

To: Andover School Committee
Superintendent Berman
From: Sara Stetson and Nancy Koch
Date: December 14, 2017
Re: Analysis of May 18, 2017 Parents' Forum

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On May 18, 2017, the Andover School Committee held a special meeting to hear feedback and input from parents of students who received special services during the 2016-17 school year. A total of 23 parents participated in the forum. Based on video footage of the meeting, staff members have analyzed the parents' comments with a goal of developing recommendations and actionable steps to enhance services for students and strengthen communication with parents. This report provides the details of that analysis and the recommendations that sprang from the findings.

There were several staff and parents present. Of the parents who participated, 23 of them offered a total of 83 comments. Seventy percent of the parents wanted to talk about issues related to dyslexia, indicating that this particular disability is a primary concern of the parents who attended. Overall, the comments ranged from positive to negative to neutral. Some parents offered specific suggestions, while others brought up issues that had already been addressed or that were based on incomplete or inaccurate information. Regardless, we valued all comments because they reflected the parents' perspectives and gave us information for making improvements that will move students and programs forward.

On the negative side, there were 18 comments (or 22 percent of all of the comments), with a large proportion centering on children with dyslexia. Fully half of the negative comments dealt with referrals or diagnoses that were either late or lacking. Three comments mentioned regulatory compliance or other procedural matters. The remaining six negative comments were single references to topics such as funding, the qualifications of instructional assistants, and the level of expectations that teachers hold for students with disabilities.

On the positive side, we tallied 23 comments (or 27 percent of all of the comments). Nearly half of the positive remarks focused on the high quality of services being delivered to students with language-based and other learning disabilities. Other positive feedback covered a variety of topics, such as the responsiveness of staff, collaboration with regular education, and the smooth IEP process.

Nine comments (or 11 percent) related to issues of school climate and culture. We analyzed these items separately, since they were not specific to special education services. Bullying by other students and a teacher's insensitive labeling of a student with special needs are concerns that require guided conversations and close coordination among all adults in a school.

Another set of nine comments (again, 11 percent) suggested actions that were already in place at the time of the forum. These recommendations included the use of specific consultants, working with Landmark Outreach, professional development in research-based interventions, and services for students with dyslexia or language-based disabilities. We were disappointed to find that so many interested parents were still unaware that these steps had been taken, yet we were gratified to know that parents supported the decisions and approaches the District had already implemented for enhancing student programs.

We gleaned a significant amount of information from the parent forum and believe we are now better positioned as a District to strengthen the services we offer to students with special needs. In particular, we learned that many parents are operating on the basis of incomplete or inaccurate information and so are

unaware of our services, initiatives, and progress. It is clear that the published reports, parents' nights, and School Committee presentations are not reaching the public. We must hasten to strengthen existing lines of communication and expand to new ones. One major step in this direction has been the development of an interactive digital magazine about Andover's special services. We already have 400 subscribers to this quarterly publication. We are also rewriting all of our program descriptions and will post them on the District website. We will continue to be proactive in seeking other methods of reaching parents more frequently and effectively.

A second area that needs attention is the depth and expansion of professional development so that all teachers, both regular and special education, are attuned to students' academic, social and emotional needs and so they develop skills in addressing those needs. This situation is especially acute for students with dyslexia, who tend to find ways to compensate for their learning disability until the workload and expectations overwhelm them.

We take seriously our commitment to helping every student with special needs to achieve success. We look forward to working with our colleagues in the regular education program to ensure that school climate and professional development are aligned with this goal. Most of all, we appreciate the parents whose forthright comments, both the compliments and the criticisms, were offered in the spirit of joining hands to enhance all students' wellbeing and outcomes.

