

MILTON PAC
MiltonPac@yahoo.com

January 19, 2010

School Committee
Milton Public Schools
Milton, MA 02186

Dear Members of the School Committee,

Thank you for giving the PAC an opportunity to share our thoughts and opinions regarding the current status of special education in Milton. We understand that Massachusetts law requires the School Committee to work closely with the PAC¹, and we look forward collaborating with you more closely in the future.

The new PAC board views our role largely as providing information and support to Milton families with children with special needs, and when necessary, advocating for programs and policies that ensure best practices and the success of our students. We view our relationship with the Milton Public Schools as one of collaboration and partnership, and in the end, believe we are all working toward the same goals.

Overview of Past Successes

We would like to start by praising the administration and staff for several positive changes to special education over the last couple of years including;

- 1) Co-Taught Classrooms: The development and growth of the co-taught classroom model has provided an appropriate inclusive and effective learning environment for many elementary level students who need in-class modifications and supports to successfully access the general curriculum. Both the children on IEPs, as well as their typically developing

¹ “The parent advisory council duties shall include but not be limited to: advising the school committee on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities; meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school committee’s special education programsIn the course of its duties under this section, the parent advisory council shall receive assistance from the school committee without charge, upon reasonable notice, and subject to the availability of staff and resources. (MGLc. 71B, sec. 3)

peer students, have benefited greatly from this more individualized and highly successful teaching model.

- 2) Addition of Peers in the Summer Program: Parents' requests and concerns were heard, and we thank the district for adding typical developing peers into the summer program classrooms to provide a more socially inclusive experience.
- 3) Elementary Language Based Classrooms: The district has made positive changes to the language based classrooms at Collicot in the last year by increasing the inclusion of these students into more general academic instructional periods. The PAC applauds the school system for taking this very positive step as it is well documented that true inclusion will increase academic outcomes.
- 4) NECC Program: The addition of a New England Center for Children (NECC) classroom at Collicot appears to be a step in the right direction toward appropriately educating young students with autism in their community. Since this program is new, the *PAC recommends that the administration convene a feedback session with these students' parents to review the program's first year and potential for continued success.*
- 5) Gross Motor Room: Thanks to the generous donation from one of our PAC parents, and the cooperation and support from the district, this state-of-the-art gross motor therapy room at Collicot is a wonderful new resource for the community.
- 6) Improved Communication: The PAC was happy to see Superintendent Gormley's 11/3/09 Email Blast which included a brief description of the special education classrooms in the district. This is a good start toward informing the community about our special education programs, and we recognize the Superintendents' effort to improve communication.

Concerns and Recommendations

Despite these and other improvements to special education in the last couple of years, the PAC would like to share with the School Committee some of our current concerns and recommendations for improvement.

Generally speaking, the PAC feels we have been left out of the planning, developing and evaluation of special education programs as required by

law. To make matters worse, we are sensing an overall chipping away of special education that seems to be driven too much by financial concerns instead of best practices or students' needs. As parents, employees, and members of the community ourselves, we have great appreciation for the challenges the town, and specifically the school system, continues to face year after year in this economy. As you read the following list of concerns, please keep in mind that we are aware of the economic challenges, but also note that this fiscal crisis does not eliminate the district's responsibility to provide a "free and appropriate education" for every one of our students.

Additionally, as concerned parents and PAC members volunteering our time and efforts for the benefit of all students and our cherished special education program -- keep in mind that we must have more information, more consistent communication, and meaningful involvement with both the School Committee and the school administration moving forward.

MCAS and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)

Both the School Committee and Superintendent Gormley list student achievement and specifically, "closing the achievement gap in all subgroups" as a top goal for the current school year.

As you are well aware, there is a substantial achievement gap in the special education student subgroup in many of our schools. Alarming, it is clear from the town's 2009 MCAS results that *currently*, there is an achievement gap for students with disabilities at: **Pierce** (they were the only subgroup at the middle school not to make AYP in both Math and English); **Collicot** and **Glover** (failed to make AYP in both Math and English); and **Cunningham** where the school did make AYP but still has an achievement gap for special education (although, notably, they made nice improvement.) Neither Tucker, nor the High School has enough special education students to make an official subgroup for MCAS.

