



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council Business Meeting

Meeting Minutes – Sept.12, 2012

I. Call to Order

Nancy Sherburne called the meeting to order at 7:35 pm. The following Board members attended the meeting: Bill Guthlein, Nancy Sherburne, Caroline Jarvis and Carolyn Sprague. Also in attendance were School Committee member Paul Murphy, Pupil Services Liaison Julie Towell as well as four other AB SpEd PAC members.

II. Approval of Minutes

Review of the June 2012 meeting minutes was postponed until our next scheduled meeting in October.

III. Organization/Business Issues

A. *Ongoing Topics/Initiatives from Last Year*

- *Connections Program at the HS* – Last June we discussed how the SpEd PAC has been lobbying for an extension of the Connections program at the high school level. This would complete the service model for students on the autism spectrum, as it is currently in place pre-K through grade 8. The PAC put together a cost-benefit analysis of the program last year and presented it to the School Committee. For this fiscal year money has been set aside for the addition of a part time counselor (0.2 time) and a transition planning specialist (1.0 time) to begin this program. Nancy Sherburne estimates we're probably heading into a tight budget year for the next fiscal year, but is cautiously optimistic about funding for this program because we have the support of Lisa Huebner and Alixe Callen who have made the Connections program a budget priority this year. Paul Murphy reported encouragingly positive feedback from School Committee members on the Connections program extension.
- *Continuum of SpEd Services K-6 at Douglas & Gates* – The SpEd PAC is hoping the school system will extend SpEd programming to include Grades 4-6 at Douglas this year. Both Gates and Douglas currently only have K-3 programs. We briefly reviewed reasons why it's beneficial for all elementary schools to have K-6 SpEd programs, with key reasons being: distributed inclusion (it's better to have SpEd students evenly distributed across schools instead of concentrated at a few), the convenience to families with siblings, and the difficulties associated with requiring SpEd students to switch schools mid elementary experience.
- *MCAS performance of special education students* – The SpEd PAC is working on an MCAS analysis report for the AB regional school district as well as one for APS. The criteria for judging student progress via MCAS has changed this year as a result of the state receiving a waiver to NCLB. There are now a number of exemptions to performance requirements, which favor school districts whose students perform in the top 90% of the state. The highlight of the regional findings at AB is that there are some serious concerns about the growth and achievement of special education students in English Language Arts. In addition, the aggregate student population is not performing as well as expected in this area.

- *Financial analysis of special education budget growth* – Bill gave an overview of the highlights of his financial analysis of special education spending trends in AB and APS over the last five or six years. He took data from the state website, looking at the number of students on IEP's and budget spending for Special Education, and broke it down. The data does not include students on 504 plans. Contrary to popular thought, there has been no explosion in SpEd spending. The number of students has flattened, and in some ways declined. Overall spending is also declining. The per-student cost is flat to declining, especially at the high school level. He compared the Acton data to three other school districts: Lexington (the gold standard for MCAS and growth percentile scores), Concord-Carlisle, and Westford (known as good but frugal). The percentile growth score is a definite soft area for Acton SpEd students – i.e. the gap between SpEd students and peers is wider in Acton than elsewhere. Our cost per student is usually the lowest of the schools, and growth in spending is lower than in other school districts. In fact, our special education spending is not growing fast enough to keep up with inflation. Bill will share the AB and APS reports with the School Committee tomorrow and he hopes that giving the committee members this information will discourage further erosion of the SpEd budget as we move forward.
- *SMART Goal #2* – Paul Murphy spoke about the district's "SMART Goals." There are five SMART Goals – one each for various educational areas within the Acton and AB school districts. SMART Goal #2 relates to Pupil Services and special education. Last year the benchmarks for improving special education programs and services emphasized reducing costs instead of program improvement. The average number of times cost savings was mentioned for the other four Smart Goals was only 3 times, while for the special education SMART Goal cost savings was mentioned 12 times. Paul found this disturbing and shared his concerns with the School Committee at their offsite summer workshop. He requested that SMART Goal #2 be written similarly to the rest of the goals this year.
- We then discussed why there's a perception that too much money is spent on Special Education. The main reason offered up is a public tension between those who don't know SpEd students and are upset about the tax money being spent on their behalf and those who are intimately aware of the level of actual student need. There was a consensus that public education would be helpful. As would having PAC representatives on each of the school's PTOs, so all parents could become more aware of student realities for this population.

B. *Topics/Speakers for Presentations this Year*

- There followed a discussion of speakers that we are planning on or considering bringing in. Julie Towell reported that the earliest possible date for Jeff Bostick was late spring or early summer given his busy schedule. Nancy advised Julie to book him on whatever date he is available. His topic would be in the area of mental health. Pam Ely is speaking on Oct 17th for a full day, plus an evening reprise of the morning talk. The PAC will cohost the Federation's Basic Rights workshop with Maynard possibly in October (date tbd). Nancy has been trying to get a date with Family Ties for a talk called Let's Get Organized but has thus far been unsuccessful.
- Paul was at a conference where he saw a legal council speak about financial planning topics such as trusts and he thought the topics covered would be of interest to our community. Nancy and others brought up that there are two lawyers in Acton who speak on this subject – David Feakes and Barry Harsip. David Feakes regularly contacts Nancy to see if we'd like him to speak to the PAC about special needs family planning. He presented to the PAC

several years ago. In general it's good to wait a couple of years between talks on the same subject.

