



# Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council

June 6, 2022

Newton School Committee  
City of Newton  
1000 Commonwealth Avenue  
Newton Centre, MA 02459

## **RE: 2021-22 Newton SEPAC End-of-Year Report**

Dear School Committee Members,

On behalf of the special education parent/guardian community of Newton Public Schools, we respectfully submit the attached report, for your consideration.

Kind regards,

The Newton SEPAC Board



## End-of-Year Report to the Newton School Committee

June 6, 2022

**To:** The Newton School Committee: Rajeev Parlkar (Ward 1), Christopher Brezski (Ward 2), Anping Shen (Ward 3), Tamika Olszewski (Chair, Ward 4), Emily Prenner (Ward 5), Paul Levy (Ward 6), Kathleen Shields (Vice Chair, Ward 7), Cove Johnstone Davis (Ward 8), Mayor Ruthanne Fuller (*ex officio*); and Superintendent David Fleishman

**From:** 2021-22 Newton SEPAC Board Members: Jessi Champion (Chair), Eliza Spaulding (Treasurer), Jenny Klein-Sosa (Secretary), Suzanne Buchko (At-Large), Erin Kelley-Makol (At-Large), Helen Scarr (At-Large)

**Cc:** Casey Ngo-Miller, Incoming Asst. Superintendent of Student Services

## Newton SEPAC End-of-Year Report

### What is the SEPAC?

Every School Committee is required to establish a Special Education Parent Advisory Council, per the Massachusetts General Laws, in part due to the legislative initiatives of Massachusetts Advocates for Children. The duties of the SEPAC include those noted below (M.G.L. c. 71B, 3):

“The school committee of any city, town, or school district shall establish a parent advisory council on special education. Membership shall be offered to all parents of children with disabilities and other interested parties. The parent advisory council duties shall include but not be limited to: advising the school committee on matters that pertain to the education and safety of students with disabilities; meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development, and evaluation of the school committee's special education programs...”

Other duties include meeting regularly with school officials to participate in the planning, development and evaluation of the district's special education programs; and cooperating with the District on their annual workshop on the rights of students, parents and guardians under state and federal law.

The SEPAC is a self-governing public body which creates its own by-laws and operational procedures. A SEPAC is different from other parent groups in a school district such as a PTA, PTO or School Council – a SEPAC does not represent families from one school, but represents all families of children with disabilities from the entire school district. In the fall of 2021, the Massachusetts Division of Open Government published ruling O.M.L. 2021-150 which determined that SEPACs with by-laws consistent with those of the Newton SEPAC are no longer held to open meeting laws.

## Prior Years' Summary

The Newton SEPAC was unable to present the End-of-Year summary to the School Committee in the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years. Brief summary information is included below, which was provided by the Co-Chairs for these years, Rajeev Parlikar, Christine Carey and Peter Shea.

### 2019-20:

- Key Challenges: NPS shutdown; change to distance learning; need for services for students with significant needs
- SEPAC was part of NPS recruiting team for Beth Fitzmaurice, new Assistant Superintendent for Student Services (July 2019)
- SEPAC presentations, including the required Basic Rights presentation (September 2019-March 2020)
- Weekly meetings with Student Services (March-June 2020)
  - SEPAC advised on response to pandemic shutdown, supports for students, move to remote learning
- All SEPAC meetings and presentations go virtual (March 2020 onward)
- SEPAC was part of NPS recruiting team for Emily Bozeman, new NNHS Department Head for Student Services (May 2020)
- SEPAC Awards moved to virtual process

### 2020-21:

- Key Challenges: Return to school in hybrid models; DLA ramp-up; evaluation backlog; service delivery for all students within new learning models
- All SEPAC meetings and presentations, including the required Basic Rights presentation, continued to be virtual
- SEPAC continued to advise Student Services on issues related to hybrid and distance learning (September 2020 onwards)
  - Specific topics included feedback from Distance Learning Academy families, backlog of evaluations, etc.
- SEPAC set up Q&A with Student Services on special education services within hybrid and distance learning (October 2020)
- SEPAC was part of High School Working Group (October-December 2020)
  - Spoke with special education parents and administrators in other school districts to get feedback on hybrid learning options
  - Held meetings with Newton and METCO special education families
- SEPAC Awards remained a virtual process

## Board Composition and Liaisons

- Board election held in June 2021; 8 positions
    - Chair: Jessi Champion
    - Treasurer: Eliza Spaulding
    - Secretary: Jenny Klein-Sosa
    - At Large: Suzanne Buchko
    - At Large: Erin Kelly-Makol
    - At Large: Helen Scarr
    - At Large: Robin Schwartz (part year)
    - At Large: Bridgitte LaMarche (part year)
  - Other Key People
    - SEPAC Liaison Coordinator: Kim Gallagher
    - SEPAC Elections Coordinator: Sarah Solomon
    - School Committee Liaisons to the SEPAC in 2021: Emily Prenner, Anping Shen
    - School Committee Liaison to the SEPAC in 2022: Paul Levy

According to current by-laws, Board positions are held for a period of 1 year. Nominations and elections occur in late May-early June and the new Board will assume their roles in July 2022.

All 22 Newton schools, as well as out-of-district placements, were represented by at least one SEPAC Liaison in 2021-22. They were instrumental in sharing information and resources and fostering community among families with children receiving special education services in Newton. At each school, the SEPAC Liaison meets regularly with administration, supports special education staff, runs support or informational groups for parents, includes special education announcements in newsletters and ensures information about the SEPAC is distributed at school and at IEP/504 meetings. SEPAC Liaisons serve on all schools' PTO Boards to ensure the needs of children with special needs and their families are appropriately accommodated and included. They are also a key link in the chain of communication between parents and special education staff and administration.

