



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council Business Meeting

Meeting Minutes – Nov. 20, 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 as well as 3 other AB SpEd PAC members.

II. Approval of Minutes

The September 2012 meeting minutes were reviewed. A motion was made and seconded to approve the minutes as written. The Sept. 2012 minutes were approved unanimously.

III. Organization/Business Issues

A. Family Movie Night – Sat Nov 17th 2012 – This was an enjoyable event attended by about 50 people. It was felt that the evening's success was largely due to it being cohosted by both the Acton-Boxborough and Maynard SpEd PACs as well as Heidi's outreach to friends and personal contacts. Nancy Sherburne mentioned that Heidi Friedman should be personally thanked for all of her efforts organizing the successful event.

B. Futures Education Review of Special Education Services – Futures Education is a Boston-based private education firm hired by Dr. Mills to review the AB Regional School District to identify cost efficiencies and savings related to special education. The group is looking into the areas of transportation (special and regular education), counseling and psychological services, related services (PT, OT, Speech and Language), and paraprofessional supports. Dr Mills' goal is to find \$150,000 in savings to fund the Connections/Bridges Program for students on the Autistic Spectrum attending the Acton-Boxborough High School. Futures Education usually works for a percentage of the cost savings it identifies; however, Dr. Mills negotiated a set fee in this instance. It is still costing the Acton Boxborough Regional School District a bit of money.

The Acton-Boxborough SpEd PAC has been looking for feedback from other districts regarding their experiences with Futures Education. Some districts expressed concern regarding perceived losses and cuts in services to special education students. Nancy and Bill have chosen to enter into the process with an open mind. Dr. Mills has invited the PAC leaders to participate in meetings with Futures' staff and review the organization's findings. Nancy has read a number

of reports from other Massachusetts' school districts written by Futures Education and suggested the reports are somewhat formulaic.

Some recurring recommendations were setting entrance and exit criteria for special education students. For example, to be considered eligible for special education services Futures routinely recommends that children score at least 1½ standard deviations below the norm to qualify for entrance into special education. This type of arbitrary criterion is worrisome and not supported by the law. Futures reports also recommend that school staff on the IEP team pre meet to discuss and agree on what the district will offer a student prior to the IEP Team meeting, which is counter to the law. The organization also recommends that districts remove all professional and clinical judgment from the decision making process regarding a child's eligibility as well as which services to provide. When Nancy questioned Futures Education staff about how they felt this was in the child's best interests they replied that establishing objective criteria instead of making individual child specific decisions helps the district provide more consistent services for all children. Nancy worried that this approach seemed to remove the 'individual' from Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for students. There was concern that this might not be in the best interests of students and their families.

It was mentioned that the mandate for Futures Education was documented in the Superintendent's SMART Goal #2 titled, "Pupil Services – Program Development and Fiscal Accountability." (Go to Goals & Plans section of the district's website at www.ab.mec.edu and look at the District wide/Curriculum SMART Goals for 2012-3 for more details.) The entire goal seems to focus on contracting with Futures Education to find \$150,000 dollars in special education efficiencies to pay for the Connections/Bridges program at the high school. Again, this is a disappointing goal for the second year in a row. It does not address the evaluation of current programs and services to identify areas of improvement or ways to enhance student learning and educational outcomes. While we appreciate the effort to find a way to fund the much needed Connections program at the high school, the approach seems to be based on a "rob Peter to pay Paul" scenario.

Dr Mills moved forward with bringing Futures Education in to the district because a number of other superintendents told him the company helped their districts save thousands of dollars in special education costs. Some School Committee and Finance Committee members in Acton-Boxborough continue to perceive the special education budget as bloated and push to reduce spending in this area. Dr. Mills hopes this review will identify any areas of potential savings for the district and lay the topic to rest. It's common knowledge that out-of-district placements are more expensive than in-house special education programs like the proposed Connections Program at the High School. It is surprising to SpEd PAC members that the administration and Finance Committee haven't jumped on building the Connections Program given the anticipated

long-term savings to the district. However, it's likely that Dr. Mills didn't feel he'd be able to pass an investment budget to provide for the Connections Program unless he had a recommendation to do so from Futures Education. The goal is to have this outside report prior to the December 2012 Holidays. Dr Mills is ready for tough negotiations with the Finance Committee. However, the Connections Program would be a small upfront investment for a long-term gain. Paul Murphy felt there was some support for the Connections Program on the Finance Committee, which was positive feedback.

