

Needham SEPAC social skills group

Suggestions for collaborative program improvements

The SEPAC social skills has been meeting regularly since the start of the school year and has completed a survey of the SEPAC members. Based on feedback received in the survey, and taking into account the challenging budgetary environment, the group settled on four areas where we felt we could collaborate with the Needham Public Schools to make the most positive impact on the students' lives.

District wide disability awareness program

We would like to take this opportunity to offer our support to the efforts currently underway to expand the successful, parent-led disability awareness programs that have been running for several years at the Eliot and Hillside schools. Ideally a disability awareness program could be started at all elementary schools in the 2010-2011 school year.

Additional training for teaching assistants and recess staff.

Teaching assistants are central to the success of many students with disabilities, and they perform a very demanding role. A key part of this role is the skill of facilitating the special needs child's integration into the general education population, and balancing this against intervening on behalf of that child. We recommend additional training, on as broad a basis as possible, by a recognized expert in the field. Parents have recommended Lori Hodgins of "Adventures Outside the Box" and Cynthia Levine of Shriver Clinical Services Corporation.

NPS staff who regularly monitor recess may also benefit from the same training in social facilitating, and recognition of both positive and negative social behaviors in both the special education and general education population, since a great deal of our children's social education occurs outside of the classroom.

Depending on funding availability representatives from the PAC would be willing to help draft an NEF grant proposal to cover the modest cost of the training.

We would also like to see teachers and other social skills specialists (guidance, SLPs) encouraged to go to recess/lunch periodically to observe the children's social performance in the recess setting, if they are not doing so already.

Finally, some parents have indicated a willingness to volunteer to help monitor recess.

Analysis of social skills programming as part of the ARRA funded special education program review

Social skills are a key component of the NPS curriculum, but particularly so for the majority of children in special education. We request that the ARRA (“stimulus plan”) funded special education program review include a review of the social skills instruction currently on offer in the district. The review could include comparison with best practices in other comparable school districts to ensure that NPS remains at the forefront in developing these essential skills in our students.

A “Social exchange” to help children to practice their social skills outside of school

For children to build lifelong social skills they must generalize the social skills learned in school to environments outside the classroom. One component of this is to have regular social interactions outside of school. The Best Buddies program in middle and high school provides one such avenue for children in middle and high school. At the elementary school level play dates provide a good opportunity for children to practice their social skills, particularly play dates with a typical peer.

Unfortunately it can be difficult finding play dates for children who are working on their social skills, and so it is suggested that NPS could provide a “Social exchange” that would allow parents of both special education and typical children to sign up, provide a brief description of their child, and find potential play dates from outside of their current class, and potentially in other elementary schools and grades. The bigger the pool the more likely parents are to find a good match. Parents of typical children could be encouraged to view participation in such an exchange as a form of charitable giving. Facilitation materials could be prepared by a representative from NPS who is a trained social skills facilitator (for example one of the speech therapists).

The social skills exchange could be little more than a database that could be searched for matching ages & interests. There would be a modest amount of work involved in setting up such a database, but ongoing management should be a relatively small workload. By operating the exchange from within the NPS, and by helping to draft guidelines for facilitating a successful play date, it would appear more official, and the PAC would avoid potential issues of confidentiality.