

A Special Meeting of the Regional School District 14 Board of Education was held Monday, February 3, 2014, in the Central Office Conference Room, 5 Minortown Road, Woodbury, Connecticut.

Present: Superintendent Jody Ian Goeler; Board members George Bauer, Carol Ann Brown, Charles Cosgriff, John Chapman and Maryanne Van Aken; Director of Finance and Operations Wayne McAllister; District Management Council representatives Nate Levenson and Wallis Raemer; Board Clerk Deb Carlton
Unavailable to attend: Board members Janet Morgan, Sophiezane Bartlett and John Swendsen
Also present: three members of the public, and reporter Mike Preato (*Voices*)

Mr. Chapman called the meeting to order at 6:36 pm.
Mr. Goeler introduced Mr. Levenson and Ms. Raemer.

Mr. Levenson spoke of three overarching concepts in the work he did here: this was not a special ed study but rather looked at what we do for kids who struggle; there is a lot of overlap for students with/without an IEP. They promised and feel they delivered a short list of suggestions, more than we should attempt at once. They are heavy lifts and, if easy, we would have already done them. We are starting from a good place. While there is the tendency to dwell on what needs to be done differently, the special ed department is well managed and fiscally prudent. Our practices are commonplace and within the standard way districts do things. He outlined his group's philosophy – what they recommend must be good for kids and financially feasible. He described the process for reaching the conclusions he is bringing the board and offered a number of commendations. He offered 5 "opportunities."

Opportunity 1 is to look at reading intervention at the elementary level, as we have too many students struggling with reading. He cited evidence that if a student is unable to read by 3rd grade, his whole life trajectory is changed for the worse. He noted that extra help in R14 looks much different for students with an IEP than for those without one. He did not see a uniform approach to best practices. He noted two key components of reading intervention: the most skilled person should be doing it, and extra time is needed.

Opportunity 2 is to look at greater support for students struggling in math at the secondary level and to reassess the practice of increasing intensity rather than support. Having more adults helping does not necessarily help student achievement. If those helping are extremely skilled, however, they will be able to see why students are getting the wrong answer, be able to reteach, and make progress. Again, extra time is needed. R14 offers about a 1:4 staff to student ratio at the secondary level for students with mild/moderate disability and this is a very intense level of support. He recommends less intensity and more time.

Opportunity 3 suggests clear criteria for when a student or class receives a para. He noted that paras can create the unintended consequence of lack of independence in students; also, human nature causes teachers to defer to paras for those students who have them, so those students receive less time with the better trained adults. We have more than the typical number of paras and a full 25% of our paras are 1:1 while the norm is less than 10%. We have many paras at the secondary level, a time when they usually fall off drastically. There is not "crystal clarity" here as to when you get a para and when it ends, what the right role for the para is, and what else the student needs.

Opportunity 4 asked to consider the cost effectiveness and workload of the special ed director. R14 has an above average number of people giving a lot of social/emotional support. He asked us to take an opportunity to think about how the management structure works, who manages the paras? He spoke highly of the use of a behaviorist and asked that we consider this as they tend to be very effective. He suggested looking at the pool of people we have and to move them around to better meet needs.

Opportunity 5 was one he almost did not include. He suggests we consider expanding an in-district program for children with autism as a full ½ of our outplacements are autistic students. This would depend on the age of the children and how they could be grouped in order for this to be possible.

He answered a few questions from the board as time allowed.

Mr. Chapman noted R14 has twice the national average of outplaced students. He wondered whether the 50% autistic make-up of that group is also above the average, asking this related to the use/need for a behaviorist.

Mr. Bauer asked how Mr. Levenson compiles comparison data. He said like communities are compared nationwide from a compiled database using similar demographics and spending levels.

Ms. Brown felt the ratios stand out, and that ratios do not equate to achievement. One skilled teacher working with 10 students effectively is better than 1:1 ineffectively.

Ms. Van Aken concluded that a culture shift is needed in R14 away from the notion that more is better.

Mr. Levenson said it would be critical to have the "something better" planned and ready before taking anything away for success to be achieved.

The special meeting of the Board of Education adjourned at 7:30 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Carol Ann Brown, Secretary
Regional School District #14 Board of Education

Recorded and filed subject to Board of Education approval by: Debra W. Carlton, Board Clerk, 2/4/14