

District-Wide Special Education Program Evaluation

Department of Student Services

Hingham Public Schools

Hingham, Massachusetts

Conducted: Fall 2023

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I. Executive Summary

The Superintendent of Schools and the Interim Executive Director of Student Services requested a district-wide evaluation of special education programs and services. This evaluation focused on the current status of special education within the district, and comparing the special education census, expenditures, and staff. Attention was given to specific programs and services, the pupil census, expenditures, what is working well in the district, and concerns that staff and parents have over programming needs. The administration sought recommendations to assist in short and long-range planning that goals that can be met within the next three (3) to five (5) years.

The evaluation process consisted of reviewing written documents from the Office of Student Services, descriptions of programs and services, roles and responsibilities, census and budgetary data, curriculum material, procedures and practices, out-of-district placements, and DESE Coordinated Program Review material. Seventy-seven (75) IEPs were reviewed. There were observations of specific programs along with thirty-minute one-on-one and group interviews with fifty-five (55) individuals.

From this process, findings and recommendations were developed, including full explanations for each recommendation. This report provides the district with the necessary information to move forward with enhancing existing programs and services, and continuing the expansion of some of the work currently underway.

The district has developed a number of special education programs and services that address the special education needs of the student population. There are many positive aspects and components to the available services and programs. While there are many recommendations in this report, it is strongly suggested that the district initially focus efforts on the following areas:

- Specialized Instruction
- Inclusive Practices and District Accommodation Plans
- Preschool/Early Childhood Programming
- Staff Utilization
- Professional Development

Addressing these topic areas within a reasonable timeframe (3-5 years) will enable the district to enhance their goals of meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

The consultants are grateful for the assistance of the Office of Student Services support staff, and the school-based staff, in scheduling school visits, class observations, and interviews.

II. Introduction

The Superintendent of Schools and the Interim Executive Interim Executive Director of Student Services requested a district-wide evaluation of special education programming. The administration sought recommendations to assist in addressing the current and future status of special education district-wide, including:

- o present and future program needs;
- o the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes and activities;
- o the instructional supports that are required to ensure greater access to the general curriculum for students with special needs;
- o current and future staffing and space needs for special education;
- o effective utilization of existing programs;
- o services and professional and paraprofessional staffing for special education;
- o comparative data for the district in relation to state data for census and expenditures;
- o cost containment initiatives;
- o procedural practices; pre-referral procedures;
- o and professional development offerings for all school-based personnel.

Purpose

An independent review of district-wide programs and services provides a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strength, needs, and recommendations. It allows the district to be examined from the perspective of what is working well, but also areas that need to be strengthened.

The evaluation process is a multi-step approach to assist the district's leadership team and the school-based special education personnel to engage in a guided and focused discussion, enabling effective short and long range planning, while recognizing and addressing issues such as:

- o Identifying trends and patterns in referrals to special education;
- o Identifying similar profile characteristics in the non-referred and referred

students, and changing demographics;

- Identifying instructional strategies that are utilized throughout the district;
- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel, and their role and responsibilities with respect to serving students in Individualized Educational Plans;
- Identifying trends in the program placement of students;
- Determining the effectiveness of current program and service interventions;
- Staffing and resource needs that reflect current and anticipated student needs;
- Creating a long-range plan that addresses the agreed upon needs of the student population;
- Establishing a comprehensive approach to program and service development that is linked to the budget planning process.

This evaluation process produces information that will enable the administration and school-based special and regular education personnel to develop an action plan(s) leading to more effective approaches for serving the students of the district.

It is important to note that the effectiveness of this report depends upon the stakeholders coming together to discuss the Findings and the Recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the school-based special and regular education personnel can develop short and long range action plan(s) that will address the agreed-upon issues.

*Conducting the
Evaluation:*

Mr. Robert McArdle, M.Ed.

Mr. McArdle has over forty-five years in public education as a Mediator and Educational Specialist for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Administrator of Special Education for Woburn Public Schools, Pupil Personnel Administrator for Greater Lawrence Technical High School and the Stoneham Public Schools, Executive Director of the Greater Lawrence Education Collaborative and Executive Director of the Gifford School. Mr. McArdle has been a Visiting Faculty Member at Salem State College, Fitchburg State College, the University of Massachusetts/Boston and Endicott College, in addition to consulting for public and private schools. Mr. McArdle has served in several Interim positions and has been on a number of advisory boards, task forces and special committees. He was also the Northeast Associate Manager of the Walker Partnerships, conducting numerous Program Evaluations as well as mentoring many new Administrators. He has presented at a number of conferences and conducted professional training sessions for professional school personnel for over forty years. He is the co-author of “A Practical Approach to Special Education Administrator,” has served in several executive board positions, including President of the Massachusetts Association of Administrators of Special Education, and is a past recipient of the Massachusetts Special Education Administrator of the year award.

Sandra C. Einsel, Ph.D.

Sandra C. Einsel is an independent special educational consultant. She has 40 plus years of experience in special education, including as a teacher, assistant principal, counselor, principal, out of district coordinator, and head of special education for Walpole Public Schools, Holliston Public Schools and Foxborough Public Schools. Her work in special education has focused on inclusive practices, specialized programming, process and procedure, and bridging the division between general and special education. Dr. Einsel was an adjunct professor at Boston College teaching both undergraduate and graduate students in special education courses. She also participated in several federal grants awarded to Simmons College regarding inclusion of students with special needs within the general student population. The Goldin Foundation honored Dr. Einsel with the 2009

Goldin Award for Excellence in Education. Dr. Einsel earned her Ph.D. from Boston College in Special Education and Higher Education, a Certificate of Advanced Educational Study (C.A.E.S.) in School Psychology from Boston College, a Master of Arts (M.A.) in Counseling from Boston College, and a Masters of Education (M.Ed.) in the area of Deaf/Blind, Multi-Handicapped, also from Boston College. Dr. Einsel earned her Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Deaf Education with a minor in Early Childhood from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas.

Marlene M. Dodyk, Ph.D.

Marlene Moskowitz Dodyk is an experienced special educator and administrator, devoted to the field of special education and program development for over 40 years, 39 of which were within the Wayland Public Schools. As the Early Childhood Coordinator/Out of District Coordinator and Interim Executive Director of Student Services and an ardent believer in inclusion for all students, she guided and worked collaboratively with staff, other administrators, and parents to develop high quality programs to meet the needs of students ages preschool through age 22 within the public schools. Early in her career, Dr. Dodyk was on the forefront of developing programs for students with disabilities within other extracurricular and educational programs. Currently, she continues to share her expertise consulting with local school districts and educational programs on special education program evaluation and development, conducting professional development workshops, and mentoring directors of special education. Dr. Dodyk holds a Master's degree in Special Education (M.Ed) from Boston University and a Doctorate in School Leadership and Curriculum and Instruction (Ph.D) from Boston College. Her Bachelor of Arts degree was in special education, elementary education and psychology from Brooklyn College

III. Methodology

This program evaluation employed a four-step approach.

1. Document Review. The evaluation team reviewed numerous special education documents. These documents included program descriptions for in-district programs, job descriptions for department staff, census, procedural practices for special education, the pre-referral process, budgets, staffing census, caseloads, out of district placements, sample IEPs from all levels and programs, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) comparative census and expenditure data with the state averages, and professional development offerings for all staff.
2. Walk-throughs. The evaluation team engaged in walk-throughs of all the schools with the Interim Executive Director of Student Services and Special Education Coordinators. This allowed observations of all special education instructional settings, informal conversations with the principals, and meeting with numerous special education personnel.
3. Observations. The evaluation team conducted observations of the following programs throughout the district:
 - a. Preschool program
 - b. Elementary
 - c. Middle School
 - d. High School

The three evaluators allocated their observations among the specific programs. Observation time varied from ten (10) minutes to thirty (30) minutes, depending on the specific program

4. Interviews. The evaluators conducted interviews and discussions as follows:
 - Directors – 3
 - Assistant Superintendent – 1
 - Assistant Director - 1
 - Principals - 5
 - Assistant Principals - 2
 - Evaluation Team Chairpersons - 6
 - School Adjustment Counselors - 3
 - Guidance Counselors - 2
 - General Education Teachers - 3
 - Special Education Administrative Assistants - 2
 - Special Education Coordinators - 2

- Special Education Teachers - 11
- Speech/language Therapists - 4
- Preschool Teachers - 4
- BCBA - 1
- SEPAC Parents - 3
- Head Nurse - 1
- Paraprofessionals - 3

The interviews were thirty minutes in length. Questions were tailored to the service and program under review. Questions and discussion focused on the following:

Questions for Staff:

- What is your role and your primary responsibilities?
- What is working well for students with disabilities?
- What do you see as a major influence(s) on referrals to special education?
- To your knowledge has the district implemented a system-wide pre-referral process/RtI/MTSS? How is the DCAP utilized as part of the process?
- What do you currently see occurring for students who are struggling with their academics?
- What do you see as obstacles to student success?
- Do you have common planning time?
- What assessments are used to determine a disability?
- Do all staff utilize the same assessments?
- How are decisions made to write services into an IEP? Is their program or service criteria?
- How do you determine pull out services versus inclusive services?
- When pull-out Math or English is offered how is the curriculum developed?
- How is the decision made to place a student out of the district?
- What are the strengths of the various itinerant services?
- How often are services not provided to a student at initial referral? How are services made up if you miss a student?
- What suggestions do you have to enhance the effectiveness of your respective role and your department?
- What changes, if any, do you believe need to occur? To enhance the existing programs and services?
- What are your thoughts regarding professional development needs?
- What duties/activities are you involved in-in addition to providing direct service to students?

- If you could change one thing to be more effective in your role, what would it be?

The questions varied somewhat depending on the specific role of the individual who was interviewed. Discussion expanded beyond these specific questions based on the individual's experience within their respective role, their experience in the field of education, length of time that they have been in their current position, and any other factors that emerged from the interview process.

Questions for Parents:

- What are the services that your child is receiving?
- Do you feel that you are kept informed regarding your child's progress?
- Do you feel that the staff members working with your child have a good working knowledge of your child's needs?
- To the best of your knowledge, are regulatory requirements met?
- Do you feel that you receive answers to your questions from special education personnel within a reasonable time frame?
- Do you feel that school personnel are receptive to your suggestions?
- Do the staff members working with your child indicate that they see effective progress? Do you see progress?
- Do you feel that you have access to the personnel working with your child?
- Do you feel welcome in the school?
- Are there any issues that you feel the department or school should be aware of, in relation to you, as the parent of a child with special needs?

As with the district-wide personnel, these questions were expanded upon, based on the flow of the discussion, the individual's experience with the district regarding their child's IEP, and the length of time that their child has been involved with special education.

IV. Commendations

This section of the report recognizes the efforts of the district and the administration in meeting the needs of the students. Special Education is a complex mandate for public schools. There are competing interests that place significant pressure and financial burden on the district. Hingham Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of the students.

