



Newton Special Education Parent Advisory Council

June 12, 2023

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

RE: 2022-23 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 review.

Kindly,

The 2022-23 Newton SEPAC Board



End-of-Year Report
to the Newton School Committee

June 12, 2023

To: The Newton School Committee: Rajeev Parlikar (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 Kathleen Smith

From: 2022-23 Newton SEPAC Board Members: Josh Goldstein (Co-Chair), Jenny Klein-Sosa (Co-Chair), Eliza Spaulding (Co-Chair) Jessi Champion (Secretary), Suzanne Buchko (At-Large), Kim Bourdeau (At-Large), Suzanne Buchko (At-Large), Jill Canelli (At-Large), Kim Gallagher (At-Large)

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

Newton SEPAC
2022-23 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.

2022-23 Board Composition and Liaisons

The board election was held in June 2022; and additional election was held in August 2022 for unfilled positions. The SEPAC began this school year with 9 board members, and reduced to 8 after one resigned mid-year for personal reasons.

- o Co-Chair: Josh Goldstein
- o Co-Chair: Jenny Klein-Sosa
- o Co-Chair: Eliza Spaulding
- o Secretary: Jessi Champion
- o At Large: Kim Bourdeau
- o At Large: Suzanne Buchko
- o At Large: Jill Canelli
- o At Large: Kim Gallagher
- o At Large: Robin Richardson (part year)

In addition to the board, other key leadership roles supported the year's work.

- o SEPAC Liaison Coordinator: Kim Gallagher
- o SEPAC Election Coordinator: Cheryl Lavoie
- o School Committee Liaison to the SEPAC for 2022-23: Paul Levy

According to current by-laws¹, board positions are held for a period of 1 year. Nominations and elections occur in late May-early June and the next board will assume their roles in July 2023.

¹ [2017 - Newton SEPAC By-Laws](#)

All 22 Newton schools, as well as out-of-district placements, were represented by at least one SEPAC Liaison in 2022-23. 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 disabilities and their families are appropriately accommodated and included. They are also a key link in the chain of communication between families and special education staff and administration.

Preschool:

NECP Sharon Kunder & Jacquelyn Orleck

Elementary Schools:

Angier	Cara Colgate, Jill Hempen-Anthony, & Renee Krikorian
Bowen	Ellen Taverna
Burr	Eliza Spaulding
Cabot	Anna Claeys
Countryside	Jill Canelli
Franklin	Yael Mito
Horace Mann	Kim Bourdeau
Lincoln Eliot	Winko An
Mason Rice	Lindsay MacAuley
Memorial-Spaulding	Jenny Klein-Sosa & Karina Simonian
Peirce	Jessi Champion
Underwood	Stacey Hero
Ward	Tabatha Flores & Jordyne Wu
Williams	Naz Nami Yenmez & James Rosenblum
Zervas	Maureen Forry

Middle Schools:

Bigelow	Brigitte LaMarche & Rocio Calvo
Brown	Kim Gallagher
Day	Spencer Poole
Oak Hill	Hannah Schuwarz

High Schools:

Newton North	Lori Melchionno
Newton South	Kim Gallagher & Karina Simonian

Out-of-District:

Ann Rounseville

Survey and Goals for the Year

The Newton SEPAC Board began the 2022-23 school year by conducting a survey to assess community priorities and interests. The results informed the drafting of goals that the board shared with NPS Administration and in open board meetings, and to which we referred back throughout the year. Many of these goals were discrete and relatively achievable within a short time horizon, whereas others represented longer-term, systemic changes that would require strong commitments, partnerships, and stepwise objectives to achieve.

2022-23 SEPAC Board Goals for SEPAC/NPS

- Facilitate social connections for Out-of-District students and families, within local school communities and with each other (among OOD), and across the district; connecting with PTOs at the neighborhood schools to participate in events; planning cross-school playdates
- Better identify and meet the learning needs of students who don't qualify for a 504 or IEP yet whose needs aren't being met by the GenEd curriculum
- Build stronger reciprocal communication systems between the district, schools, and families, and provide additional resources/educational opportunities to parents
 - Conduct a Special Education Needs Assessment with families and students, including surveys and other touchpoints for hard-to-reach families
 - Educate staff and parents on key elements of an effective, collaborative IEP process
- Improve consistency and availability of special (also referred to as "accessible") education staff trainings, focused on key topics
 - Provide educator training on post-pandemic trauma-informed instruction/classroom management
- Recruitment and retention efforts
 - Include SEPAC representation on the search committee for the new Superintendent
 - Expand existing diversity-focused HR initiatives to include seeking candidates with disabilities and/or who are neurodivergent
- Increase focus on and transparency in program evaluation efforts
 - Conduct comprehensive evaluation of elementary and middle school special education programming and of NPS's early literacy program
 - Develop/leverage existing criteria to assess extent to which NPS is creating neurodivergent/disabled-affirming schools and learning environments
- Expand NPS's DEI focus to include making our district more affirming, inclusive and accessible for students of all brain types
 - Ongoing professional development re reframing disability: educator/administrator training; consulting opportunities for administrators and "specialists" (SLPs, OTs, IFs, psychologists, etc) with neurodivergent experts in these same fields
 - Universal design: with respect to educational curriculum and school buildings (sound-proofing/acoustics; lights; other sensory sensitivities; spaces designed with attention to different regulatory needs)
 - Implement formal curriculum for students re inclusion and emphasize informal discussion opportunities in the classroom/school community
 - Creating positive identity/community around neurodiversity and disability: Events (for students, parents, community); Student groups/mentors; Speakers; Resource sharing with parents re inclusion/neurodiversity/social model of disability

