

**STRATEGIC PLAN FOR EDUCATING
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
IN THE CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

*Adopted by the
Cambridge School Committee*

July 18, 2000

Cambridge Public Schools
Cambridge, Massachusetts

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This strategic plan represents the culmination of a collaborative planning process that drew on the contributions of many Cambridge educators, parents, and community members.

First and foremost, John Malloy, Interim Director of the Bureau of Pupil Services, and Drew Parkin, parent of a student with special needs, deserve special mention for their unflagging efforts to give form to the numerous ideas and concerns voiced about the need to improve special education in the City of Cambridge. Dr. Malloy made completion of the plan his top priority and never wavered in meeting this critical need; his dedication and hands-on leadership turned good intentions into reality. Mr. Parkin, the plan's principal author, brought his planning expertise and his commitment to the City's special education students to the endeavor, spending long hours synthesizing myriad recommendations into a coherent set of strategies.

The planning process was initiated in January 2000, following a Cambridge School Committee resolution that directed Superintendent Bobbi D'Alessandro to develop a plan for enhancing the education of the City's students with disabilities. Already a strong proponent of improving the City's special education system, Superintendent D'Alessandro provided critical oversight and resolute support for the plan's development. She was assisted in this endeavor by her Special Education Advisory Committee and by Tom Hehir. Dr. Hehir served as consultant to the Superintendent, eloquently voicing the key tenets of inclusionary education and special education laws, and outlining the plan's implementation strategy.

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Several parents brought their front-line experience to the planning process, including Rene Kazinsky, chair of the Parent's Advisory Council for Special Education; Nancy Brickhouse, the Council's co-chair; Karen Dobak; James Monteverde; Robert and Virginia Swain; and Mary Parkin, who also edited several drafts of the plan.

The Cambridge Teachers' Association's Inclusion Study Committee, consisting of Jamilla Bakr, Barbara Boyle, Chris Colbath-Hess, Annette Cournoyer, Arthur Gilman, Leslie Kramer, Alice O'Brien-Mouseau, and CTA President Roger O'Sullivan, reviewed the draft plan and offered detailed and constructive recommendations.

All elementary school principals reviewed the draft plan and attended meetings to discuss plan concepts and strategies for plan implementation. Principals Len Solo and Joseph Petner also served on the Superintendent's Special Education Advisory Committee and were instrumental in defining the central role that principals must play if the strategic plan is to succeed.

And finally, beyond their role as decision-makers, each member of the Cambridge School Committee took an active personal interest in this plan. Mayor Anthony Galluccio and

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STRATEGIC PLAN FOR EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

The Cambridge School Committee has directed that the Superintendent prepare a “strategic plan” for special education. The plan must effectively implement the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, as well as the Commonwealth of Massachusetts’ Chapter 766. It must also be compatible with School Committee policies. The goal of the plan is to provide meaningful guidance for enhancing the educational experience of Cambridge's students with disabilities from age 3 to graduation or age 22, in order that they might achieve their full potential and be productive members of society. The plan also aims to ensure that special education programs and practices enrich the education of all students in the Cambridge Public School system. In developing and evaluating special education services for individual students, the Cambridge Public Schools will employ the standard of "maximum feasible benefit."

This strategic plan is the result of a detailed review of recommendations for improving Cambridge’s special education programs as offered in various reports and forums. Source materials include: (1) the Massachusetts Department of Education’s *Cambridge Public Schools Coordinated Program Review Report of Findings*; (2) *Assessment of Special Education Services in Cambridge* by Sue Gordon and Heidi Miller; (3) Cambridge Public Schools Interim Report, K-8 (draft) by Dr. Tom Hehir; (4) a memo to Superintendent Bobbie D’Alessandro on the elements of a successful inclusion program prepared by Dr. Anne Larkin; and (5) notes from a December 2, 1999, Superintendent’s Special Education Advisory Committee issue forum. The draft plan was made available to the Cambridge School Committee, the Superintendent’s Special Education Advisory Committee, school principals, Bureau of Pupil Services staff, the Cambridge Teachers Association’s Inclusion Study Committee, and interested parents and members of the community. Several people offered written comments. All comments were considered in the preparation of the final plan.

The plan is predicated on the following basic principles:

- All children, including students with disabilities, deserve a high quality educational experience, access to the general curriculum, and full participation in the activities of the school community.
- Educating students with disabilities is the responsibility of the entire school system, not just special educators.
- Students with disabilities are entitled to the same level of school choice and program options as other students.
- Inclusion is a fundamental civil right.
- Services are determined by the needs of the child, not by the availability of programs or resources.
- Properly conceived and implemented, programs for educating students with disabilities can provide significant benefits to the entire school community.

