

# **Presentation to the School Committee**

Andover Public Schools

January 15, 2014

# Why are we here tonight?

In Massachusetts, 90 % of children with disabilities are as intellectually capable as their non-disabled peers of achieving academic proficiency, **so their academic achievement should be substantially similar to their non-disabled peers** as long as they receive the special education services they need in order to learn.

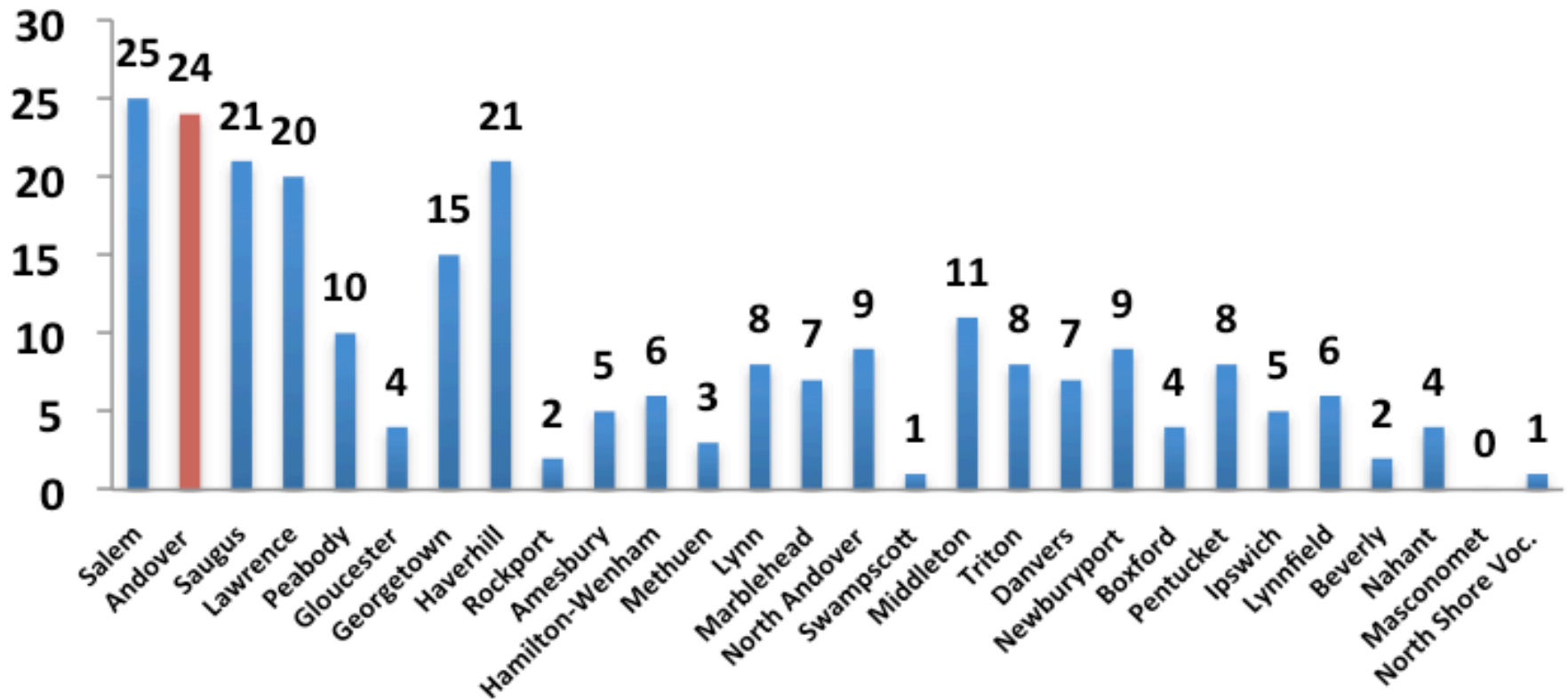
Source: MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)

# Data Sources

- Andover SEPAC First Annual Needs Assessment Survey - March 2014
- Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) Coordinated Program Reviews (CPR) and Andover Public Schools Corrective Action Plans (CAP) - 2008 & 2014
- Walker Partnerships Reports - 2009 & 2013
- DESE's Guidance for Special Education Parent Advisory Councils
- School Committee Policy Manual
- Andover Public Schools Strategic Plan

