

# **EDUCATION TASK FORCE REPORT**



**As presented to the Melrose Public Schools on**

**November 13, 2007**

# EDUCATION TASK FORCE REPORT

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1 - 2
Inclusion: A Long-Term Vision.....	3 - 4
Proposed Goals and Objectives	
• Communication and Technology.....	5 - 8
• Programming.....	9 - 11
• Staffing.....	12
• Professional Development and Training.....	13 - 14
• Transitions .....	15 - 17

## **APPENDIX**

Methodology for Development of Education Task Force Report .....	18 - 21
Acknowledgements.....	22

## **Introduction**

November, 2007

Dear Melrose Community:

In 1975, when the U.S. Congress enacted what is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a revolutionary concept was made the law of the land: children with disabilities were entitled to a free and appropriate public education, just like any other child. In the years since, there has been an amazing evolution that has demonstrated that not only can children with significant disabilities learn, but they can learn side-by-side with other students in the public schools. National data clearly demonstrate major increases in the number of public school children with significant disabilities who no longer receive their education separate from the general student body. Qualitative and quantitative data have also clearly demonstrated the benefits of for all learners. However, this movement towards enhanced inclusion has not been without its challenges and concerns.

The Melrose Public Schools reflect the national trends. Melrose has undertaken a variety of efforts towards improving the level of inclusion over the last several years. There have been periods of significant progress, as well as times where progress on inclusion has been stagnant. Today in Melrose, there is renewed energy and attention towards the issue of inclusion, and growing capacity to consistently meet the needs of all learners. At the same time, significant challenges still exist.

In June of 2005, the Melrose School Committee (“School Committee”) endorsed the formation of an Education Task Force (“ETF”, “Task Force”) to draft a multi-year plan for improving services for all children and creating an environment where all children participate fully in the life of the school. For close to two years, this group, consisting of a cross-section of teachers, administrators, parents, school committee members, and experts in the field, met to develop a long-term vision for the Melrose Public Schools, and offer specific strategies for enhanced inclusion. The end result of these efforts is the attached report.

While much of the discussion regarding inclusion focuses on students with disabilities, to be successful a vision for enhanced inclusion must also be about meeting the diversified learning needs of all students. As a reflection of this broad vision of inclusion, the Task Force came to consensus on the following definition:

*Melrose values each and every one of its children and the Melrose Public Schools will provide the best education possible to every single child. All children will learn in an atmosphere that supports the individual strengths of each child, and where all children participate fully in the life of the school.*

The attached report lays out specific principles, objectives, and concrete measurable action steps for building a truly inclusive community in our schools. The recent changes in school administration, including a new Superintendent and a new Director of Parent Pupil Services\*, provide excellent opportunities for embracing this vision, and we hope

this report can serve as a guide and “to do” list for Melrose Public Schools in making this vision a reality.

When planning documents such as this are released, there are often concerns about the availability of resources to implement such a plan. We want to emphasize that lack of resources is not the primary issue or barrier in making this plan a reality. Many of the action items in this plan can be accomplished within the parameters of existing resources, and simply require enhancements and changes in current practices. At the same time, some of what we have proposed will require additional resources. While the Task Force recognizes the ongoing fiscal challenges faced by public schools, we hope that the long-term vision, and the steps and supports needed to realize that vision for inclusion, will be a priority when budgetary decisions are made over the next few years.

Completion of this report is not the end of a process but only the beginning. We are committed to monitoring the progress of this report’s implementation quarterly in conjunction with the School Committee and Administration. We would like to express our sincere appreciation to everyone who provided input and assistance in the development of this report. The information and feedback we received over the past two years was invaluable, and very much added to the richness of this document.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our work and findings, and we look forward to working together with the community to ensure the finest quality education for all our children.

Sincerely,

Members of the Education Task Force

**\*At the time of the compilation of this report the task force was advised that the Administration will be changing the name of Parent Pupil Services to Pupil Personnel Services (“PPS”).**

## **Inclusion: A Long-Term Vision**

We believe the following principles and strategies will form the basis for the Melrose Public Schools to provide an educational experience of consistent quality that supports the strengths of each child and where all children participate fully in the life of the school.

**Enhancing inclusion requires a long-term ongoing commitment** – The ultimate intent of this report is to ensure that inclusion is one of the core principles around which the school district is organized and education is delivered. This requires a commitment to a long-term, ongoing effort. Inclusion should be part of the fundamental educational beliefs of the district.

**Need to build capacity** – Realizing the vision for inclusion requires capacity building at multiple levels throughout the district. Within this report there is a comprehensive set of recommendations, action steps and strategies that will enable that capacity to be built. Some of these action steps and strategies are already in process; others can be implemented fairly quickly, while still others will take time and investment.

