



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council Business Meeting

Meeting minutes – May 9, 2012

I. Call to Order

Nancy Sherburne called the meeting to order at 7.40pm. 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, School Committee representative, Xuan Kong, and 3 other SpEd PAC members.

II. Approval of Minutes

The April 11, 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. Organization/Business Issues

- A. Secretary position – Melinda Palmer has already been voted in as Co-Secretary for SpEd PAC. It was agreed to hold off on electing Carolyn Sprague as the other Co-Secretary until the June meeting, which is our Annual Meeting and Election of Officers.
- B. Pilot special education summer program update – Letters have gone out to parents of special education students who have social skills goals in their IEPs, inviting them to a meeting Wednesday May 16th, 7pm at Pupil Services. Summer class options will be discussed and parents will be asked to identify their children's preferences for available summer classes. There will be 3 - 4 different activity choices each week offered through the Acton Escapades program run by Community Ed. Parents will be encouraged to register their children that evening in order to hold a place in their preferred classes.
- C. Input to Superintendent's performance review through May 11th – The state is requiring school districts to implement a new evaluation model for teachers in 2014 that includes student performance criteria. Dr. Mills has volunteered to be the first person in the district to be evaluated using the new evaluation process. Any input to his evaluation must be submitted by Friday May 11th. SpEd PAC will not submit a group evaluation, but encourages individuals to either write, or to contact the School District via their website and follow the link under 'Superintendent'. One SpEd PAC member commented this seemed like it was more time that it was worth. Nancy Sherburne reflected that this was an opportunity to include parent feedback in the process and review student performance, class performance and observations about the school district as a whole.

Also discussed were some new special education spending cuts and restrictions. The level service budget for next year included a \$105,000 **reduction** for special education

assistants in FY'13. Bill Guthlein and Nancy Sherburne were concerned that this cut would be difficult to implement without reducing student services considering student need for classroom assistants is identified in a child's IEP. These reductions will impact students directly so parents should be made aware of them. Nancy Sherburne suggested that the impact of this policy should be tracked, and that the SpEd PAC members should be alerted of this change via e-mail and asked for their feedback. Julie Towell, Pupil Services Liaison, mentioned ESPED, a software system, which currently stores IEP information within the school district. The system is capable of producing a variety of statistical reports but she was uncertain if ESPED could calculate and track IEP identified SpEd assistant hours.

Concern was also raised with regard to the removal of the 7th Grade Half Team at the RJ Grey Junior High for September 2012 and beyond. The Connections program, which is currently attached to the Half Team, will now be moved to a full team as of next school year. The rationale for eliminating the half team was purportedly falling enrollment numbers at the Junior High. In addition, a second academic support center was added at the Junior High school for next year. However, parents voiced concern that the budget included a Half Team for FY'13, which was voted on by taxpayers at town meeting. Children across the board sometimes need the extra attention that a smaller group provides (55 vs. 110 students and 2 vs. 5 teachers). It was reflected in the SpEd PAC meeting that the Half Team was a 'stepping stone' for many children, and not just those children in the Connections program. Parents were concerned that there was no public discussion about the removal of the Half Team even though it had been voted on in town meeting, and wondered if this removal after the fact was legitimate. They also wondered if now more than one special education program would be attached to a single team at the Junior High. Another concern included the possible loss of FTE staff 'teams' as a result of the removal of the Half Team. However, Nancy shared that the teachers from the half team were being reabsorbed into the existing full teams.

Nancy Sherburne also mentioned an internal directive she had learned of that purportedly required all full-time SpEd staff who leave through normal attrition to be replaced by part-time staff to save the cost of benefits. The implications of this policy would mean a potential breakdown of communication between SpEd staff, regular staff and home; increased supervision/evaluation time, and potentially lower caliber job applicants. Nancy said it was her understanding that this directive only applied to SpEd staff not regular education teaching staff.

Discussion continued around how staff for the new academic support center at the Junior High School would be funded. Would SpEd staff who have historically manned the academic support center continue to belong to Pupil Services or be reassigned to the school principle, thus reducing special education staffing further? Finally, parents discussed their disappointment at the lack of funding for the Connections IV program at the High School next year. The hope is that we will be successful at getting funding for it

included in the FY'14 budget. However, in the interim some staff have been reallocated within the High School for next year: a transition specialist and a .2 FTE school psychologist to begin to address some of the unmet needs for this student population. Also the SpEd PAC did a cost analysis for the proposed Connections IV program, which was presented to the regional school committee and administration for which we are awaiting feedback. When asked what parents could do to support the Connections program, it was suggested that they could write letters of support to the school administration expressing their support for the program and explaining why we need Connections IV at the High School.

D. Summary of School Committee and Administration Meetings.

Lower Fields – The project was approved at Acton Town Meeting, but is still waiting for approval by Boxborough at their upcoming Town Meeting.