The strategic plan contains the following key elements:

1. It identifies the underlying principles that will serve as the basis for Cambridge's future special education initiatives from kindergarten through the 12th grade or, for qualified students, age 3 to 22.
2. It establishes strong and supportive system-wide leadership through a new Office of Special Education.
3. It supports a full continuum of services and placement options.
4. It promotes school-based planning for educating students with disabilities, with a strong emphasis on inclusive programs and flexible service delivery models.
5. It provides guidelines for curriculum development and modification, student assessment, and other essential educational components.
6. It identifies and clarifies the role of parents and ways to facilitate their involvement.
7. It provides guidance for using financial resources to support special education activities.
8. It provides guidance on plan implementation and evaluation, including periodic review by teachers, administrators, and parents.

The strategic plan sets a direction for Cambridge's special education programs and services for the years 2000 through 2005. The actions described in the plan are general in nature rather than detailed prescriptions. Pragmatic issues about implementation are left to system-wide administrators, principals, and others who might be responsible for a given action.

The plan should not be viewed as static but rather as a dynamic set of principles and actions that can -- and should -- be modified and refined as they are implemented and as educators and parents learn more about what works best for the City's children.

1. SYSTEM-WIDE GUIDANCE

Objective: Clear and explicit guidance will be available to direct the education of all students with disabilities.¹

Actions:

1.1 Adopt a concise *mission statement* that captures the Cambridge Public Schools' special education philosophy and objectives. The following mission statement is proposed:

“Students with disabilities have the same rights of access and belonging as other students and are offered a high quality education that is consistent with their individual needs.”²

1.2 Establish a *policy statement* to direct the Cambridge Public Schools' special education programs. This statement will set forth general principles for assuring that students with disabilities receive a high quality educational experience and access to the general curriculum.

1.3 Prepare a comprehensive *policy and procedures manual* that implements federal and state laws and provides specific guidance for implementing the concepts contained in the strategic plan. The manual will be made available to administrators, teachers, and others involved in the education of students with disabilities.

1.4 Prepare a plan for each Cambridge elementary school and the high school for educating students with disabilities. These *school-based plans* will include short and long-term goals along with strategies and a schedule for achieving them. Inclusion will be an integral component of these plans.³ Plans will be tailored to complement regular education programs and to enhance the educational experiences of *all* students. Each principal will be responsible for overseeing preparation and implementation of the plan for his or her school. School Councils and the Office of Special Education (see action 2.1) will collaborate in the development of these plans. Plans will be integrated with School Improvement Plans and will be reviewed annually to determine if circumstances have changed.

¹ The term “students with disabilities” refers to students from age 3 to 22 who are eligible to receive special education services as defined by federal and state law.

² The Cambridge Public Schools adhere to a “controlled choice” policy that allows parents to select the school for their elementary school-aged children subject to certain guidelines and restrictions.

³ “Inclusion” refers to programs that integrate children with disabilities into the regular school community to the fullest extent consistent with a given child’s needs. For many students, inclusion means being in a regular classroom full-time and having the necessary supports to succeed in this environment. For other students, it may mean receiving some services in a regular classroom and some in a “pull-out” setting. For still others, it may mean a substantially separate classroom but with frequent and meaningful interaction with the regular school community. Regardless, as defined by federal and state law, students should be placed in “the least restrictive environment” consistent with their needs. (This is often referred to as “LRE.”) It is the needs of the student -- not the availability of programs and resources -- that determines the extent to which the child is integrated into the regular school community.

2. LEADERSHIP & COORDINATION

Objective: The Office of Special Education will serve a vital leadership, coordination, and advocacy function, while direct intervention will increasingly be the responsibility of the individual schools.

Actions:

2.1 Rename the system-wide office that administers special education programs to more aptly describe its function and place in the Cambridge Public Schools' administrative structure. The proposed name is the **Office of Special Education**.

2.2 Establish the position of director of the Office of Special Education as an “executive director,” and make this position reportable directly to the Superintendent. The executive director’s primary responsibilities will be to: (1) supervise system-wide special education activities, and (2) evaluate the effectiveness of school-based special education services at the pre-school, elementary school, and high school levels.

2.3 The Office of Special Education will:

- Be accountable for ensuring compliance with federal and state special education laws and regulations and with Cambridge School Committee policies.
- Take responsibility for coordinating and allocating funds for special education services.
- Facilitate the implementation, evaluation, and revision of this strategic plan..
- Take the lead in researching promising models and techniques for educating students with special needs, and work in tandem with administrators and teachers to apply these.
- Be an active partner with all elementary schools and the high school in the development and implementation of plans and programs for including students with disabilities.
- Collaborate with the Professional Development Office and the Staff Council to implement professional development programs for administrators, teachers, and others involved in the education of children with disabilities.
- Assign a person from the Office of Special Education’s central office to serve as a key contact for special education activities within each school. This person will supply information, monitor the school’s special education-related needs, facilitate resolution of issues, and otherwise assist school-based staff and parents in planning for and delivering special education services.
- Within each elementary school and each “small school” within the high school, designate a staff person to serve as coordinator for Office of Special Education-related services. Typically this will be the school psychologist. This person will oversee Individualized Education Plan development and implementation, address parent and staff questions and concerns, assist the principal in coordinating overall planning and delivery of services, and serve as a communication link between the school and the Office of Special Education.

