



**Eanes ISD
Parent Symposium 2018
Summary Report**

Introduction

On April 5, 2018 Eanes ISD conducted its annual Parent Symposium to discuss issues related to Special Education throughout the District. This Symposium was unique in that students and special education and general education teachers were invited in addition to parents, which resulted in a robust conversation, increased awareness of multiple issues and stronger relationships. Participants were placed in small groups to discuss questions across several areas: Transition and Life After High School, Inclusion, Academics and Rigor, and Special Education. The Special Education section included questions specifically for parents and others specifically for students.

Because of the increased number of participants and what were apparently very interesting topics, the amount of information generated from the small group sessions was prolific. In order to capture the information and analyze content within and across topic areas, Copia entered the information into an Excel spreadsheet, which is included as an electronic component of this report. We believe the information available within the spreadsheet may be very useful in multiple applications.

High-Level Takeaways

1. The topic area that generated the most conversation and feedback was Transition and Life After High School.
2. The question that generated the most conversation and feedback across topics was “What are the opportunities to improve?”
3. The need for cross-training and collaboration between general education and special education teachers cut across all topic areas and was noted multiple times.
4. Pre-ARDs are regarded as very valuable/helpful.



5. Parent and teacher education regarding the pre-ARD and ARD processes, terminology, timelines, etc. is viewed as essential.
6. The need to standardize operations and best practices across all campuses was mentioned frequently.
7. The role of the teacher's assistant (TA) was a frequent topic of conversation, in areas such as the need for a professional path for TAs, increased compensation for TAs, and more training for TAs.
8. Teachers would also like more training, specifically regarding the difference between modifications and accommodations, and in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) program.
9. Teachers frequently mentioned the need for additional planning time and for collaboration between special education and general education teachers, particularly related to modifications, toward the goal of shared and aligned expectations.

Transition

As mentioned previously, this topic generated a tremendous amount of conversation, particularly related to the first question, which was “What are the most important skills and abilities our students need to succeed after high school?” This generated 88 different responses, which we were able to break down into three categories: life skills, social-emotional skills and academic/learning skills.

- Life skills, which included skills such as financial management, employment skills, decision-making, etc. composed 37% of the total responses.
- Social-emotional skills comprised 30% of the responses.
- Academic/learning skills also comprised 30% of the responses.

District strengths in the area of Transition included multiple components; the most frequently mentioned were the district staff, the ATS program, robust resources and the wide variety of opportunities available for students. Areas for improvement seemed to focus a great deal on the topic of college-readiness as well as beginning the overall process of transition earlier, whether from elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, or beyond high school.



When asked what they need that they don't have, the same responses were repeated, specifically a need for more transition services that begin earlier, and more information about college and related possibilities for the future.

Inclusion

The topic of inclusion seemed to be the most important/motivating from the student perspective, and they expressed a desire to be part of a group and to share common interests with others. They very much appreciate activities that are open to all interested parties over specialized inclusion activities. Examples of this include choir and band, which were noted several times by students:

- ***“Choir was huge because it was accepting of all students.”***
- ***“Choir is like a family.”***
- ***“Band is very inclusive.”***
- ***“Choir has allowed life-long friends after high school.”***

From a teacher's perspective, inclusion activities are enhanced when there is time allotted for planning modifications and/or access to modified materials. Morning meeting time was also singled out as being very helpful and effective, as was the reverse inclusion program. When asked if they could add/subtract/change one thing related to inclusion, teachers spoke frequently about the need for a behavioral interventionist or social-emotional counselor as well as an inclusion specialist. Other suggestions included:

- Always have a special education component in professional development sessions – this speaks to being an inclusive district.
- Ensure that staff that enter mid-year receive training and learn about student IEPs.

Students frequently mentioned the lunch period as an opportunity for improvement:

- ***“have more people with the same lunch time”***
- ***“more options for requesting lunch time”***
- ***“being able to do club activities during lunch time at middle school”***

And in the words of a student:

“Inclusion was the most important part of school – you felt like everyone else.”



Academics & Rigor

Feedback in this section addressed a number of issues. Overall, it appears that people believe the district operates at a higher level of rigor than most, providing numerous options for students such as AP and pre-AP classes. One issue that was mentioned several times is the intensity of the rigor in the 4th grade curriculum. This was described as “miserable, too much rigor,” with the comment that it should be dispersed more equally across 3rd and 5th grade. Another frequently mentioned comment was that ARDs should include students more often and that ARDs are better when students are present and advocating for themselves.

