

SPECIAL EDITION

Mamaroneck SEPTA Mission Statement

Recognizing that students have a broad range of learning styles and abilities, SEPTA works to promote a quality learning experience for all children. SEPTA aims to promote a better understanding of children's learning differences and to be a resource for all parents.

May 2007

Special Education Parent Teacher Association

Volume 1, Issue 2

Dear friends,

My co-president Amy has given me this opportunity to write our presidents' letter. Before I write my thoughts as an outgoing president, I wanted to thank Amy for being an amazing partner. Her energy, enthusiasm, good humor, memory for details and follow-through made this a wonderful year for me as well as for SEPTA. She will be staying on for another year, supported by an experienced and strong executive board. I predict even better things in the year to come.

My third daughter was born extremely prematurely, weighed one and a half pounds and had multiple medical issues resulting in multiple educational issues. Unlike many parents, we knew from the start that special education would become part of our lives. When we moved to NY, we picked Westchester for the public schools and Mamaroneck, in particular, for its reputation for inclusive and successful special ed. We have not been disappointed. 14 years of school have introduced us to over 100 teachers, assistants, aides, and therapists who have had a place in our lives. And that doesn't count the crossing guards, custodians, secretaries, administrators, other parents and friends who have also played a formative role. It took a very big "village" to raise Melissa, to give her confidence in her abilities, acceptance of her disabilities and put her on the road to college, adulthood and independence. I know our family could not have done it alone.

In order to be an integral part of the "village", I joined and became active in SEPTA during its very first year. I joined because I wanted to help my daughter. What I didn't realize was how much I would benefit as well. SEPTA became a community of friends with whom I have much in common. We have supported each other, cried with each other, learned the system, shared milestones that other parents take for granted, rallied for changes, and learned how best to advocate.

For me, SEPTA can be broken down into three components.

The first is education. Our meetings are as diverse in topics as our kids' needs are. Because I was on the board so often, I attended meetings even when I was sure the topics would not apply to my needs. There was never a meeting at which I didn't learn at least one thing. Melissa has come to dread me attending a SEPTA meeting because I come home with a new theory I want to try out with her. A tickle session before homework was probably her least favorite-but does seem to work! We still use the four steps to solving math problems that I learned at one meeting, ending each problem with the question "does this answer make sense?" In addition to the topics, I learned from other parents about parenting and from our teachers and therapists about our school system. Because I feel strongly about education, I am particularly proud that SEPTA has been able to revitalize this newsletter.

The second important part of SEPTA is advocacy. I learned that the most important part of advocacy is having established relationships. Through SEPTA, my relationships grew with administrators and teachers as well as parents. I know, now, that SEPTA is a more powerful voice than any individual one. I also learned *how* to advocate, including

organizing my thoughts, choosing my words, picking my battles, giving changes time and looking at the bigger picture. These skills come much easier when we are part of a group. SEPTA has advocated for our children on many issues, with other parents, with individual teachers, with the administration and at the state and federal level.

And the final piece of SEPTA is support. Learning from more experienced parents and helping the less experienced were both enormously satisfying. Through our relationships with other parents, we realized that we were never alone in our search for education that works for our child and that success in education is just a small piece in our quest for a complete and satisfying life for our children. The support we offer each other helps keep our individual issues in perspective and benefits all of us, our children and the community we live in.

I'm sure SEPTA could mean many different things to you. I encourage you to find out what it could offer. As I leave my active role in SEPTA to join the school board, I look back fondly and with appreciation for all SEPTA has been to me. I look forward to continuing to work with all the PTAs and will always welcome any phone call-for advice, complaints, and suggestions or just to chat.

Nancy

A message to Nancy Pierson...

A personal thank you from Amy for being a truly wonderful SEPTA co-president, a very special person and a wise soul. On behalf of the entire SEPTA board and all of our members a huge thank you. We will miss you. CONGRATULATIONS on becoming a school board member. We are so proud of you!

