



# HINGHAM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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**Dr. Suzanne Vinnes**  
Director of Student Services

November 2018

Dear Special Education Community,

The purpose of this *Dear Special Education Community* letter is to provide a formal update of the work completed as I conclude the first few months of my induction to the Hingham Community and to share some developments from the Student Services Department. It has been very exciting to get to know faculty, students, families, and the broader Hingham community. I continue to be humbled by the outpouring of support that has been offered me and look forward to leading such a strong and talented faculty.

## **Welcome New Faculty**

In August, the Student Services Department welcomed the following new faculty: Elementary - Amanda Harding, Special Education Teacher (South), Amy Shaker, Occupational Therapist (South) Colleen Franke, School Psychologist/Team Chair (PRS), Stephanie Whalen-McCosker, Special Education Teacher (PRS), Karen Costello, Special Education Teacher (East), Rachel Petit, Special Education Teacher (East), and Amy Miller, Special Education Teacher (Foster). Korey Oulette (Special Education Teachers) joined us at the Middle School and Rebecca Liebal (Special Education Teacher) and Laura Bennett (Psychologist/Team Chair) joined us at HHS. Also, in just the past month, we have welcomed Shannon Nunzio, Occupational Therapist, to support our current OT faculty in their provision of services. Finally, Marissa Brezner, Speech and Language Pathologist, has come onboard to assume the speech and language responsibilities at HHS. The addition of these professionals has provided much needed resources toward our efforts in meeting the needs of our students.

## **Professional Development**

Over the past few months, the Student Services Department has continued to support our faculty in their professional learning experiences. In October, the Student Services Department joined the Literacy Department in supporting 7 reading specialists and 8 special educators in attending “Dyslexia and the Brain” at Harvard Medical School. Upon their return, these teachers shared out pertinent information to the rest of our department so that we could all benefit from the information learned. Just recently, our Team Chairs, myself, and our Assistant Director, Liz O’Neill, attended a Special Education Legal Summit in Randolph. Topics discussed included educating students with significant health care needs, a review of 2018 Case Law, and strategies to resolve Special Education disputes.

This month, our 6 Speech and Language Pathologists will attend ASHA’s national conference. ASHA (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association) is the premier annual professional education event for speech-language pathologists, audiologists, and speech, language, and hearing scientists. This year the ASHA convention is being held in Boston, bringing together approximately 15,000 attendees. Also, on November 20<sup>th</sup>

I will be facilitating the first of a two-part professional development series entitled “Using a Strengths and Challenges Model to Hold IEP Meetings and Write Individualized Education Programs.” All Special Education faculty will come together to learn how to make IEP meetings even more efficient, clear, transparent, and informative. The second session will be held in March with a focus on the development of IEPs. I am excited that we were able to support these opportunities and expand our in-district offerings.

### **Special Education Faculty Meetings**

Each month, 4 faculty meetings (Chairs/Psychologists, Elementary Special Education Faculty, Middle School Special Education Faculty, High School Special Education Faculty) are held across the district to support collaboration, provide professional development, and increase consistency across the district. These have been terrific opportunities to get to know staff, understand the challenges they face, and most importantly, receive an update on the progress their students are making. I treasure these opportunities where we can come together to collaborate and celebrate accomplishments.

### **School Visits**

Over the past 6 weeks, I have had the pleasure of spending a full school day in each of the six schools. My visits have included observations of most Special Education classes and planning meetings with administration and teachers. I have truly enjoyed engaging with students, watching them work, and observing strong, effective instruction. These visits have been very positive and have verified the hard working, compassionate, and effectiveness of our teachers’ instruction.

### **Special Education Continuous Improvement Task Force**

The district formed the Special Education Continuous Improvement Task Force (SECITF) to provide a collaborative effort between the school district and our community in the planning and execution of a district wide program evaluation. The first programs the SECITF identified to be evaluated were the programs of Hingham Middle School.

#### *HMS Program Evaluation*

Last Spring, Boston University was selected to conduct a comprehensive Special Education program evaluation of the Hingham Middle School programs. The primary goal of the evaluation was to assess the needs of the Special Education department relative to: resource allocation, the role of paraeducators, the collaboration between special and general education teachers, and a review of our specialized programs.

As this work began last year, we initially expected to receive a report from BU by October 31, 2018. In September, our Assistant Superintendent, Dr. LaBillois, and I met with the BU team to get an update of their status. At that time, in discussion with the BU team, we asked that they return to HMS to conduct focus groups with our guidance counselors and reading specialists, as well as observe our students with disabilities during their inclusion in general education classes. We both felt these were key areas requiring focus as the BU team concludes the evaluation. A month extension was granted and we anticipate receiving their final report and recommendations by the end of the month.

Once the report has been received by the district and shared with our Special Education Continuous Improvement Task Force, an informational meeting will be held at HMS to provide interested families with the results, as well as a detailed account of the steps to be taken to address the report’s findings. Formal presentations will also be made to our SEPAC and the Hingham School Committee in the coming weeks.

The district is seeking parents willing to volunteer to be part of this work. Specifically, the district is seeking volunteers from South Elementary School and Hingham Middle School to serve as parent representatives to the SECITF. Interested parents or guardians who would like to volunteer to support this work are asked to contact Dr. Suzanne Vinnes by 11/28/18.

### **Next Steps**

As we enter these winter months, I'm excited to continue the work of examining our programming to ensure that we are working toward making our vision a reality: a public system that provides a strong Special Education program grounded in excellence: An excellence achieved through 1) positive and collaborative parent/school partnerships grounded in mutual respect and transparency, 2) the adjustment or development of programs to meet the unique and evolving needs of our students, 3) operating a fiscally responsible and well run system of providing specialized instruction, and 4) creating a safe environment where we are all learning, growing, and taking risks together.

Should there be any questions or concerns about this update, or if you have any ideas or suggestions for how best to share future information, please do not hesitate to be in touch.