**Current strengths as building blocks** – The Melrose Public Schools have many strengths and inclusion for every child will be accomplished through respect for those strengths, and continuing to maximize what the schools do well.

**Inclusion is never completed** - Inclusion is not a project that Melrose will some day complete. It is an ongoing process that continues to evolve over time.

**Inclusion does not occur separately** - Inclusion is not something that happens separately from all other elements of education planning and delivery. It must be embedded within all aspects of the education process and culture. Our vision is that there is no such thing as an “inclusion” classroom, but that inclusion occurs in every classroom and educational setting throughout the district.

**Inclusion is about students of all abilities** – While much of the content of this plan focuses on students with disabilities, inclusion is truly about ensuring that education is delivered in a way which respects and accounts for the needs of all learners, while minimizing the need for grouping and separation of students by learning abilities.

**Respect for each child as a learner** – Respect for all learning styles and abilities is necessary to develop an educational system where children learn together in an atmosphere that supports the individual strengths of each child, and where all children fully participate in the life of the school.

**Different needs at different levels** – A core principle of inclusion in the Melrose Public Schools is a recognition that the needs of children evolve as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and that the strategies used to meet the needs of all learners need to evolve as well.

**Transitions** – A critical component of an inclusive educational system is ensuring that students are successfully transitioned from year-to-year, and that as students move

through the system, a comprehensive, collaborative, and timely transition process occurs. This includes planning for and having high expectations for post-school outcomes for all students in both higher education and employment.

**Leadership** – Support for inclusion must come from all levels. Critical to this effort is support of administrators who need to be clear about the vision for the system as one that embraces inclusion, while taking concrete steps to ensure the necessary supports and resources are in place to support this vision.

**Role of principals** - As the leader and manager of each school, it is critical that each principal in the district understands and be supportive of the vision of inclusion for the Melrose Public Schools, and manages the school in a way that supports this vision. This includes creating a culture of inclusion in the day-to-management of the school, and supporting staff in their efforts to enhance inclusion.

**Adequate and appropriate staffing** –A fundamental key to inclusion is adequate and appropriate staffing. Research has clearly shown that appropriate class size is critical to successful inclusion practices. The Melrose Public Schools will design staff roles to ensure that staff is deployed in a way that is supportive of the vision for inclusion, and ensure that all staff are properly trained and qualified for their roles.

**Respect for all educators** – The Melrose Public Schools are characterized by dedicated staff committed to ensuring that all students receive the best possible education. The role that each and every educator plays is respected, and this respect is inclusive of all general and special educators and professional staff at all levels regarding the positive impact they have on student lives.

**Reduction of out-of-district placements** – The Melrose Public Schools recognizes that educating all public schools students within the community is the preferred option. Reducing the number of out-of-district placements is a key measure regarding the success of inclusion efforts. Efforts in this regard focus on providing appropriate accommodations and services, and anticipating the needs of the students that will be entering the schools and advancing to each grade.

**Community support** – The vision for the Melrose Public Schools outlined in this report cannot be realized without the support of the community. Key to the success of this effort is building that community support through: regular communication in a variety of venues and forums; a consistent message regarding the long-term vision for the Melrose Public Schools from all staff, administrators, and school committee members; and an active dialogue with the community.

## **Proposed Goals, Objectives and Action Steps**

The following sections outline steps the Melrose Public Schools can take to foster inclusion throughout the district. These action steps have been divided into the following areas:

- a) Communication and Technology,
- b) Programming,
- c) Staffing,
- d) Professional Development and Training, and
- e) Transitions.

While some of these steps will require additional resources, many of them can be implemented at little cost. Regardless of financial cost, however, the success of this effort requires an abiding real commitment by the Melrose Public Schools administration, faculty, staff, School Committee, parents, and community as a whole. Perhaps most critical to the goal of developing a culture of inclusiveness in Melrose is an openness to new ideas, to different ways of doing business, and to remaining true to the vision of enhanced inclusion and educational excellence for all.

---

### **Communication and Technology**

Good communication requires three things: a sound message, timeliness, and an appropriate medium.

The Melrose school district needs to make sure that the contents of its messages to parents, students, teachers and other are accurate, informed and consistent. During the course of the Education Task Force's information gathering, parents and educators both commented on the need to improve the quality of messages about specific students' needs, as well as more general information about resources available to support teachers and families. In addition, the Task Force found that the message of inclusion from the administration and schools to the community must be deliberate, clear and consistent. This can be accomplished through effective collaboration among administrators and educators to refine and broadcast the benefits of inclusion for all students.

