Preparing for the Future

Thank goodness the warmer weather is finally here.
It continues to be a busy time at the Collaborative. Here is a brief update on the current work being completed at the Collaborative.

The District Improvement Planning Process with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is going well. The thirty member team (made up of staff, parents, half of our member district SPED directors and other stakeholder groups) is very committed to developing a successful plan for the Collaborative. Work has been done to create a three year plan which aligns educator goals with the Collaborative Improvement Plan. Next steps will be to create an action plan with progress and impact benchmarks. After this we will monitor and publicly report on progress and ultimately redesign and tweak the District Plan if required.

Collaboratives are for the first time required by Federal and State law to participate in the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Coordinated Program Review (CPR) process. Valley Collaborative has been scheduled for this review during the 2015-2016 school year.

According to DESE:
“All Collaboratives will be reviewed on their implementation of federal and state special education requirements; targeted federal civil rights requirements under Title VI, Title IX, and Section 504; selected approved public day school standards under 603 CMR 28.09 and 603 CMR 18.00 (if applicable); state learning time and selected nutrition program requirements. The onsite review team will be led by representatives from the Department’s Program Quality Assurances unit (PQA).”

Our first CPR information session was Friday, May 8th at the DESE in Malden.

A great deal of work continues to be done to upgrade all of our “homemade” systems to commercial systems. The Accounting/HR Software package, Infinite Visions, and SchoolBrains are particularly challenging. As you can appreciate implementing even one of these systems requires a great deal of work upfront. We are almost there and the Collaborative will be structurally set up for decades to come.
Given the fact that this was the first year in our new facilities and operating under the Board’s “Downsizing vote”—where the operational focus is now on our nine member districts—it has been challenging and has required me to relentlessly perform due diligence, as the margin of error is unforgiving. As expected enrollment is slightly down, resulting in the following: overall revenues have decreased approximately 16% from the original FY’15 projections, resulting in approximately a one million dollar gain.

This result represents successful management of many moving parts that require constant monitoring in order to avoid the harms associated with a significant decrease in revenues. In other words, I have had to analyze and micro manage the budget throughout the year-constantly making monthly corrections and adjustments to staffing and resources. As a Superintendent and now over 3 years in this position as Executive Director, I continue to be keenly aware of how nimble and “on your game” you need to be in order to constantly manage budgets built on unpredictable and fluctuating revenue streams.

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My best to you,

Chris
Chris A. Scott, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Third Annual Valley Collaborative Field Trip

On Monday, May 18th students, staff and parents arrived for the annual school trip. Nineteen students from the Transitional High School program and five staff members set off to see Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and New York City. The Valley travelers went to see historic places and to immerse themselves in the diversity and excitement of both wonderful cities.

Students saw where the Constitution was written, debated and signed at Independence Hall, took a tour of the Liberty Bell and visited the Ben Franklin Institute. The students were especially excited to eat the notorious “Philly Cheese Steak.”

After spending a few days in Philadelphia, students and staff were eager to get to New York City. One student was overheard saying, “Let’s go tackle New York City.” Staff and students enjoyed being from Boston and traveling the streets of the “evil empire.” Students visited the 9/11 Memorial, the National History Museum, Times Square, the World War II aircraft carrier Intrepid, climbed to the top of the world at Rockefeller Center, took a boat ride to see the Statue of Liberty and, finally, attended a Broadway show to see Matilda. Lily Stacey, a student in the School to Work program, stated, “I really liked going to see the museums and the Broadway show.” While traveling home from a long week, Tim Patterson from our vocational program; was overheard saying to his peers. “This was the best time of my life; I don’t want to go home.” That sentiment was echoed by several peers around him.

After School Program Strengthens Social Ties

For Valley Collaborative students, the opportunity to learn and grow doesn’t stop when the school day ends. Thanks to an expanded after-school program, students can work on their social goals, including building friendships, while trying their hands at art, cooking and outdoor adventures.

“That’s important,” says Program Lead Kristine Bonsack, because students at the Collaborative leave their social groups in their home school districts. “They don’t have many social opportunities. The after school rec program gives students a way to continue to work on their social skills in a structured environment that’s also a lot of fun.

The after school program recently expanded to four days a week, thanks in part to the generous support of area businesses. (See page 7 for a complete list). The expansion allows time for some new activities, including swimming at the nearby Radisson Hotel in Chelmsford, where several Valley Collaborative students work.

Expanding to four days also gives students the opportunity to enjoy more of Valley Collaborative’s popular Experiential Physical Education program. Led by registered Maine Guides Trevor Donoghue and Joshua Ciampa, the program introduces students to the world of exercise and adventure. “These activities build a sense of community,” explains Ciampa. “The students get to take on leadership roles that they might not have in another setting. They also learn patience through the activities.”
Spotlight on Valley Collaborative Programs

Valley Collaborative’s long season of relocation and renovation is finally wrapping up. The Elementary School recently concluded its move to a custom-built site on Coburn Road in Tyngsborough. Principal Annie Willis says that the new space will help her team do an even better job of serving the school’s students. “We really pride ourselves on being able to customize instruction to meet the needs of our students,” says Elementary School Principal Annie Willis. “Having a space that was built with the students in mind enables us to really focus deeply on the needs of specific students.”

