



A Spotlight on Special Education

February 2016

Dear Parents and Guardians,

As Director of Special Education, one of my responsibilities is to provide an annual Special Education Update, addressing a range of special education topics and issues, PreKindergarten (PK) to the age of 22. On February 3, 2016, I presented an agenda that discussed the breadth and depth of our programs, the fiscal costs of these programs, what these trends mean for present and future budgets, and most importantly, how the special education leadership team hopes to continue to effect change - collaboratively - regarding program development and effective budgetary planning.

The majority of our students receiving special education services are supported within in-district programs, PK-22. This means that most students attend general education classes with additional specialized support: academic support and instruction, speech and language services, occupational and/or physical therapy, mobility and/or vision services, counseling/psychological services and transition planning.

For some, whether it is for preschoolers, older elementary children or adolescents, a more specialized in-district program is needed. To that end, the Dedham Public Schools have developed a number of high quality programs for students with significant needs. The 2015-2016 Program Descriptions available on the district's website reflects our commitment towards a continuum of services across grade levels and across schools.

Preschoolers identified with special needs, ages 3-4, begin their educational journey at the Early Childhood Education Center (ECEC) where mandates require that all programs must be developmentally appropriate and in a setting with typically developing peers. An increase in Autism Spectrum disorders as well as the enrollment of medically fragile children characterize the challenges starting at preschool and beyond.

Early intervention programs do not necessarily pay off today, but they pay off tomorrow and all the tomorrows thereafter, evidenced by reduction in referral rate, frequency of services, type and longevity of services. If our little tots are able to matriculate into our in-district programs, we offset costs while adhering to mandates. The vision and philosophy behind early intervention is

that intensive services at an early age will lead to generalization of skills and independence over time.

As these children reach school age, our four elementary schools offer a continuum of programs and/or services for grades 1-5. Programs at Dedham Middle School and at Dedham High School offer highly specialized programs as well, keeping in mind that making programmatic adjustments for students as they grow require flexibility. As students get older, services added may include small group credit bearing classes, life skills, and strong transitional planning for other educational or work related experiences once they leave Dedham.

What about our students who require Out-of-District programming?

While we work to meet the majority of our students needs in-district, there are specific factors that can present significant challenges to some of our students. As such, special education teams must consider: child and adolescent development, the level of severity with regard to behavior and general safety, emotional fragility and medical care, along with educational needs. As a result, there are those students who more likely fit the criteria for an out-of-district program. They need highly specialized services, in an environment that can meet their behavioral and social emotional needs.

Planning for the Future

For student success, we need:

- Excellent practices that are research based and measurable.
- Strong support systems based on visionary leadership, collaboration among parents, teachers and administrators, with decisions based on data.
- Analysis of that data so that our school district can figure out the etiology of problems and make recommendations for systemic interventions.

The complexity of our students' needs has already been established as well as the benefits of providing comprehensive early education programs. We know we will continue to have an increase of students at the preschool level, mainly because of Autism Spectrum Disorders. We also know that for a number of students, the cluster of students with developmental and learning disabilities will continue to grow as well students struggling with serious emotional impairments.

Our continued commitment is to include diverse students in in-district placements. Keeping our students in-district, connected to their home community, is still least restrictive and the most cost effective approach.

At this time, in order to meet required mandates, our vision is to:

- Strive for a continuum of in-district services, PK-22, including the majority of our students with flexible options.

- Increase mental health services and supports across schools and programs
- Support pre-referral initiatives such as Response to Intervention (RtI) and Student Assistance Teams (SATs)
- Address regulatory mandates and compliance issues for pre-referral, paperwork and transition.

In-District Program Development and Design

Located at the Riverdale School, the Access Program services students with significant language based learning challenges (learning, attention, language and socialization). The proposal to expand our Access Program will enable us to provide identified students with a continuum through their elementary grade to grade experience.

Student Social-Emotional Health and Wellness

Mental health challenges are not unique to Dedham. More and more, our role as educators has become integral in the areas of mental health and chronic illness. Today, families come to us for services, comfort, and treatment and school staff must understand what resources are available both in and out of school. When considering the mental health of a child, we are constantly looking at severity (personal safety, level of stress), intensity, frequency, and duration. As our responsibilities have increased in very unexpected and unpredictable ways, an increase in psychological support at both the elementary and secondary level is requested.

Transition Services Mandates

The Individual with Disabilities Act (the IDEA) now outlines a mandate to ensure that all students with disabilities have available to them services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living. Post-secondary planning is required to be highly individualized, including but not limited to transportation, employability training programs, etc. A dedicated full time Transition Specialist is recommended to ensure the viability of our new Career Center while offering efficiencies to meet this mandate by helping teams develop post secondary goals, provide small group instruction in the form of school to work seminars, and provide employability and life skills training.

Summary

There are six primary drivers to any special education budget:

- The number of students we serve as a district
- The number of faculty and staff needed to educate these students
- The number of services required to meet each student's individualized goals

- The grouping patterns necessary to meet those Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals
- The frequency of recommended services
- The type of program; in-district or out-of-district

In order to meet required mandates, our vision is to leverage our internal expertise to grow or initiate new programs, to establish program continuums, and to reduce costs by efficient models in program development that allow students to remain connected to their home communities and typical peers.

That said, whenever program design is in process, teams must ensure:

- Transitional planning among out-of-district schools, our school district, and home
- Curriculum alignment among out-of-district schools and our school district
- Consistent support for families and students

The special education leadership team - Amy Muldoon, Marjorie Goldstein-Fradin, and Meredith Becker - continue to study our in-district programs as a system, making sure our programs offer a continuum of services that are cost effective and ensure educational progress. New programs and service delivery models will continue to be proposed as student trends are identified, data collected and analyzed. Always, we are committed to studying, training staff, and offering educational and learning opportunities about specific disabilities, in collaboration with our Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC).

We continue to appreciate your support and input as we pursue these goals.

Sincerely,



Liza O'Connell
Director of Special Education