



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council Business Meeting

MEETING MINUTES – APRIL 11, 2012

I. Call to Order

Nancy Sherburne called the meeting to order at 7:40 pm. The following Board members attended the meeting: Bill Guthlein, Nancy Sherburne and Caroline Jarvis. Also in attendance was School Committee member Paul Murphy, Pupil Services Liaison Julie Towell as well as another AB SpEd PAC member.

II. Approval of Minutes

The January 20, 2012 meeting minutes were reviewed. A motion was made to approve the minutes as written. The meeting minutes were voted on and approved unanimously as written.

III. Organizational/Business Issues

- A. PAC Secretary Position Open – Nancy shared that she had solicited volunteers to fill this open position via the PAC electronic distribution list. Melinda Palmer volunteered to share this position with another individual. We will continue to look for a second individual to share the secretarial duties with her. Nancy asked if anyone else would like to volunteer for the Secretary position. There were no additional names offered. A motion was made to elect Melinda Palmer as a Secretary of the organization. Melinda Palmer was elected by unanimous vote to fill the vacant Secretary position.
- B. Parent Bullying Prevention Sessions in April – Liza Huber conducted two bullying prevention sessions yesterday and today to educate special education parents on the bullying prevention interventions that the district has implemented since adopting its new Bullying Prevention and Intervention Policy. In her presentation Liza shared that the district is now seeing a spike in the reporting of bullying incidents from students and parents, which was predicted by bullying experts and is considered a good sign in that students and family are feeling more comfortable reporting issues of concern. Liza shared that all staff in the district working with kids have received training regarding bullying prevention, including bus drivers, cafeteria workers, recess monitors, etc. Those parents who attended one of Pupil Services bullying prevention sessions felt the presentation was very informative. However, concerns were voiced that information regarding the district's implementation of bullying prevention interventions doesn't seem to be getting home to parents in the district. It was suggested that Liza consider offering another parent information

session that was open to all parents in the school district in a larger venue such as the HS auditorium.

- C. Pilot Special Education Summer Program – Pupil Services has designed a pilot summer program in coordination with Community Education that will principally serve students on the Autism Spectrum who have social skills goals in their IEPs. The SpEd PAC has been lobbying the district to enhance access to before and after school and summer programming for students on the Spectrum since the issue was raised in our 2008 Parent Survey. Specifically related to the summer program, parents were unhappy that they felt they had to choose between their children’s academic needs and social skills needs since Acton’s Extended Year program only offered academic support in a substantially separate environment without any typical peers.

This year the pilot summer/extended school year program will serve students entering 4th – 7th grade. The pilot program will add three weeks of fully integrated afternoon programming from 1:00-4:00 pm, 5 days a week through the Acton Escapades program. The afternoon program will provide an opportunity for supported social skill development with typical peers. This will be in addition to the existing morning academic program and include an adult facilitated lunch bunch to bridge the two programs. This year the pilot program will include approximately 12 students broken into 3 groups of 4 – each supported by a special education assistant. Each group of students will participate in 3 different activities based on the available course offerings during the specific 3 weeks of the pilot program. Examples of classes include Fresh i movie making, video game design, clay animation, drama, cooking, the world of comics, etc. There will be a nominal fee for each student to help defray the cost of the program (\$50/week or \$125/3 weeks vs. \$165/week); however, ability to pay will not prevent a child from being able to attend the summer program. Folks felt this was a wonderful first step for the district. The hope is that this pilot program will be expanded next year to include more children with identified social skills needs for the full 6-week summer program.

- D. Enhanced Community Offerings for Special Education Students – Nancy shared that as a result of an online discussion on the Parent_2_Parent email forum a small group of parents expressed interest in volunteering their time to work with Acton Recreation to enhance the community offerings accessible in town to special education students. Those parents include Cathy Fochtman, Director of Acton Recreation, Srabani Banerjee, Bonnie Thompson and Nancy Sherburne. Nancy will set up a meeting to kick off this effort.

