
**"UniteOurVoices" Newsletter # 140
January 9, 2015**

INFORMATION ALERT: Families of children with disabilities in Fulton County Schools in the Community Based Instruction (CBI) program.

Dearest Advocates:

Over the last few weeks, I have been on a fact finding mission regarding the changes to the Community Based Instruction (CBI) program for children with disabilities in the Fulton County School system. I had the opportunity to discuss with Ms. Smith many of the concerns that you have regarding this significant change to where our children will receive services in high school in the next couple of years. Starting next year children will start to be moved to their home school to receive services under the CBI program in high school (therefore- no more "cluster schools"). I'm very impressed after talking to Ms. Smith about how well this change has been thought out to make this decision successful.

I wanted to inform families as soon as I had the correct information to send out. I'm looking forward to my son's being at the same high school in the coming years like they were in elementary school. As always, this is still an IEP team decision and families will have input into where their children will attend based on the needs and services of the specific student.

Fulton County staff plan to have "town hall chats" in the coming weeks for those families impacted by this change and I will be sending out information as available as well.

Below is the email I sent to Dr. Avossa (Superintendent for Fulton County Schools) and Ms. Smith (Executive Director-Services for Exceptional Children for Fulton County Schools) earlier this week. In red letters is Ms. Smith's response to the questions. As you can see, much thought and planning has went into this placement change for our children. As always, families need to watch this change closing and communicate to each other and Fulton County Schools the issues/concerns that you may have.

In addition, I have attached the Fulton County Schools "Questions & Answers Community Based Instruction Program Expansion" sheet dated December 2014 for those interested.

Happy Healthy New Year to everyone. I hope you find this information helpful. Today, is Jacob's 15th birthday. Can't believe my miracle baby is 15 today! How the time flies.....

Have a great weekend and if you have any concerns about the above changes, feel free to e-mail me. I have a follow-up meeting with Ms. Smith next week to further discuss families concerns.

Sincerely,
Heidi

Dear Dr. Avossa and Ms. Smith:

A few weeks ago it was brought to my attention that Fulton County is looking to de-centralize their CBI program in the high schools starting in the fall of 2015-16 school year.

I know you don't know me, but I have been very involved with parent involvement/engagement, education and advocacy for individuals with disabilities for over 13 years in education and healthcare in Georgia. I was on the State Advisory Panel for special education for three years and worked with GADOE on many projects in the past. My focus over the last 6 years has been on healthcare and Medicaid waivers but I still try to be involved with special education issues. I have a distribution list of over 2,500+ members and a Facebook group of over 700 members. I try to educate and help families understand issues that impact their children with disabilities and advocate for change when necessary. (Dr. Avossa- we actually met two years ago at the Special Olympics in Sandy Springs and we discussed my involvement in the disability community).

Many families rely on me to communicate and explain changes and this is one that I need your help in understanding. I have a few questions I would like to have answered to help with the communication of a major change to special education services in Fulton County for our families....

I received the "Community Based Instruction Program Expansion" FAQ dated December 2014 a few weeks ago but waited until now to contact you because of the holiday break. This is a major change to the CBI program and wanted to know to what extent families have been involved in the process?

My son, Jacob, has been in Fulton County Special Education for over 12 yrs. We have seen a lot of changes (both good and bad) and are concerned about how this is going to be handled. I can see both the positive and negatives of having our children in the community school they live but we need communication and explanation on how this is going to occur to help families have confidence in the system.

Here are my questions:

1. What was the driving force to de-centralizing the CBI students? **Our driving force is our students and we want to be sure that everyone has the opportunity to attend school in their home school, in their own neighborhood, with siblings, friends, and**

neighbors. In addition to providing services at all schools, we will reduce the amount of time that our students spend on busses and offer the opportunity to the larger community to have the opportunity to interact with CBI students and better understand their needs.

2. How and when are families going to be notified? (Since the changes begin the fall of 2015-16.) Further communication will come over the course of the next couple of weeks but each individual child will be discussed at their IEP meeting as service and placement will still be an individualized decision.

3. How is this being funded? There are economics to scale with having everyone centralized. Teachers, paraprofessionals, therapists are able to have a synergy, work together and have support. This is being funded using a combination of local and federal funds. This is the same mechanism we currently use. The decision to more broadly offer these services across the district is based primarily on the needs of our students and feedback from parents, not necessarily on cost. We are committed to ensuring the same type and quality of services is offered. While we are “bundling” services as the program is currently designed, we also recognize that some of our personnel resources may not increase or decrease – they may simply shift to other locations across the district. On the other hand, fewer students will be transported long distances to attend school which decreases fuel consumption and the need for other related resources.

