



**Acton-Boxborough Special
Education Parent Advisory Council
Board Meeting - Wednesday,
November 12, 2008**

MEETING MINUTES

- I. Call to Order: The meeting was called to order by Nancy Sherburne
Attendees: Nancy Sherburne; Terry Lindgren, Bill Guthlein, Steve Lowe, Valerie Ryan, Mike Coppolino, Elaine Molasky, Sandra Pallozzi, Candace Doncaster, Lynne Zawada, Cynthia Overman, Julie Towell
- II. Approval of September Minutes: The minutes from the September 16, 2008 AB SpEd PAC Executive Board Meeting were presented and reviewed. A motion was made to approve the minutes as written. The motion was seconded and the minutes were unanimously approved.
- III. Election of New Secretary: Nancy shared that Valerie Ryan had volunteered to run for the position of SpEd PAC Secretary. She asked if there were any other candidates who'd like to run for this position. No other volunteers came forward. A motion was made to elect Valerie Ryan Secretary of the AB SpEd PAC. The motion was seconded and unanimously approved. We welcome Valerie Ryan as our new secretary and thank our outgoing secretary, Srabani Banerjee, for her time and commitment to the PAC.
- IV. Presentation by IPS parents: Parents representing the Acton-Boxborough Integrated Preschool's Applied Behavior Analysis Program for Children on the Autism Spectrum (ABA Program) presented their concerns to the Board. Mike asked how many children were in the program. ABA parents believed there were currently 9 children in the ABA program, however Pupil Services only counted 7.
 - A. Nancy provided a brief overview of ABA parent concerns from 2005-2008:
 - From 2002 to 2005 there was a full-time Program Director in place for the ABA Preschool Program. Nancy stated that, according to Liza, there were 15 to 18 students in the program at that time.
 - In 2006 the Program Director position was reconfigured to be shared by two part-time staff. Unfortunately, their schedules overlapped and some days there were two staff on site and other days neither was available. Parents began to raise concerns about program oversight and IEP services that weren't being delivered. They outlined their concerns in a letter, which included missed clinic meetings, staff training that hadn't occurred, and direct IEP services that hadn't been delivered. The parents filed this letter as a formal DOE

complaint. The DOE found in the parents' favor and missed IEP services were provided belatedly to those students by the school district.

- In the fall of 2006 ABA parents met with Liza Huber regarding their belief that the ABA program needed full-time leadership. As a result of those meetings parents were under the impression that the district was committed to hiring a full-time director for the ABA Program. The parents waited patiently for a year and were surprised in 2007, when a different service model for program director was implemented. A full-time staff member was hired but only half of her time was dedicated to the ABA Program Director position while the other half was dedicated to a Lead Teacher position in one of the integrated classrooms.
- In the fall of 2008 parents continued to be concerned that the quality of the ABA program was diminishing and that the current half-time leadership model was not providing adequate program leadership and oversight.
- Over the last three years parents have written three letters to the district signed by virtually all families in the ABA preschool program regarding their continued ABA program concerns. As a PAC we are bringing their concerns forward in an effort to resolve their ongoing program design and leadership concerns.

B. New Service Model: Steve asked why the ABA Lead/Director should not be expected to take more than one area of responsibility. Nancy outlined some of the responsibilities of the Lead, including: general ABA program design and oversight; individual student program design; supervising and training staff; observing children across multiple settings; screening incoming students, updating and modifying individual programs; and conducting monthly clinic meetings with each family. The Parents pointed out that the process is very data driven and that spectrum children are complex and have very individualized needs that require coordination among multiple direct service providers, such as PT, OT, and S/L specialists.

Parents also shared that the Surgeon General recommended approach for spectrum children is to provide 20 hours of ABA intervention per week for significant results. A Board Certified, Master's level professional is required to supervise a quality ABA program. It was pointed out that the current ABA Lead is not yet Board Certified nor is she supervised by a Board Certified ABA specialist. While there is a consultant to the ABA Program, she does not supervise the current Lead. Parents emphasized the importance of certification of the new ABA Lead and that the Lead needs adequate time to run the program properly. It was agreed among the group that quality, intensive education/intervention is critically important for these students, and if done effectively at an early age, can reduce the need for services later.

Steve asked why the number of children had decreased so significantly from 2005 to 2008. Nancy shared that Liza said some children with more significant needs were being placed out-of-district at this time. It was also theorized by parents that perhaps the limited methodology used in the program had led some families to consider private program placement.

C. Communication: Terry observed that it has been parents' experience that school-parent communications have been inconsistent and slow – calls and emails haven't been promptly returned. He suggested that there are consequences of this in terms of information exchange between parents and outside providers and between parents and school staff. Parents gave examples of the impact of the new policy that eliminates direct communication between parents and trainers (specially trained aides working directly with the children). Parents stated that the young age and complex needs of their children makes direct contact with the trainers for a few minutes before and after school each day critical. They went on to point out that the combination of documentation in the home logs and face-to-face communication is essential to ensure quality home-school communication. Parents pointed out that the change in policy with regard to direct contact with trainers was made in a unilateral manner by the administration – there was no advance notice to or discussion with parents. Parents gave examples of the direct impact of the policy on individual, long-term ABA programs in place for their children. Examples included: transition from parent to school; potty training, eating programs; and ability to communicate about how the children were generalizing their programs to the home setting on a day-to-day basis.

