

Westport Community Schools
Special Education Program Evaluation

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Introduction

The Westport Community Schools does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or homelessness. The Department of Student and Special Education Services facilitates full access to the general education curriculum and the school/community learning environment for every student based on student potential and identified special needs. The goal is to provide support services in the least restrictive environment which, for the majority of students, is the regular education classroom. Special education is provided to students who are determined eligible and are not making progress with regular education instruction.

Westport has its own school system. Currently there are three schools: Alice A Macomber School, which provides pre-school (PreK), kindergarten, first grade, and second grade; Westport Elementary School, which serves grades 3-6; and Westport Junior Senior High School, which serves grades 7-12. A new Junior High School, slated for construction, is expected to be completed for the **2020-21** school year.

This evaluation of the special education programs and services of the Westport Community Schools was conducted as an independent evaluation requested by the district. While the evaluation addresses compliance requirements consistent with the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA-2004) and Massachusetts regulations (603 CMR 28.00) that govern special education, its main purpose is to provide an objective view of district programs and services for consideration by the District as it develops plans for current and future programming. It is important to note that special education and regular education are inherently intertwined in their responsibilities to educate. Every special education student is also a regular education student. This fact was evident to the evaluator throughout the review process, and clearly evident in survey responses. Therefore, the reader can expect to see references throughout the evaluation to the coordination with regular education programs and responsibilities in descriptions, findings and recommendations.

The evaluation elements included reviews of records and classroom observations, interviews with special education administration, principals and the Superintendent. Confidential surveys were well received and provided the most personal representations of how the district functions. Surveys were completed by 20 parents, 20 teacher assistants, and 44 teachers/ ancillary staff persons and 1 principal. During the timeframe of the evaluation process, the DESE was conducting its Coordinated Program Review (CPR) of the District. The information relating to the special education portion of the review was shared with this evaluator and used to assess compliance to regulations. Reviews of a previous evaluation, the approved program proposal for the new junior senior high school and the DESE 2015 Westport District Review Report provided indepth information and insight to classroom practices and coordination of staff and services across the district. Additional statistical data was reviewed, including local student enrollment, placement distribution, disability information, and previous Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reports. Data and information pertaining to the Westport Community Schools and comparisons to similar districts may be obtained at Mass.gov under the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

The evaluator acknowledges the cooperation of the district's administrators and office personnel, staff, support personnel, and parents who participated and/or facilitated the program evaluation efforts.

A. Eligibility and Placement

Description

For a student to be determined special education eligible, three criteria must be met: 1) the existence of one or more educational disabilities, 2) lack of effective progress in school as a result of the disability, and 3) the requirement for specialized instruction and/or related services and associated accommodations. These determinations are made by the Evaluation Team. Placement in programs is then made consistent with the evaluation results and the Individual Education Program (IEP). Eligibility for special education, once determined, is reevaluated every three years and a review of current services is conducted annually. Teachers, special education providers, and parents/guardians/caregivers are integral members of the team process. In the district, the majority of students are supported in an inclusionary model. Some students require a more intensive and specialized level of support that is best met in a separate setting. All students are included as appropriate through a thoughtful process of planning and support(s).

If not eligible for special education, a student may be provided general classroom accommodations, or referred for a determination of eligibility for accommodation(s) for a disability under Section 504. The referral for a 504 determination is made to the regular education program through the 504 Coordinator. Section 504 Accommodation Plans are addressed as regular education program options under the scope of building Principals and thus are not reported herein.

Findings

Interviews, surveys, reviews of student records and classroom observations, other documentation as notes above, indicate that students found eligible for special education are receiving appropriate levels of service in the areas of need identified. As required, placement is determined by the IEP team in accordance with regulations and with consideration of the level of services required in a variety of programs provided in-district and in collaborative or private programs out-of-district.

Enrollment data indicates that the number of students with IEPs enrolled has dropped slightly over the past three years with the total student population also declining. It is a credit to the district that the number of students placed outside of the district has steadily declined over the past few years. The High school graduation rate has increased.

