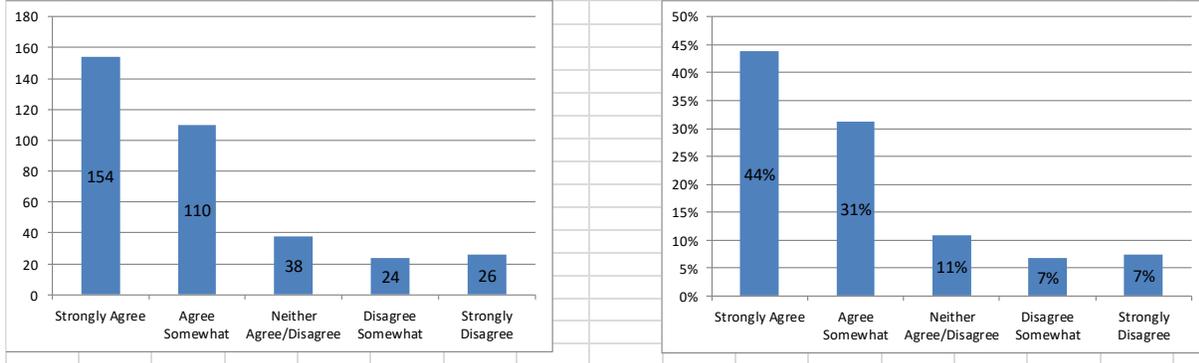
“On more than one occasion delays or nothing at all have occurred, finding this out from my student, not from the staff I should hear it from with an explanation. I feel if I do not check constantly by daily communication with my child that services get lost.”

We received numerous comments desiring more communication overall with and from the IEP team and providers. Please see page 14 in the Selected Open-Ended Responses section for a sample of these remarks. This is in many cases a parent education issue as lines of communication can be opened through the IEP.

In 2015, the PAC reported the troubling finding that one in five parents feared negative consequences to their child or themselves if they disagreed about their child’s special education needs. The 2017 survey found that the number of parents who fear negative consequences declined to 14%. While the ideal is universal trust in parents’ ability to communicate freely without consequences, we welcome and herald the improvement while continuing to try to reach the roughly 1 in 10 parents/guardians who fears reprisal.

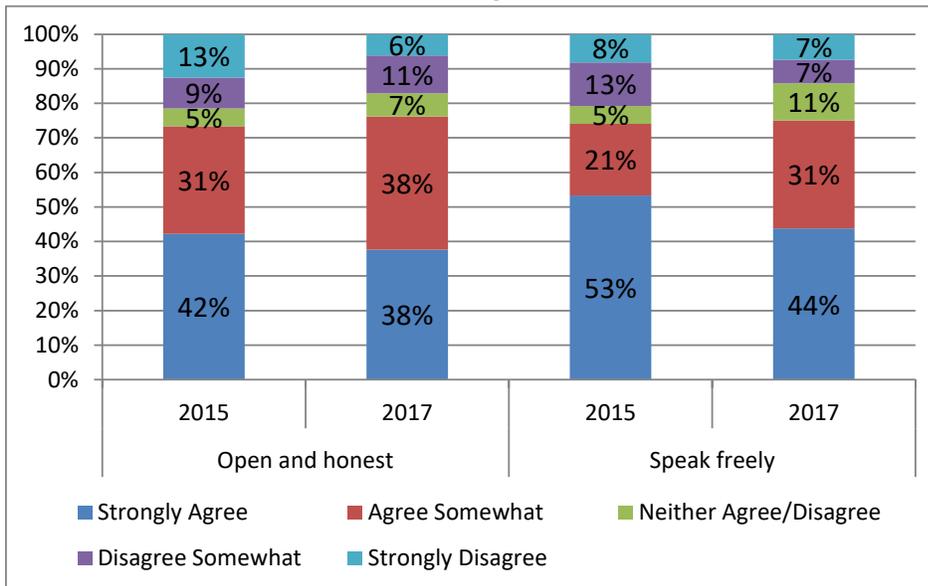
Ability to Speak Freely

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.