### Preschool:

### Elementary Schools:

|                    |                                   |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Angier             | Sarah Solomon                     |
| Bowen              | Ellen Taverna                     |
| Burr               | Eliza Spaulding                   |
| Cabot              | Lindsey Fieldman & Anna Claeys    |
| Countryside        | Jill Canelli                      |
| Franklin           | Yael Mito & Amy Horsman           |
| Horace Mann        | Kim Bourdeau                      |
| Lincoln Eliot      | Lauren McMinn                     |
| Mason Rice         | Lindsay MacAuley                  |
| Memorial-Spaulding | Jenny Klein-Sosa & Anat Linden    |
| Peirce             | Amy Fallon & Lindsey Conkey       |
| Underwood          | Rocio Calvo                       |
| Ward               | Marriah Vengroff & Tabatha Flores |

Williams  
Zervas

Aditi Deshpande & Naz Nami Yenmez  
Julie Swersey

Middle Schools:

Bigelow  
Brown  
Day  
Oak Hill

Brigitte LaMarche  
Kim Gallaugher  
Heather Gipson-Cosier  
Karina Simonian & Hannah Schuwarz

High Schools:

Newton North  
Newton South

Dianna Magnani & Agatha Clancy  
Lisa DePalma

Out-of-District:

Ann Rounseville

## **Mission**

The Newton SEPAC Board began the 2021-22 year by discussing what we, as a community, wanted our vision to be for the year and what areas were important for our focus. We developed the following mission statement:

*In 2021-2022, the Newton SEPAC will strive to connect and engage with families of students with special education needs to promote those students' best interests. Through respectful and empathetic partnership, the SEPAC will advocate on behalf of students and foster communication among school district leadership, families, and the community with the goal of transparent, constructive, and reciprocal sharing of information. The SEPAC will promote the values of universal respect, acceptance, and inclusion for all students in special education, with sensitivity toward racial/ethnic and socio-economic equity.*

## **Challenges**

A multitude of challenges faced our special education community throughout the year, many stemming from disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All Newton students returned to full time in-person learning after more than a year of hybrid or full distance learning. For special education students, many of whom had been in person during the pandemic, the increase in numbers of students and staff in the building presented an adjustment period. Throughout the year, staff and student absences due to illness continuously changed the landscape of the school population. These shifts are often additionally difficult for students with disabilities, who rely upon an array of educators and support staff to access learning.

Families entered this school year seeking information about district-wide special education programming options for their students, and many reported feeling a lack of transparency and incomplete or unavailable information regarding programs. Families needed clear and thorough information to determine whether programs not available in their neighborhood schools might fit their students' needs. Previous SEPAC Boards had requested an updated Program Guide from NPS administration, but this was not yet completed.

Many also shared concerns about program effectiveness (particularly post-pandemic), and families called for comprehensive evaluations of elementary and middle school special education programming. Regarding upper grades, SEPAC requested follow-up from NPS on findings from the *Special Education Evaluation of Secondary Programming Serving Students with Social/Emotional/Behavioral Health Needs*<sup>1</sup>, that was conducted in 2020, but there has been no response.

For families whose students were transitioning between levels (i.e., elementary to middle; middle to high), the lack of vertical alignment for some programs resulted in difficult decisions around placement and concerns about disruptions in learning continuity. Students approaching the end of high school were also impacted by a significant gap in opportunities for Transition planning during preceding pandemic years.

Additionally, in December of 2021, NPS informed the SEPAC of the unexpected resignation of the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services. While other administrators stepped in to fill many needs, families shared concerns about the impact of this central leadership role vacancy, especially with half the school year still ahead. Later in the year, NPS revealed significant budgetary constraints that would affect staffing in the coming school year.

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<sup>1</sup> [06-03-20Newton, Final Version.pdf](#)

Overall, students across grade levels, particularly those with pre-existing vulnerabilities related to disabilities, have faced significant learning disruptions and increased social-emotional needs that must be monitored and supported. And families with students in Newton special education have expressed the need for more information about program availability and effectiveness, as well as a desire for continuity of leadership for their students.

## **Strengths**

Where there is adversity, however, there is also opportunity. The special education community brought forth many strengths throughout this school year. Students were excited to return to in-person learning and to reconnect with friends, and they exhibited great resilience in their ability to adjust to a changing learning environment. Our NPS staff, as always, have been caring and excellent, and have been flexible in responding to the needs of students in special education. City and District leaders have been willing to hear pointed criticism and to have hard, solution-focused discussions. And SEPAC families have stepped up to volunteer their time and effort to support our community through family engagement, advisory efforts and a desire to expand partnerships.

## **Family Engagement**

The central goal with regard to family engagement this year was to provide opportunities and events that would foster a sense of togetherness and community among our students and families involved in special education. Below we describe the range of meetings, presentations, and other gatherings coordinated by our Board to facilitate ongoing communication, information sharing, and collective support with our community at large.

### **Open Board Meetings**

Open Board meetings were held monthly beginning in August 2021, with a total of 10 throughout the year. They were held both in-person and via zoom when possible, or solely via zoom otherwise. Meeting times were offered mostly in the evening, with some in the morning to accommodate various families' needs and encourage diverse participation. The option to participate virtually was widely indicated as a preferred venue in our survey of families conducted in fall of 2021, and has increased accessibility for many. Open Board meetings were an opportunity to plan and discuss presentations, discuss family concerns, and disseminate information from NPS, DESE (the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) and other important resources. There were many constructive discussions on timely topics and the meetings offered an opportunity to gather feedback from the community.

In addition, Board representatives met with NPS Student Services leadership throughout the year. While these meetings were scheduled on a monthly basis, several were canceled during the shift in Student Services central leadership. A total of 5 meetings were held by the time of the SEPAC presentation to the School Committee, with one more scheduled for June 2022. The first two meetings were held in person with the remaining 4 scheduled via google meet. These were attended by the SEPAC Chair and 1-2 rotating SEPAC Board members. NPS representation was Beth Fitzmaurice (Assistant Superintendent for Student Services), Maura Tynes (Director of Elementary Special Education), and Lisa Langone (Director of Secondary Special Education and Special Services) for the first three meetings, and the rest included David Fleishman (Superintendent), Maura Tynes and Lisa Langone. During these meetings we discussed concerns of families, advised on projects (e.g., the Special Education Program Overview), and discussed upcoming events that could be advertised and attended by all parties. It is specifically noted that Maura Tynes and Lisa Langone remained anchor points for the Student Services central office and provided consistency in leadership throughout the year.

## Presentations

The Newton SEPAC organized and hosted a total of 19 presentations during the 2021-22 school year. Each session is described, below.

