



Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council

Business Meeting

January 8, 2014

- I. Call to Order

Nancy Sherburne called the meeting to order at 7:35 pm. The following AB SpEd PAC Board members attended the meeting: Nancy Sherburne, Bill Guthlein, Carolyn Sprague, Paul Murphy and Julie Towell. Four other members also attended the meeting.
- II. Approval of Minutes

Review and approve minutes – The meeting minutes for November 2013 and January 2014 will be considered at the next meeting.
- III. Organizational/Business Issues
 - A. Upcoming Presentations – The following presentations will be hosted by the AB SpEd PAC and/or surrounding communities in the coming months.
 - On Jan. 16, 2014 Sudbury will be hosting a talk by Aimee Yermish entitled “Bright but baffling: Giftedness, Learning Disabilities or Multiple Exceptionalities – Helping Your Child Develop Executive Function.” This talk looks like it will have useful information for both older and younger children.
 - On February 3rd the Acton SpEd PAC is co-hosting a talk in Maynard by the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) entitled “Basics Rights Workshop.”
 - On March 19th Dr. Nadine Gaab will present “The Typical and Atypical Dyslexic and ADHD Brain and Reading.”
 - In April/May we’re hoping to bring Dr. Jeff Bostic in to speak on mental health related issues. Nancy and Julie will coordinate possible presentation times with Dr. Bostic to lock in a date for the spring.
 - B. Superintendent Search Update – Following the retirement announcement of Dr. Mills in September 2013, the School Committee commenced a search for a new district leader. The process involved soliciting as many qualified candidates as possible, narrowing the list of candidates to ten individuals for interview, Search Committee selection of the final 3-4 candidates and then final Superintendent selection by the full School Committee. Bill Guthlein brought an announcement from the Search Committee that included the finalists’ interview schedule and public, community forums. He reported that the selected finalists are a quality group of candidates. Each finalist will be invited to attend a day of meetings and forums in the AB School District. Those tentative dates are set for January 16, January 21, January 22, and January 23. Parents and other community members are invited to attend the public forums to meet the candidates and ask questions directly of the finalists. Parents and

community members who attend these forums will be asked to fill out a feedback form for each candidate to provide the School Committee with direct feedback from the community. These public forums will be held from 7:00 to 8:00 pm in the R. J. Grey Junior High School library on the day of each interview.

- C. Budget Priorities Update – Nancy Sherburne and others reported on items currently included in the fiscal year 2015 budget that will be considered by the School Committee and voted on. The following special education FTE equivalents are currently in the FY '15 proposed budget:
- 1.0 FTE Special Education Coordinator (Grades 6-8) to ease the work loads of the Elementary Special Ed. Coor. (K-6) and Secondary Special Ed. Coor. (7-12) as a result of increased needs presented by regionalization (additional elementary school) and increasing mental health issues for students at the high school.
 - 0.6 FTE Psychologist at Merriam and McCarthy-Towne schools
 - 0.5 FTE Psychologist at ABRHS
 - 0.4 FTE Special Education Teacher at Merriam due to increased number of students being served in that program.
 - 0.4 FTE Speech/Language Chairperson

See budget slide number 17 in the “Superintendent’s Introduction” presented in the Feb. 1, 2014 School Committee Packet located on the school’s website at: <http://ab.mec.edu/about/packets13-14/02-01-14-DrMills-intro.pdf>

Nancy shared concerns that this budget doesn’t include funding to complete the K-6 continuum of specialized services at Douglas and Gates, which currently only provide K-3 support for students receiving specialized SpEd services. Last year Liza Huber reallocated a .4FTE at Gates to try to begin to address this issue in some way; however, that program needs to be built out and no such efforts have been made at Douglas yet. Students are still being asked to change schools mid-elementary experience and/or are crashing miserably when the appropriate supports are not available for them to continue at their current elementary school. Nancy worked with two families this year – one at Gates and one at Douglas, whose children spiraled downward to the point where they each required an out-of-district placement. The experience was deeply destructive to the children as well as the families.

The Finance Committee is pushing for a decrease in the proposed FY15 budget because of projected decreases in student enrollment and a desire to return monies to taxpayers whenever possible. Acton has experienced only a modest decrease in class sizes so far; however, Boxborough has experienced a much more dramatic decline. The Finance Committee is focused on not increasing staff numbers due to concerns regarding budget sustainability, consequently hiring staff is a hard sell. Nancy suggests there are a variety of legitimate reasons why the School Committee could

push back if they chose – chief among them the high student to staff ratios in the district; increasing numbers of more significantly impacted students, high caseloads of special educators, and arbitrary paring down of special education staff/assistants over the last five years. Carolyn brought up the independent consultant’s special ed. efficiency report done by Futures, Inc., which confirmed that Acton maintains a lean and efficient Special Education operation – leaner in some areas than even they would recommend as a cost-cutting agency, e.g., student to assistant ratios.

Paul Murphy also shared information regarding a recent School Committee vote on class sizes that ended in a tied vote. He allowed as how he voted for one option in the meeting, but had since reconsidered that view. The issue will come back up before the School Committee in the future. The discussion regarding class size arose as the result of merging School Committee policies due to regionalizing K-12. Nancy shared that she understood from Curt Bates that the Boxborough class size recommendations were based on current research and best practices. They have smaller fourth grade class sizes than Acton because it is a critical year developmentally as well as a year in which academic demands increase significantly for students. Nancy strongly supports the School Committee using academic research as the primary criteria for setting district educational policy as opposed to bottom line financial cost, which some town boards and school administrators encourage. She believes funding and budget issues should be addressed during the budget process not when establishing educational policy for the district. Paul hopes that when considering budget priorities the School Committee will support redressing any overly aggressive cuts made to special education over the past five years. He will request a copy of the final Futures report from the administration for further review.

- D. AB SpEd PAC Regionalization Update – Nancy has received a copy of the Boxborough SpEd PAC’s By-Laws for merging with AB’s By-Laws. She’ll see if she can bring a proposed revision to the By-Laws to our next business meeting. Also, as a reminder on Saturday, January 25th, beginning at 9:00 am in the R. J. Grey Junior High Library, the School Committee will hold their public interviews of the three Superintendent finalists. The School Committee plans to take a vote to recommend one candidate as our next Superintendent in the afternoon after committee deliberations.

IV. New Business

There was a discussion about the inability of special education students to get the supports they need to successfully participate in honors classes. One parent was particularly frustrated with obtaining support services for a student in honors math at the high school and the resistance they encountered from the classroom teacher regarding reasonable requests for their child. Other parents shared the same types of experiences/concerns.

- V. Adjournment – the meeting adjourned at 9:20 pm.
- VI. Next Meeting – Feb. 12, 2014 at 7:30 pm in the R. J. Grey Library.

Respectfully submitted by Carolyn Sprague, Secretary