It is essential to note that with the appropriate modifications and accommodations -- as is required by law -- most children with disabilities have the ability to fully access the curriculum and be successful on MCAS. The PAC requests involvement in the administration's discussions of how educational services are currently being delivered to students on IEPs, and how these services can be improved for the benefit of all students by reducing the gap.

Integrated Preschool

Milton is fortunate to have the integrated preschool program that has grown over the past several years in response to increased need in the community. More and more children are being referred to the program by Early Intervention and local pediatricians -- *the need in the community is real.*

However, it is our observation that children's access to services and programs is being quietly reduced, and in some cases, families are being shut out and programs and services are being denied even when children have well-documented needs. In certain cases, families' requests for assessments are denied, and in some cases, where assessments are being conducted, results are being withheld. And this is just what the PAC is hearing from those parents who have some knowledge of the process and their rights. We have no doubt that there are other children who are not receiving the level of services or accommodations they need.

Preschool parents have been complaining *for years* about poor communication and lack of follow through by school staff. There have been countless accounts over the last few years --- many of which have surely gone unreported to the School Committee. One recent example is from a parent with a child with complex needs, who shared with us that her request for a simple communication notebook or checklist was denied, and she was abruptly told, "we don't do that," *a response that is against the law.*

Another parent expressed frustration that members of the preschool staff she encountered maintained a pervasive attitude that the insight and contributions of the parent were not necessary. This viewpoint hinders open communication and the ability to resolve issues and provide support and accommodations that are in the child's best interest and necessary to allow the young student to access the curriculum.

Preschool students are a vulnerable group of students, with parents who are often new to the system and still struggling to sort through their young child(ren)'s emerging complex needs and issues. These parents are almost always much less aware of the special education process and their rights under the law. It is easy to see how these families can be easily ignored, or even worse, misled. We respectfully request the School Committee take a closer look at the integrated preschool.

Because the integrated preschool is the "gateway" to special education services for many Milton families, it is extremely important that --at a

minimum-- parents are welcomed and given timely information, and that services and programs are provided to students who need them. Decreasing access, and thus reducing the number of preschool students receiving special education services, might cut costs for the district in the short term, but will most certainly lead to more students in the future struggling to access the curriculum and requiring intensive services. This will cost the school system much more time and money, and most importantly, negatively affect the long-term outcome for these children. We all know that the earlier and more intensive the intervention, the more successful the child will be in the long term, and the more cost-efficient service delivery is. The PAC looks forward to working in collaboration with the district to improve this situation.

Co-Taught Classrooms

Last year, in response to a PAC- initiated meeting addressing parents' concerns about an apparent staffing model change in the 4th grade co-taught classroom at Glover, Mr. Rubin distributed a document to school staff entitled "Co-Taught Special Education Program Description" dated April 28, 2009. **(see attached)** It provided a description of the staffing model to be one full time regular education teacher and one full time special education teacher for grades K-3, *but reduced the special education teacher to half-time for grades 4 and 5.*

Parents were understandably outraged at the cut in services, but the school administration argued that there was no reduction in staffing because the special education teacher had never formally been assigned to the classroom for the entire day. However, this fact was never communicated to parents of any child in that class even in IEP meetings. These parents were all *understandably* under the impression that the class was fully staffed all day due to the fact that the district's written communications about the program had always stated so.

The school district has repeatedly promoted the co-taught program in written communications as being staffed by both a full-time special educator and a full time regular educator in every grade. In a document the school administration submitted to the school committee in December, 2008 **(see attached)**, and posted on the district's web page, the K-5 program is described as being fully staffed, stating, "*All students in the co-taught classrooms benefit from small class size and the attention of two highly trained full time teachers, one a general education teacher and the other a special educator.*" So, halfway

through the school year, administration were publicly touting the merits of the fully staffed co-taught model *including grade 4*, while grade 4 was not in fact fully staffed with a special educator! In addition, as recently as the Superintendent's Email Blast on November 3, 2009 (**see attached**), the classrooms are clearly described, once again, as including a full-time special educator as well as a full time regular education teacher.