Specific Commendations:

District Commitment to Reflective Educational Practices and Inclusion

- The Superintendent and Interim Executive Director of Student Services, for commissioning this district-wide evaluation. This reflects the continued dedication of the district's administrative and instructional personnel to the concept of inclusion, and commitment to meeting the educational needs of children. In addition, the district has demonstrated the ability to adjust to unanticipated and specialized student needs as they arise.
- The thoughtful insight and openness of all interviewees and school-based staff with respect to this evaluation. This was consistent with the observed dedication and concern that special education staff exhibited for their students.
- Gradual efforts to introduce the Tiered System (RtI/MTSS) of Instruction, including Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Though not a formalized program, there are pockets of Tiered Instruction occurring, especially at the elementary level. There are currently two intervention blocks scheduled each day within elementary classrooms, one each for reading and math. There are currently two full time reading specialists for each elementary school, and one full time math specialist at the elementary level. Two reading and math interventionists also provide direct support for instruction.
- Staff development. The staff professional development offerings at the elementary level provided staff an opportunity for greater insight into the developmental stages of child growth.
- Professional development opportunities about the new reading program. The district has arranged for special education teachers to participate, along with their general education colleagues, in professional development opportunities to learn about the new reading program (In To Reading) being adopted at the elementary level.
- Interventionists at the elementary level. At the elementary level, interventionists work with both general education and special education students, allowing the special education students multiple opportunities to learn a skill.
- Classroom technology. Throughout the district there is excellent classroom technology, including computers for students, and smart boards and ViewSonic for teachers to use for instruction.
- After-school activities. The middle and high school have made efforts to make various afterschool activities and sports available to students with disabilities. The best buddies program at the High School and unified sports at the Middle

School are excellent examples of inclusive practices.

- Commitment to the social/emotional wellbeing of students. This is reflected on the Social-Emotional Wellness link on the Homepage of the Hingham Public Schools Website. The district has begun efforts to strengthen Tier 1 social emotional learning, including the addition of guidance counselors at the elementary level last year, and the Second Step curriculum at the Middle School.

Special Education Instructional Programs

- Developing a continuum of programs and services for the various disability groups of students across the district, at all levels. The various programs allow for a wide range of students to be included in the general education curriculum and in their home school district.
- Commitment to inclusion. The district's commitment to inclusion is demonstrated by a high percentage of special education students included in general education classes (90.8%), compared to the statewide average (80.2%). (Source: current DESE DART data Oct. 23)
- Curriculum modifications. At the elementary level, special education teachers are responsible for modifications to the curriculum.
- Efforts to align instruction. The special education teachers in the substantially separate programs, have made efforts to align the instruction to the curriculum frameworks and the ongoing use of data to drive instruction (e.g. RISE programs). Related service providers oftentimes will co-teach with special education teachers in substantially separate programs.
- Strong commitment to developing specialized programs. This is shown by the Landmark Outreach Program consultation to the language based classrooms at the elementary and middle school, and the use of the ACE curriculum developed by the New England Center for Children for students on the Autism Spectrum Disorder continuum.

Individualized Education Plans (IEPs)

- Well-written IEPs. Student IEPs provide a detailed picture of the student, their strengths, and their needs, with disabilities clearly identified. Assessment data is integrated into the student performance profile and what steps need to be taken. Transition plans are completed where required. Goals and benchmarks are measurable and are tied to the specific benchmark.

Special Education Administrative Personnel

- Well-functioning Evaluation Team Chairperson model. The Evaluation Team Facilitator model of support ensures continuity of services, guidance, and follow-through on compliance issues, procedures and practices at the building level.
- Dedicated Evaluation Team Chairs. Middle school and high school have dedicated Evaluation Team Chairs, with secretarial support. This model provides on-site program oversight and supervision of the special education personnel.
- Well-functioning central administrative personnel. The special education central administrative personnel are very knowledgeable, instrumental, and key to the running of the district's organized and efficient system of special education administrative tasks, and paperwork requirements. They follow up with staff when IEPs are incomplete, require further documentation or clarification, and when timelines must be met. They are also responsible for the fiscal operations of the special education budget, processing necessary paperwork to ensure compliance, and filing documentation to secure funds (e.g. Medicaid, circuit breaker reimbursement).

V. Factors Affecting the Implementation of Programming and Services

Numerous factors affect the district's ability to deliver instructional and related services to students. None are more pressing than the student census, but the following list provides context to drive program development and service initiatives.

Census vs Needs of the Students

The number of students receiving special education support and the intensity of their needs in any district affects the implementation of programming and services. Currently, Hingham has 16.5% of the student population on Individual Education Programs (IEPs). Although this is below the state average of 19.4% (Source: DESE DART data Oct. 23), the reviewers noted that the percentage has increased from 12% over the past five years.

Inclusion of Students with Special Needs

To increase the inclusion time of students with special needs, school districts must develop long-range strategies to address professional development, staffing support and technology supports and upgrades. There are various program options available for servicing a range of needs among the special education population. Hingham, like many districts, has a high number of varied programs to serve students.

Some other districts have limited program options or choices, and rely more on out-of-district day and collaborative programs. There are districts with appropriately staffed programs that are being effectively utilized to maximize services to students. Other districts claim to be inclusive, but they have not developed the capacity to service their most involved students. This often results in sending students to in-district substantially separate programs, or too-costly out-of-district programs.

Hingham has made considerable progress in program development over recent years, making program options available in an attempt to reduce the need for out-of-district placements. Initially, program development can be costly. However, in the long term, in-district programming contains growth in special education expenditures while building the district's capacity to maintain students within the district.

Before 2000, Massachusetts Special Education Regulations, under Chapter 766, mandated districts to develop IEPs that would "maximize a student's potential," which was then the most demanding and comprehensive standard in the country. Other states adopted the federal standard under IDEA (Individuals with Disability Education Act) that ensured students make "...effective progress through a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)."

In 2000, Massachusetts adopted the federal standard of "effective progress." There has been ongoing debate as to whether districts need to provide the comprehensive level of services to special education students, or a minimum level of services. This question of which level to provide, versus the spiraling cost of special education, is often a continuous and heated controversy in many school districts. The issue becomes even more of a concern in a challenging economic environment.

In 2001, Congress again passed the landmark Act, No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The stated goal of NCLB is "to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind."

All of these statutes have focused attention on students with increasingly diverse learning needs achieving high academic performance in general education.

These changes have greatly affected the delivery of special education services to students. Prior to these changes, the service delivery relied on "pulling" students out of the general education classroom to provide specialized instruction that often did not relate to accessing the curriculum. Hingham continues to rely on this model of instruction. When students are removed from the general education classroom, they lose important instruction time, which, in many cases, leaves them at a significant disadvantage to be successful in participating in state and local assessments.

For many school districts, the development of effective in-classroom support models has allowed special education students to have more access to the general education curriculum. Another model to consider is co-teaching for students with a variety of disabilities and instructional needs. This model would require the reallocation and

flexibility of how time is used, including but not limited to grouping structures and schedules. The collaboration of the general and special education teachers can create a classroom environment that differentiates instruction and makes essential accommodations that allow all students to maximize their potential. To effectively implement this co-teaching model of instruction, districts need to be flexible with staff assignments from other special education programs, or hire additional staff. Hingham currently does not utilize a co-teaching model across the district, and it does not ensure a continuum of instruction in all content areas and across all grades levels. The co-teaching model is not the only solution. Differentiated supports, tiered instruction, and UDL are other models to support inclusion. These all are effective approaches to increase the opportunities for special needs students to have greater access to the general education classroom and curriculum.

Fiscal Aspects of Special Education

Special Education is expensive for all school districts. The percentage of the school budget dedicated to special education, across the state, has grown over the years.

Special education costs have increased across the state to 22% in FY 22, while the statewide special education census has risen 19.4%. For Hingham, in FY 22, the special education budget was 22% of the school budget, right at the state average, while the special education census was 16.5%, well below the state average. It was noted by the reviewers that Hingham's percentage of special education students has risen by 4.5% since 2017. Currently Hingham has thirty-nine (39) students in out-of-district placements. (Source: DESE DART data 10-23) This factor places a burden on the district, both in tuition expenditure and transportation charges. Not only does the district have to fund outside placements, but it also has to maintain in-district programs. The district has experienced growth in the Early Childhood Program, and it is also experiencing growth in students with Autism. These populations require intensive staffing with an array of related services. There are no easy answers, but districts must decide whether they will continue, in the long term, to develop in-district programs when there are sufficient cohorts to sustain programming; thus, the number of students that are placed outside the district will be reduced. Over time, the growth in special education expenditures for out-of-district tuition and transportation costs will be contained.

The reality is that "good programming" is costly. It is labor intensive and requires a substantial commitment from the Town, the School Committee, administration and teaching staff. It can, however, also be cost-effective. When districts develop a full continuum of services, they are able to provide programs for special needs students. The benefits of having an appropriate continuum of programming across the district, for all disabilities, at all levels, will lead to the prevention of students exiting the district, containment in the cost for special education, and the means to provide for students within the district's building capacity. Out-of-district placements, next to personnel expenditures, are the single largest expense on a special education budget.

Out-of-District Placements

School districts are continually confronted with how to contain the growth in special education expenditures. The three major expenses that affect the special education budget are personnel, out-of-district tuitions, and transportation. Currently, Hingham has 39 students in out-of-district placements. This represents 6.9% of the district's identified special needs population, and is slightly higher than the statewide average of 6.2%. (Source: DESE DART data 10-23)

Resources must be dedicated to construct appropriate in-district programs based on student population cohorts. Appropriate space, staffing, materials, and supplies must be built into program development. Many times, a district must set the priority of program development to a specific disability population, and begin the implementation on a small scale. These efforts will produce results, because the district will have a program in place to accept students. The effort to build capacity will reduce the reliance on out-of-district placements, reduce students exiting from the district, and may enable a student(s) to return to the district. All of these steps will assist in containing, and possibly reducing, the growth in tuition expenditures.

Advocacy and Legal Perspective

Advocacy and legal disputes are a continuing factor affecting the implementation of programs and services. To provide context, prior to Chapter 766, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, through various DESE administered legislative acts, funded the placement of students with special needs into privately operated day and residential school programs. This practice created a network of private schools within the state to service various disability populations. Because these programs were established for serving the specific disabilities of students, over time they became very specialized. Most of these programs continue to operate today, even though public schools have created a continuum of services and programs at both the district level and through their education collaborative affiliations.

Massachusetts has a long history of advocacy by special interest groups on how special education operates at the state and local level. This influence by advocates, their associations, and the interests of other parties can greatly affect what actions a district may be required to undertake to maintain and develop quality programs and services. These influences can also create an environment at the local level where cost-benefit (*avoidance*) decisions are not necessarily made in the best interest of a student, and instead are determined by what the parents believe is in the best interest of their student. A conflict may arise which can only be resolved through mediation, a hearing, or in some cases, a settlement.

