



Attleboro Special Education Parent Advisory Council (ASEPAC)
2014/2015 Annual Report

Attleboro SEPAC Overview:

In accordance with federal and state special education laws and regulations and in adherence with all the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) directives and advisories pertaining to the creation and functioning of special education parent advisory councils, Attleboro Public Schools has established and will continue to foster the Attleboro Special Education Parent Advisory Council (ASEPAC). ASEPAC receives its statutory authority from the Chapter 71B, Section 3 of the Massachusetts General Laws. This authority is also codified in the Code of Massachusetts Regulations (CMR), 603 CMR 28.07(4).

ASEPAC Mission Statement:

The mission of ASEPAC is to facilitate understanding, respect and support for all children with special education needs in our community.

ASEPAC's duties as outlined in Chapter 71B of the Massachusetts General Laws include but are not limited to:

- Advising the district on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities
 - Meeting regularly with school officials
 - Participating in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school district's special education programs
 - Organizing a Basic Rights Training as outlined in the statute:
 - *Each school district shall conduct, in cooperation with the local parent advisory council, at least one workshop annually within the school district on the rights of students and their parents and guardians under the special education laws of the commonwealth and the federal government and shall make written materials explaining such rights available upon request*
- M.G.L. c. 71B, § 1

ASEPAC Board Members serving for 2015/2016 as elected on May 21st 2015:

Angela Ferreira - Chairperson

Susan Akell - Co-Chairperson

Vacancy - Treasurer

Michelle Brouillard - Workshop Coordinator

Vacancy - Secretary

Julie Doxsey - Public Relations

ASEPAC Meetings:

In keeping with the state's Open Meeting Law, our meetings are posted at least 48 hours in advance, minutes are kept, and agenda/attendance sheets are maintained by the ASEPAC Secretary in compliance with the Public Records Law. ASEPAC hosts general meetings monthly September – May. Officers meet monthly with the Special Education Director and board meetings are held by officers as needed for planning purposes. In 2015/2016 ASEPAC will introduce dedicated monthly parent support for 30 minutes prior to each general meeting during the school year. This will give parents the opportunity to seek guidance and support from ASEPAC officers face to face.

ASEPAC 2014/2015 Accomplishments:

The Board worked hard to achieve goals and objectives on behalf of all students, families and staff in the Attleboro Public Schools. We continued our outreach efforts to members, educators, school PTOs, and the public in general. Some highlights are:

- Collaboration with the CTE program for design and production of a Buddy Bench. This has been an exciting venture for ASEPAC. Installation and celebration will take place in September 12, 2015 at Willett Elementary School. Additionally, ASEPAC is collaborating with Laurie Reagan K-8 ELA Curriculum Coordinator and Principal Jeff Cateon to develop and implement the PBIS training for the staff on the intention and use of the buddy bench. This same information will be shared with the PTO during the fall at Willett. ASEPAC does intend to provide a buddy bench and PBIS training at each elementary school in the district.
- ASEPAC hosted a Paint & Vino Night fundraiser in July 2014 to assist in helping to cover the costs of the ASEPAC Buddy Bench Project. This fundraiser was very successful and it was well attended by both special education families and staff.
- ASEPAC conducted a district-wide needs assessment survey to assist in gathering feedback and comments to help learn what the primary concerns are among parents and guardians of students with disabilities in the Attleboro School District. This data should be utilized by special education administration to assist in meeting the needs of students that require special education programming and as a guide for improving special education services within the district.