- Maintain frequent communication with principals, special education and regular education staff, and parents on topics related to special education. While continuing to use traditional modes of communication, make increased use of email and the Internet as a means to exchange information.⁴
- In collaboration with principals, monitor equity of natural proportions at all Cambridge Public Schools (see action 4.4).
- Prepare and distribute to parents an end-of-year “customer satisfaction survey.” The survey will focus on overall service delivery and is not intended as a means to evaluate the performance of individual educators or specialists.

2.4 Assign principals the responsibility for implementing school-based special education plans, programs, and services. (As referenced in action 2.3, the Office of Special Education will collaborate in this. In combination, principals and the Office of Special Education will ensure overall compliance with procedural requirements of applicable Federal and state law.)

2.5 Convene a Superintendent’s Special Education Advisory Committee and use this committee as a means to facilitate communication and provide advice on special education issues. The committee will address system-wide questions, not child-specific issues. The committee will consist of parents, educators, and community representatives. The director of the Office of Special Education will serve as chair.

3. LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Objective: The Cambridge Public Schools will meet all federal and state legal requirements relating to the education of students with disabilities.

Actions:

3.1 Fully implement federal and state special education laws and regulations, including meeting all Massachusetts Department of Education program review criteria. Examples of these criteria include:

- Preparation of written assessments
- Timely evaluations
- Individualized Education Plan signature requirements
- Parental involvement in drafting of Individualized Education Plans
- Goals presented in measurable terms
- Team chairperson designation and attendance at team meetings
- Team-based reviews
- Written notification to parents
- Notice of team meetings

3.2 Establish procedures and provide necessary staff to ensure timely determination of eligibility.

⁴ Email and the Internet open new and exciting ways to exchange information. Care must be taken to ensure that parents and others are not excluded from the exchange of information due to a lack of access to these technologies.

3.3 Using a checklist, summary report, or other tool, provide parents, principals, and other Individualized Education Plan team members with a means to monitor plan development and service delivery.

3.4 Conduct training sessions on federal and state requirements for principals, Individualized Education Plan team leaders, team members, and other staff as appropriate.

4. STUDENT PLACEMENT

Objective: A full range of placements will be available, and placement decisions will be made by the Individualized Education Plan team based on what is appropriate for the child rather than what is available or convenient.

Actions:

4.1 Provide a full range of special education options within the Cambridge Public Schools, from full inclusion in regular classrooms to specialized "self-contained" classrooms to hybrid programs.⁵

4.2 Provide expanded placement opportunities for children with intensive special needs or low-incidence disabilities traditionally educated in self-contained classrooms and outplacements.

4.3 Provide a stable environment for students with disabilities by maintaining year-to-year continuity of services in the same school. This will, at a minimum, require reconfiguration of some self-contained classrooms.

4.4 Achieve a balance in each school between students with disabilities and typical students in order to have a diverse, inclusive student body. The balance of students with disabilities to typical students should approximate "natural proportions," that is, the mix of students in any given school should mirror that of the community as a whole.⁶ Principals are responsible for monitoring natural proportions within their schools. If a principal concludes that the balance is being exceeded, and that this is affecting the school's capacity to provide quality services to both students with disabilities and regular education students, he or she should communicate this to the Superintendent in order that corrective measures might be initiated. Corrective actions might include relocating Special Start or other "feeder" programs, facilitating development of programs in other schools, working with parents to identify suitable alternatives, or, when necessary, placing a temporary cap on enrollment for all students. Regardless, no student should be removed from a placement solely to achieve natural proportions.

⁵This range is often referred to as prototypes 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. A student in a prototype 1 placement is in a regular classroom for all or most of his/her education. A student in a prototype 4 placement receives all or most educational services in a separate classroom. Prototypes 3 and 4 are hybrids where students receive part of their education in a separate setting and part in a regular classroom. A prototype 2 placement will involve more time in a regular classroom, a prototype 3 less. A prototype 5 is a placement outside of the public school system.

⁶ This action is not meant to infer that an arbitrary procedure or formula be established, nor that parental rights regarding school choice be diminished. Rather, it suggests that school officials be cognizant of the need for balance and equity when establishing programs, making placement decisions, and otherwise taking actions that affect the mix of students.

4.5 In implementing action 4.4, seek to achieve a concentration and mix of students with disabilities within a given school that will allow for efficient delivery of services and for these students to have “ability peers.”