Timeliness of response to concerns was also consistently expressed as an issue. Under the new administration, significant improvements have occurred in this regard. At the same time, Melrose Public Schools needs to continue to strive to ensure that responsiveness to parental questions and concerns and internal staff-to-staff communication are consistent and timely.

The quality and timeliness of communication are related to the medium used. For Melrose, one key to improving communication is to improve the use of technology in communications, and use the Internet and e-mail in a way consistent with a modern organization.

The Task Force also found significant concerns in terms of the use of technology for learning. Because technology is a critical component of today's educational environment, there is a need to ensure adequate technology and appropriate training throughout the district. Regarding technology for learning, the Task Force found there was: a) an insufficient technology available to support the full range of learning styles and abilities; b) technology that is not always reliable and tested; and c) technology that is not always easily accessible within schools.

The Task Force proposes the following steps as a comprehensive approach to these communication and technology challenges.

- 1. Establish and publicize service levels for communication with parents.** Establish a mechanism for tracking response times to parents requesting information about their children, about policy, or about particular events or incidents. The Task Force recommends that the administration establish a policy of responding to every phone, e-mail, or regular mail request for information from parents to administrators or teachers within one business day. A response is not necessarily a solution to a problem, but is instead an *acknowledgement* that the message was received with a tentative outline for how it will be handled.
- 2. Establish a plan for communicating with PPS.** Families often express frustration and confusion regarding communication with PPS. To address this issue, in conjunction with the general establishment of service levels for communication, specific parameters and procedures should be established regarding communication with PPS, with these parameters and procedures disseminated widely, including through the district's website and other means.
- 3. Provide service provider information for parents in September.** Melrose utilizes a number of external service providers to meet the needs of special needs students. The district needs to ensure that parents know who the various service providers for their children are as soon as the school year starts.
- 4. Establish resource libraries and catalogs for teachers and parents, and adequate support so that the resources are easily accessed.** The parents of Melrose entrust the district to teach their children to value and use libraries and the resources they contain to better understand the world they live in. In turn, the district should make resources available to teachers and parents so that they may better understand the educational environment in which their children live.

It is recommended that these resource libraries include the following components:

- A collection of materials for educators, for working with diverse learners, which is updated and expanded on a regular basis. Materials would be available through a physical central materials library as well as an on-line library. (An example of such a library is on the Arlington Public Schools website:  
<http://www.arlington.k12.ma.us/departments/technology/assistive>)

- An on-line resource center for educators, which includes resources available within Melrose Public Schools and neighboring districts, as well as links to educator-oriented materials and resources.
  - A resource library specifically for parents (primarily on-line) with links to a wide range of parent-oriented materials and resources. The ability of parents to easily access information and resources is critical in their efforts to work in partnership with the schools in supporting their child.
  - Guides to help parents identify agencies that are available to provide specific services, which provide details about what the agencies offer to schools and to students.
5. **Create greater and consistent awareness of availability of new materials for teachers and staff.** Implement a systematized approach for sending out notices to teachers and specialists informing them when new materials for diverse learners are available.
  6. **Provide adequate technology for learning throughout the district, including technical equipment, programs and services to support all learners and learning styles, and proper training on use of such technology.** Melrose Public Schools will provide appropriate technological programs/services that are reliable and in working condition. The MIS Director will provide a practice run on all materials/programs and provide easy access for support when problems arise.
  7. **Incorporate email into district communication strategy.** To date, email communication between parent, teachers and administration has been inconsistent. Because most parents in the district have email access, this should be a major, though not exclusive, means of communication. Greater use of email will ensure that time-sensitive information is sent to a wide or narrow audience quickly and directly.
  8. **Review and revise all materials to promote a culture of inclusion.** Establish a work group to review all materials utilized by the district (teacher manuals, professional development, curriculum, school handbooks, websites, School Committee policy manuals, etc.) to ensure that these materials promote and reinforce a culture of inclusion, and changes will be made as necessary. As part of this effort, groups that partner with the schools will be contacted to ensure that the materials they are using within their work with the schools promote a culture of inclusion.
  9. **Develop a practical, hands-on manual, possibly titled, "An Educator's Guide to Best Practices," to be distributed to all educators for use in classrooms and school communities.** The purpose of this manual is to help all educators better understand issues, such as: inclusive philosophy and attitudes, the roles and responsibilities of all educators, setting up classrooms, planning and developing units and lessons, adaptations and modifications, timelines, and procedures for developing and implementing IEPs. The manual should contain concrete

strategies, grids, checklists, and worksheets to help educators plan their lessons appropriately in order to address a variety of learning styles in their classrooms, as well as individual goals for students with IEPs. Posting this handbook online will make it easily accessible.