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

Dear Septa:

In celebrating this second edition of the SEPTA Newsletter, it is hard to believe that with it comes the rapidly approaching end of another school year. However, instead of thinking about "winding down" our office and department is hard at work for this is the busiest time of year. There are numerous Annual Reviews being held each day as together we review the progress our students have made and with that information the committee constructs a program for the coming year. It is also the time when we as a department reflect on both our areas of accomplishment along with those that continue to require on-going focus. I am happy to say that our elementary IST's are proving to be effective arenas in which intervention techniques and strategies are developed as a means of addressing the needs of students who are exhibiting some level of difficulty within their learning environment. In addition, we are pleased that our inclusion models are expanding throughout the district. At the secondary level a great deal has been done in the area of Transition Planning, which next year will be additionally supported through a State Model Transition Grant. While there are numerous other areas that have been focused upon, there are far too many to mention them all in one such column.

This newsletter also affords me the opportunity to share some personal reflections, for as most of you know I will be retiring at the end of this school year. During my tenure in the district, I have had the good fortune of serving in a variety of roles ranging from teacher to that of an administrator. In each of these capacities the true dividend has been the cultivation of many wonderful relationships with students, teachers, parents and fellow administrators. While there has been many challenges along the way, it has clearly been that of Director of Special Education which has given me the advantage of seeing the district through another lens and in its entirety. During my four years in this position, I have had the support of a talented, dedicated hardworking administrative team and office staff. Together we have taken steps to both streamline the IEP process and enhance the quality of our CSE meetings. We have also put in place a pre-referral process that is now employed in varying degrees in all of our schools. Our transition services have been significantly enhanced, and as a result this extremely important aspect of a student's plan has become an integral part of our focus. We have come a long way since our ground breaking schools foundation grant entitled Transition University. As these are just a few of the strides we as a department have made, I am also very aware that there are several areas and issues that remain a work in progress. We are confident that over time these too will be on the list of accomplishments. In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the past and current SEPTA officers, and to the entire membership for all of your insight, commitment, candid feedback and untiring support. It was always very much appreciated and for it all I offer my humblest thanks.

Sincerely,
Peter R. Berendt

TEACHER'S AIDES

By Jill Preece

In this issue of *Special Edition*, we would like to pay tribute to the contributions of the Special Education Teacher's Aides. In order to highlight the role of these valuable members of our district and community, several aides were surveyed.

Although the respondents work with children of all ages in a variety of capacities, the overarching theme was that they all love the challenge of working with classified students. The aides enjoy earning the trust of the students they work with and seeing the progress each child makes over time.

They all took different routes to become an aide, nonetheless each feels lucky to have found the profession. Michelle Franchi decided to make a career change and is now an aide at the High School. Michelle Miyashita left the business world and became an aide at Central School, where she herself actually attended! Both of these women enjoy the variety that each day brings.

The aides are a dedicated group of individuals. For instance, Linda Geiger, an aide at the Hommocks, actually learned Braille in order to gain a better perspective on her one-on-one work with a visually impaired student. They also take advantage of other opportunities for developing their skills, such as attending the workshop recently presented by Susan Varsames Young. They give of themselves because they find their work with classified students so rewarding.

They celebrate the successes of the children and feel a mixture of joy and sadness when the children move on. The fact that the children do move on is due, in large part, to the contributions of our very special Special Education Teacher's Aides!

SEPTA WELCOMES OUR NEWEST SPECIAL EDUCATION AIDES

Barbara Adell, Rose Allen, Carmen Alvarez, Dirk Beckford, Belinda Berrios, Jennifer Brush, Andrea Byrne, Patricia Cavallo, Javiel Ceballos, Diane Cividanes, Margaret Cook, Jim Cunningham Jr., Linda Dagnino, Trevor Dimmie, Juliet Dowd, Josephine Fiore, Michelle Franchi, Ruthann Frattarola, Michael Greason, Tyler Hewitt, Tash Jacobs, Slavka Klobusicky, Janice Lancia, Cheryl Liga, Rosa Lopea, Barbara Marcello, Danielle Nardozi, Victoria Ramos, Doreen Reid, Walter Runcie, Patricia Scerno, Robyn Stock-Dempsey, Francine Talt, Enkeleta Temali, Allison Verenini, Toni Weston, Marianne, Wolpert, and Ebony Yizar

CONGRATULATIONS AND ADIEUS

A special congratulations to the following individuals that have been granted tenure:

Jennifer Josephson, SE teacher, Chatsworth
 Kathy Rie, SE teacher, MAS
 Susanna Franco, Speech/Language Pathologist, MAS
 Jolita Gudaitis, School Psychologist, HMX
 Ronald Blain, SE teacher, MHS
 Cathy Fullerton, SE teacher, MHS
 Mara McGowan, SE teacher, MHS
 Michele Viviano, SE teacher, MHS

A bitter- sweet adieu to the following retirees:

Peter Berendt
 Lynn Reichgott
 Cora Rust
 Gail Solomon
 Sandy Weinman
 Many thanks for all you have done for our children over so many years!

