



January/February 2010

Dear Parent/Guardian,

There are many challenges today for our families, our community, and our schools. We are in the midst of an economic crisis that we have not experienced since the Great Depression. We only have to look at the newspapers to realize that the cost of Special Education is rising. Just the other day, I read an article in the Boston Globe about those costs which had risen during the last five years, partly due to the higher costs of running those programs (specialized teaching; specialized instruction; small group learning; assistive technology), and the reduction in both federal and state dollars. While we acknowledge these difficult times, I know we are resilient and our schools will remain energetic.

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. Our goal in this budgetary process is meeting the budget guidelines for survival 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.

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.

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. 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, 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.

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. Innovative programs such as the Connections program at the junior high school, and the expansion of our Hayward model at the high school are reducing the number of students who require out-of-district placements.

During this time, we have been able to continue our collaboration with parents that goes beyond the IEP process, through individual meetings, discussion of pertinent issues and concerns, and involvement in open forums for discussion. I want to thank all the parents who have called me to express their opinions, written emails and/or letters to me or who have voiced their views constructively at our forums. Your valuable feedback continues to support our Pupil Services Action Plan and goals.

As I said specifically last year in OnTeam, 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 and the needs of each individual child. With your continued support, we will prevail through these extremely challenging fiscal times.

Sincerely,

Liza Huber

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