

# WARWICK SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

## 2003/2004 Annual Report

The Warwick SEAC is required by State Regulation One, X, 2.0pp. 55-57 to present a report to the School Committee on an annual basis.

*PURPOSE:* This report is to show the work of the SEAC, and to advise the School Committee on special education services currently offered, unmet needs of special education students, and Warwick's compliance with State and Federal regulations.

The Warwick SEAC members have reviewed the implementation of the Special Services "Action Plan" which was derived from the recommendations of the Task Force to review the Special Services Division Management Study. This plan has been implemented under the direction of Stephen Lowery, Director of Special Services. A talented and enthusiastic group of people continues to monitor how special education services are delivered in Warwick, following a mission, toward the goal of educating all children according to their needs. The Warwick SEAC supports the District's goal to improve overall education for all students. Therefore, the Warwick SEAC supports the expansion of programs such as the fully inclusive models that will positively impact upon improving methods of education in all our elementary schools.

Our monthly meetings have been devoted to fulfill the requirements stated in our purpose, and further to promote an increase in parent participation and support. The Warwick SEAC requests the opportunity to make a presentation to the full School Committee and respond to questions at the Committee's October meeting.

We are disappointed with the continuing teacher contract issue and the union's position on trainings and other matters. While some teachers are doing what they normally do, the atmosphere at some of the schools continues to deteriorate as this drags on and there appears to be no solution on the horizon. The refusal of teachers to attend trainings over the summer, go out on field trips, be a part of PTO/PTAs, attend our meetings, and to staff the usual fall open houses that a lot of parents depend on for information and introductions is also very distressing. The trainings are necessary for teachers to learn the new paperwork and protocols required by the No Child Left Behind initiative and benefit them as well as our children. There are also some teachers that are indeed 'working to rule' and therefore not available to parents either before or after

school should the need arise. Parents of children with special needs tend to need more access to teachers than other parents and though this is not all teachers, there are enough to warrant us mentioning this.

Besides attending regular monthly meetings and reviewing implementation of the aforementioned Action Plan, the Warwick SEAC monitors all activities that impact on education, special services, and families. The Warwick SEAC conducts its business by way of subcommittees. The following have been active for the past school year:

### **Inclusion Subcommittee**

This is a major focus of the Warwick SEAC as it is our belief that all students are entitled to an education in the Least Restrictive Environment with supports and services intact, and therefore, we are dedicated to the training, education, and supports necessary for the inclusion of all children. We are hopeful that the number of elementary schools that have developed "inclusive" classrooms with appropriate supports will continue to grow beyond the present number of schools participating. The overall success of this program depends on the dedication and proper training of ALL the school personnel involved, as well as the families of the children.

The summer program at Drum Rock has just completed. We would like to continue to expand this program to include more peer models for the children that spend the summer weeks there and wish to explore options such as having more parent involvement and off site field trips. We had a meeting in the fall to brainstorm with the parties associated with the summer program. We still continue to see issues with finding appropriate 'peer' models for our children as well as funding for these non-disabled children to attend the program. Once again, this year we had a questionnaire sent out to students and teachers that participated in the ESY program and got a great response. We also had many suggestions as to how to improve the program and continue towards more inclusive practices. It would be wonderful to see this issue explored and funded in years to come as it seems absurd to continue to move towards inclusive education during the regular school year then discontinue it during the summer. We would once again like to thank the administration for its continued support and creative use of resources to allow the ESY children to participate with peers in alternative programs over the summer.

With all the good news that we have on our programs becoming more inclusive, we also have not so good news. The enhanced junior high/middle school pilot program that was running for 3 years at Gorton Junior High and was to start running at the other junior high schools has ended, due to contract issues. This program was a huge step towards the inclusion and success of special education students for the upper grades and was very well received by these students and families as it included extra time for reading and literacy that isn't possible with the 'old' 6 period schedule. The end of this program

signals a step backwards in special education and no one wants to see that. We would like to thank Mr. Ken Sheehan and others at Gorton Jr. High who had worked so hard on this model and hope to see the issues resolved in the future.

### **Liaison Subcommittee to the School Committee**

By attending School Committee meetings and informing the SEAC members of issues that impact on education in our schools, we are able to keep up to date on issues and activities in a timely manner. In this way, we can support the administration, when appropriate, or voice our concerns. In addition, the School Committee is mandated to appoint a member to attend the SEAC's regular monthly meetings. We would like to commend Mr. Robert Cushman, one of the new School Committee members, for attending several of our meetings this year. It's always beneficial to us as well as the School Committee when information can be shared. We would like to see the School Committee assign someone on a monthly, rotating basis. SEAC needs the support of the School Committee to assist us in our goals for Special Services. We also had 3 of the candidates for the School Committee-at-large primary join us at our August meeting. Hopefully, the upcoming elections and the results will infuse new energy and enthusiasm in the School Committee and its ultimate involvement with our committee.

Several of us attended the School Committee's open meeting regarding the Teacher's Union/School Committee impasse and what exactly was at issue. This meeting was well attended by union members as well as parents and administrators, but most parents would not speak up due to the volatile and disruptive nature of the union members present. We also witnessed some of the teachers' union membership disrupting a School Committee meeting and feel that this behavior is inappropriate for these professionals.

We also supported, but didn't get to speak because of the late hour, the Warwick City Council budget hearings for the School Department.

### **Speakers and Trainers**

Qualified experts are on this subcommittee to bring their expertise into our schools for training and support of our families and faculty. This year several workshops were conducted with the support of the SEAC. Our 3<sup>rd</sup> annual information night on what happens when your child with special needs <or any child for that matter> enters kindergarten had to be cancelled, due to the teachers' union position on after school participation. We had hoped to continue this as yearly event as well as expand it to the families with children entering the pre-school system, but until the contract is settled, this event is on hold.

We also had a workshop that provided information on how parents/caregivers of children with special healthcare needs can plan for a future for their children when they are no

longer around, that is, to set up a special needs trust. Financial Planner Randall Poirier spoke to several parents about this important issue.

Dr. Tom DiPaola, Director of the Rhode Island Office of Special Populations came to visit and speak in September about the new No Child Left Behind initiative.

We also had a workshop on Alternate Assessment and this year our annual IEP writing training focused on children in elementary school.

### **Public Relations Subcommittee**

Working with all the other subcommittees, it is our goal that the Warwick SEAC, and Special Services in general, are highlighted, recognized, and thought of with respect. To accomplish this, press releases, advertisements to showcase training and special events, and visibility at events in all elementary schools for questions and distribution of brochures take place. Our Home Page on the web, <http://www.warwickschools.org/SPED/SPED.htm>, notes meeting agendas, upcoming training workshops, and events.

### **Membership Subcommittee**

Recruitment of new parent and consumer members to assure a full quorum and a 51% roster representation of parents of children receiving special education is the function of this subcommittee, as mandated, for our business to go on. The SEAC brochure includes a membership application the school personnel guarantees distribution to parents as part of our outreach efforts. We've had a new parent member join us this year but we still are in need of more parents, a principal or two, teacher(s), and related services personnel representatives.

In closing, we commend Stephen Lowery for his excellent leadership and goals he has supported on the Task Force. He is committed to quality education and families appreciate his accessibility to them. Special thanks also go to Paul Vigeant, Assistant Special Education Director for attending almost all of our meetings.

Sincerely,  
Sharon Terzian, Co-Chair  
Annie Johnson, Co-Chair  
cc: Warwick School Committee  
Rhode Island Department of Education