

# **SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

## **March 2009 Update**

### **Overview: Programs and Services**

State and Federal law mandates that Wellesley provide special education services to its residents, beginning at age three and continuing through age twenty-two or high school graduation, whichever occurs first. The law mandates that all children with special needs receive those services that allow them to access and progress in public education; moreover, if a student's needs are such that a town cannot provide for them in a public setting, then the law requires that the town find and pay for an appropriate private school for the child.

Special education services are provided for children with a spectrum of needs from mild to very severe. A range of programs (including classroom-based support, support in learning centers, partially- or fully- contained local programs and out-of-district programs) and services (e.g., screening and evaluation, speech/language and physical therapy, and psychological services) are needed to meet the needs of a growing population of students with disabilities.

Current trends affecting both the range and volume of the special education services the Town must provide include:

- An increased preschool population with special needs.
- An increased number of children with significant disabilities, including medically-fragile children, multi-handicapped children, and children with diagnoses along the autism spectrum or pervasive developmental disorders.
- Growth in the number of high school students with significant emotional and/or behavioral issues.

All decisions regarding a student's eligibility for services, as well as the appropriate level, type, and venue of such services, are determined after a rigorous evaluation process by a team of educators, special education professionals, and parents. The results of this process are presented in an Individualized Education Plan (an "IEP") for that student. Parents and students are entitled to an independent education evaluation at public school expense if they feel that the testing done by the school is not "comprehensive and appropriate." If parents disagree with a proposed IEP or placement, the regulations provide for a dispute resolution process before a hearing officer. Hearing decisions are made using a standard of "free and appropriate education." If a hearing officer finds in favor of the parents' request, the school department is financially responsible for the requested placement and for the parents' attorney fees.

### *Instructional Special Education*

The majority of students on IEPs have mild to moderate disabilities, spend most of their school day in regular classrooms, and receive the most routine services within the special education programs such as speech therapy, reading or math tutoring, occupational therapy or physical therapy.

### *Inclusion Program*

The Inclusion Program covers students with intensive special needs who require significant support from specialized staff such as behavioral analysts, deaf educators, speech/language therapists or occupational therapists, to name a few. In many cases,

the Inclusion students also require a dedicated teaching assistant. Inclusion students spend large parts of their school day in “substantially separate” programs and activities, but in some cases also participate in regular classroom activities when their specialist schedules permit. Expenses for the Inclusion Program cover individualized materials and assistive devices, specialized training for staff assistants, and outside services needed to support the medically-fragile students.

Whenever the Town has a critical number of students with similar special needs, new programs are instituted locally as they are more cost-effective than out-of-district placements. Tuition for a private day school setting is often extremely expensive, ranging from \$30,000 to over \$120,000. As examples, two programs--the Middle School Language Class and the Middle School Intensive II Inclusion program--were created by the School Department in FY08 for students with intensive special needs who were aging up from programs at Hardy, Sprague, and Upham. The FY09 budget funded an additional ISS classroom at Sprague School to accommodate four rising kindergarten students. Similarly, the FY10 budget request funds an additional inclusion classroom at the High School to accommodate two students entering the High School from the Middle School Skills program. If these programs did not exist, the students would not be able to be educated in Town and would be placed in more costly out-of-district programs.

#### *Out-of-District Placements*

As part of the special education mandate, students between the ages of 3 and 22 with special needs who cannot be educated in the Wellesley schools are enrolled at the Town’s expense in educational programs at other public (collaborative) or private schools. The State Division of Purchased Services sets annual tuition rates for these services.

#### *Transportation*

Special education students must be provided transportation to the Wellesley schools or to out-of-district placements should they need it. Funding for transportation covers salaries for the transportation coordinator, transportation attendants and van drivers for the school’s thirteen vans, and expenses associated with outside vendor transportation services, as needed.

#### **Special Education Budget**

The total special education budget is separated into two components: Instructional Special Education and Special Tuition and Transportation (STT).