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| September 30, 2021, Virtual         | <i>Basic Rights Under Special Education Laws</i>                       |
| October 14, 2021, Virtual           | <i>School Committee Candidate Forum</i>                                |
| October 28, 2021, Virtual           | <i>Resilience Film Screening and Panel</i>                             |
| November 17, 2021, Virtual          | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 1 - Building Positive Relationships</i>   |
| November 18, 2021, Virtual          | <i>Coordinating Your Special Needs Financial &amp; Estate Planning</i> |
| December 2, 2021, Virtual           | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 1 - Building Positive Relationships</i>   |
| December 15, 2021, Virtual          | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 2 - Sleep</i>                             |
| December 19, 2021, Playground       | <i>Social Event</i>  |
| January 6, 2022, Virtual            | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 2 - Sleep</i>                             |
| January 19, 2022, Virtual           | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 3 - Eating</i>                            |
| January 27, 2022, Virtual           | <i>Interactive Media Use and Youth Mental Health</i>                   |
| February 3, 2022, Virtual           | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 3 - Eating</i>                            |
| February 16, 2022, Virtual          | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 4 - Schedule and Routines</i>             |
| February 17, 2022, Virtual          | <i>Making Fitness Accessible to All</i>                                |
| March 3, 2022, Virtual              | <i>IEP For the Home - Module 4 - Schedule and Routines</i>             |
| March 31, 2022, Ed Center           | <i>Understanding our Differences Program Activities</i>                |
| June 2, 2022, Virtual and Ed Center | <i>The Neurodiversity Paradigm</i>                                     |
| June 6, 2022, Virtual               | <i>SEPAC Annual Presentation to School Committee</i>                   |
| June 16, 2022, Virtual              | <i>Mapping Your Future: Navigating Executive Function Challenges</i>   |

The *Basic Rights* presentation is required to be held by the district at least annually and offers families the opportunity to learn about the process of seeking eligibility for and participating in Special Education. Information was provided regarding laws, regulations, and student/guardian rights related to accessing a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

All *School Committee Candidates* participated in a *forum* prior to the election, which was very well attended, with over 40 viewers. Candidates took turns answering a variety of questions collected in advance by the SEPAC from our community. Of note, this forum was the only one made available by any organization that included *all* candidates (not only contested races or specific Wards).

The Federation for Children with Special Needs co-sponsored a film screening of the film '*Resilience*,' which was followed by a panel discussion and question and answer session. This film focuses on the detrimental effects of childhood trauma and how resilience plays a role in mitigating negative outcomes.

The series *IEP for the Home* was sponsored by NPS, and also offered in partnership with the Brookline SEPAC, so that each of the 4 modules could be offered in the morning and also in the evening to allow access to more families. The series, developed and presented by Ludwig VonHahn of Tufts Medical Center, aimed to inform and help parents set their children up for educational success by laying a valuable framework at home. Modules included Building Positive Relationships, Sleep, Eating, and Setting Schedules and Routines. Families were given extensive time to discuss challenges they were facing and to walk through concrete ways to address those issues.

*Coordinating Your Special Needs Financial and Estate Planning* was presented by Caleb and Brendan Harty of Harty Financial. This presentation gave a broad overview of the ways financial and estate planning are different for families who are planning for children with special needs.

In the winter, a *Social Event* was held outdoors at Auburndale Playground. This was one of the first opportunities in a long time for families and students to come together *in person* in a relaxed and unstructured setting. Positive feedback was received from participants, who shared a desire to have more live events in the future.

*Interactive Media Use and Youth Mental Health* was presented by the Digital Wellness Lab at Boston Children's Hospital. They presented recent research on the relationships between interactive media use and the well-being of children and adolescents. The presentation also covered the latest science-based strategies parents and caregivers can employ to support children in developing a "healthy" relationship with technology and screen media.

*Making Fitness Accessible to All* was presented by Inclusive Fitness and discussed ways to engage children with special needs to make fitness enticing.

The *Understanding our Differences* program provided an interactive opportunity for caregivers to directly participate in program activities, as a way to experience how disabilities and diversity are being presented in our schools.

The *Neurodiversity Paradigm* was presented by 2 multiply-neurodivergent individuals. Neurodivergent kids have long been defined by their "deficits" - which themselves are based on deviations from the majority - and taught

to conform to neurotypical expectations in order to "overcome" their differences. Led by the neurodivergent community itself, the neurodiversity movement has emerged in recent years to offer a different approach: neurodivergent people may think, communicate, regulate, etc. in ways that are different from, but no less valid or "normal" than, those in the neurotypical majority.

*Mapping Your Future* is being presented by Signet Education and aims to discuss ways to support older students who are navigating the Transition process beyond high school.

## **Other Family Engagement**

With family engagement as a focus, SEPAC worked to connect with families in broad ways. The SEPAC maintains a google listserv, facebook group, and website to communicate and provide information for members. This year, NPS was asked to send several communications using the Aspen portal to directly reach families with children on IEPs, as well as to include information in the superintendent's newsletter: District News.

We conducted a survey of families to determine what topic areas were of interest, what concerns families had, what has gone well, and what format worked to best provide information including method and timing for meetings and presentations. This helped inform planning for the year.

A collaborative document with Recreational Resources was created in a shared google drive where families could contribute referrals. It has become a repository of information that is continually available and growing.

A special family support group was created called the Transition Working Group. This was a subgroup of members that are interested in the Transition process for students moving from high school or a post-graduate program into the 'real world,' in whatever format that means for them. The group discussed housing, post-secondary education options, employment, and more related topics.

SEPAC requested and helped facilitate NPS-led information sessions focused on special education for families approaching what is colloquially known as 'little t' transition as well. This refers to students' movement from elementary to middle school, or from middle to high school. It is distinguished from the 'big T' transition which refers to the transition beyond high school or to a post-graduate program. Information sessions were held at all 4 middle schools as well as Newton North High School and Newton South High School. Information sessions were open to all families with interest, regardless of catchment area. A session for students Transitioning from high school to the post-graduate program (Community Connections) has been requested, and NPS has committed to providing this before the end of this school year. Most sessions were recorded and the SEPAC community has been provided with the links that are accessible.

SEPAC annually collects nominations for the SEPAC Special Education Awards. This year, there were 267 nominations for 233 individuals, covering 26 schools & programs as well as NPS Central Administration. Nominees receive emails including their nomination statement, expressions of thanks from the Mayor, Superintendent and the SEPAC, a certificate of recognition, and a small starfish lapel pin as a token of gratitude. The pin represents the ways in which educators' efforts impact each student in profound and lasting ways.

## Advisory Efforts

SEPAC serves in an advisory capacity for Newton Public Schools and the School Committee, and represents the needs of our special education students in collaboration with many other related organizations. Below are some highlighted ways in which we fulfilled this legislative mandate.

NPS finalized and released an updated *Overview of Special Education Programs* in Newton, a document which included the current, full list of district-wide special education programs, the student profiles most often enrolled in each program, and programmatic features and structures of each offering. SEPAC served in an editorial capacity, examining the document from a caregiver perspective, with a lens of clarity and depth of detail.

NPS revised their Non-Discrimination and Harassment Protocol during the 2021-22 school year. SEPAC was asked to provide a single point of feedback on this process through a representative.