The chart below indicates the decrease in parents and guardians from 2015 to 2017 who disagree with their ability to trust communications from administration and their ability to speak freely or disagree with IEP teams without fear of negative consequences to them or their children. Of note, the number of Strongly Agrees across both questions declined while the number who Agree Somewhat and Neither Agree nor Disagree in the case of the ability to speak freely increased.

Trust & Communication Questions Change over Time 2015-2017

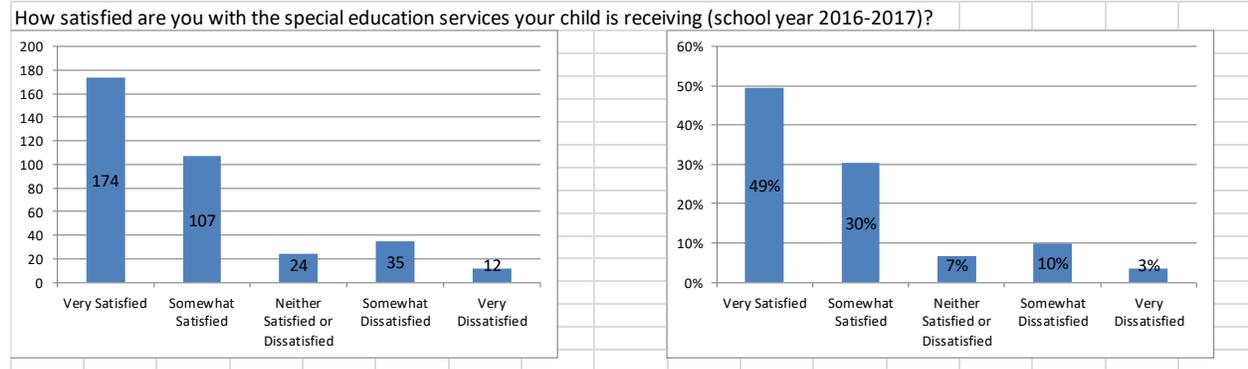


After the 2015 survey, we added to the Open Issues on our monthly meeting agendas that findings regarding Out of District families' experiences countered overall positive trends. In the area of communication, the 2017 survey found material improvement for OOD families for both questions asked. We welcome the improvement while noting OOD families are still tracking behind in this area compared to other respondents.

Positive Trend Continues

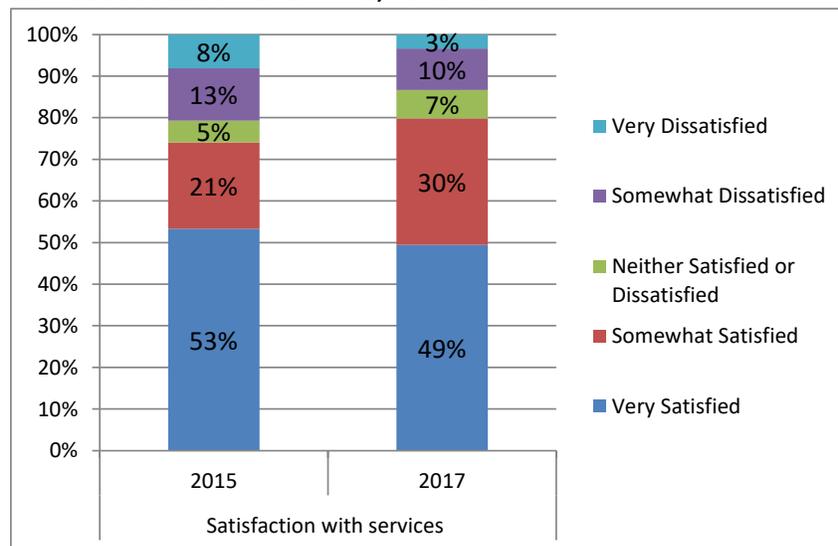
The PAC is pleased to report that most parents continue to be satisfied with the special education services their children receive based on survey data and open-ended responses. As the chart below shows, almost 80% of parents and guardians expressed satisfaction with their children’s programming.

