

Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council (AB SEPAC)

Annual Meeting Minutes June 9, 2021

I. Call to Order

Amanda Bailey called the meeting to order at 7:33 p.m. AB SEPAC Co-Chairs Abe Gutierrez, Amanda Bailey, and Carrie Weaver; Interim Director of Special Education Debbie Dixon; School Committee liaison to the SEPAC Diane Baum; and 9 other community members were present. The SEPAC Co-Chairs provided an overview of the processes for remote participation and voting.

II. Approval of Minutes

Meeting minutes from May 19, 2021, were reviewed. A motion was made and seconded to approve the meeting minutes as written. The motion passed with three abstentions.

III. Organizational/Business Issues

A. Updates from Interim Special Education Director

Meetings are scheduled through the end of the year as staff work to complete evaluations and re-evaluations. IEP progress reports should be available all summer on PowerSchool. Progress reports have been inaccessible in the past when the system was shut down.

The special education office is now fully separate from Student Services. The assistant to the Director is moving from .5 to 1.0 FTE (Full Time Equivalent). The other assistants will go from 3.0 to 2.5 to cover the Early Childhood Program (ECP) and high school (1.0), the junior high (.5), and elementary (1.0). This will be reassessed when the ECP moves to new facility. The assistant to the Director will assume Out of District (OOD) paperwork. This should streamline communication and be more efficient for reporting, managing contracts, etc.

The Interim Director clarified from the May meeting that Pathways is not a substantially-separate program; there is a continuum from full inclusion to sub-separate. Education in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is always the objective. The SEPAC noted there have been issues starting students from substantially-separate placements versus the LRE when transitioning students from the ECP into kindergarten. Parents have not known what to ask for or how to advocate for inclusion.

The junior high team leader is moving to Gates and Douglas. The junior high position will be posted. A former elementary coordinator is moving to assistant principal at Conant. The long-time psychologist from Merriam is leaving the district.

A parent asked what can be done to prevent future transportation gaps. Drivers didn't return when schools reopened; CASE has ½ the drivers they did pre-pandemic. Some students cannot wear masks and must be transported solo. Routes therefore cannot be combined. If this requirement eases, there will be more latitude. Students have been in remote longer than necessary when caregivers could not transport instead.

The SEPAC thanked the Interim Director for her service. She has been an invaluable resource

and wonderful to work with over the past two years.

B. Review of SEPAC Activities & Priorities from 2020-2021

The SEPAC Chairs present to the School Committee tomorrow. Many efforts this year fell into an information sharing, educational, and support capacity rather than an advisory capacity. Moving forward, the SEPAC needs to resume the advisory capacity in a meaningful way.

A brief update was given on the following:

1. Address and remove barriers to SEPAC participation and leadership for Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color who are parents/guardians of children with disabilities [ONGOING]

The SEPAC elected its first officer of color in many years. This will be ongoing focus until SEPAC meeting participation and leadership consistently reflect our community. Survey demographics data will provide insight about who the SEPAC is currently reaching.

2. Participate in the search process for a new special education director [MET]

Jennifer Truslow has been hired from Weston. The Weston SEPAC spoke very highly of her and her role in ensuring their SEPAC was included in district committees and conversations.

3. Monitor state guidance and families' experiences regarding reopening schools [ONGOING]

4. Community education on Basic Rights and other topics [MET]

Two workshops took place, one on transition planning and one on basic rights.

5. Conduct parent/guardian survey(s) [NOT MET]

Family support this year included monitoring state technical assistance advisories and caregiver education regarding guidance, COVID Compensatory Services, transition to in-person learning, etc. The SEPAC presented to the Gates PTO on the continuum of supports and the special education eligibility process. Social media (500 followers) and newsletter (1400 subscribers) were used to share low/no cost workshop and training opportunities in different languages.

At the district level, the Co-Chairs participated in the DESE Tiered Focus Monitoring interview process. The SEPAC boosted TFM caregiver survey participation. The SEPAC gave input and feedback on the district Student Opportunity Act Plan and other matters before the School Committee. There is ongoing advocacy regarding parent/guardian engagement throughout the development, implementation, and future use of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports.

Regionally, there is a long-standing partnership among the Acton-Boxborough, Maynard, Concord/Concord-Carlisle, Sudbury, and Lincoln-Sudbury SEPACs. The Littleton SEPAC was added this year. There will be a coordination and leadership development meeting this summer.