Parents shared that the home log was an ineffective replacement for direct communication as many of their questions and comments went unanswered when they attempted to communicate via the home log. Concerns were voiced about the quality and completeness of the information provided about the school day in the home logs. Another example of restricted access to information was given by a parent who unobtrusively waited to observe her child on one of his first days of school and was told this was not allowed and was asked to leave. Parents pointed out that the barriers in communication result in considerable challenge in their ability to relay information to outside professionals and to discuss their children as informed Team Members at IEP and Team Meetings.

Mike asked if the problems had existed when a full-time director was in place. Parents noted that the first problems were experienced when the single, full-time director model was changed. Terry wondered if the problems might be a function of staff qualification and not just time dedicated to the position. Parents pointed out that the current ABA Lead was not hired at the director level and therefore may not have director level qualifications coming into the position. They also pointed out the considerable responsibilities the current Lead has in running an Integrated Class while at the same time maintaining her responsibilities as ABA Program Lead. Mike indicated that he heard the parents concerns and that they had presented information consistent with what had been brought to the School Committee's attention in years past.

D. Recommendations of Outside Evaluators: Parents also pointed out that there was a discrepancy between services recommended by physicians based on extensive neuropsychological testing, and what was being provided to the

children by the district. Mike asked what information the district had to counter the physician recommendations. Parents stated that the district used their own experience with the children and their own assessments but questioned whether or not district staff had the necessary training/expertise to dismiss recommendations made by physicians following extensive testing.

- E. Summer Services and Floater Policy: Parents went on to share that there had been inconsistencies and oversights in providing summer services and that the communication with parents regarding this issue had been inadequate. Parents were confused about why some children who were to receive summer services did not receive them and some who needed summer services due to risk of regression were not offered those services. Additionally, Parents had concerns regarding the new Floater Policy. This policy allows 2 staff to float among 3 children. The parents were not informed by the administration about the policy, but found out incidentally. The parents stated that their children were supposed to have a 1:2 staff to child ratio at all times and that this policy was in violation of their children's IEPs.
- F. Therapy Providers: Parents pointed out that there is currently no communication from the OT and PT providers to parents and very limited communication from the Speech provider. Parents had requested that direct service sessions be noted on the daily home logs; however the administration had been unwilling to accommodate this request. Parents noted that their access to these providers is severely limited.
- G. Closing: Mike asked what the response had been to the previous letters. Nancy shared that in 2006 the DOE found in favor of the parents and the school was required to provide missed IEP services and staff training. Nancy went on to say that the primary parent concern regarding a full-time program director had not been addressed to parents' satisfaction and that the ABA parents continue to feel that the current service model is not adequate to maintain program quality.

Action items: Per Mike's request parents will provide accounts in writing of their experiences to Nancy. Nancy will organize the written accounts and include them in the School Committee packet. A summary of the outcome of the upcoming parent meeting with Liza will be provided to Mike. Terry and Nancy will now assume the responsibility of taking the ABA parent concerns forward for resolution.

- V. Organization/ Business Issues:
 - A. Status of PAC Survey: Nancy let the group know that surveys were continuing to come in slowly. She emphasized that parents need to be encouraged to fill them out and should feel certain that they are anonymous. Nancy now has 41 responses.

Action Item: Julie offered to send another reminder to parents. Nancy gratefully mentioned that she would provide Julie with the content for an email reminder.

- B. Dec. 10th Superintendent focus group meeting: Nancy spoke of the upcoming PAC meeting during which Heather Harer, Superintendent Search Committee Chair, would run a focus group/discussion forum specifically for parents of children with special needs. She emphasized the importance of parents attending to share their perspectives on what qualities, skills and experience they feel the next superintendent should possess, as that individual will directly impact the future direction of special education in our school district.
- C. PAC presentation to School Committee Nov. 20th: Nancy and Terry will present the PAC's goals and priorities for the current school year. In May the PAC will return to present its accomplishments for the year.

VI. Open Issues

- A. Recommendations of Outside Specialists: Nancy shared that an increasing number of families are contacting the PAC saying their neuropsychological evaluation recommendations are not being accepted by the district or incorporated into their child's IEP. Mike mentioned this represents a flawed process – the goals are to have good staff making good decisions leading to good outcomes and to have open, safe communications with receptive educators. He went on to state that the same issues have been raised year after year indicating a lack of district progress in this area. It was mentioned that the majority of SpEd parents are happy with the services provided by the district. It was theorized that the difference in experiences may be a function of the complexity of the child's needs. Steve suggested that a histogram be generated to clarify this.

Action Item Julie to talk with Liza about getting demographic data from Pupil Services' 2007 parent survey to look for patterns by age and disability, etc.

- VII. Adjournment: A motion to adjourn the meeting was made and unanimously approved.

VIII. Next Meeting – PAC General Meeting Dec. 10th at 7:00 JH library

Library Donation – In closing it was noted that the PAC would formally donate the books and funds it has collected in Lynne Deutsch's memory to the Acton Memorial Library at 11:00 am on November 13th. A total of \$570 dollars was raised and close to 100 books were collected. Pupil Services generously shared a copy of each of the books in their parent lending library.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Valerie Ryan, Secretary