

ANDOVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Student Services Office

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Dear Parents and Guardians of Students with Disabilities,

District leaders and faculty have been working vigorously and tirelessly to tackle important issues related to special education students and their individual needs. We believe we have made significant progress in a number of areas. We were pleased to have the opportunity to interact with parents at last week's public forum.

One area that we focused on this year was our program for children with literacy and language-based learning difficulties. Knowing that many of you and your children have a personal stake in this particular topic, I would like to share with you the following report about the extensive work we have undertaken and the progress we have made.

PROGRESS REPORT ON LITERACY AND ADDRESSING LANGUAGE-BASED DISABILITIES

Our work this year has set the stage for long-term structural changes and initiatives to improve and expand the services we offer to students with learning disabilities, in particular, students who are in the various stages of learning to read. One of the significant benefits of this effort has been the collaboration between regular education and special education staff in addressing needs in this area and the collaboration among our curriculum, student services, and technology departments.

To focus only on dyslexia would be to oversimplify a more complex systemic need to look deeply at our approach to literacy in general. Thus, we have approached this initiative on multiple fronts, including: a) training for regular education teachers on both dyslexia and literacy development, b) specific training for special education teachers, reading teachers, and specialists on assessment and intervention methods for various subtypes of reading disorders, c) universal screening to identify students who may have reading challenges, plus progress monitoring systems for students who have exhibited difficulty learning to read, d) the restructuring of in-district programs, and e) community education and outreach.

Training: Regular Education

In the area of general education, we have raised districtwide awareness and better understanding of dyslexia. For example, 54 teachers participated in a course on dyslexia, 28 teachers attended a conference at Harvard Medical School with the International Dyslexia Association, and even more teachers have participated in a year-long expert speaker series. This spring, another 51 middle school teachers participated in a mini-course on language-based learning disabilities through Landmark Outreach. The purpose of this course was to prepare for the expansion of language-based services across all middle schools. Our teachers will continue to work with Landmark Outreach throughout the year to support students in the general education content classrooms, to adopt specific methods of instruction, and to promote a co-teaching model. In June, we will begin the course and consultation program with our elementary staff. Another strand of instruction for regular education teachers includes assistive technology. For example, this fall

we will roll out the TextHelp (www.texthelp.com) platform to support students with language-based learning disabilities in content-area classes.

At the same time, we have been reviewing the fidelity and consistency with which we approach prevention programs such as Foundations, which is a Wilson-based phonics program in all elementary schools. We have been providing tier two interventions based on the professional development we have offered to staff, and this fall we will be adding the Lexia Learning System (www.lexialearning.com) to elementary classrooms. The literacy curriculum review, which we launched this year, is utilizing the professional development and diagnostic work we are doing with students to evaluate tier one and tier two literacy programs for adoption in 2018-19.

Training: Special Educators, Reading Specialists, Speech and Language Pathologists

In the area of interventions to address language-based learning disabilities, we have trained 41 teachers and specialists in the Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing program (LiPS), 16 teachers in the Wilson Language method, 25 teachers in the Story Grammar Marker program, and 13 teachers in the Orton-Gillingham method. All Education Team Facilitators (ETFs) received training in the importance of the direct instruction of high frequency sight words and systematic methods for vocabulary. They worked with Jeanne Tucker from Tucker and Associates and Jill Hartmann from Hartmann Learning to see how sight words can be organized and instructed as part of an explicit reading program such as Wilson. Future training will include a second year of training in the EMPOWER program, the Framing Your Thoughts program to support writing, and a cohort for assistive digital technologies. In June, 26 more teachers will participate in the Wilson Language training and 12 of them will continue with the year-long practicum next fall. This summer, we will work with Commonwealth Learning to train paraprofessionals in the LiPS program, and our teachers and specialists will participate in a course on dyslexia and accessible instructional materials through Diana Petschauer of Assistive Technology for Education.

In addition to formal workshops, teachers have been working with consultants and coaches. For example, Dr. Nadine Gaab from Harvard Medical School participated in our teacher training this year and she will continue working with us on refining our early screening and primary instruction. Ann Larsen from Landmark Outreach has been consulting to the language-based program and training regular education teachers to support students with language-based learning disabilities. Lisa Brooks from Commonwealth Learning is providing our teachers with ongoing coaching and consultation as they implement research-based interventions such as LiPS and Wilson. She will teach a mini-course on phonemic awareness for Kindergarten teachers this summer. Drs. Melissa Orkin and Stephanie Gottwald from Tufts Center on Reading and Language Research have provided ongoing training with teachers and administrators throughout the year. They provided two sessions on dyslexia and the brain, a day-long workshop on identifying and planning for the various subtypes of dyslexia, and consultation on an assessment protocol used to identify subtypes of dyslexia. In the coming year, they will be working collaboratively with the HILL for Literacy and Commonwealth Learning to train our teachers in a comprehensive data team model.

