Autism Commission

Sub-Committee for Three Years Old - Fourteen Years Old

Meeting Minutes –February 10, 2017

500 Harrison Avenue

Members present were Carolyn Kain, Dianne Lescinskas, Christina Fitanides, Teresita Ramos and Sarah Geldart.

Members accessing meeting remotely were Laurie Gobeil, Julie Kelley and Zackary Houston.

Carolyn Kain, the Chair, called the meeting to order at 1:40pm and welcomed the members to the meeting of this Sub-Committee. Ms. Kain stated that the meeting was subject to the Open Meeting Law and that the Sub-Committee members present would need to vote to approve the remote participation of some members because of their geographic location, whenever any members were utilizing video and/or tele-conferencing. Remote access was approved unanimously. Minutes from last meeting in January were reviewed and one minor change to the minutes was addressed. The amended changes of the January meeting minutes were approved unanimously.

Carolyn stated that the Commission meets quarterly and our focus should be on the number of issues that have been discussed in this sub-committee. Tina had sent out legislation for discussion today. Carolyn reviewed some of the priorities that have been discussed by this group including the Autism Endorsement for General Education teachers that was supported by the full commission. She reviewed the issues that many families have with not knowing or understanding their rights around special education. She said that her office is in the process of creating brochures for families that will direct them to resources. The office is also updating the website to also be a beneficial resource for families. She asked if this sub-committee would be interested in creating a brochure or fact sheet that would be specific to this age group- it should be concise in nature so it doesn’t overwhelm families and it could be translated in multiple languages. Families need to know their rights and where to go for resources that will enhance their child’s life.

Tere said that the Autism Support Centers (ASC) should be the resource for families and are already doing this work. We should direct families to these centers and increase traffic to them otherwise we could be wasting the time and investment in the centers.

Carolyn responded that we can use this as another tool to direct them to the support centers – Autism Support Centers do not have information on families to connect with them and many families do not know about them. We are trying to provide as many opportunities to get information out there. We could use the fact sheet as a tool for families to guide them to ask specific questions regarding resources. Our information could go to schools, community centers and pediatrician’s offices. Zack agreed saying that the IEP team should be helping with what is available for families in terms of services and within the community. Tina said the IEP meeting is an appropriate place to give information but a school is still obligated to provide services and not negate their obligation. Carolyn said that the purpose is to help families understand what other services their child may be eligible for and not to supplant what public school districts are required to do by law.

Carolyn said the information should be concise and is critical for families. Carolyn requested that the other subcommittee members contribute to this fact sheet or brochure by sending resources they recommended to be included by email to Dianne (Dianne.Lescinskas@state.ma.us).

Laurie asked about sharing information from DPH with pediatricians. Carolyn said she is meeting with DPH on early detection and screenings and will bring up this issue of sharing information at the meeting. Zack discussed a booklet by the Association for Science in Autism Treatment – it is for newly diagnosed. It could be distributed to the pediatricians – it is not Massachusetts specific but could be a tremendous resource for families.

Carolyn discussed the role of the Federation for Children with Special Needs and how they currently connect with families, she asked if there were any suggestions on how they can better connect families with this resource and its parent trainings. Sarah said that DESE funds the Federation’s teacher and parent training – this year they received $500,000 from DESE. Carolyn asked if the trainings were specific to autism; given the prevalence of autism. Would they consider doing specific trainings? Sarah responded that it is not specific to autism but they do trainings on Basic Rights, Transition and Positive Solutions. Tere mentioned that Leslie Lesley from the Federation is giving a few presentations that are specific to autism. Tina mentioned that MAC also does some training on autism for parents and professionals – one is specific to the Omnibus Law. Carolyn said that given the prevalence with autism it would be a good idea to talk with the Federation about adding autism to their trainings.

Discussion moved to translation services for family. Sarah commented that not every district has a need for translation. Currently, they are working on their “Making Money Matter” initiative and are re-directing 2-4% of their 240 funds for program evaluation to see what is contributing to poor outcomes of students with disabilities. It will take a look at the translation need.

Tina moved the discussion to two pieces of legislation that she had sent to the group.

