



N. NEW BUSINESS
10

Mission & Overview:

Our mission is to provide parents access to relevant information, training and emotional support in meeting their children's special needs and to improve the educational experiences of those with special needs in Dover. We encourage effective communication, understanding, and mutual respect among students, parents, educators and the community-at-large.

Our organization is successful when both parents and educators feel valued, supported and heard. Success also means that individuals feel as though they can be the best advocates for the education of all children within Dover. Specific goals are to:

- Ensure that parents and educators within the Dover School District have awareness of and access to resources already available within our community for children with special learning needs
- Deepen a connection between parents of children with special learning needs and educators
- Create a community of individuals that come together to support, encourage and educate each other: a trusted group of those in similar circumstances who "get it"

2012/2013 Activities¹:

- Created www.doverfamilyschoolalliance.org to offer updated information about the special education process, available programs, support services and individuals within our community
 - Developed DFSA Facebook page to connect parents and promote relevant Seacoast events
- Hosted two informal opportunities for parents/educators to meet and connect
- Led three workshop events on topics germane to special education:
 - 11/30/12 – Training: Best Apps for Kids with Learning Disabilities
 - 2/20/13 – Discussion: Budget Review w/ Director of Pupil Personnel Services
 - 4/1/13 – Training: Strategies for Behavior – National Center on Inclusive Education
 - 5/9/13 – Discussion: Screening of documentary "Bully"
- Promoted the need for parents to complete the Parent Involvement Survey for the State of NH
- Created a recognition event to celebrate the contributions of paraprofessionals in the Dover SD

Potential/Anticipated Long-term Activities:

- Host a roundtable "meet & greet" with relevant individuals within the Dover public schools (IEP specialists, coordinators, SLPs, etc.) to hear about their job and how it impacts students
- Create a "welcome packet" that the district can share with parents that are starting the special education identification process
- Promote/celebrate innovation and resources that educators use for children with special needs within the district
- Develop a "mentor" program for parents new to the special education community and those who are more experienced and/or have older children
- Conduct research on issues facing special education professionals, including ongoing learning needs and classroom resources
- Serve as a "voice" for parents of children with special needs
- Collaborate with PTA/PTO organizations to co-sponsor events mutually beneficial to all audiences (i.e., fundraising for new playground or promoting a guest speaker)

¹ Based on feedback from initial brainstorm session held 9/27/12.

Structure:

DFSA will remain loosely defined and has not applied for 501c3 tax-exempt status at this time. As the program evolves, all options for formalizing the group will be considered.

The school district will endorse the program and provide space for the group to meet (e.g., school library), but will not be responsible for funding or leading the program. School district employees are invited to all activities and a district representative serves as a "liaison" on the steering committee.

This program is open to any/all parents who wish to attend. The focus will be on topics that are of interest to parents of children with special needs (such as, "What is the IEP process?" or "Developing Executive Functioning Skills"), while others may have wider range appeal (such as, "Bullying").

Other Relevant Info:

- The group stays positive and is a safe place for individuals to share. Every meeting is public, with an agenda and ground rules. This is not a forum for airing grievances or "complaining."
- DFSA is a collaborative, mutually-beneficial school-parent group – not "just a parent group."
- Informal "networking time" will be built into each meeting agenda
- We seek to offer educators professional development credits for attending our workshops.

Background:

In 2012, a number of parents within the Dover School District, whose children have a variety of special education needs, expressed interest in developing a deeper relationship between parents, teachers, case managers and the district around special education. Parents were feeling isolated and ill-informed about how to best meet their child's educational needs.

Around the same time, the Dover Special Education coordinating team – citing parent engagement survey data – saw the need for parents to feel more connected in the special education process.

After initial meetings with district representatives and interested parents, the team determined that a parent information & support group is a cost-effective and inclusive way for parents to network, share resources and learn with each other. This group will also serve as a vehicle for parents and educators to connect with each other in joint learning opportunities, deepening relationships and understanding.

NH Connections, an independent nonprofit with experience in parent-school collaborative programs, was engaged as a neutral third party support. NH Connections facilitated the initial meeting and will remain as counsel "behind the scenes" for the school district and parent leadership team.

Leadership:

Karen Berg – Parent (GES) & Educator (DMS)
Nancy Duffy – Parent (DMS)
Alyson Genovese – Parent (GES)
Holly Goodell – Parent (WPS)

Carolyn Hodges – Parent (DMS)
Beth Mattingly – Parent (GES & DMS)
Sherrie Sheehan – SpEd Coordinator (DMS)
Jamie Willett – Parent (DMS)

We seek additional Steering Committee members, especially representatives from DHS and HSS.