

March 28, 2014

Dear School Committee Members, Finance Committee Members and Board of Selectmen,

Our names are Nancy Sherburne and Bill Guthlein and we are the Chairs of the Acton-Boxborough Special Education Parent Advisory Council (AB SpEd PAC). Our job is to advise the School Committee and district on issues that pertain to the education and safety of children with special needs.

We are writing to you today because we have serious concerns about the 2015 budget process and outcome. We understand that fashioning our district's town and school budgets each year is a long and arduous task and that it is difficult to balance the needs of diverse populations within the community. However, this year there seem to have been multiple disconnects in the budget process, which unfortunately have negatively impacted families of children with special needs.

The AB SpEd PAC was actively involved in the budget process and attended all School Committee meetings, including Budget Saturday. The 2015 budget voted by the School Committee on February 6, 2015, included an essential new staff position for a Special Education Coordinator. This new position was required to reduce an excessive workload for the existing Elementary Special Education Coordinator and to effectively manage the increased responsibilities of our newly expanded K-12 AB regional school district. The need for this position had been identified last year during regionalization planning by Boxborough Superintendent, Curt Bates and Acton Director of Special Education, Liza Huber. During the 2014 school budget cycle a commitment had been made to realign special education staff resources from Blanchard to fill this necessary position in the newly expanded school district.

Unfortunately, after public pressure from members of the Finance Committee and Board of Selectman to reduce the school budget, this staff position was summarily cut from the 2015 school budget. With less than 24 hours notice the Special Education Coordinator position was removed from the budget by School Committee vote on Feb. 12, 2014. We only became aware of this budget change hours before the meeting. Given the short lead-time there was little opportunity for public comment or Committee deliberation. We're concerned that the ramifications of this decision weren't fully considered prior to the vote.

As of July 1, 2014 the current Elementary Special Education Coordinator is responsible for:

- Supervising, training and evaluating 119 certified special educators and special education assistants across 6 elementary schools in two towns (including 28 additional staff from Blanchard);
- Designing, developing and managing special education programs K-6 at 6 elementary schools in two different towns; and
- Committing financial resources of the district, chairing high stakes Team meetings and coordinating student needs with staff, school administrators and parents.

Moreover, the new evaluation system mandated by the state substantially increases the amount of time the Coordinator must dedicate to that activity. It is simply not possible for one individual to perform these tasks fully and effectively for 119 staff at six different schools – the numbers are prohibitive.

The current 2015 staffing configuration is likely to lead to a degradation of services and kids falling through the cracks due to staff overload. We expect:

- Less time will be spent on program evaluation and design, teacher development and support as well as direct student teaching;
- More children will likely move to the junior high without adequate transition planning;
- And special education costs associated with delayed identification and program development for students will likely lead to increased special education spending and possibly more out-of-district placements.

In addition to the loss of the Coordinator position needed to meet the needs of our expanded school district, there appears to have been a significant disconnect between the town and school budget processes. Following the School Committee vote on Feb. 12, 2014 to reduce the 2015 school budget and the Finance Committee vote on Mar. 11, 2014 to support that reduced budget, special education families were dumbfounded to read a front-page article in the Beacon titled, "Surplus Leads to Revamped Budget." This article revealed that the Acton Leadership Group had identified \$885,000 in surplus at the last minute that it was going to devote principally to reducing the tax levy in town. We have been fielding angry calls from parents who feel very misled by the town regarding its resources during the 2015 budget process.

These hiccups in the budget process leave us with several unanswered questions:

- How could we get so far through the budget process before the ALG realized or shared that the town had almost a million dollar surplus that could have gone toward essential school and town staffing needs?
- Why are we prioritizing reducing the tax levy in town over essential town safety and school education needs?
- And how is the school district going to ensure that the responsibilities of the Elementary Special Education Coordinator will be accomplished successfully across our newly expanded school district in 2015 given the current staffing level?

Your response to our concerns in the next week or two will determine whether or not we can support the town and school budgets at Town Meeting this year. Thank you very much for your time and attention to these matters.

Respectfully submitted,

*Nancy Sherburne & Bill Guthlein*

Acton-Boxborough SpEd PAC Co-Chairs