The Instructional Special Education budget includes services for the majority of students identified as having special educational needs. The special education costs associated with these students, are incremental to the cost per student of regular education.

The Special Tuition and Transportation budget includes the staff salaries and expenses to educate the students with intensive special needs who receive instruction through the “*Inclusion Program*” in the Wellesley schools and the expenses (tuition) for the students who are placed “*out-of-district.*” In addition, STT includes the “*transportation*” costs (e.g., van driver salaries, expenses related to contracted transportation services) for any special education students who require transportation, whether they are on IEPs, attend vocational school, or have “504 Plans” (a modified form of special assistance). Many of these children require and receive special education support during the summer as well.

## **Funding Special Education**

Budgeting for all of the special education programs, including the out-of-district tuitions, for the next fiscal year is based on students who have been identified as having special needs on October 1<sup>st</sup> of the current fiscal year. The School Department then factors in students who will age-out of current programs and students who may require out-of-district placements because their needs cannot be met within the district. The cost of educating students in special education programs is primarily born by the taxpayers in the local community. However, other sources provide substantive offsets.

**Federal Funding:** The Federal Special Education Entitlement, a federal grant program, funds professional special education staff, teaching assistants, and a modest amount for materials. In addition, an Early Childhood Special Education grant funds an occupational therapist, as well as instructional materials. Both grants cover the costs for pension and other fringe benefits. The amount of funding varies by year. In FY09, Wellesley received Federal grants totaling \$1,059,944, and the same total has been budgeted for FY10.

**State Funding:** In FY04, the Massachusetts State legislature funded the “circuit breaker” special education reimbursement program to provide financial support to local governments for the cost of students in both inclusion and out-of-district placements. Under the program, school districts receive partial reimbursement for the costs of these programs. The FY10 budget assumes a reimbursement rate of 70% of the cost to educate any student above a threshold, which equals four times the statewide average per pupil cost. This threshold used for the budgeted FY10 reimbursement is \$37,328. Circuit breaker funding is subject to the following limitations:

- Circuit breaker funding does not fund any transportation costs.
- Circuit breaker funding is calculated on a child-by-child basis, not on an aggregate basis; therefore, circuit breaker funding is triggered only if an *individual* child's tuition exceeds the threshold. For example, if the town pays \$55,000 tuition for a student to attend an out-of-district institution, the state will reimburse 70% of the \$17,672 cost above the threshold of \$37,328. Hence, the town pays \$42,630 and the state pays \$12,370 for this student's placement.
- Since the state does not pro-rate the formula, the state uses a threshold of \$37,328 regardless of when during the year a child goes into an out-of-district program.
- Circuit breaker funding is a reimbursement program that is based upon the prior fiscal year's expenditure. Therefore, the projected circuit breaker funding for the current fiscal year is a projected reimbursement for expenditures in the prior year.

The chart on the next page shows a steady increase in the circuit-breaker funds Wellesley has received over the last few years. The FY09 reimbursement was \$2,040,466; the FY10 circuit breaker reimbursement is expected to be \$2,050,094.

In addition, the School Department may apply for “extraordinary relief” under the circuit breaker funding program if the current year “circuit breaker eligible” costs exceed the prior year's eligible costs by at least 25%. This funding typically is received in the fiscal year in which the expenses are incurred. The last time Wellesley was eligible for “extraordinary relief” funds was in FY2006 when the Town received \$272,051.

**Fee Revenue:** Regulations require that preschool classes include roughly equal numbers of special needs and typically developing children. Tuition revenue received from the families of typical developing children enrolled in the program provides a modest offset to the cost of the preschool program.