As a whole, the public may have little or no knowledge of what a district has to do in order to serve a student with special needs. When a dispute occurs between the parents and the school district with regard to the services recommended for a student, the

parents have the right to resolution of the dispute through a third party. Although this action is sanctioned in special education law and regulations, it places the burden of evidence on a school district to prove that their recommendations meet the standard of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the federal statute for meeting the needs of the student. This can lead to an expensive out-of-district placement if parents prevail through the Bureau of Special Education Appeals hearing. The expense for the school district can be considerable, not only for the placement, but should the parents prevail in a hearing, they are entitled to recoup their legal costs from the school district. Therefore, school districts are continually confronted with the issue of cost-benefit when a dispute arises over a placement within the district or a placement in an out-of-district tuition-based program. This aspect of special education is an area of which few are aware or fully understand. School districts are often confronted with the fact that many parents have the means to retain legal counsel and “dispute resolutions.” This can be an expensive line item in the special education budget. The expense is not only a direct cost, but also an indirect one because it requires the staff to spend time meeting and preparing to assist the district in deciding what course of action it will pursue if a dispute arises.

This history of educational advocacy greatly impacts the evaluation and placement process for students determined eligible for specialized instruction through special education, and this can lead to a great deal of uncertainty during the school year. This advocacy role plays an important part in the issue of expenditures for special education, not only in staff time at all levels within a school district, but through independent evaluations, mediations, and due process hearings. The results of a due process hearing, or the settlement of a case prior to this hearing before the Bureau of Special Education Appeals, can lead to unanticipated expenditures during a school year. These expenditures significantly add to a special education budget at any given time. There is no guaranteed approach that will ensure an avoidance of these legal encounters, but quality and defensible internal programs and services certainly will reduce the potential for unanticipated legal and placement expenditures. The district’s exposure can only be measured by the recent history of legal involvement for the district. This factor cannot be ignored when formulating a special education budget, and when developing long-range programming and service initiatives.

Technology/Assistive Technology

Children with multiple disabilities have unique needs and challenges. Many of these young children struggle to communicate their wants and needs, engage in their world, and learn abstract concepts and ideas. Professionals and families working together must identify the individual supports that each child needs. This will ensure that the child with multiple or very specific disabilities can be an active participant in all aspects of their educational life and can make meaningful progress toward valued life outcomes. The tremendous advancements in technology have greatly impacted the educators’ abilities to provide students with disabilities a better access to their environment. Through comprehensive assessment, appropriate technology can be provided to students that will enhance their education and daily lives and as a tool for universally designing classroom instruction and spaces.

Educational Experience

The final factor that has to be constantly considered when addressing the needs of students with disabilities is: *To what extent can the district provide an appropriate comprehensive educational experience for students?* There is little question or doubt that Hingham is willing to meet the academic needs of its students with special needs. Hingham, like many school districts, is facing new considerations as to what the district should provide for students with significant disabilities. These new considerations need to be continually assessed for each student with respect to program and service options, especially as the population of students with more severe needs moves from one level to the next. It is a factor that all evaluation team members must seriously consider when developing and designing placement recommendations. The overall culture of the school community will need to gain a greater understanding of these new considerations.

VI. Findings

Through this program evaluation process, it was very apparent that the school district administration is committed to meeting the needs of the district, at the individual buildings and the students. The following findings can assist the district with the work that needs to be completed. These findings are in no particular order of priority.

Specific Findings:

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

1. Individual Education Program (IEPs)

- Hingham has developed a team meeting protocol template used by Special Education Team Chairpersons to facilitate and record notes from the meeting. It consists of pertinent team meeting information; meeting norms; an agenda checklist; allocated space to identify student strengths and challenges as identified by professionals and parents; and specific information to be included in a student's IEP (Goals, services, accommodations, and appropriate areas to consider such as vulnerability to bullying and autism). There is a section designated for methodology (including content, delivery of instruction, and performance criteria). This form is completed inconsistently at team meetings, and when completed, is inconsistently given to the parents at the end of the meeting. The IEP (if deemed appropriate by the team) is then forwarded to the parents.
- A review of the IEPs found that many describe in detail testing evaluation results. However, often the results use only percentiles and technical terms, which parents and others may or may not understand.

- IEPs include a host of accommodations that are best practice, and not specific to the disability or the student. Often some of these accommodations are included in District Curriculum Accommodation Plans (DCAP).
- Present Levels of Performance most often include statements under content and performance criteria. These two sections are specifically used only when there are significant modifications to the curriculum, and should be used sparingly. Most often, it is appropriate to complete the methodology section, as this is the essence of special education.
- IEPs include measurable data to indicate performance levels within current levels of performance, yet inconsistently incorporate specific benchmark measurable data within goals and objectives. Actual grade level expectations are inconsistently incorporated into the Current Performance/Measurable Annual Goals section of the IEPs.
- Service delivery grid includes services that have no corresponding goal (e.g. math). In addition, elementary IEP services, including frequency of services, are written to coordinate with the general education instructional times both for in-class support as well as pull out services. Moreover, many of the IEPs offer similar services in Grids A, B and C.
- Often, program service delivery is program-based, with students being fit into programs and not tailored to the individual needs of students. Alternatively, many students receive support in a specific area in both the general and special education setting, which may result in over-servicing a student.
- Special educators and related services personnel do not appear to be calibrating service delivery according to the particular needs of students. Students with specific needs may receive the same type of services as other students with different needs.
- Extended year services are often included in service delivery without school year data collection to document substantial regression. Inclusion of these services in IEPs occurs whenever the IEP meeting is scheduled (e.g. in December).
- In addition, clear delineation of the need for paraprofessional support is not consistent across the district. For example, when does paraprofessional support appear on the grid and/or where it is specified to be individual or small group support.
- A review of IEPs indicated that some students receiving specialized reading instruction in language based specialized programs, often do not receive speech and language services (direct or indirect).

- An educational justification based on the student’s disability is required for the delivery of services outside of the general education classroom, and should reflect the goals outlined in the IEP. Many IEPs justify students receiving services in a special education setting in order “to make faster progress.” This is not an appropriate justification for pull-out services.
- Transportation is offered to all preschool age children, although not based on their disability. State special education regulation (603CMR 28.05) states that school districts are responsible for transporting students when their Team determines that **the student's disability requires** transportation or specialized transportation arrangements in order to benefit from special education.
- IEP amendments are written for a change in placement (*e.g.*, substantially separate program) without conducting a re-evaluation. Similarly, ancillary services are added without an evaluation. Both of these situations require an evaluation/re-evaluation per state regulations.
- Special education services to students enrolled in private schools are provided in various ways: some come to the district’s schools, others receive services at the private school by contracted providers, and others choose to waive receiving services. The reviewers have not seen this service model in other districts they have reviewed. Typically, special education services are delivered on-site within the district during district school hours.

2. *Entrance/Exit Criteria*

- There is some confusion about when a student would be referred for special education, and when general education supports need to be used. Entrance and exit for students on 504s or IEPs are not understood.
- There is a lack of understanding by school-based personnel as to what the entrance/exit criteria are for the numerous special education programs and services. It appears that staff’s assumption of entrance criteria for substantially separate programs is based on whether a student would require an out of district placement, or whose needs are such that they are unable to access or require significant modification to the general education curriculum. In addition to uncertainty of the process and criteria by which students enter a program, exit criteria from a program are not defined throughout the various programs.
- Some criteria exist for the placement in the Integrated Preschool Program. But the criteria are specific to what programs exist, and are based on having two or more areas of need, as determined by standardized and non-standardized testing and observations, and when applicable, early intervention referral information. Other considerations which may be used to determine eligibility include environmental factors, family history, behavior, and birthdate, all of which may not be indicative of a disability. Having a disability is the first criteria for eligibility for special education service

- From the IEPs reviewed, Speech and Language eligibility (entrance and exit criteria) should be calibrated system-wide, since there appears to be a significant number of students receiving speech and language services. Speech and Language have identified language skills assessed during the early years; however, there are no benchmarks for specific ages. Clinical judgment based on informal observations are often used to determine eligibility and service delivery. From the lists of testing instruments provided, some require updating to the latest edition. This year, the district has upgraded some of the testing instruments.
- Physical and occupational therapy refer to criteria for these services in an educational setting developed by the North River Collaborative. These criteria explain physical and occupational therapy, and the skills they work on in an educational setting. The document does not include specific benchmarks for child development or particular test instruments used to assess a child's developmental level, each of which are used to determine eligibility for special education. It is unclear as to whether Hingham has adopted these criteria, or have established their own entrance/exit criteria for physical and occupational therapy.

3. *Curriculum and Instruction (Curriculum, Instruction, Evidence based Practices, and Data Collection)*

- During the special education program observations and building walkthroughs, it was noted that elementary and middle school special education classrooms are appropriately sized for servicing groups of students, with storage space readily available. At the high school the space allocated for special education services is limited, and in the case of the RISE the allocated space is not fully appropriate for the instructional needs of the students.
- The middle school currently has structured grade level teams only in grades six (6) and seven (7). Grade eight (8) has no grade level teams. In the past, special education teachers were a part of the grade level teams in grades six (6) and seven (7), but they were removed from teams this school year.
- In general, the district employs a pull-out model of special education service delivery, providing services outside of the general education setting. It appears the district is relying on paraprofessionals for supporting instruction in the general education classroom setting, and there was an inconsistent use of differentiated instruction and universal design for learning at all levels.
- Currently, students at the secondary level receive special education instruction in the learning centers. Schedules often dictate where students receive services at the middle and high schools, with academic support classes often being multi grade at the middle and high schools. Middle school and high school schedules limit the ability to group students for academic and counseling support, often creating wide ability and need ranges within the same academic or counseling group.

- Elementary age students typically receive services with same grade peers in small groups (usually 1-3 students) in the learning centers, as well as in the general education classroom. Elementary special education liaisons are assigned to particular grades.
- The majority of high school support employs a pull out model, specifically in Science and Social Studies. When students are pulled out for strategy classes teachers spend a significant amount of time on homework support, as opposed to learning and developing executive function skills and strategies.
- Interviewees also indicated that accessing curriculum for the pullout/specialize program classes is difficult (“have asked not received”). The obvious concern is assuring that all students have access to the curriculum for MCAS purposes, and that any modifications can be made based upon student need. Curriculum in all content areas must be made available for all teachers to access.
- While the district has placed a focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), interviews indicated that there is some uncertainty of where special education students fit into this initiative and discussion.
- Assistive technology is available for all students. Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) devices are available for students in specialized programs.
- While the district has some students receiving specialized reading instruction, there is inconsistency and lack of continuity in this, and in other specialized reading instructional programs, due to lack of properly trained staff.
- Math is leveled in the middle school There are various leveled courses offered at the high school. Leveling needs to ensure that special education students are not held back from accessing higher-level courses when appropriate. The criteria for accessing placement in all courses must be clear to all involved in the process.
- Consultation services with a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) are available throughout the system.
- Paraprofessionals are available to support the special education students in the general education and special education classroom settings. Some paraprofessional assignments shift to meet the needs of students and, at times, for coverage. The district needs to develop a criteria for receiving paraprofessional assistance, and a process to review paraprofessional assignments, to ensure that they are not being over-identified for use in the instructional process.
- Data is not consistently taken, analyzed and integrated into best practices, except for the programs that provide services to students on the autism spectrum (ASD) or students with similar needs.