Due to the departure of the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services mid-year, a hiring search was implemented for a replacement, who would begin July 1, 2022. Consistent with previous searches, SEPAC was invited to participate in this process. Jessi Champion and Eliza Spaulding collaborated with NPS on the development of interview questions and an overview of characteristics desired in a candidate. They also participated in the interview process for rounds 1 and 3. The hiring committee was unified in presenting a vision of the ideal candidate and were unanimous in the recommendation of Casey Ngo-Miller for the position.

SEPAC participated in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Tiered Focus Monitoring Review, which examined special education and civil rights in our school system. NPS submitted documents to DESE for review in spring 2021, and the accompanying site visit was conducted the week of March 21, 2022. SEPAC partnered with DESE and NPS for a community presentation on the TFM Review process, and we alerted our community to the availability of surveys as a mechanism for family feedback to DESE as part of the process. We are currently awaiting results from the TFM review, which are due to be released in the coming months, and we will follow up with NPS regarding any findings.

In spring 2022, NPS announced a significant budget shortfall for the upcoming 2022-23 school year. SEPAC engaged in frequent contact with School Committee members and NPS staff to share understandings of the anticipated implications for special education in Newton. SEPAC presented two formal advisory statements at public School Committee meetings regarding potential impacts of budgetary challenges on special education in Newton. Below is an excerpt from April 4, 2022, which represents the concerns shared at that time:

*“The SEPAC is concerned that if vital resources are missing, more students will fall further behind, achievement gaps for vulnerable subgroups will widen, and long-term, the need for special ed evaluations and services will increase. These outcomes will be costly for every affected student, and for the district as a whole.”*

The Mayor invited citizens of Newton to make recommendations for the use of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding, provided to the City of Newton and allocated at the Mayor’s sole discretion. SEPAC created a working group to collect and prioritize needs and suggestions gathered from our community. From these efforts, a detailed proposal (see Appendix A) was drafted and sent to the Mayor on March 11, 2022. Although no formal response was received regarding the specific recommendations put forward, the SEPAC remains open to collaboration with the Mayor and NPS should certain suggestions be selected for targeted funding.

## **Collaboration and Partnership Goals**

Moving forward, SEPAC has goals for new and continued ways to strengthen relationships between families, the City, the school district and the School Committee.

Community groups such as FORJ (Families Organizing for Racial Justice), ELPAC (English Learners Parent Advisory Council), PTOC (Council for Parent Teacher Organizations), and school PTOs (Parent Teacher Organizations) all serve an invaluable role in individual school communities and across the whole district. There are many areas of intersection between our missions, and we hope to continue to identify shared goals and work closely together to achieve them.

School Committee representatives who join our gatherings are instrumental in conveying information both from and to the SEPAC. It is suggested that, by having all members of the School Committee rotate through attending SEPAC Open Board meetings, the School Committee members will grow in their understanding of SEPAC families and their concerns. SEPAC would like to facilitate informational trainings tailored for School Committee members around topics such as Neurodiversity that could help inform future policy. The SEPAC looks forward to expanding communication avenues with the School Committee to ensure that high priority issues are elevated in attention.

The SEPAC hopes to not only strengthen existing relationships with NPS administrators, but also to build new ones with incoming leaders. We also hope to represent our community in the hiring search for the Director of Secondary Special Education and Special Programs, as well as the interim and full Superintendent. We encourage NPS special education administrators to commit to continued monthly meetings with the SEPAC, as these meetings have been integral in our ability to fulfill our advisory role with NPS.

The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and the SEPAC have a shared interest in cultivating an inclusive, accepting, respectful, and safe school environment for all students, especially those belonging to one or more vulnerable subgroups. As an example, we hope to engage in conversations with DEI leadership about ways in which NPS can create a neurodiverse-affirming school environment.

We recommend follow-up on the Tiered Focus Monitoring review report that is forthcoming from DESE. We also recommend follow-up on the findings from the 2020 evaluation report entitled *Special Education Evaluation of Secondary Programming Serving Students with Social/Emotional/Behavioral Health Needs*. The SEPAC hopes to continue to collaborate and advise on program development and resource allocation related to student needs, and we continue to appreciate NPS's responsiveness in these areas.

The City of Newton can provide resources to SEPAC families that are much needed and appreciated and we hope to collaborate to bring these resources to a wider array of families. We also hope to follow up with the Mayor regarding our ARPA funding recommendations that address needs in the areas of Program evaluations, post-pandemic SEL needs for students, Playground accessibility, etc.

## Gratitude

We appreciate the opportunity to share our efforts with the Newton School Committee. The Newton SEPAC would not be a successful conduit for our families without the dedicated leaders of our City, our school district, our School Committee, our Board, and of course, our tireless educators.

The Newton SEPAC would like to specifically recognize the recipients of the 2021-22 Special Education Awards:

|                    |                       |                          |
|--------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Lisa Addleman      | Michelle Callaghan    | Will Demarest            |
| Caitrin Adelman    | Jennifer Campbell     | Hannah Depietro          |
| Daniel Arroyo      | Amanda Caramanica     | Donna Devaney            |
| Lauren Atkinson    | Ariel Carlin          | Anastacia Dias           |
| Sara Azzam         | Laura Carlin          | Sarah Doane              |
| Jamie Bainton      | Amanda Catalano       | Julie Dorfneilsen        |
| Terri Bancroft     | Melanie Chan          | Susan Douyotas           |
| Megan Barberio     | Meefong Chen          | Scott Dunlop             |
| Emily Bard         | Albert Cho            | James Ellis              |
| Zachary Barr       | Charles Clarke        | Matt Espelin             |
| Joe Barrett        | Jade Clune            | Natalia Espinal          |
| Priscilla Bartley  | Olivia Cohen-Milligan | Cheryl Etoniru           |
| Cindy Basso        | Alyssa Coleman        | Jamie Fahlbeck           |
| Stephanie Baumann  | Paul Connolly         | Carolyn Fertig           |
| Mackenzie Beatrice | Robin Cooley          | Sarah Field              |
| Charlene Beh       | Danielle Coppola      | Kevin Flynn              |
| Christina Bennes   | Kristen Correia       | Emma Fogg                |
| Amanda Bixby       | Tracy Corrigan        | Beth Friedman            |
| Sarah Blanusha     | Anna Cox              | Renae Fulkerson-Keszycki |
| Nina Blum          | Melissa Crimmins      | Brian Gagne              |
| Laura Boehm        | Shirley Sutton        | Alex Galli               |
| Catherine Boudreau | Meredith Crowe        | Joseph Gardner           |
| Meghan Bowes       | Jill Curry            | Amy Geer                 |
| Emily Bozeman      | Ted Dalicandro        | Sarah Gentile            |
| Christina Brown    | Megan Dalo            | Elizabeth Gerritsen      |
| Lexi Brown         | Kate Daoust           | Selena Giroux            |
| Lisa Butler        | Katy Dearborn         | Shelby Gitlin            |