FORUM ON SPECIAL SERVICES – MAY 18, 2017:
ANALYSIS OF PARENTS' FEEDBACK ANDD'S PLAN OF ACTION

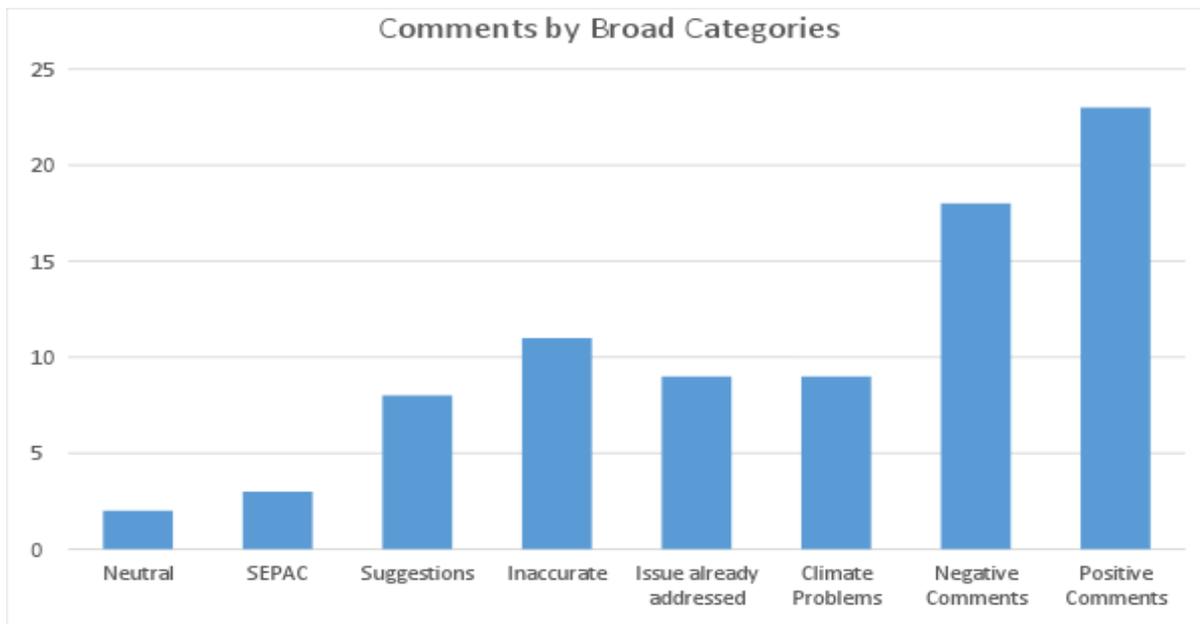
On May 18, 2017, the Andover School Committee held a special meeting to hear feedback and input from parents of students who received special services during the 2016-17 school year. Staff in the Department of Student Services recently completed an analysis of the parents' comments from that meeting. The goal is to use the feedback in developing recommendations and actionable steps that will enhance services for students and strengthen communication with parents. This report provides the details of that analysis and the initial recommendations that resulted from the findings.

Process of Analysis

Using video footage of the forum, we conducted an informal content analysis on the participants' discourse. Content analysis is the systematic application of coding methods to the analysis of message characteristics. First, we reviewed the footage and distilled each speaker's verbal input into discrete comments. A "comment" was defined as a verb statement related to services, programs, funding, staffing, or assessment. When there were points of disagreement, we reviewed the footage again until we reached consensus.

We used a coding technique to organize the data into themes, categories, and sub-categories. Before viewing the footage, we identified likely codes or topics as "dyslexia," "inclusion," "staffing," and "budget." Next, we viewed the footage to identify additional codes and to eliminate any of the original codes that were not relevant. By the end of the coding process, we had identified 83 discrete comments made by 23 individuals. Of those 23 individuals, 70 percent wanted to talk about issues related to dyslexia.

In addition to noting the specific topics that the parents brought up, we also coded the comments into eight broad categories as depicted in the following graph. For example, we coded some comments as primarily negative, meaning they were critical in nature; others were coded as positive, meaning they were favorable toward the topic; and some were simply neutral. Still others dealt with issues that had already been addressed by the District, presented ideas based on inaccurate information, or were offered as helpful suggestions. Finally, some comments clustered around matters of school climate and a few touched on the work of the SEPAC.

