

Operational and Efficiency Evaluation of
the Norwood Public Schools for the Town of Norwood
A Study Conducted by
The Abrahams Group
April 2015

Review of Findings by Norwood Public Schools

This report was commissioned by the Committee of 21 to conduct an operational and efficiency evaluation of the Norwood Public Schools in the areas of Special Education, Non-classroom Information Technology, Revenues, Staffing and Compensation, Facilities and Grounds and Business and Finance operations. During the course of this study the Abrahams Group was insuring that compliance needs were being met, looked for redundant operations and suggested areas for potential cost savings and more efficient service delivery within the School Department.

I. Trends in the Norwood Public Schools

The total enrollment has been relatively stable for the past five years while the rate of low income students has risen to 28.7% from a low of 8.8% in 1998. The numbers of students referred for Special Education services has remained steady in the 16 to 17 percent range over the years from 1998 to present. However, as noted below, the type and intensity of the disability we teach has become more severe requiring additional instructional and medical services. Students who are in need of English Language Instruction has risen during the same time periods from 3.3% to 7.1% of the student population. Over the past five years approximately 10% of our students have moved into or out of Norwood in any given year. Even with these changes in student populations the school system has been able to maintain student scores. As stated in the report, "The results of the continued overall good performance can most likely be attributed to a number of things: student/teacher ratio, good teaching, professional development, and updated appropriate curriculum materials. All of which have a cost."

We continue to address our students' academic performance through test analysis by district, school, classroom and individual student. Those tests include SAT's, MCAS, teacher designed measures and mid-term and final exams. All of these measures inform our future plans, professional development practices and teaching conversations among the staff with their principals. Our strategic goals monitor our progress towards improved student performance at all levels, and the School Committee together with NPS Administrative Team examines student progress as it becomes available each year between June and September.

II. Special Education Services

Four of the five elementary schools have substantially separate programs for students whose learning needs require specialized instruction. The report mentions a concern for overstaffing at the Bach and Willett Schools. Upon further examination beyond just the total number of students in each class, it was noted that the Balch School has students divided by age ranges, hence, the need for two teachers as the Department of Education requires no more than a four year age span in a class. The increased staffing at the Willett preschool is due to the nature of services needed by the students enrolled in that program which included diapering, bottle feeding, and one-to-one supervision for some of the students with impulse control issues. These programs receive referrals from Early Intervention

Providers who identify children within the first few years of life who need developmental assistance to progress to a healthy life style.

The Abrahams Report states: “Norwood is able to provide for most of the students with disabilities in appropriate programs within the general education setting. The State’s average in the category is 15%.” Norwood’s average is 9.8% showing that students age 6 to 21 are placed whenever possible in their home district programs when services are available. Our school system strives to create and staff programs such as the LEAD program which assists students who are 18 to 21 years old with life skills and job experience transition activities in the Norwood community. This program was noted as an asset to the Special Needs Department and capable under the right circumstances of generating tuitions from other school districts.

The report suggested that we build the capacity of our general education staff through professional development on teaching methods for teaching students with diverse learning needs. We have scheduled a workshop for October 7th in support of that suggestion.

Also recommended was the goal of celebrating student’s completion and removal from a Special Education Plan as they become independent learners who no longer needed the supports provided in earlier grades. This emphasis as part of the culture of learning across the district would have far reaching results and successes for all students. We will continue to work on this.

Staffing is a constant focus that the Director of Special Education and the Superintendent review monthly, examining ways to improve services, find efficiencies, reassign or eliminate support services as students move out of the district or progress to more independence. Classrooms with co-teachers, composed of regular education and special education teachers working together, are beneficial to students and are maintained as added costs allow. In some cases an additional salary is added to a class for student support which will not result in a cost savings but may be necessary due to Individual Educational Plans.

The final suggestions involved our special needs transportation for students who leave our district each day or are bused to the Willett School for the preschool program. The suggestion of increasing the salaries of drivers has been implemented in order to attract more drivers. Ridesharing currently takes place and bus replacement is underway. Due to FY15 and FY16 budget constraints and reductions we will need to scale back the number of vans and buses we purchase on a regular basis.

III. Non Classroom Information Technology

The District’s technology is overseen by a Director of Technology who works closely with the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction. This partnership which also includes a technology committee composed of teachers across the district allows for the delivery of curriculum and a long range technology plan that meets students’ learning needs. Day to day data needs are met by the Technology staff who also support the needs of the teachers and students as they use Smartboards, Chromebooks, iPads, computer labs and other technology tools in the course of their learning. The report is correct in that we do not have one “person in charge of classroom instruction of technology” but the shared role works for us and our budget at this time. What we do need as we plan for the future are some staff members to focus on in class technology support and professional development for maximum technology use. The current staff of 7.8 FTE’s has allowed us to migrate to Google Apps for Education, post a new website, install Smartboards, laptops, and Lady Bug document cameras in almost every classroom in Norwood as well as increase our network infrastructure and wireless coverage. Our students have increasing opportunities for technology use with their learning including the purchase of Pearson’s Envisions 2.0 Mathematics Program for students in kindergarten through grade 5. Our infrastructure has been designed for this purpose.