|                    |                    |                    |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Nancy Caira        | Katie Deehan       | Johanna Gittleman  |
| Sheri Calcagni     | Megan DeKing       | Bridget Glenshaw   |
| Andrew Gluck       | Nicole Levasseur   | Jennifer Mega      |
| Jenna Goldstein    | Melissa Levin      | Martha Mitchell    |
| Lisa Goldthwaite   | Valerie Lewis      | David Moller       |
| Kayde Gower        | Seton Lindsay      | Amy Montalto       |
| Ben Gresser        | Sharon Lipman      | Regina Moody       |
| Joanna Gualtieri   | Rebecca Lozinsky   | Abigal Mugo        |
| Brenda Hammerstrom | Danielle Lualdi    | Rima Mulla         |
| Paula Hayward      | Deborah Lund       | Gabrielle Mulrean  |
| Maggie Heffernan   | Tara Lundy         | Kara Murphy        |
| Allison Hitchings  | Yole Magliore      | Laura Murphy       |
| Derek Hogan        | Michele Magno      | Sarah Newman       |
| Benita Hong        | Lindsey Mallette   | Yaelle Nisinzweig  |
| Yi Ling Hsu        | Patrick Manning    | Alecia Nunes       |
| Allison Hutchinson | Rose Mariano       | Emily O'Brien      |
| Caitlin Irwin      | Marianne Marks     | Max O'Connell      |
| Evan Janow         | Spencer Marzano    | Elizabeth O'Brien  |
| Barbara Johnson    | Shea Matta         | Shayna Packer      |
| Jennifer Johnson   | Amanda Mazzola     | Elizabeth Page     |
| Steve Johnson      | Kayla McAlister    | Kate Parker        |
| Betsy Juarez       | Bridget McAnulty   | Donna Pentaleri    |
| Elizabeth Kalmanov | Debbi McCadden     | Corey Percival     |
| Michaela Keenan    | Kerry McColgan     | Sam Petracca       |
| Julie Kelly        | Cam McCormick      | Melissa Phair      |
| LuAnn Keough       | Kim McDonagh       | Richelene Pierre   |
| Victoria Kmetz     | Elizabeth McFadyen | Elisheva Pinsky    |
| Deborah Knisell    | Mike McGonagal     | Alexander Poole    |
| Andrea Koenig      | Sara McKechnie     | Evelyn Porter      |
| Kayla Kornreich    | Jannon McKenna     | Tiyana Portis      |
| Christine LaFleur  | Kyle McKenna       | Tammy Reisman      |
| Lisa Langone       | Amy McMahon        | Mackenzie Rhoades  |
| Jenna Launie       | Sara McSwiggan     | Juanita Richardson |

|                  |                      |                            |
|------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Taylor Lee       | Justin Means         | Shannon Robichaud Filipiak |
| Evan Roche       | Alex Strongin        | Kimberly Vanaman           |
| Allison Rose     | Sarah Style          | Erika VanVleck             |
| Marita Rosen     | Masumi Suenaga       | Ellen Vogler               |
| Sarah Rosenthal  | Maria Sullivan       | Justin Walker              |
| Linda Ross       | Kristian Sumner      | Bonnie Wellins             |
| Deirdre Rourke   | Trish Szoke          | Chesley Wendth             |
| Lauren Rozenvayn | Dina Tedford         | Kelsey Werner              |
| Lauren Sack      | Samantha Terwilliger | Mary Theresa Whalen        |
| Julia Shannon    | Rachele Thivierge    | Keith Whelan               |
| Angela Sheehan   | Sarah Thorne         | Alison Wilson              |
| Molly Sheehan    | Michael Thurm        | Jonathan Winkler           |
| Roberta Sherman  | Henry Toulmin        | David Wright               |
| Dana Shulsinger  | Libby Tower          | Julie Younis               |
| Kyra Slawski     | Michelle Traverse    | Tiffany Zaehringer         |
| Micheal Smith    | Jessica Treadwell    | Yiran Zhang                |
| Jason St. Clair  | Maura Tynes          | Cheri Zunick               |
| Kristyn Stem     | Kelly Vaillancourt   |                            |

## **Appendix A**

Newton SEPAC Proposal: *ARPA Funding for Special Education*  
(7 pages, below)



# Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council

March 11, 2022

Mayor Ruthanne Fuller  
City of Newton  
1000 Commonwealth Avenue  
Newton Centre, MA 02459

**RE: Newton SEPAC Recommendations for ARPA Funding**

Dear Mayor Fuller,

Thank you for the opportunity to suggest priorities for use of ARPA funds.

As you know, the Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) represents families of students in NPS special education. The Newton SEPAC Board reached out to our community, and we have drafted the attached, for your consideration.

The first page is an "At-A-Glance" summary of our recommendations, followed by full descriptions of the rationale and details supporting each item. Please note that items reflect feedback from all corners of our community and are presented in no particular order of priority. Although we have not conducted a thorough cost analysis, we believe total funding for this proposal would fall in the **range of \$3M to \$4M**.

We understand that ARPA funding is not intended to supplant NPS budget spending; therefore, many of our suggestions propose one-time funding for short-term consultant work. Although hiring of consultants may not be ideal from some perspectives, *we believe that the urgency of pandemic-related needs merits leveraging external supports to make rapid and impactful changes that will yield long-term results in student outcomes.*

Finally, we want to highlight that many of these recommendations will require **collaborative partnerships** between the City of Newton, Newton Public Schools, and the Newton SEPAC Board and parent community. We stand ready to contribute and participate in any way that we can, for the benefit of our students.

We appreciate your attention and consideration.

Respectfully,

The Newton SEPAC Board

### ARPA Funding for NPS Special Education - Newton SEPAC Recommendations "At-A-Glance"

Newton's special education students have been disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic, and their ability to 'bounce back' is widely variable.