4. Specialized Programming

- There is vertical alignment from elementary to high school for some strands of substantially separate programming, specifically servicing students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (RISE Program); comprehensive learning needs Comprehensive Learning Center- CLC); and language based learning disabilities (Language and Academic Home Base - LAHB). The Supported Learning Program at the high school is focused on students with social/emotional learning profiles. However, there is no clinical and paraprofessional support available to the program. Furthermore, there is no such program at the elementary or middle schools.
- Programming for students with behavioral and emotional issues is limited, and there is not a continuum of services for these students from elementary through high school. There has been some discussion at the middle school of piloting a social emotional program, however, this did not occur. The district should review options currently available at the middle school to determine if the need does exist for a program.
- The CLC and LAHB programs at East School both share the same classroom and are each staffed with one special education teacher and at least one paraprofessional (LAHB has 2 assigned paraprofessionals). The programs operate independently of each other. At present there are 2 students assigned to the CLC program (one additional student comes in, for one block of time daily, for instruction in a specific curriculum area). The LAHB has 5-7 students enrolled in the program. Students in both programs are seen individually or in dyads. Currently, this structure of programs sharing a room, although not best practice, is somewhat doable, given the small numbers of students enrolled in the CLC program.
- Specialized classrooms range in size (minimum of 2 students), all having one designated special education teacher and a minimum of one paraprofessional. They receive very small group instruction, often individually or in groups of 2-3 students. Many have opportunities for inclusion, although typically they are accompanied by a paraprofessional or a special education teacher.
- There was confusion seen among both special education and general education staff as to how decisions are made, and how to place students in the RISE (Reaching Independence Through Standardized Education) program, the CLC (Comprehensive Learning Center) program, and at the high school the SLC (Supported Learning Center) program. Criteria that is available to all needs to be developed for these programs.
- Paraprofessionals are assigned according to the needs of the students and are determined by the team. They are assigned to provide support for students with inclusion, or to work with students in small groups in the substantially separate classrooms.

- The LAHB and CLC programs incorporate some specialized instructional programs (e.g., Orton Gillington materials and strategies in LAHB program). However, an emphasis is placed on accessing the general education program and using modified general education classroom materials.

5. *Transition Activities*

- There continues to be a need for more consistent communication with respect to transitioning students from one level to the next across the district (preschool to elementary; elementary to middle school; and middle to high school), with written and formalized protocols and processes. This is true for students receiving services in learning centers, and in particular for students in specialized programs.
- Transition between the levels for students with social emotional/behavioral concerns needs particular attention. Staff at the receiving school do not believe they are well informed about the incoming students.

6. *Parent/Guardian Awareness and Support*

- Interviews indicated that parents are not always feeling welcomed or treated as Team equals. Too much jargon is utilized in the meetings, and testing results are not fully explained.
- While staff do engage with parents, there is no clear or consistent process/protocol used across the district to engage parents. Currently staff are left on their own as to the information they share with parents, and how often contact is made.
- Parents are inconsistently provided with team meeting summary notes (template) at the conclusion of team meetings.
- Parents reported that they are not notified when a professional service provider is vacated or unfilled, which has an impact on their child(ren) receiving the special education services outlined in their respective IEPs.

PRESCHOOL/EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMING

- The district leadership has undertaken a review of the present programming offered at the Integrated Preschool Program, and is in the process of developing another program model. It is unclear to what extent, if any, current preschool personnel have been involved in the process. Recommendations are forthcoming from the administration.
- Placement in the various preschool programs is determined primarily by age and

the recommended services in student IEPs.

- There are five preschool classrooms. Classrooms are scheduled either 2, 3, 4, or 5 days per week. Three classrooms are integrated half-day programs, either morning or afternoon. Two substantially separate programs service students with more significant needs, requiring more repetition, intense language exposure, and more frequent therapies.
- One of the substantially separate programs services pre-kindergarten age students, ages 4-6, all of whom participate in extended day programming.
- Currently, there are approximately 4-8 students in a classroom. It is anticipated that more children will enroll as the year progresses, particularly as identified through special education and some through community parent choice. This process of enrollment and class composition limits instructional groupings and opportunities for program development and enhancements, as well as children's experiences.
- Each integrated classroom has community peers enrolled. Prior to Covid, there was a waiting list for enrollment of community peers. Currently, enrollment of community peers to serve as role models is a challenge. It is unclear as to the exact reason for this challenge, although it is suspected that many families sought alternative placements during Covid when the district provided a placement only to students with IEP service delivery needs. In addition, many families are seeking 5-day per week programming, and some with full day enrollment options. Two or three days per week, and afternoon programming, are less desirable, particularly for meeting the needs of young children who learn through repetition, and in the morning when they are not napping.
- Services are determined by standardized testing, informal assessments, parent input, clinical impressions, and impressions of what areas may be impacted in the future.
- Speech and language therapists deliver services delineated in IEPs, and provide whole class lessons on social thinking and whole body listening (to model for classroom teachers). Similarly, it was reported that the occupational therapist provides direct services to students, as well as whole class lessons on the Zones of Regulation.
- All staff in the substantially separate program are trained in Safety Care.
- While the program incorporates theme-based learning opportunities, primarily based on holidays and seasons, these opportunities appear to be loosely tied to the early childhood state standards. There is no consistent approach to vocabulary, language, concept development, math concepts, science and social studies. The classrooms provide children time for free play/choice of centers. Some activities provided to students are teacher directed. Circle times are scheduled from 20-30 minutes. Daily playground time (30 minutes per day) is allotted for free play and gross motor skill development. There is little evidence of research-based early

childhood curriculum within the classrooms. Preschool classrooms have specials (art music, physical education, library) every other week.

- There are six-year-old students attending the Integrated Preschool Program. Parents need to secure a waiver from the Superintendent's office to have their child remain at the preschool for an additional year before entering kindergarten. This is independent of the IEP process.

STAFFING

1. Special Education Teachers, Related Service Providers, and Team Chairpersons

- Caseloads of special education learning center teachers vary by school and school building level. At the elementary level, often special education learning center teachers are assigned by grade and have an average caseload of 11-16 students, depending on the grade level and composition of students and their respective needs. Their schedules include designated blocks of time for testing, planning and lunch. Some include special education team meetings times, and some include PLCs in their weekly schedules, although some occur on a particular week.
- Teacher schedules indicate services being provided outside of the general education classrooms with individual students, or with small groups of up to about three students (average), often two students in a group. These teachers also provide services within the general education setting to support students with the general education curriculum, often without these services being specified in student IEPs. Some elementary special education teachers have PLCs written into their weekly schedules, although some indicate that they occur on a particular week.
- Middle school schedules indicate that teachers are working with students in small group strategies for learning and specialized reading classes. Inclusion in general education classes occurs in English, Math, Science, U.S. History and World Geography. Instructional groups at the middle school appeared to range from one student to eight students.
- High school schedules indicate that teachers work with students in co-taught English, Humanities, and Algebra 1 classes, and that small group work is conducted in strategies for learning, transition skills, and reading. Instructional groups at the high school appeared to range from one student to eight students.
- There is little time for grade-level or building-level special education teachers/teams to collaborate to discuss cases and learn from one another, particularly at the secondary level.
- Substantially separate classrooms all have one designated special education teacher and a minimum of one paraprofessional. Paraprofessionals are assigned according to the needs of the students, as well as to provide support for students

with inclusion, or to work with students in small groups in the substantially separate classrooms.

- At the elementary level, speech and language therapists provide services either individually or in dyads. They also deliver some in-class social thinking group lessons, particularly in the preschool and at the early elementary grades. They also have designated times for testing and planning. Speech and language therapists at the middle school and high school service some students within the specialized programs, otherwise services are provided outside of the classroom.
- Occupational therapists have sufficient time for planning, evaluations, and consultation and provide therapies individually or in small groups of 2 students.
- Overall, it appears the district's direct related service providers have manageable caseloads and are positioned well to service students with special needs. It does appear, however, that each discipline (occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, physical therapy) has clearly identified areas which they address. However, therapeutic interventions are not coordinated.
- There are occasions at the high school and middle school when Special Education personnel are assigned as liaisons to students for whom they have no direct instructional contact.
- The roles of the Team Chairpersons differ at the various school levels. The elementary Team Chairpersons are psychologists who have a dual role, as the school psychologist responsible for testing and seeing some students, and chairing all special education Team meetings. At the middle school and high school, the Team Chairpersons' sole responsibility is to chair special education Team meetings. Special education teachers write their students' IEPs, with the Team Chairpersons responsible for chairing the meetings, reviewing the IEPs, and then forwarding them to the building principal for signature.
- Team Chairpersons have time to meet together to develop more consistency and coordination of systems. In the past, this occurred monthly.
- Many special education staff reported that they were not aware of written and current job descriptions. It was clear that general education staff continue to be confused over the various specific roles of the special education personnel. This is fairly true across the district at all levels, although at the elementary level roles appear to be much clearer.

2. *Counselors and Counseling Services*

- There is a school counselor and an adjustment counselor at each elementary building, four school counselors and two adjustment counselors at the middle school, and eight school counselors and two adjustment counselors at the

high school.

- At the elementary level, the school counselors primarily provide the Tier 1 social emotional support by teaching. They develop their “Toolbox” curriculum at each grade level, and teach a bullying prevention program. These school counselors are responsible for the implementation of the 504 process and plans, consulting with teachers, and providing support to individual and small groups of students as needed.
- Adjustment counselors at the elementary level work with students either individually or in groups, as called for by the 504 or IEP plans. Both consult with teachers, staff, parents, and outside providers; conduct safety evaluations if necessary; and serve on the school crisis team and Instructional Support Team.
- At the middle school and high school level the school counselors work similarly to the elementary school counselors. However, at the high school the school counselors also do post-secondary planning, and support the transition room coordinator. One of these counselors works part time on post-secondary topics such as common application workshops, career and job fairs, and seminars for 9th and 10th graders. This counselor also provides exploration programming for non-college bound students, and grant writing through MassHire.
- The school adjustment counselors at the middle and high school provide similar services as the elementary school adjustment counselors, working with students on 504 and IEPs.
- According to IEPs and interviews, the school counselors and adjustment counselors provide services to a multitude of students. However, at times the school adjustment counselors are not part of the decision-making process for adding a student to their caseload, or the inclusion of direct services on the Service Delivery grid of student IEPs.
- Interviewees indicated a lack of understanding of the counselor role and the school adjustment counselor (SAC) role.
- All staff work to support all students. Interviewees reported that they would like a consistent message about how to work with students with behavioral and emotional issues, and the need for more professional development on effective strategies and methodology.
- Care Solace assists the counselors in helping parents find appropriate medical therapists, providers, and supports nearby, to assist after school care for particular students.