As a PAC we will respond publically to the Futures Education report *if* the report recommends the type of controversial changes mentioned above like inappropriate exit and entry criteria for special education, pre -Team staff meetings to determine supports outside of the Team Meeting process or the removal of clinical and professional judgment from decision making – see above for more detail. The AB SpEd PAC asked that Futures Education compare our district's spending to economic and educational peer districts as opposed to state and national averages when looking for cost savings. The PAC also requested that Futures take into account closing the achievement gap between regular education and special education students prior to making cost cutting recommendations. Unfortunately, they told the district it would cost a lot of extra money to do the latter. The SpEd PAC still feels all recommendations should be weighed in regards to their impact on closing the student achievement gap.

C. 2012 SpEd PAC MCAS Analysis – The PAC has significant concerns regarding the 2012 special education English Language Arts performance on MCAS in the AB region. There are new state MCAS criteria and performance goals as a result of the NCLB waiver that Massachusetts was granted last year. Extra credit is granted in certain areas using a complex formula. In the new calculations, which include 4 years worth of data, the most recent year's data is more heavily weighted than earlier years' data. Acton-Boxborough qualified for an exception to its standard achievement goals because student performance was in the top 10% in the State. It is unfortunate that this exception kicks in for districts even when the actual MCAS performance gap between regular and special education students is increasing as it was in some cases this year. By 2017 a new metric called the "proficiency gap" has to be closed by 50% for all "high needs" students including special education students. The proficiency gap referred to is the difference between the high needs group's CPI performance in 2011 and a CPI score of 100 (or proficient). So this new state measure is tracking the progress of special education students against their own 2011 MCAS performance. This metric does not compare special education student performance to regular education student performance as achievement data has in the past. It was observed that the new MCAS performance standards seem to actually remove incentive for high performing school districts to improve special education students' performance as long as the aggregate population can carry the district over a certain performance threshold. The PAC will be issuing an amendment to our 2012 AB MCAS report

that includes a discussion of the new proficiency gap criteria required by the NCLB waiver and clears up any confusion between achievement gap terminology and the new proficiency gap metric, which Nancy and Bill originally understood to be the same thing.

There was a meeting scheduled with APS elementary school principals on Nov. 20th 2012 to discuss APS' 2012 MCAS performance. Deborah Bookis and Liza Huber were also scheduled to attend that meeting. Unfortunately, 2 hours before the meeting Pupil Services communicated that "something had come up" and all five of the elementary principals were no longer available to attend the meeting. Since the meeting had already been postponed over several months Nancy and Bill decided to go ahead and meet with Liza Huber and Deb Bookis to gain whatever insight they could into the APS district's recent MCAS performance. It was pretty clear that the principals didn't want to meet with the AB SpEd PAC to discuss MCAS. Nancy and Bill had hoped to get some insight into current trends from the building principals so they could include that information in their MCAS report to the district. Deborah Bookis and Liza Huber were very accommodating and shared as much information as they could in the absence of the principals. However, many of the questions asked at the meeting could only be answered by the building principals so it was unfortunate they chose not to attend.

Some key areas of concern were:

1. Student Growth Percentiles for special education students have dropped at Douglas in English Language Arts by more than 25 points in Grades 4 – 6 and in Math by more than 30 points. District staff who attended the MCAS meeting were unaware of this sharp decline and unable to offer any insight into the dramatic slide. Deb Bookis was going to contact Douglas and research this issue.
2. Special education students in the 4th Grade across the district have had a 2-year substantial decline in ELA SGP. While the 4th grade MCAS includes open-end writing prompts, which are historically difficult for this population to tackle, the decline is a red flag that deserves to be explored.
3. General volatility in student performance across schools and grades – There is a tendency to have very large changes in MCAS performance at individual schools from year to year. This trend tends to be exaggerated for the special education student population. Conant has had a particular issue in the last couple of years as well as Douglas.

Bill observed that the district's model for addressing issues seems to be a 'fire-fighting' one as opposed to a real proactive drive to keep standards up from year to year. Individual tutoring within schools is probably being done away with as a cost savings measure and MCAS results may reflect this in the special education population across schools.

The APS report will hopefully be issued before the end of November. Deb Bookis shared that he district has reviewed and analyzed student English Language Arts performance to identify specific areas of weaknesses in instruction. Baby steps in improvement are happening. Formative tests are now being used more frequently across the grades (tests administered throughout the school year to improve immediate instruction). Deb Bookis confirmed that the results of these formative tests have directly correlated to student MCAS performance. The elementary school principals had suggested to the School Committee last year that they expected formative testing to demonstrate that their students were mastering instruction contrary to MCAS performance. In fact, formative testing is identifying the same weaknesses revealed by MCAS student performance.