4.6 As a part of the annual Individualized Education Plan process, re-evaluate the needs of children receiving services in self-contained classrooms to identify those who might be better served in a more inclusive environment, and create opportunities for this. (Section 5, *Implementing Inclusion*, describes steps that will be taken to provide these opportunities.)

4.7 Continue to recognize placement in out-of-district settings (“outplacements”) as a viable and necessary option for the student with disabilities whose needs cannot be met in the public school setting. At the same time, recognize the value of increasing options for these students within the Cambridge Public Schools. Welcome families with students in outplacements to stay engaged in the activities of their “home” schools, and maintain active communication with these families to plan for the student’s potential return. As part of the annual Individualized Education Plan process, students in outplacements should be re-evaluated to determine if these placements continue to be warranted or whether their needs can be met within the Cambridge Public Schools. In the latter case, ensure that the necessary services are in place prior to the student’s return.

4.8 When circumstances allow, commence planning for placement transitions early in the year with the aim of having plans in place six months prior to the proposed transition.

4.9 Compile and maintain information about the community and school population that can be used to identify trends and special circumstances that might influence future placement needs.

5. IMPLEMENTING INCLUSION

Objective: Meaningful inclusion opportunities will be provided in all schools, all grades, and all classes.

Actions:

5.1 Provide the opportunity for all students with disabilities to be educated in any Cambridge Public School in accordance with Individualized Education Plan team recommendations and the Cambridge Controlled Choice Policy. Students will receive appropriate support services regardless of the school selected. This opportunity will exist whether or not a school has completed inclusive program development as described in the following action. To help parents make an informed choice, information should be made available regarding each school’s special education programs and services.

5.2 Systematically increase the capacity of all schools to educate students with disabilities in regular classrooms. Each school will prepare to offer high quality inclusionary education for its students through a systematic capacity-building program that will include appropriate planning, professional development, and infrastructure development. (Planning for inclusion is a key component of the school-based plans described in Section 1, *System-wide Guidance*, action 1.4. Professional development is described in more detail in Section 6, *Professional Development*. Infrastructure considerations include pre-determined classroom size, program coordination, technical supports for curriculum adaptation and modification, instructional supports, and team development.)

5.3 Create a culture where all Cambridge Public School teachers and administrators view the education of students with disabilities as a core value and responsibility.

5.4 In each school with one or more separate or substantially separate special education classes, prepare a plan for including these students in a meaningful and substantive way with the rest of the school, ensuring that they have both access to the general educational curriculum *and* the opportunity to participate in all school-based programs and activities available to regular education students, including assemblies, field trips, school publications, extra-curricular activities, and after-school programs. This plan will be a component of the school-based plan called for in action 1.4. (Action 8.4 provides more specificity for the high school.)

5.5 In the Individualized Education Plan for each student in a separate or substantially separate special education class, ensure that specific reference is made to how the student is to be included in school activities outside the self-contained classroom.

5.6 Establish a disability awareness curriculum that will be presented each year in all schools.

5.7 Create, implement, and disseminate a meaningful model for inclusive education at the middle school level.

5.8 Provide the flexibility to creatively use both special education and regular school budgets to facilitate school-based inclusive programs. (See Section 16, *Financial Resources*)

6. PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Objective: Educators will be equipped with the knowledge necessary to provide high quality educational services to all students with disabilities.

Actions:

6.1 Establish an introductory professional development course for *all* administrators, teachers, and other appropriate staff that focuses on special education concepts, law, and the Cambridge Public Schools' approach to educating students with disabilities.

6.2 Initiate a systematic special education professional development program for Cambridge educators, including principals, teachers, and paraprofessionals. To the extent possible, make the program school-based. Educators should actively be involved in the development of the program. Each participant should have a mentor to review the professional development plan and assess progress. Topics might include:

- State and federal laws and regulations
- Understanding disabilities
- Inclusion theory and techniques
- Team-building
- Individualized Education Plan development and implementation
- Behavioral management
- Social skill building, peer mentoring
- Critical thinking
- Literacy
- Augmentative communication

- Curriculum adaptation and modification
- Computer technology
- Integrating therapeutic and other services into the classroom
- Academic assessment and evaluation, alternative assessments
- One-on-one and small group instruction
- Educational and developmental issues related to elementary school students
- Educational and developmental issues related to students in the middle grades
- Educational and developmental issues related to high school students

6.3 Encourage local colleges and universities to offer graduate programs in inclusionary education, and make these available to Cambridge teachers.

6.4 Actively seek cooperative arrangements with colleges and universities to offer school-based inclusion and other special education experiences within the Cambridge Public Schools as a key component of teacher training programs.