TEACHER ASSISTANT AND AIDE TRAINING

Teacher Assistant and Aide Training:

On Superintendent's Conference Day our special education consultant, Susan Varsames Young offered a workshop on Supporting Social Play for the school district's Teaching Assistants and Aides. The workshop was attended by over 150 participants and from initial feedback everyone found this to be a most informative workshop.

The participants were exposed to a lecture format while a variety of interesting toys were provided at each table to manipulate and enjoy. The lecture reviewed the developmental stages of play. Before long, the staff was in groups with an assignment of plotting social and motor milestones on a time line from birth through 6 years of age. As the groups stumbled over each other to plot the skills on a large wall chart, they realized how both motor and social developments integrate. A lengthy discussion followed with examples of how to assess a child's level of play and how to foster recreational skills within their respective learning levels. The final task brought lots of laughs to the staff. The workshop participants were divided into groups and given a variety of toys and common objects. Their assignment was to create two games/activities with these materials. They had to give each game a title, write out the rules, and then demonstrate how to play their newly created game for the rest of the group.

The creativity was impressive, and the staff left with easy practical ideas as to how to engage all learners in play and recreational activities. Using such simple items as a parachute, nerf balls, bean bags, a checkered carpet, and stones resulted in fun ideas that were applicable to all levels of play. After the workshop, together we made a list of common inexpensive supplies that can be offered at recess time to accomplish these newly learned skills. This list will be shared with the individual building staff in order that items can be gathered and/or purchased if desired.

by: Susan Varsames Young

PROMOTING LITERACY IN SIXTH GRADE SCIENCE

Differentiating in the classroom

By Elissa Rappaport

The sixth grade science teachers are very excited about the recent purchase of National Geographic theme sets which will integrate authentic reading material of various levels into our curriculum.

These books cover various topics related to our course of study, and come in four different levels, allowing the teacher to assign appropriate reading level material to the different types of readers in the class. Since the basic information about the topic is the same across the different books, all students are exposed to the same key information.

The main difference between the levels is the degree of depth, complexity, and additional detail in the text. This allows advanced readers to be exposed to challenging material, while providing developing readers with a simplified version to aid in understanding the concepts.

BUILDING BRIDGES—BREAKING BARRIERS

For almost 20 years prior to 2004, our third and fourth grade elementary students had been participating in a program named “Understanding Handicaps”. This program was designed to teach the students (and often the parent volunteers) about a number of disabilities including visual and hearing impairments, physical and cognitive disabilities.

The program included several sessions on each disability, giving the children a chance to learn about the disability, simulate the actual experience and challenges of the disability and to meet an adult or child who has lived with the disability. Though the program was very popular with the children, there was some concern among the adults that the lessons were learned in isolation and not reinforced in later years.

In 2005, a district level task force was formed to create a vision and set of values that would become part of *Building Bridges-Breaking Barriers*. (later shortened to *Building Bridges, BB*) “The goal of BB is to provide ongoing opportunities for students, staff and parents to develop awareness, sensitivity and respect for the strengths and challenges of all individuals including those with disabilities. This comprehensive effort seeks to provide opportunities for authentic dialogue and shared experiences that address the issues and potential partnerships among all students” (excerpted for BB task force report 2005-2006)

All teachers and administrators have been introduced to *Building Bridges* and funds of \$12,000 are allocated in the district budget for programs and literature that meet the core values.

According to Annie Zimmer, Asst. Superintendent of Curriculum, BB is now built in to the curriculum in all four of our elementary schools, Hommocks and MHS. The unifying element is carefully chosen literature with both merit and accuracy which exposes students to disabilities. Effort has been made to engage teachers and administrators in the selection of materials used in the classroom. The choice of literature followed guidelines from SEED, Seeking Equity in Education and Diversity, which suggests that literature and curriculum serve as both a window to a different world and a mirror into the reader’s self.