When examining Town services that include Town Government needs and the Norwood Light and Broadband Company we have potential partnerships for the future. Currently we have shared equipment, professional development and town-wide networking plans with one another to the benefit of all involved. We will continue to pursue future collaborations that will benefit the three departments.

IV. Revenues

It is reported that “The town taxes the full levy and has had no excess levy capacity for several years. The town’s “new growth” a major determinant of levy capacity has been lower the past couple of years as compared to the Abrahams study communities.” Norwood also receives a minimum amount of Chapter 70 Educational Aid from the State due to its strong economic standing among other Massachusetts communities. “In terms of school revenues, 13.2% of the school system’s funding is from state and federal grants which are positive and stronger than the outside funding levels of the six comparative school systems. Our revenues continue to be a significant part of our challenge to grow the school system and keep pace with rising costs.

V. Staffing and Compensation

Norwood was compared to Burlington, Canton, Dedham, Milford, Stoughton and Walpole using FY14 data. Key findings show Norwood in the middle of the group with the following: 12.6 students to all teachers (275.8 FTE), 15.8 to 1 ratio for general education staffing, 111.1 to 1 ratio for Arts and Languages, 132 to 1 ratio for administrative/clerical staffing levels. Norwood ratio for ELA, Reading, Math, Science, and Social Studies classifications was the second highest at 37.2 to 1 students per staff member and had the second highest number of English Language Learners at 245 students. Norwood has the second lowest student to teacher ratio for special education teachers at 12.2 to 1 and the lowest nursing staffing ratio at 386 to 1 for the comparative school systems. The student to district administrators’ ratio was 304 to 1 comparing Norwood as the second lowest ratio for the 29.6 administrators in the district. Part of this low ratio is due to the number of neighborhood elementary schools and their staffs.

Teacher compensation for the first 7 years of employment is one of the lowest for the comparison communities and then improves beginning in years 8 through 10 where Norwood rewards the longer term teachers. Fifty-five percent of Norwood teachers are in the top three steps of the pay plan. In contrast, Canton and Dedham have 35% of teachers in the top three steps; Milford has 59% and Walpole has 73% in the top three steps. A value is placed on keeping our teaching staff and allowing the students to benefit from well trained veteran teachers.

VI. Facilities and Grounds

The School operation involves day to day cleaning plus short and long term maintenance of all the school buildings. The report compared Facilities and Grounds to Andover, Dedham, Lexington, Natick, Needham and Wellesley. The Abrahams report used two studies to analyze the recommended area to be cleaned by a custodian during their shift. The American School and University Magazine (AS&U) and the National Center for Education Statistics *Planning Guide for Maintaining Schools* (NCES) were used. The difference between the two studies is University cleaning vs. public schools with younger children and teachers who stay in their classrooms especially in elementary schools. It was interesting to note that the Abrahams group choose to use the University cleaning per foot comparisons that found we could reduce staff as opposed to the NCES study of public schools that supported and

recognized the current level of staffing and cleaning required especially in our elementary schools. The supposition that the District could reduce the staff by 3.5 custodians across the district did not take into account that the bulk of our cleaning takes place after the students have left the building and that the day custodian cannot cover the same square footage that the night custodian can because of their additional day time duties. Furthermore, we believe that contracting with outside custodial services would have negative consequences that outweigh the potential cost benefits. Custodians know the school and its' mechanical quirks, the students and their parents, and provide an overall culture that contributes to the safety and security of the school especially in an emergency. The cleanliness of our students' classrooms should not be sacrificed and allowed to deteriorate below the high standards we now maintain.

The Norwood Schools had the highest per pupil cost for building maintenance which will require further study to see if other communities report all their costs. Do shared departments use alternative reporting structures? Do the age and number of our buildings matter? (42 yrs to 104 yrs.) It was noted that we should develop a long-term plan to replace or substantially renovate buildings. We will begin that process after reviewing the Mount Vernon Group Study of our school buildings.

Lastly, if a consolidation of Town and School buildings and grounds operations were to be considered it would be imperative that the management for this new department be shared equally between the Town Manager and the Superintendent of Schools so that the school side with the greatest amount of square footage could have their needs addressed in a timely manner. If this new department head is only evaluated by one Town entity, issues of equity may arise which, if unmet, would have additional financial consequences.

VII. Business and Finance

The school business functions are performed at three levels: school sites, Savage Center Business Office, and in the Town accounting, treasurer and purchasing offices. The costs of the Savage Center Business Office was examined and determined that it was in-line with the other school districts reviewed and was less than Dedham and Walpole at \$270,000 for five FTE's. The suggestion was made to develop a written agreement as to the allocation of indirect costs to the school department as used for example in Schedule 19 which is sent in each year for State reporting. Other Town and School efficiencies will need further research.

VIII. Final Thoughts

As is the case with all the audits we participate in, we appreciate the feedback given to us by the professionals involved in these evaluations. We implement those suggestions for improvements that are deemed appropriate and manageable. The School Committee and Administrators weigh all ideas and then review and revise the District's Strategic Plan for Improvement which can be found on our website.