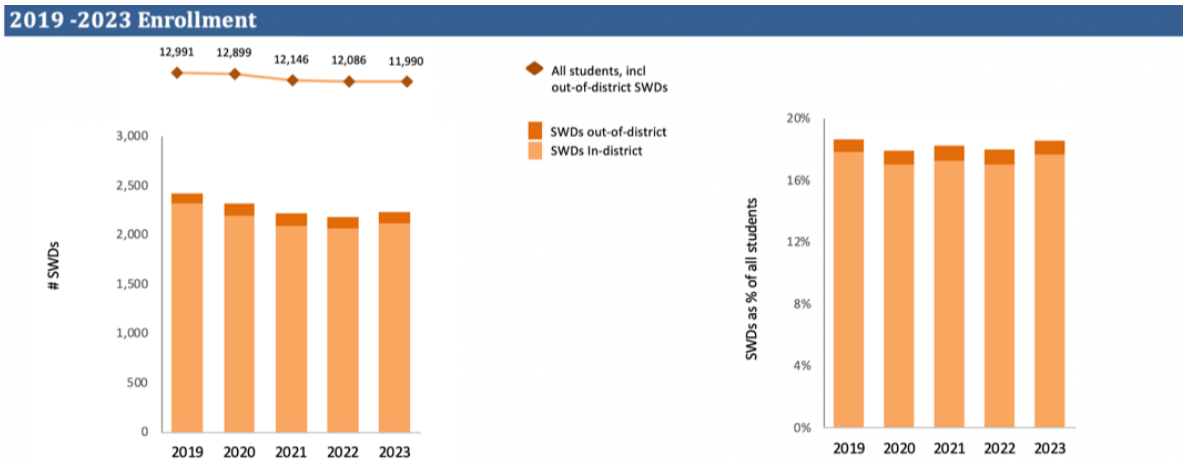
- Evaluate and improve Transition efforts
 - Training for middle and high school staff
 - Evaluate/compile resources
 - Partner with Newton Hires
 - Create Pre-Transition Mentorship Program
- Evaluate playground accessibility and support improvement projects
- Evaluate class sizes throughout the District and identify opportunities to limit class sizes, particularly for those on IEPs in inclusive classroom settings (i.e., smaller class sizes for co-taught classrooms)
- Examining benefits of co-taught classrooms for students with range of neurotypes/disability categories and, if applicable, expand access to/availability of co-taught classrooms
- Expanding ESY eligibility criteria and programming options

Data Trends – NPS’s Students with Disabilities

The data below provides a snapshot of the demographics of the disabled student population in NPS, as well as data-based examples that highlight the urgent need to address a number of gaps related to the school experiences and academic performance between students with disabilities (SWD) and their non-disabled peers.

Enrollment

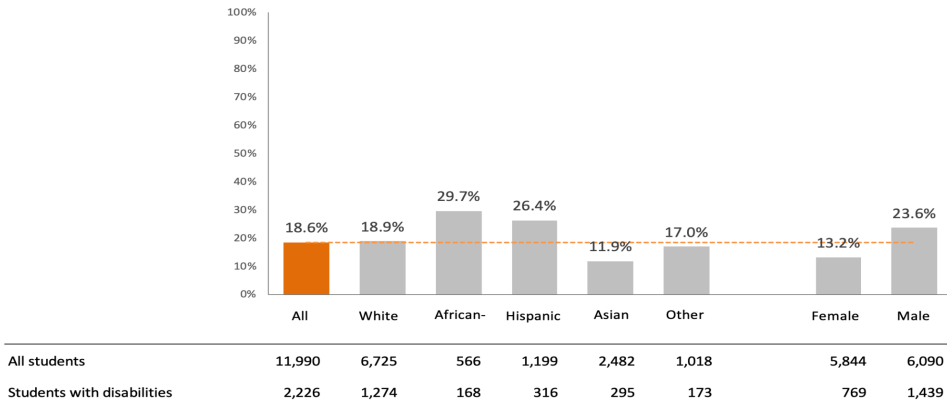
While NPS has seen a decline in all student enrollment over recent years, the percentage of students with disabilities (SWD) has remained relatively constant, at ~18%. Students with disabilities are primarily served in-district within inclusive classrooms at neighborhood schools or in district-wide programs housed at particular schools within NPS. In 2023, 4.8% of NPS’s students with disabilities were served in out-of-district placements, down from 5.2% in 2022 and 5.5% in 2021.



Across NPS, there is an overrepresentation of students with disabilities in groups identifying as African-American, Hispanic, and male; and there are lower than expected rates of disabilities reported among Asian and female students, as compared to all students (see NPS’s 2023 data, below).

2022-2023 Students With Disabilities by Race/Ethnicity Groups and Gender

Students with and without disabilities as percent of students in race/ethnicity and gender* groups



This chart shows, for example, that 30% of African-American students have an IEP, while 19% of all students have an IEP.

Social and Emotional Well-Being

Every year, students in Newton’s secondary schools are asked to complete the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). In June of 2022, results were reported by NPS to the School Committee for all subgroups except for students with disabilities. The SEPAC board made several requests for this information to be compiled and reported out for students with disabilities. In response, NPS presented 2022 YRBS results² for high school students³ with disabilities the following November. A number of alarming findings were shown, as summarized below.

In 2022, compared to non-disabled peers, NPS’s high school students with disabilities reported higher rates of mental health issues, risky and violent behaviors, substance use, and experiences of discrimination, and they reported feeling less connected in their school communities.

Specifically, students with disabilities reported that, among other things, they were more likely than non-disabled peers to:

- describe their life as somewhat or very stressful
- worry about social issues, family issues, and being bullied or harassed
- feel sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in a row in the past 12 months
- hurt themselves on purpose without wanting to die in the past 12 months
- seriously consider and/or attempt suicide in the past 12 months
- feel a lack of school connectedness across several measures (peers, adults in and out of school, safety)
- have been bullied in school
- ride in a car with a driver who had been drinking alcohol or using marijuana in the past 30 days
- drive a car when they had been drinking alcohol or using marijuana in the past 30 days
- worry about their safety when in school and not at school

² [November 2022 - NPS’s YRBS addendum for high school students with disabilities](#)

³ It should be noted that a middle school analysis was not possible because the question asking respondents to self-report disability status was not included in that administration. The SEPAC advised that this question be included in middle school YRBS administrations going forward to allow for disaggregation of results.