- Participation in Blue Pride Night at Attleboro High School to help foster outreach to families with students receiving special education support services.
- Maintaining the Attleboro SEPAC Facebook page to provide public meeting announcements and to provide links to disability and special education resources for families and staff. We have found this to be a great resource for our members. Our Facebook page is located at: <https://www.facebook.com/AttleboroSEPAC>
- Maintaining an email list serve for families. We share information from MassPAC (a statewide SEPAC list serve) that shares information on disability related events and other local SEPAC's meetings and events. This information helps families connect with special education and disability related resources and services within our community and the surrounding area.
- ASEPAC helped coordinate and participated in a special education informational event at Hill Roberts Elementary School. This event was an outreach program for families of students currently receiving special education services as well as families who felt as though their student may benefit from learning about special education.
- ASEPAC hosted a family fun event during February vacation called *Drums Alive* presented by Wiggle Kids. This event provided a fun outing for students receiving special education services and their families. This event was supported by a grant received from the Attleboro Cultural Council and the use of the community room at Cardi's Furniture in South Attleboro.
- ASEPAC participated in a group discussion at the Attleboro Public Library to talk about children with differences, special education, bullying and advocacy. The group discussion was a comparison of the fiction book *Wonder* by R. J. Palacio and the real world social issues experienced by students that the book touches upon. The Attleboro Public Library each month invites local agencies and experts to participate and offer information to the group discussion. It was noted that another school district uses this book as required reading in the middle school and ASEPAC would like to pursue looking into the possibility of incorporating that in the Attleboro School District.

- ASEPAC provided the administration with requested documentation for compliance with the Coordinated Program Review currently being conducted in the district. Additionally ASEPAC looks forward to participating in the on-site verification phase of the Coordinated Program Review. Documentation submitted by ASEPAC for review included:
 - Current list of ASEPAC officers
 - ASEPAC by-laws
 - ASEPAC 2014/2015 schedule of events
 - ASEPAC brochure
 - ASEPAC 2014/2015 meeting agendas and minutes for training sessions conducted by the Attleboro School District
 - ASEPAC 2014 school committee presentation
 - ASEPAC 2014 annual report
 - ASEPAC 2014 executive board meeting minutes
 - ASEPAC 2015 needs assessment survey

- ASEPAC is still working with the city auditor as well as the business management office and Mr. Furtado to clarify the financial responsibilities of ASEPAC funds as outlined in an advisory memo from MassPAC in 2012. The goal is to have ASEPAC funds in the appropriate account by the beginning of the 2015/2016 school year with the intent that these funds will be used solely to fund ASEPAC events and needs. A proposed ASEPAC budget is included with this report and we ask that the school committee make a motion to accept and approve the submitted budget. The advisory memo from MassPAC states:

PUBLIC FUNDS:

Because a SEPAC is a public body established by a school committee, any funds raised or contributions received by a SEPAC are public funds, subject to the laws governing grants or gifts to the school committee.

(M.G.L. chapter 44, section 53A and chapter 71, section 37A).

This means funds raised by the SEPAC must be deposited with the municipal treasurer, held as a separate account, and become part of the district's End-of-Year Pupil and Financial Report.

ASEPAC 2014/2015 Presentations:

- September 25th Meet & Greet with Mr. Sheehan Superintendent of Attleboro Public Schools and Dr. Linda McSweeney Director of Special Education and Student Support Services
- October 16th Basic Rights presented by the Federation for Children with Special Needs
- November 13th Assistive Technology presented by Kim Janssen Technology Integrator/Assistive Technology Coordinator Attleboro Public Schools
- December 11th Parent Support Night
- January 15th BCBA/Behavioral Services presented by Collette Howe MST, Ed.s, BCBA Attleboro Public Schools
- February 19th Family Fun Event: *Drums Alive* presented by Wiggle Kids
- March 19th Guidance for parents on supporting siblings of children with disabilities presented by Ashley Coates of Coates Corner
- April 16th Attleboro Area School to Career Partnership presented by Christine LaChance Executive Director
- May 21st Parent Support Night and Officer Elections

ASEPAC Feedback and Concerns:

- a) **Communication.** As noted in the Guidance Manual for Special Education Parent Advisory Councils published by DESE in March 2010
- *in order for SEPAC's to be most effective in improving special education in the district, there must be true collaboration between the SEPAC and the school district leadership.*

Additionally a SEPAC's duties are outlined in Chapter 71B of the Massachusetts General Laws which includes, but is not limited to:

- *Participating in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school district's special education programs*

