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# Going mainstream: Parents share mixed views as Northampton prepares to launch a new special education model next school year

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City mom Erica McMahon said classroom “inclusion” looks good on paper, but there are children for whom mainstream education simply won’t work. She says her son, who attends R.K. Finn Ryan Road Elementary School, is one of them.

That’s not the case for another Ryan Road parent, Suna Turgay, who thinks inclusion will be great for her 10-year-old son. She said her son, who has Cornelia de Lange, a genetic mutation, currently spends much of his day outside the general education classroom receiving speech and physical therapies.

The two moms recently shared their diverging views on an ambitious new plan set to launch next school year in which elementary students receiving special education services move into mainstream classrooms rather than be separated based on their needs. The School Committee last month unanimously approved the plan that eliminates 19 educational support positions, retaining 14 as building-based subs, and adds 5.5 special education teachers and one general education teacher.

While many are excited about the changes coming to the city’s elementary schools, some parents, like McMahon, have their reservations.

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McMahon's son, Hunter, 7, has autistic tendencies, brain malformation and cortical and visual impairment. She said he is nonverbal and operates at a 9-month-old level.

"The lights will still be too bright, the kids will still be too loud, there will still be too many visual distractions and there won't be enough help in the classroom," she said.

Under the current model, Hunter spends much of his day in a Ryan Road classroom where about eight other students filter in and out throughout the day as they receive various services and therapies. McMahon worries that this will change under the coming model, that the homeroom feel will splinter and that her child will miss out on much-needed peer support.

"I'm not worried they aren't going to be getting their therapies — that's how the (individualized education plan) works," she said. "It's just a matter of where it's happening. There won't be peer support. There are quite a few kids who this won't work out well for. It's actually going to seclude the kids with the highest needs."

Turgay, however, believes the new model will enable her son to spend time with more of his peers in the general education classroom.



"I think with the new setup there's going to be more supports for him to participate in the classroom and also get the socioemotional support he needs within that class," she said. "He wants to be in his typical third-grade classroom. I think that everyone wants to see him there more."

Superintendent John Provost said that while he couldn't speak to any specific student's medical needs for confidentiality reasons, "we will not unilaterally change services of a child."

Laurie Farkas, the district's director of student services, said she invites any parents with concerns about looming changes to call a meeting.

"We are happy to meet with anyone," she said. "We have been adjusting our schedules to make sure we're available to any parent concerned about how the reorganization at the elementary level will impact their child."

Farkas said there will be no changes to a child's education plan without consent from the parent and staff at their school.

"We always aim for consensus when we are making changes to a student's IEP because the parent has due process as a next choice," she said.

Ryan Road has a higher concentration of students with higher medical needs, and Principal Sarah Madden said that's because her school is best equipped for students with mobility challenges and other needs. There are no stairs leading into the school, which has two

classrooms across the hall from one another that are specially designed to accommodate students with higher needs. In response to parents' concerns about those classrooms remaining available, Madden says: "the physical spaces are not changing."

Currently, students receiving special education services attend to academic needs in one classroom, and physical and medical needs in the other. Those rooms will not go anywhere, she said, and Michelle Walden — currently stationed in the rooms — will be retained as a designated "floater," meaning she won't be among the special education teachers to shift into a co-teaching model with a general education teacher. She said the school has 52 students on IEPs, and nine of those students make heavy use of the two classrooms.

"We do have a variety of needs. That's why the floater position has to be there," she said. "I don't see her only working with those students who have medical challenges, but certainly she would be the liaison for those families."

### **More special ed teachers**

Madden said she is excited to bring the additional special education teachers into the academic mix.

"I see it as a strong move educationally, to best meet the needs of our students," she said.

Madden acknowledged that some students with higher needs may require more support from perhaps an educational support professional. Though the school loses two out of 15 ESPs in the staffing shift, she said a number of them will still be available for one-on-one work.

"Depending on the needs of the students, that's still an option," she said. "It would be based on student need at any given time."

Overall, Madden said the changes will not be easy.

"I think that any time you are instituting change there are difficulties, but there's also great possibility," she said. "Together we can bring about positive change with the new structure."