6.5 Encourage staff and administrators in community-based after-school programs, summer camps, and recreation programs to undertake specialized training in special education by inviting their participation in appropriate professional development activities and by collaborating with these entities in planning for and implementing professional development activities that are applicable to both school and community agency staff.

7. CURRICULUM

Objective: Students with disabilities will have access to the general curriculum, including state-mandated curriculum frameworks.

Actions:

7.1 Integrate the needs of students with disabilities into all Cambridge Public Schools curriculum development activities. This will be accomplished through both increased awareness and understanding on the part of curriculum development teams and the assignment of special educators and/or inclusion specialists to participate on these teams.

7.2 Create age-appropriate social skill-building curricula, and seek to integrate social and behavioral components into other curricula.

7.3 Provide technical supports as needed to assist teachers in adapting their curriculum to meet the needs of individual students with disabilities.

7.4 In each student's Individualized Education Plan, identify curriculum content areas where modifications or accommodations will be needed, and outline the form that these will take.

8. HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Note: This section presents actions specific to older students. Actions included in other sections also apply and may, in some cases, overlap with the actions of this section.

Objective: Students with disabilities will be fully included in all high school activities and will receive an education that will equip them to lead fulfilling, productive lives.

Actions:

8.1 Ensure that the high school’s plan for educating students with disabilities (action 1.4) is fully incorporated into the high school restructuring process. The high school special education plan should be augmented by an implementation strategy within each “small school.”

8.2 As described in action 5.2, systematically build the high school’s capacity for educating students with disabilities in regular classrooms. As an initial step, assign someone responsibility for initiating regular classroom inclusion programs and creating the support systems necessary for students with disabilities to succeed in the regular classroom. Adapting curriculum and facilitating collaboration between regular and special educators will be major emphases.

8.3 Ensure that students with disabilities have access to the full range of classes, including both academic and vocational education classes. Also ensure that these students have access to internships, sports, clubs, and other educational and extracurricular programs offered at the high school.

8.4 Integrate all self-contained classrooms and resource rooms into the “small school” structure, and, within each “small school,” create and implement a plan for facilitating interactions between regular education students and students in special education classes. Mentoring, “buddy” programs, and similar techniques should be components of this plan. Students in self-contained classrooms should typically be assigned to regular homerooms. (This action is similar to action 5.4, but is tailored to the high school situation.)

8.5 Establish a disability awareness curriculum for use in high school health classes.

8.6 Evaluate the issue of outplacements to determine if the relatively high number of high school-aged students in outplacements is warranted and to identify other possible ways of meeting the needs of some of these students.

8.7 Provide increased opportunities for students with disabilities to participate in the “Schools to Careers” and other vocational education programs.

8.8 Monitor the progress of students with disabilities to identify those who are at risk of leaving school prior to completion of their educational programs. Seek to identify these students as early as possible in order to target actions that will encourage them to stay. For students at risk of leaving school, establish an objective in the Individualized Education Plan regarding this issue as well as actions to address the matter. Students at risk of suspension should be similarly monitored.

8.9 Work with the Massachusetts Department of Education to establish high school graduation guidelines for students with disabilities that will ensure that all such students who demonstrate meaningful long-term effort consistent with their abilities are allowed to graduate. Students with significant cognitive delays and students in outplacements will be included in this program. Ideally, the Individualized Education Plan team should be charged with establishing alternative assessment tools and graduation requirements specific to the needs and abilities of the individual student. Similarly, monitor grade promotions to ensure that students with disabilities are not adversely affected by promotion policies.

8.10 Develop a meaningful vocational and continuing education program for those 18- to 22-year-old students eligible for continued educational services, perhaps through a collaborative effort with adjacent communities, local colleges, and/or local employers. This

program should be distinct from the traditional high school curriculum and should have a strong emphasis on transitioning these students from the high school to the larger society.

8.11 Continue to provide effective transition services to eligible students with disabilities, including initiating transition planning at age 14 and services at age 16.

9. PRESCHOOL/SPECIAL START STUDENTS

Note: This section presents actions specific to younger children. Actions included in other sections also apply and may, in some cases, overlap with the actions of this section.

Objective: Children aged three to five years with disabilities will have opportunities to be fully included in preschool programs either at the community preschool chosen by families or in Special Start integrated preschool classrooms.

Actions:

9.1 Continue to find innovative ways to evaluate young children, including assessing the child's functioning levels using familiar materials. Provide training for preschool and early childhood teachers in assessment methods so that they can be active participants on the evaluation team.

9.2 Ensure that young children with disabilities have the opportunity to participate in quality educational programs by encouraging community preschools to embrace best educational practices and by supporting ongoing professional development for community preschool staff and Special Start teams.

9.3 Affirm the role of parents as their child's advocate and "first teacher" by involving them in all stages of the transition, pre-referral, evaluation, and intervention process.

