

October 27, 2010

Dear Parents/Families:

It has come to my attention that there are some questions with regard to the Special Education Program review. This is an extremely important project and your involvement and understanding are key to its success, so please allow me to clarify some areas of concern.

I first shared my intentions of conducting an independent program evaluation during the Special Education Presentation to the School Committee in September 22, 2009. At this public meeting I stated that one of the Office of Special Education commitments was to: *“Improve instructional practices, services and programs for students with disabilities; with the ultimate goal of closing the achievement gap by contracting an independent evaluator who will conduct a program, review of all special education programs including, although not limited to, inclusionary practices”* The information presented to the School Committee was also posted in the district’s website. Also, in the first Parent Advisory Council meeting in 2009, Dr. Young, Superintendent and I shared this information with the group of parents that attended the meeting. However, looking back, I can understand why there are some concerns and confusion among parents as the process has been long and in different stages. To be clear: this evaluation has been conducted at my initiation because I believe that improvements are needed. This evaluation will serve to help me clarify the strengths of our programs and areas in need of change.

WestEd consulting group was contracted to conduct a Special Education Program Review. A Request for Proposals was written and posted in the City of Cambridge website. The City of Cambridge bidding process is as follow:

Contracts of \$25,000 or more - Purchasing conducts a formal advertised competition using sealed bids for proposals. In a bid competition, the contract is awarded to the qualified bidder who meets the specifications and offers the best price. (M.G.L.c.30B,5). In a proposal process, the contract is awarded to the offer or submitting the most advantageous proposal taking into consideration the specified evaluation criteria as well as price. (M.G.L.c.30B, 6).(Excerpt from the City of Cambridge website).

Bidders submitted their responses and WestEd was determined the most qualified. If you wish to learn more about WestEd, please visit their website at www.wested.org.

The **purpose** of this program review is to provide:

- *Recommendations for strengthening our special education programs (substantially separate and inclusion).*
- *Recommendations for improving communication with the public in order to build confidence in our programming, staffing, and organization around special education.*
- *Recommendations for cost containment measures which do not compromise the quality of services provided.*

- *Recommendations for the development of additional programs to serve students who currently receive services outside of the district.*
- *Clear definitions of terminology, such as “full inclusion”.*

Project requirements listed in the Request for Proposal were as follow:

1. *An analysis of MCAS scores and the achievement gap of special education students.*
2. *Interviews with special education administration, district staff, school based special educators, and administrators, and parents of students with disabilities.*
3. *A review of the current and proposed job functions and responsibilities of OSE staff.*
4. *An evaluation of all special education programs provided within the district including the following:*
 - *The delivery and quality of related services: Speech and Language, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Assistive Technology, Counseling, Behavior support, etc*
 - *The quality of the substantially separate classes at the Pre-School, Elementary/Middle Schools and Cambridge Rindge & Latin School (CRLS). These programs include: Autism, Learning Disabilities, Development Delay and Behavior Classes.*
 - *The quality of integrated and co-teaching programs. These include: a co-teaching model at the Haggerty School, a co-teaching program at CRLS and the integrated classes in the Early Childhood Program. Current inclusion practices in the district, including “pull out” and “push in” services.*

Requirements listed for the consultant group to submit as stated in the Request for Proposal:

1. *Submit a resume for every person who will be involved in the project. The resume shall include the number of years experience providing similar services described in the Scope of Services Specification.*
2. *Please submit two samples of work completed by consultant for projects similar to the one outlined in the Scope of Services Specification.*
3. *Please provide the names, telephone numbers, and addresses of three references. References should be from school districts of a similar size and economic diversity as the Cambridge Public Schools. The Cambridge Public Schools reserves the right to use itself as a reference. A bid may be rejected on the basis of one or more references reporting less than excellent past performance by the bidder.*
4. *Please submit a written proposal which states the Consultant’s approach and timeline for the project described in the Scope of Services Specifications.*

Please be advised that WestEd submitted all documents related to these requirements. No one from the OSE Administrative Team had any connections/affiliations with any staff member at WestEd prior to the beginning of the program review. Lastly, samples of prior reviews conducted by the consulting group were reviewed by district administration and references were called. WestEd progress with regard to the program review is being supervised by a Steering Committee. The members of this committee include: Dr. Carolyn Turk, Deputy Superintendent, Ms. Maryann MacDonald, Executive Director, Ms. Barbara Van Sickle, Director, Student Achievement, Ms. Claire Spinner, Chief Financial Officer and I.