- Nancy is looking into an ADHD speaker named Carol Gignoux who has offered to speak on topics related to this disability. She has a particular presentation titled, "Unlocking the Potential in Students with ADHD" that sounds interesting. Someone also mentioned John Rady or Ned Hallowell as potential ADHD speakers in the area. Nancy said she had received some parent feedback that Ned Hallowell's presentations included a bit of a sales pitch, which we try to avoid when looking for speakers.
- Caroline wondered if Kirsten Murphy, advocate for Connor's Law in NH, would be interested in speaking. Her story about bringing Connor's Law to legislation is interesting and could possibly be blended with a more general talk on parent advocacy and/or current political trends in special education legislation.

C. *Priorities for This Year*

- *Enhancement of SpEd accessible after school/summer/vacation activities* – The pilot summer program for social skills practice through existing Community Ed classes ran last summer for three weeks of the summer/extended year program. Julie reported that Pupil Services has received limited parent feedback regarding students' experiences. Bill shared that his family had an extremely positive experience with the new program. Community Ed was very accommodating. Apparently some parents asked for custom changes to the offerings, which couldn't be arranged. Julie reported that Lynne Laramie was pleased with the program although it took a lot of her time to supervise. Scheduling was a challenge and there were fewer participants than expected. We surmise that this may be related to the late invitation to students to participate. Families often set up summer camps/activities for their children as early as January-February. Julie explained that it's hard to finalize the schedule before the end of the year because Community Ed needs to see the enrollment level for the classes before confirming them, and that's not known until just a few weeks before summer classes begin. Other challenges with the program are that we have no control over who offers what classes each year. The recommendation was made that we ask Community Ed to solicit certain teachers participation to support student programming for next summer. It would be ideal if we could present upcoming class offerings at the Merriam Summer Camp Fair.
- *Additional options for exploration* – Other possibilities for enhancing after school options include coordinating classes through Acton Recreation. The Director, Cathy Fochtman has been very open to exploring that opportunity. We also discussed drawing ideas from the successful Sudbury program run by Anna Woods, a specialist in adaptive sports. Parents expressed interest in swimming classes, bowling and martial arts.
- *How to reach and involve more people* – We talked about SpEd PAC outreach possibilities, such as Family Movie night, a Planet Gymnastics event in the winter, open house coffee hour (a more informal gathering for sharing experiences and brainstorming), a parent topic night. Francesca Ricciardi used to lead a group called Parents of Challenging Children, which was a terrific parent support group. She's no longer doing that so maybe the PAC should consider picking up that effort. It would be good to poll the membership for current topics of interest to families. We discussed inviting other PAC's to joint district meetings and events. A suggestion was made that we could do something with the Acton Family Network for children in the 0-5 age range.

- We settled on the idea of trying a SpEd PAC night, which would be a more informal gathering as opposed to a business meeting. The suggestion was made to consider holding it in a community building instead of in one of the schools so it feels less formal. We also discussed the need to share the pros of connecting with more experienced parents as a way of encouraging families of younger children to attend.
- Another suggestion discussed was that we could bring in local resources/speakers such as individuals from the school district to discuss a particular topic. We also discussed having a Willow Book night. There was additional discussion about the normal rise and fall of SpEd PAC's over time as people come and go and the sense of need for the PAC rises and falls. Sometimes PAC's go dormant and need to be rebuilt from scratch. It's important to avoid this if possible so that know-how isn't lost in transition from one group of parents to another.
- A discussion ensued on how to increase the PAC's visibility within the district. It was noted that Pupil Services has been good about including PAC information in their On Team newsletter, which goes to all special education families. However, we need to find ways to increase our visibility in the community on a more regular basis. We talked about a promo sheet or PAC brochure being included with each IEP that goes out to families. Julie clarified that currently it is only being included with 3-year re-evaluation packets. **Action item: Julie will explore the possibility of including a PAC brochure in each IEP that goes out.** The Beacon may be an avenue for promoting meetings in the Calendar section; however, they have become less reliable about publishing meetings as of late. It was also suggested that we explore using the Acton Patch to advertise events. We discussed trying to include blurbs in each school's email communication with parents. However, it takes a lot of effort/manpower to stay on top of the various schools' deadlines for submissions and most schools now require the principal's review and approval of submissions prior to inclusion, which further complicates the process. Some principals are open to including our events and others are not. Alternatively we could simply have someone show up at PTO meetings with brochures that people could take if interested.

IV. **New Business**

No new business was raised.

V. **Open Issues**

Nancy let Julie know that the PAC was interested in discussing the progress and plans the district has in regards to increasing the use of technology in the IEP development and revision process. We haven't heard anything about this effort in some time.

VI. **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 9:05 pm.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Carolyn Sprague