



March 9, 2022

NRSD School Committee  
NRHS Building Subcommittee  
50 Mechanic Street  
Bolton, MA 01740

Dear Members of the NRHS Building Subcommittee:

On behalf of the nearly 25% of students at the Nashoba Regional School District with disabilities and/or learning challenges, the Nashoba Special Education Parents Advisory Council would like to offer some considerations with regard to the new building plans for Nashoba Regional High School.

Although we understand that the District is undoubtedly working with architects who will incorporate the ADA - Americans with Disabilities Act design accommodations, Nashoba SEPAC is asking your committee to consider some broader accommodations as this building project must look not only to the current law in designing for disabled students but the trends which show that there is a very high likelihood that the number of students with disabilities will continue to grow and it is important to consider this in our NRHS building design.

Whether one researches data from the Centers for Disease Control, the U.S. Census Bureau or even international articles concerning disabilities, one truth emerges as evident: the rate of disabilities in the world is increasing and along with that is the growth in the rate of children born with disabilities and learning differences. Whether the increase is due to changing medical definitions, growth of autism and ADHD determinations, longer life expectancy, older maternal and paternal age, environmental causes or perhaps evolution, the fact remains that disabled students are not going away and their rate is only increasing so it makes good sense to address the needs of this population in the building of the new high school.

Although Nashoba SEPAC does not have the data regarding individual students and families in our district, we have researched building accommodations for disabled and learning challenged students, we have collected input from parents in the community highlighting their

concerns and recommendations and hereby submit the following for consideration in the upcoming building design:

### SENSORY ACCOMMODATIONS

Many of our students are sensory challenged. This means that the way information enters their senses is different from the way sensory information enters the typical student or individual. They may be particularly sensitive to light, hearing, sense of smell or taste or even have a dysregulation with regard to their personal space in the world which is known as proprioception. Having to filter sensory information in an environment which is attacking your senses is a leading cause of anxiety in these students. Some accommodations below directly affect the sensory needs of our students.

**LIGHTING:** Choose lighting that is not glaring and that is silent. Some lighting hums and that can be entirely anxiety provoking for students.

**COLORS:** Bright colors tend to increase anxiety in students whereas pastels and less busy walls provide more comforting space. Avoid busy wall designs and graphics.

**SOUND:** In all matters including lighting, signage, ventilation, heating, air conditioning, clocks, and more sound must be considered. Many of our special education students are highly affected by sound - some can not differentiate the teacher's voice from other background noises. It is imperative that lights, clocks, heating and cooling systems be silent. It is also important to have acoustic considerations in individual classrooms so that sounds from other classes are not coming through. Using glass walls to separate classrooms causes both visual and auditory distraction and should be avoided.

**BATHROOM FACILITIES:** Most people don't realize that modern bathroom facilities are anxiety provoking for many of our students. The glare from lights, the noise from automatic toilets, towel dispensers, hand dryers and even squirts of soap attack the senses for many of our students. There is an element of loss of control over the surroundings which also provokes anxiety as one can not control all of the automated features. Oftentimes, these students will go the entire day without using the facilities so as to avoid this anxiety provoking trip to the bathroom which in turn creates medical issues - as you can imagine. We ask that there be a designated - single old fashioned flush toilet, paper towel holder, non-automated bathroom located strategically throughout the school for the students who do not feel comfortable using the larger automated bathrooms.

**HEARING IMPAIRED STUDENTS:** Hearing impaired students must often read lips while trying to write notes. There should be equipment set up in rooms to allow for closed captioning of a teacher's lecture so that the hearing impaired (and students with slow writing skills) can capture the lecture points.

**SIGHT IMPAIRED STUDENTS:** The design of the school should have wide hallways that allow for students who walk or ride on devices. A handrail and change in flooring on one side of the

hallway (such as a small indent that can be followed with a cane) can allow a sight impaired student who walks with a cane or device to maneuver independently.

**ADHD AND AUDITORY PROCESSING DISORDER STUDENTS:** Often, students with ADHD or auditory processing disorder have difficulty differentiating sounds which is why they may seem incredibly distracted. Having rooms with equipment that allows the teacher's voice to be heard in a headset allows the student to be able to focus on that voice as opposed to all the other auditory distractions which are competing for the student's attention.

**ROOM WITHIN A ROOM:** So many of our special education students have separate testing room accommodations. This is done to allow for a quiet space with minimal distractions for test-taking purposes but often, we do not have enough space and students are put into a room with a number of other students and many distractions. It would be ideal to have a small room in the corner of each classroom where a small number of students could take a test in silence. It is important that this room be well ventilated and acoustically quiet with minimal visual distraction. It would be best to have a window incorporated in this sectioned class. The room should be wired for special devices and auditory/visual equipment which may be needed depending on the needs of the individual student. This is an area of concern that affects many of our families because it is a critical accommodation which makes a huge difference to our students. This is also an area which the SEPAC has received many complaints about students being brought to rooms where lessons are being taught/ or where the room simply is not quiet making the accommodation essentially useless.

**REGULATION SPACE:** There should be an indoor space where students who feel particularly stressed or dysregulated may use. The space should have necessary regulating equipment in line with the age group. It would be best if the space were close to counseling offices or other professional staff such as an occupational therapist's office.

**OUTDOOR SPACE:** Outdoor space should be designed to allow for additional classroom set up; socialization; quiet areas for reading or calming activities.

**KEEPING IT SIMPLE:** Students can be overwhelmed with architectural designs that call for many zig zags and complex routes to classes. It is best to use layouts that are easily understood. While it is important to use pastels and subdued colors as an overall scheme, it is useful to use color in a border or a line design to differentiate departments or information in signage. **ERGONOMIC DETAILS** - It is important that door windows / door handles and other such detail be at such heights to accommodate the walking and chair-bound student.

**SIGNAGE:** Care should be taken to include sign contrast for students with low vision and braille for blind students. Students with visual impairment require a considerable amount of light to see and read so it is important that signs not be placed in dark areas. There are certain fonts that are dyslexic friendly as they have more space between the letters which helps the dyslexic individual take in the information. We ask that signage use dyslexic friendly fonts. The top

dyslexic fonts can be found here:

<https://exceptionalindividuals.com/about-us/blog/our-top-10-dyslexia-friendly-fonts/>

**FIXTURES:** It is best to have movable fixtures (desks and seats) to allow for change in design as needed but there should also be space in each classroom to allow for students who must learn with special equipment/ chairs or recliners.

We appreciate that it is difficult if not nearly impossible to foresee all of the needs of future students but we believe that with these recommendations, we will be better able to help both general and special education students as many of the aforementioned accommodations benefit both populations.

We are grateful for the opportunity to present this proposal and look forward to the development and building of our new high school.

Thank you to the committee for all of your efforts with this building project.

Sincerely,

Charlene Cabral, First Chair

Michele Powell, Second Chair

The Nashoba SEPAC\*

\*Special Education Parents Advisory Council