- 10. Develop a plan for communicating the Melrose Public Schools vision for inclusion.** Upon completion of the strategic plan, it is recommended that a communications strategy be developed to create public awareness and support for the vision of inclusion in the Melrose Public Schools. This communication strategy would consist of external communication from the district and task force, outreach to all local newspapers and other media outlets (Free Press, MMTV, etc.), communication via Melrose Public Schools web page, public presentations, etc. It will include initial communication regarding the strategic plan, and then ongoing communication regarding efforts towards enhancing inclusion.

## Programming

Programming is the central issue in meeting the needs of children with diverse abilities. Effective programming requires a continuum of services for students throughout their entire educational experience in the Melrose Public Schools, with curriculum combined with the full range of necessary supports to provide the child a quality education.

Programming should be conducted within a culture and atmosphere characterized by:

- Clarity about what is necessary to meet student needs.
- Creation of programming designed for specific student needs, rather than fitting students into existing programming which may not be appropriate.
- Clear expectations for teachers, students, and parents with consistent effective quality programming from year-to-year.
- Transitions that ensure consistency for individual students from school-to-school and year-to-year.
- Communication to parents and staff regarding changes in programs, and why changes are necessary.

While Melrose Public Schools has major areas of quality and excellence, the district also faces a number of programming challenges, including:

- The need for more consistent programming received by some students from year-to-year
- Gathering and utilizing adequate data, such as the number of students currently in the system, as well as those due to enter in the coming years
- A need for consistent assessments of student needs
- Proactive programming that properly responds to student needs
- A need for continuous parent advocacy to ensure adequate programming
- A need for improved and consistent communication when programs are changed
- Effective fact gathering as to why students leave the system and what type of programming would enable them to stay.

We recommend the following action steps to address programming issues:

**1. Develop and implement a systematic approach to identifying and responding to student needs, through the following action items:**

- a) By March 31, 2007, conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the current programming, regarding who are the students being served via IEPs currently in the system (both in and out-of-district), what their needs are, and what programming is needed to support those needs. In addition, similarly evaluate the needs of the students who will be entering Melrose Public Schools over the next few years, based on data from early intervention programs.

- b) Based on the data, modify the current programming, and create new programming to support the identified student needs.
  - c) Develop a system for ongoing collection of data regarding student needs that includes consistent use of recognized assessment tools and methods. Each year, re-evaluate existing programming and modify it based on student needs.
  - d) Develop a mechanism for data collection and surveying of students who leave the system, including an exit survey for every student who leaves the district.
  - e) Develop and implement a standardized programming evaluation instrument that will be used annually and ensure consistency from year-to-year.
2. **Provide common planning time for teachers and paraprofessionals.** The ability to conduct planning together is critical for enhancement of inclusion and ensuring that individual student needs are met. While resource and scheduling logistics make the development of common planning time a challenge, the Task Force strongly feels it needs to be a major priority if Melrose Public Schools is to improve its ability to meet the needs of students with diverse needs.
  3. **Promote an inclusive culture throughout the school day in all levels of activities through clear policies and practices.** Areas to be addressed within such policies include: a) inclusion of students with diverse abilities in athletics, music, art, etc.; b) conducting school activities in an inclusive manner including: field trips, special projects, class pictures, extra-curricular activities, etc.; c) infusion of inclusive practices within school-based and community-based after-school programs.
  4. **Develop a policy regarding even distribution of students with diverse needs across classrooms.** Develop a policy which clearly states that students on education plans will be evenly distributed among the classrooms at their grade level, and that by policy or practice, Melrose Public Schools will not have a class with a disproportionate number of students on IEPs.
  5. **Establish system wide “Disability Awareness Programs” for staff and students’ families.** These programs will provide both staff and families with training on a range of disabilities, including physical, intellectual, social and emotional issues that students face.
  6. **Create services, supports and programming for children with serious emotional issues (e.g., depression, mental illness).** The model of these services would not be a substantially separate setting, but rather a resource room model, with services available to students on an as-needed basis, for varied lengths of time. This would allow students who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to work effectively in the general education classroom to continue to go to school in Melrose and work on grade level material with support from an MSN.
  7. **Explore additional areas for program changes, improvements and enhancements.** The Education Task Force recommends further exploration of the following programming areas:

- *Expansion of the role of the Instructional Support Team (IST) to oversee strategies for students who are experiencing educational challenges.* The ability to provide effective accommodations for students who are experiencing such challenges may reduce or eliminate the need for specially designed instructed and/or related services on an Individualized Education Program (“IEP”). General educators may be more able to respond to the needs of diverse learners, given better feedback from the IST.
- *Consideration of a site based Pupil Personnel Services administration model (“PPS”), with the PPS administrator working as an integrated part of the on-site team.* Site-based PPS administration would provide a knowledgeable "go-to" person in each building to respond to the unique needs of students in a proactive way and provide administrative support.
- *Enhancement of Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (“MCAS”) tutoring programs for students with special needs who are not taking the MCAS-Alt.*
- *Assess services for accelerated learners.* To better support children who are working beyond the grade level benchmarks, Melrose Public Schools should consider formalizing an accelerated academics program for K-5 and beyond, that would be conducted in an inclusive setting.