- E. Presentation to School Committee and Cost Benefit Analysis of the High School Connections Program – Nancy shared that she and Bill had made a presentation to the School Committee on March 22, 2012 regarding the financial analysis they conducted related to establishing a Connections program at the high school. The proposed Connections IV program would complete the continuum of services the district currently provides Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8 for students on the Autism Spectrum. This program is an educational model in which services are delivered to students through specialized programming and support. The program is designed to prepare students for successful post secondary education, employment and independent living. Pupil Services has identified 22 students at the high school who would benefit directly from this program. Right now 2-3 students per year with an Autism Spectrum diagnosis who could be served in district go out-of-district because we are unable to meet their needs through the current educational model. These students are successfully educated in district during their junior high school years through the Connections program, so with appropriate supports at the high school should be able to succeed there as well. The financial analysis Nancy and Bill conducted with the numbers provided by Liza Huber shows a potential cost savings to the district of more than \$900,000.00 over the next four years. The cost savings come from reduced out-of-district tuition and transportation costs over that time, which far exceed the staffing costs of the Connections IV program. For more detailed information go to the PAC website (www.abspedpac.org) to view the Connections IV Cost Benefit Analysis and recent presentation to the School Committee.

Bill raised the question of how this program failed to make it into the FY '13 budget this year. It seemed like such a financial no brainer for the district. Those present discussed the situation in an effort to better understand what happened so that future endeavors to put forward cost effective programming would have a greater chance of success gaining School Committee and Administration approval/support. It was observed that the School Committee and Administration have a finite resource of brain power, which was occupied in large part by the Lower Fields project this year. It was also noted that the late presentation of supporting data for Connections met with political complications at the Administrative level. Moving forward, the PAC would like to get the numbers in the Cost Benefit Analysis vetted by the School Committee and Administration so that we can hit the ground running in the fall as we enter the next budget cycle. At the School Committee meeting March 22nd Mike Coppolino asked Dr. Mills to have Don Aicardi vet the numbers. Paul Murphy will follow up with Mike to see if he has heard from Don Aicardi or Dr. Mills regarding the validity of the Cost Benefit Analysis numbers. Paul offered to help with this issue any way that he could in the future.

- F. Summary of School Committee & Administration Meetings – Participants felt the main issue at this juncture was the Connections IV Program, which had already been discussed.
- G. PAC Survey Report – The 2011 AB SpEd PAC Parent/Guardian Survey Report has been published electronically and can be found on the PAC website at www.abspedpac.org. Bill talked about how difficult it is to use Constant Contact for the survey because it doesn't cut/sort the data for you at all. All analysis requires manual computation. The suggestion was made that perhaps we should try Survey Monkey or another survey tool the next time we conduct one.
- H. MCAS Report Status – Bill is currently separating the single draft MCAS report into two separate reports – one for APS and one for ABRSD so that the information can be more easily shared with the Administration and individual School Committees.

IV. New Business

- A. Elimination of Half Team at the Junior High School – A parent shared that her son had come home from R. J. Grey with the news that one of his teachers told him he was the last class of students who would be on the Seven Orange half team. Apparently the half team was being eliminated to create a second Academic Support Center at the Junior High. This was news to everyone in the room. It was noted that there hadn't been any public discussion of this by the School Committee or Administration during the budget process. To the best of everyone's recollections the half team at the Junior High had been included in the approved budget for FY '13. Nancy and Julie Towell said they would investigate this information further. Julie hadn't heard anything about this through Pupil Services. Parents were upset that this news was communicated home through a student and not via any formal communication channel with parents.

V. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 9:25 pm.

Next Meeting: AB SpEd PAC Business Meeting on Wednesday, May 9 2012 at 7:30p.m. in the R.J. Grey Junior High Library.

Respectfully submitted by Nancy Sherburne