At the state level, Acton-Boxborough is a stakeholder in the DESE IEP Improvement Project via the SEPAC. The SEPAC participates in ongoing feedback sessions as part of the Regional Family Engagement Coalition regarding the pandemic's impact and implementation of the MA Family Engagement Framework. Co-Chairs participated in a DESE focus group to identify opportunities for resources and trainings related to family engagement and leadership. An ABRSD parent participated in development of new dyslexia guidelines.

C. Seek Nominations & Elect Officers for 2021-2022 School Year

The SEPAC can have up to three chairs and two secretaries. The non-officer members of the Executive Board are the Past PAC Chair and one Standing Committee Chair (Outreach). Rules for remote elections were reviewed. Kara Lafferty, Amanda Bailey, Carrie Weaver, and Abraham Gutierrez were nominated for Co-Chair, Abraham in absentia. Carrie Weaver declined

the nomination to run for Standing Committee Chair of Outreach with an emphasis on Out of District families and PTOs. Kara, Amanda, and Abraham were elected with 11 ayes and 2 abstentions. Erica Abbruzzese was nominated for Secretary and elected with 11 ayes and 2 abstentions. Carrie Weaver was nominated for Standing Committee Chair (Outreach) and elected with 11 ayes and 2 abstentions.

D. Review & Vote on SEPAC Priorities for 2021-2022 School Year

A motion was made, seconded, and passed with 9 ayes and 3 abstentions to adopt the following priorities brainstormed during the May meeting, with the understanding that they may evolve as circumstances warrant:

1. Relationship building with new administrators, families, and other SEPACs

Of note, next year there is a new Director of Special Education, a new high school principal, an interim junior high principal, a new junior high coordinator, a new elementary principal, an interim elementary principal, and shuffling of assistant principals. There are also two new School Committee members.

2. Address and remove barriers to SEPAC participation and SEPAC leadership

3. Gather stakeholder feedback and make recommendations regarding inclusion for students placed in substantially-separate program(s)

This item follows up on Pathways conversation. Other new program continuums K-12 (Compass) should also be examined for how students are included.

4. Continued advocacy regarding SEPAC dyslexia recommendations

5. Monitor families' experiences with Extended School Year, return to school, and pandemic recovery

6. Workshops on basic rights, post-secondary options, other topics TBD

IV. New Business

A parent asked about a closed community or forum for parents of students with disabilities. There is a SEPAC-sponsored parent to parent list on Groups.io. The SEPAC does not use Facebook due to student privacy and quorum concerns. People are welcome to start groups independently of the SEPAC. There are local Facebook groups for parents of children with food allergies and ADHD/anxiety/OCD. Mighty Networks and Slack were mentioned as possible platforms.

A parent asked about support and access extended day and community programs. A summary of rights under ADA and advocacy strategies would be appreciated.

A Co-Chair asked about remote versus in person meetings for the coming school year. Attendance has been steady or slightly up and new people have been able to participate with Zoom meetings. Information from the state about continuing remote participation is pending. Preference was expressed for a hybrid model, broadcasting the meeting live even if people watching remotely were unable to vote. The SEPAC needs to include additional remote accessibility features.

Several parents expressed the need for more information regarding the SEPAC. Some OOD families are not aware of the SEPAC or what it does. One parent has had a child in the system since the ECP and did not know about the SEPAC until high school. Outreach methods were discussed, including the offer from the Interim Director to have the SEPAC mailing list link/brochure be included in the emails from the office support staff to families with new IEPs, etc. Special educators could do this as well. This was done in paper form in the past. A parent shared they had a positive experience moving to the district because of the SEPAC. The Medford SEPAC

model of 1:1 outreach with a personal connection was considered. Ongoing awareness will be key, including outreach to private providers. That may be a project for the regional SEPACs.

The Interim Director asked about continuing Zoom IEP team meetings or resuming in person. A parent expressed it may be a “barrier” if the whole team is in the building except the parent. There is time saved and work samples are easier to share in person. The Interim Director noted parents are given every opportunity to participate and remote can be a choice moving forward.

Parents/guardians are encouraged to view recordings of workshops by advocacy organizations like Mass Advocates for Children.

V. Open Issues

A review of open issues was held over until the fall.

VI. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:58 p.m.

VII. Next Meeting

Meetings for 2021-2022 TBD

All AB SEPAC meetings are open to the public. We encourage parents of children with special needs and others interested in special education to attend. Please check our website (www.absepac.org) for information regarding upcoming events.

Respectfully submitted by Amanda Bailey, Co-Chair