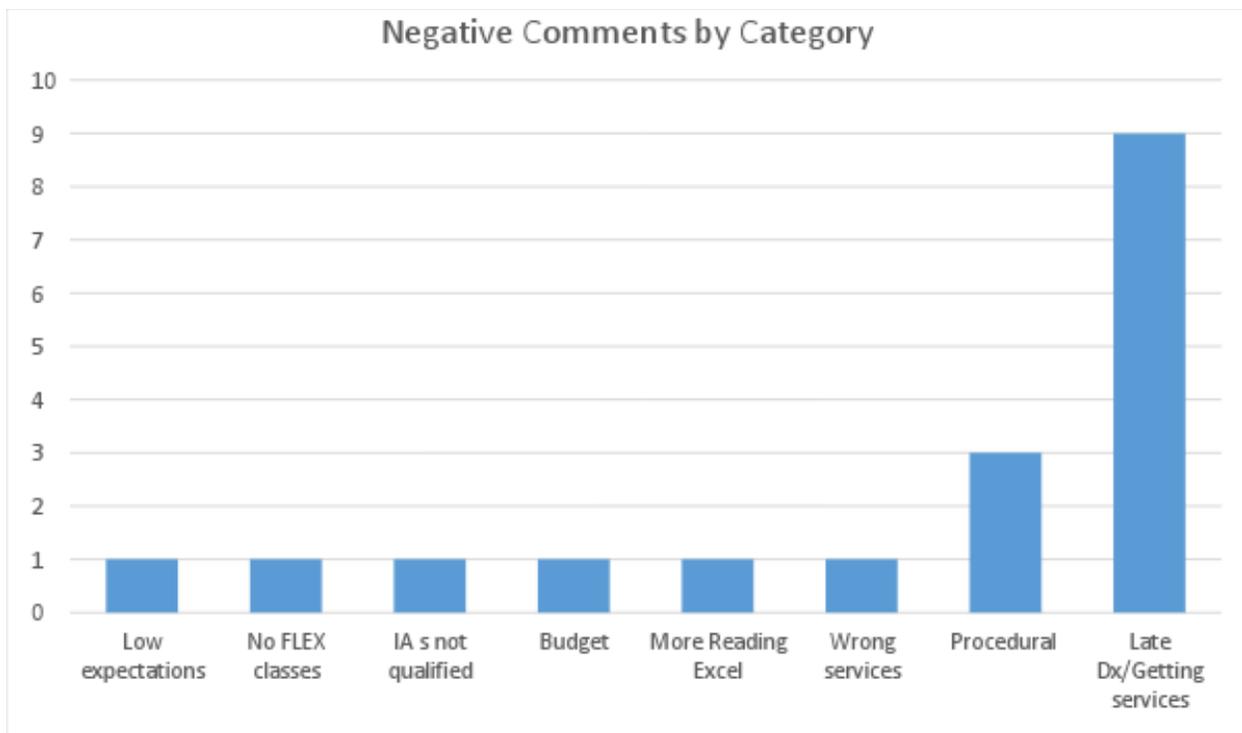


The vertical bars indicate the number of comments that fell into each broad category. For purposes of analysis, we also grouped the comments according to the frequency with which they were brought up by parents. Thus, within the topical themes, we identified categories of high frequency, moderate frequency, and low frequency. The next sections of this report will discuss the eight broad categories broken down according to level of frequency.

Negative Comments

We begin our discussion by examining the negative comments. We recognize that it takes courage for parents to come before the School Committee and the staff in a public meeting and to voice criticisms of programs or services. Parents take this step because they are advocates for their children. We want to honor that role by assuring them that we hear their concerns, take them seriously, and will make every effort to reach a fair resolution that is in the interest of the students.

There were 18 comments (22%) coded as negative. In order to determine actionable items within this group, we coded the comments by topic and frequency.



High-Frequency Categories

A large proportion of the parents (70 percent) focused on experiences with their children who have dyslexia. Negative comments centered on the problem of referrals and/or diagnoses that were either very late or never happened at all. Some of these experiences occurred years ago and some were more recent. Most parents had made us aware of these issues at previous dyslexia forums. While we believe we have now taken actions to minimize such occurrences in the future, we understand that parents still feel frustrated that their children's learning disabilities were not detected and remediated more effectively.

To inform our current practice, we studied parent reports, file reviews, and staff reports. While it is not entirely valid to make conjectures about something that happened years ago, we did uncover several factors within the regular education program that may have contributed to some of the late or non-existent referrals. First, universal screening, progress monitoring, and Districtwide assessment were not always consistently applied. Lacking objective assessments, teachers often had no basis for recommending

individual students for special interventions. Second, it was common practice for elementary teachers to use leveled readers, which enabled some children to memorize sight words and thus appear to be actually reading. Third, the District-adopted phonics program may have sometimes been delivered in a whole-class format instead of being customized to students' individual needs. Fourth, and perhaps most critical of all, regular education teachers had not received sufficient and appropriate training—including in their college coursework—to enable them to identify signs of possible dyslexia.

Another issue may have arisen with some children who *were* identified as needing special education. Some students with phonemic awareness deficits received Guided Reading instead of a code-emphasis approach.

Although we were not in the district at that time, these hypothetical statements are intended as an attempt to understand the possible underlying factors in order that we may all improve. Educators' understanding of cognitive processes continues to evolve. Schools everywhere—including Andover—find themselves in an ongoing state of adjusting their instructional approaches and teacher training to incorporate the latest findings. Responses to these issues can be found in the many reports on literacy initiatives, expert consultants and coaches, new assessments, and research-based intervention programs that were provided to the School Committee and are now available on the District website. We have addressed many of these concerns over the past year, and we are providing strong support for students with language-based learning disabilities and for their teachers, in both the regular and special education classrooms. We will continue to train teachers to use non-subjective assessments, to recognize the signs and symptoms of dyslexia, and to respond in a timely, appropriate, and effective manner.