- skip school because they felt unsafe on their way to or from school, or at school
- experience discrimination based on gender identity and on religion
- carry a weapon on school property in the past 30 days
- participate in a physical fight on and off school property in the past 12 months
- experience unwanted sexual contact or were forced to do sexual things that they did not want to do
- been hurt physically only or hurt sexually only by someone that they were dating or going out with
- ever, and in the past 30 days, drink alcohol, use electronic vapor products, use marijuana, or smoke cigarettes

Academic Achievement

Academically, students with disabilities have consistently scored significantly lower than their peers on ELA and mathematics MCAS. Below are some notable examples, excerpted from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website⁴.

NPS's students with disabilities have consistently had, on average, the **lowest ELA and math performance of all subgroups** for at least the last 3 years.

In 2022, only 25% of SWD in grades 3-8 and 42% in grade 10 met or exceeded expectations in ELA, compared to all student rates of 65% and 80%, respectively. Similarly for mathematics, only 30% of SWD in grades 3-8 and 38% in grade 10 reached proficiency, compared to 68% and 79% of all students, respectively.

These **gaps in academic performance persist, and are not narrowed, as students with disabilities and their peers progress through NPS**. For example, in 2022, there was a 40% gap in grades 3-8 compared to a 38% gap in grade 10 ELA between students with disabilities and all students. Mathematics gaps were similar, with differentials of 38% in grades 3-8 and 41% in grade 10.

English Language Arts (ELA), Newton Public Schools

Next Generation MCAS Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by Student Group				
Student Group	2019	2021	2022	2022 # Included
All Students	73	70	65	5387
High Needs	48	47	38	1902
Low Income			33	744
EL and Former EL	58	59	47	689
Students w/ disabilities	33	32	25	1032
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.				6
Asian	79	78	75	1088
Afr. Amer. / Black	41	37	33	257
Hispanic / Latino	53	49	44	484
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Latino	77	77	70	428
White	76	72	67	3117

Next Generation MCAS Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by Student Group				
Student Group	2019	2021	2022	2022 # Included
All Students	78	86	80	937
High Needs	51	61	55	329
Low Income			58	145
EL and Former EL	46	56	56	66
Students w/ disabilities	43	53	42	195
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.				2
Asian	81	89	86	170
Afr. Amer. / Black	48	61	45	44
Hispanic / Latino	69	66	61	95
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Latino	82	88	79	58
Nat. Haw. or Pacif. Isl.				1
White	82	90	83	567

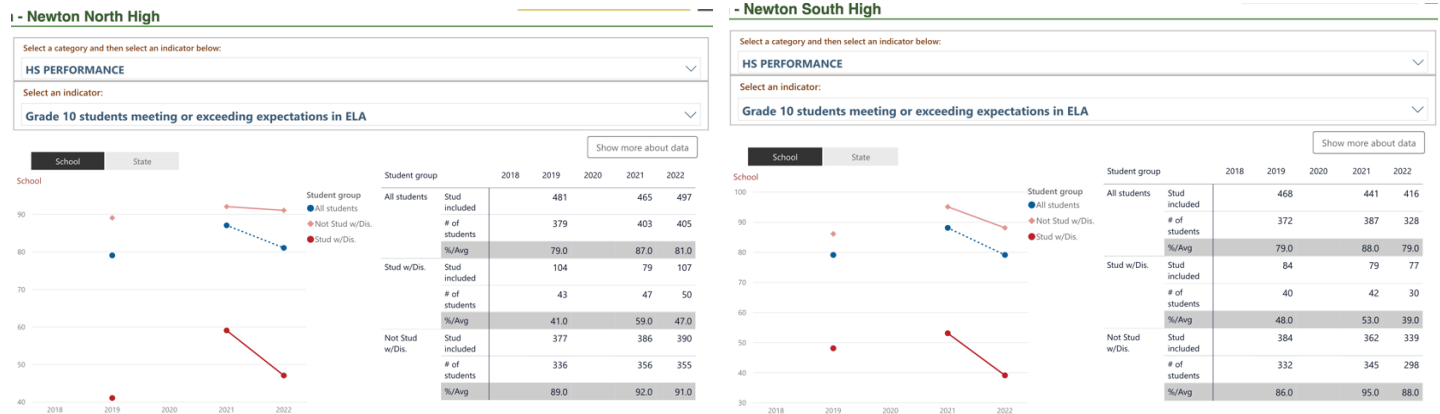
Mathematics, Newton Public Schools

Next Generation MCAS Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by Student Group				
Student Group	2019	2021	2022	2022 # Included
All Students	73	60	68	5381
High Needs	50	37	42	1898
Low Income			31	745
EL and Former EL	68	55	60	689
Students w/ disabilities	34	23	30	1027
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.				6
Asian	87	81	84	1090
Afr. Amer. / Black	32	19	26	258
Hispanic / Latino	45	31	41	485
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Latino	76	66	72	427
White	74	60	69	3108

Next Generation MCAS Percent Meeting or Exceeding Expectations by Student Group				
Student Group	2019	2021	2022	2022 # Included
All Students	84	83	79	923
High Needs	63	54	54	323
Low Income			55	139
EL and Former EL	78	62	66	65
Students w/ disabilities	50	46	38	192
Amer. Ind. or Alaska Nat.				2
Asian	92	91	92	170
Afr. Amer. / Black	56	45	42	43
Hispanic / Latino	76	60	53	92
Multi-race, Non-Hisp./Latino	83	91	81	58
Nat. Haw. or Pacif. Isl.				1
White	86	85	82	557

