

Niskayuna SEPTA Meeting Minutes

September 27, 2023

6:30pm

In attendance:

Beta Clark, Kim Russ, Beth Halayko, Kimberly Tully, Lena Eson Roe, Carl Mummenthey, James Feuerbach, Joanna DiPasquale, Amanda Mahar, Nicole Normandin, Brianna Meilke, Julie Bouyea,

Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 6:30pm.

Welcome new attendees! SEPTA's email address is niskysepta@gmail.com, and website is <https://sites.google.com/view/niskysepta>.

A Mahar introduced the executive board as well as the SEPTA board and email address.

Member Business

A Mahar introduced the [minutes for June 2023's meeting](#). N Normandin voted to approve the minutes, J DiPasquale seconded. The minutes from the June 2023 meeting were approved.

Presidents' Reports

A Mahar reported for the presidents. We are looking for a co-vice president. Please email niskysepta@gmail.com for more information. We anticipate a time commitment of approximately 2-3 hours per month.

There will be a fundraiser for SEPTA at Chipotle. More information will be on our social media page and website. Date: October 23, 4-8pm.

SEPTA congratulates Niskayuna High School - named a [National Banner Unified Champion School](#)

Treasurer's Report

J Feuerbach reported as Treasurer. Since June 2023, \$65 in dues, and money paid for insurance were all activities.

Please join or renew your membership. Membership is \$10/person (\$5/teachers and students). You can join online at <https://niskysepta.memberhub.com/store/>.

District Reports

Board of Education:

K. Tully reported for the Board of Education. Good start to the year. Capital project is continuing. Next referendum vote will take place in Winter 2024. This will include more work at VA to help shift to 5-6 and 7-8 building. Architecture teams finishing plans and will present to voters.

Investigating pilot program for electric buses; district is investigating grants.

Q. What if referendum does not pass? If referendum does not pass, likely scenario would be to alter plans or dollar amounts to present again. COVID really changed plans for timing workforce, dollar amounts - this is very much the original plans, and district wants to complete the plans. Goal is to continue to move forward in the right direction.

Faculty advisor's report

B. Halayko noted that it is nice to have full team of administrators. A goal this year is to increase TAs, teachers, and staff members with SEPTA meetings. Idea to have staff night, TA night, teacher night in SEPTA meetings. Nice to have virtual option since not everyone lives close by. A Mahar noted that we can have specialized meetings and invitations.

Speaker Series: Student Support Services

- **Tim Fowler**, Assistant Superintendent for Pupil Personnel Services
- **Julie Bouyea**, Director of Student Support Services K-6 (CSE for all five elementary schools)
- **Andrea Marques-Clarke**, Director of Secondary Special Education (CSE for Iroquois MS and Niskayuna HS, related service providers - school psychologists and school social workers)
- **Brianna Meikle**, Assistant Director of Student Support Services (CPSE, Van Antwerp MS, out of district programming, related service providers - OT, PT, and speech)

(A Marques-Clarke - regrets)

[Presentation slides may be found here.](#)

T Fowler began discussion about the S3 services. New members of the team include B Meilke and J Bouyea.

B Meilke shared highlights of Extended School Year / Summer 2023 program. Students had activities that went beyond school - therapy dogs, sensory gym, etc. - for well-rounded student experiences. Very positive experience.

T Fowler recognized the HS unified program: Special Olympics National Banner Unified Champion School Recognition. Only 8 schools have been recognized for this inclusive partnership. The program pairs general ed and special ed students together, participate in

sports together. This provides inclusive leadership as well as sports! More information and press will be in the future. Special thank you to teachers for leading this program.

Goals and updates for the year:

- Rebranding, reorganization of unit to S3 - Student Support Services.
- The continuum of services.
- Refining departmental processes and procedures - goal is to build out procedures, department handbook, and other efficiencies within the department.
- Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for schools (TCIS) in Nisky - building this system, huge initiative. Helps with types of intervention and training needed.

Why rebranding?

T Fowler shared a chart of S3's services, including school health services, Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE), Committee on Special Education (CSE), out of district placements, and leadership for services such as OT, PT, speech, social work, and psychology departments. This structure will help better support these services and bring in new initiatives such as TCIS.

Is this set up with middle school restructuring in mind? Yes, exactly. While this follows the middle school banding certification, this structure will help bring a better layer of organization to the services.

Continuum of services

Last year, S3 identified gaps and where more services were needed. Middle school Communications program was brought online; new class at IMS. This year, the focus is on a MS-level intensive management needs (IMN) program for 2024-2025. Currently there is no program past Birchwood ES. S3 will be developing this program and make it part of the budget development process.

Special ed services handbook (forthcoming). Last year included a lot of development on the continuum of services with teachers. It needed more visual layout to be similar to other district handbooks. The handbook provides more explanation around related services, "at a glance" performance areas, related services from outside providers (e.g., assistive technology) and how they relate to students / staff / caregivers, definitions of key terms that are found in various special education settings. Handbook also provides a description of classes and programs offered by the district. This will be shared with families and posted to the district website. Members noted that this is helpful for transparency. C Mummenthy also noted that this is a good resource for all staff as well, to better understand the continuum of services.