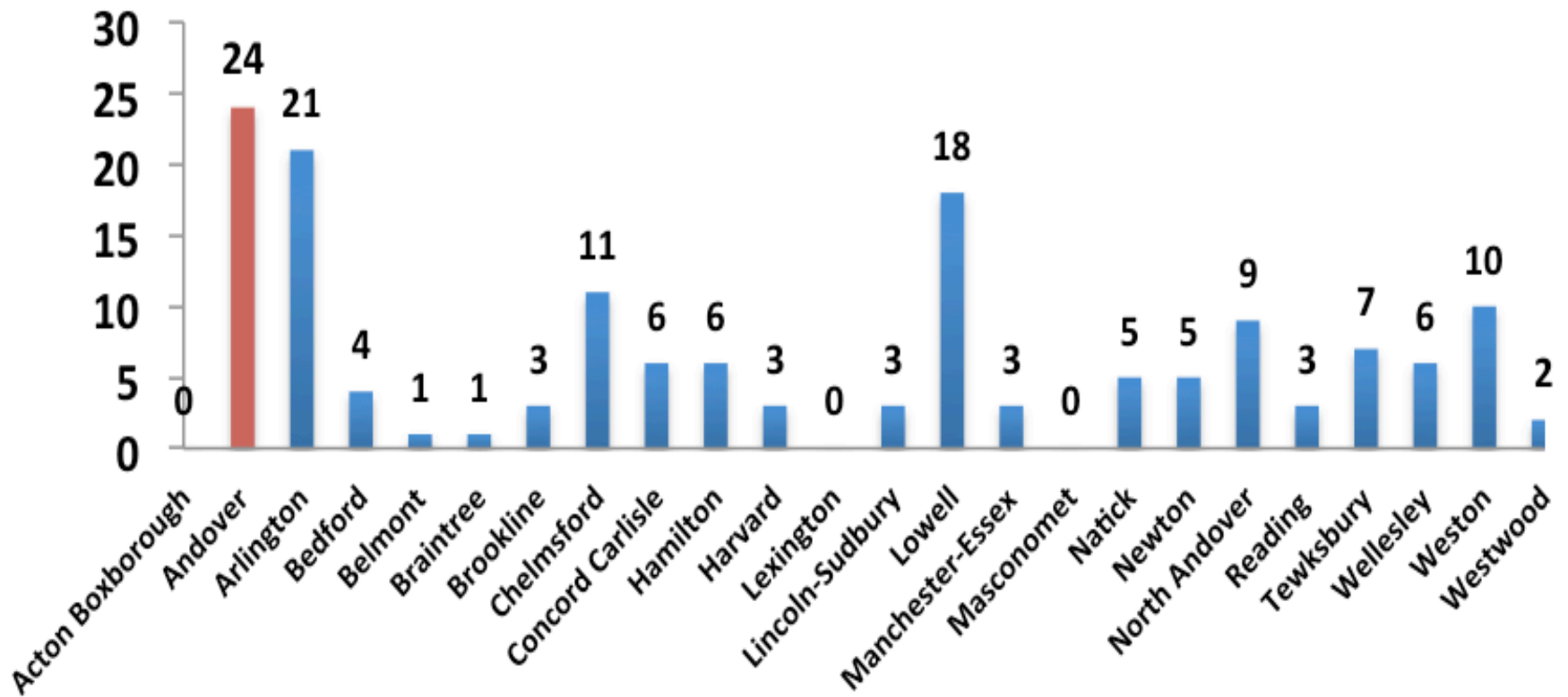
# DESE CPR Compliance Ratings Comparing Essex County School Districts

