



Special Education Program Review – Frequently Asked Questions – March 23, 2011

The following questions have been raised by the Special Education Program Review Parent Advisory Committee and through individual questions from various parents. This document hopes to answer those questions and serves to inform a larger group. Please direct any questions to the tri-district planning team: Dr. Julie Cooley, Dr. Anne Wirtz, Anne Dunn, or Steve Johnson (see below for contact information).

Has the special education tri-district study team engaged in thorough planning? A comprehensive Action Plan was developed and reviewed by the superintendents: Dr. H. Griffith and Dr. J. Asplund, the tri-district boards of education members: Marilyn Harlow (115), Nicki Snoblin (115), Chris Rossman (67), Sally McDonald(67) and Mary Jane Brady (65) , and community members who serve on school board committees (see <http://www.lfhs.org/board/committees.html> and <http://www.lf67.org/schoolboard/committees.html> for full education committee list). The Action Plan has been posted on all district websites and was reviewed during a Special Education Parent Advisory Meeting in February. Feedback on the Action Plan will continue to be considered. Progress on the Action Plan will be discussed at future Parent Advisory meetings and updates posted on school websites for all parents with any students with an IEP to view. A variety of consultants are involved in the process and 18 months of planning will be completed by fall 2012.

What is the current state of the district's relationship with NSSED and their administration? NSSED is an active and cooperative partner in the tri-district study. NSSED has experience in assisting other districts when they take back one or more special education programs. When they offer assistance, they keep the best interest of students at the forefront. For the last three years, NSSED administrators have offered support to Lake Forest and Lake Bluff when new district programs were developed in-district for early childhood students and for high school students who need more intensive emotional and behavioral supports. Active discussions between district and NSSED administrators continue to occur and alternative arrangements are being developed and considered.

How are the “decision makers” (superintendents and school board members) involved? Both superintendents and school board members receive regular updates on progress of the study. A meeting was held in January with superintendents and several board members present. Parents who attended the meeting were able to hear their perspectives and ask questions. A similar meeting now scheduled for April 19, 2011 at 6:30 PM. Updates have occurred at most school board meetings and through regular questions from several board members.

What is the function of Parent Advisory Committee and did any parent volunteers get left out? A parent advisory was formed to provide ongoing feedback and to create recommendations that will go to each superintendent. The committee includes parents from each of the three districts and represents primary, middle and high school grades. The Lake Bluff/Lake Forest LDA was invited to participate to represent parents whose children may receive a related service from an NSSED provider and to help inform the larger group of parents. Only one parent who applied to the committee was not asked to participate because they did not have a student in special education. No parents with a student currently in the “transition program” applied to the

committee. However, a sub-committee of parents with a student in transition programs (or recent grads) will be formed if enough parents will agree to participate.

Which factor is most important: quality programs, educating students in their own community or financial considerations? Quality education is at the heart of every decision made in our districts. Each of the tri-districts has always been committed to educating students in our community when that is the best educational placement. Recent financial hardships have become a more prominent consideration and impact all educational programs in our districts. Despite the tough economic times – quality programs remain our priority.

Do you plan to share financial information related to this decision? During the January meeting and in subsequent board meetings general information related to potential savings has been discussed. Financial information will continue to be shared at future meetings.

What are the benchmarks of quality that are under consideration? A plan to evaluate future programs is under development with input from the Parent Advisory. A review of state standards, best practice literature and research will be considered to benchmark quality.

Will a continuum of services and placements continue to be available? A continuum of services is required by federal and state special education laws. Our districts will always have students who need placements outside of the district and this will continue to be determined based on individual needs by IEP teams. Our tri-districts have always considered and placed students in programs run by other school districts or other special education cooperatives and will continue to do so when it is the best available placement.

If our districts withdraw from NSSED will those placements still be available? Based on past practice, NSSED has accepted students from non-member districts when space is available. NSSED cannot guarantee placement for any non-member districts. The NSSED board members make this type of decision. Our districts will pursue such placements with NSSED when in the best interest of students.

What will happen to students currently in NSSED programs? Placement decisions for all students will continue to take place during annual IEP meetings. Natural breaks in school programs (such as moving from middle to high school) will be considered by our district administration. NSSED programs change yearly based on enrollment, so some programs that used to exist – no longer do – this is always a factor that could impact placement decisions. NSSED has assured tri-district administrators that they are will participate in any transition discussions with student needs in mind.

Will current Educational Life Skills educators be hired by the high school? It is in the best interest of students in the Educational Life Skills programs to hire as many of the outstanding educators in the ELS program as is possible. This has been discussed with those teachers and while they too have shown interest, formal meetings can't take place until more planning occurs. The high school administration, superintendent, and school board members highly value this group of educators. NSSED supports districts hiring of their staff whenever a program becomes district run.

