

# Outline of Remarks to the GDRSD School Committee

## SpedPAC . 1 February 2006

Sarah Campbell, Vice President

Recent changes in special education services reflect changes in society and what is expected of school districts, and we believe that the District is poised to meet that challenge in a number of ways, including:

- **Analyzing** the Coordinated Program Review data (which corroborates many of the concerns SpedPAC has had in recent years) and using the Corrective Action Plan as a springboard to improving overall communication and compliance withing the District.
- **Establishing** connections with parents - Dr. Genovese and Ms. Endicott have made concerted and commendable efforts to creating an ongoing, meaningful dialogue with the PAC.
- **Investing** in people and programs that will help the district better identify and address learning problems at the elementary school level.
- **Solidifying** the move to building-based services by facilitating better use of teaching resources and better communication among administrators, special education teachers and regular ed staff
- **Increasing** training and support for regular education teachers on the components and teaching strategies for specific disabilities to allow for more effective inclusion and educating parents and the larger community on how inclusion enhances the learning process for all of the children in the class and the District.
- **Improving** the TEAM meeting process to create equal and effective partnerships between schools and families, particularly during school-to-school transitions and that key period when a disability is suspected but not yet confirmed.

*The bottom line:*

**Better communication means better training means better compliance** – you cannot achieve any one of these without the other two.

# Remarks to the GDRSD School Committee

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As a School Committee, you all understand that society requires more from its schools than it did in previous generations. This is the reality of two income families and a more mobile, media-saturated culture. Children and adults are exposed to more information at school and at home and we are faced with the demands of both processing that information and building a principled, nurturing environment within our families and our communities. Add to that the yet-to-be explained spike in people with attentional, emotional, cognitive and developmental disorders and we have a real crisis on our hands. Regardless of the cause, we have more kids with more diverse needs than ever.

The good news is that we have more and better ways of reaching and helping these children. The bad news is that the best way to put that knowledge to work is by providing more training, more teachers and professionals and smaller classes, all of which costs money in an era when the state is cutting its contributions to the schools even as it issues a report about what Groton-Dunstable needs to do to comply with State Regulations.

The CPR outlines chronic problems in the School District, issues that special Education parents have tried to bring to the District's attention for a number of years and we hope that we are at last poised to address them. SpedPAC is encouraged the sense of partnership the District leadership has extended to us. We will do whatever we can to support its efforts to bolster its programs, increase teachers resources and training, and we hope to extend that sense of partnership to families of children with special needs.

The District is doing its best to take a long view and plan for the kinds of programs that will keep as many children educated in District as possible, and that means building programs and supports that address the growing population

of children with disabilities. Money spent on programs to catch up with kids who are already failing or placed out of District is necessary but not always cost efficient, just as fixing repairs is invariably more expensive than preventative maintenance. Wise spending means investing in reading programs, behavioral supports and hands-on training in how to identify and address disabilities, especially at the elementary level. If we improve our ability to identify and treat learning disorders at the elementary level, we will save on remedial and behavioral supports at the middle school. Our failure to do this in the past has resulted in many of the problems we face today.

From our perspective, the move to building based services has led to better communication and a greater sense of community for all educators in the schools, but further steps are required before we can call this reporting structure a success, including:

1. Elementary school teachers and administrators require more training and resources on how to identify and support children with learning difficulties, particularly at the elementary level;
2. school staff and parents should be informed and educated about the components of inclusion and how effective inclusion makes for a better learning environment for students at all levels of learning;
3. The District needs to improve the TEAM meeting process to create equal and effective partnerships between schools and families, particularly during school-to-school transitions and that key period when a disability is suspected but not yet confirmed.

SpedPAC is, by definition, a group intended to help children and families with special needs, but we feel very strongly that the supports that Groton and Dunstable provide for special education students improve the quality of education for all of the children in our towns for a number of reasons:

1. including students with disabilities in regular ed classrooms underscores our commitment as a society to understand, engage, and embrace those with different ideas, backgrounds and abilities;
2. the programs and training mandated to meet the needs of children with disabilities allow teachers to reach and challenge their students in new ways that allow all students to approach intellectual tasks in new ways and to think differently and critically during the learning process;
3. “special education” is a very broad term, and a significant number of children who qualify for special education services in one area sometimes fall under the heading gifted and talented in another.

We appreciate the opportunity to come before you tonight, and we hope that each of you will find a moment in the next few months to attend a SpedPAC meeting or event so that you can see first hand the families we represent and the work that we do.

If you come away from this evening with nothing else, please remember these words:

Better communication means better training means better compliance— you cannot achieve any one of these without the other two.

Thank you.