Publicly, in a large meeting requested by the PAC and attended by both administrators and parents of children in the co-taught classrooms (both students on IEPs and peer students), the administration claimed that because parents had not realized there was a reduction in staff until the spring when they learned about it from the PAC, that "it must be working well since there were no complaints." And continued to make the point that because it is "working," we have nothing to complain about. Parents of children -- both those on IEPs and those who are not -- were extremely upset that the school had failed to communicate this essential fact to them -- that the classroom was not staffed with two full time educators for a full day as promised. Furthermore, special education parents were understandably even more furious at the stated reasons for cutting the special educator to part-time, the most memorable being; "children in co-taught classes need to wean themselves off of the support of a special education educator in the classroom before they go to middle school."

We find these offensive statements to show a lack of understanding of the needs of students with disabilities, who require accommodations and modifications that do not go away simply because a child leaves elementary school. This viewpoint also appears to be contrary to the law regarding the needs of the students determining the services provided, not basing an individual child's needs on a school system policy. In addition, the school's tactics show a lack of respect to parents of children who are not on IEPs, who were also told that their children were being placed in a classroom that was staffed with two *full-time* teachers.

Additionally, this program description document Mr. Rubin distributed to staff changes the student eligibility for these classrooms, stating that the programs are designed to meet the needs of students with "significant levels" of disability; that "only students who would otherwise require significant amounts of pull-out (50%-75%) special education services should be considered ..."; and that "only students with a moderate to high level of services specified on the PL3 form can be considered for a co-taught program." This "criteria" does not match the reality of our current co-taught

special education students. Many of our children in these classrooms have more moderate needs and would fail to meet this definition. Our concern is that this criteria attempts to severely limit access to students with mild or moderate special needs, and will be used by staff to erroneously deny appropriate service delivery to students -- particularly those entering the system at the Kindergarten and first grade levels. It appears to be part of a larger unspoken cost cutting plan to scale back special education.

This fall the PAC brought these concerns to Mr. Rubin who explained that he himself wrote the description and it was not his intention to limit access, but simply intended to prevent school principals from placing students in the classrooms "just because there was room." When we pointed out that several of our own children who currently have co-taught classroom written into their IEPs would not qualify under this new criteria, he suggested this program description is not used by staff and team leaders for determining eligibility, and therefore we should "not worry." When pressed further, he suggested he was open to editing ideas supplied by the PAC.

Although we are happy to have been given an opportunity to help shape this definition and criteria, we are concerned that the program description was developed and published and distributed without concern for the very realistic possible outcome of, at best, confusing staff and parents, and, at worst, limiting some students' access to the most appropriate available classroom setting, and without PAC input. Furthermore, the PAC believes that this type of program description and criteria should be written collaboratively by a knowledgeable group of administration, staff and parents for every special education program and be made available to the community. (Please see more on this below under recommendation for "Special Education Guide).

Need for Inclusion /Continuation of the Co-Taught program at Pierce

This year is the first year Milton has a 5th grade co-taught classroom (at Glover), and for some of these students (and for many co-taught students to follow as they advance grades) it is not clear how their needs will be appropriately met in 6th grade and beyond at Pierce.

Pierce currently offers primarily *substantially separate* programs such as REACH and Step 2 to meet the needs of students with more significant challenges, and a language-based program for students with "language

based learning disabilities.” The feedback we have gotten from parents of children in these various programs includes; the locations of these classrooms are isolated from the rest of the building; there is little to no inclusive opportunity (e.g. they do not even eat lunch in the cafeteria with the other students); and there is little or no understanding of the goals of these programs -- and clearly a lack of communication with parents. Overall there is much concern that students in these programs are not accessing or being exposed to the general curriculum.

Although the language-based program has an inclusion component with students on IEPs being educated in regular classes for Math and English with the support of special educators, it is not enough. It is also concerning that there is no special educator teaching these students with language based learning disabilities science and social studies courses -- which are also an essential part of every students’ curriculum and tested on the MCAS. Reportedly, there is only a paraprofessional accompanying students to their history and science classes for support. Not only is that not appropriate or effective, but it is counterproductive to the student’s self-esteem and ability to integrate into the general social setting at school.