ASEPAC was not contacted regarding the formation of a "Special Education Executive Board" as outlined in the 2015 Special Education Status Report presented to the school committee on May 4th 2015. Nor has ASEPAC been invited to any of the subsequent meetings conducted by this board. Further, our concern about communication is emphasized by the recent special education programming changes (elimination of a sub-separate program - LEAP K-2) which ASEPAC learned about not from administration but from concerned and confused parents. This change took place very late in the school year and it took place *after* students were assigned by their IEP teams to be placed in this program - which has now been eliminated. These teams were forced to reconvene and choose a different placement with limitations as to what placements options were available with only 2 weeks left in the

school year. ASEPAC has been accustomed to learning about all special education programming changes and being prepared to support parents prior to when the changes take place. ASEPAC has further concerns as to whether students who were slated for placement in that sub-separate LEAP program who have now been reassigned to a general education placement will have the necessary supports that they need within the general education classroom. The IEP teams chose to place these students in the LEAP program knowing the students would have received the specialized instruction and supports needed to access the curriculum successfully. While ASEPAC supports inclusion for all students with disabilities and the district should always comply with placing students in the ***Least Restrictive Environment*** we must truly understand and apply what supports are needed in a general education classroom –for both the student and the general education teacher - in order for this model to be successful. The way in which this programming change took place seems to go against the districts newly adopted Strategic Plan Overarching Goals - specifically

- *APS will place students at the center of all educational decisions through guided planning to achieve personalized goals.*

b) **Assistive Technology.** AT continues to be an area where APS needs to improve upon to appropriately provide support for students receiving special education services. With the lack of infrastructure in buildings and the inability to maintain a wi-fi connection, accessing specialized programs and software via technology devices continues to be prohibitive and often prevents students from accessing the curriculum as identified within the support accommodations documented in IEP's. Our inability to implement infrastructure that supports required technology for students as outlined in their IEP has a direct impact on teachers and students by limiting the capabilities of supporting specialized instruction and utilizing technology tools in a meaningful way for students receiving special education support services.

1. While the district has benefitted from having an expert dedicated as the AT Specialist, the amount of time allocated for this position as compared to the AT support needs within the school district leaves students and teachers without the ability to fully utilize AT tools in an efficient and consistent way. ASEPAC feels the district needs to consider increasing the time allotted for the AT Specialist to address this concern.

2. Additionally, it is critical that proficient professional development and training take place in order for school staff – both general education staff as well as special education staff - to assist students who are utilizing technology in support of attaining the goals and benchmarks as defined in their IEP. Parents have shared concerns that implementation of AT is not taking place in a timely manner as well as a lack of maintaining consistent use of AT either due to technical problems encountered or lack of training to support the day to day use of the technology.
 3. Thoughtful and careful planning must be implemented for a student with AT as part of their IEP as the student transitions from classroom to classroom within the same school as well as school to school when a student is transitioning from elementary to middle and finally high school placements. The implementation needs to be seamless so that when transitions take place the student and the staff can be ready to utilize AT tools instantly.
- c) **Service Delivery.** ASEPAC is very happy to see the addition of speech and language services at Attleboro High School and that the funding has been appropriated in the budget. Our high school students will benefit from this much needed support. However, based on numerous communication and feedback from families with students at Thacher Elementary, ASEPAC suspects that there needs to be an increase in speech and language providers at this school as well. Because of the many specialized programs housed there, Thacher Elementary is a high level need school. It is imperative that we ensure compliance for all students needing speech and occupational therapies by having enough service providers delivering required services during the school year and during ESY.
- d) **Pre-K – Kindergarten.** ASEPAC would encourage the administration to consider adding a program to support students who are receiving special education services in the ELC that would benefit from another year of support to assure kindergarten readiness. Frequently students receiving special education services in pre-K require second and third years in order to be ready for the transition to kindergarten. Often full day pre-K students repeat lessons/activities in the morning and again in the afternoon or spend their day in two different classrooms. We have noted that other school districts have begun offering programming that offers a pre-K classroom model more conducive to students receiving special education support (as well as peer model students who don't meet the age requirement for kindergarten) for getting ready for kindergarten. A classroom designed to start to build on the transition of a longer day, allowing

more time to focus on academics and to hone in on kindergarten readiness skills. The program is still based on pre-K curriculum with the ability to expand, but the concept is time. More time allowed for students to master concepts with additional supports. A year to set a child up for success in a more reflective classroom of the next year to come. ASEPAC feels that this type of program would greatly benefit the students of Attleboro Public Schools.

