

School Committee Candidate Ellen Grieco Letter to Wayland SEPAC, May 2, 2021

Dear Wayland SEPAC Parents,

As a candidate for reelection to the School Committee, I would like to share some of my thoughts about special education in the Wayland Schools starting with Martin Luther King's famous words "Life's most urgent question is what are you doing for others?" All parents have an immediate response to this question, but parents who have children with learning challenges in school, answer this question more immediately, more robustly and more poignantly. For us, every day is filled at least in part, with the question, "what can I do to help?"

The Wayland Schools do a reasonably good job providing special education services to our children. Special education is well funded in Wayland, the IEP process is generally fair and thoughtful of student need and growth, our staff is well trained and they work extremely hard, we have developed programs that enable routine inclusion of students with special education needs in our classrooms. Several years ago, we engaged an outside consultant to fully evaluate our student services programming and funding and in response, we have made changes at all levels.

Our Director of Student Services is thoughtful and resourceful. Last Spring, when the pandemic hit, I spoke with Dr. Whitehead, and expressed my opinion that if he needed additional funding to provide appropriate special education services to our students during the pandemic, he should ask the School Committee for whatever he needed. Understanding that the school closures might disproportionately impact students on IEP and 504 plans, Dr. Whitehead did ask us for additional resources, and he utilized savings from out of district placements, to hire seven additional staff to enhance hybrid and remote instruction for students on IEP and 504 plans. More recently, we have initiated and strongly supported the High School clinical social worker and two elementary school guidance counselors that are included in the 2021 school budget request to Town Meeting to provide support for all our students.

But there is significant room for growth. For example, I believe that Wayland could consolidate and enhance its programming for children with language based learning disabilities. Sudbury and several other peer towns have defined programming for these students, including specifically trained staff. Carroll School is on our doorstep and would, I expect, consult with us to design and implement such programming in our schools. This need is significant to these children: research at Carroll and MIT has shown that many LBLD issues can be ameliorated by specific teaching methods (Wilson or Orton Gillingham) as children grow, and it would be wonderful if we could make this benefit available in our schools for these students.

I would like to understand better the changes the District has made in the Children's Way classes and the impact they will have on our youngest learners now and going forward. We should gauge how these changes are benefitting the children who attend the new classes, evaluate the impact of the changes in demographics in the existing classes, and be sure that the Children's Way's administration is supported in assessing and implementing this transition.

Another area of growth is emotional resilience and safety in our schools for children who receive special education services. Consider this communication that a teacher wrote about one of her students:

*"I also wanted to share with you a poignant, brave moment last week. As part of the MLK "I Have a Dream" unit, we were doing an activity in which students were asked to reflect about experiences from their own lives in which they felt or witnessed judgement because of differences. One question asked students to consider if they had ever heard the term "special education" or "SPED" used in a derogatory way. She volunteered that she felt there is an unfair, negative connotation about students in org skills classes. She went on to say that it is not right; students receiving extra support are working as hard as everyone else and they shouldn't be judged for having help if they need it. I was so proud of her; I know it was a risk for her to speak out on this subject with her peers."*

This needs to change. While our SEL program is great, it is not structured to target the issue of emotional safety for these children in our schools. We need to consciously undertake programming that encourages our whole community to know how amazing these children are who face unique challenges learning every day in our schools.

These are just some of my thoughts on special education in Wayland today. I have attended SEPAC meetings and spoken many times with Colleen and Anne-Louise, both of whom have done an amazing job, with your help, revitalizing SEPAC and leading our families during the many challenges of the pandemic. Dr. Whitehead has also provided support for these efforts and has worked diligently to provide answers, assistance and comfort during this difficult year. And I believe that our new superintendent, Dr. Easy, will be a thoughtful and committed leader of our special education students, families and staff going forward.

I am available to talk any time with parents, to understand your ideas and concerns and how your and your child's experience in our schools could be improved. I am asking for your support going forward with my work on the School Committee to further enhance and fund our programming. Please vote for Ellen Grieco for School Committee in the election on May 11.

Thank you,

Ellen  
508-560-9888

There is additional information about my work on the School Committee over the past 10 years on my website, [grieco4schoolcommittee.com](http://grieco4schoolcommittee.com).