3. Paraprofessionals

- Paraprofessionals are playing an increasingly prominent role in the education of students with disabilities. With pressure from parents who want to ensure that their children are adequately supported, and general educators who want to make sure

that they and their students are adequately supported, the use of special education instructional assistants has become a primary mechanism to implement more inclusive school practices.

- The district reported 125.6 special education paraprofessionals for FY 22 , who spend considerable time working directly with individual and small groups of students. These positions are assigned throughout the district’s special education programs, both within inclusion settings and substantially separate programming. (Source: current DESE DART data)
- Established criteria are not in place for the assignment and utilization of special education paraprofessionals to a program or a student(s). Many elementary classrooms have an assigned paraprofessional. It is unclear what as to the role that the paraprofessional plays within the classroom, and the degree to which these paraprofessionals foster student independence, as opposed to promoting learned helplessness. In addition, there does not appear to be criteria for determining the need for additional paraprofessional time/hiring when indicated.
- As students with disabilities increasingly are placed in general education classrooms, the use of paraprofessionals has greatly expanded. Paraprofessionals spend considerable time working directly with individual students and small groups of students. These paraprofessionals have varying backgrounds and experiences.
- There is no training except “on the job” training for paraprofessionals working in inclusion or specialized programs.
- Paraprofessionals are evaluated by the principal.

4. Administrative Oversight

- Currently there is one Interim Executive Director of Student Services , one Assistant Director of Special Education who is responsible for the placement and monitoring of students in out of district placements, a Coordinator of Elementary Special Education, and a Coordinator of Secondary Special Education.
- Over the course of the several years, there has been a lack of consistent leadership, guidance and oversight of the special education program by an Executive Director of Student Services. This has resulted in procedures and policies remaining unclear, and often left to the discretion of staff. Identification of disabilities and eligibility for special education have become murky, with the desire to help struggling students through special education seen as the primary intervention resource.
- While the district has invested in the development of specialized programs to meet the more comprehensive needs of students, these programs have not had the necessary consultation and monitoring needed for effective programming.

- The district has developed many new positions within special education, however, many staff are unclear of the focus of the positions. Although staff are working to meet the needs of students, there is a lack of specificity regarding roles and responsibilities of various special education personnel. Many interviewees were not aware of current job descriptions and duties.

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

- The district has a commitment to the inclusion of special education students in general education classrooms. The latest DESE data indicates that Hingham's full inclusion rate is 82.7% (state rate is 66.9%). (Source: current DESE DART data 10-23)
- The district provides inclusion and co-teaching opportunities for students to learn within the general education classroom setting. However, the district does not have an articulated philosophy of inclusion and co-teaching, what role each plays in the education of all students, and meeting the needs of students with special education learning profiles. For many educators in the district, there is no distinction between the inclusion model and the co-teaching model of instruction. There is also a wide range of confusion among general education staff regarding inclusion and in-classroom support, accommodations, and modifications.
- Multi-Tiered System of Instruction (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) programs have been established at the elementary schools, and are in the process of being further developed and refined. However, this initiative driven by general education lacks a uniform approach across the district. Reading deficits are reported by staff and are reflected in IEPs, with many of these being addressed through MTSS and IEP service delivery. At the middle school and high school there are very few Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions available to students.
- RTI/MTSS are primarily focused on reading and math skill development. There should be enhanced and encouraged dialogue regarding what should occur in general education classes to address the need to develop organizational and executive functioning skills. The lack of focus on this area has led to increased numbers of students being referred to special education.
- A comprehensive District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP- last reviewed in 2016, which teachers are able to access and incorporate into their daily teaching practices and classroom management) is not currently utilized, and the DCAP is currently being updated. When completed, staff must learn to understand what the DCAP accommodations are, and how they can be used throughout the general education classrooms. Communication is strained between General and Special Educators regarding strategies for all students (DCAP), and the special strategies that special educators provide.
- Time for collaborating is not available at all levels. When there is time, the time

is limited, and initiatives are either general or special education, not joint. This siloed approach to instruction and learning leads to fragmentation rather than joint ownership of students, their learning experience, and skills development.

- The Instructional Support Team (IST) is perceived as a gatekeeping mechanism for special education, although this is not the intent of IST teams. Many view the IST as taking a long time to address students' needs. This then leads to parents making referrals and necessitating a special education evaluation.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- It appears that the numerous mid-level and some central office leadership changes over the past several years have led to inconsistent building leadership, and lack of a cohesive professional development plan at the various school levels, and across the district. Staff members communicated an interest in having more frequent and in-depth training opportunities.
- Interest was expressed for a training program in the area of eligibility determination, as well as a greater understanding of the difference between a typical student who is struggling and a student who is eligible for specialized instruction. Staff are seeking clarification regarding the meaning of specialized instruction, curriculum modification, and accommodations, as well as an understanding of special education terminology, practices, procedures, regulations, and available services within the district.
- There continues to be a need for professional development for professional staff regarding instructional and behavioral interventions; understanding of the various disability categories, how they impact, and how to teach them; and developing a common understanding and set of strategies for addressing the mental health needs of students.
- General education staff continue to be confused over the various specific roles of the special education personnel. This is fairly true across the district at all levels, although at the elementary level it is much clearer. In addition, there is confusion on the part of teachers on the effective use of paraprofessionals in their classroom, and understanding the role, purpose and intent of this type of support within the classroom. Teachers are not fully clear on what effective strategies and approaches should be implemented by the paraprofessionals.
- At the secondary level, there was some expressed concern, frustration, and a lack of understanding concerning appropriate grading, student workload, and assignments for students with disabilities. Interviewed staff members expressed interest in discussing these issues and developing consensus on these practical issues that they encounter.
- There is limited, if any, time to train paraprofessionals. There is not a structured format in place for special education teachers to meet with their assigned paraprofessionals for supervision purposes and planning activities. Additionally,

there is not a structured format available for teachers serving students in similar programs across the district to come together.

- Time for general and special educators to collaborate is sparse.
- Specialized professional development for staff who teach in substantially separate programs/specialized programs is not available.
- Special education program personnel do not have an opportunity to meet periodically throughout the school year to discuss their programs, share information, discuss issues that relate to their specific program, and plan for future needs.
- Up until this school year, the preschool team designated Wednesday afternoons for special education team meetings and evaluations. This schedule precluded the preschool staff from having professional development. This school year, one Wednesday afternoon a month is designated for professional development and PLC time. Two of the remaining afternoons are set aside for planning. Structured professional development times need to be incorporated on a more consistent and frequent basis to insure a high quality program.

VII. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the evaluation process that was recently completed of the Hingham special education programs. The findings listed in the previous section are the foundation. Each recommendation is followed by an explanation intended to further expand on the rationale. As indicated in the introduction, these recommendations are intended to provide insight for the administration and school-based personnel in making decisions regarding the direction that they determine with respect to the existing programs and services. These recommendations should be viewed as a point of departure for involved personnel to engage in discussions that will lead to the development of programs and services that truly meet the needs of the student population.

There will be a need for the stakeholders to come together and develop an action plan that consists of short and long-term steps. Budget implications, as well as structural and organizational issues need to be well-understood, so that appropriate program development can be instituted. Through an inclusive process of discussion, a plan will emerge that is comprehensive, meaningful and purposeful. These recommendations are presented in no particular order of priority.

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

1. Individualized Education Program (IEPs)

IEPs need to be tailored to the individual needs of students and written to be understood by educators working with the student and parents.

Explanation:

- IEPs are legal contractual agreements between the district and parents. They must include the results of evaluations conducted; the needs of students who have an identified disability; the necessary accommodations and, if appropriate, modifications to curriculum; goals and objectives in areas of need; and services to be delivered by special education personnel.
- The special education department and general education colleagues must meet to gain clarity regarding the different eligibility disabilities on the Special Education flowchart, and to know what strategies general educators can use to support all students who may be struggling.
- Special and general education staff need to discuss the definition of least restrictive setting (LRE) and discuss various models of service delivery (*e.g.*, inclusion, co-teaching, and pull-out service delivery models) to achieve the goal of meeting the needs of students in the district. Careful consideration should be given to how students are grouped in classrooms, as this will enable personnel to effectively and efficiently meet the needs of students. Special education personnel and general education staff should discuss ways for students who require specific skill intervention to be provided with services within the general education classroom setting. Once there is consensus, the district will be prepared to develop IEPs consistent with current best practices in special education and will guide the staff in determining service delivery for the various special education programs using a consistent approach.
- Review students whose primary diagnosis is Specific Learning Disability (SLD) and those whose secondary diagnosis is SLD, to ensure appropriate services are being delivered to all students with SLD.
- Determine a consistent amount of time for service delivery for students receiving encoding and decoding instruction.
- Review Extended School Year (ESY) protocol and criteria for services. Establish a consistent timeline for adding ESY to students' IEPs. Decisions should be made yearly on the standard of substantial regression based on data taken before and after each vacation, and policy determined by the Hingham Public Schools.
- Determine whether Executive Functioning skill development needs to be provided to ALL through general education or through special education.
- Clarify criteria and guidelines for the assignment of in-class supports and paraprofessionals to be reflected on the Service Delivery section or within Additional Information. The paraprofessional's goal is to work towards independence for all students.
- Special education staff should review a random number of IEPs that reflect Grid B and Grid C support to determine which services are necessary to make progress.

Consideration should be given to building student independence and not becoming reliant on adults.

- Delineate the process for eligibility for continued special education through well-articulated Re-Evaluation processes and procedures. A student can only be found eligible or not eligible for special education at an Initial or Re-Evaluation. Services cannot be terminated in any area without a re-evaluation being conducted.
- Discuss service delivery for students in substantially separate programming and how to clarify on the IEP that they are attending this type of program. This provides clarity to any person reading the IEP.
- Collaborate with the Assistant Superintendent and Director of English Language Arts on instruction and assessment in the district, to better understand the reading needs of students at the various levels of the district, and to determine how to meet their needs within the MTSS model created by the District.
- As the new state IEP is rolled out this year within the District, this is an important opportunity to “reset” how IEPs are developed, so that they are a roadmap to a student’s special education program. Special education staff need to attend training sessions to understand the new format, and embrace the various elements of the IEPs, so that student goals and objectives are clear and measurable. The district needs to work towards developing consistency within the district.
- Procedures for utilizing the new IEP format need to be clear to all service providers and constituents. A review should be conducted of the staff to determine if they are able to access what they require. Any procedure developed must indicate all required elements, and how the district expects them to be addressed.

