To: Superintendent and BBRSD School Committee
From: Jannel Fitzpatrick, Director of PPS
Date: May 2025
Regarding: Pupil Personnel Services Updates:

1. Special Educational Annual Determination
2. Bridges
3. The Role of the Special Education Coordinator

Special Education Annual Determination

DESE is required to make annual determinations regarding districts' specific needs regarding performance and compliance data points related to specific federal special education requirements. Berlin-Boylston's Annual Determination Rating for 2024-2025 is DESE's highest rating; "Meets Requirements."

- Data points included are from the 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 school years.
- School districts received the annual ratings on 5/2/2025
- The Berlin-Boylston administrative team is in process of examining the data related to the rating

DESE redesigned the annual rating process for 2024-2025.

- The current rating is no longer based on a rubric with weighted scores, it is now a matrix
- It continues to be aligned with state and federal special education requirements frequently described as "Indicators."
- DESE has noted the scores are now fully aligned with State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) data that can viewed publicly on the DESE website.
- Some of the considerations in the 2024-2025 rating are identical to those included in prior ratings and some considerations are different
- Considerations that are identical to prior years are now broken down differently

The 2024-2025 Matrix has 3 Categories:

1. Performance
2. Compliance
3. Other Considerations

Performance

1. Percentage of children with disabilities who graduated with a regular high school diploma (Indicator 1)
2. Percentage of children with disabilities who dropped out (Indicator 2)
3. Proficiency rating of 4^{th},8^{th} and high school children with disabilities again grade level standards for ELA and Math (Indicator 3B)
4. Percentage of children with disabilities ages 5 through 21 who are in a regular classroom 80-% or more of the day (Indicator 5A)
5. Percentage of preschool children with disabilities attending and receiving the majority of their special education and related services in a regular preschool setting (Indicator 6A)

Compliance

1. Significant discrepancy, by race and ethnicity, in the rate of long-term suspension a expulsion, and have noncompliant policies, procedures or practices that contribute to the significant discrepancy and do not comply with specified requirements (Indicator 4B)
2. Disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups n special education and related services due to inappropriate identification (Indicator 9)
3. Disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in specific disability categories due to inappropriate identification (Indicator 10)
4. Child Find (timely initial evaluation) (Indicator 11)
5. Early Childhood Transition (Indictor 13)
6. Number of Findings of noncompliance (2023-2024) by Public School Monitoring and/or Problem Resolution Systems
7. Noncompliance not corrected within 1 year

Other Considerations

1. Fiscal
    a. Maintenance of Effort met in FY23
2. Timely and Accurate LEA Reported data
    a. Indicator 7 records
    b. Indicator 14 response rate
    c. Equitable Services Child Count (October 2023) submitted on time
    d. Equitable Services Child Count (October 20234) accurate and reliable

DESE notes additional considerations in the following areas will be included in future ratings:

Outcome Results:

1. Percentage of children with disabilities who entered preschool below expectations and made gains by the time they turned 6.
2. Percentage of youth no longer in school and enrolled in higher education, in some other postsecondary education or training program or competitively employed or in some other employment

Fiscal:

3. Fiscal monitoring/audit findings of noncompliance
4. Fiscal/Audit noncompliance not corrected within 1 year

Bridges

The Bridges program was established in 2018 at Boylston Elementary School to provide special education services to district students with more significant and complex developmental needs. Through this program, students can remain in their home district and attend specials, general education classrooms, and school-based activities as appropriate for each student. This in-district specialized program has many strengths, including an inclusive school culture, a dedicated multidisciplinary team, prioritizing functional communication and dedicated space for transitional skills.

In 2023, the Bridges program expanded to meet the growing student needs in our district. This expansion added a Bridges classroom at Berlin Memorial to ensure students receive appropriate services within their home community and reduce the need for more restrictive out-of-district placements.

Each elementary classroom hosts a developmentally appropriate cohort of our students. The younger cohort currently receives services at Berlin Memorial, and anticipated enrollment indicates nine students will be enrolled in this classroom. The Berlin program is nearing classroom capacity, making it increasingly challenging to maintain appropriate group sizes and age spans within compliance. The older student cohort is at Boylston Elementary, and anticipated enrollment indicates only two students will be enrolled in this classroom in 2025-2026. Both schools currently serve students from the other town. 6 students are residents of Berlin, and 5 are residents of Boylston.

Classroom Location As-Is	**2024-2025 Enrollment**	**2025-2026 Enrollment**
Berlin	7 (4 Berlin, 3 Boylston)	9 (6 Berlin, 3 Boylston)
Boylston	4 (2 Berlin, 2 Boylston)	2 (2 Boylston)

The administrative team has assessed the needed next steps for the increased demands for this specialized program and projected imbalanced group sizes. The resulting recommendation is to bring the elementary Bridges classrooms together under one school roof. Bringing both elementary Bridges classrooms under one roof will ensure more balanced teacher assignments, improve staff training opportunities, and allow for better allocation of staffing and resources. Additionally, this move supports the district's commitment to keeping students within their home community by fostering predictable age cohorts and increasing peer interaction. By streamlining the program in one location, we can ensure a more sustainable model that effectively meets the evolving needs of students and staff. Having both Bridges classrooms in one school will enable us to have more equitable groupings that are in the best interest of students.