It is admirable that steps are being taken to improve inclusion programs at Pierce, but much more must be done. Every child has a right to be educated in the least restrictive environment with the appropriate modifications and accommodations. This appears to not be happening yet for many Pierce students. Furthermore, there does not seem to be a program model appropriate for the students who are about to graduate from the co-taught classrooms at the elementary school. *Where do these special education students, who don’t have language based learning disabilities (and thus who were not in the language based elementary school program) go next year at Pierce?* There seems to be a large gap waiting for these students to fall into.

To ameliorate this situation, the PAC proposes the replication of the highly successful elementary co-taught program at the middle school to meet the needs of these students, and to provide appropriate instruction in the least restrictive environment. We understand that other districts have successful co-taught models that are tailored appropriately for the upper grades and the district needs to start looking seriously at such models.

The students moving up from elementary school still need, deserve and would greatly benefit from access to the general curriculum and exposure to non disabled peers at the upper levels. To do otherwise is a huge step

backwards for the students who are thriving in the co-taught classrooms. Milton needs to address this issue as our first set of co-taught students are getting ready to enter Pierce middle school next year. We are available to work with the School Committee to discuss our recommendation in greater detail and look forward to working with the administration to create a middle school environment that addresses the educational needs of *all* students.

Therapy Services

As with teachers, therapists are sometimes unexpectedly absent for days, weeks or even months on personal, medical or family leave. However, unlike for teachers, there does not seem to be an effective plan or policy in place for temporarily replacing special education therapists who are absent for extended periods of time. Students are going weeks, and even months in some cases, without crucial services, in violation of the law. An IEP is a contract, strictly governed by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and it appears that the Milton school system is out of compliance.

For example, recently at Glover, the Occupational Therapist left unexpectedly on personal leave on or about the first week in October and was only replaced by a new therapist on January 11th. The PAC would like to acknowledge that the administration was quick to notify affected parents about the unexpected departure of the therapist. However, although the administration was working to fill the position, and admittedly faced some challenges in doing so, children at the Glover school missed up to 50 days of therapy services, and these services are in students' IEPs to allow them to access the curriculum and legally *must* be provided, regardless of staffing problems. This is unacceptable. Compensatory services do not make up for the services not delivered *when* they are needed

In March of last year, again at Glover, a speech and language therapist was placed on administrative leave and students missed approximately a month of therapy before a new therapist was brought into the school. Parents were not notified of this therapist's departure until approximately two weeks later when a parent requested information after learning from her child that she had not seen her therapist in days. This parent suggested that the administration communicate this fact with all affected families, at which point they did.

For the most part, parents are reasonable and understand that unforeseen circumstances arise and we empathize with the challenges schools face in staffing in such situations. However, like all school systems, Milton needs to be aware of the law, comply with it, and communicate openly with parents about the situation. We are requesting a review of existing policies and procedures in place addressing these situations with the PACs involvement to ensure that they are in line with Massachusetts law so that students do not miss unreasonable amounts of therapy in the future.

In addition, compensatory services are often very difficult to offer to these students especially when a therapist has been out of the building for a long period of time. It is often not realistic or more importantly, even effective to provide make up services after the fact, such as over the summer. Compensatory services must be offered to students when the situation arises, but more appropriately, substitute therapy services need to be provided in a reasonable and timely manner *as soon as possible* after a therapist is out on leave or leaves his/her position.

Loss of Inclusion Specialist

Last year, Milton cut the Inclusion Specialist position and placed those responsibilities under the Director of Personnel and Pupil Services. The Director of Personnel and Pupil Services is a very busy position and sweeping the Inclusion Specialist position under that title is in our opinion inappropriate and ineffective. The Inclusion Specialist had provided essential services to teachers throughout the entire district, coaching them on appropriate strategies to ensure that the needs of all children in every classroom were met. In addition, the Inclusion Specialist provided direct instruction to students who needed her services.