## Corrective Actions Required for Partially Implemented Special Education Categories in Essex County



# DESE CPR Compliance Ratings Comparing Andover & Comparable School Districts

## Corrective Actions Required for Partially Implemented Special Education Categories by Comparable Towns.

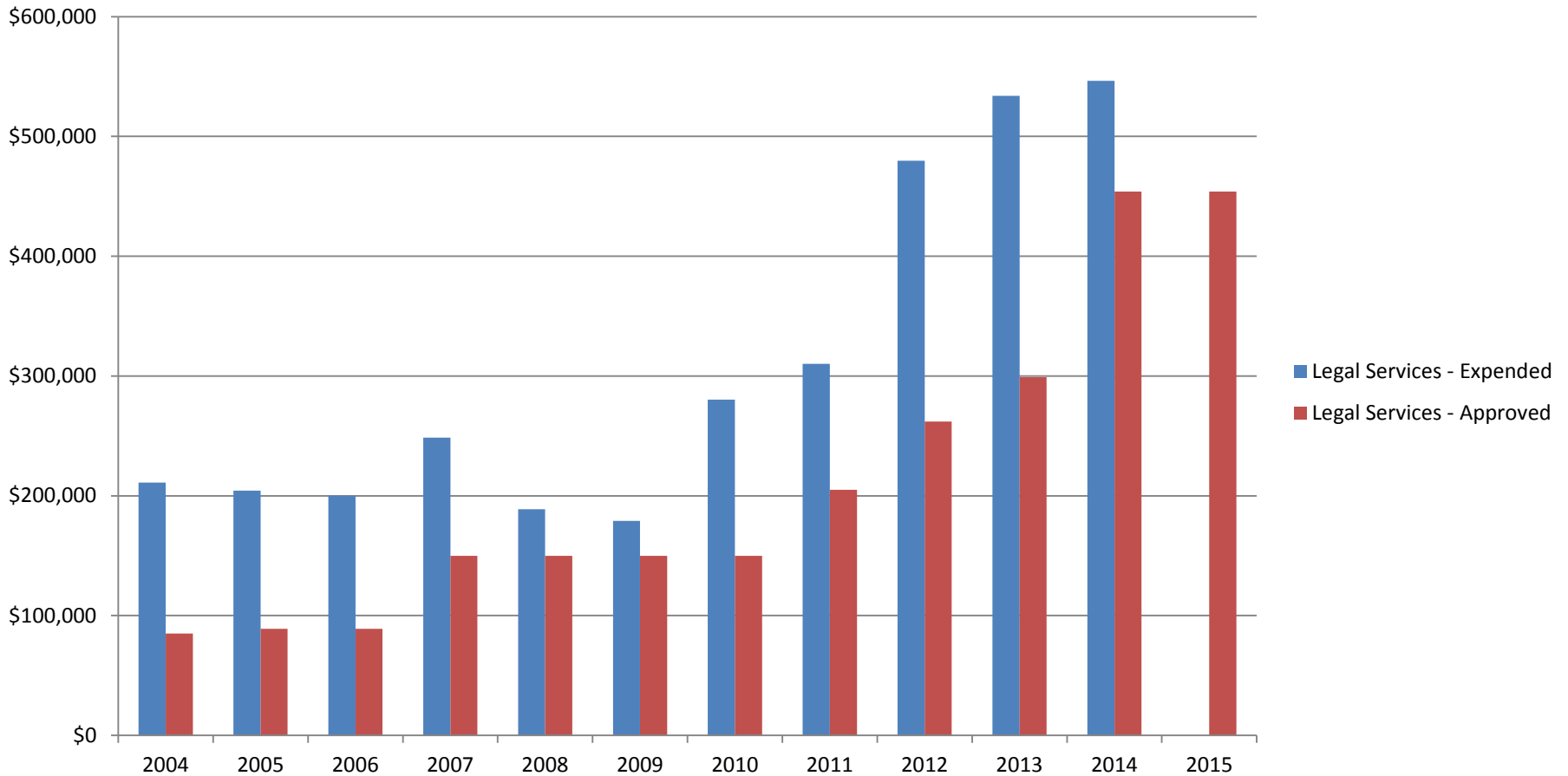


# Why does Non-Compliance Matter?

- Negative impact on student's education
- Ineffective plan of instruction and support
- Student can easily “fall through the cracks”
- Places students at risk of failure
- Increased emotional & behavioral problems
- Staff unable to make appropriate decisions
- Places the District at financial risk

# Why are Andover Public Schools Legal Expenses Rising?

## District Legal Spending



# **Andover Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC)**

SEPAC's regulatory responsibilities include:

- 1. “advising the school committee on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities”**
- 2. “meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school committee’s special education programs”**

mandated by Massachusetts General Law Sec 3 of Chapter 71B



# Why a Survey?

“Learn what the primary concerns are among parents of students with disabilities in their community....Information gathered from the needs assessment can be used to fulfill SEPAC’s regulatory responsibility”

Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education’s (DESE)  
**Guidance for Special Education Parent Advisory Councils**

# Survey Design & Methodology

- Andover parents & guardians - general & special education
- Developed 26 question areas through collaboration with parents, school administration, staff, and the school committee
- Rating scales of 1 – 10
  - allow for more detailed data analysis
  - public familiarity with this type of scale
- Narrative response opportunity after every question
- Survey link open for 23 days from 3/25/14 to 4/17/14
- Promoted by SEPAC and APS online, by email and in newspapers

