

Minutes to Special Ed Community Meeting September 30, 2014

(Note: see the Appendix for acronyms and certain terms used herein)

I. Welcome and Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Dr. Tendai Ngoro. Dr. Ngoro thanked the participants for attending and referenced the evening's agenda (available on the SEPAC website at www.somsepac.org).

Members of the Executive Committees of the SEPAC and PTO were asked to briefly stand and introduce themselves. Dr. Ngoro then outlined the structure of the new combined SEPAC/PTO meetings ("SOMA Special Education Community Meetings") which will be in place for the 2014-2015 school year. She stated that, while the meetings are being combined, the SEPAC and PTO remain separate organizations with distinct missions.

At various points in the evening, Dr. Ngoro acknowledged and thanked Administration and Board of Education attendees who included Dr. Pat Barker (Director of Special Services), Robert Schmidt (Supervisor of Special Services 6-12), Ella Rideau (Supervisor of Special Services K-5) and Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad (Board of Education Special Ed Liaison).

After being introduced, Ms. Lawson-Muhammad stated that she was happy to see the special ed community coming together, and she said the close alignment of the SEPAC and PTO is something that she strongly supports. She stated that it is important for the special ed community to have one voice, and that the community will be more powerful in getting the district where it needs to be if it stands together.

II. Announcements

Recreation Dept.: Leon Morton discussed TryCAN, a 13-township partnership whose goal is to provide low-cost recreational and educational services for the special needs communities in its partner towns. Among TryCAN's offerings are programs in sports, music, social skills and reading. Maplewood and South Orange residents may participate in TryCAN programs in any of the 13 partner townships. A TryCAN handout was distributed at the meeting (available on the SEPAC website).

Mr. Morton then introduced Keith Knudsen, Director of Recreation and Cultural Affairs for Maplewood Township. Mr. Knudsen informed the meeting that his

department is seeking to increase offerings for special needs students. Upcoming programs are expected to include:

- Fall soccer (6 weeks)
- Winter / Spring basketball
- Winter Arts
- Winter bowling (under consideration)

Mr. Knudsen stated that he plans to again run PURE mentoring training, which is training provided free under a grant to family members of special needs children and those who expect to be supervising these children. Training is generally offered for persons 15 and older.

Finally, Mr. Knudsen discussed the possibility of re-offering a free program on Resiliency for Parents of Special Needs children. He asked that interested persons contact him because last year's offering was not well attended.

Persons interested in any of these programs should contact the Maplewood Department of Recreation and Cultural Affairs.

School Liaisons: Sonya Selig introduced the special ed parent liaisons, who are parent volunteers at each school (as well as an out-of-district volunteer) whose role it is to maintain open communication lines between each school community and the SEPAC/PTO. A list of liaisons was distributed (available on the SEPAC website).

Parenting Center: Barry Berg spoke about the Parenting Center, which provides speakers and workshops on various topics of interest to parents. Mr. Berg suggested that if parents are interested in particular topics for future presentations, they should contact Sonya Selig.

State Settlement / Professional Development: Sharon Huetz directed interested persons to the SPAN (Statewide Parent Advocacy Network) website for a synopsis of the settlement, under which SOMA will be monitored by the state for four years after being cited for least restrictive environment as well as a disproportional number of students of color being classified. The SPAN link is available on SEPAC's website. Ms. Huetz stated that SEPAC is waiting for further input from district administration about its reaction to the settlement.

(See below for district input from Ella Rideau)

Transitioning Out of School: Barry Berg raised the idea of establishing an informal group to share experiences and concerns regarding the transition from the educational environment to the post-education world. Interested persons should contact Sonya Selig.