We believe the loss of this position demonstrates a very troubling pattern of lack of support for true comprehensive inclusion in our schools. Inclusion does not mean putting a child in a classroom with an aide or having a child interact with their typical peers for a few minutes a day -- inclusion means having a child's unique learning style being welcomed and understood and accommodated in every school environment in a manner that allows that child to be included with peers, and peers to be accepting and appreciative of every person's value. We all know that "respect for human differences" is one of the core values of the Milton public schools and we believe the loss of the inclusion specialist does not reflect well on our district's commitment to that core value.

The PAC also discovered that the district is spending \$30,000 on an inclusion consultant for Collicot and Pierce after requesting information from Mr. Rubin about how federal stimulus package money is being spent on special education this year. Although the PAC applauds this hiring, we respectfully request an update on the objectives and progress of this consultant project and to be fully included in this process from this point forward, and ask that the School Committee help facilitate this with the administration.

Current Position Openings

Director of Personnel and Pupil Services

Although the PAC has not yet been officially informed, it is our understanding that Mr. Rubin has retired and will be leaving his position at the end of the school year.

As such, the PAC is concerned about the status of this position and the loss of leadership *specifically* over special education and what it would say about Milton's commitment to the needs of students receiving special education. We were glad to see the advertisement for the position in the Boston Globe this weekend as we believe it is important to have a position solely dedicated just to special education, and it's our hope that this position doesn't get swept into an existing administrative position, as competent as other existing staff members might be. We understand it would be a tempting budget reduction move, but do not think its in the best interests of our students or the district. We respectfully request that the administration inform the PAC of their plans and include the PAC in the process of hiring a new Director. *We are grateful to Mr. Rubin for his contributions, and wish him much success in his retirement.*

Glover School Principal

We also request that the PAC be involved in the hiring process for a new principal at Glover with the recently announced retirement of Dr. Korschun at the end of the school year, especially because of the existence of the co-taught program at this school and the needed examination of that program's staffing that must take place. It is imperative that the new principal of Glover be not only knowledgeable about special education and the inclusion model, but also be able to work successfully with the Glover community to manage these programs in a cooperative and positive environment. We all know this has been challenging in the past.

Although the PAC has not always agreed with Dr. Korschun, overall as a principal she has been very supportive of special education, and the co-taught classrooms in particular. She has advocated for the growth and co-taught classrooms in her school, and readily handled a very tough situation involving misunderstanding and push-back from parents a few years back when the co-taught classrooms were first being implemented. *We are grateful to, and must applaud Dr. Korschun for her contributions, and wish her much success in her retirement.*

Special Education Funding

The School Committee lists “review of sustainability on a number of programs offered by Milton Public Schools” as one of its top goals for the current school year. *The PAC echoes these concerns.*

For example, we would be remiss if we didn’t point out the very obvious concern about the district’s current use of approximately \$600,000 in *federal stimulus package money* resulting from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act this year to fund a variety of special education expenses. Most notably, the approximately \$500,000 used to pay for the gap in state “circuit breaker” money that helps pay for out of district placements. And it’s our understanding that a substantial amount of stimulus package funding was also used to fund the new NECC program this year among other things. We have concerns about how those programs will be paid for next year when stimulus package money is no longer available. As such, we respectfully request a breakdown of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act spending in writing and an opportunity to be included in future decisions regarding the spending of stimulus money on special education.

Furthermore, the PAC would also like to know if the district’s new grant writer is working on possible grant funding for either existing or proposed new special education programs, and how the PAC and other concerned parents can bring ideas to the grant writer in a coordinated effort to improve special education programs in these challenging economic times.

Communication & Information:

Communication with Parents

Both the School Committee and the Superintendent have specifically articulated “improved communication with parents” as one of their top goals for the current school year. *We couldn’t agree more.*

One of the most common complaints we here from parents is regarding poor communication. So much can be accomplished simply by improving communication between staff and parents, as well as between administration and staff. Under Superintendent Gormley's leadership we have observed some improvement in this area and we are delighted. But more can be done, and some of the communication failures under special education are actually required by law, so more *must* be done. Frankly speaking, better communication, more information, and increased transparency not only positively affects the reputation of special education and the school system in the greater community, but it also goes a long way toward preventing larger problems in the future and ultimately, saving money.

