

May 8, 2009

Dr. Barbara Dunham
Superintendent of Schools
Town of Sharon
1 School Street
Sharon, MA 02067

Dear Dr. Dunham:

Thank you very much for taking the time to meet with Sharon Special Education Parent Advisory Council (“SSEPAC”) representatives, Karen Bernanke Lowe and Marcy Kaplan with regard to the IDEA stimulus funding. Thank you also for inviting Steve Kaplan, Director of Student Services and Linda Callan of the School Committee to meet with us and allowing SSEPAC members to speak with the PTO representatives. We really appreciated not only your willingness to meet with our representatives on such an important topic, but also your generous support with regard to the reforming of SSEPAC.

At our April 16th SSEPAC meeting, the membership thought it may be helpful to crystallize for you some of our thoughts regarding the IDEA stimulus funding. We understand that you are in the process of hiring a K – 5 Special Education coordinator for coverage of Heights and East Elementary schools. We very much appreciate the need for this, and would like to ensure that a certified special education coordinator is also engaged to oversee the program at the Cottage Street School.

IDEA/Stimulus Funding

It is truly an exciting opportunity to be able to add resources to help all students, including struggling students, students on 504 plans, and students on IEP learn more efficiently and effectively in the classroom. We believe that there are three main areas that could benefit tremendously from the use of the stimulus funds: assistive technology, additional resources for the training of staff in this technology, and the purchase and incorporation of some additional teaching programs.

All of these ideas are believed to add long term value to the Sharon Schools, allow for better inclusion of children with learning differences, increase differentiation in the classroom and avoid the “funding cliff”.

1. Assistive Technology

On a general level, we believe that there are three essential areas where Sharon Students can reap the greatest benefit of assistive technology:

- 1) Technology designed *to teach skill development* in reading and writing such as:
 - a. Lexia, an Orton Gillingham style of teaching, www.lexialearning.com;
- 2) Technology that *provides all children access to the curriculum* including:

- a. Kurzweil;
 - b. Read and Write Gold;
 - c. Ghost Writer, and other Text to Speech programs currently available;
 - d. Rosetta Stone, a program that helps children to learn foreign languages;
and
- 3) Software providing *typing tutorials and instruction* in order for children to access the above technologies.

We recommend that Sharon Public Schools put into place these three elements of assistive technology so that all children can access the curriculum throughout their school day. We have found a resource to help Sharon Schools make the best decisions for the children in the district. (Please see Alltech at www.alltech-tsi.org). In addition, we suggest the use of Red Cat technology, Franklin Readers, a voice recognition program, word prediction software, additional laptops, smart board technology, and the so called “clicker” technology. Furthermore, the expanded and more frequent use of palm pilots and keyboards within the classroom would greatly benefit many students.

2. Technology Inventory and Incorporation

While we all can agree that technology can make a tremendous difference in the ability of our children to access the curriculum, our members report a level of confusion and frustration in determining the inventory of technology in our school system. Therefore, SSEPAC requests that a central audit be conducted with the goal of creating a central inventory of available technology. This inventory should include all tools used to support educational access such as weighted or pressure vests, seating that allows for movement, and other sensory items. A key component of this inventory would be a list of where each item is located within the school system and who provides the access to that item.

Once this inventory is completed, a key part of all IEP meetings could then involve determining what assistive technology would help each student to learn more effectively and how to attain that technology for each student. Parent involvement in understanding what technological options are currently available will greatly help this initiative.

Our members also report an apparent disconnect in getting the technology currently available into the classroom for everyday learning. In response to this concern, SSEPAC suggests that a (Zoomerang) survey be conducted of the teachers to determine their thoughts and concerns regarding the use of technology, so that we can be sure to bring the teachers on board with this program. Clearly, teacher support is paramount and their perspective is vital to understanding how we can use technology in the classroom most efficiently and effectively.

Additionally, the hiring of a technology consultant for two years to work “hands on” within the school system would help speed up incorporation of the technology into the daily lives of our struggling students. This expert would be able to help us bridge the gap

between intentions and reality and would help to create an institutional support of these initiatives.

3. Additional Programs: Cornell Method, LIPS, Handwriting without Tears and Brain Gym

In addition to the technology, our membership supports the addition of programs to improve the learning for all Sharon students, especially those student struggling with learning challenges. For example, as we discussed, there is widespread support for providing programs on study skills, particularly at the 5th, 6th and 8th grade levels. The “Cornell Method” has been recommended. This approach would help students with executive functioning issues as well as provide every student with a better platform for learning.

SSEPAC also supports integrating additional multi-sensory programs into our elementary school “learn to read” years. For example, the Lindamood Bell LIPS program for establishing sound/symbol correlation would help all children. Similarly, a multi-sensory program could be integrated into our handwriting program to better reach students who struggle with learning letter formation for a variety of reasons. The multi-sensory approach of these programs would be productive (and fun) for all students.

Another type of program we suggest for incorporation into the Sharon School System is called Brain Gym. It is a kinesthetic approach to helping students be more receptive to learning. It is available as a classroom based program and has been incorporated into classrooms around the country with helpful results. This sort of program can help students with attention and behavior challenges be more available for learning.

Finally, we suggest the purchase of additional books to be used by the special education students or the students who are struggling readers. These books would provide the ability for students to continue to bring home appropriate books for daily reading beyond the WEB reading program. We believe that the additional availability of books in the special education rooms for students to bring home and read with parents would help struggling readers. Further, we have heard the concern expressed that advanced readers in kindergarten do not have access to level appropriate reading resources. Perhaps we could purchase additional books for the kindergarten classes so that all children have access within the classroom to books at their reading levels .

Elementary School Special Education Coordinator

In addition to a discussion of IDEA funding, the future staffing of the elementary school special education coordinator was raised on April 16th. There was grave concern that there would not be a coordinator (or coordinators) dedicated to covering special education at Cottage Street. We believe that there should be a certified coordinator(s), specifically trained for this essential task, overseeing all the elementary schools.

Cottage does not benefit from a program like NECC which has a clear structure, specific goals, professional staff and curriculum design. At Cottage there are a number of struggling children who are making little effective progress under the current structure and design. Although the DLP has gone through a number of changes, we feel that Cottage would benefit from a direct coordinator to oversee the many different instructional activities that are in place in the school. We feel that the staff needs to have a direct supervisor to help them implement new strategies and design individualized programs and to ensure consistency throughout the school system.

Thank you very much for your attention to these matters. We are also forwarding copies of this letter to the School Committee, Mr. Kaplan, Ms. Cohen, Ms. Fisher, and the PTO chairs. The letter was reviewed and approved by our members at our SSEPAC meeting on May 7th, 2009.

Very truly yours,

SSEPAC

Co – Presidents: Karen Bernanke-Lowe
Becky Zorovic

Co – Vice Presidents: Marcy Kaplan
April Lomba

Co – Treasurers: Rhonda Jansky
Judy Crosby

Secretary: Richard Godmintz

Cc: Sharon School Committee
Mr. Tim Farmer
Mr. Steve Kaplan
Ms. Cheryl Fisher
Ms. Rachel Cohen
Ms. Amy Steinberg
PTO Chairs