Satisfaction with Special Education Services 2016-2017



The next chart shows service satisfaction from the 2015 survey (asking about 2014-2015 school year) and service satisfaction from the 2017 survey (asking about the 2016-2017 school year). The percentage of parents dissatisfied with special education services declined by 8 points and those satisfied increased by 5 points over this span. The increase in positive responses is due to an increase in the Somewhat Satisfied answer, which more than offsets the decrease in the Very Satisfied top answer.

Service Satisfaction Over Time, 2015-2017



Respondent satisfaction with services shone through in the open responses as well. Parents and guardians shared accolades for specific educators, programs, and schools. Many of these remarks reflect positive, consistent communication between staff and parents.

“The services are excellent. We are more than pleased. The staff handled our son’s needs with tact

and compassion. They were kind and positive. We have seen huge improvements already in our son and this is his first year of having help [...].”

“Incredibly happy with the Integrated Preschool at Boxborough. Communication has been great and my child has really improved over the past few months.”

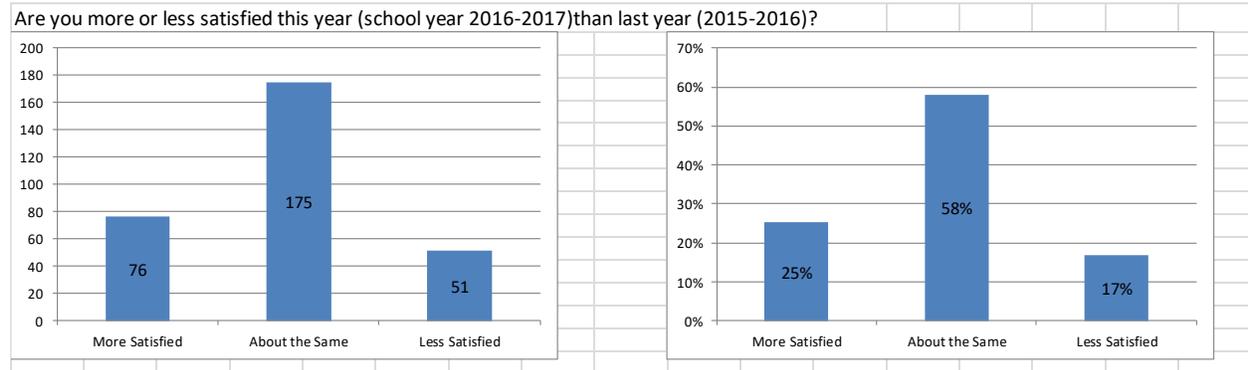
“We came in with an IEP from our former district. The staff [...] were terrific from the beginning. Overall, I have been very satisfied with the caring support that our son has received to date.”

“My child has had many services and we have seen tremendous growth- the IEP services have been amazing and the teachers/specialists are truly outstanding [...].”

“Thank God for [...] the Bridges program. [The special educator] and the team there have been very supportive of our son and are excellent communicators.”

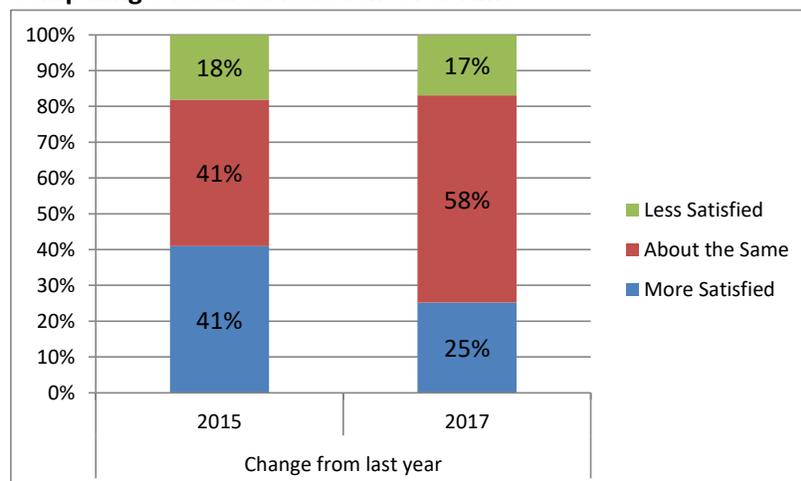
The PAC also queries families about overall satisfaction year over year in order to capture experiences beyond services, among them the team process, communication, and changes in department administration and organization.