1. Certification of Interpreters in Educational Settings – she provided the group with a fact sheet and language from the bill

(House Docket No. 2680).

* The bill addresses the qualification of interpreters.

Sarah said that DESE does get calls from districts regarding a shortage of interpretations services – but by imposing higher standards this may end up creating a higher bar or an additional hurdle and could cause further shortage of interpreters. She also said this could be a funding issue. Tina replied that DESE could set the qualifications but not be the provider.

After further discussion, Carolyn said that she doesn’t see the full commission endorsing any specific piece of legislation that has been filed by others – but it is appropriate to share this information so that people in their respective advocacy roles can individually know about it and support it if they choose. Tina asked if the full commission would make a similar recommendation to the one in 2013 that steps would be taken to ensure the quality of interpretation. Carolyn said we should look at the current ways that districts are accessing the service when needed, and also look at how other agencies work around this issue given the varying demands. Carolyn said it is not reasonable to expect districts to employ multiple interpreters full-time if they do not have the families requiring this service but they are required already to provide both interpretation and translation services. Carolyn said that this could be something that DESE discusses with districts during their planned regional meetings to focus on specific issues and making it part of the public monitoring of IEPs – they could check students IEPs who they know do not speak English and see if the materials were interpreted and if a translator attended the IEP meeting. She said school districts should also know that there will be a review on how they are handling this issue during the monitoring process.

Tina asked if the Commission could vote on supporting the idea at its meeting in March. Carolyn responded that she wasn’t sure what Tina’s expectation was with regard to voting on any issue at the Commission level given that an annual report was just filed and the Commission does not meet until after March 1st of this year, and the Commission is still developing a process for receiving and reviewing subcommittee recommendations. Carolyn said she is working on a process for the Commission.

There was general consensus to recommend that; “DESE will take steps to ensure that the school districts have access to the number of appropriately qualified interpreters and translators necessary to provide communications in parents’ primary languages”, which is the same as the 2013 report.

Tina provided a fact sheet and language from the bill (House Docket No. 908) Augmentative and alternative communication opportunities for students with disabilities –

* Increase expertise in the area of augmentative devices to educators

Carolyn said she didn’t understand why this bill does not include SLPs – as they are primarily responsible for providing communication services to students under their IEPs and many do not know about augmentative devices. Tina responded that the goal was to start with special education teachers but there is a need for general education teachers to be trained as well. Zack made a point on training that there is a challenging trend to move towards mass training given that communication needs are very individualized. Training should be individualized and evidence based on the child’s needs– he would hate to see districts mass training and have no one using it in the classroom. Tina said that there would need to be guidance from DESE but this recommendation was to have it included as part of coursework for educators. Carolyn read the recommendation from 2013 around augmentative communication. “Revise the Massachusetts education licensure regulations to require that general education teachers and specialists receive sufficient coursework and practical experiences in methods of augmentative and alternative communication.” Julie said that this was an important piece for individuals with ASD and that by giving a person a voice or communication skills you can address behaviors.

Tina discussed the need to increase capacity of the Childs Waiver Program, over 800 families applied last fall. She would like to see it increase to 500 and to expand the waiver to also cover ages 9-22, as was recommended in 2013. Carolyn said in addition to the waiver program that 85% of the individuals in the DESE/DDS residential prevention program have ASD, and this is school-aged children including those over 9 years of age. Tina said she would like to recommend that the children’s autism waiver capacity be increase to 500. There was general consensus to recommend “that the children’s waiver capacity be increased”. Carolyn said the waiver currently serves 260 kids, which is an increase from 157 in 2013. The waiver provides 3 years of intensive services and the family is able to pick the services which include, respite, home modification etc. It is income based, you need to qualify for Mass Health and have a diagnosis of autism that could possibly lead to residential. After the 3 years there is a step down decreased level of service.

Sara Geldart of DESE recused herself from endorsing all of the recommendations at today’s meeting, all of which were from the 2013 report. Julie said that she supports the recommendations.

A doodle poll will go out to the sub-committee to set the next meeting date. With no further business to discuss, the meeting was adjourned.