

Valley Collaborative special ed. group returning \$2M to Lowell-area school districts

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The Valley Collaborative special-education school is giving back \$2 million to its nine-member districts. Officials credit sound fiscal management and significant enrollment. Sean Glavin, director of finance and operations, and Chris Scott, executive director, outside their office in Billerica. SUN/RICK SOBEY

BILLERICA -- The Valley Collaborative special-education school is setting the standard for reform.

It was nearly impossible five years ago to talk about the collaborative without mentioning the word "scandal."

But today, the collaborative -- with headquarters at Linnell Circle off Middlesex Turnpike -- is frequently praised for its sound financial management and significant program enrollment.

As a result of the Valley Collaborative's successful school year, the board recently voted that it will return \$2 million to its nine member school districts -- Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Westford, Tewksbury, Tyngsboro, North Middlesex Regional, Groton-Dunstable and Nashoba Valley.

"Our enrollment has been very strong this year, resulting in a surplus of funds," Executive Director Chris Scott said at the Billerica location on Monday. "Reducing our facilities footprint has also helped.

"I credit the board," she added. "(Billerica Superintendent) Tim Piwowar's leadership has been really strong on the board."

This is the third consecutive year that the collaborative is returning monies to its districts. Last year, Valley Collaborative gave back about \$250,000.

This year, the collaborative is returning \$2 million -- \$310,927 to Billerica; \$467,569 to Chelmsford; \$281,764 to Dracut; \$167,635 to Westford; \$294,741 to Tewksbury; \$120,327 to Tyngsboro; \$318,462 to North Middlesex; \$35,498 to Groton-Dunstable; and \$3,073 to Nashoba Valley.

"That could mean 10 teachers and programs they could support in Chelmsford," Scott said. "They can create their own programs if they choose."

Piwowar, the board chairman, said that returning the \$2 million is an "incredible testament" to Scott and the whole team at Valley.

"The focus is on the students, which is where it should be," Piwowar said.

The Billerica Public Schools plan on treating the \$310,927 as one-time revenue, he said. The funds may go to curriculum, capital projects or supplies.

Enrollment from September 2016 to May 2017 has jumped from 295 to 324 -- an increase of 29 students, or a 9.8 percent spike. That 29-student increase equates to about six classes at the special-education collaborative.

Since 2013, the collaborative has restructured its operations, human resource policies and financial practices, which have provided sound fiscal results. For example, the collaborative has significantly reduced its operating costs by purchasing the building at 40 Linnell Circle and a fleet of transportation vehicles.

The collaborative's annual rental costs in 2014 were close to \$1.5 million because of the legacy from the previous leaders. Today, rental costs have been reduced to \$400,000.

In addition, the transportation and travel budget has gone from \$633,000 in 2014 to \$104,000 this year. There used to be 65 vans, but that has been sliced to 44 vans.

At the same time, however, the collaborative has not increased tuition rates for students since Fiscal 2011. There's been a significant increase to student programming, while administrative and operations costs have continued to trend downward.

"All of the decisions we make are student-centered and student-focused," said Sean Glavin, director of finance and operations. "The board has a strong commitment to students and families."

Five years ago, the collaborative -- then called the Merrimack Special Education Collaborative -- generated negative publicity for allegedly misusing tens of millions of taxpayer dollars.

The state Inspector General's Office dropped a bombshell of a report, alleging that John Barranco, former director of MSEC and Merrimack Education Center (MEC), wined and dined local school superintendents and picked up the tab for their lavish hotel rooms, Boston Harbor cruises, and trips to Florida and the Kentucky Derby.

But Barranco and the former superintendents have not been charged for an alleged scheme in which they allegedly misused close to \$40 million of taxpayer money.

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