Our schools have been encouraged by the central administration and the PTAs to seek out and find programs that fit their own culture, time constraints and maturity of their students. As expected, Building Bridges now has many forms. The following are a few examples of some of the iterations.

At MHS this year, the book *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* was chosen as the high school’s “One Read” and read over the summer by staff, students and many parents. This highly acclaimed book is about a confusing and sometimes darkly humorous time in a young man’s life. What makes the book unique is that the hero is on the autism spectrum and the book is written from his perspective.

In addition to the reading, the students were given an opportunity in school to come together in small groups, facilitated by student leaders and discuss the many facets of the book including autism. The student facilitators had been trained by a consultant to the district about autism.

At Hommocks, the English teachers have been using selected books as required reading during the year. They have worked some facts about the disabilities into the book discussions which take place in class.

In addition to buying appropriate books for the library, both Mamaroneck Ave and Central have tried new and different initiatives. This year, Central’s fourth grade students are participating in a dance program in which they are learning etiquette and acceptance along with dancing. Students from the self-contained classes have been part of this program, thoughtfully paired with students from the general education classes. MAS has set up a program in which some of the older students work as older buddies or mentors in the school’s integrated (special needs and non-special needs students) pre-k classes.

A discussion of the above at PT Council (all PTA presidents and several other parent liaisons) concluded that there may be room for some additional learning experiences for our children in which the PTA’s could play a lead role. SEPTA would like to organize a district committee to spearhead other initiatives that bring more disability specific awareness and education into all of the schools. We are hoping to form a small committee in the near future. Ms Zimmer has stated that she would be very open to hearing new ideas. If you have any interest in this, please contact one of the SEPTA presidents.

AUTISM—FACT, FIGURES, MYTHS AND HOPE

(Excerpted with permission from the *Autism Society of America*)

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www.autism-society.org

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. One should keep in mind however, that autism is a spectrum disorder and it affects each individual differently and at varying degrees - this is why early diagnosis is so crucial.

Autism is one of five disorders that falls under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD)...

- Autistic Disorder
- Asperger's Disorder
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD)
- Rett's Disorder
- PDD-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)

...as many as 1.5 million Americans today are believed to have some form of autism. And this number is on the rise. Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies, autism is growing at a startling rate of 10-17 percent per year. At this rate, the ASA estimates that the prevalence of autism could reach 4 million Americans in the next decade.

Autism knows no racial, ethnic, social boundaries, family income, lifestyle, or educational levels and can affect any family, and any child. And although the overall incidence of autism is consistent around the globe, it is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, and although it is defined by a certain set of behaviors, children and adults with autism can exhibit any combination of these behaviors in any degree of severity. Two children, both with the same diagnosis, can act completely different from one another and have varying capabilities. You may hear different terms used to describe children within this spectrum, such as autistic-like, autistic tendencies, autism spectrum, high-functioning or low-functioning autism, more-abled or less-abled; but more important than the term used to describe autism is understanding that whatever the diagnosis, children with autism can learn ... and show improvement with appropriate treatment and education.

Every person with autism is an individual, and like all individuals, has a unique personality and combination of characteristics. Some individuals mildly affected may exhibit only slight delays in language and greater challenges with social interactions. They may have difficulty initiating and/or maintaining a conversation. Their communication is often described as talking at others instead of to them. (For example, monologue on a favorite subject that continues despite attempts by others to interject comments).

People with autism also process and respond to information in unique ways. In some cases, aggressive and/or self-injurious behavior may be present. Persons with autism may also exhibit some of the following traits:

- Insistence on sameness; resistance to change
- Difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures or pointing instead of words
- Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language
- Laughing (and/or crying) for no apparent reason showing distress for reasons not apparent to others
- Preference to being alone; aloof manner
- Tantrums
- Difficulty in mixing with others
- Not wanting to cuddle or be cuddled
- Little or no eye contact

- Unresponsive to normal teaching methods
- Sustained odd play
- Spinning objects
- Obsessive attachment to objects
- Apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain
- No real fears of danger
- Noticeable physical over-activity or extreme under-activity
- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Non responsive to verbal cues; acts as if deaf, although hearing tests in normal range.