4. How are families going to be guaranteed that there are highly qualified teachers and staff with special education background in the classrooms? I hope you would do more than just having a general education teacher take a classes to be “certified” and have no formal training or background in special education. Of course! The teachers who teach our students will be the same teachers and paras we currently employ. The only change is where they will teach some of our students. This year we have instituted an Intellectual Disabilities Academy to provide more rigorous professional development to current teachers and we are working on a professional development to begin next month that mirrors this academy, except it is designed for administrators and support personnel. This summer we are planning opportunities for other personnel such as custodial staff, front office staff, and others who will interact with our families and our students.

5. How are you going to handle the need for more OT, PT, ST therapists, music therapists, adaptive art teachers, etc? Fulton County has an issue now with not having enough therapists in the cluster schools. In addition to employing individuals for these positions, the district also contracts with multiple agencies to ensure that we are staffed at capacity with highly qualified and certified personnel. We do not anticipate difficulties in this area.

6. I have spoken to teachers and staff at a variety of schools about their concerns of becoming an “island” at the high school with no support. How will you make sure this does not happen and the classes **ARE fully integrated** into the high schools and not

just “step child” class rooms? **None of our schools will have less than two classes, with most schools having 3 to 5 classes. This provides an opportunity for these teachers to maintain a professional learning community focused on their needs within the larger school community. An additional part of our drive to offer these services more widely is to ensure that we are more inclusive and not segregating students with special needs to specific schools across the district.**

7. In my experience, one of the most important success factors in special education is the **positive attitude towards our children and wanting them to be successful.** If our children are placed at schools where they are not welcomed by the teachers, administration and students- It will be a disaster. What steps will be taken to ensure that the children will be welcomed and accepted in their new schools? **Leading up to the beginning of this process, we engaged in multiple meetings with our SEC Advisory Committee, parents, and we met individually with each high school that will open a new program in fall of 2015. All of our administrative teams and teachers have been overwhelmingly supportive of this decision and they are eager to welcome our students. In addition, as I mentioned previously, we have a menu of professional development opportunities that will be offered this semester and through the summer months to increase awareness and answer the questions of anyone who needs additional opportunities to learn about the needs of our students.**

We have always wanted Jacob to be at his home school with his brother that is in the same grade, but Northwestern MS did not have the necessary supports so he has been attending Haynes Bridge MS. I can't say enough fantastic things about the staff and being in a cluster school. I'm just concerned that if this is not implemented properly, families and staff will have more difficulties than benefits provided by a de-centralized CBI program. **Please trust me that we share your same concerns and we are taking this transition very seriously.**

Just like with the redistricting of the attendance zones in North Fulton County the last few months, families of children with disabilities deserve the same ability to express input and concerns to this “re-districting” of CBI children in a public comment setting before implementation. I have been told that there was a task force but I have not seen anything in writing to the families regarding this change. Families deserve the same level of communication and input as general education families. I feel that this **IS** a re-districting issue and families deserved to have a voice before this change is implemented! **Coffee chat opportunities as well as other forums for information and discussion are forthcoming. Ultimately, this is in the best interest of our students as all students should have the opportunity to attend their home school. What happens with each individual student can and will be discussed at their IEP meeting when services for high school are discussed.**

I know you have a staff meeting with the high schools on Thursday, but would appreciate a response as soon as possible. I want to issue an alert out to the families this week but wanted to contact you to help me understand your perspective and communicate properly with families these significant changes.

There are a lot of rumors out there now. I want to help! Look forward to hearing from you. **Ms. Moore, I really do appreciate your willingness to help with communication throughout your community and I'd be happy to talk with you further about any ideas or questions you may have.**

"United - We Will Make A Difference"

Sincerely,

Heidi J. Moore

(Proud Mother to Jacob - 15 yrs old with Down syndrome, Autism & Leukemia Survivor and Jared - 13 yrs old with amazing spirit & love for his brother)



Beginning with the 2015-2016 school year, "Community Based Instruction" – called CBI, for short – classes will be expanded throughout the school district instead of being housed in a few locations. These classes are offered to Fulton County students with intellectual disabilities who require some of their academic, daily-living skills, or employment skills to be taught in a community setting, such as a supermarket, retail store, or office building, etc. Although this program is called Community Based Instruction, the classes also are housed inside traditional high schools and provide academic instruction.