2. *Entrance/Exit Criteria*

There is a need for clear and concise entrance and exit criteria that are well established and followed for all special education programs and services.

Explanation:

- The district has endeavored to develop programs and services to accommodate moderate to severe special needs students. This investment has been beneficial, providing quality programming and related services for students. Although personnel from each program were able to articulate what they perceive as the entrance criteria for their specific program, they were less specific about exit criteria.

- For all of the programs and related services, stated entrance and exit criteria need to be developed that are evidence-based, from current research, and reflect the mission and goals of each program. For the programs and services that provide a continuum of programming and services, it is essential that entrance criteria, exit criteria, and referral protocols are adhered to as stated, and they must be structured in a sequential manner for each district-wide program. Placements in in-district programs should not be determined on accessibility to general education curriculum. Rather, the emphasis should be placed on how students can access the curriculum in the least restrictive setting. The establishment of these criteria can be completed, in collaboration, when program descriptions and personnel roles and responsibilities are being updated.
- Criteria should be created for related services of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling services. There are established professional standards for these services that outline the criteria that need to be in place. Regarding the related service, discharge from these services is infrequent, even when stated goals have been mastered. It is essential that exit criteria be formulated and followed so that when students succeed, they can either move to less service time or be discharged. In addition, Speech and Language staff need to calibrate regarding eligibility for speech and language services.
- If the related service providers of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy and school adjustment counseling have written entrance and exit criteria in place, this would ensure that caseloads are appropriate, and that students are recommended for a change in service at the appropriate time, not just at annual reviews and re-evaluations. Too often, students continue to receive a related service for an undetermined time such as a full year, or year after year. With established entrance and exit criteria, students will be able to have a service reduced, when necessary, or be discharged from that service at the appropriate time after a re-evaluation is conducted.
- The establishment of entrance and exit criteria, based on evidence-based practice, will assist the district in reducing the possible length of time a student is assigned to a specific program, and determine the duration of time that a student receives a specific service.
- Given the changing profiles and needs of young children, The Integrated Preschool Program staff need to recalibrate eligibility criteria for placement in the integrated program, and substantially separate programs at the preschool level, based on *current* standardized measurements and benchmark milestones for specific ages. While clinical judgment is an important component of evaluations, particularly for young children, it needs to be supported by discrete measurements, with developmental variability given careful consideration.

3. Curriculum and Instruction (Curriculum, Instruction, Evidence based Best Practices, Data Collection)

Curriculum and Instruction

There needs to be a thorough review of evidence-based “best practice” that is applicable to the various special education instruction and support programs currently operating within the district.

Explanation:

- Special education instruction and service delivery must take into consideration the delivery of instruction in the least restrictive setting, and include research-based curriculum and evidenced-based practices in instruction.
- The district offers an array of programs and support services designed on the basis of the designated needs of the special education population. This is an effective approach for servicing the diverse special education population within the district. However, because the needs of the population are continuously changing, these changes in students’ needs warrant a change in the approaches that special education instructors utilize to service students.
- District leadership needs to begin a review process with all special education staff to determine the following:
 - *What evidence-based practices are currently being utilized?
 - *How effective are these practices on student outcomes?
 - *Do they meet the identified needs of the students?
 - *How is data utilized to determine student outcomes, and to meet the identified needs of students?
 - *When and why a student remains in an inclusion setting to receive services, or is pulled out for services.
 - *Determine how goals and benchmarks reflect evaluation results, and the impact of the disability on the student’s ability to perform in the classroom.
- An example of “best practice” needs to occur in the academic support/strategies periods. It appears that special education staff members, especially at the secondary level, are struggling with “getting the work done” on home assignments, term projects, and test preparation. Academic support periods need to spend the bulk of student time on learning “how to ” get the home assignments completed at home, “how to” prepare for a test, and “how to” complete a term project. Students need to learn the skills that will help them become independent and successful learners. Certainly, they may require some assistance with various assignments, with reviewing new concepts, with having content re-taught, or with getting their work organized, but the ratio of this type of support to learning “how

to do it independently” should be no more than two out of five periods.

- Many positive experiences of teaching and providing instruction were observed throughout the district, but there needs to be a review of all practices to ensure that the practices follow evidence-based “best practice.” Changes in strategies of instructional and behavioral intervention practices should be aligned with the intent, purpose, function, and outcome for the students within the various classes. UDL, differentiated instruction, and the use of the DCAP are considered to be some best practices. In addition, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Inclusive Practices Guide serves as a model of resources the district can use to meet this challenge.
- Special education staff members need to design strategies which will allow students to be shared among programs and services. Students should have access to program options and choices. They do not always fit nicely into one model or service. The sharing of a student among special education staff and programs may enable the student to benefit from the expertise of other special education staff and other program designs. This recommendation applies to all the models of instruction and programs, including the in-classroom support model (inclusion), at all levels.
- The middle school needs to review the team design to ensure that it is consistent from grade to grade. As noted, there is no team in grade eight (8) currently. A review of the utilization of special education teachers should also be undertaken to determine if having them on a team has more benefits for students than having them accessing students on a pull-out basis. As noted, special education teachers in grades six (6) and seven (7) were removed from teams this school year.
- The middle school and high school schedule often dictates where students receive services. This often results in special education academic support having multiple grades of students with their special education teacher. Interviews indicated that teachers may not be able to meet the specialized instruction indicated in individual student’s IEPs. The district needs to consider minimizing having multiple grades together, and look to students being serviced by grade level or by the area of specialized instruction. A review of scheduling should occur, at both schools, to ensure there is flexibility in meeting student needs.
- Inclusive practices, expectations and co-teaching need to be formalized. The district needs to be clear about its commitment to inclusion at all school levels.
- There should be consideration of developing a scheduled block of time when all students are able to receive support and enrichment within the school day (e.g. flex block, advisory block).
- To assist with being proactive, the district needs to assure that the continuum of services offered is consistent building to building and level to level – preschool to kindergarten, elementary to middle school and middle school to high school. The

continuity of services needs to be in place as students transition through the district

- A review of classroom space and locations would benefit the district. Program space is lacking for the high school RISE program for Life Skills Instruction. Designing and equipping space at the high school needs to be strongly considered and addressed. The creation of space properly equipped will enhance services and vocational/job opportunities for students. Special Education programs should be provided in classrooms that are equal in scope and size to the general education classrooms. Special Education classes should also be located in the main flow of the school.
- A review of how specialized instruction is provided in the RISE and Life Skills classes should occur, to enhance opportunities for students to receive services in the inclusive environment.
- Strong consideration should also be given to revisiting and developing differentiated instruction and UDL across the district, and providing push in support for students. Interviewees indicated that it is difficult to meet student needs when servicing multi grades in classes that are not scheduled with students requiring similar instruction.
- The development of “power standards/essential skills” in each subject area, along with primary goals to focus upon, would be valuable to special education teachers as they work to ensure they are covering required information. As indicated earlier in the report, all staff need access to all curriculum and the essential skills required for students to master.
- As indicated earlier in the report, students are being identified based upon their program rather than their own individual needs. The district should consider a comprehensive change in the current names of the existing programs. A culture has developed whereby a student is considered or referred to as a program, rather than the student being identified as an individual regardless of their program affiliation. A change in program names/titles could provide an opportunity to direct the focus away from the program, and more on the student.

Data collection

A thorough review needs to be conducted of what data the district is collecting, to improve decision making and internal practices.

Explanation:

- All staff would benefit from additional training on performance data collection in all forms. There is a concern for the “in between(er)” students that performance data is not being collected in a manner that will drive the instruction for these students who are demonstrating slow or limited progress.

- The district offers an array of programs and support services that are based on the designated needs of the special education population. As discussed above, the RtI/MTSS efforts need to be reviewed and enhanced. Consideration needs to be given to what data will be collected and how the data should be viewed. General and special education staff would benefit from training on user-friendly data collection systems.
- Referral trends should be reviewed relative to how many referrals were made to the IST team at each level, and what the outcomes were. This data should be reviewed and assessed in relation to pre-referral and RtI/MTSS efforts. The data will assist in developing future professional development initiatives at the school and district level.
- The district should also review the findings of no eligibility throughout the district. This information will assist the administration in identifying referral trends and focusing on needed interventions.
- A procedure needs to be developed to ensure that all staff member schedules are submitted routinely at various times of the school year for review. Schedules should be collected at a minimum of three times, and should be submitted in a format that is consistent across the district. Having this data on file and readily available will assist with addressing staffing needs that arise throughout the year, and identify options that might better preserve student service delivery and teacher consultation time.
- Establishment of an annual review of program populations. An annual review of students placed in each program should be considered to ensure that the programs continue to meet the specific population for which they were developed. Teachers and building administrators should be consulted to assess their input. Because so much effort has been committed to the programs, assessing their continued effectiveness will benefit students, teachers, parents, and administrators.
- This review will also allow the special education department to remain proactive to the needs of students, such as identifying reasons for increased reading instruction demands at the middle and high schools, and addressing programs and services to address these factors.
- Data process and procedure needs to be developed to analyze, inform, drive, and integrate into instructional practices

4. Specialized Programs

The district needs to analyze the current profile and needs of its special education population, to strengthen its capacity to address these needs with high quality special education program options and components.

Explanation

- The district needs to establish entrance and exit criteria for the specialized programs and this needs to be shared with all staff. At the secondary level, special education staff need to ensure that general education is aware when a student is in one of their classes. Interviewees indicated a reluctance to modify the general education curriculum for special education students who are enrolled in general education classes.
- Ongoing analysis of students recommended to and placed in specialized programs needs to occur, to ensure that students meet the criteria and profile for the intended population of the program. This information will be helpful to the district in identifying other possible programs (based on needs) for consideration.
- As indicated earlier in the report, the district should review the need for designated service options/programs at the middle school level, to address students who may require more focused services for social and emotional needs.
- To meet the increasing social emotional needs of students within the district, development of programs at the various school levels may be beneficial. These programs will require dedicated professionals and oversight for coordination and continuity of care for students in order to be successful.
- There should be continued consultation with the Landmark Outreach Program to strengthen the LAHB programs throughout the district, to ensure high quality and specialized instruction to meet the language-based needs of students enrolled.
- Steps should be taken to identify supplemental specialized instructional material to support students with comprehensive learning needs.
- As new students enter the Post Graduate program designed for students whose comprehensive needs require special education services past Grade 12, the focus should be reviewed to ensure it continues to meet the needs of the student population.

5. Transition Activities

Transition practices should be structured in a more sequential and consistent manner between the various school levels.

Explanation:

- Each year, transition activities are conducted for students moving from one level to the next. The steps that are in place for transition seem to be structured. However, school-based personnel apparently view transition differently from preschool to elementary, from elementary to the middle schools, and from the

middle schools to the high school.