For most of us, the integration of our senses helps us to understand what we are experiencing. For example, our sense of touch, smell and taste work together in the experience of eating a ripe peach: the feel of the peach's skin, its sweet smell, and the juices running down your face. For children with autism, sensory integration problems are common, which may throw their senses off they may be over or under active. The fuzz on the peach may actually be experienced as painful and the smell may make the child gag. Some children with autism are particularly sensitive to sound, finding even the most ordinary daily noises painful. Many professionals feel that some of the typical autism behaviors, like the ones listed above, are actually a result of sensory integration difficulties.

There are also many myths and misconceptions about autism. Contrary to popular belief, many autistic children do make eye contact; it just may be less often or different from a non-autistic child. Many children with autism can develop good functional language and others can develop some type of communication skills, such as sign language or use of pictures. Children do not "outgrow" autism but symptoms may lessen as the child develops and receives treatment.

One of the most devastating myths about autistic children is that they cannot show affection. While sensory stimulation is processed differently in some children, they can and do give affection. However, it may require patience on the parents' part

There is no known single cause for autism, but it is generally accepted that it is caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function. Brain scans show differences in the shape and structure of the brain in autistic versus non-autistic children. Researchers are investigating a number of theories, including the link between heredity, genetics and medical problems. In many families, there appears to be a pattern of autism or related disabilities, further supporting a genetic basis to the disorder. While no one gene has been identified as causing autism, researchers are searching for irregular segments of genetic code that autistic children may have inherited. It also appears that some children are born with a susceptibility to autism, but researchers have not yet identified a single "trigger" that causes autism to develop.

Whatever the cause, it is clear that children with autism and PDD are born with the disorder or born with the potential to develop it. It is not caused by bad parenting. Autism is not a mental illness. Children with autism are not unruly kids who choose not to behave. Furthermore, no known psychological factors in the development of the child have been shown to cause autism.

Discovering that your child has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be an overwhelming experience. For some, the diagnosis may come as a complete surprise; others may have had suspicions and tried for months or years to get an accurate diagnosis. In either case, a diagnosis brings a multitude of questions about how to proceed. A generation ago, many people with autism were placed in institutions. Professionals were less educated about autism than they are today and specific services and supports were largely non-existent. Today the picture is much clearer. With appropriate services and supports, training, and information, children on the autism spectrum will grow, learn and flourish, even if at a different developmental rate than others.

While there is no known cure for autism, there are treatment and education approaches that may reduce some of the challenges associated with the condition. Intervention may help to lessen disruptive behaviors, and education can teach self-help skills that allow for greater independence. But just as there is no one symptom or behavior that identifies individuals with ASD, there is no single treatment that will be effective for all people on the spectrum. Individuals can learn to function within the confines of ASD and use the positive aspects of their condition to their benefit, but treatment must begin as early as possible and be tailored to the child's unique strengths, weaknesses and needs.

ESEA—NCLB REAUTHORIZATION

Did you know that ESEA- NCLB is up for reauthorization by Congress?

What exactly is it?

It is a law that Congress passed in January of 2002.

Fun fact

What is the largest volunteer child advocacy organization in the nation?

The National PTA

The National PTA recommends the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) including the NCLB act (no child left Behind)

Its recommendations are grounded in 4 core principals

-more accountability to parents

-better data through a more understandable delivery system

-better resources to help teachers and parents

-community support

To read and learn more about this please visit

The PTA National office website

www.pta.org

and

www.ed.gov/nclb

If you find that your child is in crisis and you are considering taking them out of school, please remember to contact the Special Education Department immediately. They can be and want to be of help!

Can my child receive service without being classified?

Students can receive extra support through building level services, (reading, speech improvement and counseling) based upon individual needs.

What are Academic Intervention Services (AIS)?

AIS provide additional instruction in reading and math to assist all students in meeting state standards. The services are supplemental to the instruction provided in the regular education classroom. Students who are classified by the CSE may not be excluded from receiving AIS.

(excerpted from the MUFSD Handbook for Special Education available in its entirety on the SEPTA website)

FUN IN THE SUN

By Joan George and John Savage

FUN IN THE SUN Olympics began 10 years ago. The physical education staff at Central School wanted to find a way to do something special for the students with special needs who were in our classes. We wanted to find activities that were fun and rewarding in themselves and wanted students to feel special for having participated. The only reward was the joy students felt because they did their best. We enlisted the support of classroom teachers, students and administrators.

