

Minutes from Special Education Community Meeting December 3, 2014

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Jane Bleasdale welcomed the group, reviewed the agenda, and opened the meeting by reading a statement from Special Education Parent Advisory Group that was prepared in response to the previous week's presentation by the District's Director of Special Services at the Board of Education meeting. Dr. Bleasdale noted that the statement (which follows) will be submitted in writing to the Board of Ed and posted on the SEPAC web site (somsepac.org). She invited those interested in this topic to speak with her at the end of the evening or follow up via email to: info@somsepac.org

At the November 24th Board of Education meeting, there was a presentation on special education that laid bare a number of issues that affect not only our students but the entire school community. In particular, there were revelations about the \$450,000 consultancy contract with the District Management Commission, which was mismanaged and ultimately failed to achieve its stated goals.

While this is a disappointing and frustrating, it is not surprising to many of us who for years have been speaking out and raising questions about the lack of communication, consistency, accountability, and transparency – much less an overall strategic vision for student success.

Yet rather than pointing fingers, we see this as an opportunity to galvanize our community and help the Board and administration move from outrage to constructive action. We look forward to meeting with the newly formed Board in the coming weeks and months to share our experiences and perspectives and to work together to improve systems, structures, and student services.

In the immediate term, we urge the Board and administration to act swiftly and decisively in the area of student outcomes. Given the significant changes to services in recent years (e.g. the inclusion model) it is imperative that the effectiveness of special needs programming be measured methodically and reported with transparency.

We welcome your input and involvement. Please see me at the end of the meeting to share your experiences and suggestions on this topic.

II. Announcements & Updates

Liaisons

Sonya Selig introduced the school liaisons and explained their role to serve as a point person and a resource for families of students in each school building and those in out of district settings (for a current list of liaisons, see: somsepac.org/contacts/school-liaisons/)

Columbia High School reported that the annual college and career night event held in the spring will this year offer an expanded roster of institutions that offer college programs and vocational-technical training for students with special needs.

Clinton Elementary reported concerns regarding the new consultative model for inclusion teachers, introduced this year (a discussion which was tabled for the planned break-out session later in the meeting.) Families also report that they were not informed of case manager re-assignments at the beginning of the school year – or ever.

The liaison who serves Maplewood Middle School (MMS) also serves as liaison at Jefferson Elementary; she will consult with the MMS Home School Association (HAS) re: transferring the responsibility to another interested parent (it is an elected HAS board position at that school.)

Jefferson School reported that the liaison has mainly been responding to parents who have reached out regarding learning the intervention and referral, evaluation, and classification processes.

The liaison for families with students in Out of District placements reported that it is difficult to reach those families because they are in many buildings across the region. She is looking to get the word out about new offerings and changes in District services, so that these students and their families feel more connected and can participate in programs, activities and events at their home school or elsewhere in the District.

No other liaison announcements were made.

Parenting Center

Barry Berg reported that Parenting Center is running its annual Holiday Toy Drive to collect gifts for children in the neediest families in our community. Last year, 155 families with nearly 500 children benefited from this effort. The Parenting Center seeks donations of new, unwrapped toys and/or cash so that gifts can be purchased. All donations are tax-deductible and should be in by Friday December 12. Contact the Parenting Center directly for more information: call 973 762-5600, ext. 1850.

Montrose School

Ann Leeb reported on the Montrose building (near Mountain Station in South Orange) is being repurposed. Special needs preschoolers will finally have their own home; existing program (i.e. ABA, inclusion, and multiply disabled) will be transferred to this site, and new programs will be added, e.g. high-quality preschool for tuition-paying and subsidized students. Construction is underway, and the site is scheduled to open in September 2015. Floor plans are available. The District is looking at partnering with Montclair State University and adopting their Developmental, Individual, Relational (DIR) approach. The advisory committee, which includes parent representatives, will be focusing next on marketing to attract a robust student body. For more information, parents and caregivers are encouraged to contact Ms. Leeb or Ms. Selig (see liaison contact list.)

Success Stories

Rob Schmidt, the District's Special Services Supervisor for grades 6-12, provided an update about the transition programs. Right now, CHS has only "career awareness and exploration" for students in self-contained classrooms, and the school is looking at ways to build this out further with more hands-on opportunities.

Mr. Schmidt reported on site visits he conducted with the Principal and Transition Coordinator from CHS and a parent representative to Livingston and West Orange High Schools to observe their transition programs for students with special needs. Both programs were strong: Livingston has a large classroom with a working kitchen, in which students prepare meals to order for faculty and staff, and a laser engraver that students use to engrave awards for fellow students. They also take orders for custom tee shirts created for a variety of teams, clubs, and events. The SOMA visitors found students – with a range of abilities – to be very engaged and empowered by this "Career Internship Program" (CIF). In West Orange, transitioning special needs high school students were out in the community, working at local businesses, sometimes with aides helping to facilitate their participation.