# “Survey Says...”

- **887** total respondents
- **115** pages of results
- **2358** narrative responses

*“The comments give a lot of meaning to what those percentages are”*

- School Committee Member

# Customer Satisfaction

from SEPAC 2014 Needs Assessment Survey

The percentage of parents reporting low satisfaction was **nearly twice as much for Special Education** than for the Overall School District

	Low Satisfaction (Rated 1 – 3)	High Satisfaction (Rated 8 – 10)
Overall APS	10 %	52 %
APS Special Education	19 %	47 %

**APS Strategic Plan** desired outcome for **Goal # 4 Communications:**  
*“District parents report an increasingly favorable rating of the school district overall...on school effectiveness surveys to achieve an **80% rating by 2016**”*

# Special Education Areas of Concern

1. Lack of Transparency
2. Communication
3. Teacher/Staff Training
4. IEP/504 Process & Non-Compliance
5. SEPAC Role – Awareness & Education of Community

# 1a. Lack of Transparency: Perceptions

- **Needs Assessment Survey 2014**
  - *“school committee needs to communicate more openly with Andover public”*
  - *“lack of website postings Sped programs”*
  - *“what is the breakdown of Sped costs?”*
  - *“I was NOT aware of the review”* (DESE CPR)
- **Stakeholders: Parents, SEPAC, Community Members, other Town Boards**
  - Requests for information on programming, staffing and budget have been denied or ignored by APS Administration & Staff.

## **1b. Lack of Transparency: Data**

- **Walker Partnerships Report 2013**

- Andover taxpayers paid \$15,380 in FY2013 for this District-Wide Special Education Program Evaluation commissioned by the Student Services Department.
- Results not presented to the public or posted on school website like other school districts, such as North Andover

# Recommendations

## Transparency

### School Committee Operations

1. Conduct all school committee business at evening meetings, as daytime meetings exclude the working public from attending and asking questions.
2. Post accurate and detailed agenda items for all meetings.
3. Create a policy to define school committee workshops.
4. Televise and video record all meetings and workshops
5. Allow public input at all meetings per policy



# Recommendations

## Transparency

6. List all in-district specialized programs on APS website with full descriptions including entrance and exit criteria.
7. Include a flowchart listing staff names and positions for special education and 504 Plans.
8. List detailed credentials of staff/specialists.
9. Create benchmarks comparing APS to other school districts in areas of both special education and general education and make available to the public.

# Recommendations

## Transparency

10. Commission an external independent audit of Andover Public Schools in collaboration with SEPAC Executive Council.
11. Inform parents well in advance using district-wide email regarding any audit of APS.
12. Update public on most recent school district/committee reports, evaluations and audits

# Recommendations

## Transparency

13. Schedule monthly meetings between APS Administration, Student Services, 504 Coordinator and SEPAC Executive Council.
14. Invite SEPAC Executive Council to participate in the development and evaluation of special education programming.
15. Invite SEPAC Executive Council to participate in Quarterly Sped meetings attended by the Student Services Department, the School Committee and the Finance Committee.

# 2a. Communication: Perceptions

- **Needs Assessment Survey 2014**
  - *“parents do not know contacts at each school for special education”*
  - *“Teachers are gag ordered from advocating for children.”*
  - *“SPED dept developed culture of “us versus parents””*
  - *“fear of having open discussion of the Team to honestly assess a child’s disability and discuss services and interventions that would help”*
- **Walker Partnerships Report 2009**
  - *“There is not an ongoing parent education program in place that identifies what the district is responsible for/required to provide under special education legislation”*

## 2b. Communication: Data (Parents)

**\*\*\*Same Corrective Action in 2001, 2008 and 2014\*\*\***

- **Corrective Action DESE CPR 2001**
  - *“The onsite team could not confirm through either document review or staff interviews that this criterion has been implemented.”*  
(Communications are in English and primary language of home)
- **Corrective Action DESE CPR 2008**
  - *“While the district has indicated a keen interest in improving the situation, record reviews, document reviews, and interviews indicate that the district does not yet have the resources or procedures in place to assure that communications with parents are consistently conducted in English and the language of the home.”*
- **Corrective action DESE CPR 2014**
  - *“Important documents are not always translated for parents whose primary language is not English. Also, the interpreters used to translate at IEP meeting are not always familiar with special education.”*