**8. Collaborate with nearby communities to share insights, issues, and challenges, and pursue opportunities for partnering through sharing of staffing and services.**

Because the district is relatively small, servicing a city of approximately 28,000, and because neighboring communities may be facing similar challenges, best practices would develop out of a sharing of information and resources.

## Staffing

Melrose is working hard towards providing superior services but greater consistency on how these services are delivered is needed. There is a clear message that current staffing levels for an inclusive program are insufficient. As part of the Task Force findings, educators also indicated issues with inadequate staffing especially in specialists such as Moderate Special Needs teachers, paraprofessionals, and psychologists.

Through implementation of the initiatives below Melrose will improve its capacity to provide more effective and consistent services to the students:

- 1. Conduct a systematic review of staffing patterns to ensure resources are organized and deployed in a way that best meets current and future student needs.** Analyze current staffing patterns to clarify various staff roles and how such roles are utilized to best meet student needs, while ensuring that resources are being deployed in a way that maximizes their utilization. Part of this review would include long-term planning for future staffing based on data regarding students who are currently progressing through the system as well as students entering the system.
- 2. Create a staff position of literacy coach to spearhead professional development.** A literacy coach position would provide needed support for teachers and paraprofessionals and be a link to the classroom and development of targeted professional development.
- 3. Create a position of Inclusion Facilitator(s).** The purpose of this position would be to undertake the implementation of the District's strategic plan for enhancing inclusion. As other districts have demonstrated through utilization of such a position, an Inclusion Facilitator would maximize the District's resources and minimize out of district placements while ensuring that all children's needs are met.
- 4. Hire a range of additional staff members** to provide necessary supports to students and staff, including:
  - **Social Workers** (for all levels)
  - **Reading and math specialists** to address needs K-8 (provide direct services, "coach" general education teachers, and plan professional development)
  - **Attendance Officer** - A dedicated position that ensures the attendance of students with emotional issues will provide an economical solution to administrative staff currently occupied with these duties.

## **Professional Development and Training**

Throughout the Education Task Force's work, teachers, parents, and other community members cited professional development and training as an area for improvement. In every forum we heard that professional development planning must be undertaken with the goal of inclusion in mind. Teachers and staff have identified that they believe there is often too little specific training on the needs of children with special needs and how to deliver those services in the general education classroom. The concerns ranged from a lack of familiarity with the needs of specific children, to no training in general regarding educating children with severe special needs or physical disabilities.

Additional feedback on professional development and training included the following:

- Staff and teachers felt that the general education staff does not attend the professional development opportunities around inclusion as frequently as necessary to ensure a positive inclusion model.
- There was overwhelming support for providing the opportunity for parents, specialists and teachers to share best practices that exist within Melrose Public Schools and replicate and support those throughout the system.
- The identification of role models in providing a successful inclusive classroom would be helpful to all staff.
- There was also a strong sentiment that professional development needs to be offered in an ongoing way as opposed to one-time trainings which are not as effective in developing a comprehensive understanding and skill set.
- It was strongly suggested that paraprofessionals be offered more training related to inclusion.

The Task Force proposes the following steps to address these professional development and training issues:

- 1. Develop and plan professional development based on the current and future needs of the district, and in support of the district's long-term goal of enhanced inclusion as a shared value.** Professional development should be provided that is flexible and responsive to the range of staff and student needs, and which incorporates a long-term vision and support for professional development. Rather than reliance on one-time trainings or seminars with no follow-up, plan all professional development to provide long-term support and ongoing education. With enhanced inclusion as a goal, make corresponding priorities in planning training and teacher and staff evaluations. The ultimate goal of professional development should be ensuring that all staff people are using best practices in their roles.
- 2. Identify and utilize existing staff to provide professional development.** Current Melrose Public Schools' staff has a wealth of experience and expertise that can be utilized within professional development.

**3. Continue peer mentoring as part of professional development activities.**

Mentoring by professional peers has proven to be a successful strategy for development of staff.

**4. Providing training and professional development on the following topics:**

- IEP development including:
  - a) writing effective and meaningful goals;
  - b) developing measurable goals
- Working with specific populations (i.e., autism, down syndrome) to respond to current and anticipated future needs
- Use of specific materials and technologies (e.g., smartboards)
- Curriculum modification (general education) and differentiated instruction
- Creation of multi-aged, non-traditional teaching models.

