End of Year Report
June 5, 2017
To: The Members of the Weston School Committee - Danielle Black, Alex Cobb, Ed Heller, John Henry, and Sanjay Saini

Cc: Midge Connolly, Jennifer Truslow, Pamela Bator, Cynthia Mahr, Anthony Parker, John Gibbons, Matthew Lucey, Jennifer Faber, Erin Maguire, Lee McCane, Cheryl Antoine, and Elizabeth Nagarajah

From: Christen Lacey, Chair, Weston PAC

Date: June 5, 2017


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Executive Summary

The Weston Public Schools have made strong gains in serving the needs of students with special needs in the past few years. The Weston PAC is grateful for the efforts of so many individuals who have worked to improve programs and to create better learning experiences for our students. Moving forward, we can consider a model of continuous improvement, in regards to special education programs and services, the intersections between special education and general education, and in providing social-emotional supports for students.

Why Is There a Parent Advisory Council for Special Education?

Every School Committee is required to establish a special education parent advisory council, per the Massachusetts General Laws, in part due to the legislative initiatives of Massachusetts Advocates for Children (http://massadvocates.org/specialeducation/legislation/). The duties of the PAC include those noted below:

The school committee of any city, town, or school district shall establish a parent advisory council on special education. Membership shall be offered to all parents of children with disabilities and other interested parties. The parent advisory council duties shall include but not be limited to: advising the school committee on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities; meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school committee's special education programs…

Massachusetts General Laws, M.G.L. c. 71B, 3
(https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71B/Section3)
Collaboration

A few years ago, the PAC met with former Superintendent Dr. Cheryl Maloney and articulated its top three priorities at that time as:

1) Transparency

2) Collaboration

3) Trust

Weston parents of students with special needs were seeking greater transparency regarding WPS special education programs and services, and wanted to partner more collaboratively with administrators and faculty, in an effort to build and restore trust between families and the schools.

Then and Now

In June of 2014, the PAC presented to the Weston School Committee (2014 presentation - http://www.westonpac.org/uploads/3/1/5/0/31506421/pactoschoolcommittee060214.pdf) and as a “snapshot” of the journey in recent years towards improving the district’s special education programs, we note the following:

**Then:** The PAC presented data on the achievement gap between all Weston students and Weston students with disabilities.

**Now:** Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Pamela Bator annually presents the results of standardized testing, and documents the progress towards closing the achievement gap for Weston students with special needs (2016 WPS report - http://westonschools.org/index.cfm?cid=42729&pid=12284).
Then: The PAC requested team meeting facilitators.

Now: Beginning with this school year, there are now team chairs in all five schools. The team chairs serve as the primary point of contact for families of students on IEPs, lead IEP meetings, and prepare IEP documentation, which has led to improved communication and relationships with families.

Then: The PAC highlighted the need for universal screening for foundational reading skills, and the importance of identifying the specific nature of reading challenges to provide targeted interventions.

Now: The Weston Public Schools have begun utilizing several Kindergarten screening tools that assess phonological awareness, including rhyming, segmenting, and blending, as well as assessments of letter-sound knowledge. We extend our thanks to Elementary ELA Curriculum Specialist Katharine Odell for championing this initiative over the past several years. Further development of these efforts will continue with the elementary school principals and Case House Administration, including a review of research by Dr. Nadine Gaab, whom WPS and the Weston PAC hosted in 2015 (Weston Media Center video of Dr. Gaab’s presentation - https://vimeo.com/146314475 and Dr. Gaab’s presentation is also available for download - http://www.westonpac.org/dyslexialanguage-based-learning-disabilities.html).

Then: Concerns raised in the PAC’s parent survey included:

Source: http://westonschools.org/index.cfm?cdid=42729&pid=12284

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</tbody>
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“Until the school is actively involved, I fear this is just parents talking with parents and not impacting administrative and school efforts.”

**Now:** As noted previously, in recent years the PAC has endeavored to work collaboratively with the schools and administrators. These efforts are consistent with the MA DESE Guidance for Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/pac/guidelines.pdf), which notes:

“One key principle we hope that readers receive from this guidance is that in order for PACs to be most effective in improving special education in the district, there must be true collaboration between the PAC and the school district leadership.”

**Then:** The 2014 presentation highlighted the increases in the number of children identified with autism nationally, the importance of early intervention, and suggested improvements to WPS programs to support Weston students on the autism spectrum.

**Now:** The ACCESS program has been expanded to all grade levels, and there are other forms of support available for students with autism who utilize other programs and services. While the program improvements have been significant at the elementary level, the PAC continues to support further program and professional development at the secondary level.