Satisfaction This Year (2016-2017) Over Last Year



The change over time in overall satisfaction is illustrated below. The number of people who feel about the same has increased 17% with a corresponding decrease in additional satisfaction. This may indicate that most people have experienced limited direct impact from the changes year to year within the Student Services department.

Comparing Overall Satisfaction Over Time



Extended School Year Programming

Extended School Year is defined as “special education and/or related services provided beyond the usual school year, at times when school is not usually in session—typically during the summer. ... ESY services are individualized, as documented by the child’s needs in the IEP”² ESY is distinct from summer school or academic remediation provided to students without disabilities. Massachusetts law states “[a]n extended school year may be identified if the student has demonstrated *or is likely to demonstrate* substantial regression in his or her learning skills and/or difficulty in relearning such skills if an extended program is not provided” [emphasis added].³ Eligibility for ESY is determined annually in consultation with the IEP team, including parents or guardians.

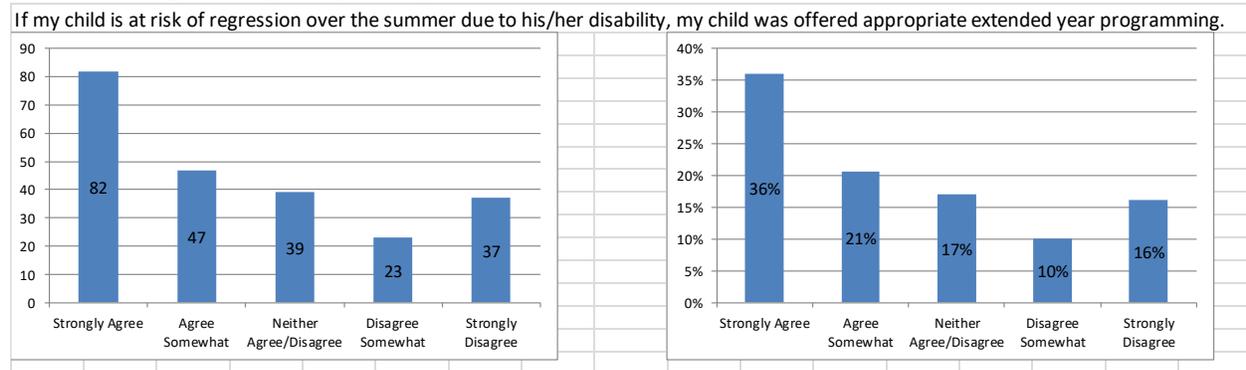
Survey question 4 asked, “If my child is at risk of regression over the summer due to his/her disability, my child was offered appropriate extended year programming.” About half of those taking the 2015 survey answered the question, indicating belief their child was eligible for extended year services, with 39% of those respondents disagreeing with the statement. Those representing students with Specific Learning Disabilities demonstrated the most negative response. This finding saw ESY programming added to the Open Issues on the PAC’s monthly business meeting agendas. In fall 2016, we began to hear from families that staff were informing them their children had to demonstrate regression in order to qualify for ESY. The 2015 survey finding and these anecdotal reports about changes to how children were being determined eligible for ESY prompted us to follow up in this survey.

The following chart breaks down our 2017 findings by response number and percentage of the total.

² Wrightslaw, “Should Your Child’s IEP Include Extended Year Services (ESY)?,” *The Wrightslaw Way to Special Education Law and Advocacy* (blog), February 3, 2009, <http://www.wrightslaw.com/blog/should-your-childs-iep-include-extended-year-services-esy/>.

