

Winchester Special Education Parent Advisory Council (PAC)

*Ensuring that all of Winchester's children are educated
in an innovative, challenging and nurturing environment*

Minutes January 7, 2015 General Business Meeting

I. Introductions

The meeting opened at 7:30 pm with introductions from interim Co-Chairs Donna DePriest and Pamela Cort. Donna also identified interim Secretary Colette Desmarais, Treasurer Sarah Abdelkader, who had a prior commitment and Webmaster Kathy Matrundola. Pam Girouard, Administrator of Special Education, described her background, noting her 21 years of professional special education experience and her experience in parenting her 19-year-old and 21 year-old sons. The following special education team supervisors then identified themselves:

- Greg Rosenthal: Winchester High School Coordinator, former special education teacher;
- Sherry Krause-Mazza: McCall Middle School Coordinator, former special education teacher and director;
- Kristine Lacey: Ambrose, Lincoln and Lynch Elementary Schools Coordinator;
- Christina DiMare: Muraco and Vinson-Owen Elementary Schools Coordinator; and
- Sarah Casey: Pre-School Coordinator.

II. About the Parent Advisory Council/Volunteer Opportunities

Co-Chair Donna DePriest explained that the parent advisory council (PAC) is a resource to promote community-wide understanding of special education. The PAC supports parents/guardians of children receiving special education services through programming and resources in collaboration with the administration. She expressed the goals of making PAC meetings forums through which people can share ideas to advance special education in the town and creating a positive, strong working relationship with the administration.

Donna called for volunteers to: (1) assist with public relations to get the word out about PAC meetings/activities; (2) serve as school representatives to help gather feedback from parents/guardians and share best practices; and (3) represent the PAC at Winchester School Committee meetings. Meeting attendee, Mr. Chris Linsky, volunteered to be the representative to the School Committee. Co-Chair Pamela Cort reported that the PAC is revamping its website (www.winspecialpac.com) and urged people to offer ideas to restructure the site. Individuals interested in volunteering and/or offering feedback on the website can contact Donna DePriest (dp.depriest@verizon.net), Pamela Cort (pamola_s@yahoo.com) and Kathy Matrundola (kathy.iatrou@verizon.net).

III. Update on Special Education in Winchester

PAC Co-Chairs Donna DePriest and Pamela Cort turned the meeting over to Pam Girouard, Winchester's Administrator of Special Education. Pam said that although she will be actively involved in the PAC, it is not her role to facilitate meetings. She is looking for the PAC to be a vehicle to improve special education in Winchester. Pam noted that she and a number of special education staff members, including Greg and Christina, are relatively new to Winchester. The District recently hired two psychologists, two adjustment counselors at the high school, one learning center teacher, a district-wide board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) (Maureen Michaud), a transition coordinator (Jennifer Callison) and several teaching aides. In addition, Winchester has a new high school principal, assistant superintendent (Jennifer Elineema) and superintendent (Dr. Judy Evans). The district plans to hire a special education language-based teacher and several special education aides. These new hires will bring fresh perspectives and viewpoints to help the programs grow and improve. She expressed her strong belief in an open door policy and collaboration, but said that people may not always like answers they receive or certain decisions.

Pam identified the following areas as priorities: program evaluation and development, staff education and accountability, and vertical alignment (maintaining consistency from the elementary to middle school to high school). She would like to see a shift toward co-teaching.

To date, Pam has undertaken an evaluation of the Language Based Learning Disabilities program at Vinson Owen. The district also has contracted with the Landmark School's outreach program and has solicited feedback from Dr. George Marinakis from Camp Triumph on the town's social, emotional and behavioral programs, particularly the Partnership Program at Muraco. Jennifer Elineema is conducting professional development for staff on special education legal compliance and continued training on differentiation. Christina DiMare will offer a development course on teaching methods that reach "all kids of all types".

Pam then described several other objectives and activities underway with respect to special education in Winchester:

- Calendar of Events: The calendar would include information on PAC meetings and other events of interest to parents/guardians of children with special education needs. The goal is to have the calendar available by spring.
- Programming: Pam would like to offer programs on behavior issues, evaluations, behavior plans and other interventions by Maureen Michaud; transitions from public schools into higher education and the work force by Jennifer Callison; executive functioning by Sarah Ward; and the Basic Rights workshop that the district is legally obligated to provide on an annual basis.
- Co-teaching: The district is piloting co-teaching strategies at the high school, Ambrose, Lynch, and Muraco.
- Transitions: There is a heightened focus on developing better transition programs

for students ages 18 to 22 (e.g., job training, vocational assessments, life skills) as well as for students transitioning from pre-school to kindergarten, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school. She reported that she and Jennifer Elineema are seeking grants to establish an 8th to 9th grade transition program, understanding that the high school construction work currently poses some initial challenges. Christine Lacey mentioned summer programs that exist for the 5th to 6th and 8th to 9th transition, and a parent cited the Grade Expectations course that is offered.

- Assessments: The district is working to update the assessments used (e.g., WISC-V) to ensure that they are comprehensive.
- Extended Year: Work is underway to develop the programming for the extended year, which will run from July 6 to August 6.
- Restraint Policy: The district is revising its restraint policy to reflect updated state requirements based on Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) recommendations.
- Individualized Education Plans (IEP): The state will roll out a new IEP format in September. Pam mentioned the state law that permits students ages 14 and older to attend IEP meetings. She said that although she understands that some parents/guardians have concerns about their child's attendance, it could give students a voice in the direction of their education. It's also a very good way for students to exercise their self-advocacy skills.
- Coordinated Program Review (CPR): The district will undergo a state review of all education services later this year that examines English language learners (ELL), civil rights and special education. The district will submit the first round of materials in May. Staff from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will then conduct a site visit and interview parents/guardians.
- Budget Development: The first round of budget development is underway. In addition to ensuring that the district meets state mandates, top priorities include funding to support co-teaching, transition programs (e.g., job coaching, vocational assessment and training, job site database, community outreach and travel training) and a psychologist for McCall. Pam said that although the budget is one factor in the equation, it is not the driving vehicle to improve student services. She welcomes staff and parent feedback for their thoughts on bettering special education for Winchester.