- Hire an external consultant team to deliver training in trauma-informed instruction and classroom management to general and special education staff. Set ambitious targets and deadlines for a high percentage of staff to be trained.
- Expand access to Extended School Year (ESY/summer) programs for special education students whose progress toward IEP goals slowed significantly during the pandemic.
- Create short-term "Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Acceleration Academies" to remediate pandemic-related social, emotional, and/or behavioral regressions (similar to NPS's literacy and math Acceleration Academies).
- Fund workshops for parents on topics like connecting school to home, anxiety management and executive functioning in kids.

Many of Newton's special education students are economically and racially diverse, placing them at even higher risk and amplifying their need for multifaceted supports to match their post-pandemic needs.

- Hire a consultant team to conduct a **Special Education Needs Assessment** with families of students with IEPs, 504 plans, and those engaging in or learning about the eligibility evaluation process. Mirror the *Community Needs Assessment* already funded. Despite pandemic-related declines in total enrollment, NPS special education remains ~18%; and within our inclusive model, we must proactively encourage a strength-based approach that values unique brain and body abilities.

- Invest in **neurodiversity training and consulting** -- designed and provided by neurodivergent advocates -- for general and special education staff to better understand and support students of all brain types.

Many key recommendations from the "[Secondary Special Education Specific Programs Evaluation](#)" (Ristuccia, McArdle, & Early, 2020), completed during the pandemic, have not been addressed.

- Hire a temporary "**Special Project Coordinator**" to develop and monitor a clear **Action Plan** that includes measurable goals, estimated timelines, and concrete due dates.

Post-pandemic special education program quality, efficacy, and equity are unknown (with challenges reported). There's also been "stop/start" inconsistency in NPS's internal "Early Literacy Review," with little progress made.

- Hire an external consultant team to conduct a **comprehensive evaluation of elementary and middle school special education programming**. In the meantime, purchase evaluation tools & curriculum materials so schools don't have to share and borrow.
- Hire an external consultant team to **evaluate NPS's early literacy program** in the elementary schools, purchase updated curriculum materials, and provide trainings to at least 3 literacy-specific staff per elementary school.

The rising NECP cohort, which includes many low incidence disabilities, will require expanded elementary special education programming to keep those students in-district (per Dr. Fleishman).

- Support the **NPS-planned elementary STRIDE program expansion** by funding consultant-led PD for special and general education staff in disability- or program-based instruction, and by purchasing curriculum materials, supplies, and tech.

After 2 years of pandemic-related uncertainty and anxiety, students with disabilities need **stability**; but some successful NPS special education programs are simply not available across grade levels (from elementary to middle to high).

- Coordinate with NPS leadership as they develop their budget so that **new/re-allocated FTEs for new vertically aligned programs can be matched with ARPA funding** for hiring efforts, initial PD, and purchasing of materials and tech needed to get the programs off the ground. Start with scaling up the **Direct Instruction (DI) program** from Oak Hill MS to Newton South HS.

Newton's students with disabilities who are approaching **Transition** beyond high school have lost nearly 2 years of vital preparation time, and they need a stronger, more comprehensive set of supports right now.

- Hire an external consultant to evaluate and centrally **compile Transition resources** currently available in NPS.
- Fund content expert consultants to provide **training for middle and high school staff on vital Transition topics** (e.g., options for higher education, navigating public assistance programs, securing housing, finding a job, etc.).
- Link students with disabilities with **Newton Hires**, giving them direct access to incentivized opportunities to become contributing employed members of our Newton business community.
- Fund the creation of a **Pre-Transition Mentorship Program** through which vocational attributes of juniors and seniors can be identified, and relationships between these students with disabilities and Newton businesses may begin and strengthen.
- Allocate startup funds to establish a **Transition House**, which is a semi-independent, temporary housing option available to a small group of graduating NPS students with disabilities.

Marginalization of and bullying toward students with disabilities are persistent realities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and these students need staff that can empathize and help them feel connected and understood.

- Hire a consultative disability expert to guide NPS Human Resources in implementing best practices to **locate and recruit differently-abled staff, and develop incentive programs to encourage retention and promotion**.
- Support hiring of a **Special Education School Coordinator** (equivalent to the NPS budget-funded FORJ School Coordinator).

Newton's students with disabilities have inconsistent and limited accessibility to playgrounds at our schools.

- Hire an expert consultant to conduct a **comprehensive accessibility assessment of all elementary and middle school playgrounds, and fund upgrades for all playgrounds to meet high standards for accessibility**.

**ARPA Funding for NPS Special Education**  
**Newton SEPAC Recommendations (Full Details)**

**Newton's special education students have been disproportionately negatively impacted by the pandemic, and their ability to 'bounce back' is widely variable.** Already at a disadvantage due to challenges related to disabilities and risk for marginalization, the pandemic's social isolation, remote learning periods, and abrupt stopping of and later changes in support service delivery caused significant regressions for many students with disabilities in social-emotional, academic, and behavioral learning. These impacts were often more profound than impacts observed in their regular education peers. Even though a large proportion of special education students returned in-person sooner than peers, many—especially medically fragile students—were still unable to do so and remained fully remote for the duration of last school year. For those who did return in-person, they did so without typical peer models initially, limiting their social learning opportunities. And ongoing staffing changes and shortages caused disruptions in interventional support, thereby interrupting student progress. Additionally, SEPAC has heard from parents this year that NPS has re-evaluated criteria for students to qualify for ESY, implying that fewer students with disabilities may have this opportunity during summer to prevent further regressions. Finally, parents of students with disabilities also support their children's learning at home, but with exacerbated challenges caused by the pandemic, they need workshops that can help them understand and link strategies used at school to the home.

- Hire an external consultant team to deliver **training in trauma-informed instruction and classroom management** to general and special education staff. NPS can demonstrate its stated commitment to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) by providing education and tools to staff on how to identify warning signs of a trauma response (e.g., anxiety, depression, anger, withdrawal, work refusal, etc.), how to quickly enact appropriate support protocols, and when to reach out to special education staff. This training will also assist in minimizing the incidence of more restrictive behavior intervention with our students with disabilities, a rate that is monitored in the State Performance Plan, Part B, Indicator #4A for *Suspensions/Expulsions* (see [SPP](#), pages 20-22). Clear and ambitious targets and deadlines should be set for a high percentage of staff to be trained quickly.
- Use ARPA funds to **widen access to Extended School Year (ESY/summer)** programs for special education students whose progress toward academic, social-emotional, and behavioral IEP goals slowed significantly during the pandemic. To accomplish this, hire temporary staff, extend stipends to existing staff interested in a short-term opportunity, and/or contract with other existing community-based programs with a proven track record of serving individuals with disabilities (e.g., Camp Echo Bridge, Athletes Unlimited, etc.).
- NPS received [ESSR-III](#) funding to run **Acceleration Academies** for students in general education identified by teachers as showing slow progress in reading (K-2) or math (3+). Allocate ARPA funds to **create short-term "Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Acceleration Academies"** for students identified by teachers as needing additional targeted support to rectify social, emotional, and/or behavioral regressions. SEL Acceleration Academies should focus on anxiety/depression awareness and management strategies, executive functioning support (e.g., planning, organization, time management, transition preparation, etc.), social pragmatics and interpersonal dynamics training, self-regulation strategies, and other key areas of need. NPS should follow the planning and coordination they've already done for academic Acceleration Academies, to leverage systems already in place.
- Fund **workshops for NPS parents of students with disabilities** that provide strategies to align with and connect learning from school to home, as well as introduce methods to support students in anxiety management, executive functioning, transitions between levels, and other topics.