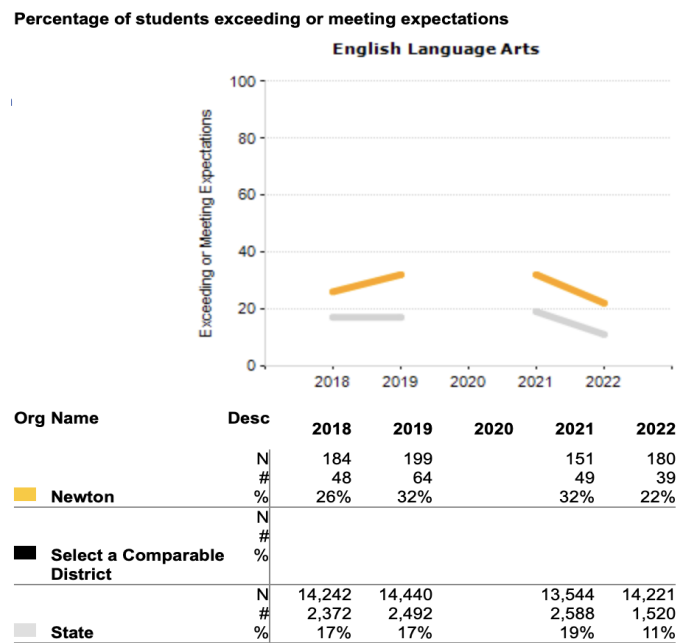
⁴ Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) provides a number of data analysis tools, allowing many ways to disaggregate and compare data. A list of useful datasets and reports, referenced in this document, can be found here: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/dese-directory-of-datasets-and-reports>

Some DESE tools give the public the ability to compare students with disabilities to their *non-disabled* peers—not just the *all students* group. Using this option, we see that Grade 10 ELA performance trends showed **even wider gaps between students with disabilities and their *non-disabled* peers** in ELA over several years, and at both high schools.

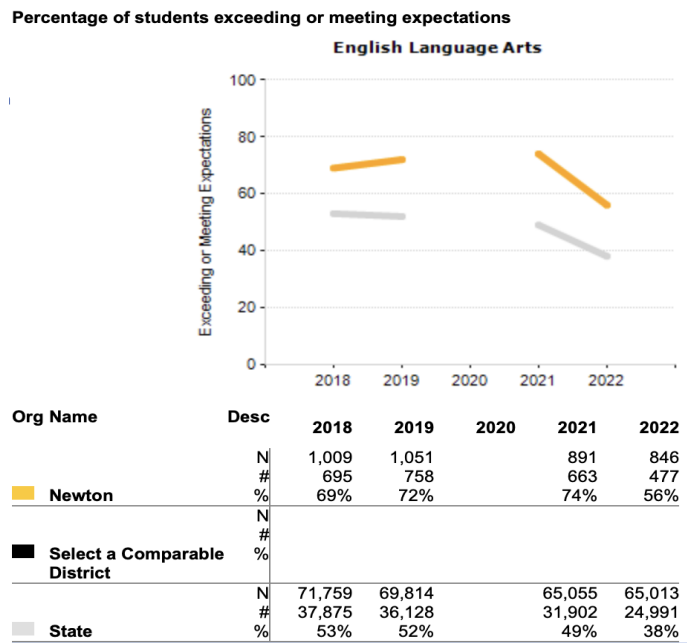


Drilling down to a key marker for early literacy development—which is foundational to academic achievement across all subjects—2022 Grade 4 ELA results showed that 56% of all students met or exceeded expectations. For students with disabilities, that number was 22%.

Students with Disabilities, Grade 4



All Students, Grade 4



This data provides a mere slice of the picture—many more examples exist. It is clear, however, that no matter what data points are examined, there is considerable evidence highlighting the need for NPS to explicitly and intentionally prioritize providing an equitable and inclusive educational environment for our students with disabilities in order for them to fully access the general education curriculum, and to lessen the stark disparities that exist between these students and their peers.

Addressing Disparities

We are deeply concerned about the significant disparities between the experience of NPS students with disabilities and those without. As a district committed to academic excellence, educational equity, and social and emotional wellbeing for all students, we have a responsibility to address these gaps in a meaningful and comprehensive way.

First, we need to commit as a district to addressing these disparities in order to fulfill NPS's fundamental mission and adhere to its core values. As part of that work, we need to acknowledge the myriad ways in which NPS, like society as a whole, is structurally ableist – in that it was constructed primarily by, and, inherently, for, the non-disabled majority – and work to become an anti-ableist and disability-affirming school district. We should make clear that inclusion is not a place, it's a mindset that requires continuous challenging and improving; that accessibility – to physical spaces and learning environments and curricula – is not an accommodation, it's a basic human right; that disabled people don't need pity or special acts of kindness, just the same respect and dignity that should be afforded to all humans. Our district-wide goals and statement of values should reflect these core principles.

Second, we should seek out, amplify, and defer to people with disabilities. They are the experts of their experiences, and in many cases, they also have professional expertise (i.e., as special education teachers and universal design consultants) that further informs their perspectives. The disability rights mantra – “Nothing about us without us” – exists for a reason: all too often, well-intentioned, non-disabled people attempt to “help” disabled people without stopping to ask them what would be helpful. NPS should seek out diverse viewpoints from within the disability community, including from those who criticize any number of widespread general and special education practices because they are not affirming, and even harmful, for students with disabilities. The disability community is not a monolith, nor, for that matter, are NPS educators and administrators, but where large segments of that community call into question practices that are common within NPS, we at least have a duty to study the concerns, reflect on our own practices, and provide information and meaningful choices to families that address those concerns.

Third, and relatedly, we need to change the way we think about disability. We invite NPS and the broader Newton community to hear from the many disabled people who consider disability to be a core aspect of their identity and as something that is value-neutral (in other words, not “good” or “bad”). That is not meant to take away from the significant impairments many disabled people experience; we should, however, examine the ways in which society, and NPS, can be *disabling*, and work to deconstruct the barriers we have unintentionally constructed.

Though people with disabilities may think, learn, communicate, move, regulate, socialize, emote, and experience their sensory environment in ways that differ from the majority, their ways of being are no less valid than their non-disabled peers. Moving around in a wheelchair is not better or worse than walking, just different, though if a building or playground is not constructed in an accessible manner, a disability can be incredibly disabling. Similarly, those who are adept at small talk and keep their bodies still while talking are not better at socializing than those who prefer blunt conversations and flap their hands, but they are disabled in a world that does not accept their ways of being.