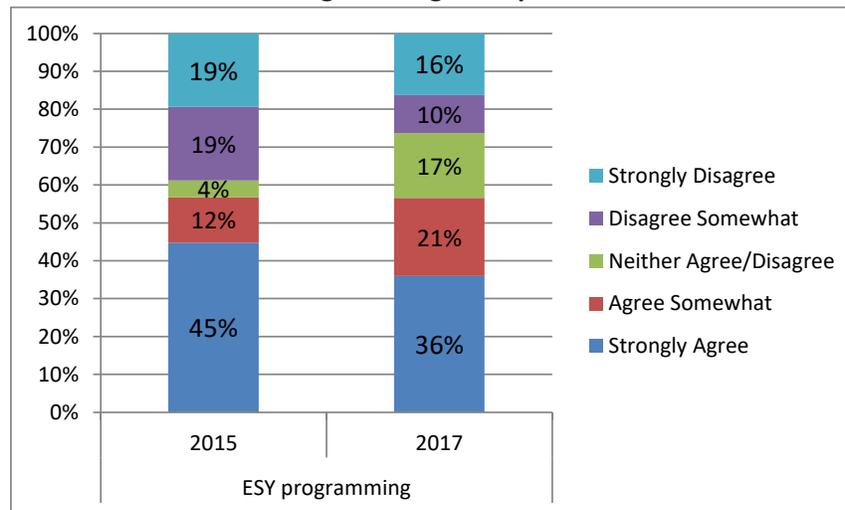
³ 603 CMR 28.05(4)(d)1

2017 ESY Program Eligibility Perceptions



The chart below shows parent/guardian responses to this question broken down by percentage in 2015 and 2017, with the least satisfied depicted at the top of the bars. The relatively low level of satisfaction has persisted, with more than one in four respondents (26%) disagreeing that their child was offered appropriate extended year programming. Agreement with the survey statement held at 57%, with a drop in the Strongly Agree response offset by the increased Somewhat Agree response. Negative responses declined by 12 points and the neutral response increased.

Extended School Year Programming Perceptions 2015 to 2017



[Q: If my child is at risk of regression over the summer ... my child was offered appropriate extended year programming.]

Given the trend, the PAC sought more information from Student Services about eligibility statistics, criteria applied, and program changes year over year. The numbers of students deemed eligible last year and this year are provided in the chart below. We note that the total number who qualify includes those in Out of District placements not administered by Student Services. We have tried to focus our subsequent inclusion of open-ended responses to those (1) directly related to ESY services provided by ABRSD and (2) issues related to overall parent education around ESY eligibility determinations.

Year Over Year Change in ESY Eligibility

	2015-2016	2016-2017
SwD on October 1	968	933
ESY Qualified*	296	260
% Qualified	31%	28%

*Data provided by Student Services on June 16, 2017

Some open-ended responses reflected changes experienced around eligibility and the qualification process for ESY. Student Services revised the internal procedure for documenting eligibility, resulting in more robust documentation practices. Note that ESY eligibility is not guaranteed and must be reviewed at least annually by the entire IEP team, including parents.

"The ESY discussions were different this year; the team stated that my student had to demonstrate regression to qualify."

"I was extremely disappointed in the process for determining if my child was eligible for summer programming. This was his first year in Jr High and he was told he was not eligible, even though he has had summer programming every year since he was 3 years old. He was finally given some summer programming but it will be very short days/3 days a week."⁴

Per Student Services, the following changes were made to the 2017 ESY programming from the 2016 program levels:

- the Early Childhood Program (preschool) was reduced by one hour per week;
- junior high and senior high school programming was reduced to three days per week from four, including the Occupational Development program;
- and the elementary Applied Behavioral Analysis program was increased by one hour per week.

Overall elementary hours remained static. The impact of the direct cuts are difficult to track as individual students may simply require fewer hours to prevent substantial regression or issues with recoupment than in previous years. Some responses, however, registered deep concern with the service reductions and the amount of programming available. The PAC notes that ESY programs should be tailored to individual student need and not capped at a certain number of hours, days, or weeks.

