



# Special Needs Advisory Council

Nantucket, Massachusetts

*Laura Steele, Suzanne Fronzuto – Co-Chairs*

SNAC Meeting Minutes

January 20, 2021

**(Note:** The meeting was held by video conference via ZOOM App)

The meeting was called to order at approximately 6:00 PM with six people in attendance at the start of the meeting. An opening welcome by co-chair Laura Steele was followed by participant introductions. The minutes of the December 16, 2020 meeting were accepted.

## Director Update:

- Deb Gately, Director of Special Services

**MCAS:** The State has announced they have modified the test that will be administered this year. Students in grades 3 – 8, 9 and 10 typically take tests in math and ELA (grades 5 and 8 also do science, technology and engineering) with two sessions in each subject area. This year the State has reduced the sessions to one each, in a modified version of what students would usually take for tests in order to measure what they've learned. Testing dates run from April 5<sup>th</sup> through May 28<sup>th</sup> follows:

- ▶ 04/05/21 – 05/07/21: ELA
- ▶ 05/26/21 – 05/28/21: Math
- ▶ **Grades 5 and 8 only** 04/27/21 – 05/28/21: Science, Technology and Engineering

The State has transitioned their system, and a computer-based test will be administered. If a child has a paper-based exemption on their IEP (meaning they have to take the test by paper and pencil rather than by computer-based method) the schools through their principals are required to submit exemptions by January 29<sup>th</sup>. Liaisons are historically good at making sure principals know if they have a student requiring a paper test so the exemption gets filed.

In other MCAS news: Alternate portfolios (for students who do the MCAS-Alt, a portfolio-based assessment where students don't take the actual test but compile a portfolio showing a level of competency) were given an original due date of April 1<sup>st</sup>. This is now changed to May 5<sup>th</sup>. Parents, guardians and family members have the opportunity to review portfolios before they are submitted and may wish to be aware of these date changes. Deb also reviews all portfolios before submission to the State, which is a new practice for the district. Deb is advising teachers of the eight students currently in the

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### Director Update (continued):

district with portfolios to take part in as many of the State help sessions as possible. Deb provided some professional development to teachers on this as well over the past week. The portfolios are comprehensive documents, and the goal is for students to be represented in the best way they can. Teachers responsible for the portfolios will be attending virtual progress sessions in the next week and working directly with coaches from the State.

SNAC Website: Deb has uploaded all agenda and minutes available to her to date on the Special Services webpage on the NPS website. Deb screen-shared the updates and invited feedback. The site, which is known to be complex, is something Deb can continue to revitalize and maintain. There is missing documentation from the past couple of years and the outdated resource flyer will be replaced when Laura Steele provides Deb with the current version. Laura was hoping the school principals would add to their own weekly newsletters mention of any upcoming SNAC meetings along with a reference to the SNAC webpage. Deb said this can also be done the by Department of Special Services website as well as through any email communications she sends.

### Parent/Staff Discussion:

A parent commented that the pandemic has highlighted the disparity in kids, and for some the gap has grown wider. The approach to special education, UDL (Universal Design Learning; the way of building curriculum) which works for all children, is not applied; special ed is siloed rather than truly integrated. What types of professional development happens for gen ed and special ed teachers? Is there a live conversation about the tenants of special education and truly integrating it into the classrooms so that all children benefit? Can Deb, being new to the district, share if there is any discussion coming into the district about the schools rethinking how to touch all kids?

Deb shared her background in language-based learning disabilities and curriculum development, the latter of which was her platform when applying for her position in the Nantucket Public Schools. A recent conversation she had with school administration was about accessibility to accommodations to all students whether or not they are on educational plans. For professional development, when starting this year she was intent on having the special educators participate in building level PD centered around students being separated (the siloed versus integrated model). Deb's philosophy is that special educators are teachers within the building and provide instruction to kids requiring specially designed instruction, but they are part of the building community. During the September – December PD sessions both special and gen ed teaching staff shared that what's happening in classrooms is basically the same but may look different in the various settings. This approach of combining all teachers for PD is new, as past practice was having a separate PD for each set of teachers. Another significant component of PD this year is on the development of the multi-tiered system of supports, which is response to intervention (what's being done for students who don't necessarily need an IEP and what can be done before it reaches the need for that process). UDL is integrated into this discussion. During her transitioning-in period Deb has tapped into what people

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### Parent/Staff Discussion (continued):

are thinking but does not currently have the latitude, but is pushing in that direction. A parent always has the right to request an evaluation, but the schools are now educating parents about all the other things that be done for their child before taking a new direction. A student may in fact qualify in the end, but the school needs to ensure the child is learning and supported before starting the evaluation process. Deb received excellent feedback from teachers on the exercises done in today's PD session.