Some ideas to consider in furtherance of these goals: (i) seeking out experts, ideally from the disability community, to provide professional development and consulting opportunities for educators and administrators; (ii) creating schools and curricula with universal design principles at the forefront, which will benefit all students

regardless of disability status; (iii) adopting curricula for students to learn about inclusion through an affirming lens; (iv) creating affinity groups for students with disabilities; and (v) recruiting and retaining those in the disabled community to work at NPS.

With overarching goals based in data, research, and community feedback and ideas for shifting the mindset around how to acknowledge and address disparities, the SEPAC engaged in many activities this school year intended to leverage the many strengths of the district and also tackle a number of challenging issues head-on. In the sections below, we outline the ways in which SEPAC reinforced and established new relationships with NPS staff, advised on many urgent and interrelated topics, and conducted our regular business of holding open board meetings, offering educational opportunities, supporting individual families through direct contacts, maintaining an active listserv, providing recognition to staff via awards, and a number of other initiatives.

Advisory Efforts

One of the SEPAC's key roles is to serve in an advisory capacity for Newton Public Schools and the School Committee, and to represent the needs of students with disabilities in collaboration with other related organizations. Below are some highlighted ways in which we fulfilled this legislative mandate.

NPS was joined in July of 2022 by a new Assistant Superintendent for Student Services, Casey Ngo-Miller, whom we were pleased to work in collaboration to begin to establish shared goals, highlight the many successes of our students with disabilities and special education staff, discuss existing and new challenges faced by our community, and continuing to engage in regular pathways of communication, such as monthly meetings and check-in emails.

At the end of 2021-22, NPS's former Superintendent of schools announced his departure. In the fall of 2022-23, the School Committee contracted with an external consultant group to facilitate a hiring search for a replacement, who would begin July 1, 2023. The School Committee set out to create a Search Committee, and implemented a process by which any individual Newton resident could submit their name for consideration of serving as a Search Committee member. One SEPAC board member, Jessi Champion, was selected and served in this role. The Search Committee was tasked with developing an overview of characteristics desired in a candidate, reviewing application submissions, and conducting a closed interview process, which would yield a slate of final candidates for consideration by the School Committee. At every point during this process, the Newton SEPAC board advocated around the need for targeted and accessible outreach directly to families within NPS's special education community to understand their perspectives and priorities, and we relayed information regarding surveys and focus group opportunities via our listserv. Our board members participated in focus groups sessions and, once final candidates were announced, contacted SEPACs from each individual's current district to gather information. The Search Committee put forth their recommendations for two final round candidates, and the School Committee was unanimous in their endorsement of Dr. Anna Nolin for the position. The Newton SEPAC is pleased with the selection of Dr. Nolin to be NPS's new superintendent, and we look forward to working with her in partnership going forward.

Early in this school year, NPS's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) office also engaged in a hiring search to fill their Assistant Director of DEI position, previously left vacant during the last school year. Consistent with prior internal administrator searches, SEPAC was invited to participate in this process. Eliza Spaulding served as a committee member. We are pleased that the role was filled by Naomi Joseph, and we look forward to working with her in partnership going forward.

In returning to previous concerns shared by the SEPAC community around program effectiveness, SEPAC has continued to stress the importance of ensuring program quality and comprehensiveness in discussions with NPS administration. For example, in 2020, NPS contracted with an external consultant group to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of selected secondary district-wide programming. This program evaluation yielded a report entitled: Special Education Evaluation of Secondary Programming Serving Students with Social/Emotional/Behavioral Health Needs⁵. In July 2022, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) issued its Tiered Focus Monitoring Review report of NPS⁶, which examined special education and civil rights in our school system. SEPAC has reiterated requests for administration to follow-up on findings from both of these evaluations, and to report out to the community on progress made toward recommendation from each. We will continue these efforts.

In September of 2022, Mayor Fuller announced the allocation of “\$2 million towards new reading curriculum materials for students and teachers, Kindergarten-5th Grade in all 15 elementary schools.” The following month, NPS administrators presented to the School Committee, outlining limited information regarding an internal curriculum review process that had yielded the selection of Fountas & Pinnell Classroom as our district’s choice. The SEPAC board spoke in public comment at that meeting in strong opposition to this recommendation. Below is an excerpt from October 5, 2023, which represents concerns shared at that time:

“Parents have asked about the methods used by the NPS internal working group to evaluate and compare curriculum options. Many have expressed concerns about the potential selection of a curriculum that is not endorsed by DESE, specifically Fountas & Pinnell. Concerns about F&P have included that it is not evidence-based, does not follow the science of reading, lacks aspects of cultural sensitivity, and does not ensure equity for our most vulnerable students, especially those with learning disabilities. In addition, parents have shared concerns that NPS’s dyslexia screening protocols may under-identify dyslexia in early elementary, resulting in students falling behind or being identified later on in upper grades (if at all), after missing out on vital resources and targeted instruction during their neurological critical period. This past May, the Newton SEPAC recommended to the Mayor that ARPA funds be allocated to hire external consultants to evaluate NPS’s elementary literacy program, and to fund implementing a research-based literacy curriculum. Tonight, we reiterate this request.

We will hear that F&P was the working group’s original recommendation, and the reasoning behind that. We hope to also hear how NPS intends to address the concerns raised about F&P, and how they will evaluate the efficacy of the planned 7-classroom pilot. As the process of updating the curriculum unfolds, the Newton SEPAC strongly encourages NPS to engage directly with concerned parents by actively seeking feedback, *while* changes are being considered and *before* those changes are implemented. We strongly encourage NPS to listen carefully to the issues being voiced and consider the experiences of all students, from kids in general ed receiving grade-level reading instruction to learners being screened for dyslexia and needing support services. Decision-making should be based in research, expert opinion, and staff expertise, and decisions should also place value upon family feedback. We encourage NPS to consult experts in the field of literacy instruction both inside and outside of NPS, and to keep the public informed along the way.”