### **Teacher/parent skeptical**

But one city parent, who also happens to be a special education teacher in Chesterfield, said she's skeptical of the new model, and that there's enough staff support to make it happen.

"A decision like this needs so much time and attention," said Katherine Sasser. "If it's true what (Provost) says that this is not being born out of a budget crisis, then there is time."

Sasser has two children in the district. One has a language delay and is on an IEP, while another is at the top of the class. She worries that at the elementary level it will be too difficult to meet those students with higher needs and at the same time challenge students at the top.

“The demands on classroom teachers are incredible,” she said, adding “to develop a curriculum for that one kid” with high medical needs “is at best a part-time job.”

Plus, she said, these students outside of the mainstream classroom weren’t placed there lightly.

“These children are out of the classroom for a reason, and one of those reasons is they can’t be in a mainstream classroom all day,” she said. “Northampton didn’t take them out of the classroom to exclude them. They did it because the team decided it was in the best interest of the child.”

Provost said he understands that change is difficult, but it is necessary to make in order to address “our high needs future.”

He said the district’s high needs population jumped 49 percent over the last three years, and students separated from traditional classrooms are disproportionately male students, students of color and students on reduced lunch. The inclusion model has evolved over the past decade as a response to increasing levels of need in public schools. Other area districts that incorporate inclusion and co-teaching include those in Westfield, West Springfield, Ludlow, North Adams and Agawam, according to Curriculum Director Nancy Cheevers.

To support his claim that the move is a good one, Provost cites a 2012 study commissioned by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education that suggests students receiving special education services are more successful under inclusion models.

“Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements appeared to outperform similar students who were not included to the same extent in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers,” the study states.

Jen Stavely’s daughter is a 5-year-old at Bridge Street School. She has Down syndrome, autism, seizure disorder and is nonverbal. Stavely worries that her daughter will be too distracted in a bigger classroom with more children.

“I don’t want to sound negative. This model could possibly work but these are my concerns,” she said. “I just worry about her achievement in that big classroom environment.

“I don’t think it’s going to work for everybody, and I think that accommodations need to be made that are appropriate.”

Evie Hawley's daughter, Alice, has Down syndrome and frontal and parietal lobe damage from a stroke she had at birth. Alice now attends JFK Middle School, but when she was younger, Hawley spent a lot of time and energy writing grants for the district and pushing for a model like the district will move into later this year.

"Northampton's been great to us. We decided this was the best place for special ed," she said. "Acknowledging that budget has a clear impact on our kids is part of that reasoning."

Hawley, who now has a master's in education and has worked as a teacher, said she didn't know a lot about educating children with disabilities before her daughter was born. But she's learned a lot since.

Because Alice has significant expressive language deficits, she speaks in five-word sentences. She said the new structure will help children like hers learn how to more successfully express themselves.

"In (the separate) room, she's not hearing expressive language," she said. "The modeling isn't there."

Hawley said that children challenged to express themselves also have difficulty expressing what they've learned, meaning they tend to be underestimated.

### **'What's best for our kids'**

"Even my parents believe she doesn't belong in the general classroom," she said. "We judge people — and I even catch myself doing this with my own child — by the things that come out of their mouths."

She said that people who oppose inclusion models often are coming from a place of nostalgia, in that "the way we grew up is what we feel is best for our kids." But she said the community needs to think about what's best for all of the students.

Hawley explained that Alice can sit in on a lesson about plankton, and though she won't learn the same things as her mainstream peers, she benefits from being there.

"Fully capable students might look at photosynthesis," she said. "My daughter will learn that there is life floating in the water and it gets energy from the sun."

Though she thinks the new model is a good move, she's skeptical the staffing is adequate. "I do believe that this is the best practice direction, but I'm wary of whether or not they'll be able to pull it off well," she said. "I think that their model is flawed, but it's the right direction. The teachers need the support."

Hawley said she hopes the district can work out the kinks, but in the meantime she feels strongly it's headed down the right path. "The direction we're going is good," she said. "We don't have any money to do anything, but that's where we have to go."

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