We used Olympic events and format for our activities. We taught the activities as part of out track and field curriculum. An opening ceremony complete with parade and lighting of the Fun in the Sun torch to Olympic music officially began the games. Children from other Central School classes acted as enthusiastic spectators cheering loudly and supportively as the athletes marched around the blacktop carrying representative flags.

Each athlete had the opportunity to participate in all the events including 50-yard dash, hurdles, shot put, target throw, relays, long jump, broad jump, and high jump. Upon the conclusion of the events, every athlete received a medal and certificate. Parents and relatives were invited to attend and support their children. Many did!

The event was a huge success and we invited the other elementary physical education teachers in the district to join us with their special needs classes. Of course our colleagues jumped right in, thus making Fun in the Sun Olympics an annual district wide event. Now students from all four of the elementary schools come to Central School each year to participate.

Following the opening ceremony, track and field events and presentation of medals to every athlete, we conclude the morning with a pizza, and ice pop lunch. Thank you SEPTA for your support and generosity. And thank you to the four elementary schools for providing t-shirts for the athletes.

Every year the event has grown. With the support of teachers, administrators, aides and custodians as well as parents and community leaders we have been able to give students a special day with special memories.

This year Fun in the Sun will be held on May 30 at 9:30AM at Central School.

Please join us!

COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

For many students and families, the college search and application process can be stressful. For students with learning disabilities and/or other special needs who expect to need support services in college, the process becomes even more complex. What to look for, whom to ask, how to apply for accommodations on pre-college tests, which tests to take, and when to declare to potential colleges that educational support may be needed, are among the many questions that some families need to add to an already lengthy list. This winter, two meetings were held to address some of these issues.

In February, SEPTA hosted a Parent Network with a panel of parents and one student who have successfully been through the college search process, keeping the above special needs in mind. A summary of helpful tips coming out of that meeting, as well as other related links, can be found on the SEPTA website.

On March 12, SEPTA, the guidance department and the special education department, hosted Allen Tinkler, MS Ed to speak from a college counselor's point of view. Mr. Tinkler is a former special educator turned private counselor who specializes in helping students who have a variety of needs such as learning disabilities and ADD plan for college. He stressed that students should always find a list of colleges that meet their personal wishes first and then look at this list with an eye for educational support services. While all colleges need to provide accommodations to students with documented disabilities so that the student can access the education (Section 504 of the Reha-

bilitation Act and the ADA), there is an enormous difference among colleges in the range of services that are provided to support the students. During college visits, a trip to the office that provides educational support or accommodations is vital. It is not enough to ask the questions on the tour or in the information session. Questions to ask the learning center or office for students with disabilities should cover the range of services offered, any fees involved, and the documentation needed to qualify for services. The visit may also give a first impression of the support including the number of staff available and the "feel" of the room, i.e. is it an office that the student would be comfortable attending.

Many students who have successfully completed high school are confident that they no longer need the support they have been receiving. This may not be the case.

Differences between HS and college that may affect students with disabilities include: increased free time, fewer chances for feedback, e.g. one midterm, one paper, or final vs. many quizzes and tests, faster moving curriculum, more independent work, little to no contact with parents and a higher GPA grade needed to graduate. Mr. Tinkler recommended that parents encourage independence and self-advocacy skills for their children. In fact, colleges are often not allowed to communicate with parents once the student reaches the age of 18. Students and parents should be aware that a student must "self-identify" in college in order to be considered eligible for services. Mr. Tinkler recommended that parents encourage their children to fill out

appropriate paperwork needed to receive support or accommodations even if the students are sure these are no longer necessary. Knowing how to access support should be looked at like insurance for students; it can be there if and when it is needed. Other topics touched on by Mr. Tinkler, included, when and how to declare needs since colleges cannot request this information, how best to present a student with disabilities in the application, and the testing or documentation needed to receive accommodations. Some alternative and creative options for students who may not be ready for a traditional college experience include: a "gap" year, starting a local or community colleges, starting with a lighter academic load, and finding a private tutor, organizer or ADD coach.