In collaboration with Berlin and Boylston Principals, the PPS Director and elementary special education coordinator carefully considered which elementary school would be better suited to host both Bridges classrooms. Although there are clear advantages and disadvantages for each as the host school for both Bridges classrooms, we recommend Boylston Elementary School as the site location. This will require preschool students to remain at Berlin Memorial and Tahanto Preschool for their preschool years and make some adjustments to the preschool schedule when needed.

Students' families will need to be consulted on the district's plan to move the programs under one roof and be assured of the district's commitment to maintaining this model. SEPAC has been consulted and is in support of the move.

Factors related to staffing, furniture, instructional materials, and transportation have been assessed. Costs associated with the program can remain unchanged and respective to each Berlin and Boylston as they currently are. For example, Berlin can continue funding one Bridges teacher, and Boylston can fund one. We identified some smaller one-time considerations associated with a move, such as relocation of furniture and supplies from one building to another, that can be facilitated by district staff.

As students transition to Tahanto, the need for an additional special education teacher is growing, and this will be reflected in the FY27 PPS Director budget requests.

We are utilizing consultation services through CASE Collaborative to assist us in developing opportunities for improvement, such as program vision and alignment PK-12, instruction materials, staffing challenges and professional development, program supervision and long-term planning. Results of this work will include an increasingly detailed program description, clarification of staff roles, alignment of instructional materials and, likely, a program name change to signify the program consistency and improvements at all levels.

The Special Education Coordinator Role in Berlin-Boylston

The Berlin Boylston School District currently has two Special Education Coordinators. One coordinator works at Berlin Memorial and Boylston Elementary, and one at Tahanto Regional. Both also serve as the district's Preschool Coordinators. The district has had these positions for at least as long as my 15 years in the district, and likely much longer.

Special Education Coordinators in Berlin-Boylston are certified as Special Education administrators by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and currently average 20 years of special education experience.

The Special Education Coordinator role is an essential component of our special education program, ensuring that students with disabilities receive the appropriate support they need to succeed while maintaining strong family partnerships and legal compliance. They perform a highly nuanced set of responsibilities requiring technical expertise and interpersonal sensitivity, including:

- Serves as the local educational agency representative on the IEP team
- Responsible for committing district resources and overseeing the services in the building
- Supporting progress for students by aligning schedules for school staff and students, interventions, and accommodations with Individualized Education Programs (IEP)
- Maintaining positive, consistent communication and collaboration with families
- Ensuring compliance with state and federal regulations regarding special education, including Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Individually, each coordinates with families participates in and facilitates approximately 200 meetings annually, including IEP meetings, transition planning, reconvenes, external agencies, and other school districts when needed
- Supervising, consulting, and providing oversight for special education staff, ensuring that services are effectively delivered and staff are supported
- Assisting in student transitions to and from hospitals or Department of Children and Families (DCF) placements and other locations with complex transition needs
- Part of the team that identifies, supports, and takes appropriate next steps for students who may be struggling at school
- Consult with building administration to ensure procedural rights of students and parents are implemented
- Participate in program development to maximize the district's ability to meet the needs of students in district
- Provides professional development to staff including general education teachers, special education teachers and paraprofessionals
- Support student progress and independence by remaining current on evidence-based interventions and strategies
- Frequently sought out member of the building-based team of administrators and staff

In addition to their special education responsibilities, the coordinators serve as Preschool Coordinators. They are the first point of contact for all families entering the school system for the first time. In this role, they oversee and facilitate preschool enrollment through regulated ratios and a nuanced set of coordinated work with school staff and families, as well as early intervention agencies. As preschool coordinators, they support the preschool staff in meeting individual student

learning, social, and emotional needs while ensuring the district complies with child-find responsibilities.

The Special Education Coordinator's responsibilities impact all students, not only those with IEPs. The coordinator helps create learning environments where all students can thrive by ensuring appropriate staffing, scheduling, and resource access. When this position is understaffed or vacant, disruptions ripple through classrooms, hindering student outcomes, impacting instruction, increasing teacher workloads, limiting opportunities for timely communication with families and jeopardizing compliance.

Recent years have underscored the need for consistency in this position. At Tahanto, a series of unrelated staff transitions created periodic vacancies in this role that were felt acutely by both families and staff.

The Special Education Coordinator plays a pivotal role in ensuring that our district delivers legally compliant, high-quality, student-centered special education services. The position supports families during some of their most vulnerable moments, guides staff in complex instructional and behavioral decisions, and helps maintain the balance and functionality of classrooms across the district.

Given the role's demands, the depth of its impact, and the challenges experienced during recent transitions, sustained investment in full-time, qualified Special Education Coordinators is essential to the success of our students and the integrity of our special education programs. The need for an additional special education coordinator at the elementary level has been growing, and this will be addressed in the FY27 PPS Director budget request.

The Special Education Team Leader Role is More Important Now Than Ever

– Laurel Peltier

"…… these people are the ones who are charged with bringing teams together to partner–to brainstorm and imagine a positive, possible future–and to do the work of mapping out the pathway to that future together by listening to the students they serve and to one another. Without team leaders who are skillful and committed to building responsive teams, what we're doing around the IEP or 504 team table becomes confusing and chaotic. No kids are served well by divided teams. Right now, communication, collaboration and unity are not easy. Someone needs to make a way for us to work together and bring our best to students with disabilities. That's the job of the education team chair. That's why team chairs are more important than ever."