

Future Management Systems, Inc.

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Program Evaluation Report Billerica Public Schools' Special Education Program 2004-2005

For the 2nd consecutive year, FMS completed an evaluation of Billerica Public Schools' Special Education Program. The evaluation collected information from parents of students who receive services about the effectiveness of programs funded under the auspices of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA). Through collaboration with the Billerica Special Education Director, her staff, and the Billerica Parent Advisory Council, a survey was distributed to parents of all Billerica special education students (approximately 1250). This survey, which was designed with parent input, was mailed to parents with their child's IEP (Individual Education Program) and returned to the Special Education Office with the required signature pages from the IEP. This method of distribution and collection insured that all parents received the survey and was an efficient and effective method of obtaining parental feedback. The surveys sought to determine the stakeholders' satisfaction with program operation and services, perceptions of programs' strengths and challenges, and suggestions for program improvements. The response rate was approximately 17%, with a total of 207 surveys returned overall. While the responses have been analyzed based on the specific schools where children attended school, it is important to note that a number of surveys (26) did not include the name of the school or referenced more than one school (where parents had multiple children in the Special Education program). All respondents were assured of the complete confidentiality of their responses. Survey data were aggregated and analyzed. Findings are reported below.

In addition, FMS was asked to collect data and to report on the dropout and graduation rates for special education students. The Billerica Special Education Director, in collaboration with the High School Principal, compiled data for the graduating class of 2005.

? **Parent Feedback**

Survey data indicate that parents are quite satisfied with their experience with Billerica's special education services/programs (See Table 1). While the number of parent returns to last year's parent (2003-2004) survey was much smaller than this year's, some results indicate significant progress in areas which suggested a need for improvement last year.

For, example, a major concern voiced by parents as part of the 2003-2004 survey was the amount of time that passed between a Team meeting and their receipt of the IEP. This year's survey indicated that a large majority of respondents (80%) "received my child's IEP in a timely manner (3-5 school days)". In reviewing specific school data, the Vining School and the Marshall Middle School parents indicate more concern in regard to this timeline than the other schools.

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Last year's survey also indicated a lack of satisfaction with parents' "understanding of the timelines and paperwork process associated with the Regulations". Parent returns in 2004-2005 indicate that most parents feel that they have been provided with information about their rights under the laws, that they have received the Parent's Rights brochure and that they are satisfied with the level of communication they have with school staff. This also represents an overall improvement in parent perception.

Another area of concern voiced by parents in the 2003-2004 survey related to the condition of their child's special education classroom/facility. This issue was not addressed in the 2004-2005 survey.

Many parents indicated that their child had not participated in any pre-referral activities prior to a referral to special education. This data must be considered with caution, however. It is likely that, in many cases, a number of years have passed since their child would have been involved in pre-referral activities. In addition, since the reporting and communication requirements involved with pre-referral activities are quite limited (certainly when compared to the special education process), it is altogether possible that parents may be unaware of pre-referral activities.

Almost all parents are aware of the SPED Parent Advisory Council, and most parents report that communication with the school staff was "easy and open". Parents reported, at a very high percentage (93%), that they felt that they were treated as equal participants in Team meetings and that their views and concerns were given consideration. For the most part (over 80%), parents viewed evaluation reports prepared by Team members as helpful and believed that the Team process increased their understanding of their child's "strengths, needs, and development".

Over 90% of parents reported that the Team meeting was scheduled in a timely manner and at a mutually convenient time, that there was a helpful exchange of information and ideas about the child's educational needs at the Team meeting, and that there was adequate time allotted for the Team meeting.

A slightly lower percentage (85%) indicated that they were able to communicate with their child's teachers (although it should be noted that the survey question did not specify *special education* teachers), and that they received their child's special education progress reports in "measurable terms". A similar number (86%) felt that the IEP developed for their child was appropriate.

An even lower percentage (79%) indicated their agreement that their child's IEP modifications and recommendations had been "effectively communicated and implemented between appropriate regular education and special education staff".

Survey results have also been analyzed based on school buildings (See Table 2). While there is widespread similarity among the different schools relative to survey results, one or two schools appear to have a lower level of satisfaction in several areas. (This impression, however, should be considered in perspective. Since the number of parent responses in individual buildings was

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quite small and, in the schools with the least favorable responses, represented only 13% of the total special education parent population, 2 or 3 dissatisfied parents could easily skew the findings for a single building.)

In addition to the data generated by survey responses, parents were given the opportunity to comment on various issues. The most useful information elicited through the comment option came from Question # 14: *Please describe any changes or recommendations you may have for improving the referral/evaluation, review, re-evaluation and/or Team meeting process.* It is noteworthy that many parents, when given the opportunity to voice concerns or suggest improvements, used this question as an opportunity to indicate their level of satisfaction with the process. (See Table 3).

