



On Team

January 2008

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As Director of Pupil Services, one of my responsibilities is to present the Pupil Services budget for FY09, with a special emphasis on Special Education, from PreKindergarten to the age of 22. As such, on November 29, 2007 and on January 19, 2008, I presented an agenda that discussed the breadth and depth of our programs, the fiscal costs of these programs, what these trends mean for present and future budgets, and most importantly, how the Pupil Services Leadership Team hopes to continue to effect change - collaboratively - regarding program development and effective budgetary planning.

The majority of our students receiving special education services are supported within in-district programs, PK-22. This means that 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, whether it is for preschoolers, older elementary children or adolescents, a more specialized in-district program is needed. While a continuum of special education services and programs is available to students with a broad range of disabilities, there has been significant interest in better understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders as well as students with Serious Emotional Impairments. These disabilities are listed in the federal regulations.

Preschoolers, ages 3-4, who are identified on the Autism Spectrum, may start out in our Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) Program, and move into our Integrated Preschool, before Kindergarten. As these children become school age, the Connections model at the Conant School provides a continuum of those services, Kindergarten to Grade 3 and Grade 3 to Grade 6. Thinking in terms of this continuum, programs at the RJG Junior High School and at the Acton-Boxborough Regional High School currently offer integrated programs to students on the spectrum as well. However, making programmatic adjustments for students as they grow require flexibility. As students get older, services may include small group grade level credit bearing classes, continued pragmatic language and social skill instruction, and strong transitional planning for other educational or work related experiences once they leave Acton-Boxborough.

In summary, the percentages below reflect our Acton and Acton-Boxborough students receiving special education services:

Students Receiving Special Education Services		
Services	% of total APS Students	% of total AB Students
In District	16.9 %	12.55 %
Out of District	1.04 %	2.43 %
Total	17.94 %	14.98 %

We emphasize early intervention at the elementary schools and services are intensified. Regarding the data, it is important to remember that our school goal is to teach our children skills to feel comfortable in a variety of academic and social settings and to help our students integrate into less restrictive programs over time. When we examine the APS in-district percentages with AB percentages, we would expect APS student numbers to be higher because of our early intervention programs and our ability to target early learning experiences, sometimes with more intensive services. At the regional level, services and numbers of students tend to decrease. This is a logical test of our programs. Are our students developing skills, and becoming more independent over time? The answer is a resounding “yes”. Is our early investment yielding a long term gain? Again, the answer is “yes”.

What about our students who require Out-of-District programming?

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

Effective Budgetary Planning

For student success, we need:

- Excellent practices that are research based and measurable.
- Strong support systems based upon visionary leadership, collaboration among parents, teachers and administrators, with decisions based on data.
- The analysis of that data so that our school district can figure out the etiology of problems and make recommendations for systemic interventions.

One issue raised during the budget presentation is that out-of-district schools are able to apply throughout the year for additional funds called Extraordinary Relief through the Operational Services Division of the Department of Education. This can cover building projects, staffing needs, or other issues. More and more, the school districts receive letters of approval where schools have increased their tuitions from 10-40% in the middle of a given fiscal year. Of 200+ DOE approved schools and collaboratives, 19 schools have already received this extraordinary relief approval; another 14 have been approved for next year. Although there is justification, the reality is an increase to the cost of special education and a concern for our town.

Planning for the Future

The complexity of our students' needs has already been established as well as the benefits of providing comprehensive early education programs. We have wonderful programs within our Concord Area Special Education (CASE) Collaborative that meet many but not all of the needs of our students.

In checking our assumptions, we know that we will continue to have an increase of students at the preschool level, mainly because of Autism Spectrum Disorders. We also know that for a number of students, the cluster of students with Asperger Syndrome (on the Autism Spectrum) will continue to grow as will students struggling with Serious Emotional Impairments.

In order to be fair to our students, to our parents and the community at large, I am sharing some of my thinking about my vision with some favorable budgetary implications.

Program Design and Development

Our continued commitment is to include diverse students in in-district placements. Keeping our students in-district, connected to their home community, is still the least restrictive and the most cost effective approach.

At this time, I am pleased to share that the FY09 budget proposes a new in-district program:

The Connections Program

Located at the RJ Grey Junior High School, the newly designed Connections Program naturally and seamlessly continues our elementary Connections model in which a student who started in our preschool program with support from Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) continues through our primary and intermediate levels with integration as a priority. Now, there will be a well-focused junior high program in which specialized educational, social and behavioral components are integrated throughout the curriculum.

Summary

Whenever program design is in process, teams must develop those designs to ensure continuity of program, training of staff, support for parents, and ultimately reduction of costs.

Educational continuity 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

Training of staff and support for parents requires targeted professional development and close collaboration and supervision of staff so that we enhance not only our instructional tool kit but also offer a new set of skills for both our staff and parents.

Reduction of costs requires that we continue to scrutinize expenditures systemically as well as individually, bring students back from out-of-district placements, and reduce the “triggers” that lead to out-of-district placements.

For example, we will be studying our out-of-district students and reflect back to the triggers (academic, social, emotional and behavioral) which may have led them to block learning when compared to their peers. The benefit of this reflection is to help students move more rapidly towards their educational goals.

Additionally, 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. New programs and service delivery models will continue to be proposed as student trends are identified, data collected and analyzed. Always, we are committed to studying, training staff and offering educational and learning opportunities about specific disabilities, in collaboration with our Special Education Parent Advisory Council (PAC), and working together with our CASE Collaborative on program development and services.

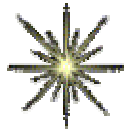
We continue to appreciate your support and input as we pursue these goals.

Sincerely,

Liza Huber
Director of Pupil Services

Special Information

1. For Liza's complete budget presentations, with slide by slide commentary, please go to the Acton and Acton-Boxborough website at <http://ab.mec.edu>
2. Our Lending Library for parents is open in the Pupil Services lobby with new books for you to see. We are in special need of books that cover the following topics:
 - Autism Spectrum Disorders
 - Homework Challenges and Solutions
3. Acknowledging our own students who have died over the year, we offer our sympathy as we share in those losses as a school home family. The following quote is shared:



*Some people come into our lives and quickly go.
Some stay for awhile and leave footprints on our hearts.
And we are never, ever the same. ~Author unknown*



Join the Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council by visiting www.abspedpac.org Co-Chair Paul Clough, phclough@verizon.net Co-Chair Nancy Sherburne, nsherburne@mindspring.com