The Valley Middle School is also on the move and will relocate to Billerica in June, when construction on the school’s custom-built facility at 40 Linnell Circle is completed.

The completion of Valley Middle School’s new Billerica location signals the end of a busy period of consolidation, transition, and redesign for the Valley Collaborative. At the beginning of the school year, high school students at the Collaborative, who had previously been divided between four different buildings, moved into a central state-of-the-art location at 40 Linnell Circle.

Dr. Chris Scott says that watching the Collaborative’s vision take shape through a variety of construction projects has been amazing. “We’re so proud to now be able to offer facilities that have really been built with our students in mind. It’s been a long road but well worth it.”

At Elementary School, A New Focus on Parent Engagement

Drop by the Valley Collaborative Elementary School these days and you’re likely to encounter parents—lots and lots of parents. That’s because the school and its staff are placing a new emphasis on parent engagement, explains Principal Annie Willis.

“In the past parents really hadn’t been involved in the school, and this year we really set out to change that. Having parents engaged in the school builds a real sense of community that benefits them and the students,” says Willis.

Parent volunteers have been helping with school beautification and pitching in at the library. They also organized a Teacher Appreciation Week intended to show how much they love the school and appreciate the staff who work with their children everyday. The special week featured an array of treats—parents surveyed staff members in order to identify their favorite snacks—as well as a raffle of gift cards that the parents donated.

Christine Schwefler was one of the parents who helped put Teacher Appreciation Week together. She says that she signed up for one simple reason: “I wanted to say thank you for all that the school has done for us.” Schwefler’s 11-year-old son Nicholas has attended Valley Collaborative Elementary School for three years, a period during which he has thrived, says Schwefler. “His behavior has changed. He’s come such a long way and I owe that to the teachers and their compassion and love for him. This was my way of saying thank you back to them.”
Site I: Alternative Vocational Students Learn—and Earn

What if you had the opportunity to learn valuable workplace skills as a student—and earn money in the process? Students attending the Vocational High School program at Valley Collaborative do just that. The program is designed to help students develop transitional skills so that they are prepared to successfully enter the workplace after graduating from high school.

Program Lead Chris Cowan says that the school is modeled on a traditional vocational/technical high school—but with some key differences. “Classes here are smaller and less formal than in the traditional school system, which lets students form relationships with the staff,” says Cowan.

Students have the opportunity to work in one of several “shops” at Valley, including culinary, woodshop, car detail and landscaping. Also an offer: internships at a number of area businesses, including A Plus Computer Solutions in Lawrence, AMA Transportation in Billerica and Rudy’s Fuel and Auto Service in Chelmsford. A new partnership with the Laborers Union also gives students the opportunity to “construct a career path” through the Laborer’s acclaimed apprenticeship program. Apprentices receive 150 hours of instruction on topics from safety to construction skill, and earn 60 percent of a union laborer’s wages, even as they’re still being trained.

“We really try to emphasize positive rewards for our students as they learn workplace skills,” says Cowan. “Making sure they’re being paid for their work is part of that.”

Site II: Alternative High School Aims to Expand Horizons

If the Valley Collaborative High School programs had a motto it might be “expanding horizons.” That’s because the approximately 150 students who attend the alternative high school programs here not only have access to a trusting, structured and safe therapeutic environment, but are being prepared to survive and thrive in the larger world.

At the heart of the school’s approach is a model called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or PBIS that rewards students who make good choices. “Ultimately the students learn to make their own choices, with real world consequences,” explains Program Lead Julie Fielding.

And program staff make sure that students have plenty of opportunities to interact with the larger world, including community service projects to help teach students the importance of helping others. Students are currently volunteering at the Wish Project, the Lowell Transitional Shelter and the Humane Society, as well as at the Valley Collaborative’s own Early Education Center.

Students also have the chance to experience things they’ve never done before, including outdoor activities like rock climbing, hiking—even overnight camping. “We really encourage the students to try new things that they may be fearful of at first,” says Fielding. “With the right supports, our students can do just about anything.”

Case in point: the first-ever overnight camping trip, in which twelve students and Valley Collaborative staff traveled to Lonesome Lake, a trip that required them to hike in with their gear and sleep in the great outdoors, something many of the campers had never done before. Fielding notes that the ratio of four staff members for twelve students ensured that everyone stayed safe.

»continued on back page.
Site III: Building Skills for Employment, Independence

The COAP, SCOAP and School-to-Work programs start with a basic belief: even students who confront profound challenges can learn the fundamental skills necessary for employment. Students in Valley Collaborative’s Site III programs learn through community-based employment opportunities and classroom activities. While on the job, students, who are paid for their work, get plenty of close supervision by an on-site vocational instructor.