**5. Provide training in inclusion for specialists and non-classroom based faculty and staff including coaches, art, music, nurses.** Such professional development is essential for promoting enhanced inclusion as a shared value.

**6. Increase professional development for paraprofessionals.** Professional development for paraprofessionals is currently minimal. An investment in training and skill development for paraprofessionals will produce positive results for all children and teachers in the district.

**7. Use outside partnerships and universities to provide ongoing high quality training.** Our area is rich with resources from universities and colleges, non-profits, other educational partners, and other school districts. It is recommended that Melrose Public Schools contact surrounding communities regarding collaboration on training, and build relationships with academic and other partners for ongoing training and professional development.

## Transitions

Effective year-to-year transitions, as well as transitions from school-to-adult life, are critical to successful educational experiences for students. The Education Task Force identified Transitions as an area of inconsistent practices and systemic challenges. The following are some of the current issues in this regard:

- Staff require adequate time to receive and review students' paperwork prior to their arrival in the classroom.
- Successful programming should involve proactive planning, scheduling and communication enabling paperwork to be in place prior to the student's arrival in class.
- Ensure programs have specialized equipment and proper staffing before the start of the student's school year so that teachers can have adequate time to set up classrooms properly and familiarize themselves, if necessary.
- Formalize transition meetings that allow present-year teachers to discuss the valuable and effective teaching methods they've established with their students to next year's teachers.
- Establish a plan for transitioning from school to adulthood for students with special needs who need access to adult services. Melrose Public Schools also needs to ensure compliance with the Department of Education's transition planning form which speaks to those students selecting employment and/or post-secondary education. Students transitioning to adult services need the district's help by providing them with the information and training with which they can navigate the bureaucracy of adult services.

These and other transition recommendations could be accomplished, in many cases, with little or no additional funding resources. The Task Force recommends the following steps to address these transition issues:

### **1. Create a system-wide framework for transitions that includes the following:**

- a) A system-wide timeline for transitions, starting in May/June of the current school year;
- b) Tools by which current classroom teachers and other professionals (paraprofessionals, specialists, etc) can pass on critical information gleaned from classroom experience with students to supplement IEPs;
- c) A checklist to ensure that all physical and technological supports outlined in students' IEPs are in place before school starts each September.

### **2. Explore alternative teaching methodologies, such as looping, co-teaching and multi-aged grouping for grades 1-5.** Such methods have been used in the past, but are not currently being utilized. Comments heard during the course of the Education Task Force's work addressed the fact that good practices are tried and proven for a period and, in some cases, discontinued. Melrose Public Schools should review data from nationally recognized promising practices, assess their efficacy, and determine

their appropriateness within Melrose Public Schools. For those that emerge as best practices for the district, an implementation plan, including training and professional development, should be developed, along with a long-term integration and support plan.

**3. Create a quality, comprehensive vocational program at Melrose High School.**

The ETF recommends that Melrose Public Schools survey surrounding communities as well as refer to prior in-district programs that have experienced success in vocational training. Development of this program could result in Melrose students returning to the district and could also serve to generate revenue with the intake of out-of-district students.

**4. Assign responsibility for Transition Coordination.** Ideally, the district would best be served by creating a new position of Transition Coordinator. Until that position is created, responsibilities need to be assigned in order to improve student transitions. To that end, we propose that the district assign the following responsibilities for transition to one or more current employees:

- a) Facilitate transitions for all students on education plans: those entering the system for the first time; those transitioning from school to school; and those transitioning to adult services, using the framework developed through Action Step #1, above.
- b) Ensure that transition requirements of IDEA are implemented for each student, including planning for needed transition services for post-school activities, no later than age 16. With these plans and activities, an emphasis should be placed on employment in the community, post-secondary education, and other integrated community activities as preferred outcomes, in conjunction with the goal of minimizing or completely eliminating transitions to facility-based disability programs (e.g., sheltered workshops, day habilitation, etc.).
- c) Ensure that students who may qualify for support from adult services agencies have a referral made by age 16 to determine eligibility. Build and maintain relationships with the Department of Mental Retardation, Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, Department of Mental Health, workforce development agencies (e.g., The Career Place, Metro North REB), and other entities, to facilitate their participation in transition planning and teams. Connect students transitioning to adult services with the resources available to them.
- d) Contribute information and materials on transitioning to the district's Resource Library for teachers and parents (see Action Step #4 in Communication and Technology section).
- e) Provide transition training to faculty and parents on at least an annual basis. Post and publicize available transition workshops for staff and parents from state agencies (DMR, MRC, DOE, etc.) as well as those available from The ARC of Massachusetts, Autism Support Center, Institute for Community Inclusion, Federation for Children with Special Needs, MA Families Organizing for Change, etc.

