



End of Year Report to Newton School Committee

June 10, 2019

Presented by Newton SEPAC Co-Chairs
Christine Carey and Rajeev Parlikar
www.newtonsepac.org

To: The Newton School Committee: Margaret Albright, Ruth Goldman (chair), Diana Fisher Gomberg, Matthew Miller, Bridget Ray-Canada, Anping Shen, Kathy Shields, Steven Siegel, Mayor Ruthanne Fuller (*ex officio*)

Superintendent David Fleishman

From: 2018-2019 Newton SEPAC Co-Chairs: Christine Carey, Rajeev Parlikar

Cc: Karen Shmukler, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services

Summary

Overall, Newton Public Schools continue to be a welcoming and supportive environment for students with special needs. There are opportunities for improvement in some areas, and the Newton SEPAC is grateful for the efforts of so many individuals within NPS who have worked to improve programs and to create better learning experiences for our students.

The Newton SEPAC continues to have a strong, collaborative relationship with the Newton School Committee and Newton Public Schools. Over the 2018-19 school year, the SEPAC has worked to address broad concerns that affect large groups of parents as well as to support parents on issues that are specific to a certain program or student.

This report outlines key themes from this year and progress made in the past year. It also highlights potential focus areas for the future. We look forward to continued collaboration on these areas with you.

Why is there a Special Education Parent Advisory Council?

Every School Committee is required to establish a special education parent advisory council, per the Massachusetts General Laws, in part due to the legislative initiatives of Massachusetts Advocates for Children. The duties of the SEPAC include those noted below:

“The school committee of any city, town, or school district shall establish a parent advisory council on special education. Membership shall be offered to all parents of children with disabilities and other interested parties. The parent advisory council duties shall include but not be limited to: advising the school committee on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities; meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school committee's special education programs... “

Massachusetts General Laws, M.G.L. c. 71B, 3

Community Connections and Outreach

The Newton SEPAC offered a variety of meetings and events to inform and educate parents throughout the course of the 2018-19 school year:

Thursday, October 18, 2018

Johanne Pino of Massachusetts Advocates for Children presented on *Preventing Bullying of Children with Disabilities*, followed by Q&A.

Wednesday, November 7, 2018

Dan Heffernan, Esq., a special education attorney and Newton parent, presented a workshop on *Basic Rights in Special Education*. This was the required annual Basic Rights presentation, which is a workshop designed to help parents learn to be effective partners with their child's school, to determine their child's eligibility for special education, and to plan, make decisions about, and monitor their child's progress in school.

Tuesday, January 9, 2019

Jeffrey Sankey, Esq., a special education attorney, presented on *10 Traits of Effective Parents in Special Education*.

Wednesday, January 30, 2019

The Federation for Children with Special Needs gave the *Basic Rights in Special Education* presentation in Mandarin at the request of Newton's Chinese community.

Wednesday, February 6, 2019

Massachusetts Advocates for Children gave the *Basic Rights in Special Education* presentation at a location in Boston to provide easier access to Newton's METCO parents.

Wednesday, February 13, 2019

NPS Student Services and the Newton SEPAC co-hosted a presentation by Kristen Jacobsen, MS CCC-SLP on *Executive Function Skills in Children and Adolescents*. Ms. Jacobsen is currently leading the Landmark Consulting work for NPS on executive function skills. We appreciate the support of Student Services with covering the speaker fee for this event.

Tuesday, March 12, 2019

Dr. Kerim Munir, MD, MPH, DSc, Director of Psychiatry at the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, Boston Children's Hospital presented on *Mental Health in Children and Adolescents with Developmental Disabilities*.

Tuesday, April 23, 2019

The community liaison officers from the Newton Police Department led a discussion on *Public Safety for Individuals with Special Needs*. They covered programs that are in place in Newton to provide extra safety and comfort to individuals with special needs. They also described the training being rolled out across the Newton Police Department to better prepare officers for dealing with situations involving individuals with special needs.

Thursday, May 16, 2019

A general meeting was held for parents to come and ask questions and get support.

Thursday, May 30, 2019 – 10th Annual Newton SEPAC Special Educator Awards Ceremony

More than 150 individuals were honored at the 10th Annual Newton SEPAC Special Educator Awards. Honorees included Principals, Student Services administrators, special education teachers, general education teachers, therapists, classroom aides, crossing guards, and others who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to make Newton a more welcoming and supportive environment for our children. Many honorees, parents, and students were in attendance, as were Mayor Fuller, Superintendent Fleishman, Assistant Superintendent Shmukler, and members of the School Committee. The Awards Ceremony was held in the Newton South cafeteria for the first time and hope to do so again in the future.

Board Meetings

The Newton SEPAC held open board meetings on the following dates (meeting agendas and minutes can be found at www.newtonsepac.org):

- Tuesday, September 11, 2018
- Tuesday, October 16, 2018
- Thursday, November 15, 2018
- Tuesday, December 11, 2018
- Thursday, January 10, 2019
- Thursday, February 7, 2019
- Thursday, March 7, 2019
- Tuesday, April 9, 2019
- Thursday, May 9, 2019
- Tuesday, June 11, 2019 (to be held tomorrow)

Progress in the 2018-19 School Year

Newton Public Schools and the School Committee have been helping to address a number of specific concerns raised by the SEPAC in our previous end of year update.

1. **Additional administrative support at NNHS:**

The NPS budget approved an additional special education administrator at Newton North to help cover the larger volume of students on IEPs.

2. **Increased focus on pathways for post-high school transition:**

The “Transition Taskforce” is a new collaborative effort in place that brings together NPS, the SEPAC, and City of Newton administrators.