9.4 Provide intensive home programming as a precursor to a classroom experience for children with severe disabilities. This service should be connected to the classroom curriculum and should involve classroom staff in the planning for services and transition to the group.

9.5 Provide a workable, educationally based transition from Early Intervention to the Preschool Team. Actively coordinate with Early Intervention agencies regarding the transition services offered by these agencies and the Cambridge Public Schools. Recognize the need to provide parents with clear explanations regarding this transition and what to expect once their child is part of the Cambridge Public Schools community.

9.6 Establish a classroom for children with severe disabilities currently served by out-of-district placements. This classroom will optimally be located in proximity to other preschool classes to provide opportunities for inclusion.

9.7 Facilitate smooth transitions from preschool into kindergarten by providing kindergarten teachers and principals with information and possibly training regarding developmentally appropriate curricula for children with disabilities.

9.8 Continue to develop the transdisciplinary model for the delivery of related services to young children with disabilities in the community and in Special Start classrooms.

10. ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT

Objective: The educational progress of students with disabilities will be actively monitored using tools appropriate to the needs of the individual student.

Actions:

10.1 Establish an ongoing program to systematically assess and evaluate the educational progress of students with disabilities. Assessments will be linked directly to Individualized Education Plan goals, and assessment tools will be defined in the Individualized Education Plan. For students with significant cognitive disabilities, success will be measured in terms of the individual student's progress, not in relation to the overall school community; in some cases, this may necessitate alternative academic standards. For students unable to participate in standardized tests, documentation of ongoing student growth through portfolios is strongly recommended.

10.2 Ensure that students with special needs receive appropriate Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) accommodations or alternative assessments. A student's Individualized Education Plan will specify whether MCAS accommodations or alternative assessments will be needed as well as the form that these will take.

10.3 Take a proactive role in the development and testing of MCAS alternative assessment tools, with the objective of ensuring that these meet the needs of Cambridge students and provide appropriate and meaningful measures of student progress.

10.4 Ensure that principals and teachers are not unfairly held accountable for overall school or class test scores that are disproportionately influenced by the performance of students having disabilities. In part, this might be accomplished by reporting and evaluating MCAS results for students with disabilities separately from the general student population.

10.5 Work with the Massachusetts Department of Education to modify the way that the MCAS scores of students with disabilities are determined and recorded. Explore development of alternative standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities. A student should not "fail" the test due to cognitive or other difficulties beyond his or her control; rather, a larger and non-judgmental developmental continuum should be created so that all students can be accurately assessed and the progress of each individual student determined.

11. EDUCATION-BASED RELATED SERVICES

Objective: Students with disabilities will receive high quality therapeutic and related services aimed at enhancing their educational progress.

Actions:

11.1 Ensure that the Cambridge Public Schools can continue to attract and retain quality physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists, counselors, and other specialists by recognizing these professionals as full members of the faculty and continuing to offer competitive salaries and professional status.

11.2 Periodically review specialists' caseloads as defined in Individualized Education Plans to ensure that they have the time to provide necessary services, participate in team meetings, interact with educators and parents, participate in professional development, participate in pre-referrals, and otherwise support integrated services. Create formal parameters for measuring specialists' caseloads that take into account the full range of responsibilities.

11.3 To the extent possible, integrate therapy and other related services with the regular curriculum. This will be accomplished by: (1) providing increased opportunities for specialists to be involved in curriculum development and implementation; (2) providing appropriate services in the classroom as part of the regular school day, thus minimizing separate "pull-outs"⁷; and (3) working with classroom staff to carry over therapeutic practices to other classroom activities.⁸

11.4 Whenever possible, concentrate an individual therapist's caseload in one or a few schools in order to encourage integration of services and decrease travel time.

12. SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS

Objective: Supports will be provided that promote the social, emotional, and behavioral development of students with disabilities and allow students with social, emotional, or behavioral issues to succeed in their educational programs.

⁷ There are, and will continue to be, situations where "pull-outs" for individual attention are necessary and appropriate.

⁸ An example might be an occupational therapist working with teachers and classroom aides to establish and reinforce proper pencil-holding technique.

Actions:

12.1 Provide technical assistance and/or professional development in addressing social, emotional, and behavioral issues involving students with disabilities. Intervention should begin at the earliest possible age.

12.2 When appropriate, provide mental health services in the school setting in order to better integrate therapy and counseling with educational services. Make increased use of outside mental health agencies to support school counselors in providing these services.

12.3 Make increased use of behavioral and emotional testing as a component of core evaluations as a means to identify and develop plans for treating behavioral issues. Early intervention with younger children is especially important. For students with behavioral issues, use the results of functional-behavioral or other appropriate assessments as guidance in the development of Individualized Education Plans.

12.4 Provide students with disabilities meaningful and ongoing opportunities to build social skills through facilitated social interactions with both their ability peers and typical students, “buddy programs,” and other innovative approaches.

