

**Business Meeting Minutes  
December 15, 2021**

**I. Call to Order**

Amanda Bailey called the meeting to order at 7:35 p.m. AB SEPAC Co-Chairs Amanda Bailey, Abe Gutierrez, and Kara Lafferty; Secretary Erica Abbruzzese; Special Education Director Jennifer Truslow; and several members were present.

**II. Approval of Minutes**

The review and approval of November 17, 2021, meeting minutes was postponed.

**III. Organization/Business Issues**

A. Updates from Monthly Meeting with Director of Special Education and;

B. Follow Up from Parent/Guardian Conversations

The Director of Special Education relayed that staffing is one of the major topics district wide. Staffing qualified teachers and paraprofessionals is an equal problem. The district is doing everything they can to attract, train, and retain staff. A problem has been attrition due to paraprofessionals obtaining teaching positions. The Director is working collaboratively and proactively with each principal.

K-2 referrals for special education evaluations are markedly up across all schools. Initial evaluations are also up at RJ Grey and ABRHS. Students are dysregulated with lots of big emotions—much of this coincided with initial data collection.

The Director then provided an update on the significant disproportionality finding. The Assistant Superintendent for DEI is attending a meeting later in December and the district will be doing a deep dive with study teams to evaluate how students are being identified and evaluated. The Director said the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has a stringent process when districts are found to be disproportionate and Acton-Boxborough will follow the guidance. Specialized programs need to be well-defined, especially some of the newer programs—everything from who qualifies to how the services are implemented.

The Director then discussed the district's focus on social emotional learning. The Superintendent stated at a community coffee that social emotional well-being is the most important focus right now. All classrooms are in a "low boil." Staff are seeing a lot of aggression and emotional dysregulation. This is a major concern and budget driver to support students and staff before being forced into a reactive state. A-B has a high proportion of psychologists and behaviorists relatively speaking, which is positive. The Director shared school counselors are at recess trying to support kids however they can. She also noted that there is a need to look at how stressed-out staff are and to ensure they have the resources to

support kids. There were spikes in disciplinary referrals at RJ Grey and ABRHS, but those have tapered off a bit.

The SEPAC asked what the organization can do to help. Discussion points: 1) Information gathering regarding what the district is currently doing; 2) Analyzing the proposed budget and how the SEPAC can add value to that process; 3) Making concrete recommendations. Staffing and training are key. The Multi-Tiered System of Support steering committee will be looking at social emotional support, not just academics.

A question was posed about in-person volunteers in the schools and whether visitor restrictions are DESE-driven or district-driven. Other than COVID restrictions, all policies are district-driven regarding volunteers. Discussion ensued around equity with the SEPAC urging that all schools implement volunteer policies equally.

What can the SEPAC do to close the knowledge gap between what's happening at the schools vs. community perception and understanding? Do caregivers know social emotional learning is currently the biggest focus? Ideas include:

- 1) Reinstate parent volunteers (will also help ease the burden given staffing shortages)
- 2) Build in feedback on social emotional initiatives with parent/teacher conferences
- 3) Consolidating mental health resources given difficulty accessing support outside of school (comprehensive resources exist at abschools.org)

The kindergarten transition letter just went out to Early Childhood families. The SEPAC can follow up. Given concern regarding open enrollment and disability-related equity concerns, how is information shared?

School Committee member and liaison to the SEPAC Ben Bloomenthal introduced himself and relayed he looks forward to collaborating with the SEPAC.

#### C. Current District Administrative Searches

The SEPAC has not been asked to participate in the principal searches for Gates and Conant, which is not consistent with precedent. The SEPAC has requested the names of search committee members and will endeavor to have meaningful disability-focused participation. A seat at the table is critical given institutional knowledge. The SEPAC will continue to focus on relationship building.

#### D. CASE Collaborative Capital Plan & Proposed Recreation Spaces at Colebrook

The above referenced capital improvement plan and proposed ADA-compliant playground is up for approval at the School Committee as ABRSD is a CASE member district. Co-Chair Lafferty asked if anyone had recommendations for new accessible playgrounds in Acton. North Acton and West Acton need either a new playground or upgrades to existing facilities. Merriam is considered the most

accessible playground in the district. As the town has replaced playgrounds, accessibility has been a priority/focus. ARPA funds are designated for Acton Recreation. Continued advocacy is key.

#### E. Updates on SEPAC Priorities for 2021-2022

##### 1. Relationship Building – DEI, ELPAC, Families, District, Other SEPACs

The SEPAC appreciates the Director’s time to get to know the SEPAC and the community. The SEPAC must cultivate relationships—multiple people need to be working across platforms. The SEPAC sits on the joint PTO and will reach out to PTOs to encourage collaboration. The SEPAC should also connect with the ELPAC. Education regarding the mission and goals of the SEPAC will be a focus. A workshop on the continuum of student support is forthcoming. SEPAC business meetings are back on the district calendar. Staff recognition forms are being received. The Connections program had numerous accolades. The SEPAC will request information be shared at the kindergarten orientation. Social events, surveys, collaborating with the Acton-Boxborough Family Network, and exploring other networking opportunities are ongoing.

##### 2. Workshops

- “Supporting Students” 12/8/21 Recording & Slides Available

- Basic Rights in Special Education and Anti-Bullying Presentations

Suggestions for speakers are encouraged as there is money in the 501c(3) budget. Massachusetts Advocates for Children has an anti-bullying workshop with strategies to proactively address harassment and teasing, not just put the onus on the targeted child. There is a free online support group for siblings of children with behavioral disabilities being offered from UMass Medical.

#### IV. New Business

There was no new business.

#### V. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 8:48 p.m.

#### VI. Next Meeting

Wednesday, January 12, 2022, at 7:30 p.m. Virtual Meeting Over Zoom

*Respectfully submitted by Erica Abbruzzese, Secretary*