Shortly after this meeting, SEPAC board members began reaching out to other NPS parent groups, including school PTOs, PTOC, ELPAC, and FORJ, to alert them of issues related to the general education literacy curriculum in our district, which affect all students in elementary and beyond—not only students with

⁵ [2020 - Special Education Evaluation of Secondary Programming Serving Students with Social/Emotional/Behavioral Health Needs](#)

⁶ [2022 - DESE’s Tiered Focus Monitoring Report for Newton Public Schools](#)

disabilities. Members of the SEPAC board, alongside many parents of students in general education from across the district, and peer parent group leaders, organized efforts to come together regularly to share information with families about NPS's evolving plan for making changes to the elementary literacy curriculum. This group, later independently called the Newton Literacy Collaborative, advocated to NPS administrators and to the School Committee to ensure that whatever process NPS engages in to determine next steps for curriculum changes, it would be evidence-based and grounded in peer-reviewed research, incorporate a range of representation within NPS staff (from both general and special education) in gathering of feedback and in decision-making, leverage DESE's Mass Literacy⁷ resources and guidance, and seek feedback from families and the greater community along the way. By March of 2023, NPS started additional pilot tests of three literacy curricula that are on the DESE-approved list: Wit & Wisdom, EL Education, and Core Knowledge Language Acquisition (CKLA). These are ongoing, as is the original Fountas & Pinnell pilot, which was begun this past fall.

SEPAC leaders continue to advocate for NPS to engage in a transparent, inclusive, and comprehensive process for determining next steps for our early literacy curriculum. In addition, the SEPAC board has kept a close eye on NPS's plans for implementing Massachusetts' dyslexia screening mandate, which was passed in September of 2022 and is required statewide by July of 2023. This legislation states that Massachusetts school districts must screen students' individual reading ability and literacy skills at least twice a year in an effort to identify learning disabilities earlier. SEPAC has encouraged NPS to fully implement dyslexia screening protocols as soon as possible, given many community concerns shared over the last year about students in need of support being identified too late, sometimes after reaching middle or high school, and other times identified only after special education eligibility evaluations. NPS expanded their slate of assessment tools and began some implementation this year, but there is work yet to be done to ensure that families are informed of early screener results and support plans in an accessible and timely manner.

In spring 2023, after a failed override vote that would have generated additional funding for NPS, district leadership announced a significant budget shortfall for the upcoming 2023-24 school year (FY24). The Newton SEPAC board shared concerns about anticipated implications on NPS special education servicing and programs with School Committee members, NPS staff, and the SEPAC community. SEPAC spoke in public comment and directly with School Committee members regarding potential impacts of budgetary reductions on special education in Newton. Below is an excerpt from a public comment delivered on April 12, 2023, which represents concerns shared at that time:

"We ask you [Mayor Fuller] and the School Committee to carefully consider all possible ideas for accessing funds, like those in tonight's memo, to make our children whole in the short term, while you work on longer-term solutions to structural deficits. If you make the intentional choice not to provide vital funding, the impacts on our students will be felt immediately, and the long-term effects will be grave.

Please think about our students with disabilities specifically. We know that larger class sizes will hurt every student, but they will disproportionately impact kids from marginalized groups, especially disabled learners. If you reduce Kindergarten aides and ELL supports, more referrals for special ed evals will follow, even beyond this year's spike.

⁷ [DESE's Mass Literacy initiative](#) is a "statewide effort to empower educators with the evidence-based practices for literacy that all students need."

If you cut special ed teachers and aides – those who make classrooms and curricula inclusive and accessible for students with disabilities – gaps between these students and their peers will widen. And if you allow sharp increases in caseloads for the remaining special ed staff, the quality, comprehensiveness, and individualized focus of services for students will suffer, and educators will burn out fast. Down the road, these cuts risk a rise in legal disputes and out of district placements, which are costly.”

In addition to broad staffing cuts, the proposed FY24 budget also showed a complete removal of the line item supporting the Understanding Our Differences program, a disability and inclusion education program with a 45-year history of partnership with NPS. Earlier in this school year, the SEPAC received some critical feedback regarding the UOD program from a subset of caregivers and staff, and at that time and for many months later, an overwhelming number of SEPAC community members gave voice to strong and widespread support for UOD. The SEPAC communicated all feedback to NPS administration, as per our role in representing our community as a whole. After the UOD cut was announced, the SEPAC board advised NPS to reinstate funding for disability acceptance and inclusion education programming, re-naming the line item using language that we believed clearly encompassed UOD, but did not explicitly reference UOD. This created the impression among some in the SEPAC community that the board advocated to cut UOD, which we did not. Notwithstanding, many SEPAC community members did not feel heard or well represented by the SEPAC board in this process, and we take responsibility for that. At this stage, we remain concerned that NPS has not explained their process that led to cutting disability education funding, and UOD specifically, and we continue to encourage transparency from NPS leaders. In our most recent meeting with administration, SEPAC board members specifically conveyed (i) the continued disappointment that \$64K was initially cut completely (without explanation from NPS) and then only restored at half of previous funding; (ii) the continued overwhelming community support for utilizing the \$32K for UOD programming (to the extent NPS has concerns, they can work with UOD during this time to make changes); and (iii) that SEPAC plans to organize a community meeting with Anna Nolin so that members of the community can share their perspectives about UOD and broader inclusion efforts or lack thereof.

In addition to budget advocacy efforts, SEPAC has also focused on other topics of community concern, such as unexpected changes to Extended School Year (ESY) recommendations families experienced, which caused concerns that NPS had changed its process or criteria for determining ESY eligibility, and challenges families were experiencing around connecting soon-to-be NPS graduates with educational and community services to support themselves and their families before, during, and after the Transition beyond K-12.

SEPAC has also engaged in consistent check-ins with NPS administration around planning for the new IEP⁸, which was released by DESE this year and must be fully implemented statewide no later than school year 2024-25. We have encouraged NPS leaders to develop a thoughtful and comprehensive roll-out plan and to begin staff training and use of the new protocols as soon as possible, ideally within this current school year. SEPAC has additionally offered our assistance in conveying information to parents and families to help facilitate a common understanding of the changes ahead.