12.5 In accordance with existing laws and policies, ensure a timely response to situations where students might be unsafe to themselves or others.

13. TECHNOLOGY

Objective: The educational opportunities of students with disabilities will be enhanced through active use of computers and related technology.

Actions:

13.1 Prepare a comprehensive strategy for the use of technology in educating children with disabilities, and ensure that the needs of these students are considered in the development and funding of all system-wide and school-based computer and technology programs.

13.2 Provide technical assistance and training for teachers, instructional aides, and specialists in the use of computers and other augmentative and assistive technologies that can enhance the educational experience of students with disabilities.

13.3 Provide for the individual needs of those students with disabilities who require specialized augmentative or assistive technology equipment or devices.

14. COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Objective: The education of students with disabilities will be enriched through active involvement with the larger community.

Actions:

14.1 Establish formal relationships with other City departments and programs, non-profit organizations, colleges, and adjacent communities to provide students with disabilities the opportunity to participate in after-school, summer, recreational, and social programs.

14.2 Establish collaborative arrangements with local colleges and universities aimed at strengthening the Cambridge Public Schools' special education programs and services. These might include internship programs, research, curriculum development and adaptations, and professional development. (Opportunities for collaboration involving professional development are described in Section 6, *Professional Development*.)

14.3 Forge relationships with community mental health organizations in order to offer timely and efficient mental health services (see action 12.2).

15. FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Objective: Parents of children with disabilities will be integral members of the education team and will take an active role in their children's education.

Actions:

15.1 Prepare a parent's handbook that describes regulations, parental rights, and programs and services and provides other information that will help parents to guide their children's education. This might take the form of a "reader-friendly" version of the policy and procedures manual referred to in action 1.3.

15.2 Hold an annual workshop where parents and family members can meet special education administrators, learn about Cambridge's special education programs, and become familiar with Individualized Education Plan procedures. This will be particularly beneficial for families new to the school system, although all families should be invited.

15.3 Prepare and distribute written information to all parents of children with disabilities periodically during the school year. Topics might include upcoming educational workshops or advocacy meetings, information concerning innovative special education practices, and explanations of new policies. This could be a collaborative effort with the Parents Advisory Council.

15.4 Through the Office of Special Education, the Parents Advisory Council, school-based parents groups, or a combination, offer a series of lectures and/or workshops on topics related to the education of students with special needs.

15.5 Provide training and information on Cambridge's special education programs for parent liaisons and parent information staff in order that they might more effectively provide information to families and, in the case of liaisons, facilitate school-based parent involvement.

15.6 Through the family liaison for special education and others, provide one-on-one consultations with parents and families in order to facilitate parent involvement in their children's education. This could involve helping parents in understanding the Individualized Education Plan process, making connections with community resources, and increasing parental understanding of their children's disabilities and educational needs.

15.7 Create an informal parents mentoring program that will link families who are unfamiliar with the Cambridge Public Schools' special education programs with others who have more experience.

15.8 Encourage the Cambridge Parents Advisory Council for Special Education to maintain a broad and diversified membership and to establish by-laws that articulate the organization's mission and structure.

15.9 Recognize the role of the Parents Advisory Council in advising the School Committee on matters that pertain to the education, health, and safety of students with disabilities. Include the Parents Advisory Council in the planning, development, and evaluation of special education programs. Provide appropriate support for communications between the Parents Advisory Council and the parent community.

15.10 Foster the creation of school-based special needs parent and family groups to address school-based concerns and other relevant issues, and encourage interaction between these groups and the citywide Parents Advisory Council. This could be achieved through formal representation from each school on the citywide Parents Advisory Council.

15.11 Offer parents the option of having their names added to a parent contact list. This information would be made available to the Office of Special Education, the Parents Advisory Council, and school-based special needs groups, and would be used to contact parents concerning special education issues. Parental consent should be secured through a systematic approach that reaches all parents of children with disabilities that might include: (1) the signing of annual Individualized Education Plans, (2) kindergarten screening and registration, and/or (3) signing of consent forms for re-evaluations.⁹

15.12 Both citywide and within each school, forge relationships between special education parents groups and other groups with overlapping interests, including school improvement councils, parent/teacher organizations, and bilingual parents groups.

15.13 In all of the above actions, support increased involvement of parents and families of students with disabilities who, for any of a variety of reasons, may not participate fully in their children's education. This may involve various forms of written and personal outreach. An example might be flexibility in the scheduling of Individualized Education Plan team meetings.

15.14 Important written communications, including the parent's handbook and system-wide newsletters, should be made available in major world languages used by Cambridge families.