- Staff members are performing the necessary steps for transition, but there is a tendency for each school to shape the process somewhat differently. It would be beneficial to review the steps with all staff involved, to ensure that practices and procedures are being consistently followed. If the process needs updating, this would be an appropriate time, before transition activities begin.
- It is essential to have written procedures in place designating timelines for various activities. Definitions should also be included for the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in the transition activities/protocols at each level. It is recommended that the district develop very specific steps for the transition process from one level to the next.
- Sharing of information to determine the most appropriate programming and support services for students should not be left to a “move up day,” or one meeting held in the spring. Planning should begin in January or February, and communication should be structured throughout the spring, based on a set timeline for the various activities, ensuring that the actual transition of the student is completed in a manner that enables success.

6. Parent/Guardian Awareness and Support

The district needs to develop effective strategies to improve parent awareness and understanding of their child’s disability

Explanation:

- Parents are an essential part of the IEP process and their child’s education. The district needs to be open to their input, and have reasonable discussion that is respectful and mindful of their concerns. Although there may be disagreement, there should always be open dialogue to discuss the issues.
- The district needs to ensure they are working with and supporting the Special Education Parent Advisory Council. Training should be sponsored, for both staff and parents, to raise the level of awareness and appreciation of parents’ concerns and needs, and to focus on topics of mutual concern, such as data collection, student progress, and utilization of the IEP. These opportunities should be conducted jointly.
- It would be advantageous for the district to develop a parent engagement process/protocol for use across the district to engage parents more consistently. A systemic approach to what and how often information is shared would assist staff in working with parents.
- Parents would benefit from an increased awareness of the special education

process and programs that exist throughout the district. Consideration should be given to having entrance/exit criteria and program descriptors on the Special Education website, to allow parents the opportunity to understand the workings of placement and available services (note: this would be beneficial for staff as well).

- There needs to be a focus on assuring that parents are part of the Team process, and that they are able to have their questions/concerns addressed.
- Notifying parents when various staffing situations occur, or when there is a position that needs to be filled, is critical to ensuring trust between the district and families. As noted in this report, the district needs a protocol for staff to assist with parent communication. The protocol should include various topics, such as how often communication is expected, when to notify parents of various situations (when a position is not filled for a period of time, etc.), refraining from any financial references and from “we don’t do” responses, sharing student progress, and providing additional guidance.
- Parents need presentations on MTSS to support the schools’ initiatives.

PRESCHOOL/EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMING

The district needs to re-envision and create a high quality early childhood special education program and Integrated Preschool Program, to reflect the current profile and needs of students and families, and to incorporate best practices in early childhood education.

Explanation:

- The Pre-School program must be part of the comprehensive programming of the district. This approach will enable the district to address program growth and needs as they occur. The school system needs to be viewed as Preschool through Grade 12, rather than K-12. One way to begin addressing this is to consider having pre-school representation at principal and district special education administrative meetings. Services and staffing need to be assessed, to ensure that student needs can be met by teachers with the necessary background in special education, and early childhood skills and experience.
- The district should develop a Mission and Vision statement for the Integrated Preschool Program (IPS) to guide the structure, curriculum, teaching and learning experiences of the IPS now, and in the future, using the 7 Core Principles of the Guidelines for PreSchool Learning Experiences.
- The district needs to align the IPS curriculum with: Massachusetts Early Education and Care Standards and Curriculum for 3 and 4 year olds; Preschool and Kindergarten Standards in Social-Emotional Development and

Approaches to Play and Learning; Guidelines for Preschool Learning Experiences; Massachusetts Curriculum PreK-12; and the Massachusetts Pre-K Science, Technology, and Engineering Standards.

<https://www.mass.gov/eec-learning-standards-and-curriculum-guideline>

- Given today's changing needs of children and families, it is strongly recommended that the district continue its efforts to revamp the Integrated Preschool Program. With the efforts already underway, it is recommended that the "re-envisioned" program now take into the consideration the following:
 - a. Incorporate more options and time for children's learning opportunities, with children provided center options for targeted skill development, and teachers becoming facilitators and partners in children's learning, versus teacher-directed.
 - b. Embrace the development of thematic units of exploration, based on expressed areas of children's interest and research-based curriculum that aligns with the curriculum frameworks and state standards, rather than the traditional preschool themes. The curriculum should include literacy, math, social studies, and science.
 - c. Consider revising the structure of the IPS program, beginning with grouping children by age (or smaller ranges of age) within a classroom. For example, have classrooms specifically for children ages 2.9 years to 3.5 years; 3.5 to 4.5; and 4 to 5; each having expanded hours of learning opportunities to learn, explore, play and socialize.
 - e. Provide a variety of options for program hour attendance, starting with a minimum of 3.5 hours of learning, play and exploration. This could include an additional option of staying for lunch and socialization. There could also be extended hours enabling students to have a full day of classroom experience. The District may also consider offering a full-day program to coincide with work hours, providing extended day hours (in the early morning and late afternoon) for families.
 - f. Restructure enrollment to accommodate a minimum of three days' per week attendance at the program, with options for 4 or 5 days, creating a menu of family options. Eliminate the options of two days per week and afternoons only.
 - g. Provide children with comprehensive special needs a balance of opportunities during their school day, plus targeted skill development (if appropriate, ABA discrete trials).
 - h. Survey similar types of public schools and local early childhood centers for program hours and fee structures, as a baseline for

establishing new program hours and fees.

- i. Survey all families of preschool age children to determine options most favorable to families. The survey could inquire about options for specific number of days, and length of days (*e.g.* 3 hours per day, 4.5 hours including, full day ending at 3 PM, full day with extended program to 5:30 for after school care). This serves as a launching point to program expansion and gaining community support for the program.
 - j. Carefully examine the eligibility criteria for a special education placement. This will enable the district to restructure the IPS program.
 - k. Recalibrate the delivery of related services (speech and language therapy, physical therapy, and occupational therapy), with services being delivered in groups up to 4 students, and balanced between delivery of services in the classrooms and in therapy rooms.
 - l. Hire dual-certified early childhood special education teachers and work with current staff to seek supplemental certifications to strengthen the teaching practices of these professionals. The training of professionals influences the orientation of their teaching practices, classroom organization, and planning of curriculum activities. Thus, having dual-certified early childhood special education teachers will enhance the district's ability to provide high quality, developmentally appropriate, early childhood special education programming.
 - m. As an Early Learning Department, discuss and develop consensus on the following areas related to eligibility for special education and the development of an IEP:
 - 1) Establish clear eligibility guidelines and criteria for special education based on state and federal standards.
 - 2) Develop a guideline for what to offer in Pre-Academics, Behavior, Fine Motor, Gross Motor, Speech and Language, and Social/Emotional skill development for students with Low, Moderate or High Needs. This will enable IEP service delivery to more accurately and consistently address the needs of the student and their disability/disabilities.
- Provide the Integrated Preschool (IPS) Coordinator with a mentor, particularly as the program is re-envisioned. It might be advantageous to shift the IPS Coordinator position to become a full-time Integrated Preschool Program Director. That expanded role would call for extensive experience in early childhood programming and special education teaching. The role could have responsibility for coordinating all aspects of the preschool program (*e.g.* placement decisions, program options, curriculum); supervising and evaluating IPS teaching and paraprofessionals; problem-solving complex student and

- parent issues; serving as Team chairperson with responsibility for all the meetings and paperwork, and facilitating the transition from early intervention.
- Develop an Integrated Preschool Program (IPS) brochure and website.
 - Develop a Multi-Tiered System of Support to address the growth and development of early childhood age children in the various developmental domains, for those children who may be experiencing some developmental lags in specific areas. This may help address their needs without being identified with special needs.
 - The IPS Director could work with the Administrator of Elementary Special Education or Executive Director of Student Services to implement IPS staff professional development, specifically designed for the staff and student needs.
 - Staff should work with the IPS Coordinator to determine topics that would assist the staff in implementing excellent curriculum and its activities, enhancing the outcomes for IPS students and prioritizing professional development
 - With some preschool classrooms shifted to another school building, time should be allocated to allow preschool staff to coordinate and collaborate on program structure and curriculum, so that the program is cohesive across school buildings. The IPS Coordinator, Administrator of Elementary Special Education, Executive Director of Student Services, Superintendent, and the Director of Facilities need to take into consideration playground equipment and any physical space renovations to address student safety.

STAFFING

1. Special Education Teachers/Related Service Providers and Team Chairpersons

The district needs to assess staff utilization and allocation of professional resources to maximize effectiveness and efficiency in meeting the needs of students and the various special education programming options.

Explanation

- The district might want to consider prioritizing psychologists conducting evaluations and working directly with students. The Preschool Coordinator *could* have a dual role as Director of the Preschool and Special Education Team Chairperson, with much being dependent on the enrollment of the preschool.
- It would be beneficial to have professionals trained in special education whose primary responsibility is Special Education Team Chairperson(s). This person can service multiple school buildings.
- Clarify the roles of the Coordinators of Special Education at the elementary and secondary level.

- The district needs to consider having only direct service providers act as liaisons for the students they serve at the high school. It is unrealistic to expect personnel to act as liaisons for students that they are not servicing. Valuable time is lost and relevant student performance information may not be reported when this approach is used.
- The district needs to develop a process to allow continued access and review of staff schedules. This will assist in decision-making about staff assignments, and help identify overloads or available time for various staff.
- Develop and update job descriptions, with roles and responsibilities of each special education position in the district, and share them with staff.

2. Counselors and Counseling Services

The district needs to assess the roles and responsibilities of its clinical staff, including guidance counselors, school adjustment counselors, and psychologists, to maximize the use of their expertise and skill sets with students, staff, and families.

Explanation:

- Interviewees indicated a lack of understanding of the counselor role and the school adjustment counselor (SAC) role. Clarification and training for school personnel regarding the different roles each plays at each school level would provide all staff a clear understanding of the responsibilities of each position.
- The district needs to assure that SACs (school adjustment counselors) are always involved in the decision to add students to their own caseloads.
- Clinical supervision needs to be in place for the SACs and school psychologists on a consistent basis. Again as with the specific program staff, this group of professionals needs clinical supervision to assist with treatment planning, goal setting, providing guidance to school administrators about the level of risk a particular student may represent, and to assist with building capacity with staff understanding and management of complex students and families with mental health needs.

3. Paraprofessionals

The district needs to establish criteria by which paraprofessionals are assigned to a student, a group of students, a program, or a classroom.

Explanation:

- The district has a substantial number of paraprofessionals who provide beneficial services to students with disabilities (125.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE))

paraprofessionals). However, it is not clear to all staff how final assignments are made to a special needs student, group of students, program, or classroom. The lack of criteria and understanding of the roles of paraprofessionals can lead to an overreliance and a potential “learned helplessness” of students over time.