What schools will open CBI programs during the 2015-2016 school year?

Cambridge High School, Chattahoochee High School, Tri-Cities High School, and the program at Langston Hughes High School will expand to house additional CBI students.

Where are the CBI programs currently located?

There are five schools where these services are offered to approximately 300 students across the district: Alpharetta High School, Roswell High School, Centennial High School, Banneker High School, and Langston Hughes High School.

How did Fulton County decide what schools would receive the new programs?

The schools slated to have programs in the fall of 2015-2016 are those whose physical facilities are currently ready, or will be ready, to house students in the CBI program when our next school year begins.

Why are we doing this?

We continue to strive to put our student's needs first. Many years ago, when CBI programs were opened at a few locations, those locations were sufficient to meet students' needs. When we analyze the home school location of our current students, we noticed that they are not concentrated to one region of the county so our programs shouldn't be concentrated either. Instead, every high school attendance zone has students in need of these services. We believe that students have the right to attend the same high school as their neighborhood peers and siblings and have their community-based instructional needs met. Many of our families will benefit from having all of their children attend the same high school and have voiced support through the Services for Exceptional Children Advisory Board. Our students who require bus transportation will likely benefit from shorter ride times and more reasonable pick-up and drop-off times.

Shouldn't every high school have this program?

Yes, we believe so. This is the first phase of our plan to expand CBI programs across the district. Our timeline is designed so that all remaining high schools will begin to offer the CBI program at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school-year. While we have the physical space available at all high schools now, we want all of our schools to provide a home-living center and properly adapted classrooms for our students' use.

Which students will be enrolled in the new programs?

The programs at Chattahoochee, Tri-Cities, and Cambridge will provide programming to students in need of the CBI program who are also residents of their attendance area.

Will students at existing locations be moved to their home school if a program will be available there next fall?

Yes. Unless a student's IEP requires some other service or program (for instance, if the student requires a specialized service that is otherwise not available), students are educated in their neighborhood school.

I am a teacher at one of the existing five schools. Is my job safe? Does this mean I will be transferred to

another school?

Yes, your job is safe. There are no current plans to reduce the number of positions in CBI programs across the district. We are looking for teacher leaders who want to open the inaugural classrooms in the designated high schools. Once staff is allocated to the new locations, any volunteers will be moved first. After that, seniority will be used to determine which teachers will be moved to another location.

Will students receive the same support services they have now (for example, adapted PE and art)?

Yes, the program will remain exactly the same. We are only expanding the locations where the program is offered. Students may receive supports and services from a variety of staff members. Some of these include nurses, OTs, PTs, Music Therapists, Adapted Art teachers, Adapted PE Teachers, Vision Teachers, Teachers of Deaf/Hard of Hearing, and Transition Teachers. Many of these individuals will work with students on an itinerant basis, coming in and out of your school on a variable schedule.

How do we schedule students for classes? How do we know what classes they should take?

A scope and sequence has been drafted for students in the CBI program. Students in grades 9-12 will be enrolled in required content classes that will be taught at a modified level. Course numbers use the state base course code with additional numbering sequences to indicate a special education course taught in a special education setting. Students who are staying beyond their 12th grade year have additional course offerings, including some pathways courses.

Who is going to support the teachers?

Fulton County provides professional development for all staff. Trainings are delivered during the summer, pre-planning, and ongoing throughout the school year. At the building level, extra levels of support are provided via the Instructional Support Teachers who, in turn, will provide ongoing support throughout the year. Moreover, administration and building staff will be trained on how to support teachers and students served in a CBI program.

Will the students have what they need in regards to sensory rooms, sensory equipment, etc.?

Yes. All classrooms/schools will be provided with all of the necessary materials and equipment.

Will this overextend the resources in each school building receiving a CBI program?

No. All schools will be provided with the necessary personnel supports and training.

How will the CBI trips be affected?

Community Based Instruction, including community based trips, will continue to be available to our students, regardless of school.

How will Project Search/Life be affected?

Program opportunities will continue throughout the county, with the possibility of additional sites opening in the future.

For more information, contact the Services for Exceptional Children Department at servicesforexceptionalchildren@fultonschools.org or 404-763-5600 ext. 145.

December 2014

Fulton
County Schools
Where Students Come First