

LEARNING for LIFE

SMEC Southeastern Massachusetts
Educational Collaborative

FY2024 Annual Report



To Whom It May Concern:

Attached, you will find the FY24 annual report for the Southeastern Massachusetts Educational Collaborative (SMEC), covering the period of July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024. This report contains all of the regulatory reporting requirements of MGL Chapter 40, Section 4E, including summarized information about the programs and services offered by the Collaborative during the prior fiscal year, a discussion of the cost effectiveness of each program and service offered by SMEC, information regarding our governance and administration and a discussion of the progress made toward reaching our agency's stated goals and objectives. In addition, our FY24 Independent Audited Financial Statements are attached, and the relevant figures are embedded in this annual report.

During FY24, we continued to prioritize the recruitment of new personnel in order to expand our level of services. We were fortunate to add several new therapists to our team allowing us to expand our district-based staffing services and filled many direct care vacancies in our adult programs. However, despite the support of our Board of Directors to increase our starting salaries and provide recruitment and retention benefits, we continue to see the impacts of the ongoing national workforce crisis, which has impacted our ability to further expand our capacity to accept many of our newly referred students and adults.

After many attempts over several years to find an additional building through the public procurement process, we were finally able to find a facility to purchase in order to expand our social/emotional programs for elementary and middle school students. The purchase and occupancy of the building was completed during the first two months of the 2024 fiscal year, which then allowed us to refurbish our other Collaborative-owned building to open an intensive childcare center during the last quarter of FY24.

Balancing the needs of our students, consumers and staff with the realities and ambiguities of the information coming from our contracted revenue streams creates a difficult business climate for a self-sustaining organization such as ours. SMEC continues to advocate statewide, along with other Educational Collaboratives, for designated funding for Collaborative facilities, workforce stability, regulatory relief and program enhancement and we look forward to a return to fiscal and governance clarity in FY25 and beyond.

We encourage anyone reading this report to use the data contained herein as a brief overview of SMEC and an idea of where our agency may be heading in the future. This report provides a synopsis and fulfills a legislative requirement but much more information can be found by visiting our website or by contacting any of our program locations or our administrative office(s) to request more information or to set up a personal tour or visit. We'd love to show you around and answer any questions you may have. The best way to get to know SMEC is to speak to those who choose to be part of it. We are proud of our agency and look forward to sharing it with you.

Sincerely,

Catherine S. Cooper, M.Ed., JD

Executive Director

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GENERAL INFORMATION

The Southeastern MA Educational Collaborative (SMEC) is a public Educational Collaborative established in 1975 pursuant to the provisions of MGL Ch. 40, Section 4E. SMEC's administrative offices are located at 25 Russells Mills Road in Dartmouth. The Collaborative provides services to ten member school districts and several non-member districts from throughout Southeastern Massachusetts in addition to providing adult services through state contracts.

GOVERNANCE

SMEC membership during FY24 was comprised of the school districts of Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, Fall River, Marion, Mattapoisett, New Bedford, Rochester, Old Rochester Regional and Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School. Each of these school committees appointed a member to serve on the SMEC Board for the 2023-2024 school year as follows:

BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2023-2024

Melissa Cordeira, *Acushnet*

Michelle Smith, Vice Chairman, *Marion*

Tiffini Reedy, *Mattapoisett*

Anne Fernandes, *Rochester*

Donna McKenna, *Fairhaven**

Christopher Oliver, Chairman, *Dartmouth*

Christopher Cotter, *New Bedford*

Rosemarie Bowman, *Old Rochester Regional*

Sara Rodrigues, *Fall River***

Michael Shea, *Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School*

* Term ended April 1, 2024.

