

Executive Summary – Special Education Task Force

The Special Education Task Force was commissioned by the School Committee and formed in the fall of 2006. The group included representation from the following groups:

- Board of Selectmen – Bob Eubank
- Finance Committee – Steve Colwell, Cindy Russo (replaced by Bob Thurston)
- Special Education Parent Advisory Council/Community – Sue Tokay
- Community Representative – Keith Cheveralls
- Will Verbits – School Committee Liaison
- School Administration – Charles Horn (Special Education Director), Thomas Jefferson (Superintendent, Chair), Lorraine Leonard (Finance Director).

The goals of the Special Education Task Force were to:

- Provide a summary statement which would serve as a “definitive” compilation of information;
- Help community members and town officials gain a deeper understanding of special education;
- Help understand and work to eliminate scapegoating which currently surrounds special education;
- Provide recommendations which address the realities of special education funding;
- Identify cost saving measures, including an understanding of the system of checks and balances currently in operation;
- Develop recommendations to help address the unpredictability of special education funding.

Over the course of 15 months the group reviewed myriad reports and data sources. Broad categories of discussion and analysis included the following:

- legal requirements governing special education and a history of their evolution;
- current strands of programming offered by Harvard and the number of students served in each disability;
- the specific processes and conditions which lead to a referral and potential placement in special education;
- the process by which a student moves from an in-district to an out-of-district placement;
- the structure and function of educational collaboratives, such as the Concord Area Special Education Collaborative (CASE) of which Harvard is a member;
- review of transportation services provided independently and through the CASE Collaborative;
- results of a survey of recent spending patterns and best practices we distributed to all cities and town in Massachusetts;

- a comparison of Harvard to both similar and neighboring communities with respect to comparative expenditures and students served in varying types of programs;
- detailed financial reports analyzing historic spending patterns which are available on the Department of Education web site;
- state reports examining historic spending trends across the Commonwealth;
- state and federal roles in funding mandated special education services.

Through this report we hope to provide findings and recommendations which may be considered in concert with other data sources available to the community. Those sources include the aforementioned Special Education Program Evaluation Report, the Coordinated Program Review conducted by the Department of Education in the winter of 2007-08, and the yet to be completed independent audit report commissioned by Town Meeting in March of 2007. The Special Education Task Force endorsed the independent audit and hopes that its findings and recommendations will serve to enhance and expand upon those identified in this report. Listed below is a summary compilation of our committee's findings and recommendations.

Findings:

- 1. An analysis of special education costs indicates that Harvard is in line with most communities. Increases and expenditures in Harvard over time are consistent with both state averages and a reference group of like communities.**

Recommendation: Harvard should continue to seek out best practices which will serve to simultaneously improve student services and control costs.

- 2. The overall percentage of students on Individualized Education Programs in Harvard is near the state average. The number of students in out-of-district placements, while having decreased significantly in the past five years, remains above the state average and the average of a reference group of similar communities.**

Recommendation: The number of out-of-district placements should be determined by the number of students for whom we cannot meet their needs within the district. There is no optimum or ideal number. We recommend that the district continue to focus on ways to help students currently being educated in Harvard to remain here. This might best be realized through a combination of professional development, program development, and capital expenditures when necessary.

- 3. The creation of the integrated preschool has helped lower the current, and potentially the future, number of out-of-district placements. A financial analysis indicates that the per pupil cost of educating a student in the Harvard Preschool is significantly less than the cost of tuitioning the student to a placement outside Harvard.**

Recommendation: Maintain the current integrated preschool program and continue to seek ways to provide within the elementary school for those students who have been identified as eligible for preschool special education services.

- 4. The Concord Area Special Education Collaborative (CASE), of which Harvard is a member, is able to provide programs at tuitions much lower than most other private special education schools.**

Recommendation: Continue membership in CASE and work within the organization to develop more programs which can be housed in public schools, providing opportunities for integration.

- 5. Both survey data we collected and reports that we studied pointed to the importance of a strong seamless link between regular and special education as being essential for any system which attempts to meet the needs of all learners. Regular education initiatives that address the varying needs of all learners benefit all students, regardless of whether or not they require special education support.**

Recommendation: Provide expanded opportunities for all staff to receive training in approaches which will help provide regular education teachers with the skills required to support all students within the classroom. This would include initiatives that address the varying needs of all learners (i.e. the Differentiated Instruction model) along with ways to use classroom technology to more effectively share information.

- 6. The Acton Boxborough work entitled “A look at the Costs and Drivers of Special Education” (pages 44-49 refer) stimulated frequent discussions within the Task Force around the benefits and significance of a philosophy and culture of inclusion. It was felt, however, with some improvement noted, that such a philosophy and culture was only partially embraced within HPS. It is important to note that special education services are provided within the context of the general education program. If the general education program is supportive and accepting of differences, then special education services can be provided in an efficient and effective manner.**

Recommendation: The School Committee and administration leadership must first work to accurately discern the current reality of the philosophy and culture at work within Harvard Elementary School and The Bromfield School. A vision of an inclusive philosophy and culture should then be evolved with participation from key stakeholders. Thereafter, school leadership should be charged with ensuring it is understood, embraced and acted upon daily by all within their purview.

- 7. Progress in medical science over the past three decades has resulted in a dramatic increase in the complexity of medical conditions now present within our schools.**

Recommendation: The district must remain current in its training and knowledge of practices and support systems available to address complex medical cases as they arise.

- 8. Small districts such as Harvard often lack the critical mass of students necessary to create additional in-district offerings or specialized programs in a cost efficient manner.**

Recommendation: Adjust planning annually to allow for the potential of needed programs as possibilities present themselves. Such planning will involve staffing needs, training needs, and capital expenditures. In some instances collaboration with neighboring districts may be more efficient and economical than going through a collaborative.

- 9. Both the state and federal governments have fallen woefully short in their pledge to provide communities with funding to meet the mandated requirements of special education.**

Recommendation: Town officials, administration, and citizens alike need to continually lobby legislators and Congress to address the unmet promise of funding special education. Requirements generated by changing regulations and statutes continue to add to the cost of providing special education. Current Chapter 70 funding and other governmental revenue sources do little to help towns meet the financial burden of funding mandated programs. A concerted local effort, along with our support of organizations such as the Massachusetts Association of School Committees, the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, and the Suburban Coalition will be necessary if we are to reshape the structure of state and federal support for Special Education.

- 10. The CASE Collaborative provides an economy of scale and efficiency in providing transportation. Yet, special education transportation costs continue to be a substantial component in the overall increase in special education expenditures.**

Recommendation: Continue to seek efficiencies in operation through the CASE Board of Directors and lobby through the mechanisms listed in recommendation #9 to have transportation costs included in circuit breaker reimbursement.