Moderate-Frequency Categories

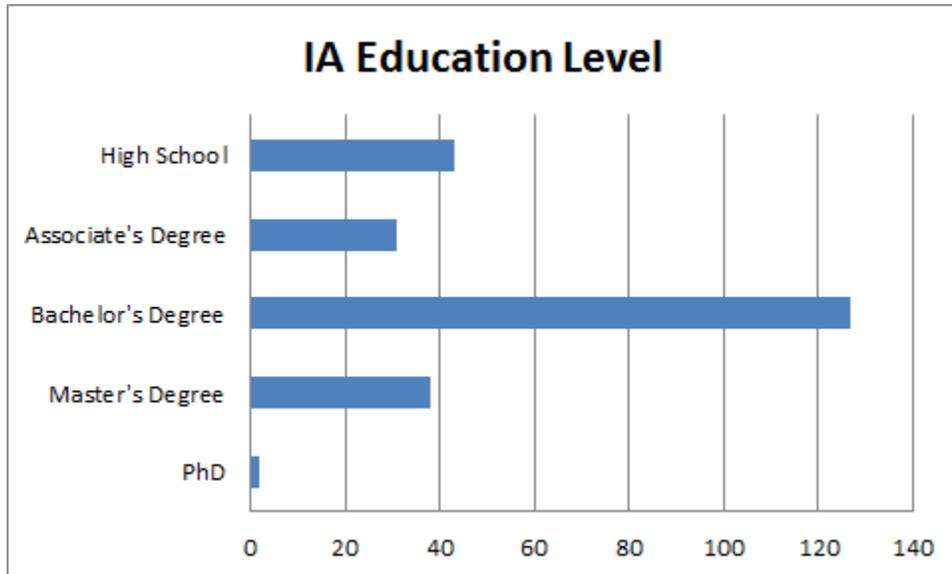
Three of the negative comments dealt with procedural issues.

- 1) *APS is not in compliance with regulations.* Response: In April 2017, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Bureau of Program Quality Assurance, conducted a compliance review of the District's special education programs and services. Of the 24 areas examined, 21 were found to be in full compliance and 3 in partial compliance. The shortfalls in those three regulatory areas have been addressed. The compliance report can be found on the District's website under Student Services.
- 2) *The wait for testing is too long.* Response: According to a recent DESE analysis of Andover's compliance with federal special education indicator 11 (timelines of evaluations), the District is in compliance. Massachusetts rules require an even shorter timeframe for evaluations than does the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The District does not have enough school psychologists to reduce the timeline further than the already rigorous Massachusetts rules require.
- 3) *APS uses special education teachers to complete paperwork.* Response: Roles of various special education staff can be confusing because there are so many specializations. Like most districts in the state of Massachusetts, Andover uses an Educational Team Facilitator (ETF) model. Each building has at least one full-time special educator who is hired specifically to coordinate referrals, evaluations, IEPs, and paperwork. This position frees up the other special education staff members to spend the majority of their time in direct service delivery to students. While we do not believe this comment requires a change in how we operate, we will strive to communicate with parents in order to clarify different roles and responsibilities.

Low-Frequency Categories

Each of the following topics drew one negative comment.

- 1) *Instructional Assistants are not qualified.* Response: All of our Instructional Assistants (IAs) have the appropriate qualifications for the position, and they are evaluated on a regular basis. Our IT department completed a brief survey of the education levels of our IA staff and the results are depicted below.