** Term ended June 5, 2024.

LEADERSHIP

In addition to the Board of Directors, the 2023-2024 SMEC leadership team also included the following:

ADMINISTRATIVE TEAM

Catherine Cooper, Executive Director

Christopher Haraden, Director of Business Services

Kimberly Wilmot, Director of Student Services

Sean Mitchell, SAIL Program Director

Sherri Tetrault, Director of Communication and PD

Sharon Donovan, ADH Program Director

Audrey Rodrigues, Human Resources Manager

Charles Farrell, Payroll Manager

TREASURER

John Nunes

2023-2024 STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

The SMEC steering committee is comprised of the special education administrators from each member district and serves in an advisory capacity to the SMEC Administrative Team:

Kimberli Bettencourt, *Acushnet*

Laurie Dionisio, *Dartmouth*

Tanya Dawson, *Fairhaven*

Lori Obenchain, *Fall River*

Kristine Lincoln, *Interim, Marion, Mattapoisett, Rochester and Old Rochester Regional*

Paul Bottome, *New Bedford*

Erin Ptaszenski, *Greater New Bedford Regional Vocational Technical High School*

MISSION, GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND OBJECTIVES

SMEC's mission statement, principles and objectives are identified in our Articles of Agreement.

Mission Statement

The Southeastern Massachusetts Educational Collaborative (SMEC) provides high-quality programs and services for all children and adults who need specialized instruction or support. SMEC utilizes a team approach to meet the needs of the whole individual in order to achieve greater personal independence and success.

Guiding Principles

- ✓ *We believe that all people have strengths, abilities and gifts and must be treated with respect and dignity regardless of their level of need.*
- ✓ *We ensure that support and services are guided by an individual's evolving needs, goals and preferences.*
- ✓ *We assist each individual to participate and contribute meaningfully to their community through school, work, community service and recreation.*
- ✓ *We believe that all individuals have the ability to learn within a safe, nurturing environment and with the appropriate support.*
- ✓ *We will safeguard each individual's right to privacy, dignity and respect.*
- ✓ *We believe that parents/guardians and families are important advocates and teachers.*
- ✓ *We believe that through collaboration and teamwork we strengthen the resources of school districts and adult agencies to provide the very best programs and services for students and adults.*
- ✓ *We have high expectations for the success of our students, staff, consumers, parents and the community.*
- ✓ *We believe that an effective organization is diverse in perspective, culture and experience.*

Objectives



As indicated in the Collaborative's Articles of Agreement, the Objectives of the Collaborative shall be:

To develop and administer, as directed by the Collaborative Board of Directors, programs, supports and services which best serve the interests of the Collaborative and its Member Committees.

To provide a vehicle for Member Committees to identify and resolve issues of a common and regional nature.

To provide professional development opportunities for educators, parents and related services personnel.



Progress

MEETING OUR MISSION AND OBJECTIVES

SMEC provides programs and services for individuals with special needs ages three to adult. Our programs have a strong focus on community integration and independence. Student services and programs are available at the preschool, elementary and secondary levels. Students who transition into adult services at age 22 and who are eligible to receive adult service funding through DDS, MA Health or MCB have the option to choose SMEC as their adult service provider. Over 90% of our eligible students in this category choose SMEC as their adult service provider upon turning 22.

Offering high-quality programs requires us to continually examine our facilities to ensure that they meet the needs of our students, consumers and staff. Our student services programs are housed in both public school classrooms and separate public day school buildings. Our adult service programs are located in two leased buildings in Dartmouth. Expansion of our programs requires us to continually search for appropriate space and we have issued several RFPs in that effort in recent years. SMEC was able to identify, through an RFP, a building in Dartmouth to expand our TLC social/emotional public day school program, complete the purchase of the property and relocate the program to the new site at the very beginning of FY24. By moving the TLC public day program to the new, larger facility, we were able to



repurpose the Collaborative's smaller building in New Bedford and acquire an additional DESE public day school license to open a new intensive early childhood program at the end of the 2023-2024 school year.