While it is important to note that each comment reflects a single parent's (or family's) views, some issues received attention through multiple comments. Many of these themes were complimentary in nature, while others suggest areas of concern. Parent comments and themes included:

- We are very happy with the program
- All went well
- I think it is fine as is
- No change required
- We are very pleased with the process, everyone has been very helpful and open
- Everyone has been exceptional his year
- All was informative, to the point and promising
- I was very impressed with the entire process
- Everyone I have encountered has been extremely helpful
- Very satisfied – Staff was great!
- They do a wonderful job and my child is happy and learning so I am happy
- The town of Billerica has been extremely helpful

- The initial evaluation process seems to be the slowest. It took almost an entire year....
- A follow-up call or type of communication would be helpful
- I would like her (staff member) to communicate with parents and involve me in the process
- Parent input is crucial
- Please refrain from looking at the dollar amount and give children what they need when they need it
- Parents need to be informed of the meeting time and date before the meeting has taken place
- I think a general outline/overview of the process and timeframe it takes should be provided to the parent upon initial request
- Re-evaluation process was difficult to understand from the written reports
- I felt they did not clearly state the modifications we discussed in the meeting
- Communication needs to be better

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? **Dropout/Graduation Rates**

The principal of Billerica High School provided data relative to the dropout and graduation rates for students in the graduating class of 2005. This information is summarized below:

- **Dropout rate:**
 - Total number of students in Class of 2005 = 352
 - Total number of dropouts = 6 (1.7%)
 - Total number of seniors with IEP's = 26
 - Total number of dropouts, special needs students = 1 (3.8%)

- **Graduation rate:**
 - Total number of students in Class of 2005 = 352
 - Total number of dropouts = 6
 - Certificate of Attainment (Life Skills) = 2
 - Certificate of Attainment = 1
 - Number of graduates = 343 (97.4%)
 - Total number of seniors with IEP's = 26
 - Total number of seniors with IEP's earning diploma = 25 (96%)

? **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Survey results indicate significant improvement in the level of parent satisfaction since the 2003-2004 parent survey was administered. It is important to note that this evaluation only reflects input from parent surveys and that the findings are based on feedback included in the 207 surveys returned (out of a special education population of approximately 1250).

Nonetheless, the parents who responded (a much larger number than reflected in the previous evaluation) expressed general satisfaction with the services and programming offered by Billerica School District. Parents, in general, feel involved and included in the process; they are aware of the Parent Advisory Council and feel positive about the level and ease of communication with the staff. Many parents praised the staff for being helpful and for the success of their child's program. When asked for suggestions relative to the need for changes for improvement, many parents indicated that there was no need for any changes.

As Billerica considers areas of possible concern and as they plan for subsequent evaluations, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Some parents continue to voice a lack of understanding of the process, particularly the initial evaluation phase. While the Special Education Department currently provides training for parents on this topic, it's important to remember that parents of students newly referred may not have had the opportunity to participate in this training (and,

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unlike most parents involved, have no history with the special education process, paperwork, etc.).

2. The staff should continue to provide (on at least an annual basis) training program for parents relative to special education procedures, processes, paperwork and timelines. This training should address federal, state and local special education issues and programs. In addition to the training program, the schools should insure that parents receive (at least annually) written materials which explain and define these issues.
3. Some parents shared concerns relative to the level of communication between special education staff and the child's mainstream teachers, including the implementation of accommodations from the IEP in the classroom. This issue also deserves examination. As in all school systems, ongoing training of regular educators relative to the needs of special needs students in their classrooms and the teachers' responsibilities is critical. Specifically, regular educators need opportunities to for ongoing learning relative to:
 - Current methods and materials for meeting the needs of diverse learners in mainstream settings
 - Assistive technology: What's available? How does it work? How could it meet the needs of current students?
 - Learning styles, learning differences and successful approaches for meeting students' needs
 - Disability awareness: Understanding various disabilities, their etiology, symptoms, presentation in educational settings, and strategies for accommodating for students with these disabilities.(The District may wish to conduct a needs assessment of staff regarding their training needs.)
4. The data relative to dropouts and graduation rates (although specific to only one class) suggests that there is no significant difference between students with disabilities and their typical peers.
5. In order to broaden the level of information, future evaluation processes should include other "stakeholders". Regular and special educators should be given an opportunity to share impressions and offer feedback. And, there may be value in focusing on specific program areas, including on-site observations, interview and record reviews.

It has been a pleasure working with the Billerica Special Education Director and staff again this year. The current evaluation indicates that areas of concern identified in the previous evaluation have been addressed and that progress is being made. Parent responses suggest a significant level of satisfaction with the process, the programs and with children's progress. The Billerica Special Education staff should be commended for their ongoing efforts, for their skills and for the level of professionalism which are required to produce these results.