**Then:** We noted that consistently significant numbers of our students were diagnosed with specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, demonstrating a need to create high quality special education programs within the district.

**Now:** Students with specific learning disabilities continue to comprise the largest number of Weston students in special education. Over the past few years, WPS has continued to develop and improve its language-based classrooms (LBCs). Starting in the fall of 2017, the Woodland School will have LBCs in 2nd and 3rd grade, the Field School will host LBCs in 4th and 5th grade, and WMS will offer LBCs and language-based programs in grades 6-8. Language-based supports are also available at WHS and are continuing to evolve. In addition, many WPS teachers have been trained in Orton-Gillingham in recent years. Also, next fall, a phonics program called Fundations will be introduced in general education in the elementary grades. The introduction of formal phonics instruction is an important milestone, and is due in part to parents advocating for this type of program for many years.

The PAC is grateful to all those who have contributed to these changes and for the financial support of the Weston community, which has made an investment in improving the education of our children with special needs.

**Transitions**

There has been a smooth transition as Dr. Midge Connolly became Interim Superintendent of the Weston Public Schools in April, 2017 and the appointment of former Assistant Director of
Student Services, Jennifer Truslow, as WPS Director of Student Services. We also extend our
thanks to former superintendent Dr. Robert Tremblay for his support of the PAC.

This is also a year of several retirements and departures. While this is not a comprehensive list,
we wish to recognize the contributions of Physical Therapist Beth Harrington, WMS nurse Pat
Hoban, and WHS nurse Kathy Becker as they retire. Their care for and dedication to WPS
students will be long remembered. We also extend our best wishes to Matt Lucey, Karen
Hillman, and Aidan O’Hara as they transition to new opportunities. In particular, Mr. O’Hara
has created a powerful legacy of inclusion for students with special needs in the WMS Drama
program, which we hope will continue.

Community Connections

Throughout the course of this school year, the Weston PAC has collaborated with the Office of
Student Services to offer a series of meetings and events to inform and educate parents:

- **Friday, September 9, 2016** - First meeting of the school year. Introductions to new WPS
  faculty and administrators.

- **Thursday, October 13, 2016** - WPS and the Weston PAC hosted an Eye to Eye
  (http://eyetoeyenational.org/) speaker presentation. A college student ambassador
  spoke to parents and students about her journey with learning and attention challenges.
  This presentation was taped by our partners at Weston Media Center, and is available
  for viewing through this link - https://vimeo.com/188289713.

- **Wednesday, November 16, 2016** - Special Education Programs at Weston High School.
  WHS faculty spoke at this evening presentation for parents about programs and services

- **Tuesday, December 13, 2016** - Basic Rights in Special Education. This was the annual
  Basic Rights presentation, which was led by a presenter from the Federation for
  Children with Special Needs (http://fcsn.org/). This workshop is designed to help
  parents learn to be effective partners with their child's school, to determine their child's
  eligibility for special education, and to plan, make decisions about, and monitor their
  child's progress in school.

- **Friday, February 10, 2017** – WPS and the Weston PAC hosted Social Thinking Boston
  (http://socialthinkingboston.com/). We extend our thanks to Nancy Clements, a speech
  language pathologist and the Executive Director of Social Thinking Boston®, a fully
  endorsed and licensed clinic through Michelle Garcia Winner and Social Thinking®.

- **Friday, March 17, 2017** - WHS and the Weston PAC jointly hosted: Perspectives on
  Student Stress: A Panel Discussion for Parents. WPS parents of students in all grades
  attended this presentation, which was led by a group of WHS faculty members and
  student speakers. The link to this presentation may be found here -
  http://www.westonpac.org/uploads/3/1/5/0/31506421/whs_perspectives_on_student
  _stress_031717.pdf
- **Wednesday, April 12, 2017** – WPS and the Weston PAC hosted a screening of *Swim Team, The Film* (http://www.swimteamthefilm.com/). The film chronicles the stories of several students with autism and their families, as well as their triumphs in and out of the pool.

- **Friday, May 12, 2017** – Final meeting of the year, for reflection and planning.

**Educational Placements and Collaboration Between Special Education and General Education**


Given the continued evolution of WPS special education programs, it may be helpful to review the “educational placements,” or levels of service. The definitions for each placement type are provided within the triangle image.

