

April 17, 2009

Dear Christine,

The members of the SEPAC would like to re-emphasize the issues raised by parents during the SEPAC meeting Monday, April 13th on the subject of inclusion. Inclusion can only work if the special needs students are actually included by their general education peers. As many parents reported during the April 13th meeting, peer reciprocation currently fails to occur to the degree necessary within the Needham schools. Additional social skill curriculum that is scientifically tracked for effectiveness is the only way to improve this situation.

The article you distributed, "Learning Throughout the Day," presented a thoughtful approach to incorporating and furthering social skills throughout the Needham schools. Parents would like to see Needham continue this type of approach. We feel the current plan is inadequate because it is based on a review of anecdotal evidence resulting in a one-time adjustment. Consequently, we are asking Needham schools to take this effort the next step by measuring progress and setting annual, quantifiable goals.

The SEPAC parents suggest the following methods for improving and measuring the effectiveness of social skill education:

- ❑ **District Wide Disability Awareness Program** – Needham must implement a disability awareness program across all schools to help general education students understand special needs. Parents could potentially run this program but they should have some common framework that is consistent across schools and agreed upon by the Needham school administration
- ❑ **Expand Existing Social Skills Programs** – Needham should teach Responsive Classroom, Second Step and Steps to Respect in all classrooms to all students.
- ❑ **Expand Social Pragmatics Program** – Needham should teach all students, in all classrooms, the social skills curriculum already taught to Needham Elementary School students on the Autism Spectrum, based upon consulting by Elsa Abele and Pamela Ely Martin. This curriculum includes whole body listening, mind files, etc.
- ❑ **Plan for Generalization** – All social skills programs should have specific written guidelines for generalization to other environments such as recess, lunch, and EASE programs. The programs should include staff training and follow-up to ensure results are attained. SLPs, guidance, and teachers must be present in these non-classroom environments at least once per week to verify skill acquisition and to opportunistically model the skills via guided intervention, for both typical and special education students.
- ❑ **Track Bullying** – The school should tally reports of bullying, especially bullying that targets special education students, and the school should use the tally to better focus social skills training.
- ❑ **Compare Bullying Data Before and After Teaching** – The school should correlated each social skills program with bullying data, before and after the instruction, as a means of measuring how effectively each program reduces the behavior.

- ❑ **New Report Card as Baseline** – We suggest Needham measure and track students' perceived social skills ability based on the new report card that was introduced to the 3rd grade this year. This would allow Needham to measure the effectiveness of any social skills programs by comparing the current baseline of report card data to the future data subsequent to program implementation. Since a different teacher evaluates the student each year, it would be important to recognize and minimize any potential bias.
- ❑ **Analysis by Outside Consultants of Special Needs Social Skills Programming** – Needham should consider the opportunities presented by stimulus money to hire an outside organization to look at improving the ASD and Special Ed social skills programming overall. See the Youthcare website for a reference to what they did in Newton. See: <http://www2.massgeneral.org/youthcare/consultations.html>

These efforts to improve social skills could be publicized as ways to improve disability awareness and sensitivity. You and other Needham Public Schools personnel could lead by your example when you speak of children with needs at public meetings and when you visit classrooms and school playgrounds.

Further, school personnel should tell citizens that because these programs have successfully intervened on behalf of special needs students, we believe that similar programs would benefit the general education students.

Last, Needham should stress that these social skills programs support the citizenship goals advocated by Dr. Gutekanst while fostering personal growth and strengthening the community at large. Part of the stimulus funding money would be well spent towards improving and tracking progress toward these goals.

Thank you for your consideration. The SEPAC board members look forward to discussing these suggestions at our next meeting.

Sincerely,

SEPAC Board