

Hanover Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC)
Final Report on Literacy Working Group to the Hanover School Committee
June 9, 2021

Introduction

In the Spring of 2019, the SEPAC Board voted to establish a working group to address reading instruction in the Hanover Public School District (hereinafter District). Parents had raised concerns at SEPAC meetings regarding students with a diagnosed language-based learning disability as well as students suspected of having a language-based learning disability and their ability to access grade level curriculum and adequately attain skills necessary to learn effectively. At the May 24, 2019 SEPAC Board meeting, the Literacy Working Group was formed. Soon after, a Steering Committee was established by a group of volunteers. Initially, the working group was intended to address reading instruction within the District, however there were also concerns brought to the Steering Committee regarding writing instruction (written expression). Since reading and writing are interconnected and both fit under the umbrella of “literacy”, the Steering Committee thought it prudent and appropriate to incorporate written expression into the group’s work with the District. What follows represents the final report and recommendations of the Literacy Working Group as approved by the SEPAC Board on June 7, 2021.

Background

The Steering Committee held its first parents’ night on October 21, 2019 in the Hanover High School Library. Parents and guardians were invited to attend and participate in discussions about literacy in the district. Approximately 15 families were represented at this meeting. Through this meeting and follow-up communications, the Steering Committee gathered a summative list of collective questions and concerns expressed by Hanover families. The Steering Committee began working collaboratively with District professionals to address the questions and concerns brought forth. Through this collaboration the idea for a Literacy Night with the Administration was born. In January of 2020, the District and Hanover SEPAC co-hosted a roundtable discussion with district professionals and parents/guardians. There were approximately 30 families represented at this meeting. Hanover SEPAC received positive feedback for the District’s engagement with families and for the work that the READ2700 Literacy Initiative was doing to advance literacy instruction for all students of Hanover Public Schools.

It is important here to note the timing of our work. Shortly after our 2nd parent evening in January of 2020, Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic and effectively changed the landscape in which we were all working. Our meetings and opportunities for further family engagement were brought to a sudden, but necessary, halt. However, since January of 2021, the Literacy Working Group Steering Committee and District professionals have been able to continue our conversations via zoom and even host a third parent evening in which approximately 75-80 families were represented. At this meeting, Assistant Superintendent Deborah St. Ives along with other District administrators and reading specialists presented up to date information regarding reading instruction in Hanover.

Coupled with the changes Covid-19 brought to our group, DESE has since released the Mass Literacy Initiative <https://www.doe.mass.edu/massliteracy/> and the Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/dyslexia-guidelines.pdf>. This too has had a great impact on the scope of our work. Parent and advocate voices in Hanover were being echoed across the state. These two new documents from DESE address many of the concerns Hanover families brought to the steering committee regarding early identification and screening, timely and appropriate interventions for children who struggle with literacy and evidence-based literacy instruction for all students.

It is also important to note that in the time period just prior to the Covid-19 school shutdown and even during the shutdown, Hanover has worked to improve and advance literacy instruction. Improvements and advancements that have been reported to the Steering Committee are:

1. The number of reading specialists working in the District has increased. These specialists have engaged in multiple events to educate families with their depth and breadth of knowledge.
2. The number of staff trained and/or certified in various Multi-sensory Reading programs (MSR) has increased.
3. Special education staff and reading specialists across the district have received training through The Landmark School.
4. Foundations, a tier 1 structured literacy program, is being used across the district and was expanded from K-2 to K-3. Heggerty, a tier 1 phonemic awareness program, is also being used across the district in K-2.
5. Hanover is working to eliminate reading instruction that is not based in the science of reading, including the 3 cueing system.

6. Hanover screened all students for risk of Dyslexia in grades K-5 during the 2020-2021 school year using Dibels 8th Edition. Students in grades 6-8 were screened based on data identifying a student as “at-risk”.
7. When appropriate, the Hanover Public School System uses the specific diagnosis of “Dyslexia” when writing IEPs.
8. IEP Teams will now rely upon data collected from evaluation assessments prior to recommending a student no longer receive a Multi-sensory Reading service.
9. A review of the literature used at Hanover Middle School is underway.
10. Hanover Public Schools administers the i-Ready assessment to all students in grades 2-8, three times per year and the results are now shared with families. This assessment provides the independent reading lexile level for each student. This information serves as a great starting point for meaningful conversations between families and educators.

As the District continues its efforts to remove methodologies not based in the science of reading and moves to incorporate the work of the Mass Literacy Initiative and the Massachusetts Dyslexia Guidelines, Hanover SEPAC is making these additional recommendations for the District’s and School Committee’s consideration. Below you will find a summary of concerns followed by our recommendations.

Parent Concerns and Recommendations:

1. Concern

Parents express concern that some areas of the IEP are not explicitly written and therefore left to interpretation. Students can change general education teachers, special education teachers, service providers and sometimes schools during the life of a single IEP. Without specific programs, type of personnel, progress monitoring tools and timelines for these tools explicitly written into the IEP, it is possible for a student’s educational plan to change unbeknownst to all members of the Team. In some cases, this will make it difficult for the Team and future Teams to have an accurate picture of the student’s progress therefore hindering the Team’s ability to make informed decisions for the student.