**Many of Newton's special education students are economically and racially diverse, placing them at even higher risk and amplifying their need for multifaceted supports to match their needs.** About a 1/4 of our students with disabilities also are identified as economically disadvantaged and/or an English language learner. And there are higher proportions of students identified for special education among some racial minority subgroups, specifically 31% of African American and 27% of Hispanic students (vs. 18% of White). There is a comparatively lower rate (13%) of Asian students identified with disabilities, which could reflect cultural and/or language barriers to identification.

- Hire an external consultant team to conduct a **Special Education Needs Assessment**, including design and implementation of **surveys and interviews**, to find out what the priorities are for families of students with IEPs, 504 plans, those going through the eligibility evaluation process, and others interested in learning more about special education for their child. Assess a 360-degree view, including students (as appropriate), parents/caretakers, teachers, and support staff. Offer surveys and interviews in *multiple translated languages* (not simply giving a link to translation websites), and explicitly seek out responses from families of color, whose first language is not English, and/or are immigrants. You have demonstrated your commitment to supporting low-income Newton residents by setting aside \$50K for a **Community Needs Assessment** examining economic stability. Our most vulnerable, and diverse, students with disabilities deserve priority attention as well, and such an effort could additionally help Newton fulfill its federal "Child Find" requirements as well as assisting NPS in meeting the State Performance Plan, Part B, Indicator #8 for *Parent Involvement* (see [SPP](#), pages 38-41).

**Despite declining overall enrollment in NPS, the proportion of special education students has remained approximately 18%.** With this high proportion of students with disabilities, most often educated in fully inclusive classrooms, we must focus squarely on **building acceptance, not simply tolerance**. We must shift the narrative away from a deficit model and toward a **strength-based approach** to teaching and learning, which places value on unique brain and body abilities.

- Newton should invest in **neurodiversity training and consulting** -- designed and provided by neurodivergent advocates (i.e., individuals who are autistic, individuals with attention differences, individuals who are dyslexic) - - for educators and staff to better understand and support students of all brain types. Because of their neurology, neurodivergent people often think/learn/communicate in ways that are different - though not lesser than - neurotypical people. And as neurodivergent advocates have made clear, being neurodivergent is often a fundamental aspect of one's identity as it impacts the way one experiences, processes and responds to the world. The NPS experience for neurotypical and neurodivergent students cannot be equitable until, as a first step, NPS *commits to creating a neurodiverse-affirming school environment*, and acknowledges and seeks to affirm neurodivergent students' unique neurologies and identities.
- Neurodiversity training will, among other things, help educators (i) improve their understanding of and communication and relationships with neurodivergent students; (ii) design learning environments that better accommodate the different ways students think, learn, socialize, sense and regulate; (iii) talk to students of all brain types about our different brain types, and communicate to students that the differences students observe in their peers are "normal"; and (iv) craft goals and measures of progress that reflect the fact that neurodivergent students' brains work differently and, accordingly, may require different goals and measures of progress than their neurotypical peers.

**Many key recommendations from the "Secondary Special Education Specific Programs Evaluation" (Ristuccia, McArdle, & Early, 2020) have not been addressed.**

- Since December of 2021, the role of Assistant Superintendent of Student Services has remained vacant. Dr. Fleishman anticipates a replacement after SY22 is over. This means that the person previously responsible for following up on findings is not in place. Allocate ARPA funds to **bring on a temporary "Special Project Coordinator"** to develop a clear **Action Plan** that includes measurable goals, estimated timelines, and concrete due dates; and provide this person with resources necessary to draft progress reports for NPS leadership, the School Committee, and the public to foster transparency in communication.

**No comprehensive evaluation of special education programming in elementary or middle has been conducted in recent years, and post-pandemic program quality, efficacy, and equity are unknown.** A variety of challenges have been reported to SEPAC. For example, we have received feedback that there is limited information available to parents and staff about program options at different schools, that NPS staff is not uniformly trained in research-based early literacy curricula and interventions, that schools must borrow and share testing kits/tools and instruments to conduct eligibility evaluations, and that disability-specific resources and materials are not always available to staff. There's also been inconsistency in NPS's internal "Early Literacy Review," with many starts and stops, and little overall progress made. Though it is true that

NPS is currently undergoing its triennial DESE Tiered Focused Monitoring, this is **not** a comprehensive review that will yield clear and concise recommendations to improve program quality.

- Hire an external consultant team (consider Ristuccia, McArdle, & Early, given their familiarity with NPS) to conduct a **comprehensive evaluation of elementary and middle school special education programming**. Such an audit should yield a set of actionable recommendations that lead to long-term improved outcomes for students with disabilities across all areas of learning (academic, social-emotional, behavioral, college and career readiness, etc.).
- Hire an external consultant team to **evaluate NPS's early literacy program** in the elementary schools, with a specific lens upon identification of and support for dyslexia. Provide ARPA funding to purchase updated, current research-based early reading curriculum materials (e.g., Orton-Gillingham, Wilson), and have the external consultant team work with the NPS Early Literacy Coordinator to provide trainings to at least 3 staff (e.g., special educator, literacy specialist, Speech/Language Pathologist) per elementary school.
- **Purchase testing kits and assessment tools for every school** so that *eligibility evaluations* may be completed without schools having to borrow or share the limited amount of materials currently available.

**The rising NECP cohort, which includes many low incidence disabilities, will require expanded elementary special education programming to keep those students in-district.** Dr. Fleishman has communicated this fact to the School Committee, and recently stated that the STRIDE program specifically would be expanded. It can be costly to send/fund students to out-of-district (OOD) placements for specialized servicing<sup>1</sup>, so broadening and enhancing programs within Newton is essential, and is a stated need, according to the superintendent. Further, the transition from preschool to elementary school for students with disabilities is foundational for later learning, and is something that is closely monitored via the State Performance Plan, Part B, Indicator #12 for *Early Childhood Transition* (see [SPP](#), pages 52-54).

