

Merrimack Special Education Support Group  
Minutes of the meeting of November 17, 2009

Presenting information this evening were Merrimack School District Director of Special Education David St. Jean, and Director of Preschool Sheila Demers. There were 7 other people in attendance.

Meeting was called to order at 7:05 pm

Barbara Publicover told the group that next month's meeting will be one of the four events put on this year in collaboration with the school district. Life coach Joan Celebi will give a presentation titled "Overwhelmed No More" at the Middle School Library at 7 pm on December 15.

St. Jean presented a chart listing all the special education staff in the district by title/job and by school. He then outlined the basic roles played by each position in meeting the needs of the district's special education population.

The purpose of this part of the presentation was to help the attendees understand whom they should be contacting if they had a question or concern about some aspect of their child's program. The first place a parent should start if their child does not have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in place, is with the child's teacher. If the child does have an IEP, then the child's case manager is usually the first point of contact for routine communication.

In addition, St. Jean said this chart will help parents better understand what special services are available in their child's school, how those services are provided, and with whom the children are interacting.

An interesting aspect of the document is that it clarifies the special identity of each of the district's three elementary schools. Each school is set up to handle a specific type of special needs population. Thornton's Ferry has a program to serve the needs of the medically fragile population; Masticola Elementary has a program to serve the students with emotional handicaps, while Reeds Ferry has a program for the unique needs of students on the Autism spectrum.

St. Jean then discussed special programs. One is Springboard to Success, which is a program for students deemed to be at risk for poor performance or failure in high school. Students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade so identified may be invited by staff to participate in the Springboard to Success program. This summer program is designed to help these students acclimate to the demands, expectations, and skill sets needed for successful completion of high school. It is not restricted to students formally identified as having special needs.

At the high school, at-risk students may elect to take a 9<sup>th</sup> grade for-credit class called Success In School. This class focuses on study skills, time management, etc, and also is not limited to special needs students.

Another program, or support, at the high school is called PASS. It is a classroom in which one or more special education teachers and paraeducators are always present to help students with difficulties, whether they are academic, emotional or physical. Many

special needs students take their study periods in this classroom, while others visit it to calm down or to get help with schoolwork. Some students participate in group discussions designed to help them improve their emotional and behavioral skills.

The Get Set program is designed for students with cognitive challenges. It is designed to help them develop work skills. Some students are able to remain until they are 21 years old. At “graduation” at age 18, such students may receive a certificate of completion of high school, which differs from a diploma because a diploma indicates satisfactory completion of all requirements. If a student receives an actual diploma, they cannot continue in the Get Set program.

In Get Set, the staff tries to help the kids get a job in the community, often with a job coach going along. Sometimes it takes several jobs to find one that is a good fit with the child’s personality and abilities. Ultimately, this program helps these children become contributing members of society

St. Jean commented on the dramatic increase over the years in the number of autistic students in public schools. Back in the 1960’s and 70’s, autistic students were educated, if at all, in separate school programs, often on college campuses. There was not a mandate to educate and to include all students under the public school umbrella. This is one reason the public school system has become so expensive over time.

Attendees commented on specific examples of children who have benefited from the inclusion approach. Some autistic students who were virtually non-verbal have gone on to become much more conversational and communicative by being in a regular classroom with non-disabled students than they ever would have had they been sequestered with only autistic classmates.

Next, Sheila Demers spoke about the Merrimack Early Education (MEEP) and Preschool programs. Demers said 70% to 80% of the kids in the preschool have gone through the MEEP process. The MEEP team gets information about young children in the community who may need special services in school by referrals from pediatricians, daycare centers etc. All we get is a name and telephone number, and if the parents choose not to respond, it becomes difficult to determine how many kids will need services.

Demers also goes out to the preschools to observe the students. Observations within the preschool setting and also in the family setting helps the observer to see how the child interacts with others.

If the parents respond, the team visits the family to set up an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP), which looks not just at the needs of the child but the needs of the entire family. The goal is to determine the least restrictive setting in which to provide the early intervention services, whether that is in the home or the preschool.

Currently we have 9 preschool classes. The preschools have roughly a 50:50 ratio between special needs students and typical students.

Barb Publicover asked how parents find out about the services that are available to their special needs children. Demers said doctors offices know about us, day care centers know about us, we are listed on the school website, but sometimes parents do not find out. The child gets to first grade and the teacher asks, “Didn’t you see this kid?”

One attendee asked about whether these services are available to children who are home-schooled. Demers said that, under NH law, home-schooled children are not entitled to special education services. The parents are making the choice to opt out of the system. Here in Merrimack, however, we treat home-schooled children like any other student. Many times, students who are home-schooled in the elementary grades end up coming into the public schools in the upper elementary school grades or the middle school, and it works out better for the students and the schools at that time if we have been able to service that student prior to their entry into our public school system.

Three- and four-year-old children are given an Individual Services Plan, not an IEP. The parents are responsible for providing the services; the district does not supervise to see how well those services are being provided. Also, unlike an IEP, parents do not have the right to demand services.

Since 3 and 4 year olds are not required by law to receive schooling, the district provides the services. Once the child reaches the age for kindergarten, the child will not receive services from Demers if the parents choose to keep them home.

To qualify for the MEEP services, the child must have 2 identified special needs.

Following up on the issue of how to get the word out about services available in the district to parents of young special needs children, one attendee suggested contacting the Merrimack Friends and Family group. They provide information to people moving into the community.