Another parent shared that there is more work to be done, with more transparency needed at all levels, including for parents, and more clarity on the district's philosophy. "Inclusion" is identified as the model, but there is in reality a two-tiered system where significant needs students or those with certain diagnoses are placed in a sub-separate program. There is currently no in-between with this and full inclusion. Students receiving pull-out in the early grades don't learn how to integrate, nor do their typical peers. All students benefit from inclusion and UDL strategies. Parents can benefit from being educated about programs and not feeling they are not part of the discussion because the school may present a "this is how we do it" approach.

Deb expressed that these important points are part of work the district has started to engage in. There has been turnover in the directorship of the Special Services department in past years, and being new to the position she is focused on looking at past practices, current programs, individual student plans through the lens of 'one size doesn't fit all.' Her discussions with school personnel at all levels as well as parents have provided insight and been helpful. She recently put out the call to special and gen ed teachers in all four schools to be part of a study group to evaluate these programs. There are 16 educators who will participate. Deb recently asked all special services staff, liaisons, social workers, special service providers and guidance counsellors to do an inventory of what the school has for students. Deb is also working separately with the humanities and STEM curriculum directors and the ELL director on the lack of a formal adoption system in the district for its programs. The inventory process identified approximately 6 – 10 programs across the four schools, some which are effective but may or may not have been adopted for use with other students. Deb stressed that the goal is not for her to micromanage the programs but to understand how current programs are benefitting kids and to help establish a vertical alignment of programs. This is achievable through an acquisition policy in the district. Deb also shared she is working with consultant Ann Larsen at Landmark who's been working for the past 10 years with CPS and NHS kids (and will be brought down to NIS and NES next year) to re-design whole language instruction, so it benefits all students. In summary, with all these initiatives there are a lot of moving parts, but the work on the school end, in conjunction with parent advocacy and the open dialogue of these meetings is helpful in identifying what all students can access so they are included in a way that is successful for them. The district is moving forward.

A parent followed up with a comment that engaging in this type of work lends itself to community-building and noted the positivity of Nantucket's diversity. Meeting the requirements of our special needs students is

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### Parent/Staff Discussion (continued):

an important part of this. She suggested a space on the webpage to serve as a forum where these new initiatives can be announced and their progress shared; where teachers can feel supported by parents and the community in making a change for all kids.

Another parent asked in relation to Deb's comments on vertical alignment and whole language instruction if it includes students with dyslexia. Orton-Gillingham (O.G.), Wilson and other programs have been used over several grades with assurance given that shifting between reading systems is fine. However, when speaking with the professionals of these programs it's stressed that fidelity and consistency be used throughout. A second parent concurred regarding the inconsistency in reading systems and expressed disappointment when changes occur that are too late for her child to benefit from.

Deb acknowledged there is differing opinion on alignment between several programs versus sustained delivery of a single method. She announced that this is being looked at right now in working with Ann Larsen. Deb will meet with Ann, Evemarie McNeil (NIS) and Kim Kubisch (NES) the first week in February. Deb has discussed with Ann the need to expand the focus from her coaching of CPS and NHS teachers to now include NES and NIS so no child is left behind in the area of language based learning disabilities. At this early roll out stage Deb is unable to articulate what the exact supports are going to be, but supports now being received by students will, if anything, be strengthened.

Parents of a new student who recently transitioned to the district shared that their integration process was very positive, with no issues discussing their child's needs and working with the school in a team based approach for creating the best plan. In stark contrast to what they experienced in their previous school district in another state, accommodations and changes were negotiated and made. They feel their student's needs have been appropriately and well provided for by the Nantucket Public Schools.

Deb, the first person to review the IEP of a new student transitioning to the district, is appreciative of receiving all feedback and is glad to know when new students and their families are introduced to the district in a positive way. Any parents with questions can reach out to Deb or Becky Earle in the Special Services office at any time. Deb expressed her gratitude for the open and honest discussion provided by all who take part in the SNAC meetings.

SNAC co-chair Laura Steele is the parent of a student who began his education in the Pathways pre-school program and is now preparing for the college search process. She shared how grateful she is to the Nantucket Public Schools who, in conjunction with her son's hard work, helped her son achieve what she was unsure would be possible when he was first diagnosed with autism at a young age. During his school experience she and her husband encountered some bumps along the way, pressed when needed, and were heard. She understands not all parents of special needs students have had this positive experience and is grateful in her current role to be a support to other parents.

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At approximately 7:00 PM the meeting adjourned with 11 people in attendance. All non-parents signed off so the Uncommon Parents support group meeting could begin. The next meeting of the SNAC is February 17, 2021 at 6:00PM. The meeting will again take place via Zoom app.

Respectfully submitted,

Lora Kebbati, Secretary of SNAC

Approved through a vote of SNAC members on \_\_\_\_\_

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