III. **Guest Speaker Presentations**

Dr. Nodoro introduced Dr. Pat Barker (Director of Special Services), Robert Schmidt (Supervisor of Special Services 6-12), and Ella Rideau (Supervisor of Special Services K-5), each who gave updates to the group:

Dr. Pat Barker

Dr. Barker thanked SEPAC/PTO for the invitation to speak, and she noted her long history of addressing the special ed community in similar forums. She then informed the group that this will be her last year in the role of Director of Special Services.

Dr. Barker then provided updates on a number of topics:

Montrose School

The Montrose Pre-K Program is moving ahead with a goal of opening next September. The administration is looking for pre-k parents to serve on sub-committees over the next year to develop offerings, marketing plans, etc. Interested persons should contact Dr. Barker.

Personnel

Dr. Barker noted the large number of changes in district and school administration roles this year. Notable were:

- Superintendent Search: Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad provided an update on the search, stating that intention is to identify a final slate of candidates by year-end, conduct final interviews starting in January (when new board members are in place) and to have the new Superintendent in place in July.
- Dr. Barker noted that several new administrators have special ed backgrounds including Jerrill Adams, the new Principal at MMS, Kimberly Hutchinson, the new Principal at Jefferson and Robert Schmidt, the new 6-12 Special Services Supervisor.

I-Step / Effective School Solutions (ESS)

Dr. Barker described changes to the programs designed to provide in-district services for students who need therapeutic support for emotional issues during the school day. Formerly these programs, which are run at MMS and Columbia, were run by ESS, a third-party provider. Starting the year, the MMS program, now called I-Step, will be taken in-district and will be run by Amy Pitucco, an administrator with a social services background. The high school program will continue to be contracted to ESS.

Child Study Team Restructuring

In response to a question, Dr. Barker described changes to the structuring of CST's. It was acknowledged that SEPAC/PTO and the administration had heard numerous parent concerns regarding the lack of consistency of services and the classification process across schools. Concerns had also been raised by CST members about the time requirements to serve students across multiple schools. In response to these concerns, the CSTs have been restructured for 2014-2015 as follows:

- **Elementary:** One case worker (except at Jefferson, which has a higher number of classified students) is assigned to manage all cases at each school post-referral. These caseworkers will have minimal responsibility for OOD placements.
- **Middle Schools:** two caseworkers are assigned to manage all cases at the each school post-referral.
- **High School:** no changes in resources.
- **Out-of-District:** the number of caseworkers assigned to OOD cases is increased from one to two.
- **Referrals:** A new 3-person team will be responsible for handling all referrals district-wide.

Dr. Barker noted that the district receives about 250 referral requests each year, with many coming very near the end of the school year. She stated that parents may notice some efforts to move CST meetings and other non-referral related activities to before the end of the year so that school CST members can be available to assist the referral team during this 'crunch time'.

Dyslexia Screening

Training for new legally-required dyslexia screenings will commence in November. This will not fall under the special ed program. Pursuant to this, all teachers will be trained to recognize dyslexic markers, and there will be new requirements for formal screenings.

Mr. Robert Schmidt

Mr. Schmidt stated that he will have four focus areas for professional development as he begins his tenure as Special Services Supervisor 6-12:

- ***Transparency:*** This is Mr. Schmidt's initial focus area. This involves ensuring that students have the opportunity to access the curriculum in multiple ways, with an emphasis on technology. His expectation is that by the end of the first marking period, every 6-12 teacher will have an online presence which includes at least the opportunity to access homework assignments. Additionally, Mr. Schmidt stated that teacher collaboration will be a focus of early development initiatives.
- ***Choice:*** This will involve ensuring that students have meaningful options in the modes and topics via which they access the curriculum.

- ***Self-Directed Learning:*** This will involve empowering students to choose activities via which they can achieve their goals and to take ownership of their learning.
- ***Reflection:*** This will involve giving students the opportunity to reflect on their learning results and styles, with a goal of improving choices and self-direction.

Ms. Ella Rideau

Ms. Rideau provided an update on professional development and the district's response to the state settlement.