- f)** Spearhead an effort to pool resources with surrounding communities in order to provide access to quality programs that will facilitate transitions.
- g)** Provide increased opportunities for vocational skill development within Melrose Public Schools. Post college fairs which showcase post secondary opportunities for special education students and school to work possibilities.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Methodology for Development of Education Task Force Report**

In June of 2005 the Melrose School Committee endorsed the formation of an Education Task Force (ETF) to draft a multi-year plan for improving services for all children and creating an environment where all children participate fully in the life of the school. An array of representatives was recruited for the ETF, including teachers, administrators, parents, school committee members, and others. This group was purposely designed to include a cross section of individuals that represented: a) a wide range of views in terms of inclusion; b) different perspectives depending on the nature of their role and relationship to the Melrose Public Schools. The group began meeting on a monthly basis in the summer of 2005.

The goal of the ETF was to determine the current state of the District's inclusion practices and where we need to improve. To accomplish this, the ETF undertook a comprehensive process which utilized a number of information gathering methodologies to ensure that all aspects of the issues involved were given full consideration. Through internal and external assessments, field expertise and the review of best practices, the ETF was able to establish some common themes.

#### **I. Research**

##### **Internal Assessment Mechanisms**

Internal assessments of the district's strengths and weaknesses were conducted by gathering information from administration, teachers, students, and support staff through surveys, forums and in-district field trips.

- During January of 2006 an assessment of the District's internal strengths and weaknesses was conducted through an online educator survey. Seventy-four Melrose public school teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, representing over a third of Melrose's educators, participated in a 19 question survey sharing their thoughts and attitudes towards inclusion, professional development, supports and mentoring in the Melrose public school system.
- A half-day public forum was conducted in January 2006 with approximately 30 people in attendance representing parents, teachers, professional staff, administrators, and school committee members. During the course of this forum, a facilitated discussion occurred that solicited input from attendees regarding their views of inclusion and whether inclusion should be enhanced within the Melrose Public Schools.
- In June 2006 an in-district field trip of the Melrose Veterans Memorial Middle School was conducted by Principal Tom Brow. Members of the Education Task Force were given an overview of the structure and goals of special education services as well as a tour of classrooms.

### **External Assessment Mechanisms**

External Assessments of the District's strengths and weaknesses were conducted through the following methods.

- During January of 2006 an assessment of the District's strengths and weaknesses was conducted through an online community survey. Two hundred and ten community members including parents of current pupils, parents of former pupils, and interested community members shared their thoughts and attitudes towards inclusion as a concept and as practiced in the District.
- In 2005 the Department of Education completed an audit, which included a review of special education services. The results of this audit provided were a significant information source for the ETF. (Copies of this audit are available at: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/review/cpr/reports/2005/0178.pdf>)

### **Identification of Best Practices**

The ETF identified best practices through the following activities:

- At the January 2006 Forum, the guest speaker was Alan Ripp, a fourth grade teacher in the Newton Public Schools. The Newton Public Schools have been one of the strongest school systems in Massachusetts in terms of inclusion and responding to the needs of all learners. Prior to working in the Newton Public Schools, Mr. Ripp worked on statewide efforts to enhance inclusion, as a staff member at the Institute for Community Inclusion, at UMass Boston, providing him a broad context for these issues. Mr. Ripp shared his inclusion best practices both as a means to educate and inform participants about inclusion and to ignite creative thinking.

During the course of his presentation, Mr. Ripp expressed his enthusiasm for the efforts that Newton has made, and how much the experience has added to his enjoyment of teaching and his students' enthusiasm for learning. During the course of his presentation, Mr. Ripp stressed the following:

#### **Inclusive education takes commitment:**

- To respect, acceptance and belonging
- To best teaching practices
- To collaboration and support

#### **Inclusion is not...**

- A location
- Dumping
- Ignoring individuals needs
- A money saving device
- About "special education"
- Something that students "get ready" for through improvement in cognitive and social skills
- Lowering student expectations
- Matching stronger students with weaker ones

Inclusion is about teaching practices and students learning – and learning together.

Mr. Ripp also shared highlights from research conducted by the National Institute for Urban School Improvement, which looked at schools districts where students with significant disabilities were included with their non-disabled peers. The researchers found the following in the districts they studied:

- No slow-down in learning of non-disabled peers
- No difference in attention from teachers
- Students without disabilities learned better social skills had higher self-esteem
  - had a stronger commitment to moral and ethical principles
  - had greater comfort with diversity
  - had increased patience.