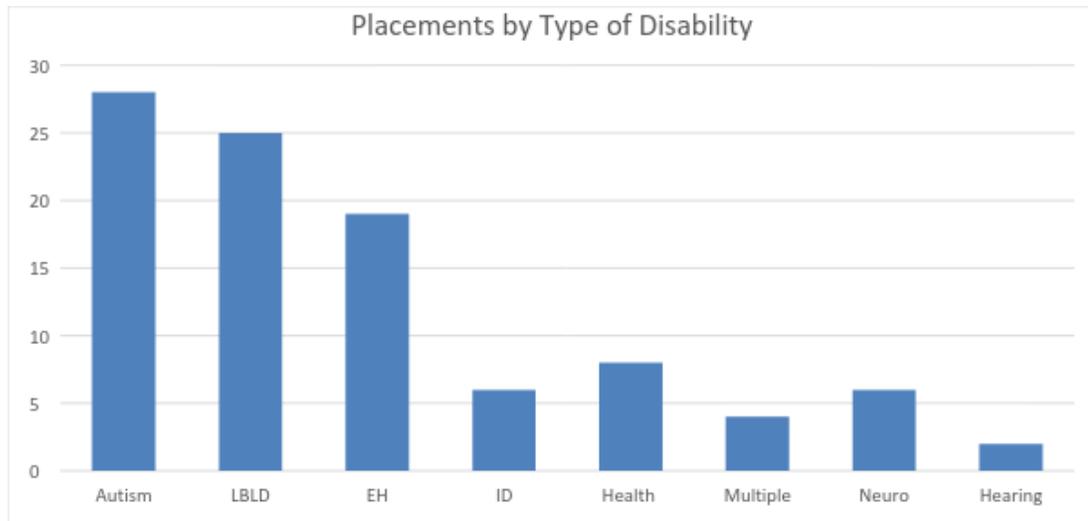


In addition to the 82 percent of IAs who have college degrees, a number of them are trained in Applied Behavioral Analysis, several are Safety Care certified, and some are trained as vocational assistants and job coaches. Some IAs have been included in the Landmark Outreach training, and 11 of the elementary IAs participated in the four-day Lindamood Phoneme Sequencing (LiPS) training last summer. Some of the non-degreed IAs hold vocational certifications, some have many years of experience, and still others are pursuing degrees in education. For example, one of our newest teachers is a former Andover instructional assistant who has now become a certified special educator, recently featured in *The Decoder*.

We agree that paraprofessional staff require regular and ongoing training. We also agree that we should continue to expand training opportunities for our IAs. Last summer, we began providing IAs with training in interventions such as LiPS. This fall, our Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) Karen Butkovitch provided Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) training to several program staff. Recently, we became one of only nine districts in the state to secure a large, competitive grant that will allow us to train IAs as literacy tutors and Registered Behavior Technicians.

- 2) *How can the budget cover all of the necessary services?* Response: Support at budget meetings from parents of students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities would be greatly appreciated. Awareness is important, but programming and staffing occurs in the context of a budget. We need parents' help to continue to advocate for services for your children.
- 3) *Expand the reading component in EXCEL.* Response: The EXCEL program has a strong model and structure. Our EXCEL team, including department coordinators, will evaluate the language arts component of EXCEL and determine whether or not changes are warranted.
- 4) *Teachers have low expectations.* Response: The staff wants our students to do their best, to make progress, and to achieve their goals. We believe an increased emphasis on inclusive practices raises expectations for *all* students with disabilities.

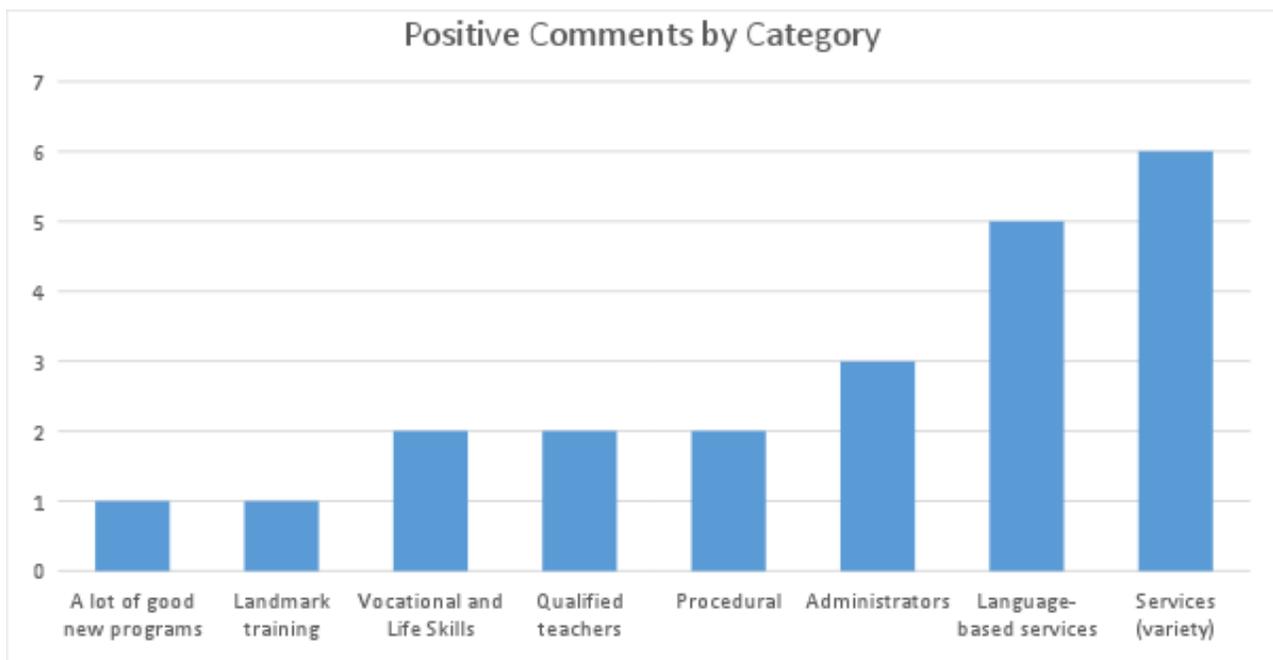
We also believe in our students’ right to access the general curriculum. Research shows that students with learning disabilities perform better and achieve more in inclusive environments. Unfortunately, our second largest population of students placed out-of-district (25) is students with learning disabilities.