Therapeutic Crisis Intervention for Schools (TCIS)

T Fowler noted that S3 is looking to build capacity in this area. Two district members already trained, plus T Fowler; another new hire also had training. Four in district now to train the trainers, but also looking to build training for all staff (not just special ed staff). Approx 4 days of training for full TCIS, but there is now a model where a trainer is in each building. 8 additional staff have full certification. Goals are to support and teach, increase student's sense of safety

and provide teaching to regulate emotions and behavior. Looking to provide co-regulation skills in a time of crisis. Research-based program that is used nationally and globally. Staff in each building make up the TCIS team.

Q&A

Staffing

How are we doing with staffing in terms of TAs? Are special ed classrooms fully staffed with certified teachers? Are there enough TAs for all IEP needs?

Overall, in a better position than other schools. However, education at large is suffering - hard to find highly qualified people that are available. For reference: Capital Region BOCES is showing approximately 70 vacancies for special education. Happy to report that one vacancy - life skills program at HS - is in the process of being filled. This will bring us to 100% for teaching. TA support overall remains a challenge. Most programs are in good shape, but new needs and vacancies are difficult; not as many candidates to fill vacancies. Principals and directors have shared that repostings are happening; we have the budget and the postings but not the people to fill the vacancies. Need to fine tune where needs are as a result. Incumbent upon leadership and people on CSE team to be spot-on with what needs are. If projections for TAs are what we are seeing, we need to be more precise. 8-1-1, 12-1-2 programs, etc. need TAs. We may need to build gradual independence (e.g., 1-1 aid going to shared aid if in a general ed program).

B Halayko noted that there are the right numbers of TAs in a program, making sure we have highly qualified TAs. Qualifications make a difference, as does training. As more people are trained in TCIS, as we can offer more trainings of that nature can also help onboard new TA support staff. As teachers and TAs retire, this will be important as well.

T Fowler also noted the opportunities to grow TAs and teachers by providing pathways to explore education as a career. Want to encourage this as much as possible.

C Mummenthy also noted that HR has provided information about how to “ladder up” from TA to teacher position, etc. Began with 96% of positions filled in an 800-member org. But if your child is in the 4% of classrooms or needs not filled, that is an issue. This is a high priority.

Can SEPTA help partner to find new staff? SEPTA families often need to find care as well, have similar experiences. Collective network could be built.

C Mummenthy noted that this would be a great partnership with SEPTA and other PTOs. Onsite job fair will help bring in new people, possibly on-the-spot job offers. Helping to spread the word will help.

Substitutes

T Fowler talked about substituted. Special ed already taps into district sub pool. Challenging part with regular substitutes is that, unless it is a building sub, subs are accepting assignments based on availability. For self-contained rooms, don't want a revolving door! Andrea Marques-Clarke working closely with building leadership to identify subs that have already worked with classrooms, students - tap into those subs to provide services during absences.

Is there a list of retirees that could come back to sub? Yes, believe that this is taking place. One thing we are seeing around the region is districts being aggressive in sub rates. The market is dictating more competitive rates.

TA rates also have this issue. Collective bargaining units are coming up on new contracts. Nursing is a good example: nurses have a new contract and ability to hire highly qualified individuals as the contract restructured.

Communication

Is there a way for parents to get in touch with TAs, particularly in middle school? Harder to make connections.

What is an appropriate amount of time for members of a team to respond to concerns? What is a caregiver's next step if concerns are not addressed or no response?

T Fowler encouraged families, at the beginning of the school year, to reach out to teachers and TAs and establish a communication plan. Some families value phone, others email. Families have different modes on communication. Highly recommend to start with classroom teacher to find out which staff members work most closely with child. Communication preference established, then staff works with families. Child's case manager is important as well, can coordinate with other teachers / team. Talking to the case manager is a central point of communication for families. Booklet and [website](#) will also note the best contacts for various scenarios, based on parent / caregiver and SEPTA feedback. The website also shows initial contact but also how to move through communication. E.g., start with special education teacher or case manager, followed by principal, followed by CSE chair. Generally, 24-48 hours is reasonable for response time. Educators are buried with questions right now. It is always okay to follow up emails with phone calls - e.g., an email could have gotten misdirected or gone into spam.

Feedback - if child does not have resource room, back-to-school night does not include meeting the case manager / consultant teacher, at least in middle school. Another way to meet that person at back-to-school night would be helpful, or one more reach-out around BTS night.

B Halayko noted that, for MS back-to-school night, other times in schedule (e.g., lunch) would be a good time to meet providers. A Mahar reported that, for Hillside ES, there was a 20-minute period between sessions to speak with all providers.

Transition services

There is only one person coordinating transition services, and they don't meet with students until senior year. Could they meet with junior year students?

S3 team will need to circle back. A Marques-Clarke will be best person to answer. The question could be related to contact time. Transitions discussions should start as early as middle school, based on state guidelines.

New-to-district students and plans - what is process to establish an IEP, and to sustain support?

Exploring referrals to CSE are important. Prior to that, a series of supports can be extended before special ed takes place. Can connect to interventionist via principal and respective director to make connection. This provides pre-referral supports, and then can move to special

ed route. Building psychologist is a great resource here, can walk through various services available. Sometimes students receive supports but parents don't know all that entails. Can link in various supports - advocate to extend support no matter where a student is on the continuum of services.

Capturing this process - where is the best place to do this?

Publicizing it on website would be ideal. The continuum handbook is very long, and we want to be sure this isn't buried.

Member / Parents tips:

- Bring summaries from prior providers.
- Many parents don't know terminology, what is the right question to ask - need this to be more plain language.
- Bring Parent to Parent IEP explainer back!

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:42 pm.