D. School Committee & Administrative Meeting Summary – We are to expect a tight fiscal budget process this year. Dr Mills is concerned he will not be able to get investment budgets approved this year. The SpEd PAC discussed the proposed K-12 regionalization of the school district - both the advantages and disadvantages. Forums have already begun to meet to discuss this with members of the community. Paul Murphy, School Committee member, offered to schedule a regionalization forum for SpEd PAC families. The PAC didn't feel that was necessary and agreed to encourage PAC members to attend the existing forums that have already being slated.

Paul Murphy gave us feedback from the Regionalization Subcommittee so far:

- Boxborough has smaller caseloads in special education than Acton. Their case oads will likely increase if we regionalize.
- Transportation costs will be reimbursed by the state IF Acton and Boxborough regionalize saving 1000s of dollars. The state would reimburse \$50 per new child moving into the new regional school district. (i.e. ALL elementary school children from all 6 schools including Blanchard).
- What would a regional school district look like? Boxborough wants more voting members on the new School Committee. How do we split the savings? 65/35. 75% of committee from Acton and 25% from Boxborough. Each Acton School Committee vote would be multiplied by 2.5 to represent the larger Acton population. It sounded to some PAC members like Boxborough was asking to have greater voting representation than the town's population would warrant.
- Efficiency of admin staff? Bringing all the teachers into one district Boxborough teachers could not be paid anything less than they currently do. Curriculum will now be the same within all the elementary schools in the new district.

- All the issues are posted on the School Committee website under “Acton Boxborough Regionalization Study Committee” and SpEd PAC families are encouraged to explore this web page more.
- May need to mobilize parents to push for investment budget items
- Paul invited PAC feedback regarding the proposed regionalization plan for K-12

IV. New Business

- **Summer Programming** – One SpEd PAC member asked about the summer program and Nancy Sherburne explained that it was a pilot program run this past summer for a small group of students with social skills goals in their IEPs. The hope is to expand this program in coming years to include more students across more grades. Nancy and Bill suggested families of special education children who were interested in having their child participate should ask for their child to be included in the summer program during their next IEP meeting and summer education planning for 2013.
- **Incorporation of Outside Evaluator’s Recommendations** – Another member mentioned that some of the recommendations by outside specialists seem to be disregarded in IEP meetings. The AB SpEd PAC has encouraged the district to support the findings from outside testing rather than doing redundant testing in district. The SpEd PAC has come up with recommendations to help parents maximum the chance of getting outside recommendations included in their child’s IEP. One such recommendation is to ask private specialists to come into the district to observe the child in the school environment and incorporate those findings in their report. The law says the school district must consider the reports and recommendations from outside professionals just as they would in-district reports and recommendations. However, parents felt the district only seems to think it needs to listen to outside recommendations, not act on them. One SpEd Pac member said there have been a number of parents from the Acton Preschool who have found that recommendations by specialists have routinely been rejected. Another SpEd PAC recommendation is to keep the same specialist over a number of years so they in the long run will have more knowledge about your child over time than teaching staff who only work with a child for one year. Paul Murphy also suggested that getting a good advocate to work alongside the parent may also improve a family’s case. The advocate can be the ‘bad guy’ and the parent can still hold on to a good relationship with the district.

V. Open Issues

A. Concerns about the process for combining outside specialists' recommendations with district evaluations/recommendations and appropriately incorporating those recommendations into the IEP.

B. Mandatory special education training/professional development for regular and special education staff – hiring dual certified staff.

C. Enhanced summer school and after school/extracurricular programming.

D. Increased use of technology in IEP development/revision process – other school districts use laptops to churn out IEP – the agreements in the meeting are captured in the moment instead of a time lapse and potential details missing from the IEP. Parents may have to partially reject the IEP so TEAM may correct the original meeting decisions. SpEd PAC went with AB district to see how another district did this a couple of years ago. It was tried in a pilot scheme but it was found that a lot of teachers were tech-phobic. The whole point of the TEAM meeting is that the discussion is properly recorded in the moment and the essence is not lost. It would save a lot of time and effort if done this way.

VI. Adjournment.

There was a motion to close the meeting. The motion was seconded and unanimously agreed on. The meeting ended at 9.50pm.

VII. Next Meeting Dec. 12th, 2012 at 7:30 pm in the R. J. Grey JH Library

All AB SpEd PAC 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.abspedpac.org for current information regarding upcoming events.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Caroline Jarvis 1/7/13