**FY10 Budget for Special Education**

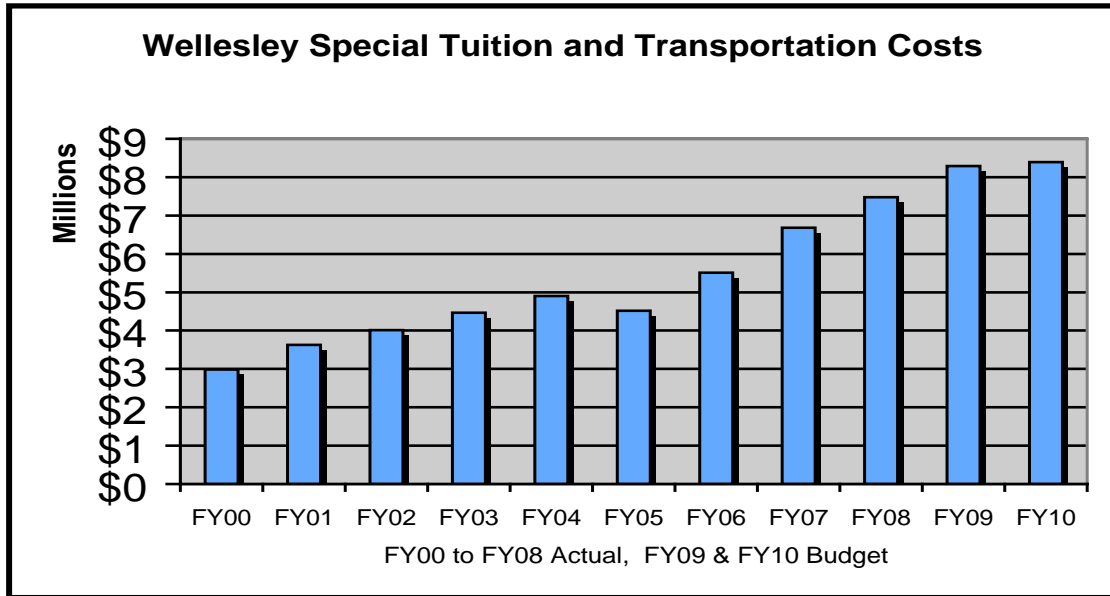
The FY10 budget includes a total cost for Special Education of \$16,177,223 which represents 30% of the proposed school budget. This is equivalent to the percentage of the School Budget spent on SPED in FY09 where the SPED total is \$15,585,797 with a total School Budget of \$51,683,013. (Both FY09 and FY10 total budget figures are adjusted for the new centralized facilities maintenance program.)

Within the FY10 Special Education figure is a \$7,780,472 cost for Instructional Special Education and \$8,396,751 for ST& T.

	<b>FY07 Actual</b>	<b>FY08 Budget</b>	<b>FY08 Actual</b>	<b>FY09 Budget</b>	<b>FY10 Budget</b>
<b># OF STUDENTS</b>					
Instructional	624	626	606	609	632
Inclusion	87	96	123	132	168
Out of District	66	68	96	93	93
<i>Total Students</i>	<i>777</i>	<i>790</i>	<i>825</i>	<i>834</i>	<i>893</i>
Students Transported	123	128	136	141	153
<b>SPED STAFF (FTE)</b>					
Teachers:	43.4	44.3	44.6	47.6	48.6
Professional Support	34.9	36.9	36.9	38.4	38.0
Classroom Support	105.3	113.7	113.8	115.5	120.2
<i>Total FTE</i>	<i>183.6</i>	<i>194.9</i>	<i>195.3</i>	<i>201.5</i>	<i>206.8</i>
<b>SPED BUDGET (\$)</b>					
Instructional	5,771,132	6,244,031	6,012,175	7,314,240	7,780,472
STT					
Inclusion	2,577,052	2,982,019	2,904,441	3,374,052	3,632,690
Out of District	4,981,484	4,575,282	5,289,866	6,010,741	5,809,699
Less: Circuit Breaker	-1,580,866	-1,899,644	-2,012,782	-2,040,466	-2,050,094
Transportation	706,985	792,818	809,107	927,230	1,004,456
Total STT	6,684,655	6,450,475	6,990,632	8,271,557	8,396,751
<i>Total SPED Budget</i>	<i>12,455,787</i>	<i>12,694,506</i>	<i>12,694,506</i>	<i>15,585,797</i>	<i>16,177,723</i>
<b>AVERAGE COST PER STUDENT (\$)</b>					
Instructional	9,249	9,974	9,921	12,010	12,311
Inclusion	29,621	31,063	23,613	25,561	21,623

