



OnTeam

February /March 2009

Dear Parent/Guardian,

As Director of Pupil Services, one of my responsibilities entails being an integral part of our District's budgetary planning, specifically, presenting the Pupil Services budget for FY10 with a special emphasis on Special Education, from Pre-Kindergarten to the age of 22. Everyone has a responsibility and holds a piece to build this school house of services for our students: the Town, the Finance Committee, the School Committee, the schools, and the home. The more we think with our above partners, the more we will be able to build and maintain these services for all students, giving them the best options for their academic and social growth.

As explained in previous years, the majority of our students receiving special education services are supported within in-district programs, PK-22. Most students attend regular education classes with additional specialized support: academic support and instruction, speech and language services, occupational and/or physical therapy, mobility and/or vision services, and counseling/psychological services. For some ~ a preschooler, an older elementary child or adolescent ~ a more specialized in-district program is needed.

While we work to meet the majority of our students' needs in-district, there are specific factors that present challenges to some of our students. In these situations, special education Teams must consider: child and adolescent development, the level of severity with regard to behavior and general safety, emotional fragility, medical care, along with educational needs. Consequently, there are identified students who more likely fit the criteria for an out-of-district program with highly specialized services, in an environment that can meet their behavioral and social needs.

Tuitions for private placements, including programs within our CASE Collaborative, average from \$35,000 to \$116,000. Residential placements can range from \$135,000 to \$250,000. On average, tuitions increase approximately 3.3% annually. Although there is always justification, the reality is an increase to the cost of special education and a fiscal impact for our towns.

Despite the harsh realities of out-of-district costs, in-district program design and development have positively impacted our budget. Students who might otherwise have been placed out-of-district are succeeding in newly established or realigned programs at both the elementary and secondary levels. With thoughtful planning, students are thriving in their home school environment. We have been able to support our families and students with services that are targeted to academic and social success, but in this regard I must commend all of our parents/guardians for significant progress in working with our schools; openly sharing your concerns, asking questions, and offering us points for

consideration. Consequently, our school/home partnership has been enhanced, ideas are encouraged and trust has been generated.

The complexity of our students' needs has already been established and we have discussed the benefits of providing comprehensive early education programs as well. We have wonderful programs within our Concord Area Special Education (CASE) Collaborative that meet the needs of many of our students. And, when appropriate, we look to bring students back to their home communities. This is an exciting time for students and families as they transition back into our public schools.

Our continued commitment is to include students in in-district placements. Keeping our students in-district, connected to their home community, is still least restrictive and the most cost effective approach. But in order to continue to provide the exemplary special education programs and services that we have today, we must ensure educational continuity. This means:

- Transitional planning among out of district schools, our school district and home
- Curriculum alignment among out of district schools and our school district
- Focused, intentional and creative educational programming
- Support for families and students at home
- Frequent meetings and contact to ensure academic and social success

The Pupil Services Leadership team continues to study our in-district programs as a system, making sure our programs offer a continuum of services that are cost effective and ensure educational progress. Moreover, we are committed to study, target, and develop programs for specific disabilities, and to work collaboratively with our CASE Collaborative on program development and services.

In conclusion, we are all aware that this is an unusually difficult time economically. The Pupil Services Department, with your support and involvement, will continue to provide quality services for our children with determination, commitment, and a sense of practicality. Our action plans and goals, merged into the district goals, have emphasized using funds creatively, evaluating programs and services more comprehensively, and realigning programs as needed to continue to meet the ever changing world of Special Education. With these fiscal challenges, and they are there, we will continue to scrutinize every program, realign them, while offering children the best programs possible.

While the School Committee has recommended a budget for FY10, our District's revenue picture is still not solidified. Our town meeting is coming up and it's important for all of us, as child advocates, to know that we have built our current budget around several optimistic assumptions by our anticipation and receipt of Federal stimulus monies (American Recovery and Reinvestment Act [ARRA] of 2009) specific to the IDEA Special Education Grant, and level funding of Chapter 70 monies (educational monies allocated for schools).

Specifically, the Massachusetts Recovery Plan will help to stabilize our economic future by adding \$280 million dollars in Federal Education Recovery Funds for Special Education costs, care and support and \$10 million dollars for preschool special education services. Schools will receive this one-time infusion of money distributed through grants. The first distribution will arrive later this

spring and in the fall, we will receive similar to but less than the first distribution. These monies will support us during FY10 and FY11. Although the rules and regulations for use of these funds are complex, we will be exploring some of the strategic efforts mentioned in the guidelines as they are complementary to the Pupil Services Action Plan: improvement in teaching (career development), professional development (aligning instruction and goals for academic achievement), purchase of materials and curriculum resources including technology, exploring opportunities with neighboring districts around data assessment and programs, partnering with other school districts, colleges and universities for training, internships, etc.

The above stimulus news is a wonderful relief but our programmatic and fiscal responsibility never ends. We must be always willing and able to think differently, plan for the unexpected in the event any of the anticipated funds are altered or for any reason other monies are reduced. In that case, our school district would be forced to reevaluate its assumptions before it concludes its FY 10 budget process. The School Committee has worked endless hours on behalf of our children. Your support at Town Meeting is essential and I hope to see you there on April 6th, 2009.

Sincerely,

Liza Huber

Director of Pupil Services