Professional Development

On professional development, Ms. Rideau noted that teachers have been requesting more in the way of special-ed focused training as well as additional opportunities to meet formally with special ed department administration. She described teacher trainings being conducted or planned:

- Special and general ed teachers are receiving training on access to resources, available supports and providing access to the curriculum for all students.
- K-8 special ed teachers are receiving half-day training on inclusion with emphasis on various means of supports, differentiated instruction and other requirements of inclusion classrooms. The training is being provided by third-party provider Learning Ally.

State Settlement

Ms. Rideau explained that the settlement is the result of a suit against the state regarding practices around 'Least Restrictive Environment' (LRE).

Schools in N.J. are required to educate all students in the LRE defined for each particular student. Generally the LRE hierarchy is seen as:

- In district, general ed classroom without supports [least restrictive]
- In district, general ed classroom with limited/minimal supports
- In district, general ed classroom with replacement structures in place
- In district , self-contained classroom
- Out-of-district placement
- Home instruction [most restrictive]

In the settlement, SOMA was cited for a disproportionate number of students-of-color being classified as special ed compared to statewide averages. It was also noted that SOMA has a relatively high proportion of OOD placements.

As a result of these findings, the state will be required to monitor SOMA for four years ending in 2018. The initial monitoring has begun with state teams collecting data by conducting focus groups and observing classrooms. The results of the monitoring should be a determination of the type of remedial actions needed and the amount and type of additional state support the district requires to rectify the identified issues.

Ms. Rideau noted that the district is awaiting action from the state with respect to professional development around the disproportionality finding and other issues identified in the settlement. In response to a question, she stated that CST members would be expected to be included in any such training.

Q&A Session

Meeting attendees asked a number of questions, and this represents a brief summary without parent attribution:

Q: What kind of documentation is available to assist parents, particularly parents new to the system, in navigating the system and obtaining required services on a timely basis?

A: Dr. Barker stated that there are a lot of materials available both from the district and outside resources, but she acknowledged that these materials are not yet available in a single comprehensive resource guide for parents. She acknowledged that this has been a goal of the Special ed Department for some time and that it still requires effort.

Q: What is the recommended course of action when a parent is concerned about a potential issue with a child, but meets with difficulty in getting a referral?

A: Dr. Barker explained that, by law, a referral for special services can only be made after documented interventions have been shown to be ineffective, typically after a period of about 6 months. She stated that it is primarily the responsibility of the parent and teacher to make the initial determination that interventions might be required, and that the next step is for the general ed teacher to see the intervention and referral team at the school. That team will work with appropriate parties (CSTs, school nurse, etc.) to help determine if interventions are warranted.

If a parent feels that this process is not functioning for his or her child, the school principal and special ed department should be contacted (preferably in writing).

A meeting attendee recommended the website <http://www.interventioncentral.org> for more information.

NOTE: In follow-up questions, it was acknowledged that this process, and the appropriate contacts, should be made more easily available to parents, consistent with the comments made in addressing the prior question.

Q: With the ongoing emphasis on technology use by students, how is the district ensuring access for all students?

A: Mr. Schmidt stated that students have far more access opportunities than they did five years ago, from the proliferation of personal technology to growing sources such

as school and public libraries and programs under which students-in-need are loaned devices. He stated that all district schools now have sufficient resources to provide technology after school to students who need it. He also stated that students are able to take laptops home if that is included in their IEPs. That said, the district acknowledges that lack of technology is a risk factor in widening achievement gaps, and to help identify such risks, the district will be conducting a phone survey in the next week to determine the level of family access to technology.

Q: Can the district start integrating O.T. and P.T. into the physical education curriculum?

A: The suggestion was noted.

Q: What are the requirements for district-provided transportation for after school activities of special ed students?

A: Dr. Barker stated that special needs transportation for after-school activities is only for the trip to the event - one way only

Q: There is a new inclusion model in place this year, with some special ed teachers spending a half-day in each of two inclusion classrooms. Does this run the risk that these teachers will become overloaded by having to manage additional special ed students and parents?