Communication with Teachers & Staff

We want to add that all too often we hear anecdotes about parents informing teachers of programs, or changes to special education services happening in the teachers' own buildings, *before* the teachers have heard about them. Too often, staff have expressed frustration over poor communication and lack of response when they have sought information from administration regarding special education (and perhaps other) matters. The PAC recommends that administration take a look at this problem and make improvements in this area to ensure that staff morale is maintained and ultimately, that our students needs are met appropriately.

And while this may be reaching a bit beyond the scope of our purview as special education parents, we'd also like to respectfully request that the administration consider giving the districts' special education staff an opportunity to connect with their peers and other program staff in the district, to foster information-sharing and encourage innovative thinking and opportunities for support. It is our belief that many teachers would jump at the chance to do so, and perhaps even on their own time. An example could be to host a night pot luck supper after school with a simple program agenda designed to accommodate these goals. The PAC is interested and willing to help support such opportunities, perhaps much like the individual PTOs help support teacher appreciation efforts.

Special Education Guide

Again, the PAC would like to praise Superintendent Gormley for publicly listing the current special education classrooms in her November 3, 2009 Email Blast. To our knowledge, this is the first time this has ever happened

and we are greatly encouraged by her communication efforts. *It's a great first step, let's take it further!*

The PAC has requested, for some time now, that the district develop an information guide that comprehensively describes the special education process, programs, and eligibility. The time has come to make this a reality. This will go a long way toward increasing communication and frankly, enthusiasm and faith in the special education system here in Milton. It is an opportunity for Milton to shine by doing what only a few other districts have done (such as Quincy and Westborough, so we have some examples to model after.)

The PAC envisions a comprehensive guide that would be developed with input from a committee made up of administration, staff and parents. Such a guide could be made available on the Milton Public School website, as well as in print for new parents entering the system, and to every parent at their annual team meeting. If staffing such a project is a concern, the PAC can assure the school district we have access to highly qualified volunteer resources who would be ready and willing to contribute their expertise, and a host of other ideas, to this project -- *let's get this done in 2010.*

Special Education Site Council

Perhaps piggybacking on the idea to form a committee to develop a comprehensive Special Education Guide, the PAC would like to see the district form a permanent "Special Education Site Council" made up of administration, staff and parents from across the district to collaborate and regularly communicate and address a variety of special education issues as they arise, and regularly report to the School Committee. This new Site Council could be charged with developing the new Special Education Guide as its first task.

World Language Review Committee

Finally, the School Committee has listed "review of the world language program" as one of its top goals for the current school year. It is our understanding that a "World Language Review Committee" requested by the School Committee was formed late this fall and is reportedly making recommendations to you in February. Despite the fact that this committee has been charged with the task of examining how the district can more efficient and effectively use its resources to address issues listed as specifi-

cally including, “Special Education Services (French Immersion and First and Second Grades” ...there appears to be no special education staff appointed to the committee, and it’s unclear as to whether any special education parents are serving on this committee.

The PAC believes that representation on a committee such as this should include both staff and parents that can represent the unique special education perspective. We are aware the Dr. Korschun had the foresight last spring to recommend one of her special education parents (and a PAC board member) to this committee and we believe the Superintendent enthusiastically agreed to appoint this parent to help represent the special education interests. However, neither this parent, nor the PAC were contacted about the formation of the committee, and in fact, the PAC only recently learned that the committee had indeed already been formed -- and now we fear it’s now too late in the process to have an influence.

We ask that the school committee please advise us on the status of this committee’s special education representation and include a PAC member and a parent of a child in special education on the committee.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of our concerns. We look forward to working collaboratively in partnership with the School Committee and the administration to protect our cherished special education programs and continue to build upon the successes and achievements of these services for our students.

Sincerely yours,

Milton PAC Board

Sharon Bacci

sharonbacci@yahoo.com

Nicque Bradshaw

nmhsml@hotmai.com

Leslie Cheverie

lkmc1@yahoo.com

Chris Lenane

kevin_lenane@newton.k12.ma.us

Joan Rush

joanier176@verizon.net

Jerry Vitti

gvitti@hfi-mass.com

Kimberly Zieselman

kzieselman@comcast.net