

Merrimack Special Education Support Group  
April 21, 2009

Meeting started at 7:05 pm. Six people were in attendance.

#### Topic 1: Upcoming events

Barbara Publicover said the literacy event, proposed for May of this year, may not get off the ground. The school district has had trouble coordinating all the schedules in that time frame. They are enthusiastic about doing it at the beginning of the next school year.

The district is also excited about the wellness event.

The district had asked for MSEG's help in getting the word out about the special education survey. We listed it on the website. The district also used the reverse 411 system to notify parents, and WE put a notice on the community access channel.

MSEG is also listed on the community access channel.

B. Publicover mentioned a program being hosted by the Amherst SESG on extended school year benefits for special education children.

She then mentioned that the district will receive \$800,000 to \$1,000,000 from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Kathy Nannicelli, special education coordinator for Merrimack Middle School, said the district is being advised not to use it for programs unless the district will be able to pick up the ongoing costs. The funds must be related to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). An attendee commented that the money must be in addition to, not a replacement for, our own money.

#### Topic 2: Response to Intervention

Maureen Tracey gave an explanation of the district's approach to two related policies, Response To Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). RTI is for academics, and PBIS is for behavior. She showed an image of a pyramid, with 80% of the children representing the base of the pyramid. These are the children who respond adequately to the regular instruction and behavior approaches. The remaining 20% are divided among those who need some more focused attention from the educators, and those that need an intensive level of services.

With RTI, the approach is to provide periodic monitoring to catch those children who have not adequately learned the subject matter through the normal education process. The lessons are retaught until the child has mastered them. The purpose is to avoid the situation where a child gets to the end of the quarter with a failing grade and that is the first time any formal attention is paid to it. The approach is to be systematic, proactive and preventative.

Very often, academic struggles lead to behavioral issues as the child feels embarrassed and unconfident about responding to questions in class. In adopting RTI, the district is moving from a zero-tolerance approach to one focusing on positive reinforcement.

PBIS is similar to RTI, except that it is for teaching behaviors as opposed to academics. Some children, for example, do not know the correct response when someone calls out their name, or is unable to read another person's emotional cues and respond accordingly.

RTI and PBIS are more for the younger grade levels. K. Nannicelli said, once these programs have been in place through the entire school career, by the time the kids get to middle school or high school, it will be easier for the educators and specialists to focus on the specific needs of the few, not trying to readjust the attitudes of the entire population.

M. Tracey said the idea to ensure the kids have mastered the expectations, not just handed in all the work. Virtual Academy and other extended learning options tie in with RTI as reinforcement or reteaching for kids who did not master the material the first time around. K. Nannicelli said there are some Virtual Academy courses available at the middle school as well.

### Topic 3: Individual issues

At this point, B. Publicover solicited comments from attendees as to why they had come to the meeting. One attendee discussed the specific issues relating to her child as it relates to the school district. Several people in attendance offered support, suggestions and direction.

B. Publicover asked K. Nannicelli what the group can do to help the SPED coordinators. Nannicelli said she feels bad when some parents don't seem to understand the process and what the Special Education department can do help them. Publicover suggested developing a list of parents who have "been there, done that," who could act as coaches or sounding boards for new parents, to help steer them in the right direction.

M. Tracey asked how they can get more people to attend the meeting. K. Nannicelli suggested an open house at the beginning of the year. Something with food, attached to some event the school is having.