Mr Tinkler both began and ended his presentation by stating that the guidance department at MHS already has many of the answers and knows many colleges that could match both the needs and desires of our students. The guidance department also has copies of the handouts presented at the meeting. As with all college searches, is up to student and parents to do their own homework and remember to ask the questions.

In addition to Mr. Tinkler's presentation to the parents, he spent time earlier in the day with the special education teachers and the guidance department. This program was funded by a grant from the Mamaroneck Schools Foundation. The grant has also funded college guidebooks for students with disabilities which can now be found in the CIC, the guidance and special education offices.

SECTION 504 PLAN

You've heard other parents talk about a "Section 504" Plan, but what is it? Could this civil rights protection apply to your child?

What Is Section 504?

As part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Congress passed Section 504, a civil rights law to protect people with disabilities by eliminating barriers and allowing full participation in areas such as education and the workplace. Since then, the Office for Civil Rights has developed federal regulations that help to explain this law.

While the law doesn't provide any new funding for programs and agencies that comply, it carries the threat of withholding federal funds from those that don't. Since public schools receive federal tax dollars, the law applies to them. It doesn't apply to many private schools because they don't receive any money from the federal government.

Who Is Eligible?

"Handicapped person" is defined by Section 504 as a person with a mental or physical impairment that limits one or more major life activities, such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working, to a substantial degree.

All students with Individualized Education Programs (IEP) are covered automatically under Section 504. Almost 9% of the nation's students aged 6-21 receive special education services,¹ with a little more than half of them identified as "specific learning disability." Because necessary accommodations are included in the IEP, there's no need to write a separate Section 504 plan for these students.

It's been estimated that 1-2 percent of students may be eligible under Section 504 alone. However, this includes students with mental, physical, and emotional disabilities, and not just learning disabilities. For example, a child with diabetes may need help from school staff to monitor blood sugar levels but have no problems with the educational program itself.

Eligibility under Section 504 isn't a consolation prize for students who aren't eligible for special education. A diagnosis of AD/HD doesn't automatically make your child eligible either. Before deciding whether she's eligible, your child is assessed by staff at the public school she attends. Then the Section 504 team considers all information about her. They must agree that she has a substantial (not mild or moderate) and pervasive (broad, comprehensive) impairment to make her eligible under this federal law.

In deciding whether a limitation is substantial, the Section 504 team also considers if your child uses a "mitigating measure" — a device or practice she uses on her own to reduce or eliminate the effects of her impairment. For example, if she tests with normal vision when wearing eyeglasses you've provided, then her visual impairment is not substantial.

If your child regularly earns report card grades of A's, B's and some C's, has standardized achievement tests scores in the average range and above, displays appropriate behavior, and attends school regularly, it's likely that she's not substantially impaired according to this particular law. If your child has problems in only one area, such as written language or math calculation, there's a good chance that the team will find she doesn't have a disability that substantially limits her learning.

Section 504 does not require the school to maximize your child's learning. For Section 504 purposes, the school will compare your child's performance to that of the average child without disabilities.

What Is a Section 504 Plan?

If your child is eligible, then a Section 504 Plan will be developed to give her access to the general education curriculum. Unlike the IEP for special education, there are no legal requirements for what should be included in the plan. A free appropriate public education (FAPE) under Section 504 often means identifying reasonable accommodations to help her succeed in the classroom. An accommodation plan usually addresses the following:

- Nature of the disability and major life activity it limits
- Basis for determining the disability
- Educational impact of the disability
- Necessary accommodations

Placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE)

What Are My Rights?

The law doesn't require parent participation in the meetings where a child's 504 plan is discussed. Nor does the law require parental permission to assess the child, or agree with the plan. However, many schools do include parents in the process. The law does require that schools let you know when they plan to evaluate your child or make a significant change in her educational placement.

The Section 504 Coordinator for your school or district can advise you about grievance and due process procedures if you have a disagreement. You can request a copy of the district's Section 504 policy, as well.

References

24th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2002)

Other Resources: websites

Wrightslaw: Discussion of Section 504, the ADA and the IDEA

U.S. Department of Education: Frequently Asked Questions about Section 504 and the Education of Children with Disabilities

Attention Deficit Disorders Association Southern Region: Section 504

Section 504 is a civil rights law to protect people with disabilities by eliminating barriers and allowing full participation in areas such as education and the workplace.

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About the Contributor

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