



A SPOTLIGHT ON SPECIAL EDUCATION *A Focus on Optimal Student Achievement*

September 2016

Dear Parents and Guardians,

Welcome back! I hope you all had an enjoyable summer and are ready for a new school year. As always, we anticipate that your child's learning in our schools will reflect high standards, academic achievement, social and emotional gains, and a solid sense of citizenship.

In order to think through a design for student achievement as a top priority, schools must have a school committee, backed by its parents, that believes and funds such efforts. **We do.** The community must also have its administrators and faculty think of student achievement as a top priority and engage students in dynamic ways to encourage an excitement for learning. Excellent instruction and focused professional development must also occur, with connections made to the Commonwealth's frameworks and standards, and instruction evaluated through various standards for measurement.

As we reflect on the steps necessary for our children with special needs to be successful, I wanted to share some of my thoughts for a coordinated view of examining, monitoring and evaluating student achievement. Certainly, examining educational structures like integrated classrooms, differentiated instruction, and opportunities for teachers to further define, and share learning strategies continue to be educational priorities. Critically important to these ideas are teacher training, and dedication and commitment to co-planning so that instruction is seamless between special and regular education.

That said, in order to shift to a truly integrated approach, we must continuously evaluate that student needs are addressed through our building based Student Assistance Teams (SATs) so that rapid intervention happens which helps the student overcome obstacles and succeed more quickly. This year, we will be streamlining our building based SATs so that challenges are clearly identified and dealt with – head on – so no child falls between the cracks. Within our SATs, short, intensive, intentional, and focused help will be provided so that every child has an opportunity for success in both regular and special education.

Another area of focus for the upcoming year includes moving forward with a regular education initiative, called ***Response to Intervention*** (RtI). Although there are many models within RtI, the US Department of Education is silent on its endorsement of a specific model; there are some common denominators.

There are three tiers to RtI model. The first tier intensively targets regular education (primary prevention) in which there is an examination of the scientifically research based instruction, all inclusive screening to identify students who may be at risk for learning and achievement, and a monitoring system to identify students who are not benefiting from this approach. Once identified, these students enter “Tier II” with opportunities to receive direct instruction by groupings within the classroom, pulled aside clarifications, and/or specific skills for a period of time, usually up to, but not exceeding eight weeks. If unsuccessful, the student enters Tier III and receives intensive services, which may result in a referral to special education.

At each tier, individual in approach, students pass through the lenses of the pyramid from the tiers (I,II, and III) of Response to Intervention (RtI) and differentiated instruction for mastery of skills. At each tier, there would be opportunities for designated inclusion facilitators to analyze and synthesize data by targeting special education and reading literacy to develop “learning focused strategies” for the classroom and assist in response to Intervention (RtI) approaches.

For students with special needs, the take away messages from this achievement design is as follows:

1. All students can learn and achieve.
2. Regular and special education will consistently enhance “learning focused” classroom strategies through Response to Intervention, differentiated teaching and co-planning.
3. A new level of thinking and mutual problem solving, from identifying the needs of the individual student to systemic intervention in curriculum, is applied by examining data on a regular basis.
4. MCAS and PARCC scores, and other factors including the student, family, and teacher, measure success.
5. Reductions in both referral and the number and scope of IEPs in special education are possible and within the design.
6. Students with special needs will have more opportunities, based upon the study of data, with the emphasis on learning strategies for skill building, clarification, and/or review.

As always, I thank you for your extraordinary support of special education and wish you the best as we begin the start of the 2016-2017 school year.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth O'Connell
Director of Special Education