Out of District	51,525	39,348	34,136	42,691	45,296
Transportation	5,748	6,194	5,949	6,576	6,565

**Special Tuition and Transportation: Rate of Growth Slowing**



The FY10 budget calls for a 1.5% increase in ST&T costs over FY09, a significantly lower rate of increase than Wellesley has experienced over the last several years. This can be attributed in large part to the efforts of the School Department to educate more students with moderate to intense special needs within the Wellesley Schools through a growing Inclusion Program where the cost of educating these students is generally significantly lower than placement in out-of-district programs. As the program grows, and larger cohorts of students recognized, greater efficiencies are realized as students can sometimes be paired with a single teaching assistant or specialist. Further, the addition in FY09 of an Out-of-District Coordinator to provide comprehensive oversight of all out-of-district placements has been a tremendous benefit to the schools.

The following table shows the most recent available benchmarking data for special education spending (before circuit breaker funding) by town from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Wellesley continues to rank first within this peer group relative to special education spending as a percent of the total school operating budget. Wellesley also ranks first within this group for out-of-district per pupil expenditure.

Special Education Spending by Town

**SPED Budget % of Total School Budget**

<b>Town</b>	<b>FY06</b>		<b>FY07</b>	
	<b>%</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Rank</b>
<b>Wellesley</b>	<b>24.6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>25.3</b>	<b>1</b>
Belmont	19.4	5	20.7	6
Brookline	20.3	4	21.9	4
Lexington	21.4	2	23.1	2
Natick	17.0	9	15.1	10
Needham	19.0	6	19.1	8
Newton	21.2	3	21.8	5
Wayland	15.5	10	15.2	9
Weston	12.7	11	13.0	11
Westwood	18.3	7	19.6	7
Winchester	18.3	8	23.0	3

**Average Out of District Per Pupil Spending**

<b>Town</b>	<b>FY06</b>		<b>FY07</b>	
	<b>\$</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>Rank</b>
<b>Wellesley</b>	<b>\$60,698</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>\$73,924</b>	<b>1</b>
Belmont	44,126	8	49,120	8
Brookline	62,369	1	57,740	5
Lexington	50,327	6	60,205	3
Natick	21,738	11	21,806	11
Needham	52,995	5	57,439	6
Newton	55,382	4	59,904	4
Wayland	36,161	10	44,002	9
Weston	45,380	7	41,881	10
Westwood	56,199	3	66,159	2
Winchester	39,904	9	50,336	7

**Summary**

Wellesley continues to provide excellent programs and services for the educational, emotional, and physical needs to students in its special education community. Wellesley has undertaken a number of steps to control costs in this area and the FY10 budget is benefiting from these efforts. The efficiencies realized through the addition of the Out-of-District Coordinator have more than met expectations both in the Coordinator's role as liaison to parents and private programs and the support the coordinator provides to staff as well as in the budget savings this oversight has provided. The School Department

hopes to see the same type of success with the addition of a Special Education Administrator to oversee the Inclusion program. This position was cut to meet the budget guidelines for FY10 but the School Department is pursuing the possibility of this position being funded through stimulus package funds for education. Based on recent positive experiences involving special education attorneys, the School Department has included funds for a SPED attorney in FY10. It is expected this will also have a positive impact on Wellesley's Special Education spending.

An evaluation of the Wellesley Schools Special Education programs is being conducted by the firm of Consulting Partners, Inc. to determine if current program and practices result in appropriate and effective programs in a cost-efficient way. Advisory is awaiting the results of this study and it is likely more steps with additional positive budgetary impacts will be taken.