- e) **Discipline.** ASEPAC has been in contact with families who have expressed concern in the area of discipline (including young elementary aged students). In September of 2014 Massachusetts DESE issued: **Superintendent's Checklist for Implementation of the Student Discipline Law.** (a copy of this checklist is attached) As a follow up, in February 2015 Massachusetts DESE issued: **Advisory on Student Discipline under Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012 *An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School*** (please see this document at <http://www.doe.mass.edu/ssce/discipline/>)
 - i. DESE's website states: *Research has shown that suspending students from school for non-violent offenses, and particularly suspending them repeatedly, has limited effectiveness in improving their behavior and performance, and causes the students to fall behind academically. School leaders in Massachusetts and across the U.S. have found that by improving school climate through positive behavioral interventions, supports, and strategies, including restorative practices and conflict resolution, they not only reduce suspensions but also promote greater school safety, discipline, and academic success.*

Certainly students who have a disability that impacts their social understanding of the rules of conduct need the support of their IEP teams and the administration that supports these teams. Prior to the decision to suspend a student who is impacted by a disability, Principals should consider if these students have IEP's with social/emotional or behavioral goals. Collaboration with a Board Certified Behavior Analyst within the school district should be considered prior to suspensions. ASEPAC feels that professional development training on the Student Discipline Law would certainly be an important step in supporting these students for the 2015/2016 school year.

f) **Transition services.** ASEPAC has shared strong concerns with the Special Education Director that without a highly qualified transition specialist on staff at Attleboro High School that our students with disabilities are put at a greater disadvantage for their post secondary success. Special education law requires specific procedures to prepare students with disabilities to transition to life after high school. ASEPAC would like the administration to know that post-secondary transition planning and implementation for students with disabilities is an area that must be pursued with a strong focus and a high level of expertise within the Attleboro school district. This process must start when the students reach the age of 14, which sometimes occurs during 8th grade. This should be an area of professional development for middle school teams working with 8th graders. The high school has been without a transition specialist for several months and the district cannot afford to have this position vacant. The post-secondary success of our students needs the support of a highly qualified transition specialist. This position should work collaboratively with middle schools as well.

- As reported from the DESE Guidelines for the Transition Specialist Endorsement (October 2013)
 - i. *Too many students with disabilities are unprepared to live and work independently when they exit high school. Currently, according to the US Department of Labor, only 25% of 20-24 year olds with disabilities are employed, compared with 60% of their non-disabled peers. Nearly half of all disabled adults who are employed have an income of less than \$15,000 per year. In 2012, data shows only 68.6% of Massachusetts students with disabilities graduated on time with their peers, compared to 84.7% for non-disabled students and the dropout rate for students with disabilities was almost twice as high as the rate for non-disabled students. The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education acknowledged that, "one reason for these outcomes is that educators are inadequately prepared to provide the transition services required under the IDEA."*

- g) **ICE Partnership.** ASEPAC is thrilled that the Attleboro School District will have its first Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment student in September 2015 at Bridgewater State University. The ICE Partnership Program provides dual enrollment opportunities to high school students, age 18 - 21, who have intellectual and developmental disabilities in an inclusive college experience. We feel this kind of opportunity will greatly improve the quality of transition services provided to students and improve their long-term success after special education services end. ASEPAC looks forward to more student participation in this exceptional programming opportunity. Additionally, ASEPAC would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the guidance department on other post-secondary opportunities for students receiving special education support services.

The officers of ASEPAC look forward to serving in the 2015/2016 school year and we are proud to be part of an effort of continued improvement within the Attleboro Public Schools special education services department.

Respectfully submitted,

Angela Ferreira Chairperson
Susan Akell Co-Chairperson
Michelle Brouillard Workshop Coordinator
Julie Doxsey Public Relations