(A video of Mr. Ripp's presentation was broadcast on MMTV and is available from the ETF).

- On May 9, 2006 members of the Education Task Force visited the Patrick O'Hearn School a K-5 public elementary school of 250 students located in Dorchester, Massachusetts. The O'Hearn School is renowned for its fully inclusive programs, which integrate large numbers of children with exceptionalities and learning disabilities. This visit provided concrete evidence regarding the ability to meet the needs of diverse learners in an inclusive setting.

## **II. Key Findings from the Community**

The following are the highlights of the findings from the surveys and discussion forum, which summarize the key issues identified.

***Culture of inclusion*** - The surveys indicated that a large majority of educators, 88%, believe that inclusive practices benefit at least some students and that a culture of inclusion is fostered in their building. Conversely, the majority of educators were not sure if the parents of their students supported inclusion. And although a large majority of the community agreed with the definition of inclusion (75%), they were divided on whether inclusion is embraced, consistently practiced and provided the proper supports in the schools. The community also felt that inclusion, as practiced, might not be suitable for all children and causes for a disruptive environment that detracts from others. Forum participants felt inclusion will gain ground and acceptance in Melrose if the community sees the overall value and positive impact of inclusion. Community education was seen as a key component of this.

***Differentiated instruction*** - The community overwhelmingly emphasized the need to address the needs of all children of differing abilities through differentiated instruction including the ***gifted and talented*** who are not provided with adequate programming. These comments were echoed in the Forum, which emphasized the need for more differentiated instruction.

***Professional development*** - Although most educators have received training in inclusive practices, with the majority of them receiving it before last school year, most do not believe that the Melrose public school system offers sufficient professional development to support inclusive practices for both general and special educators. Educators give

about equal weight to their top three priorities in making an inclusive program: professional development, materials, and support. Comments from the community echo the need for more training and qualified professionals.

***Curriculum modification*** - A large percentage of community members stressed the need for increased and consistent curriculum modification related to inclusion. As a point of interest, a majority of educators have developed their own materials in the absence of commercially available curriculum materials from the District.

***Communication*** - One of the main messages the community sent is a need for improved ***communication*** from Administration. The vast majority of comments relating to communication focused on the lack of connectivity between central administration and the District and community.

***Staffing*** - Several community members indicated that Melrose is working hard towards good services but a more consistent focus on these services is needed. There was a clear message that currently there is insufficient staffing for an inclusive program. Educators also indicated issues with staffing in terms of lack of staff, and in many cases the lack of a sufficient number of specialists (MSNs, paraprofessionals, psychologists, etc.).

***Facilities*** - The community noted a direct correlation between class size and effective inclusive practices. Educators specifically indicated class size as a significant issue while many others alluded to class size as a significant issue impacting related factors. The guest speaker of the Forum noted how the balance of students played a key role in successful classrooms with additional space and supports available when needed.

### **III. Plan Development**

After extensive discussion of the various findings and various related issues, the Task Force began work on development of the planning document. Part of this effort included an affinity process for identification of priority areas. Sections were drafted, reviewed and revised by Task Force members, resulting in the final document.

### Task Force Members

Patrea Anderson, Tri Chair of the PAC and community representative  
Naomi Baline, educator MVMMS  
Karen Burtnett, community representative \*  
Dr. Nancy Bryson, Educational Team Facilitator  
Patty Cameron, PAC member and community representative  
Joseph F. Casey, Superintendent of Schools  
Bethany Cassin Gaita, Melrose School Committee \*  
Katherine Clark, Melrose School Committee \*  
Malcolm Crystal, PAC member and community representative \*  
Kathie Downey, PAC member and community representative \*  
Marianne Dwyer, Moderate Special Needs Teacher MVMMS  
Christina Fabiano, Teacher MVMMS  
Adam Federico, Teacher MVMMS  
Dr. Rhonda Fogle, pediatrician  
Dr. George Flynn, Director of SEEM Collaborative  
Linda Gould, Moderate Special Needs Teacher MVMMS  
David Hoff, community representative \*  
Sharon Iagulli, Moderate Special Needs Teacher MVMMS  
Rebecca Kaufmann, integrated pre-school teacher  
Nina McGrath, educator MVMMS  
Susan Nadworny, Tri Chair of the PAC and community representative \*  
Taylor Rubbins, community representative and educator  
Tricia Vergados, Teacher Lincoln School \*  
Thomas Vennoch, principal of the Roosevelt School \*  
Karen Walkey, Tri Chair of the PAC and community representative  
Wendy Warren, Moderate Special Needs Teacher MVMMS \*

---

\* Authors of the Task Force Report