- Allocate ARPA resources to **complement NPS's planned STRIDE program expansion efforts** that are anticipated to be reflected in the budget (via staffing). Specifically, ARPA funds can provide **professional development** to support existing (and newly hired or re-allocated) special education staff's qualifications, and **expand trainings to include regular education staff** who interact closely with students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms.
- ARPA funds should also be used to hire consultants to **provide targeted trainings** in specific Tier-1 or Response to Intervention (RTI) reading (e.g., Orton-Gilligham) and mathematics protocols for specialists, purchase new/upgraded researched-based intervention packages for educating students with high-incidence disabilities like Autism Spectrum Disorders, Communication Disorders, Learning Disorders, etc., provide **evaluation tools/kits and intervention supplies** for special educators at every school, and to purchase **state-of-the-art computer software and assistive technologies** for students whose needs may be low-incidence but significant (e.g., personal communication devices/electronics, etc.). All these resources can be one-time purchases that would have significant long-term effects.

After 2 years of pandemic-related uncertainty and ever-changing conditions, students with disabilities need **stability**. **The pipeline for special education programming across levels is splintered, and some successful programs are simply not available across grade levels.** Specifically, there are several middle school special education programs that don't exist in elementary or extend into high school. For continuity and access, programs should run from elementary to middle to high school levels. Effective between-levels transitions are also mandated by the state, as per the State Performance Plan, Part B, Indicators #12 & 13 for *Early Childhood and Secondary Transitions* (see [SPP](#), pages 52-57).

- Coordinate with NPS leadership as they develop their budget so that new/re-allocated FTEs for expanded programs can be matched with ARPA support that would **fund hiring efforts, initial training and professional development for new staff, and purchasing of full complements of curriculum materials and technology** needed to get the programs off the ground.

<sup>1</sup> "The gross tuition projection for 2021-22 is \$12.3 million, with an additional contingency of \$460,000 for pending tuition placements." – [FY22 Fiscal and Operational Update](#), presented to School Committee on February 7, 2022

- One example of a potential pilot would be to scale up the **Direct Instruction (DI) program** that currently exists at Oak Hill Middle School. No similar or contiguous DI program yet exists at Newton South High School, despite a large group of parents who have been advocating for this directly with NPS leadership over the past year.

Post high-school trajectories for students with disabilities vary widely, and are a priority monitored by the State Performance Plan, Part B, Indicator #14 for *Post-School Outcomes* (see [SPP](#), pages 58-62). Students who are in the midst of this **Transition** have lost nearly 2 years of vital preparation time, and for them, stepping into the "post-pandemic" world can be even scarier and more overwhelming now than ever before. **Newton's students with disabilities who are approaching Transition beyond high school need a stronger, more comprehensive set of supports well before and just after graduation.**

- Hire an external consultant to evaluate and centrally **compile Transition resources** currently available in NPS, so families have one place to find information.
- Fund expert consultants to **provide training for middle and high school staff on vital Transition topics**, including requirements and options for college and vocational higher education, navigating public assistance programs for ages 18-22+, securing independent or semi-independent housing, interviewing for and maintaining gainful employment, and may other topics.
- Leverage the \$220K commitment you have already made to bolster the Newton Hires (\$220K) program by **intentionally linking students with disabilities with Newton Hires**, giving them direct access to incentivized opportunities to become contributing employed members of our Newton business community.
- Fund the creation of a **Pre- Transition Mentorship Program** through which vocational attributes and desires of juniors and seniors at NNHS and NSHS can be identified, and relationships between these students with disabilities and local businesses may begin and strengthen over time.
- Allocate startup funds to establish a **Transition House**, which is a semi-independent, temporary housing option available to a small group of graduating NPS students with disabilities. This idea, previously explored with NPS administration, would be to have a number of placement slots for recent NPS graduates, with additional slots available for non-NPS students with disabilities at a cost. This strategy would make the Transition House financially self-sustaining long-term.

In November of 2021, NPS's Head of HR presented to the School Committee on their "[Strategies to Increase Diversity in Recruitment](#)." Through this effort and NPS's recent DEI initiatives focused on race, we have seen clear evidence that students must "see themselves" reflected in their teachers, and they must feel safe and understood at school, in order to fully engage in learning. **Unfortunately, marginalization of and bullying toward students with disabilities are persistent realities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and these students need staff that can empathize and help them feel connected and supported within the school community.**

- Allocate ARPA funds to hire a consultative disability expert to guide NPS Human Resources in implementing best practices to **locate and recruit differently-abled staff, and develop incentive programs to encourage retention and promotion**. NPS should intentionally expand efforts to hire of staff who are neurodiverse or neurodivergent, differently abled physically, have limited vision or are blind, are Deaf or have hearing loss, or otherwise demonstrate resiliency in the face of disabilities that are not readily visible. Further, NPS should also consider extending HR's pathways to licensure for staff who may choose to work exclusively with students with disabilities, even if those staff are not diverse themselves.
- Use ARPA funds to support recruitment efforts to hire a **Special Education School Coordinator** position (equivalent to the NPS budget-funded *FORJ School Coordinator*) who can serve as the liaison between district and school staff, families, and students with IEPs and 504 plans. Newton can show its commitment to lifting students with disabilities back to where they were pre-pandemic by having this point-person engage in activities that parallel those of the *FORJ School Coordinator*: creating newsletters, organizing community workshops and bringing in speakers to discuss disability awareness and sensitivity, and working with Central Office to implement staff trainings on effective inclusion strategies, high-and low-incidence disability awareness, trauma-informed practice and education, and other timely topics.

**Newton's students with disabilities have inconsistent and limited accessibility to playground equipment and experiences at our schools.** \$250K has already been allocated to upgrade the [Horace Mann playground](#), which highlights your commitment to supporting the social and physical development of elementary students. Unfortunately, many other playgrounds across Newton's schools remain minimally accessible for students with physical and social-emotional disabilities, limiting their ability to engage socially and physically.

- Hire an expert consultant to conduct a **comprehensive accessibility assessment of all elementary and middle school playgrounds**, including evaluation of equipment and structures, pathways for entry, as well as availability of nearby "break" spaces for safety or self-regulation.
- Allocate funds to **make upgrades for all playgrounds to meet high standards for accessibility**.