3. **Presentation at Student Services staff meeting:**

The SEPAC presented to the entire Student Services team to describe our role working with NPS and the School Committee, and how we can help parents and caregivers navigate the special education system.

4. **Improved Out Of District outreach:**

NPS has added OOD families to email announcements from their area school. This will help OOD students to be aware of and participate in sports, activities, and events at the area school.

5. **Integrated sports teams at Newton North:**

Newton North has established integrated sports teams, following the model initially introduced at Newton South. Parent and student feedback has been highly positive.

Broad Themes for 2018-19

Several broad themes emerged during the 2018-19 school year. The SEPAC is communicating with NPS administration on these issues and asks for continued School Committee support to help address them.

1. **Non-Verbal Learning Disabilities:**

- a. Parents have expressed concerns about the services available within the district for students with a variety of NVLD. There are also newly mandated trainings, screening requirements and interventional services (MA Law S2607) that will need to be implemented by NPS.

2. **Inconsistent Aide / Behavior Therapist support:**

- a. The availability of Aide and BT support has been inconsistent for some students. Parents have also expressed concerns about the differences in capabilities across Aides.

3. School Start Times and High School Schedule Changes:

- a. The SEPAC will continue to engage with NPS on changes to school start times and the specific impact on special education students.
- b. Proposed changes to high school schedules will result in longer teaching blocks and other changes that are likely to have a disproportionate impact on special education students. NPS administration has already included the SEPAC in discussions on how to support the transition to a new schedule, and the SEPAC will remain involved.

4. Staffing turnover at Central Administration and Newton North

- a. The departure of Karen Shmukler from Student Services is a significant loss for the SEPAC and the parent community. We have a strong relationship with Karen and hope to establish one with her successor. While Karen's position is open we have specific concerns about the progress of the Transition Taskforce, open communication with the parent community, etc.
- b. The top three special education administrators at Newton North will be new for 2019-20. The parent community has expressed concerns about continuity of programming, ongoing and new student support, etc.
- c. The SEPAC would like to be involved in search process for the new Assistant Superintendent for Student Services. Superintendent Fleishman has assured us that we will be part of the search effort when it gets under way.

5. Consistency of best practices across schools and programs:

This is an ongoing challenge that reflects the decentralized structure of special education services in Newton. There has been better sharing of ideas across schools this past year, but more is needed.

- a. Newton South is providing greater opportunities for students and parents to learn about transition into special education at the high school level.
- b. Brown Middle School is offering a series of parent training presentations

6. Transition from high school to post high school:

The Transition Taskforce has begun to evaluate how to improve current programming and how to use Newton's transition specialists more effectively.

- a. Consistency of communication of policies is still needed at many levels, including between administration and parents and administration and team leaders.
- b. Transition materials/resources have begun to be posted on the NPS website.
- c. There is a growing need for options other than the Community Connections program for post-18 high school students. This may involve an extra year or two to successfully transition to a "next placement" (community college, college, job).

Suggested Areas for Ongoing Improvement

While NPS continues to evaluate and improve its special education programs, we suggest the following focus areas to improve the programs and services for NPS students and the experiences of their families.

District-wide

- Continue the work in creating transparency, fostering collaboration, and establishing trust with families of NPS students with special needs.
- Establish consistency in the development and implementation of Individualized Education Plans across all schools.
- Continue to update the NPS website with currently available special education programs, transition to post high school information, and appropriate contact people.
- Continue to offer “transition” overview meetings for families of students with special needs whose child will be moving between schools in the coming year (e.g., Pre-K/K, Elementary/MS, MS/HS). These meetings offer families a “preview” of programs and services, as well as an opportunity to establish relationships with some of their children’s future administrators and experienced parents. This is an important way to reduce families’ anxiety and to ensure continuity between schools.
- Improve communications between NPS and the families of students with special needs. Ensure that families understand the resources to contact to request a special education evaluation or for any questions regarding their children’s services, and that they are also aware that the Newton SEPAC is a resource available to parents.
- Improve tracking of disciplinary actions for students with disabilities. The most recent data indicates that disciplinary rates for students with disabilities are approximately double those of general education students.

At Our Schools

- Incorporate a discussion of educating students with special needs in NPS program reviews in subject areas, e.g., a Math program review would include a discussion of how the department differentiates instruction for students with special needs. This is particularly important in our district as many students with special needs spend some portion of their school days in general education classrooms.
- Continue to thoughtfully evaluate students learning English and those who are multilingual for special education services.
- Analyze how NPS could further incorporate assistive technology into the education of students with special needs.
- Within the high schools, consider offering the co-taught model within ACP classes.
- Conduct exit interviews with families of children with special needs who decide to leave the Newton Public Schools to understand the drivers behind those decisions.
- Ensure that progress reports are appropriately updated and sent in a timely manner, preferably at the same time as report cards.

- At all schools, provide standard documentation to parents at the conclusion of IEP meetings to memorialize what was discussed at the meeting, prior to the receipt of the full IEP.
- Ensure that all teachers have read and understand the content of IEPs. As schedules change throughout the year, teachers should read and implement IEPs for any of their new students.
- Evaluate additional supports for students experiencing school anxiety, as well as generalized anxiety. There appears to have been an increase in both groups and we should explore the drivers for these increases. Results from district-wide student behaviors survey will help.

Conclusion

Over the 2018-19 school year, the SEPAC has worked to address broad concerns that affect large groups of parents as well as to support parents on issues that are specific to a certain program or student. We look forward to continued collaboration on these areas with NPS administration and ask for continued School Committee support to help address them.