Source: WPS Office of Student Services, Continuum of Special Educational Services – PAC presentation, September 2014

For the 2016-2017 school year, the educational placement, or level of service, for Weston students on IEPs ages 6 – 21 (exclusive of preschool), was as follows:

- Full Inclusion – 77.4%
- Partial Inclusion – 12.5%
- Substantially Separate – 1.8%
- Separate Day Schools – 6.5% (public and private)
- Residential – 1.8%
As such, approximately 92% of our students with special needs ages 6-21 were educated within the district this school year, and 77.4% of those students (in “full inclusion” placements) received services outside the general education classroom less than 21% of the time.

What are the implications for Weston students with special needs?

- While the vast majority of students with special needs are educated within the district (see Appendix 1 of this report – there were 28 students in out of district placements this school year), Weston is a relatively small district and the PAC anticipates that there will be some students for whom education in a separate day school or a residential program is the appropriate placement.

- Given the high percentage of our students with special needs in “full inclusion” and “partial inclusion” placements, it is essential to foster ongoing collaboration between general educators and special educators. The majority of WPS students with special needs spend most of their school days in general education classrooms, and may need differentiated instruction to reach their learning goals.

Continuous Improvement

While WPS has made significant gains in the breadth and depth of its special education programs in recent years, we offer the following considerations as potential means to continually improve the educational programs and services for WPS students and the experiences of their families.

District-wide

- Continue the work in creating transparency, fostering collaboration, and establishing trust with families of WPS students with special needs.
- Continue to refine the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP), and ensure that all faculty and staff understand what accommodations are available to all students.
- Establish consistency in the development and implementation of 504 Plans across all schools.
- Assess the gender differences in WPS special education programs.
  - In the 2013-2014 school year, 63.5% of students in Weston special education programs were male, and 36.5% of students in Weston special education programs were female.
  - As of October 1, 2016, 67.8% of students in Weston special education programs were male, and 32.2% of students in Weston special education programs were female.
  - While the national and state data also show gender differences in special education, the distribution of many disabilities within the population is not as heavily weighted toward boys and young men. We need to take care to ensure that we are not under-identifying and potentially underserving girls and young women with special needs.
- Noting the goal of greater transparency, post on the WPS website and possibly on each school’s website, a “program grid” of the special education programs that are available in each grade/school.
- Continue to offer “transition” overview meetings for families of students with special needs whose child will be moving between schools in the coming year (e.g., K-3/Field, Field/WMS, WMS/WHS). These meetings, which were re-introduced this school year, offer families a “preview” of programs and services, as well as an opportunity to establish relationships with some of their children’s future teachers and service providers. This is an important way to reduce families’ anxiety and to ensure continuity between schools.
- Improve communications between WPS and the families of students with special needs. Ensure that families understand the resources to contact to request a special education evaluation or for any questions regarding their children’s services, and that they are also aware that the Weston PAC is a resource available to parents.
- Incorporate a discussion of educating students with special needs in WPS program reviews in subject areas – e.g., a Math program review would include a discussion of how the department differentiates instruction for students with special needs. As noted previously, this is particularly important in our district as the majority of students with special needs spend most of their school days in our general education classrooms.
- Continue to refine the Instructional Support Team (IST) model as well as Response to Intervention (RTI).
- Consider the introduction of district-wide Social-Emotional (SEL) curriculum (http://www.casel.org/).
- Continue to thoughtfully evaluate students learning English and those who are multi-lingual for special education services.
- Analyze how WPS could further incorporate assistive technology in the education of students with special needs.
- Conduct exit interviews with families of children with special needs who decide to leave the Weston Public Schools to understand the drivers behind those decisions.
- Provide earlier notice of eligibility for Extended School Year summer programs.
- Ensure that progress reports are sent in a timely manner, preferably at the same time as report cards.
- Include a discussion of students with special needs in the WPS Transportation Handbook.
IEPs

- At all schools, provide standard documentation to parents at the conclusion of IEP meetings to memorialize what was discussed at the meeting, prior to the receipt of the full IEP.
- Ensure that all teachers have read and understand the content of IEPs (as well as 504 Plans). As schedules change throughout the year, teachers should read and implement IEPs for any of their new students.

Elementary Schools

- With the introduction of the language-based classrooms at Woodland and the further growth of the ACCESS program at Country, ensure that parents are aware of the specialized programs at the K-3 level when considering whether a particular school may be a good fit for their child’s needs.
- Continue to refine the Kindergarten screening tools to improve identification of reading challenges and to deploy targeted interventions as early as possible.
- Further develop a data-driven culture with enhanced progress monitoring tools that are utilized on a frequent basis.