Our FY24 professional development offerings focused on providing educators with the tools that they need to teach all learners as well as the new Massachusetts IEP process and form. In addition to providing in-service training for our own staff on managing their own stress and staying positive, as well as our annual trainings in CPR/First Aid, Mandated Reporting, Civil Rights, Safety Care non-violent crisis intervention, RBT, suicide prevention and cultural proficiency, SMEC provided a wide variety of professional development opportunities to 825 faculty and staff from more than 126 school districts, charter schools, private schools and other Collaboratives throughout Massachusetts during the year. Our own staff members also provided onsite staff training and consultation for many additional district educators.

Courses and workshops offered for outside educators during FY24 included Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) instruction including SEI endorsement courses for regular and vocational educators and administrators, as well as Building Relationships with English Language Learners, Supporting Students to be Successful, Navigating the Cyber World, IEP Writing Strategies, Implementing the New Massachusetts IEP, Parapro Math Preparation, Google Training and Educator Mentoring.

In addition to staff training, SMEC also offered virtual sessions for parents and guardians on topics such as the new Massachusetts IEP form and process and Practical Strategies for Managing Challenging Behavior. We also held several in-person family engagement events throughout the year in conjunction with our parents' group, the Friends of SMEC, including a wellness walkathon, holiday movie and sing-along, student community art show and dance fundraiser auction.

SMEC is a member of the Massachusetts Organization of Educational Collaboratives (MOEC). MOEC represents and advocates for the 24 Educational Collaboratives statewide and SMEC's Executive Director sits on the MOEC Board of Directors and chairs its Legislative Committee. SMEC is also a member of the Association of Developmental Disabilities Providers (ADDP) and the Massachusetts Adult Day Service Association (MADSA).

SMEC is one of the very few regional sites in Massachusetts authorized to administer the Parapro examination through the Educational Testing Service. Employment as a paraprofessional in Title One schools and most other public school districts in Massachusetts requires either a minimum of an Associate's Degree/Equivalent or a passing score on the Parapro assessment. SMEC offers both the test administration and an optional Parapro test preparation workshop. 109 individuals from at least 11 different districts took the Parapro test in-person at SMEC during FY24.

We focused on goals addressing personal health and safety as well as the strengthening of our student and adult services, quality staff recruitment and retention, increasing parent engagement and public awareness of SMEC and its services, ensuring that our programs are located in suitable facilities, addressing internal organizational and developmental issues including improving overall communication, increasing our resource development capacity and maintaining strong leadership, governance and financial capacity.

Other infrastructure improvements, such as acquiring and maintaining a safe and reliable van pool, updating our technology infrastructure and attracting and retaining high quality staff, are ongoing priorities and built into the administrative decision making process for all programs. The Collaborative maintains ongoing communication with our districts and local state agencies to ensure that we are targeting our efforts to meet their ever-changing needs as well as ensuring compliance and readiness for all DESE and other state agency mandates. The nationwide workforce crisis has made it difficult to expand our services during the past couple of years, however we continue to prioritize the needs of our districts, staff, students and adult consumers.

FY24 GENERAL STATISTICS

Years in Service	48
Employees	213 ¹
Member Districts	10
Districts Served in 2023-2024	131 ²
Program Facility Sites	10
Students Served in SMEC School Programs and District Services in FY23	654 ³
Adult (Age 22+) Consumers Served FY24	152

FY24 REVENUE

Tuition and Services Member	\$5,515,118
Tuition and Services Non-Member	\$1,041,029
DDS Contracts	\$3,053,797
MCB Contracts	\$187,959
MassHealth/Medicaid	\$2,578,925
DESE CACFP	\$116,337
Professional Development	\$163,712
Intergovernmental/ Intergovernmental on Behalf	\$2,041,963
Investment Income	\$11,395
Miscellaneous ⁴	\$121,843
Total FY24 Revenue	\$14,961,747⁵

¹ Includes full and part-time employees on payroll during FY24. Does not include 1099/outside contractors.

² Based on LEA student programmatic responsibility for services as well as professional development provided to district staff.

³ Includes all SMEC program and district-based services. Does not include students receiving transportation services only.