A: Ms. Rideau explained that the maximum number of classified students in any inclusion classroom is 8, but that the vast majority of classes have fewer. Even at a maximum load of 16 students for a shared inclusion teacher, Ms. Rideau feels that the burden is not too heavy. She stated that if a parent has a concern about IEP requirements not being met, he/she should contact the child's case manager.

Q: Under the new shared teacher inclusion model, what will be the special ed teacher impact on the non-math/reading curriculum of special ed students, specifically in science and social studies?

A: Ms. Rideau explained that the special ed teachers will be available to consult with the general ed teachers on modifications in these areas, just as they do under existing consultative models.

IV. Breakout Sessions

Breakout sessions were held for Pre-K, Elementary and Secondary school groups. Issues/suggestions raised by parents in these sessions included:

Pre-K

Sonya Selig acted as facilitator for this breakout, and she reported that no parents presented themselves for this session.

Elementary

Mike Donoghue acted as facilitator for this breakout.

- There were several comments in appreciation of the new shared meeting structure.
- The primary recurring theme of the discussion was frustration in navigating the system and in understanding processes and specific roles. Several parents expressed frustration over Dr. Barker's comments about it being the parents' responsibility to understand the intervention process coming so soon after she acknowledged that her department has not yet reached its goal of fully documenting special ed processes and resources in an easily-accessible format.
- Other comments/questions/suggestions:
 - Parents need more training/information on the special ed process, specifically:
 - Selecting & managing IEP goals
 - How does one verify that an IEP is being strictly followed
 - What are alternatives when the district is simply not responsive
 - Resources available from outside the district, including state and county
 - What kind of quality control measures are in place for interventions, the new referral process, etc.?
 - How is the district benchmarking itself against other successful districts
 - How is (or "is") the district identifying "successful" districts?
 - Why isn't there a math early intervention program similar to the elementary reading program? Do other districts do that?
 - What do other districts do to provide resources to parents on resources, processes and roles?
 - Has the district or special ed department considered bringing in communications or other experts to help bring it up to speed?
 - Regarding the intervention process, is there a requirement for general ed teachers to automatically call in the intervention team when a student's performance hits certain measured levels? If not, why not? If so, how can parents be assured the process is functioning?
 - Can the SEPAC/PTO create opt-in emails lists for parent sub-groups (ie. elementary school parents, OOD parents, etc.).

- **How can parents make sure their voice will be heard in the upcoming process of selecting a new Special Services Director?**

Secondary

Jane Bleasdale acted as facilitator for this breakout.

- **The conversation was primarily about the transition to middle school, with parents sharing common experiences.**
- **Questions arose about what period of time is acceptable/policy within the district for a parent phone call or email to be addressed.**
- **Once again the issue came up for the 'line of command' supervision. Ms. Bleasdale committed to having SEPAC/PTO work on this with a goal of having something in place this semester.**

Out-of-District

Barry Berg, Leon Morton and Dr. Nodoro acted as facilitator for this breakout.

Mr. Berg reported that no significant issues were raised in this session, but that there was sufficient parent interest to plan on OOD breakouts at future meetings.

Appendix

CST: Child Study Team

ESS: Effective School Solutions, a third party provider of social services, currently at Columbia only

IEP: Individualized Education Program

IStep: A district-run program replacing ESS this year at Maplewood Middle School

Learning Ally: A third party training vendor which provides downloadable apps. It has a human voice to read to the student (as opposed to a monotone, computerized voice), and a highlighted cursor that follows the text on the screen. It is available for chrome books, too.

LRE: Least Restrictive Environment

OOD: Out-of-District

PTO: Special Education Parent Teacher Organization

SEPAC: Special Education Parent Advisory Committee

SPAN: Statewide Parent Advocacy Network