For students with learning disabilities placed in-district, the level of inclusion is more consistent with state averages, but we continue to work to increase inclusive opportunities for all students. For example, we are providing more training to support regular education teachers in their inclusion efforts. We also wrote a grant to provide training in Universal Design for Learning, and our high school department coordinator is leading a book study group on UDL and co-teaching. We have provided accessibility tools training and Texthelp training to more than 30 staff, and we have plans to expand the training to more teachers.

Positive Comments

The 18 negative comments were counter-balanced by 22 comments (27 percent) coded as positive.



High-Frequency Categories

Positive feedback was overwhelmingly focused on the quality of services for students with learning disabilities, as well as for students with a variety of other complex needs. For example, one parent stated that her child with a language-based learning disability learned how to read thanks to the help provided by his special education team. Another reported that the school district supported her child with Orton-Gillingham, even though he was not enrolled in the LEAP program.

Moderate-Frequency Categories

Several topics generated two or three positive comments each. One topic was the quality of vocational and life skills programming. For example, one parent discussed the support Paula Westmacott provided in preparing her child for work and in helping him to get a job that was consistent with his vision.

One parent commented positively about our new programs. Another parent noticed that we have been collaborating more intensively with regular education.

Other parents commented on the smooth IEP process and the seamless application of services. More than one parent noted that our staff are very responsive and qualified, and one noted they are getting even more qualified with the professional development they have been receiving. Some parents complimented the administrators for providing leadership and support for special programs at the school and District levels.

Low-Frequency Categories

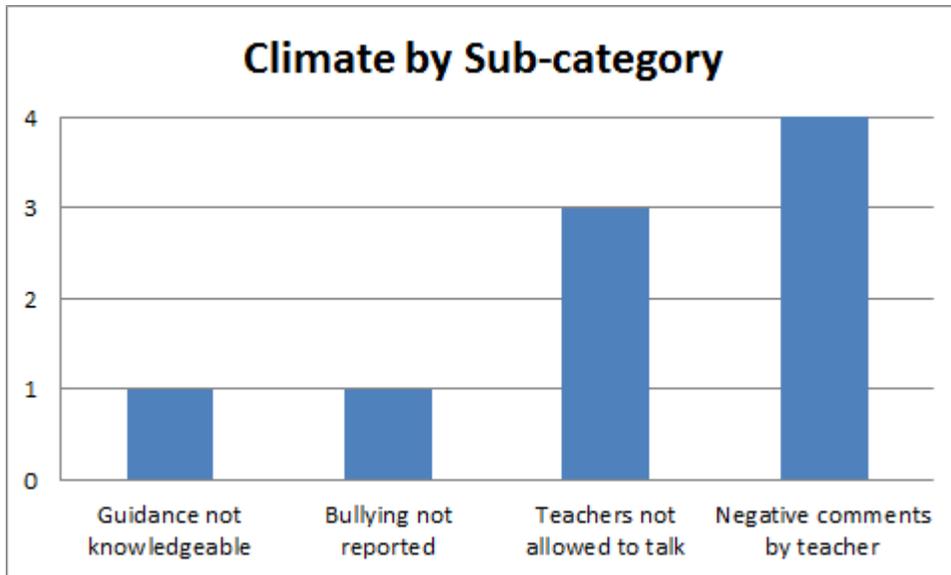
Positive comments were also received on two other topics. One parent acknowledged the many new and effective programs the District has introduced, and another spoke favorably of our ongoing consultation and training with Landmark Outreach.

School Climate and Culture

Nine of the comments (11 percent) were classified as relating to school culture and climate—an area that is not specific to special education. A school’s climate is the shared responsibility of all administrators, teachers, specialists and assistants. Nevertheless, we take concerns about school culture and climate very seriously, as does our leadership team, and we wanted to include the parents' feedback in this report.

Four parents related experiences when teachers showed a lack of sensitivity or respect by publicly mentioning a student's disability status, program or accommodation. Such remarks can cause a student to have negative attitudes toward the special services being received, or can invite negative comments from peers. We addressed the issue of respectful and person-first language with all administrators, ETFs, and department coordinators, and with *all staff* on opening day 2017. This concern has also been brought to the attention of our social work team.