⁸ [DESE's IEP Improvement Project - Forms and Resources](#)

Board Meetings

Board meetings were held monthly beginning in July 2022, with a total of 12 meetings throughout the year. They were held via Zoom on weeknight evenings. Board meetings were an opportunity to plan and discuss presentations, discuss community concerns, and disseminate information from NPS and other important resources. There were many constructive discussions on timely topics and the meetings offered a venue to gather feedback from the community.

In addition, Board representatives met with NPS Student Services leadership monthly throughout the school year. Meetings primarily took place in-person, some were virtual. These were attended by the SEPAC Co-Chairs and a rotating SEPAC Board member. NPS was represented by Casey Ngo-Miller (Assistant Superintendent for Student Services), Maura Tynes (Director of Elementary Special Education), and Melissa Gamble (Director of Secondary Special Education and Special Services). During these meetings we discussed community concerns, advised on projects (e.g., budget advocacy), and discussed upcoming events that could be advertised and attended by all parties.

Presentations

The Newton SEPAC organized and hosted a number of presentations during the 2022-23 school year. Those presentations included:

- “Disrupting Implicit Bias.” The SEPAC organized and co-hosted an event with the Newton PTOC, FORJ, and ELPAC with Dr. Tessa Charlesworth, a researcher at Harvard who studies how and why beliefs and attitudes about different social groups can change. Her presentation provided an overview of bias in society with respect to various social groups and explored what research tells us are the best interventions to shift the biases of a society, organization, and individual. Among other things, Dr. Charlesworth discussed research demonstrating that (i) though a number of interventions can decrease implicit bias at the time they are given, they do not produce long-term shifts (i.e., study participants were just as biased 24-hours after the intervention as they had been when the intervention was initially given); and (ii) to produce lasting decreases in implicit biases, systemic change is required. Dr. Charlesworth also discussed research based on millions of responses to the Implicit Association Test over time, which shows, among other things, a significant drop in implicit bias based on sexual orientation and a minor decrease in implicit bias based on race but essentially no change in implicit bias based on disability. A recording of the presentation is available [here](#) and the corresponding PowerPoint presentation is available [here](#).
- Georgetown professor and disabilities studies scholar Jennifer Natalya Fink, author of *All Our Families: Disability Lineage and the Future of Kinship*, who discussed her book and work and took questions from the community. In *All Our Families*, and in Professor Fink’s presentation, she examined why disability is often described as “a tragedy, a crisis, or an aberration” rather than an ordinary -- at least 1 in 5 people have a disability -- and necessary feature of a healthy, vibrant society. *All Our Families* explores the roots of ableism ingrained in society, including efforts to eradicate disability and systemic inequities at the heart of our care economy, and advocates for “a reclamation of disability as a history, a culture, and an identity.” *All Our Families* urges all of us to embrace our disability lineage and build more genuinely inclusive communities in the process.
- Beth Ross and Myrto Flessas, mediators with the Massachusetts Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA), gave a presentation on the mediation and facilitated IEP meeting processes and the potential benefits to families and schools of engaging in those processes.

- The Federation for Children with Special Needs gave their annual presentation helping families understand their rights related to special education to the SEPAC. This year's topic was "Evaluation and Eligibility" and covered the IDEA and Massachusetts law, evaluations and referrals, team meetings, IEPs and 504 Plans, what constitutes effective progress, and transition, among other topics.
- Mark Kelly and Karen Peirce from the Newton Parks and Recreation Department and the director and assistant director, respectively, of Athletes Unlimited and Camp Echo Bridge, gave a presentation on the history and success of those programs and on how families can continue supporting them. (Thanks to SEPAC Member Urmila Parlikar for organizing the presentation!)
- "Building Friendships at School between Students with and without Disabilities." Rachel Hayward and self-advocate Jonathan Spiller gave a presentation on tips for schools and families on fostering meaningful, authentic, reciprocal friendships between students with and without disabilities.

Other Family Engagement

This year, SEPAC continued efforts to keep our community connected with one another, by maintaining a google listserv, facebook group, and website to communicate and provide information for members. We also hosted a playground social gathering, and a community discussion to provide a space for SEPAC members to discuss how we can be an effective community of advocates.

The special family support group called the Transition Working Group, created in 2021-22, was maintained this past year. 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 other related topics. In addition, the SEPAC compiled and shared resources with families related to IEPs and Transition beyond K-12, including general timelines and checklists to assist in preparing students and families for life after high school.

Also, SEPAC representatives assisted with the first ever Disability Awareness Day at Newton South High School, which was successful and well-attended. We have offered our support to NPS administration for next year to expand participation at Newton South and to hold the same session at Newton North.

SEPAC annually collects nominations for the SEPAC Special Educator Awards. This year, there were 238 nominations for 199 individuals, covering 23 schools and programs. Nominees receive emails with nomination statements, award certificates delivered to their school, and a presentation of deidentified nominations from across the district.

Collaboration and Partnership Goals

Moving forward, SEPAC will seek to strengthen and broaden relationships between students, families, the City, the school district, the School Committee, and the broader Newton community.

Caregiver-based community groups such as FORJ (Families Organizing for Racial Justice), ELPAC (English Learners Parent Advisory Council), PTOC (Council for Parent Teacher Organizations), METCO (Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity), 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 this year we have worked in concert toward achieving them by having SEPAC board representation at other groups' meetings, discussing and encouraging community action around budget cuts, and sharing educational information via co-coordinated presentations and meetings. In 2023-24, we hope to work more closely with Newton's Commission on Disability, as well.

School Committee representatives who attend our gatherings are instrumental in conveying information both from and to the SEPAC. As put forward two years ago, we again reaffirm our request to have all members of the School Committee rotate through attending SEPAC Open Board meetings, with the hopes that the School Committee members will expand upon their understanding of SEPAC families and hear their concerns directly.