"Child regressed on most benchmarks over summer and into the year. Staff surprised when we expected accountability. Proposed programming for the coming summer is too little & not in the LRE."

"VERY disappointed in the cuts in the summer program this summer. Three days a week is ridiculous. It was already marginal support now they make it so the child cannot sign up for anything else for five weeks, offering 15 hours three days, when these children all benefit from structure leaves much to be desired in terms of support."

"I don't understand how cutting the ODP [Occupational Development Program] Summer school program to only 13 days prevents regression."

⁴ Junior high parents reported the least amount of agreement with the survey statement.

“Extended School Year programming proposed for our student with autism falls far short of recommendations from outside clinicians. He has regressed over just week-long breaks in the past. We are deeply worried about regression over the summer given his age and a shift from intensive EI to the preschool.”

Reviewing these findings, not enough progress has been made to resolve ongoing concerns regarding access to extended year programming. The PAC distributed an advisory to our email list in December 2016 to educate parents about ESY and share advocacy resources. The PAC must continue to pursue parent education initiatives around extended year program eligibility and determinations. This may include highlighted discussion during the annual Basic Rights training, bringing in a speaker on ESY, expanding the information about ESY available on the PAC site, and/or additional direct mailings to the PAC email list. We will continue discussions with Student Services about the importance of appropriate and sufficient extended school year programming for children to avoid substantial regression and recoupment issues.

Selected Open-Ended Responses

Parents and guardians expressed concern or provided feedback on a variety of other issues in the open-ended survey question. The following underscore points we feel especially worth consideration.

On general education support:

“The quality of my child’s experience is closely tied to the traits of the classroom teacher. General Ed classroom teachers need to be knowledgeable to accommodate children with hidden disabilities.”

“Our coordinator is awesome. Our child’s teacher however, was not always on board with accommodating our child, based on our experience. Our child is wrapping up the year with a lower opinion of self-worth.”

“[...] I also would like to see more effort for ‘push-in’ services everywhere NOT provided solely by assistants.”

On girls with Autism:

“The AB special education system does not seem to have the expertise or inclination to provide girls on the autism spectrum the same level of support that boys are provided. This seems to be a blind spot that could be addressed through targeted training and hiring in the district.”

“I am extremely frustrated by the limited support offered to my daughter, despite her numerous needs. She is socially isolated and has extreme anxiety, but saves her huge meltdowns for home. I wish so much that the teachers and administrators could have even a basic training about girls with autism!!”

On Specific Learning Disabilities:

“I think we need to do more to highlight dyslexia. Teacher training is virtually non-existent in this area despite its incredibly common occurrence. If more children were identified early (before grade 2) and properly remediated, we would potentially have less referrals in the upper grades.”

"I am happy that my child is receiving help but I wish it had started in the first grade when we and the teacher noted his learning disabilities. As a consequence, he is behind and his self confidence is very low. [...] I think school can do much more and intervene earlier."

"There needs to be multiple options for language based special ed programs. Students with dyslexia are not placed with the right cohort of peers and do not receive the amount or type of services they need to make effective progress."

"In his LC [Learning Center], they typically go over things as a group, yet he has a different learning disability than most of the other children so I'm not sure he got as much direction/help as he has gotten in the past."

"My main concern is around reading instruction in the elementary schools especially with those struggling to decode and encode. I think small group lessons need to be more focused and follow a set curriculum whether it is Orton Gillingham, Wilson Intensive or Wilson Just Words. It should be something that is systematic, data driven & not pieced together."

"My child has dyslexia [...]. We have fought tooth and nail with AB to receive the accommodations that our child needs and to this day they have never provided all the accommodations required."

On the need for executive functioning training and support:

"All students should be offered classes in how to be organized. This includes how to organize a locker, binders, homework assignments... Some kids just don't pick up these skills. They need to be taught strategies."