The District is interested in replicating some of our neighboring Districts' successes and is looking to identify funding opportunities. Mr. Schmidt said they were open to ideas and to help finding grants. It was suggested that the local Lions or Rotary clubs were potential prospects for start-up funds.

Miscellaneous

An announcement was made about a monthly support group for mothers of children with disabilities at the JCC on Northfield Avenue, West Orange, generally the second Wednesday from 7:30-9 pm. For more information about this and other resources relevant to the special needs community, contact: Rebecca Wanatick with Greater MetroWest ABLE, who has a wealth of information and sends an email with upcoming events every other week (to those who sign up.) Her phone number is: 973-929-3129 and her email address is: rwanatick@jfedgmw.org

Practice PARCC exams are available online. See "Areas of Special Interest" under the Special Services Department on District web site for links:
<http://www.somdsd.k12.nj.us/Page/209>

III. Speaker Presentation – Special Education Budget Primer and Analysis

Mike Donoghue, SEPAC Executive Committee member, provided an overview of the South Orange Maplewood budget cycle, highlighted key budget lines, items relevant to special education, and some analysis of trends. Follow this link to view the full presentation:
<https://somsdsepac.files.wordpress.com/2014/12/2014-12-soma-budget-analysis-final.pdf>

Some key discussion points included:

- It's interesting that enrollment of general education students in the last few years has increased by 8% but enrollment of students classified as 'special ed' enrollment increased by only by .5%. The speaker is going to seek confirmation and explanation of those figures.
- Local taxes make up about 93% of school funding revenues, while government funding makes up about 6%. The District has a goal of maintaining annual tax increases at 2%, the baseline limit increase as per state law. The District does have the option under the law to enact additional annual increases for enrollment and benefit cost adjustments and "banked cap", however the District has declined to use those additional sources in most years.
- We are not getting nearly what the state formula says we should – we get about 20% of what the current formula calls for. Even if we did get 100%, it would still only amount to ~ 10% of our budget.
- The recent history of District investment and divestment in special education includes using federal stimulus funds to hire 18 teachers, laying off the entire paraprofessional staff and outsourcing their function, and then successive years of personnel cuts disproportionately hitting special ed.
- Looking at the budget development and approval timeline, it makes sense to make one's voices heard early – preferably in advance of the March Community Budget Forum.
- It is important for our community to be clear that 'bringing students back' who are in out of district placement without appropriate programs is not an option.
- Question: What is the impact of the PILOTs (payment in lieu of taxes) that towns are offering real estate developers, which seems to have a negative impact on school funding? Are the school board and town governing bodies in sync?
- Question: How can there be a law and a formula and not full payment from the state? It's unbelievable, but it's politics.
- Question: Wasn't part of DMC's charge to look at how to deploy resources effectively with the maximum benefit? Yes, but the DMC contract objectives were not all met.

IV. Break-out groups

New Consultative Model of Inclusion

Participants raised concerns about whether the micro-scheduling of special education teachers to cover multiple classrooms and reading intervention periods is working and whether IEP requirements are truly being met for every student.

Intervention/Referral Process

Information was shared to explain how the Intervention & Referral Service (I & RS) process works. See Guide to the Special Education Process for the District's explanation:

[http://www.somssd.k12.nj.us/cms/lib7/NJ01001050/Centricity/Domain/32/A_Guide_to_Special_Ed - All in one \(2011\).pdf](http://www.somssd.k12.nj.us/cms/lib7/NJ01001050/Centricity/Domain/32/A_Guide_to_Special_Ed_-_All_in_one_(2011).pdf)

Out of District/ Home School

The following questions/points were raised in this group:

1. How many hours of instruction is the district required to provide for a home school placement?
2. Are all OOD placements being handled by one District-wide case manager? This was news to many who continue to work with the same case manager.
3. How should parents approach the District about considering an OOD placement for their child?

504s

The following questions/points were raised in this group:

1. Parents were unclear on the procedures for 504 determinations and what the difference is between a 504 vs. IEP. (Notes: the IEP roadmap link on the SEPAC web site may be helpful <http://somssdsepac.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/iepinfographic.jpg>)
2. Currently there are not published documents on what services are available to students with 504s; such documents would increase transparency for families whose kids have 504s.
3. Parents of students with 504s think that there were many violations going on in the District; they would like to have an intervention coordinator for 504 students in every school so parents know who to contact with issues and/or concerns (Note: this responsibility is usually that of the/an Assistant Principal in each building but apparently this isn't always communicated.)