



February/March 2011

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I want to begin by thanking our families who support our schools – by volunteering, by fundraising, by partnering. Crafting our dollars to create, maintain and sustain our educational programs for our students with special needs is a daunting task and an awesome responsibility. As your advocate, I cannot do it alone. It takes teamwork and your on-going support; I am ever grateful.

This OnTeam issue is my attempt to give each parent a transparent view of the budget as presented to the school committee. First and foremost, Pupil Services represents you and your children in developing the best programs for them where they will succeed and, because of this success in school, will have better future options. Second, in this economic downturn, we must look at every dollar and connect it to a program which ultimately is connected to your child. That said, we must look broader as we merge these two points, programs and costs. We are obliged by regulation to provide services in the least restrictive setting, meaning the classroom, and our vision is consistent with that theory. We want your children to be self-sufficient, competitive with the outside world, feel good about their accomplishments and themselves, and contribute to society. Each student is important to us and can make a difference in this society. In order to reach that goal, we want children to learn in the regular education classes with support as the best environment to reach that goal. For some, more support is needed and we have developed programs accordingly. But, if we keep our students segregated until graduation or for a great deal of their education, both family and school have failed as children/students will not be prepared for the outside world.

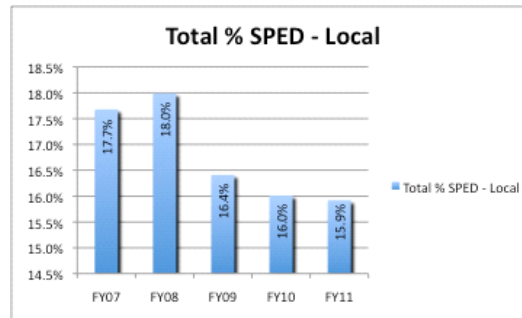
This vision is an important one for each child's self-sufficiency. We are determined to make sure that every child learns solid skills that will be the pre-requisite to higher learning of tasks and consequently, have ample opportunity to stretch thinking and exercise his/her knowledge (academic, social, behavioral). This means providing programs and supporting regular education (inclusion) and shifting more support to that endeavor. But, we are squeezed by the budget process, similar to any household. We think, we ask advice (from parents), we reorganize, re-align, and develop programs. It's the same kind of thinking you do to maintain the quality of your household during these critically tough financial times. Our efforts are tireless in reducing high cost programs (out-of district) when the student is ready for more integration and the full development of self-sufficiency. As students learn, develop more skills, apply these skills, we want them to become more responsible for learning and decisions throughout life.

With these aforementioned statements, I presented to the school committee, my view on how we get there.....

Our goal in this budgetary process is meeting the budget guidelines for survival/sustainability and at the same time providing an exemplary education. Both parents and schools know that the goal is high achievement for every child – not mediocrity. Our school and finance committees, school district staff and administrators work endless hours balancing these mutual goals of the school and home community and we are united in this process. Our goal in this budgetary process is to meet budget guidelines while continuing to provide an exemplary education.

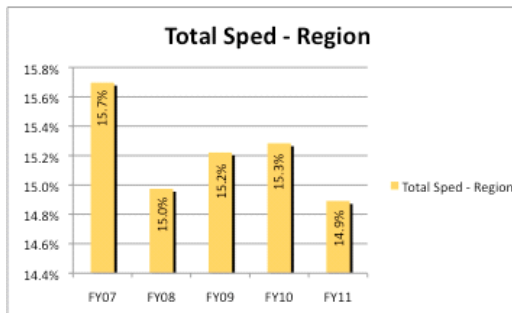
Enrollment Data - APS

	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11
Total Students	2602	2585	2559	2623	2563
Total SPED	460	465	420	420	408
Total In-District SPED	436	438	396	397	385
Total OOD	24	27	24	23	23
Total % SPED	17.7	18.0	16.4	16.0	15.9



Enrollment Data - ABRHS

	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11
Total Students	2956	2925	3022	2990	2948
Total SPED	464	438	460	457	439
Total In-District SPED	396	367	395	398	384
Total OOD	68	71	65	59	55
Total % SPED	15.7	15.0	15.2	15.3	14.9



As always, since special education is governed by regulatory requirements, change cannot happen immediately. Our initial steps centered around establishing a close school-home partnership, and ensuring open dialogue between parent/guardian and the school. Once established, we built on this positive tone and retrained our child study teams for better efficacy and efficiency, collaborated with our building principals so that all students have equal opportunity to learn, and implemented our action plans from the Special Education Fiscal Drivers Task Force, December 2008.

Strategies and interventions paid off as you will see the decrease in our Special Education numbers post interventions: 17.7% in FY08 to 15.9% in FY11 and 15.7% in FY07 to 14.9% in FY11. But, the real success was observing our regular education teachers supporting our students in their classes.

While our trends indicate that we are on solid footing, I am of the opinion that to radically change these percentages is to continue our efforts to improve individualized learning in regular education. Individualized coaching and support for at-risk students is an essential element of reducing referrals for special education and this is why I view the regular education initiatives of math and literacy coaches and/or math assistants for our most at-risk students as essential as well as the funding of professional development, and instructional supports that will improve individualized learning in regular education. Specifically, I envision that these coaches and/or assistants would help with skill development, reinforcement, and strategy building that lead to the success of our students who struggle in these areas. We must not only reach our special education students but those who remain on the risk continuum – without intervention these students may become Special Education eligible.