Post High School Transition Program – what will be available? Where will it be located? Preliminary plans are to create a program in downtown Lake Forest for students who need transition programs until the age of 22. It

is too early to decide on an exact location, but an adult oriented site near downtown is desired. Factors such as access to the train station, downtown work sites, restaurants, Lake Forest College, etc. will be considered.

A planning committee of educators and consultants, with input from parents, will begin planning soon and will continue through the 2011-12 school year. The goal will be to help students structure their day, much like it will be when their school program ends. It will vary depending on student need, but could contain; educational components, on the job skills development, volunteer or service to the community, leisure and recreation and continued life skills development such as money management. Helping families understand and link to adult services and meaningful outcomes will be a key component for all students and families.

What will happen to these programs or services:

- Extended school year for ELS students – this would be held in our tri-district schools, including Lake Forest High School.
- NSSRA relationship – this would continue to be available and is not dependent upon NSSED.
- Behavior or autism support – the tri-districts have always used a variety of consultants, both provided by NSSED or independent consultants. This type of support as needed will continue to be utilized, but it is unclear if NSSED would be open to this type of service. This has always been a fee based service regardless of the provider.
- Relationship with Department of Human Services – Lake Forest High School would contract services directly from DHS.
- Vocational and transition supports – would continue to be available at the same level as currently provided by district employees. LFHS currently has professionals that support these important activities as part of their duties. More professionals will be needed and could potentially be hired from NSSED.
- Visions – Post High School Planning Program – LFHS has been an active participant in planning and implementation of the Visions program, including having the program on-site last year. It is hoped that we could maintain this partnership with NSSED area high schools.
- Parent workshops offered by NSSED – the tri-districts would conduct a needs assessment and determine what locally provided parent programs would be of interest. We plan to explore whether or not NSSED would continue to allow participation on a fee basis.
- Adult services tours – LFHS understands the need for this important service and would arrange for this activity to continue to meet the needs of our students and families. A knowledgeable professional would be hired to program for this area.

If our districts withdraw from NSSED, how will this affect existing district special education programs? Over the past several years we have taken on the responsibility for several new programs. As we increased our expertise and expanded resources, it has benefited students beyond those specific programs. For example, the greater our working knowledge is about early learning needs, the more we can apply this knowledge to other district students when the need arises. This can occur in a number of ways, including staff consultations, more focused evaluations or sharing of materials. Another example of how development of new programs has benefited other students occurred at Lake Forest High School. About four years ago it was determined that a program was needed for students who required more support academically and help with transition to post high school options. In response to this need, the Applied Learning Program was created. Due to this program, all students in special education have benefited from a greater focus on transition services, which is now serving all

students better. We anticipate providing better supports for all special education students each time we expand our own programs and services.

Why are the districts considering information from non-North Shore districts and why would the district look to the west for partnerships?

Our tri-district has always had partnerships with professionals beyond the NSSED or North Shore schools. Collaboration of special education administrators from all over our region has always been a valued, proved beneficial and occurred on a regular basis. This high level of collaboration has benefited our students in many ways over the years. We will continue this pursuit during this study and on into the future to foster collaboration that will maximize area resources that suit the unique needs of our students. Examples include: we have had students attend public schools in Vernon Hills, Palatine and Highland Park; we have also frequently used a collaboratively managed job site in Lincolnshire.

How do we prepare staff and students for new students with significant needs entering local schools?

Lake Forest High School has had students with significant needs in the building for many years and the faculty has embraced an inclusive ideal. Both Lake Bluff and Lake Forest has been building district capacity to help students with more diverse or significant needs over the past several years. A variety of professional development opportunities have been offered in districts and other types of supports offered as needed. A yearly needs assessment completed by teachers will help determine what type of additional preparation may be needed.

How will a new superintendent for District 67 and 115 or other changes in administration affect this process?

Changes in administration will happen over a period of several years, with key study team members always available to assist during the transitions. Dr. Harry Griffith is not retiring until July 1, 2012 and Dr. John Asplund, superintendent of Lake Bluff Schools, will continue to provide his support. He, along with a new superintendent will oversee any program changes into the future. Other study team administrators will also be part of the program implementation and evaluation over the course of many years. Our districts have maintained quality programs despite other changes in various administrators several times in recent years.

Will each district decide on its own whether or not to stay or leave NSSED?

Each school board made an independent decision to provide an 18 month notice of withdrawal to NSSED in January 2011. Any decision related to NSSED must be made by each individual district based on the unique needs of that district. Lake Forest and Lake Bluff school districts value our partnerships and this would be maintained in any scenario.