One parent said that teachers had concerns about bullying, but did not report it. Three parents indicated that teachers said they were “not allowed to comment” about dyslexia at IEP meetings. We have made a concentrated effort to train regular education teachers so they have the knowledge and expertise to recognize signs of dyslexia and to respond appropriately in IEP meetings; this effort will continue.



Inaccurate Information

Eleven comments (13 percent) turned out to be based on inaccurate information.

- 1) *Students are abused and neglected.* Response: The allegations of child abuse and neglect have been investigated and were determined to have no basis in fact.
- 2) *Special Education students are sent to the basement at Andover High School.* Response: On April 7, 2017, the Massachusetts Department of Program Quality Assurance conducted a tour of AHS. All instructional spaces were found to be well within regulations under the MA Rules for the education of students with educational disabilities. AHS does not have a basement.
- 3) *Andover does not offer after-school programming for 18-to-22-year-old students.* Response: While it is not within a school district's purview to offer *respite* services, Andover Student Services does have a contract with Creative Living, and a number of students in the Transition Opportunities Program (TOP) participate in *both* after-school programming *and* weekend overnight activities. Other TOP students participate in the new unified sports program. Many AHS students with developmental disabilities participate in our AHS after-school program. We offer these extended-day and weekend opportunities as a way to increase social, vocational, recreational, and ADL experiences for our students.
- 4) *Andover does not offer an integrated college experience program for 18-to-22-year-old students.* Response: The Andover School District TOP program offers three types of integrated college programs:
 - a) TOP has a partnership with Northern Essex Community College. Non-diploma students with significant developmental disabilities are integrated into the college campus and are able to access a modified curriculum. Peer mentors are involved in classes for inclusive academic opportunities. Students are also able to access clubs and events with peers on campus. For example, TOP students are currently participating in a sports and fitness program and a chorus program.
 - b) Through collaboration with Northern Essex Community College, students in the TOP program are able to access the Massachusetts Inclusive Concurrent Enrollment Initiative. The goal of

this program is for students to take college courses that align with their post-secondary interests.

c) TOP also has a dual enrollment services program for students with developmental disabilities who do have diplomas but require assistance in transitioning to college.

- 5) *Andover does not offer work-study programming in accordance with the student's vision. Specifically, APS refused to provide a particular internship a student wanted.* Response: We understand that parents and their adult children sometimes disagree about an IEP or vocational plan. However, the TOP program follows a person-centered model. Students are individually placed based on evaluations of their interests, abilities, and personal vision. Experiences must be in accordance with the student's vocational plan.

We offer many options to students. For example, the Pfizer program is an innovative, fully inclusive, independent, and internationally recognized work-study program. In addition to the Pfizer program, students are individually placed into various work experiences in the community. At the time of the May forum and currently, all TOP students from Andover, North Andover, and tuition communities are involved in work-study programs. Placements discussed at the forum have been and continue to be vocational sites.

Some programs for ages 18 to 22 offer contrived jobs with “paychecks” provided by program fees. Many of our students, however, have real paying jobs through TOP. We believe the goal of inclusion is to provide a meaningful network and support system with *authentic* community, work, and leisure participation.

- 6) *Staff in the TOP program are not qualified.* Response: The TOP teachers, social worker, nurse leader, department head, and ETF are all certified by the Massachusetts Department of Education for their respective positions.
- 7) *Students with dyslexia are dropping out of school.* Response: We have reviewed the data from the last few years and we are not aware of any students who dropped out of school for reasons of developmental dyslexia.

Lack of Information

We were surprised at the relatively high proportion of comments (11 percent) that were suggestions or recommendations for actions that are already in place. It is apparent that vital information is not reaching interested parents. Coupled with the comments discussed above that were based on inaccurate information, this finding dramatically underscores the need to do a better job of communicating with parents about the District's programs and services.

- 1) *Work with experts such as Nancy Duggan and Nadine Gaab.* Response: Dr. Gaab worked with us last year. Nancy Duggan has been consulting with us since last spring. We have been consulting with Drs. Stephanie Gottwald and Melissa Orkin of the Tufts Center for Reading and Language Research since the fall of 2016; with Dr. Erik Falke from the Carroll Research Center since February 2017; with several staff from the Hill for Literacy since the fall of 2016; and with Lisa Brooks, consultant and Orton-Gillingham expert from Commonwealth Learning, since 2015.
- 2) *Work with Landmark Outreach.* Response: We have been working with Landmark Outreach since August 2016. We invited SEPAC to the initial planning session with Landmark Outreach in September 2016, provided a copy of the initial contract with Landmark Outreach to the public in October 2016, and held an open forum for parents and representatives from Landmark Outreach in November 2016.