The SEPAC hopes to not only strengthen existing relationships with NPS administrators, but also to build new ones with incoming leaders, especially the new superintendent, Dr. Anna Nolin. 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 where all students feel that they belong, especially those who are members of one or more marginalized groups. We have begun to engage in preliminary conversations with DEI leadership about ways in which NPS can create an anti-ableist and disability-affirming school environment, but the work here has yet to move forward. We support the commitments that NPS's DEI office has made to specific groups of students--those who are racially diverse and gender expansive, and we strongly encourage that the same intentional focus be placed upon students with disabilities as part of its "DEI Advisory"⁹ which currently reads as follows:

"Last school year (2021-22), the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Advisory was formed with the purpose of addressing NPS DEI issues and topics. In the spring of this year, the committee was relaunched with the focus on gender-affirming practices. Staff and administrators from across the district began developing a statement of values and commitment to gender identity and began developing a field trip considerations resource."

Next, we recommend follow-up on the Tiered Focus Monitoring review report from DESE that was conducted in 2022. 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*

⁹ Excerpt from NPS's [DEI Year-in-Review](#), presented on May 22, 2023 to the School Committee.

Needs. The SEPAC hopes to continue to collaborate and advise on program development and resource allocation related to student needs.

In May of 2023, the Newton SEPAC board requested to the School Committee that 2023 YRBS results be presented before the end of this school year, to keep consistent with precedent in ensuring that results are aligned with the same year of survey administration. However, we were informed that results would not be released until next school year due to already full agendas for remaining School Committee meetings. We recommend that results be presented as soon as possible in the next school year.

Gratitude

We appreciate the opportunity to share our work 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 199 recipients of the 2022-23 Special Educator Awards:

Marcela Ahlberg	Rachel Blacker	Bea Crocker	Emma Fogg
Monique Airasian	Sarah Blanusa	Melina Crovo	Megan Foley
Lori Ann Akdag	Melanie Brawley	Meredith Crowe	Beth Friedman
Joshua Amabile	Brittany Broderick	John Curley	Jon Galloni
Allyson Andrews	Karisa Browne	Ted Dalicandro	Elizabeth Gerritsen
Shayna Arasimowicz	Alison Cabrera	Cortnie Daly	Shelby Gitlin
Lauren Atkinson	Joe Cahill	Lucas Daniels	Jenna Goldstein
Katie Augusta	Michelle Callaghan	Iphigenie Danjour	Julia Goodrich
Marc Banks	Alyssa Cantwell	Mary Daskalakis	Bridget Grant
Emily Bard	Lisa Capoccia	Katie Deehan	Joseph Guarino
Meda Barnes	Crista Cavicchio	Meaghan Dumas	Alissa Gutowski
Joe Barrett	Melanie Chan	Courtney Dunne	Helen Guzzi
Stephanie Baumann	Melissa Chatfield	Nicki Eastburn	Svea Hall
Courtney Beckerman	Meefong Chen	Jaclyn Ehrhardt	Chris Hardiman
Danica Beckford	Claire Clerc	Michelle Ellis	Allison Hitchings
Linda Belamarich	Jade Clune	Anne Fagan	Yi-Ling Hsu
Nina Bennes	Sherri Cohen	Julie Ferland	Allison Hutchinson
Maureen Berardi	Katherine Cooney	Carolyn Fertig	Caitlin Irwin
Alexis Bianchi	Anna Cox	Robin Fisher	

Caitlin Irwin and All Direct Instruction Program Teachers	Caitlin McCormick	Sean Paige	Kathleen Solage
Stephen Jamele	Chance McDaniels	Leigh Pairs	Kristyn Stem
Paul Janiszewski	Cindy McGaffigan	Spencer Palmgren	Holly St Peter
Emily Keeman	Sara McKechnie	Corey Percival	Jessica StVil
Toni-Marie Kelly	Alexandra McManama	Kathleen (Katie) Perry	Sarah Style
Deborah Knisell	Scott McManus	Darlene Pezanetti	Paul Sullivan
Maria Kolbe	Kaitlin McQueen	Mark Pisaturo	Andrew Swan
Kayla Kornreich	Sara McSwiggan	Kristin Podufaly	Dina Tedford
Alex Kraus	Jennifer Mead	Diksha Pokharel	Sam Terwilliger
Lija Kurens	Jennifer Mega	Megan Power	Donna Thayer
Christine LaFleur	Krystal Mendes-Dejano	Jamie Purchia	Sarah Thorne
Colette Legendre	Lucy Methven	Cedric Quackenbush	Katherine Thornton
Valerie Brunache Lewis	Grace Migliozi	Michelle Race	Henry Toulmin
Rowena Li	Olivia Cohen Milligan	Fran Rametta	Jessica Treadwell
Seton Lindsay	David Moller	Taylor Reed	David Tynes
Jennifer Lindstrom	Steven Moreno	Lauren Roberts	Ellen Vogler
Pek-hu Liu	Katherine (Katie) Morris	Evan Roche	Erin Volante
Raul Lopez	Alison Mountford	Brian Rooney	Kara Wade
Alona Luecke	Abbie Mugo	Robin Rosenthal	Amanda Watkins
Daniela MacKinnon	Gabrielle Mulrean	Sarah Rosenthal	Chesley Wendth
Kara MacNeill	Lauren Muntendam	Lauren Rozenvayn	David Weintraub
Margaret Maher	Kara Murphy	Angelina Rubino	Isaiah Davidson Weiss
Lindsey Mallette	Rachel Nacht	Breeda Ryan	Matthew Westenberg
Kyle Maloney	Mark Nardelli	Karen Sandison	Mary Theresa Whalen
Rosemary Mariano	Bridget Nicholson	Paige Schale	Keith Whelan
Isamar Martinez	Rocco Novello	Sue Schy	Miles Wilcox
Emily Massarelli	Emily O'Brien	JJ Shannon	Heather Wood
Monica Massucco	Dalva O'Connell	Michal Shapiro	David Wright
Alethia Matthews	Anna Olore	Roberta Sherman	Derek Yerardi
Kim Mayer	Abigail Opar	Dana Shulsinger	Selena Youngstrom
Jessica Maynard	David Padgett	Sammy Silver	Andrew Ziomek