Pam finished her discussion by sharing that she has also had struggles in supporting her own children. She understands what many of Winchester's parents/guardians sometimes go through. She wants to offer resources that help parents/guardians support their children both in school and at home. She looks forward to continued positive changes and progress.

IV. Questions/Answers, Comments

Before inviting attendees to ask Pam Girouard questions, Co-Chair Donna DePriest reported that the PAC has developed and will administer a short survey to help gauge parents'/guardians' priorities and to help inform the PAC's programming and activities.

Question 1. Bullying of Children on IEPs: Co-Chair Pamela Cort asked about the federal advisory issued to states about the bullying policy for children on IEPs. The advisory revised the federal policy to make any bullying that interferes with a child's access to FAPE (a free and appropriate public education) actionable. Under the prior policy, only bullying related to a child's disability was actionable. Pamela asked if Pam knew if the district was updating its anti-bullying policy to reflect this change.

Response: Pam said that she was more familiar with regulations to implement the 2012 school discipline law (Chapter 22, regulations 37H, 37.5H and 37.75H). She committed to looking into the issue and said that the policy will need to be revised to incorporate the bulletin.

Question 2. Opportunities for Social Interaction: Co-Chair Donna DePriest mentioned that for some children, especially those with an out-of-district placement, it can be incredibly challenging to develop friendships, particularly for students in middle school and high school. Donna asked if it would be possible to explore ideas for programs/activities to help pair up high school and middle school students.

Response: Greg Rosenthal mentioned the "best buddies" program at the high school, which brings together students who would not necessarily see each other. High school staff John Fleming and Jerry Hugh were mentioned as supporting students.

Follow-Up Question: Donna asked about the possibility of expanding the program to the McCall and even the elementary schools, possibly pairing older students with the younger students.

Response: A parent attendee suggested that participation in after school social field trips for McCall students, which occur approximately monthly, could be extended to students with an out-of-district placement. Another parent attendee suggested that the TOPs program for basketball and soccer might serve as a model for a social program.

Question 3. Teaching Aide Qualifications: A parent asked about the type of experience required for one-on-one teaching aide positions and noted that there seems to be a lot of turnover. She also said that it's not clear that all aides have the background necessary to be implementing an IEP.

Response: Pam said that the turnover in part results from aides leaving for teaching positions. Assistants are required to attend training sessions. They meet with special education supervisors and teachers on a weekly basis. There is a current focus on working with the aides on data collection. Pam also said that although the district's policy precludes teaching aides from attending IEP meetings, she feels their attendance could provide helpful input.

Follow-Up Comment: The parent who posed the question reiterated her concern about the turnover rate, lack of training and what appears to be the hiring of community members looking for part-time and temporary employment. She expressed her view that there is a

lack of service delivery and continuity for special education students.

Response: Pam responded by explaining that school principals hold hiring responsibilities and that aides should be attending internal team consults. She said the focus going forward should include appropriate hiring practices. She also noted that unfortunately, several aides have left the district mid-year.

Follow-Up Question: Co-Chair Pamela Cort requested clarification on the policy regarding teaching aide attendance at IEP meetings.

Response: Pam explained that there is a DESI advisory with points too numerous to discuss at the moment. She said that in her view, although teaching assistants can provide input, the teacher is still the expert who should answer parent/guardian questions since they better understand the child's IEP and are trained to best evaluate and interpret what happens in the classroom.

Question 4. Co-teaching: A parent asked if there are any near term plans to expand co-teaching at McCall and higher grades.

Response: Pam said that there is interest in piloting co-teaching at McCall. She has proposed continuing co-teaching in 9th grade and expanding it into the other high school grades. The administration is currently examining the structure of the Learning Center program. Pam informed the attendees of co-teaching at the elementary level in a 5th grade science class at Lynch, ELA at Muraco, and 4th grade at Ambrose. Pam explained her belief that co-teaching is an excellent instructional philosophy. She stated that when it is appropriate, children might still need to be pulled out of the general setting. Whether or not to be in or out of the classroom will always be child-driven. Pam also expressed her own enthusiasm for learning the latest in instructional techniques so that she can employ those that work best.

Follow-Up Comment: Another parent offered her opinion that the co-teaching her child has received in 4th grade has made a positive difference.

Question 5. Everyday Math: Secretary Colette Desmarais said that for some children with special needs, the language-based Everyday Math curriculum could be a challenge, even for those with a propensity for math. She then asked if the district considered using alternatives.

Response: Pam let the group know that Saxon Math is also available, but it is not showing the results that they want to see. She said that The Landmark School might be able to support the district with math programming and curriculum. Pam also explained that the state's adoption of the Common Core curriculum may "shake things up a bit."

V. Concluding Remarks

Pam restated her support for a strong PAC and how she would like to help the PAC open up learning opportunities for parents/guardians outside of school. Co-Chair Pamela Cort reiterated that the PAC is intended to be a parent-/guardian-driven resource through which parents/guardians can get information and make contributions to help shape the direction of special education in Winchester. Co-Chair Donna DePriest encouraged

parents/guardians to visit the PAC website and reminded them to fill out the survey so that the PAC can develop programming and activities that meet the interests and needs of parents and guardians. The meeting ended at approximately 8:45 pm.