⁴ Includes grants, self-pays, donations, insurance claim payments and revenues not otherwise designated.

⁵ Based on FY24 Independently Audited Financial Statements-Governmental Funds Statement of Revenues.

ADULT SERVICE EXPENDITURES⁶

FY24 AMOUNT EXPENDED ON SERVICES FOR STUDENTS/ CONSUMERS AGE 22+

SAIL Program (Expenses Funded by DDS/MCB Contracts)	\$2,041,963
ADH Program (Expenses Funded by Medicaid/MA Health and CACFP)	\$1,508,218
FY24 Total Adult Service Expenses	\$3,550,181⁶

COST SAVINGS TO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Average FY24 MA Private Ch. 766 Day School Special Education Daily Tuition Rate	\$499.58/Day ⁷
FY24 SMEC Daily Member Tuition 180 Day Standard School Day Program	\$304/Day
Average Local Private Agency Therapy Fee (SLP, OT, PT, TVI)	\$100-\$165+/hour
FY24 SMEC Member Therapy Fee (SLP, OT, PT)	\$85/hour ⁸

Cost savings to districts are realized by sharing resources regionally, utilizing district owned facilities to house Collaborative programs when possible, sharing agency administrative and indirect costs between the Collaborative's adult services departments and student services departments and having district representatives guide our program and service development. Exact savings figures are difficult to quantify, however a comparison of the average private day school FY24 tuition of \$499.58 per day versus the standardized FY24 SMEC program tuition of \$304 per day for all of our 180 day/school day programs indicates significant average annual savings of \$35,204.40 per student as does a comparison of a range of contractual service costs offered by private agencies in the geographic area against the cost to districts to access the same therapeutic services through SMEC. If SMEC programs and services were not available, districts would undoubtedly be forced to utilize these higher cost private programs and services. Our programs serve students with low-incidence special needs from multiple districts allowing the districts to share the costs of operating a high-quality specialized program for several students instead of each district funding and operating an in-district program for one or two students. In addition, services provided by the Collaborative have a value added component in that we provide services specifically tailored to the needs and requests of our districts and students thereby reducing costs for certain amenities that may be included in the services offered by private providers but not necessarily required to provide a high quality program or targeted services to address specific district and students' needs.

Further cost savings are realized by operating programs within our local cities and towns thereby

⁶ Extracted from FY24 Independently Audited Financial Statements-Governmental Funds Statement of Expenditures

⁷ www.mass.gov/osdFY24; average of private day school FY24 daily tuition rates using day program data only.

⁸ FY24 SMEC member rate for hourly therapy services. Does not include contractual staffing FTEs which are staff specific.

significantly reducing special education transportation costs and the length of student trips. Cost savings varies based on route and competitive bidding quotes from private vendors. Similarly, utilizing surplus district classroom space to house collaborative programs reduces program overhead, which lowers tuition costs for all districts utilizing the program while providing a modest source of revenue for the host district.

Lastly, offering professional development on a regional basis allows districts to offer high quality professional development to their faculty and staff that might not be possible if each district, particularly the smaller districts, were required to fund and arrange courses or workshops on an individual basis. Particularly at a time when district professional development time has been reduced and is primarily targeted toward meeting new and increased state and federal mandates, targeted professional development for lower incidence or specialty staff would likely not occur if it weren't done on a regional basis through the Collaborative.

SMEC PRIMARY LANGUAGE PROGRAM

The SMEC Primary Language Program, located at the Rochester Memorial School, serves students in grades PK-6 with significant language delays and autism spectrum disorders. Staffed by a special education teacher(s), speech pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, consulting BCBA and paraprofessionals, the program offers intensive, language-based programming with a small staff/student ratio and opportunity for inclusive activities within the host building. Instruction in art and yoga are provided. School year and part-time summer programming options are available.