Closeout of the FY'12 budget and changes to FY'13 budget – There is a \$573,000 surplus expected for the end of this school year that the administration must decide how to use. Some ideas include 1) returning a portion to the regional reserves (E&D), 2) purchasing some additional FY '13 technology in budget priority order (items that didn't make it into the final FY '13 Budget) including 3 computer labs at the high school and 1 at the junior high, or 3) putting additional funds into OPEB (teacher retirement fund). At the state level, the FY'13 budget is now at the House and Senate for approval. Early indications suggest that the House is recommending higher Chapter 70 and Circuit Breaker funding for districts than the Governor's proposal. Still awaiting final figures but the district may look forward to extra state aid next year.

New Junior High Principal – The new principal appointed to RJ Grey Junior High is Andrew Shen, who is currently assistant principal at the same school. Congratulations to Mr. Shen!

State report on MA special education and their findings – Included in the School Committee 'packet' was a report on Massachusetts special education compared to the rest of the nation. Findings included: persistent performance gap between regular and special education students, all MA students score near the top of NAEP compared to students in other states, the greater the level of inclusion a SpEd child has in mainstream schooling the better their MCAS scores, and finally low-income students are over identified for special education and with students of color are less likely to be included in mainstream classes. We will post this report on the SpEd PAC website.

E. SpEd PAC's June presentation to the School Committee will be on June 7th 2012 – We have been invited to talk of our activities this year and our plans for next. The presentation will include SpEd PAC survey feedback and joint SpEd PAC-Pupil Services

recommendations related to the survey findings. We would like to present MCAS results but will need to keep the presentation brief (15 minutes).

- F. Preparation for Annual Meeting and Election of Officers June 13th 2012 – Nancy solicited names of anyone interested in running for office next year and encouraged all those present to reach out to friends to broaden the ‘circle’ of the SpEd PAC community, and encourage others to join us and become more active.

Priorities for next year will include following up on the results of the survey and using the website and email to contact the SpEd PAC community for ideas moving forward. The Acton Recreation Department, and its Director, Cathy Fochtman, are open to working with the PAC to expand SpEd accessible before and after school activities as well as summer/vacation programs. We will continue to pursue that opportunity.

An idea proposed by a parent present at the meeting was to highlight the fact that MCAS growth percentiles for children with special needs are not changing. MCAS scores represent tangible data that we should be using to assess program quality and success. Questions raised were are we closing the gap between regular and SpEd students and are SpEd children achieving their true potential? Bill Guthlein mentioned that Math programs at the Junior High had recently been turned around, proving that it can be done. Conant Elementary also improved its scores recently but the latest MCAS report shows numbers there have dropped again. The MCAS results will be shared as soon as they are available, and SpEd PAC needs to closely monitor the results, particularly for student growth percentiles.

Idea 2: One parent suggested restructuring the K–6 curriculums to reflect more depth and breadth teaching of each topic, spending longer periods of time each subject. It was shared that the curriculum is currently being realigned to match the State curriculum frameworks, which have been revised for all subjects in Grades K–12.

Idea 3: A parent suggested the need to increase the incorporation of recommendations from external/independent education evaluation reports into children’s IEPs – a need for better integration of district and private evaluations.

Idea 4: Another suggestion was to highlight the plight of the 7th Grade Half Team, and how parents reported that the Half Team was surprisingly not offered during a recent 7th Grade tour for prospective parents. Parents feel there will be repercussions in individual students’ education across the board as a result, not just to those with special needs.

IV. New Business

- A. Religious holidays – Bill Guthlein raised the issue of whether or not the school should observe religious holidays, which the school committee is currently debating. He said Dr. Mills is concerned that if the school district decides to not observe religious holidays then many teachers will be out for those religious holidays, and the district will have to rely on substitute teachers. Bill Guthlein argued that with regard to student outcomes many students regard substitutes as a ‘day off school’. Bill also mentioned there are studies to support this. Nancy Sherburne mentioned that substitutes would not know the IEP accommodations needed for individual students either. However, it was noted that Boxborough made the decision 4 – 5 yrs. ago to eliminate the observance of religious holidays in their school calendar, and that substitutes have not become an issue there. Many other school districts in Massachusetts have made the same change. Nancy felt that the current school calendar only reflects holidays for 2 major religions, while our community encompasses many other religions as well. On principle she would prefer that the district not observe religious holidays at all. A suggestion was made that maybe we should look at how many other districts have changed their policy and what the repercussions have been in those districts.
- B. A parent present at the meeting commented on the ½ days on Thursdays being ‘a waste of time’ for her family and very difficult in terms of childcare. Someone suggested that Thursday afternoons are supposedly earmarked for staff development, but are not typically used for this. What is the purpose of having a half-day on Thursdays, and should the district re-evaluate this policy?

V. Adjournment.

The meeting was adjourned at 9.30pm.

VI. Next Meeting

AB SpEd PAC Annual Meeting & Election of Officers – Wednesday, June 13, 2012 at 7:30pm in the R.J. Grey Junior High Library.

Respectfully submitted by Caroline Jarvis