As students gain more independence at work, they gradually require less supervision. And that reflects another key tenet of Site III, explains Tim Callahan, Principal, SCOAP/COAP, School-to-Work and Adult Programs. “That goal of independence is at the heart of our approach.” Students learn, not only skills needed for entry-level employment, but life skills. “They’re being provided with skills that will enable them to live at the highest degree of independence possible,” says Callahan.

Like their peers who attend Valley’s Vocational High School, Site III students also have access to a range of internships, offered in partnership with area businesses through the School-to-Work program. But skills-building Valley Collaborative style, isn’t just work. Site III students also participate in the Collaborative’s After School Recreation Program, where they enjoy art, music, and a full range of outdoor activities. (See page 3.)

“Helping students build skills, including social skills, enables us to expand the opportunities they’ll have in the future,” says Callahan. “That’s what Valley is all about.”

Valley Collaborative Middle School: ‘The Best Person You Can Be’

Valley Collaborative Middle School has a mission: to be a safe, respectful and responsible community so that students here can be the best that they can be. The Middle School uses an integrated therapy model that works on students’ social, emotional, behavioral and communication needs.

“It’s a therapeutic approach that allows students to take risks in a supportive setting as a way of building their independence,” says Principal Nicole Noska.

That emphasis on skills building goes beyond Valley Middle School’s small classroom setting. Students participate in an array of groups, including social skills, life skills and wellness, aimed at equipping middle schoolers with coping strategies that they can apply in all sorts of settings. Community-based activities give students the opportunity to put their new skills to the test.

Students also build valuable skills while having a good time. Physical education classes and Valley’s unique Experiential Physical Education program enable students to enjoy activities like hiking, fishing, canoeing, snowshoeing, cross country skiing and rock climbing. Explains Noska: “Experiential learning is a huge piece of the middle school experience. Students are working on their social and emotional skills while they’re engaged in physical activities or on exciting trips.”

The middle school also offers a six week summer program that emphasizes hands-on projects and electives, as well as community-based activities.

“We’re all about pushing students, and giving them the skills they need to be the best person they can be. That’s not always easy at the middle school age,” says Noska.
Valley Collaborative Contract Services

Valley Collaborative provides an array of services to students in other school districts. Services on offer include:
- **Transition Services** to assist districts in facilitating a successful movement for students between school and post-school activities. Valley’s unique comprehensive approach ensures that transition assessment is age appropriate and individualized.
- **Sensory Integration and Praxis Tests (SIPT).** Valley staff are specially trained to administer SIPT Evaluations measuring the sensory integration processes that underlie learning and behavior.
- **Center for Assessment and Therapeutic Services.** In addition to a battery of tests, Valley staff also conduct a situational observation in order to assess “soft skills” or pre-vocational/work readiness;
- **Professional Development**
- **AAC Services**

Valley Collaborative Thanks Our Donors

The following businesses and individuals donated to Valley Collaborative last year, making it possible for us to provide more recreational opportunities to our students.

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Third Annual Field Trip

This was the third year that students from Valley Collaborative have taken an end-of-the-year field trip. Kristine Bonsack, Program Lead for Pod 3, who coordinates the trips, conducted similar outings when she taught in Hawaii and thought that Valley students would benefit from the challenges and the rewards of hitting the road. “Just because students are learning in a separate setting doesn’t mean that they can’t share the same experiences as their peers.”

The 2015 trip was the biggest to date, with 19 Valley Collaborative students, including two who are part of the SCOAP program. Thanks to the area businesses that donated to support this year’s field trip. (See complete list of donors at left). Their financial support provided three students with scholarships for the trip.

Special Thanks To:
Marilyn Humphries, photography
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Business Corner

Valley Collaborative has made huge strides since restructuring efforts began in 2012. Not only do we have a new name and state-of-the-art facilities for Valley students, we recently received a perfect financial audit for FY’ 14. Here’s an overview of some of the changes we’ve made:

**Systems Launched**
TeachPoint Educator Evaluation; SNAP Nursing Software; eSPED IEP Writer; School Brains SIS; Infinite Visions Accounting/HR/Payroll Software; TimeClock Plus - Time and Attendance.

**Key Changes**
- Board voted for Valley Collaborative to become a member of the Group Insurance Commission to ensure retirement and health care benefits for Valley retirees.
- Valley Collaborative now owns its high school and middle school facility, and van fleet.

SARABI (JULIA LESNIK) & SIMBA (JUSTIN GOYETTE)
Alternative High School

“We encourage students to take chances and what we think of as safe risks,” says Fielding.

The “expanded horizons” theme continues after students graduate. Four new grads are college bound, and will head to Salem State, UMass Lowell and Mt. Ida next year. Two other students just became eligible for the Valley Collaborative’s dual enrollment program with Middlesex Community College.

“The programs here enable students to reach for bigger things when they’re ready to leave,” says Fielding.