- Given the number of paraprofessionals within special education, it would be beneficial for the district to maintain clear criteria indicating why a paraprofessional is being assigned to a student, a program, or a class. The reviewers were not made aware of any criteria that might exist for assigning a paraprofessional to a program or a student. Nor were they made aware of any criteria for determining the need for additional paraprofessional time or hiring, when indicated. Health and safety reasons are foremost in administrators’ minds, as well as the provision of assistance in substantially separate programs, but beyond that it becomes less clear as to “how” or “when” a paraprofessional should be utilized.
- In developing criteria, there should be efforts to ensure that paraprofessionals assigned to a program remain connected to the program to the maximum degree possible, and paraprofessionals assigned to specific classrooms remain consistent.
- The use of paraprofessionals has greatly expanded as students with disabilities increasingly are placed in general education classrooms. As the district continues to rely on these positions to support special needs students in general education classes and in substantially separate programs, it must provide more training opportunities. Paraprofessionals need more extensive knowledge of the various disabilities, curriculum frameworks, strategies of instruction and intervention, management of behavioral issues, provision of in-classroom support, and making curriculum accommodations and modifications. Paraprofessionals need a greater understanding of how instruction is provided to students with special needs.
- The district should also study the following common practices for paraprofessional staffing: trading paraprofessional positions for special education positions, increasing ownership by general education staff, time-limited assignments, and using assistants to free-up special education personnel from burdensome paperwork, so that the special education staff can spend more time with students. (“Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools.” Giangreco, M., Halvorsen, A., Doyle, M., Broer, S. Journal of Special Education Leadership, October 2004.
- The district needs to develop a handbook for paraprofessionals identifying their responsibilities, duties and other expectations.
- The district should consider creating job descriptions depending upon the paraprofessional’s assignment. The roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessionals should be reviewed and updated. The specific function of the paraprofessionals should be documented, so that school-based personnel have a full understanding of the paraprofessionals’ responsibilities. Practices and procedures should also be spelled out about how the assistants are to function in

various instructional settings, such as working with groups, working one-on-one, monitoring test taking, MCAS support, in-class support, etc. General education staff raised the concern that when paraprofessionals are working with students outside of the classroom, “What is the accountability of the position and to whom?” The reviewers saw that the accountability issue for paraprofessionals’ instruction is an ongoing concern, especially at the secondary level.

- General education teachers also need training on how to effectively utilize a paraprofessional in the classroom. Too often, both the teacher and the paraprofessional do not have a clear understanding of how the paraprofessional is expected to function in the general education classroom. A valuable resource can be underutilized when the function and purpose of the position are not understood.

4. Administrative Oversight

Administrative oversight of special education programming, services, and special education personnel needs to be redefined, with possible structural changes in the Department of Student Services.

Explanation:

- Given the turnover in important leadership roles, it is important to allow the current Interim or eventually the new Executive Director the opportunity to review the current administrative staffing for the department, and develop recommendations that will enable proper ongoing oversight.
- Procedures and policies can become unclear over time, and the district needs a formal review of procedures and policies. The most productive method is to form a committee with representation from all levels (preschool through high school) composed of general education, special education and administrative personnel. It is not clear to everyone how staff should be assessing disability categories, and ensuring proper decision-making. The reviewers found that these discrepancies are often related to how the district identifies/defines the category of special needs. A clear procedure for identification can resolve staff confusion. There may also be other areas that require clarity for the staff.
- The district needs to undertake a review of the roles and responsibilities of various special education personnel, to ensure necessary clarity. As new Special Education positions evolve over time, and staff change at the building level, there are also changes in administrators’ requests, expectations, and building needs. Specific responsibilities must be identified, clarified, and assigned to the appropriate position. Clarification is also needed for the roles and responsibilities of the Building Principals and the Executive Director of Student Services, in relation to programs and special education staff. Upon completion of this important task it is essential that it be shared with all constituents.
- The district has made a substantial investment in program development. It is not

in the best interest of the programs and the program personnel not to receive the ongoing oversight that they deserve. The district needs to determine who and how all programs are overseen, evaluated, and monitored.

- The Building Principals' and Executive Director of Student Services' roles and responsibilities as to programs and special education staff also require clarification. It is essential that the completed clarification decisions will be shared with all constituents.
- The district needs to consider developing a special education organizational chart. It was clear throughout the review that many staff have no clear understanding of the roles of various special education personnel. The district has developed many new positions, and the focus of many positions is not clear.
- The district needs to update job descriptions and ensure that all staff have an understanding of their role and the responsibilities.
- As noted, protocols need to be developed and implemented specifically in the areas of:

- Transitions
- Program Entrance/Exit Criteria
- Inclusion
- Co-Teaching
- In-class Services
- Assignment of paraprofessionals
- Parent Communication

INCLUSIVE PRACTICES

Inclusive practices need to be a district priority to meet the needs of the students, with ongoing review, and strengthening opportunities within general education programs and classrooms.

Explanation:

- The district would benefit from developing a more purposeful pre-referral (IST/SST) process, and robust district-wide implementation of the UDL, MTSS, differentiation, and Tier 1 instruction. Proactive strategies include these general education initiatives, coupled with increased inclusion of special education students, and more constructive professional development experiences for all staff. These efforts will assist in reducing out of district placements and their related costs. In-districts costs will increase, but the district will develop better capacity to serve students in the district, and create options that will continue to serve the diverse special education population.
- There are varying degrees of implementation of the pre-referral (student support)

process throughout the district. Uniform practices are needed, aligned with the Massachusetts Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). A more deliberate structure is required for the process to be more effective at each school. Once the process is more uniform and consistent, referrals for special education will be more consistent, and the district may see a reduction in referrals.

- The district should continue to devote efforts and resources to develop a comprehensive district-wide model of Tiered Support Services. Massachusetts Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) can be implemented in all schools as a student support process for all learners, before considering a referral for Special Education. While the implementation may look somewhat different in each school, the underlying process should reflect a common set of values and processes used throughout the district.
- If utilized properly, the pre-referral (IST/SST) process is an effective tool. A referral to special education is considered legitimate when a student has been referred after going through the Pre-referral (IST/SST) process. There is currently a sense that the IST/SST process can be an obstacle to a referral, suggesting that it is “just another step to go through.” There are reported examples where parents will circumvent the process by writing a letter to the school administration and requesting an evaluation for special education. This cannot be completely prevented, but further education for parents and more effective use of the Pre-referral process can reduce parental referrals.
- There needs to be a data review of students who were processed through the pre-referral team, to determine who was found ineligible for special education. This analysis can provide the district with information about training that the pre-referral team members should undertake, so only legitimate referrals are processed.
- The Pre-referral (IST/SST) process is a general education process, and members should include general educators (including teachers). Special educators should be involved to provide insight on students based upon their expertise.
- On a consistent basis, building administrators need to participate as members of the IST/SST process. Research clearly demonstrates that more effective change occurs in teaching practices when building administrators engage in the process.
- On a scheduled basis, IST/SST team members should rotate through team memberships, so that all building staff members eventually participate in the process. Participation by all staff increases staff ownership.
- To gain a greater awareness and insight into effective strategies of intervention, professional development needs to be made available to the IST/SST teams. Coaching for team members should also be part of the training experience, so that their strategies of intervention can be assessed, revised, and expanded.
- An updated manual that specifically outlines the purpose and function of the

IST/SS Tteam should be developed. The manual should include the roles and responsibilities of team members, uniform applications that are consistently used, and a suggested list of intervention strategies based on the presenting student's central issue(s).

- Given that there are class levels in the Middle School and High School, all efforts have to be made to assure that special education students are not held back from accessing higher level courses when appropriate. Student placement must be based upon current assessment data.
- The district has focused this year on DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), and interviewees indicated that they were not aware of “where special education students fit.” The district should take note, and make efforts to ensure that special education students are a part of the process.
- The district should provide additional support to high-risk students in reading and math, by a specialist or by interventions at the secondary level.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The district needs to develop a more comprehensive approach to professional development for all school personnel, by focusing on general and special education topics.

Explanation:

- The district has done commendable work over recent years to provide professional development on numerous topics of curriculum and instruction to school-based personnel over recent years. There is still a need for professional development for all school personnel regarding many special education issues, such as: “best practices” for instructing students with disabilities, pre-referral (IST/SST) practices, the MTSS model, eligibility determination for services, dealing with challenging behaviors in the classroom, students with mental health needs, and working with different disabilities in the classroom, etc. Staff members want a greater understanding of the difference between a typical student who is struggling, and a student who is eligible for specialized instruction. They also want clarification of exactly what specialized instruction is.
- Interviewed staff expressed an interest in having more frequent and in-depth training opportunities that focus on general and relevant special education topics. They mentioned the following topics, in addition to those listed above:

Characteristics of a disability
Establishing rules in co-taught classes (for ourselves and for students)
How to utilize a paraprofessional

Executive Functioning
 Child development
 Crisis intervention
 Differentiated instruction
 Universal Design
 Trauma Sensitive Schools
 Co-teaching training
 The MTSS model
 Eligibility determination for services
 Classroom management
 Modifications and accommodations in the classroom
 Managing challenging classroom behaviors
 How to work as a team and foster effective communication
 Using the IEP as a learning tool
 How to deal with difficult team meetings
 Strategies for effective communication and collaboration with parents

- The district needs to design a district-wide training program that will increase general awareness of special education terminology, practices, procedures, regulations, and available services within the district. As an example, training in Universal Design would assist in melding general education and special education; *i.e.* instruction expected of all educators and support staff, and when does specialized instruction begin? There is a need to continue the effort to provide training on differentiated instruction, accommodations, and managing challenging behaviors within the classroom.
- All staff would benefit from training on effective use of a paraprofessional in their classroom. Teachers are confused about exactly what is the role and purpose for this in-classroom support. Teachers are not clear on effective strategies and approaches that should be implemented by the paraprofessionals.
- Paraprofessionals would benefit from greater training on the Curriculum Frameworks, managing challenging behaviors in the classroom, various instructional strategies, and how they should function within a general education classroom.
- There is a need to continue training on differentiated instruction, universal design for learning (UDL), accommodations, managing challenging behaviors within the classroom, and addressing the social emotional learning of students. The district may want to consider contacting Jessica Minahan, a specialist in the field of social emotional learning and behaviors.
- Staff can be better trained in classroom management and when it is necessary to call for support from the crisis team and administration. In addition, training is needed in crisis intervention, including de-escalation strategies.
- Registered Behavior Technician (RBT) training opportunities could be offered to paraprofessionals and Teaching Assistants.

- The district could provide structured professional development times at the preschool level on a more consistent and frequent basis, to ensure the ongoing development of high quality early childhood programming. This will be especially important if the program extends the day for young children, reimagines the preschool curriculum to be research-based, and addresses the early childhood state standards in English Language Arts, math, science, social studies, and social emotional learning.
- Develop a study group of general and special educators from all levels to explore issues related to “What is right” or “What is fair,” grading, accommodations, modifications, and workload.
- It is recommended that the district take advantage of the highly-skilled special education personnel by having them present at faculty meetings and other professional development opportunities to all staff.
- The district needs to develop specific professional development for the specialized programs within the system.