## 2c. Communication: Data (Staff)

- **Walker Partnerships Report 2009**
  - *“There is a lack of a clear understanding by all staff as to the special education services that are available to students throughout the District”*
- **Walker Partnerships Report 2013**
  - *“the general education staff continue to be confused over the various specific roles of the special education personnel .....this is fairly true across the district at all levels”*
- **Corrective Action DESE CPR 2014**
  - *“District does not consistently provide progress reports at least as often as report cards are provided (should be every quarter)...not every goal in the student’s IEP has a written narrative addressing progress”*

# Recommendations

## Communication

1. Implement a standard professional practice of 24-48 hour response to parent and establish metric to monitor performance.
2. Identify process of parent options if response is not appropriate.
3. All reports relating to special education should be easily accessed by the community on the APS website, such as:
  - Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (DESE) Coordinated Program Review (CPR)
  - The District's Corrective Action Plan (CAP)
  - The Walker Partnership Reports

# Recommendations

## Communication

4. Remove SEPAC webpage from APS website.
5. Connect APS link directly to the official Andover SEPAC website:  
[www.andoversepac.org](http://www.andoversepac.org)
6. Use full name for any publicity: Andover Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC)

\*(Note: additional recommendation regarding Communications is located under Teacher/Staff Training)



# 3a. Teacher/Staff Training: Perception

- **Needs Assessment Survey 2014**
  - *“504, teachers not held accountable to adhere to school accommodations, there is an extreme lack of transparency with the process”*
  - *“504 plan lacks consistency, filled with errors, incorrect diagnosis/accommodations, 504 coordinator/assistant superintendent slow to respond, does not address issues thoroughly”*
  - *“the law mandates that school personnel be trained in basic special education regulatory requirements. If staff do not know what a child is entitled to as a matter of law, critical decisions can too easily be made based on administrative convenience or budget concerns, rather than on the child’s needs”*
  - *“hire appropriately qualified staff to meet student needs”*

## **3b. Teacher/Staff Training: Data (Professional Development )**

- **Walker Partnerships Report 2009**

- *“Interviewees expressed an interest in having opportunities to have focused and more in-depth professional development on the various learning styles of students with disabilities in order to gain awareness of how to instruct this population”*

- **Walker Partnerships Report 2013**

- *“There continues to be a need for professional development for the general education staff regarding instructional and behavioral interventions, understanding the various disabilities categories and how disabilities impact learning”*
- *“There is a need to continue the effort to provide training on differential instruction, accommodations and managing challenging behaviors within the classroom.”*

## **3c. Teacher/Staff Training: Data (General Education)**

- **Walker Partnerships Report 2013**
  - *“A continued need exists for the general education staff to have a common understanding of mental health needs and to know what interventions strategies are needed to deal with this population of students”*
- **Corrective Action DESE CPR 2014**
  - *“Review of documents and staff interviews indicate that required education topics (state and federal education requirements, analyzing and accommodating diverse learning styles and methods of collaboration) are not addressed with general education staff”*

# Recommendations

## Teacher/Staff Training

1. Invite Walker Partnerships representatives to present the findings of their 2013 District-Wide Special Education Program Evaluation at a School Committee meeting.
2. Commission Walker Partnerships to perform an evaluation in FY2016 and invite SEPAC Executive Council to participate.
3. \*Create a District-Wide Procedural Manual for Special Education and 504 Plans for staff and parents. See Mansfield Public Schools for example  
([http://www.mansfieldschools.com/sped\\_department.htm](http://www.mansfieldschools.com/sped_department.htm))
4. Invite SEPAC Executive Council to participate in the planning and development of this Manual.

# Recommendations

## **Teacher/Staff Training**

5. Use independent resource to develop and monitor staff training/education programs.
6. Collect data regarding staff retention over last two full school years.
7. Use an external independent resource to create a staff retention plan.

# 4a. IEP/504 Process: Perceptions

- **Needs Assessment Survey 2014**

- *“the District does not work collaboratively with parents, constant battle, a constant struggle and delay to see who gives up first and yet we are talking about the children who are being treated like a number.”*
- *“parents are not litigious by nature, they are forced to pursue legal action by a lethargic special needs program with flawed priorities”*
- *“For many years I have seen teachers in an IEP meeting not speaking freely because of fear of retaliation from the ETF in the meeting. I often feel as if I’m being managed in an IEP meeting instead of it being a collaborative effort to create the most effective plan for my children”*
- *“My child’s IEP is not followed, we cannot arrange team meetings to discuss”*