Another suggestion noted frequently was the need to provide training for substitutes and TAs so that the level of rigor can be more easily maintained. Both adults and students mentioned homework, specifically there being a tendency for too much homework. From adults:

- We need less homework – reduce it!
- Teachers need to collaborate to ensure that there is not too much homework.
- Add an advisory class at the high school to give time for homework.
- Teachers should check the calendar to see how many tests are being given each day.
- Assign less “rote” homework that can frustrate students if the student is demonstrating content mastery.

And from students:

- Reduce busy work.
- Reduce the number of tests that follow No Homework Night.
- Having a lot of homework in multiple classes is difficult.
- No Homework Night occurs on early release days, which is when you actually have more time for homework.

Parents/SpEd

The overarching need on the part of parents appears to be for more information, particularly related to ARDs, IEPs, special education law, terminology, etc. Responses to the question about the most important aspects of a meaningful ARD frequently address this need:



- “It’s important for the parents to understand the process even before the student enters SPED – maybe at the initial consent meeting.”
- “The pre-ARD is critical; the ARD should be a formality.”
- “Clarification/clarity of acronyms and SPED terminology, especially at the elementary level, is critical.”
- “Need more information for parents about what to look for that may indicate problems that might require intervention and referral.”
- “Need more opportunities for parents to share info/get together – in-person and on-line.”
- “Need more ARD/SPED workshops for parents and general education teachers.”

Also frequently mentioned as a need is tutoring services for youth in special education, specifically provided by special education teachers. Other forms were also mentioned, such as on-line tutoring. A number of parents indicated they would benefit from a relationship with a “mentor parent”. Parents would like students and general education teachers to be included in the pre-ARDs as well. When asked what they need that they don’t have, a number of parents mentioned an information hub on the internet where they could access a wide array of information including schedules, terminology, evidence-based practices, legal rights, and much more. This was also one of the requests made in the meeting last March.

Students/SpEd

The primary area of concern for students appears to be the acquisition of appropriate skills, inclusive of academic mastery, career and life skills, and social-emotional skills, all toward the goal of a successful transition to life after high school. Students transitioning from middle school to high school would also appreciate more information, details and advance preparation about what to expect and the primary differences in high school.

There were three specific questions asked of students only:

1. In what ways do you feel you are included and have a voice in your education?
2. What would help you participate in a meeting about your education?
3. What do you need from your teachers or parents to help you be more involved in planning your education?



With regard to having a voice in their education, students indicated that they had experienced more opportunity to voice their opinions as they got older, ranging from almost no opportunities in 7th grade or earlier to quite a bit in 11th. They also mentioned receiving emails and surveys requesting their opinions and preferences on various topic areas.

Responses to the second question about what would improve their participation were fairly limited. The most concrete idea centers around access to technology as a means of expressing opinions and requesting assistance. For example, students would like to have a home page (likely social media) on which they could post ideas and thoughts, and they appear to appreciate surveys as a vehicle for expressing themselves. They also would like to be able to set up appointments on-line, and would like to have the opportunity to invite parents or others that could help to meetings about their education.

Related to what they need from teachers and/or parents to be more involved in planning their education, the number one response was more information about the various career options that relate to specific courses. They also said that they would benefit from guidance early on regarding class choices in middle school that could lead to critical choices in high school, and that they would like to have more options for subject areas that they are “good at or interested in”. Lastly, several students said that they would like to be given more options for difficult classes that could be challenging.

In terms of constructive feedback, they said that teachers tend to send too many emails, and that it would be easier for them if their classes that involve technology or on-line presentations would use one format consistently. Apparently currently some are on Google Classroom, some on iTunesU and some on others, which causes some confusion.

Suggestions that arose from discussions...

One theme that cut across all topic areas was the parents’ desire for more communication, more information and more education beginning at an earlier point in the overall process. This included everything from terminology to methodology to future options. Methods for this included handbooks, checklists, websites, internet-based hubs, meetings and multiple communication methods.

Another issue that permeates every conversation is the need to remove the walls between special education and general education teachers so that they are all



working together towards a common individualized goal with every student. The reality of this may be difficult to achieve, but the fact that the desire/belief exists speaks well for culture and opens up the possibilities for additional cross-training, collaboration time, sharing of resources and materials, mentoring, and ultimately, increased student success.

Other suggestions included:

1. Create a resource bank of modified materials for teacher access.
2. Create/host SPED 101 boot camps for staff/teachers -- give all teachers the tools to help all kids.
3. Create an internet hub where parents can access multiple types of information related to special education.

The desire and willingness to erase boundaries between special education and general education for the benefit of all students, to have open conversations and to work together towards common goals is certainly the foundation required for progress. This foundation clearly exists within Eanes ISD.