SMEC INTEGRATED SERVICES PROGRAM I

The SMEC Integrated Services Program I, located at the Elizabeth Hastings Middle School in Fairhaven, serves students in grades 5-8 with significant social and language delays and autism spectrum disorders. It provides a continuum of services for students who have been deemed by their IEP teams to require a substantially separate classroom with a small staff/student ratio at the high school level. Services are

FY24 Program Descriptions

provided by a special education teacher, paraprofessionals, an occupational therapist, physical therapist, BCBA consultant, school adjustment counselor and a speech language pathologist. Instruction in art and yoga are provided. School year and part-time summer programming options are available.

SMEC INTEGRATED SERVICES PROGRAM II

The SMEC Integrated Services Program II, located at the Old Rochester Regional High School in Mattapoisett, serves students in grades 9-12 with significant social and language delays and autism spectrum disorders. It provides a continuum of services for students who have been deemed by their IEP teams to require a substantially separate classroom with a small staff/student ratio at the high school level. Services are provided by a special education teacher, paraprofessionals, an

occupational therapist, physical therapist, BCBA consultant, school adjustment counselor and a speech language pathologist. Instruction in art and yoga are provided. School year and part-time summer programming options are available.

SMEC ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CLASSROOM I

The SMEC ALC I program, located at the Ford Middle School in Acushnet, serves students in grades 5-8 with social/emotional, behavioral and learning disabilities. Students are served in a substantially separate classroom with a small student/staff ratio and inclusion opportunities. Services are provided by a special education teacher, reading specialist, paraprofessional, speech pathologist, occupational and physical therapists as needed and licensed mental health counselor. Instruction in art and yoga are provided. School year and part-time summer programming options are available.

SMEC ALTERNATIVE LEARNING CLASSROOM II

The SMEC ALC II program is located at Dartmouth High School, serving students in grades 9-12 with social/emotional, behavioral and learning disabilities. Students are served in a substantially separate classroom with a small student/staff ratio and inclusion opportunities. Services are provided by a special education teacher, paraprofessionals, a licensed mental health counselor, speech pathologist, occupational therapist and physical therapists as needed as well as a consulting BCBA and employment development coordinator.

THERAPEUTIC LEARNING CENTER

The Therapeutic Learning Center (TLC) is a DESE licensed public day school program in New

Bedford. Serving students in grades K-5 with significant social/emotional disabilities and trauma backgrounds, the TLC offers a therapeutic milieu with a high staff to student ratio and specialized support. Services are provided by licensed special education teachers, paraprofessionals, a licensed school adjustment counselor, a BCBA, school nurse, OT, PT and SLP. Instruction in art and yoga are provided. School year and part-time summer programming options are available. SMEC expanded the TLC program in early FY24 to serve students up through grade 8.

THERAPEUTIC LEARNING PROGRAM

The TLP program, located at the Quinn Elementary School in Dartmouth, serves students in grades K-5 with social/emotional, behavioral and learning disabilities. Students are served in a substantially separate classroom with a small student/staff ratio and inclusion opportunities. Services are provided by a special education teacher, reading specialist, paraprofessional, speech pathologist, occupational and physical therapists as needed and licensed mental health counselor. Instruction in art and yoga are provided. School year and part-time summer programming options are available.

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

Opened in April 2024, the ECP is an intensive early childhood center serving students with developmental and language delays in grades PK-K on a full day/full week school year basis. Providing an intensive, therapy rich environment with specialized teachers, paraprofessionals, therapists, clinicians and board-certified behavioral analysts, our ECP program is located in a SMEC-owned building in the far north end of New Bedford.

TRANSITIONAL SERVICES

SMEC offers transitional services to students ages 18-21 with developmental disabilities. Student services include job development, employment skills training and support, life skills/ADL instruction, social/community skills development and case management. Instruction is community based with classroom and kitchen space available at the historic Tripp School building in Fairhaven. Staffing includes special education teachers, paraprofessionals, a speech pathologist, occupational and physical therapists, job developer, job coaches and transitional/vocational specialist. Instruction in art and yoga are provided. Services are available on a full-time, part-time or extended day/extended year basis. Job coaching is available seven days per week, year-round.

THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY LEARNING CENTER

SMEC's Multidisciplinary Learning Center is an elementary program serving students in grades PK-8 with significant physical or intellectual disabilities and/or medical fragility. An experienced special education teacher, CNA Paraprofessionals and an RN create a safe, supportive learning environment for students with multi-disabilities. Therapeutic services are provided by an OT, PT, TVI and SLP. The MLC program offers a 180 day program with a part-time five-week summer component. The program is located in a public elementary school building in Mattapoisett and accepts referrals from all school districts.

SUPPORTING ADULTS FOR INCLUSIVE LIVING (SAIL) PROGRAM

SMEC's SAIL program serves individuals over the

age of 22 who have been deemed eligible for adult service funding through the Department of Developmental Services (DDS) and the MA Commission for the Blind (MCB). SMEC is a qualified state provider for employment support, residential support, community day support and individual support services. SAIL services operate year-round. Funding for the SAIL program is primarily provided through state contracts with DDS and MCB. Biannual licensure and compliance audits are conducted by DDS.

SMEC ADULT DAY HEALTH (ADH) PROGRAM

SMEC's ADH program provides a continuum of services for individuals over the age of 22 who require daily supervision, activities and case management. The ADH program operates separately from the services provided through SMEC's SAIL program but on the same campus. The ADH program operates year-round and is currently funded through Medicaid/MassHealth and licensed by the Department of Public Health (DPH) with reimbursement for hot lunches provided through the DESE's CACFP program.

ANCILLARY SERVICES

SMEC provides specialized staffing and therapeutic services to school districts throughout our region. SMEC's speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, PTAs, COTAs, SLPAs, BCBA and ELL teachers provide therapeutic, evaluation and consultation services to students and staff in member and non-member districts, vocational and charter schools throughout the region on a contractual basis.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

SMEC offers a variety of professional development activities for educators from member and non-member districts throughout the year. SMEC is one of the few DESE qualified providers of Sheltered English Immersion endorsement classes for all teachers, including vocational teachers, and administrators. In FY24, our professional development courses were offered in both virtual and in-person training formats. In FY24, 825 educators from over 126 public school districts, private schools, and Educational Collaboratives took part in SMEC professional development activities.

PARAPRO ASSESSMENT

109 paraprofessionals or aspiring paraprofessionals sat for the Parapro examination at SMEC between July 2023 and June 2024. Many also participated in our Parapro prep course focusing on math skills during FY24.

SPECIAL EDUCATION TRANSPORTATION

In 2023-2024, SMEC offered special education transportation services to our member school districts. Cost benefit to district varies based on route and competitive bidding quotes from private vendors. During FY24, due to staffing and vehicle capacity limits, SMEC's transportation services were primarily limited to students attending SMEC programs or SMEC member districts' in-house programs.

SUMMARY

This annual report summarizes the activities of the Southeastern Massachusetts Educational Collaborative during the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024. The ongoing workforce crisis, as well as the current impacts of politics and social media on our schools and businesses, has brought unprecedented challenges to our students, staff and families. Our team has risen to the challenge and has put forth tremendous effort to ensure that we can conduct high-quality, student-centered services, teaching and learning.

We are very proud to serve the communities in the Southeastern corner of the Commonwealth and to be able to partner with a wonderful group of school districts and state agencies to ensure that a wide array of high quality services is available to meet the needs of all individuals. We are looking forward to many changes in FY25 and beyond, including the expansion of our multi-disability program to the high school level, which will allow us to strengthen and expand our services and instruction so that we can provide the very best in programs and support across all grade and age levels. We welcome and encourage the readers of this report to contact us or visit our website or Facebook page in order to truly see and hear about the great work that is done here.



Southeastern Massachusetts Educational Collaborative

Visit us online at SMEECollaborative.org