Recommendation

When specific programs, type of personnel, progress monitoring tools and timelines for these tools have been agreed upon by the Team, we recommend writing this specific information into the IEP. When specific and detailed information is written into the IEP, the Team ensures continuity for the student,

clarity to the service providers and the increased ability for parents/guardians to make educated and informed decisions for their child. During the IEP period, if a student demonstrates changing needs and/or a teacher's professional expertise leads him/her to believe a different program or tool is better suited, the IEP amendment process can be utilized to make such changes. We recommend all agreed upon specific information be included in IEPs by September 2022. This timeline allows for all IEP teams to conduct their annual review and make appropriate adjustments to the language of the IEP.

2. Concern

Parents express concern regarding communication and family engagement. Specifically, parents don't have a clear picture of the different substantially separate learning environments currently available to students in the Hanover Public School District. Parents also share that in some cases patterns of missed service time as a result of teacher meetings, professional development, absence, etc., are not communicated to families.

Recommendation

To advance communication and family engagement, we recommend:

a. implementing a Districtwide system and procedure for tracking service delivery by September 2022. We have been informed that efforts to address this concern began prior to Covid-19 and will be continuing. We support the continuation of District professionals piloting systems and working to identify best practices for tracking service delivery throughout the 2021-2022 school year. A Districtwide system will assist Teams in identifying possible patterns of missed services and when necessary, work to reconcile lost service time.

b. creating written descriptions of the various substantially separate learning environments, including but not limited to the language-based learning classrooms, currently available in the Hanover Public School District. These should include descriptive qualifiers, staffing requirements, philosophies and programs incorporated into the learning environment. We recommend this information be readily available to families and staff on our district website by Fall 2021.

3. Concern

In some cases parents shared that substantial changes were made to IEPs for students with language-based learning disabilities after pursuing a privately funded evaluation or hiring an advocate or lawyer. While this privately funded level of expertise may lead to more informed discussions for the families, it is crucial that the District is ensuring appropriate services and accurate diagnoses for all students with disabilities.

Recommendation

We recognize the time, effort and resources Hanover has invested into literacy programs, staff development, and additional educational tools in recent years. To ensure these efforts are yielding positive outcomes regarding early identification and appropriate level of service for students with a language based learning disability, we recommend:

- a. continued distribution of the Team Meeting Confidence Survey to families after the annual IEP meeting. We recommend incorporating an additional question that addresses the use of privately funded resources (ie. outside evaluations, advocates, educational consultants, etc.) used by the family. Adding a question where parents/guardians can indicate if they chose to use privately funded resources with an additional space allowing for an explanation of why may prove beneficial. A careful analysis of these answers may help the district identify possible trends of any ongoing or future systemic concerns. We recommend this additional question be added to the survey for the start of the 2021-2022 school year.
- b. Identify students still in Hanover Public Schools who experienced delayed identification of a language-based learning disability and/or engaged in a privately funded evaluation which resulted in significant changes to the IEP. Once this cohort is identified, conduct a thorough case study of each of the students' educational files, including a parent interview when appropriate, to gain a complete historical perspective on that student's experience in the Hanover Public Schools. Analyzing the path to delayed identification and appropriate services can prove highly beneficial. A thorough case study with multiple professional perspectives and analyses will help to ensure that, despite receiving these services in later grades, all areas of need for each of these students are now being adequately supported. Districtwide trends may be identified to help future students with similar learning profiles. The SEPAC and District professionals will continue to collaborate in order to define delayed identification

and identify the population of students to be reviewed through a case study analysis.

4. Concern

Parents express concern with the lack of a consistent writing curriculum as well as ample writing opportunities for students across the District. While the District adheres to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks, Hanover does not have a vertically or horizontally aligned writing program. Without an aligned writing curriculum that provides instruction coupled with multiple opportunities for practicing skills along with common grade level methods, expectations and resources, any student may experience difficulty with meeting or exceeding Massachusetts state standards. For students with a language-based learning disability this is critical to their progress as they work to close the gap between current performance and grade level expectations.

Recommendation

We recommend as the District continues to review its Tier 1 writing curriculum that it simultaneously focuses on researching additional writing curriculums that are suitable for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students. The appropriate staff should be provided with professional development and resources to ensure these curriculums are available to Tier 2 and Tier 3 students when they require it. Administration has informed us the review of Tier 1 writing curriculum should be finalized by September 2022. While we acknowledge significant time, research & professional development are necessary to adopt & implement a writing curriculum, we see this as a critical need for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students to close the gap between current performance and grade level expectations.

Additional recommendation

We recommend the District Administration provide quarterly updates to the School Committee on the progress of incorporating the Mass Literacy Initiative, the Dyslexia Guidance and the recommendations set forth by SEPAC in this document starting in Fall 2021.