- 3) *Bring in research-based interventions such as Orton Gillingham, LiPS, and Wilson.* Response: In August 2016, the Student Services Director terminated the APS contract with consultant Ilda King, who had been advising the District on interventions. Training in Orton-Gillingham, LiPS, and Wilson, as well as other interventions, has been ongoing since September 2016. Andover has 19 Orton-Gillingham teachers and 3 more are working toward their certification. Since September 2016, we have trained 42 teachers in LiPS, 30 teachers in Wilson, 51 teachers in Framing Your Thoughts, and 43 teachers in Story Grammar Marker. Preschool teachers have been trained in phonemic awareness, and last summer, 11 instructional assistants received LiPS training. Many other teachers and specialists are trained in other programs including, but not limited to, Visualizing and Verbalizing, SPIRE, EmPOWER, and Landmark Writing.

Last year, we also provided a co-teaching course with Landmark Outreach about supporting students with LBLD in the content areas. We had 51 regular education and special education teachers at the middle school level participate in the training. A second course was provided for regular education teachers from Bancroft School. This fall, we offered the course again—this time to regular education teachers who were new to Andover.

- 4) *The substantially separate nature of LEAP (the former name of the program for students with language-based learning disabilities) is isolating.* Response: We agreed with this assessment a year ago, and those classes were closed in June 2017. Regular education staff members have been working with Ann Larsen of Landmark Outreach to support students with language-based LD.
- 5) *The mix of students in the language-based LD program is inappropriate.* Response: We agreed with this assessment a year ago. The District has new entrance criteria and an admissions committee to ensure an appropriate mix of students. Ann Larsen, former admissions director for the Landmark School, has been consulting with this team. These measures were implemented during the winter of 2016-17.
- 6) *APS should involve parents in programming ideas for students with dyslexia.* Response: The Student Services staff has been working regularly with a group of parents who want to help improve services for students with dyslexia. Two of those parents attended the forum. This group started meeting in the winter of 2017.

Other Low-Frequency Categories

Several areas of discussion were coded as neutral and not requiring specific action. One parent thought more people should join SEPAC, three suggested that SEPAC address issues other than dyslexia, and one encouraged everyone to keep the lines of communication open so we can continue to work together to resolve issues and improve services.

Actionable Suggestions

Some comments (9 percent) were not directly related to programs, services, or staff, but were coded as constructive suggestions.

- 1) *Provide a guide for Response to Intervention and how it works.* Response: Core literacy instruction, universal screening, district-wide assessment, referrals to special education, and RtI all occur through regular education. Student Services staff and regular education staff are collaborating to produce a Literacy Guide that will include a section on RtI.
- 2) *Provide an IEP survey.* Response: Our special education leadership team has reviewed several surveys. We have also consulted with Susan Rees from ACCEPT Collaborative. The distribution

process for our IEP survey has been discussed with the Educational Team Facilitator (ETF) at each school and parents will begin to see the survey in January 2018.

- 3) *Educate teachers on the emotional impact of dyslexia.* Response: One workshop on the emotional impact of dyslexia was offered last year. We will continue to provide professional development in this area, either through a separate workshop or by incorporating the topic into another training session.
- 4) *Report on the Federation plan that was developed by parents and the former administration.* Response: The current administration received this 2015 plan in November 2016. We have completed all items on the plan that we believe are current, actionable, and appropriate. We will develop a report and provide it to the School Committee in 2018.

Conclusions

The largest categories of comments fell under actions already addressed and inaccurate information. Thus it is evident from the data that two major tasks lie ahead. First, we must improve our methods of communicating with parents. We cannot expect parents to support our schools if their decisions are based on missing and inaccurate information. Second, we must continue to focus on preparing regular and special education teachers to identify and appropriately serve students who are grappling with dyslexia and other language-based disabilities.

A number of other action steps were mentioned in the report—many of them already underway—and are briefly summarized here.

- Provide the School Committee with a report on the 2015 Federation Plan.
- Begin distributing the new IEP survey in January.
- Continue to work on a literacy guide that includes RtI.
- Review the language arts component of EXCEL.
- Continue teacher training on the emotional impact of dyslexia.
- Collaborate with regular education staff to improve school climate for all students with disabilities.

We would like to thank the parents who attended and participated in the forum. We would also like to thank the many parents who have taken the time to meet with us individually and engage in dialogue about their children and our services. These dialogues help us to reflect on our practices and to generate new ideas as we work toward our common goal of ensuring all students have high expectations, high quality services, and a high level of participation in our school communities.