



Attleboro Special Education Parent Advisory Council (ASEPAC)
2015/2016 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 2016/2017 as elected on May 26th 2016:

Angela Ferreira - Chairperson
Susan Akell - Co-Chairperson
Rebecca Nunes - Treasurer
Michelle Brouillard - Workshop Coordinator
Julie Doxsey - Public Relations
Vacancy - Secretary

ASEPAC Meetings:

In keeping with the state's Open Meeting Law, our meetings are posted at least 48 hours in advance at Attleboro City Hall as well as on the ASEPAC website and Facebook page, minutes are kept for each meeting, and agenda/attendance sheets are maintained by the ASEPAC Secretary in compliance with the Public Records Law. ASEPAC hosts general meetings monthly September – May. ASEPAC officers meet monthly with the Special Education Director. ASEPAC officers hold board meetings as needed during the year for planning purposes. In 2015/2016 ASEPAC introduced dedicated monthly parent support for 30 minutes prior to each general meeting during the school year. This gave parents the opportunity to seek guidance and support from ASEPAC officers face to face each month. Several parents took the opportunity to seek this support from ASEPAC and we will continue to offer parent support each month during the school year.

ASEPAC 2015/2016 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 Buddy Benches for each elementary school. This has been a tremendous project for ASEPAC. To date 5 benches have been installed and dedicated – Willett and Studley each have received benches and Thacher Elementary received 3 benches for each of their 3 separate playgrounds. Hyman Fine will receive a bench in September 2016 and Hill Roberts will receive a bench in the spring of 2017.
- Financial status: As noted in the Guidance Manual for Special Education Parent Advisory Councils issued by the Department of Education with regard to SEPAC finances:

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 funds now reside with the municipal treasurer and all ASEPAC financial transactions are processed through the school district business office. A financial report and budget for 2016/2017 are attached to this report. We would like to express our appreciation for the ongoing assistance ASEPAC receives from both Marc Furtado and Rosalind Kalberer who have both helped facilitate the transition of our funds into the appropriate municipal account as well as the training and ongoing support offered in the day to day management of our finances.

- **Welcome Packets**

ASEPAC provided Welcome Packets to the ELC and to central registration for families who are new to the school district and are registering a student who is receiving special education support services

- **Take Care First Aid Training**

ASEPAC collaborated with the Interim Special Education Director and Deb Ebert on bringing Take Care First Aid training to the 12+ Program at AHS. This important program provides individuals with training in first aid, safety and injury prevention. Knowing what to do in an emergency or after an injury, builds self-confidence and independence. In order to be safe, first aid is an essential independent living skill. The feedback from Deb Ebert was that this training was exceptional and that it should be part of the 12+ Program on an ongoing basis for students as part of their post-secondary transition training.

ASEPAC 2015/2016 Presentations:

- September: Meet & Greet with Dr. Linda McSweeney Director of Special Education and Student Support Services and special education administration support staff
- October: Basic Rights presented by the Federation for Children with Special Needs
- November: Transition Planning presented by Easter Seals
- December: Parent Support Night
- January: Understanding Effective Progress presented by Dr. Susan Brefach
- March: Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment (ICE) presented by Mary Price Bridgewater State University and Post Secondary Opportunities presented by AHS Guidance & Transition Specialists
- April: APS School Budget Presentation by School Committee Chairman Stephen Withers
- May: ASEPAC Officer Elections and Suspension & School Discipline presented by The Federation for Children with Special Needs

ASEPAC Feedback and Concerns:

a) **2015-2016**

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*

It should be noted that 2015-2016 was a challenging year for special education in our district. The district was again facing the need for new leadership in the special education office and although an interim special education director was appointed, the continuous turn over in the director position created obstacles in providing the in-depth leadership and the direction needed to have special education programming that includes offering best practices and the crucial guidance and leadership needed by all the teachers and support staff within the school district. ASEPAC appreciates being included on the search committee that identified a new special education director and we look forward to working with Ivone Medeiros during the coming years as we work together to provide the most effective special education services possible within the Attleboro Public Schools. ASEPAC was given the opportunity to meet with Ivone as she transitioned into her role as Special Education Director where conversation of ASEPAC concerns and issues were identified. A monthly meeting schedule has been set for the upcoming 2016-2017 school year.

