

*The Public Schools of
Berlin and Boylston, Massachusetts*

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Dear SEPAC Board,

I hope this email finds that all of you have enjoyed a fun and peaceful school vacation week! Happy New Year to all and welcome to 2010!

As I mentioned at our SEPAC meetings in the fall, as part of the required program plan that each district files with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the special education office must conduct periodic program evaluations of its special education services. Since my arrival in 2005, we have examined our services for preschool students and for students with a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. We have recently completed an evaluation of our special education services provided through our learning centers and through inclusion services which address the needs of most of our special education population. Classroom teachers, special educators, paras, principals and related service specialists were asked to complete special education program surveys of our learning center models in our three schools. In addition, our program evaluation consultant, Dr. Mary Ann Byrnes, came to our districts for three days and interviewed various faculty members and the members of the SEPAC Executive Board.

I want to thank the SEPAC Board members who took the time to come into school to meet with our consultant, Dr. Mary Ann Byrnes. Without your input, the information received from our program evaluator would not be as objective or helpful to our continuous improvement efforts. Dr. Byrnes has completed her evaluation and I have received the final report. This report is attached to this email for your information and review.

The report identifies areas in which we function in a commendable fashion. This evaluation highlights that which is and has been obvious to administration...the dedication of our staff in providing needed services to all students. Further, Dr. Byrnes commends the districts on excellent class sizes and special education caseloads across all three schools. In addition, Dr. Byrnes commended us for our understanding that special education is a service for children with disabilities (as opposed to students who need additional assistance) and finally, also commends us for the special education professional development offered to our paraprofessionals during this school year.

Dr. Byrnes points out areas that need our continued attention and clarification. Specifically, her work with our surveys and interviews in our three districts identified the following recommendations:

- Examine and refine inclusionary services across the three districts.
- Clarify roles and responsibilities of administrators, programs and general and special educators.
- Capitalize on our district-wide professional development efforts by focusing on p.d. designed to apply our new knowledge to students with special needs.
- Embedded in these recommendations is the need to enhance opportunities for professional collaboration and planning to benefit students with special needs (and all students with diverse learning styles).

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In reviewing the report, the Leadership Team for Berlin and Boylston Public School is clear that our instructional staff have been hard at work insuring that the knowledge gleaned from professional development activities in literacy, math, assessment, standards based education and differentiated instruction is making its mark in our classrooms. One of the items that remain to be addressed includes discussions and opportunities to plan how these new learnings impact our planning and program delivery for students with special needs. Further, developing a clear philosophy and understanding of “inclusion” is imperative. One “take away” from the report is that inclusion is understood differently by different professionals, thus impacting clarity of roles and responsibilities, communication about students with special needs as well as implementation of consistently effective special education services across settings and buildings.

The report is valuable in helping us chart a course in moving ahead. To that end, the Leadership Team is exploring several options to address the recommendations of the report and the needs of the districts:

- Professional development for special education and general education staff
- Creation of working groups to characterize inclusive practices on a district-wide level and to define collaborative practices and procedures to allow us to meet the needs of students with varied learning styles while maintaining high expectations for all students
- Development of policies and procedures to clarify roles and functions of personnel as they relate to special education best practice and regulations

While the details of these efforts have to be worked out, rest assured that members of our special education parent community will be kept in the loop regarding our efforts and that I will be coming to SEPAC meetings with updates and requests for assistance as needed.

Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to read this evaluation. Your input and comments are invited and greatly appreciated. Please feel free to email me or send me a note via interoffice mail with any thoughts, reactions, suggestions or comments about the report. I will be happy to discuss the report and my comments in this letter further in one of our upcoming SEPAC meetings. Please let me know if you wish to have this discussion placed on the agenda.

Again, many thanks for your input to this evaluation and for meeting with Dr. Byrnes. I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,

Judy

Judith Vaillancourt
Director of Pupil Personnel Services