We also have some new partnerships. For example, we have a memorandum of understanding with the Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions, which will be providing literacy interns to work in Andover schools. Our most exciting new partnership is with MD/Neuroscientist Dr. Erik Falke of the Carroll School research center and the Gabrieli Lab at MIT. Because of our comprehensive work and dedication, we have been invited to join Dr. Falke and MIT to participate in cutting edge research. In fact, Andover will be the first public school in the world to collaborate with them on ground-breaking cognitive interventions for students with developmental dyslexia.

Universal Screening and Assessments

One of the most significant developments this year has been the implementation of a universal screening and progress-monitoring program across elementary schools. Using a multi-tiered system of supports model (MTSS), we have established universal screening, progress monitoring and data teams in all elementary schools. Consultants from HILL for Literacy, Tufts, and

Commonwealth Learning are working as a coordinated interdisciplinary team to help regular and special education teachers at each grade level to establish monitoring protocols, analyze data, and determine appropriate interventions. In cooperation with program coordinators from special education and ELA, we are reviewing a Lexile-based (www.lexile.com) assessment to determine students' reading levels and longitudinal progress in grades 3-12.

In the area of special education assessment, we have established a testing protocol for the comprehensive processing of referrals related to language-based learning disabilities. This protocol has been reviewed with all psychologists and ETFs, and we are now sharing it with speech and language pathologists and special education teachers. We have abandoned the annual assessment packet and lesson model from Ilda King and we have adopted a set of norm-referenced, research based assessments and tutorial lesson plans with embedded assessments from Wilson, Orton-Gillingham, and Landmark Outreach. Our consultants from Tufts University are also working with both special and regular education staff to establish a set of follow-up assessments when students exhibit low performance on universal screeners. These follow-up assessments allow us to determine whether performance is consistent with one of the subtypes of dyslexia and what intervention(s) would be appropriate. Finally, we have restructured our budget to hire a district level psychologist to oversee diagnostic protocols and consistent application of assessment tools and interpretation.

In-District Programs

Our elementary, middle school, and high school special education program heads have been working with the student services director and with our consultants from Landmark Outreach and Tufts Center for Reading and Language Research to restructure our programs for students with language-based learning disabilities. We have expanded our programming across all three middle schools and down to grade two at the Bancroft School. We are working in vertical teams to ensure continuity of programming from grade to grade as well as the application of interventions that are specifically mapped to the developmental reading stages of our students. We have also developed a curriculum—called Learning 101—to support students' executive functions. Finally, we have established an admissions committee, that includes Landmark Outreach, the student services director, teachers and specialists, and a district psychologist. The purpose of this team is to review student profiles for admissions and to monitor progress. So far, this team has reviewed all assessment records for fifth and first grade students.

Outreach

We recognize the importance of including not only the local community, but also the wider community in the discussion of appropriate responses to literacy challenges. In September, we issued individual invitations to parents to share with us their stories about dyslexia. In November, we hosted an open forum for parents of students with dyslexia to share their concerns and ask questions. In July, October, January, March, and April, we presented updates on our literacy plan during School Committee meetings. We also provided a comprehensive report, available on our website. Many of the accomplishments are consistent with recommendations that came from parents in open forums and individual discussions. We have worked to ensure that our accomplishments not only met but went well beyond the recommendations in the action plan that parents and educators created with the Federation for Children with Special Needs in 2015.

Our outreach efforts have included experts in the field such as Dr. Nadine Gaab, Dr. Stephanie Gottwald, Dr. Melissa Orkin, Dr. Erik Falke, and Dr. John Willis, with more experts to come. Some of these experts have participated in a speaker series for parents and interested parties from the surrounding communities. Finally, we have joined the international discussion by speaking at conferences and we have sought out policy makers to offer assistance with their efforts in establishing statewide guidelines for addressing the needs of students with dyslexia.

All of this effort has demanded a great deal from staff and leadership in the district. I'm pleased to report that our staff members recognize the critical importance of addressing the needs of students with reading challenges and have lent their time and expertise to moving aggressively forward. As a result, we have put in place the systems and services to better support students with reading challenges. Although this is a multi-year initiative, we have accomplished far more this year than we had anticipated. We will continue to add projects to our plan as we move forward.

I hope this report gives you a sense of the district's strong level of commitment to providing high-quality education and support services to students who exhibit language-based learning difficulties. As always, we welcome your feedback and input as we work hand in hand for the benefit of all APS students.

Sara Stetson