Several steps have been taken to meet the deliverables. These are:

- Cambridge Public Schools Staff Focus Groups (completed in May 2010). Staff focus groups invited to participate included, district and school administrators, all OSE staff, all general education staff, including but not limited to paraprofessionals, district and school coaches, guidance counselors, among others.
- Special Education Parents' Focus Groups (completed in September 2010).
- Randomly Selected Students' Records Review (scheduled for October-November 2010)
- Delivery of Services (including classrooms) Observations (scheduled for October-November 2010)
- Cambridge Public Schools Staff Online Survey (scheduled for November 2010). Same staff that was invited to participate in the focus groups will be surveyed. The survey was developed by WestEd based on comments/statements made by the staff during the focus groups.
- Mailing of Parent Survey (scheduled for October-November 2010)

The most significant items that directly involve parents are: Parents' Focus Groups, Parent Survey and Student Record Reviews.

In September a letter was sent to all parents with students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) inviting them to participate in the **focus groups**. This letter was also posted in the Cambridge Public Schools website and the Parent Advisory Council worked diligently to outreach parents and encourage participation. Five parent focus groups were offered the last week of September. Four were in the evening (childcare was provided) and one was scheduled in the morning. A total of 24 parents participated in the focus groups.

Parent Survey for all parents of children receiving special education services will be mailed directly from the WestEd offices but they will be enclosed in a Cambridge Public Schools envelope for easy identification. Mailing labels and envelopes were provided to WestEd from our office to facilitate the process. Surveys will be returned directly to the WestEd offices in a self-addressed and stamped envelope included with the survey. The parent survey was developed by WestEd staff based on the feedback provided by the parents during the focus groups.

Lastly, for WestEd to be able to completely meet these goals, their staff will need to review students' records. WestEd's original intent was to review a representative sample of 10% of the student records taken from all students currently receiving special education services through the Cambridge Public Schools (approximately 110 students). Cambridge policy is to obtain parent consent prior to releasing any personally identifiable information about any student. We are going to mail requests for consent to all parents. Once we receive parent consent, we will mail a list of those students indicating their grade, school and disability category to WestEd.

Based on the parents who have given consent, WestEd will draw a purposeful sample of PK-12 students' with IEPs who are being served in the Cambridge Public Schools to include all disability groups and grade levels.

If you already received and returned your consent, you do not have to send it again. If this is the first time getting the consent and wish to participate, please return the consent to: Judy DeVincent, Special Education Office, 159 Thorndike Street, Cambridge, MA 02141 by no later than November 5th.



Office of Special Education

Please be advised that the purpose for the record reviews is not to determine compliance with the federal and state regulations but rather to determine if eligibility decisions are being made appropriately and to the degree to which IEPs are aligned with the evaluation results and the general education curriculum; as a result, only the last IEP and latest evaluations will be reviewed. A compliance review was completed in 2009 by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. You may review this report at [<http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/review/cpr/reports/2009/0049.pdf>]

Records will be reviewed at the Office of Special Education and will not be removed from the secured area. No copies of records will be made. Please be confident that students' name, personal information or any other identifiable information will not be made public at any time during the process of the Special Education Review and/or in the WestEd final report.

I hope this letter clarifies any questions you may have about the on going Special Education Program review. We are committed to work with the Cambridge Parent Advisory Council and all Cambridge parents in our ongoing effort to improve special education services for our students.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience.

Thank you.

Aida Ramos, Ed.D.
Executive Director-Office of Special Education

**IF YOU NEED THIS LTTER TO BE TRANSLATED IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE PLEASE
CONTACT THE OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AT 617-349-6500.**