When I stepped into my new position in July 2006, the percentages in special education seemed excessively high and the slides above show a positive decline through child centered approaches and preventative work.

Careful coordination and collaboration among the private day, pupil services, and the individual elementary schools are a high priority. At Acton Public Schools, there has been a 23% reduction in private day out-of-district placements. This decrease is directly due to our initiatives of identifying students and carefully re-aligning resources at the elementary level to incorporate these students under the strong leadership of building principals and the Pupil Services leadership team. This initiative gave and will continue to foster opportunities for students to learn in their own community (school).

Over the last two fiscal years, we have been able to reduce our need for private day placements by close to 8% by returning students to our specialized programs at the region. That said, in order to give every student the maximum opportunity to achieve, we must have continuity of program to make transitions smooth and curriculum seamless, while at the same time reducing costs by planning ahead, monitoring growth, and measuring outcomes. Our goal? Meet our legal requirement to include students in in-district programs, establish programs that are seamless, move towards less restrictive and costly settings, and reduce costs by efficient models in program development. When a student returns to an in-district program and both student and parent guardian are happy with placement because the student is learning in the home community, we know we passed that litmus test! That's the real test.

Reducing costs in the out-of-district placements is not an exercise of simply reducing numbers per se. Rather, it is a several year attempt in working with families and students about their children's academic, behavioral and social needs behind the scenes, and the development of programs in our schools that can meet those needs. This is our legal mandate, namely, to include students in the least restrictive settings and I thank my Pupil Services leadership team for their tireless effort, the teachers for implementing the standards for inclusive education and the parents/guardians who support this integration. But, both the letter of the law and the spirit of the regulations stir us into different waters. Specifically, we must make every reasonable attempt to integrate our students into inclusive settings, from out-of-district placements to less restrictive settings. Integration into the regular classroom, with support when necessary, is our goal to meet the requirement. That's easy in theory, but in practice it becomes a monumental task. In order to give every student the appropriate opportunity to achieve, we must have continuity of programming to make transitions smooth and curriculum seamless, while at the same time reducing costs by planning ahead, monitoring growth, and measuring outcomes.

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, as it relates to 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 various educational needs.

Circuit Breaker Trends

	FY08 75%	FY09 72%	FY10 42%	FY11 40%	FY12 Projections
APS	\$430,759	\$633,041	\$321,575	\$347,500	\$347,500
AB	\$1,014,271	\$1,063,183	\$643,580	\$711,761	\$711,761
TOTALS	\$1,445,030	\$1,696,224	\$965,155 <i>(43.1% Lost Revenue)</i>	\$1,059,261	\$1,059,261

The Department of Secondary and Elementary Education (DESE) traditionally has offered a unique formula for extraordinary costs and relief. But, as the economy has taken a downturn, so has the formula. This erosion has set a substantial burden on the schools in revenue as the reimbursement has gone from 75% in FY08 to 42% in FY10. At the present time, we anticipate a 40% reimbursement for FY11, but those anticipated monies have not been encumbered by the Commonwealth; the figures are not “actual” received monies as yet. The Commonwealth may in fact adjust these figures up or down by the end of this fiscal year.

Due to budgetary constraints in previous years, we re-aligned resources which had a positive effect on reducing out-of-district placements for specific types of disabilities. To fully capture this reduction, the Connections program at the junior high was created in collaboration with our parents/guardians as a continuation of a successful elementary program. These junior high Connections students are moving to the high school level and need similar programming that supports their individualized needs. We anticipate that the program will receive readjustments/re-alignments every year with more integrative services and inclusion in the regular education classroom, extra curricular activities and/or work setting. Our commitment is that we want these students to be integrated into school classrooms, work programs, extra curricular and society as a whole.

Moreover, if we consider adding a learning center teacher to the junior and senior high schools, we will have an opportunity to further re-align our programs (lowering caseload; adding support to our specialized programs) and enhance our instructional opportunities to students.

More specifically, the majority of students who are assisted in their learning through specialized instruction are supported with in-district programs, preschool through age 22 (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.

As we work to meet the majority of our students' needs in-district, individual initiatives have a positive effect on program development and budget building if these individual efforts are tied to a vision and systemic goals and interventions. For our purposes, we analyze data, at the student level, to all students we are examining. We monitor the themes and trends based upon the interpretation of the data. We take into consideration a decision-making matrix which includes data, the students, the school-home connections, the goals of the school district, psychological factors that may influence the goals, etc. to name a few indicators beyond data. These internal and external factors influence the building of programs and the realignment of services, enhanced by our initiation of action plans to reduce costs. We cannot look at any issue in isolation; multiple factors in decision making makes us more responsive to the ever-changing needs of students and families.

As part of my annual goals, I have established several action plans to maintain the quality of programs while at the same time realigning them to ensure that the programs not only meet the needs of students but also are cost effective. These action plans, created from the Special Education Financial Task Force outcomes, are readily available on our website <http://ab.mec.edu/about/aboutpdf/SPED-FTF-II-FinalReportDec08.pdf>. We are continually assessing the out-of-district placements with parents/guardians and students and discussing transitional plans for their return to a less intensive setting, either involving our collaborative programs in CASE or our home district schools with support.

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 and the needs of each individual child. Every child is unique and is guaranteed the opportunity to learn in our schools. With your support, we will help families to reach that goal.

Sincerely,

Liza Huber

Director of Pupil Services



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