

**West Tisbury Finance Committee
Minutes – December 10, 2007**

Present: Al DeVito, Sharon Estrella, Richard Knabel, Ann Nelson
Absent: Brian Athearn

Guests: Bruce Stone, Town Accountant; Jim Weiss, Superintendent of Schools; Dan Seklecki, Deputy Superintendent for Special Education

Meeting called to order by Chairman DeVito at 4:30 p.m.

The chair stated that the committee was concerned about the extent and costs of special education (SPED) in the UIRSD, and that Supt. Weiss and Mr. Seklecki had been invited for a discussion, and to provide data.

How many SPED students are on the Island in general?

Mr. Seklecki: Island-wide 484 out of a total enrollment (as of Oct. 1, 2007) of 2,120, or 21%. Of that number 31 are pre-school, aged 3,4,and 5. State average for SPED students is 16%.

In the Up-Island district, 76 of 283 (26%) in West Tisbury, and 7 of 42 (17%) in Chilmark for a total of 83 of 325 (25%).

Supt. Weiss and Mr. Seklecki explained: MCAS anxiety leads to higher SPED self-referrals. Parents consider SPED as an entitlement for more support services for their child. Children are evaluated by a team, and 90% of referrals get into the program and stay in.

Of the 484 SPED students on Island, 340 require a minimum amount of additional attention, but approximately 20% (144) need more time. The number of children with significant impairment, such as autism (now 1 out of 150 students), cognitive and behavior problems, has grown considerably. The SPED program supports children from age 3 on to young adults aged 25.

Mr. Knabel asked if independent assessments (by professionals outside the school) contribute to the number of SPED students.

Supt. Weiss & Mr. Seklecki: Independent assessment is possible, but is not imposed on the district. The District has its own assessment process, although occasionally second opinions are sought or provided.

SPED costs: Statewide average is 19% of education costs go for direct services (mostly staff and support staff) to SPED students.

On Island: Up-Island 16.6%
Edgartown 15%
Oak Bluffs 17.7%
Tisbury 8%
High School 14.3%

Percentages are based on a state formula, and costs do not include transportation.

Mr. Seklecki indicated there are approximately 20 SPED staff on Island, but in addition, consultants are under contract to perform specific services. He gave as an example an audiologist who is flown in from Chatham weekly to adjust hearing aides for severely hearing impaired students.

The regional high school (enrollment 755) has 10 SPED students in residential programs off-Island, which costs approximately \$750,000 annually for tuition, of which approximately \$400,000 is paid through the state's "circuit breaker" provision (which pays for half the incremental cost beyond twice the per-pupil average in a district).

Island-wide, approximately \$500,000 is received in federal aid to defray SPED costs, which comes through the state as an entitlement grant, but nowhere near the 40% the federal government originally agreed to pay towards SPED costs. Almost all of this money goes towards helping pre-school children in need of help.

Supt. Weiss indicated that the percentage of SPED costs paid by the federal government nationally has never gotten higher than 10-12%, and is now declining.

Mr. Knabel observed that 17% of \$8M (the Up-Island budget) is approximately \$1,360,000.

Supt. Weiss observed that there is unclear coordination between the Vineyard Hospital, Community Services and the schools, which could provide cost savings and a more efficient delivery system. He stated further that efforts were underway to provide better coordination, and to centralize some SPED services for students with substantial needs.

The committee thanked Supt. Weiss and Mr. Seklecki for their patience and the extent of their presentations and discussion.

The committee discussed the proposed schedule for 2009 budget meetings beginning in January 2008.

Meeting adjourned at 6:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Richard Knabel