# 4b. IEP/504 Process: Eligibility

- **Needs Assessment Survey 2014**
  - *“eligibility determination delayed”*
- **Walker Partnerships Report 2009**
  - *“There seem to be a lack of consistent practice by evaluation Teams with respect to following eligibility guidelines”*
- **DESE 2010 three year mid cycle review**
  - *“the district must conduct a root cause analysis to determine why IEP Teams are consistently not convening within the 45 days timeline for an eligibility determination”*
- **Corrective Action DESE CPR 2014**
  - *“Review of student records and staff interviews indicated that despite the current tracking system, the district does not consistently meet the 45 day timeline for eligibility determination”*

# 4c. IEP/504 Process: Non-Compliance

- **Corrective Actions DESE CPR 2014**
  - *“IEP’s are not always provided to parents immediately ( within 3-5 days) or within 2 weeks when parents receive summary notes and a service grid at the conclusion of the team meeting.....records indicated that only one copy and two signature pages of the IEP and placement were provided to parents rather than two complete copies of the IEP”*
  - *“not all eligible students start the school year with an IEP in effect....district does not inform the parents in writing of delayed services due to a lack of personnel or space and does not offer alternative methods to meet the goals on the accepted IEP”*
  - *“the Notice of proposed school district action ( N1) form did not always address the federally required questions such as what rejected options were considered and why each option was rejected, what evaluation procedure, test record or report was used as a basis for the proposed action, and other factors that were relevant to the school district’s decision”*



# Recommendations

## **IEP/504 Process & Non-compliance**

1. Per evidence based practice, proactively evaluate children comprehensively beginning in kindergarten for all suspected disabilities.
2. Provide appropriate intensive services to eligible children when they are younger and first identified.
3. Use an external independent resource to develop ongoing internal quality control.

# Recommendations

## **IEP/504 Process & Non-compliance**

4. Open search for most qualified candidate for Student Services Director in order to complete timely transition of interim position ending in June 2015.
5. Invite SEPAC Executive Council on search committee and hiring committee for this position.
6. Have a dedicated 504 Coordinator
7. Reposition 504 Coordinator under Student Services Department

# 5a. SEPAC Role: Perceptions

- **Needs Assessment Survey 2014**

- *“Up till recently it appeared that SEPAC took direction from the director of student services; which should not have occurred. The school district does not direct activities of Andover SEPAC, their role is facilitate and assist the SEPAC in their activities”*
- *“When I learned my child had a disability, no one from the school ever referred me to the SEPAC for assistance or help. I am not fully aware of what SEPAC does.”*
- *“ I thought it was more of a “PTO” for parents of children who need services.”*
- *“the interests of the children are not represented and discussed freely. Because of that I have not attended.”*
- *“SEPAC meetings are often held at the town offices during work hours so I have not been able to attend as I do work. I thought SEPAC was led by the SPED Director of Andover”*

# 5b. SEPAC Role: Misconceptions

- **Needs Assessment Survey 2014**

- *“far too much spending is dedicated to special education at expense of the greater common good”*
- *“I am disappointed that it seems that enormous amounts of money are spent on children with special needs per capita...We are not developing our children who CAN as much as we are developing our children who CAN'T”*
- *“Too much emphasis put on Special Ed students”*

# Recommendations

## SEPAC Role

1. Encourage all APS staff to promote SEPAC in a positive way to all parents in Andover.
2. Invite SEPAC Executive Council to meet school staff and to speak about the role of SEPAC.
3. Send all SEPAC announcements to all Andover parents using district-wide email system.
4. SEPAC will create a new brochure in collaboration with the APS Student Services Director and the APS 504 Coordinator.
5. Brochure to be given to parents at every IEP and 504 meeting and linked on the APS website



# Recommendations

## SEPAC Role

6. One to two year tenure recommended for SEPAC school committee liaison to provide opportunity for all School Committee members to gain a broader understanding of SEPAC and students with disabilities.
7. Invite SEPAC Executive Council to serve on all APS hiring committees for special education staff and school administrators.
8. Create an official School Committee Policy specific to SEPAC and include SEPAC Executive Council on the team who writes the policy.

# To the School Committee

***Thank you***

*for inviting us tonight to make this presentation*

*We look forward to hearing your response to our recommendations and to working together to help make improvements in Andover Public Schools*

- SEPAC Executive Council

***“Amount of time and money it took to get our kid on an IEP; so much damage done, difficult for child to recover”***

Source: Needs Assessment Survey 2014