⁹ By law, parents are entitled to confidentiality regarding their children's special education records. While an important safeguard, this requirement often inhibits communication among parents and between parents and professionals. The intent of action 15.8 is to identify families who desire to be included in applicable communications regarding special education issues. This is especially helpful in organizing in-school parents groups and identifying families who might benefit from a particular type of educational workshop. Regardless, confidentiality of records will be maintained.

Efforts should be made to identify families of students with disabilities who speak other less common languages and to locate people willing and able to translate.

15.15 Encourage all parents -- regardless of whether their children receive special education services -- to participate in the planning and implementation of special education programs.

16. FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Objective: Financial resources will be available to meet the educational needs of children with disabilities and will be allocated in ways that offer program flexibility and, to the extent possible, provide significant benefit to all students.

Actions:

16.1 Within the annual school budget, provide a special education contingency fund that provides adequate resources for classroom aides, therapeutic services, technological equipment, and other needs not foreseen at the time the budget is adopted. (Past experience demonstrates that these needs arise on a regular basis and that the unavailability of funds leads to an unacceptable delay in the delivery of critical services.)

16.2 Develop a funding mechanism that recognizes the increased expenses involved in educating individual students with multiple or low-incidence disabilities or particularly intensive needs in a public school setting. Specific funds should be allocated for this and, to the extent necessary, should continue to be made available as the student changes placement and progresses through the school system.

16.3 Provide increased opportunities for integration of special education and regular education budgets to support inclusion. (An example is shared funding of classroom aides when all students in the class benefit.)

16.4 Establish a funding partnership program between the Office of Special Education and school principals that will allow for more flexibility in the allocation of special education resources for their schools. This is particularly important as schools increase their capacity with inclusive programs that benefit students with and without disabilities.

16.5 For all schools, provide a base rate allocation in the Cambridge Public Schools annual budget for special education materials. (The appropriate budget item is Classroom Materials for Mainstreaming.)

16.6 For all schools, provide an allocation in the Cambridge Public Schools annual budget for inclusion specialists, instructional aides, and/or other necessary staff. This may be through the general budget (for example the Elementary Instructional Aides budget item) or the special education budget (Inclusionary Programs budget item).

16.7 Incorporate special education technology needs into the Educational Technology Program budget. These needs include both general items, such as special education adaptive software, that should be available in all schools and specialized augmentative and assistive technology devices required to meet the needs of individual students. This might be accomplished by integrating these needs into the current Elementary Educational Technology and Secondary Educational Technology budget items or through adding a new budget item, Special Education Technology.

16.8 Explore creative opportunities for cost savings, including collaborative efforts with other organizations and communities, volunteer programs, etc.

16.9 Actively seek grants and contracts to support development of teacher training programs, conduct research on special education topics, and establish demonstration programs.

16.10 At the School Committee and Superintendent levels, take an active leadership role in advocating for equitable funding of special education programs by state and federal governments.

17. COORDINATION BETWEEN SPECIAL AND REGULAR EDUCATION

Objective: Regular education and special education programs will be coordinated and implemented in ways that are mutually supportive.

17.1 For all students in the Cambridge Public Schools, provide rigorous and consistent teaching of curriculum content areas that are critical to educational success, especially reading, writing, and elementary mathematics. This will help alleviate the need for some students to be placed in special education and will provide a base of knowledge and skills that will help all students succeed.

17.2 Recognize the need to assist students who -- for any number of reasons -- may have a skill deficit that does not meet the criteria for receiving special education services but does nonetheless impede educational progress. (The reluctant reader is an example.) Develop and implement strategies within the regular school program for addressing these issues. Strategies might include tutors, after school homework assistance programs, and increased attention by classroom aides.

17.3 Both system-wide and at the school level, consider how proposed special education programs and activities might be structured to provide benefits for the larger school community as well as students with disabilities. Conversely, remembering that students with disabilities are full members of the school community, all general school planning should consider the needs of these students.

18. PLAN IMPLEMENTATION, EVALUATION, AND AMENDMENT

Objective: The Cambridge Public School system will aggressively implement this strategic plan, evaluate its effectiveness in ensuring a high quality education for students with disabilities, and periodically amend it to increase its effectiveness.

Actions:

18.1 Identify system-wide priorities and timelines and translate these into a specific action plan for each academic year. Assign responsibilities for implementing the annual action plan. Ensure that schools and parents are made aware of the action plan and the ways that they might assist in its implementation.

18.2 Establish a means to periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the strategic plan and its implementation. Principals, teachers, and parents should be actively involved in this. Specific measures should be selected that can be used to judge the success of the Cambridge

Public Schools' special education services and activities. To the extent possible, these measures should remain constant over time so that trends might be identified.

18.3 Report to the School Committee at least annually regarding the status of the Cambridge Public Schools' special education programs and the effectiveness of the strategic plan.

18.4 Provide the option for amending the strategic plan based on the results of evaluations or changing circumstances.