Secondary Schools

- During the course of this school year, many families have provided positive feedback regarding improvements in special education programs and services at WHS in particular. The PAC hosted two meetings at the high school this year and remains focused on the social-emotional needs of our older students in particular.
- As noted in the WPS Office of Student Services 2016-2017 presentation to School Committee (http://westonschools.org/index.cfm?cdid=43565&pid=10257), enrollment in the WHS Bridge program remains high:

  - **29 students this year**
    - 10 freshmen (high compared to previous years)
    - 7 sophomores
    - 6 juniors
    - 6 seniors - all are graduating and attending 4 year colleges

- While this year may have been atypical, there was also an increase in freshman and sophomore students seeking support. While the PAC appreciates the work at WHS in terms of the evolution of this program next year into Bridge (ongoing support) and Transitions, district leaders also need to examine the root causes of student hospitalizations and stress. While it is critical to serve this population of students and enable them to continue to attend high school within the district when possible, we should also evaluate what more can be done on a preventative basis to support students and potentially decrease the need for this type of program.
- Although Bridge is a high school program, there has also been an increase in the number
of students experiencing emotional distress at WMS as well.

- Earlier this year, the PAC added pages to its website on Emotional/Mental Health (http://www.westonpac.org/emotionalmental-health.html) and Substance Abuse (http://www.westonpac.org/substance-abuse.html), which continue to be among the most widely accessed pages on the site, indicating a need for this information to be widely disseminated to families. WHS students’ levels of stress and substance abuse remain causes for concern, as noted in the Weston Youth Health Assessment Report 2015 (http://www.westonschools.org/index.cfm?cdid=41087&pid=30115).

- We appreciate the recent communication from the Guidance department regarding the series 13 Reasons Why and the resources provided regarding suicide prevention. Tragically, due to the prevalence of social media and other factors, younger children have begun to consider and attempt suicide, and the entire community must remain vigilant in its prevention efforts.

- There has also been an increase in students experiencing school anxiety, as well as generalized anxiety. We should evaluate additional supports for these students, and again, the drivers for these increases.

Assessment

In considering the drivers of student stress, one area for further evaluation is assessment. How are students assessed? Do they have multiple forms to demonstrate what they know? Do they have opportunities to revise and improve their work and complete corrections?

In the book Overloaded and Underprepared: Strategies for Stronger Schools and Healthy, Successful Kids, Stanford education professor and co-founder of Challenge Success (http://www.challengesuccess.org/) Denise Pope, and her co-authors Maureen Brown and Sarah Miles write:

“The Latin assidere means “to sit beside.” Assessment is an opportunity to sit beside a student – literally or figuratively – to try to understand what he or she knows and can do. Assessment is an exercise in analysis, but also in empathy. Sitting beside our students, we put ourselves in their shoes and into their heads, trying to see what they do and don’t understand and how we can best support their learning going forward.” (pp. 96-97).

In considering assessment, especially at the secondary level, are there ways of demonstrating greater empathy? We ask that the members of the School Start Time/Scheduling Innovation Steering Committee look at means of balancing the demands on students’ time, helping to ensure that school is more than the “input/output” of homework assignments and tests, and that there is time allotted for deeper learning as well as the extracurricular commitments, personal growth, and the health of adolescents.
Lighting the Way

For parents, navigating the special education process can be challenging. There are documents to review, processes to understand, decisions to make, and often a new vocabulary to master about placements, service grids, and “effective progress.” A paradigm for us to consider on the next phase of this journey is how team chairs and special educators, as well as the PAC, can help “light the way” for parents. Special education can be a complex and sometimes confusing process, and having a navigational guide can make a significant difference.

Building the Legacy

As the school year draws to a close, we wish to thank Dr. Midge Connolly for her work as the previous Director of Student Services and we look forward to continuing to work with her in her role as Interim Superintendent of the Weston Public Schools. We also thank Jen Truslow for her warmth and engagement in the early days of her tenure as the new Director of Student Services, as well as all of the special educators, service providers, general education teachers, and all those who support our children each day.

Given a model of continuous improvement, there remain ways to serve children better, however, it is also good to reflect upon how much our special education programs have evolved in a relatively short time. When parents who have struggled in the past reach out and say, “my child is getting better,” or when other parents note that, given specialized instruction, “my child is back to being himself/herself,” there is joy in hearing those messages and in knowing that our work is having an impact improving the education and lives of WPS students.

When we do the best that we can, we never know what miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another – Helen Keller

Respectfully submitted,

Christen Lacey
Chair, Weston PAC
## Appendix 1: WPS Students with Special Needs - Data by Primary Disability Code

### Update on Numbers of Students with Disabilities

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WPS Office of Student Services 2016-2017 Presentation to School Committee
http://westonschools.org/index.cfm?cdid=43565&pid=10257