"Son actively redirected from advanced work due to habits of mind but why no study and time management support?"

"We need more specific resources for executive functioning and slow processing issues."

On the need for parent education and support:

"The people who deliver the services are great. Most of the time, the IEP meetings are great. However the perception in the community is bad. The commonality is that the school staff speak a certain language to each other and the context is missing from the parents. Since the meetings are SO important, it is stressful to rely on you doing right."

"I feel a new protocol needs to be put in place to make the process of creating a plan more of a 'team' effort as it is supposed to be rather than a plan devised by the school that I have to question or say no to."

"It takes so long to implement any changes or additions to the current plan. Teachers are not open to listening parent's opinions when it comes to making a decision about child's daily needs. This should be a team collaboration and discussed thoroughly with respect to parent's perspectives. Parents know their kids the best!!"

"I feel very alone in supporting my child."

On the desire for increased communication:

"It would be great to know (and hear) periodically what is working and what is not working for my child."

"I feel that having only 1 IEP meeting in the middle of the school year is not enough. I believe there should be a meeting at the beginning of the school year, and at the end to see what goals have been met and what help needs to continue."

"In PreK I had near-weekly status reports, but now in K we hardly hear anything. I think monthly emailed reports home from the specialists who spend an hour a week with our kids would be appreciated and not too onerous."

"Last year there was a small notebook that the team and I wrote in that was sent back and forth that I would also initial. This year there was no clear way for me to communicate with her special ed team directly. Having that method of communication back would be extremely beneficial."

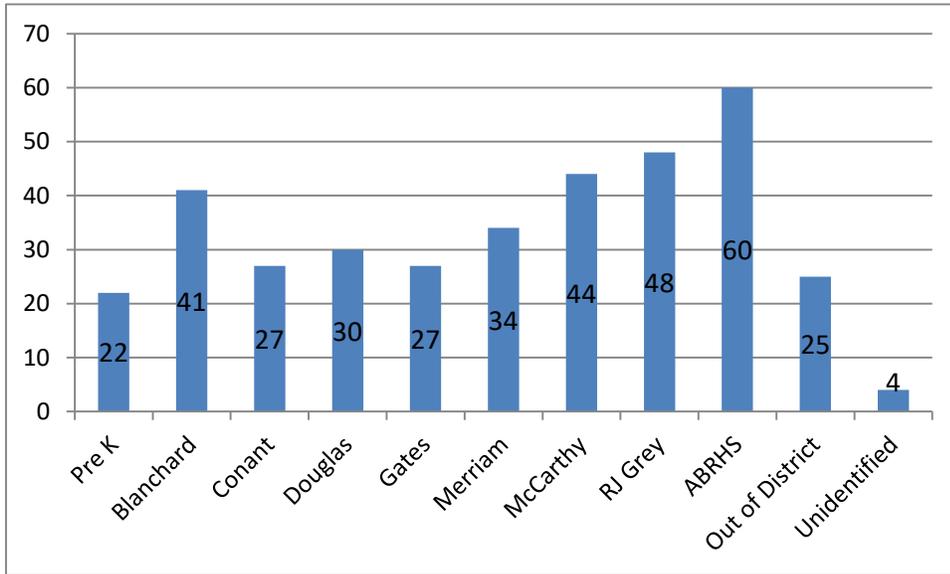
"One improvement might be more pro-active communication from the team; I would be interested to see maybe something like a monthly progress email."

Survey Demographics

The survey allowed parents/guardians to answer for multiple children with special education needs. There were 309 respondents to the first question in the survey resulting in responses related to 362 students. The 362 responses represent approximately 39% of students with IEPs based on the DESE 933 headcount as of October 1, 2016.

The graphs below illustrate the breakdown of responses by school and primary disability category. Note primary disability category refers to the ten categories outlined under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and therefore occludes some individual diagnoses (dyslexia would be included under Specific Learning Disability and ADHD under Health, for instance).

2017 Mini Survey Reponses by School



2017 Mini Survey Responses by Primary Disability Category