In an effort to support ongoing improvement in special education team meetings ASEPAC would like to suggest that IEP teams begin using a self-reflection document developed by the Federation for Children with Special Needs - document name: ***IEP Team Members-Self Reflection*** - a copy of which is attached to this report – the electronic version can be accessed here:

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:T-GNmNXmHxwJ:www.fcsn.org/pti/topics/iep/tools/self_reflection.doc+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=safari

We feel that this document would be a useful tool in helping to improve the IEP team process for all participants including parents/caregivers. ASEPAC will pursue discussion of this idea with the new Special Education Director Ivone Medeiros.

b) **AHS Renovation Planning Committee**

As the district works to form a team of representatives that will help create a clear vision for the design process of the potential renovation project at Attleboro High School we ask that the district consider including a board member from ASEPAC as a representative of that team. Parents of children with disabilities often have been insight as to understanding the learning environment and mobility access needed for students to be able to be successful at school. It is also important to plan for the unique needs of the 12+ program located at AHS to ensure that it meets the needs of all key factors of post secondary transition planning. Using feedback from families who have moved on from the 12+ program can add valuable feedback on how to improve.

c) **Transportation/Dismissal procedures**

In addition to making sure that all bus drivers and bus monitors have the training needed in order to appropriately transport students with disabilities safely ASEPAC is seeking to understand the dismissal process for students in sub-separate special education programming. It has been a long time practice to dismiss sub-separate classrooms earlier than the dismissal time for all other classrooms within each school. It has been reported to ASEPAC that some students are dismissed and leave school grounds 10-15 minutes prior to the dismissal of the rest of the school. While we understand that some students who have mobility or sensory issues that impact their ability to make their way to the buses safely we feel that many students are missing out on academic time when dismissed early. We feel that if a student has an individual need that requires additional time to depart and access transportation safely that it could be identified in the student's IEP. If a student does not have a need for additional time to depart and access transportation we think that they should participate in the dismissal process that all students utilize. Continuous early departure over the course of 180 days is a significant amount of time that can impact students who would otherwise benefit from additional academic and/or social opportunities by being included in the typical dismissal process.

d) **Discipline**

The majority of concerns from families brought forward to ASEPAC this year have been related to discipline of students receiving special education support services. It is a concern across all grade levels. This concern was addressed in our previous annual report and we feel that there is still much work to be done in effectively improving discipline for students with disabilities within all of our schools. It is important to understand that this concern of appropriate discipline is not to be confused with the thought that students who are receiving special education support services who do not follow the code of conduct *not* be disciplined, but rather we need to exercise caution in using the disciplinary measure of suspension. Research has shown that exclusionary measures, in general, are not only ineffective at reducing or eliminating the misbehavior but

may even be harmful to the child, possibly leading to lower academic performance, disengagement from school and the decision to drop out.

It is important for schools to investigate the reason for the behavior and identify whether the students IEP needs to be modified to better support the students needs. It may also mean that we need to provide further guidance to building administrators in offering the means to effectively apply the appropriate discipline for non-violent, non-weapon related and non-drug related behaviors within the written policies in student handbooks. We need to further understand that a student with cognitive impairment, social emotional disabilities, autism and reading comprehension deficits will need specific and direct instruction on understanding the code of conduct so that their ability to comply with the code is improved.

In May of this year a program quality assurance complaint filed by an elementary school parent indicated that proper protocol had not been followed in disciplining a student multiple times and the response from the Department of Education noted that APS should conduct a training for elementary school principals to ensure understanding of the proper protocol.

Although ASEPAC hosted a training workshop presented by the Federation for Children with Special Needs called Suspension & Discipline in Special Education with many school district employees in attendance, we feel that the training fell short of our goal in how to make an impact on addressing the needs of students with disabilities and discipline. Because this is not an issue unique to Attleboro but rather a national concern, the US Department of Education on August 1, 2016 issued a Dear Colleague Letter on Supporting Behavior of Students with Disabilities as well as a Summary for Stakeholders. Both of these documents are attached to this report. These documents are accessible electronically at:

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/files/dcl-summary-for-stakeholders.pdf>

<http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/files/dcl-on-pbis-in-ieps--08-01-2016.pdf>

ASEPAC feels that it is imperative that these tools be utilized by the district in a manner that will improve the discipline process for students in a way that promotes better behavior as well as ensuring students access to their education.

e) **Transition services**

ASEPAC has shared with administration the Department of Education's Special Education Advisory called *Characteristics of High Quality Secondary Transition Services* issued on July 14, 2016.

(<http://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2017-1ta.pdf>)

This advisory is intended to help school districts improve outcomes for students with IEP's. The impact of our ability to provide the necessary transition services for students with disabilities has a profound effect on whether these students will transition into a life with opportunities that are financially viable or a life of poverty. As reported from the National Disability Institute one in three Americans with disabilities live in poverty and currently seven million individuals with disabilities in this country live in poverty. We must continuously strive to improve our efforts in providing high quality transition services and financial literacy to students with disabilities. It is important that we understand how to measure the success of our post secondary transition programming.

As reported from the DESE Guidelines for the Transition Specialist Endorsement (October 2013)

- *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.*

f) **ICE Partnership**

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. ICE programming has expanded to multiple colleges and universities in the Commonwealth and ASEPAC is concerned that we are not yet actively expanding our student's involvement in this program opportunity. To date we

are aware of only 1 student participating in ICE programming. ASEPAC feels that providing the information of this type of opportunity to families and students in middle school or sooner is imperative so that IEP teams and families can develop robust vision statements in their IEP's while at the same time raising the expectations for students in their day to day academics and their future transition plans.

The officers of ASEPAC look forward to serving in the 2016/2017 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
Rebecca Nunes Treasurer