Westport Community Schools Special Education Data on September 28, 2017:

- 1441 total student population (2016 = 1492)
- 265- students with IEPs (2016= 296)
- 18% of total student population (State-wide average is 17.7%)
- 11 students are placed Out of District (2016-2017 school year = 16 students)
- 7 new students transferred into the district with and IEP since September 1, 2017)
- 10 (66%) students with IEPs graduated in 2017 (2016 = 62%)

Foremost Eligible Disabilities

- Specific Learning Disability (SLD) - 30%
- Communication – 17%
- Autism – 14%
- Health – 10%
- Developmental Delay – 6%

B. Programs and Services

Description

Within the district, special education instruction takes place in three types of academic programs: inclusion, resource (partial inclusion), and substantially separate. The majority of special education instruction within the district takes place in a full inclusion setting where students receive specialized instructional support in a regular classroom all or most of the day, that is, 80% or more of instructional time (removed no more than 20% of instructional time).

There is a smaller number of students that follow either the substantially separate or resource model and are removed from the regular classroom setting for periods of time for specialized instruction, as designated on the IEP. What differentiates the latter two programs from the full inclusion model is that students in the resource model may be removed from the regular setting to a separate classroom for no more than 60% of total instructional time. Students in a separate setting spend the majority of their instructional time, more than 80%, outside of the regular education setting. The resource room meets the needs of inclusion students by providing a more individually targeted approach to their IEP goals.

A wide range of related special education services are provided and available to students in all programs, including

- Early identification and assessment of disabilities
- Counseling and social skills - individual and group
- Adaptive physical education
- Nursing services
- Transportation services
- Occupational Therapy - sensory and fine motor, individual and group
- Physical Therapy - gross motor, motor planning individual
- Speech Therapy - speech and language therapy individual & group

- Vision services - visual planning, tracking, orientation and mobility
- Assistive Technology - augmentative and assistive technology
- Behavioral Support – assessment, interventions and classroom support

A more specific description of programs and services in each school follows. (**Please note that enrollment numbers may change daily and those listed are point in time within the 2017 school year with minor incremental variance.*) Grids provide information on student populations and staffing, and descriptions of the special education programs in each school.

The **Alice Macomber School** educates students in grades PreK through 2 and offers the following educational programs.

PreK & K

- Two inclusion classrooms with dually certified teachers, each with one TA for support. The District calls these classes *integrated classrooms*. These classrooms have part time sessions so the student count is based on a fulltime equivalent. This model provides an opportunity for special and regular education children to have a first time school experience in a totally integrated approach to learning in an academically nurturing setting, devoid of stigma.
- Kindergarten students with full inclusion programs are supported in the regular classrooms by one special education teacher, and four TAs. These staff work in classrooms to target specific areas of need as defined in the individuals' IEP.
- One substantially separate classroom for grades PreK and K. This classroom has one teacher certified to teach students with severe special needs, multiple disabilities and medical frailties. Special programming is available for children with autism. The classroom is supported by three TAs. This classroom has a track record of successfully integrating students into full inclusion classes, some making significant progress and, in some cases, moving permanently into less restrictive placements within the school. All students are included in all school activities to their ability to participate.

Grades 1&2

- Grade 1 has one TA and grade 2, none. Two regular education classrooms have been identified for inclusion students. Each grade level is assigned one special education teacher who collaborates with the classroom teacher to provide targeted instruction and indicated in the individual IEP. The TA provides support to the first grade as assigned.
- One substantially separate classroom is provided for grades 1 and 2. This classroom has one teacher certified to teach students with severe special needs, multiple disabilities and medical frailties. Special programming is available for children with autism. The classroom is supported by two TAs. Students are included in all school activities to their ability to participate. This classroom is also used for those students in inclusion settings who need to be removed for a major part of the day for targeted special educational instruction as part of their partial inclusion program.

School-MAC 34% of the District's Special Education Students	Enrollment (not including out-of-district placements)	# Students with IEPs	# Full Inclusion	# Partial Inclusion (Resource)	# Substantially Separate
Grade					
PK	58	25	20 total part time students = 10 FTE per classroom	0	5
K	110	21	8	1	3
1	106	18	9	0	2
2	119	26	11	2	3
Macomber School Teacher to Student Ratio (average) (1:1 support not included)					
Full Inclusion					
2 PreK dually certified teachers (2 integrated classrooms) = 1:10 + 1 TAs (per class)					
3 Full Inclusion Teachers = 1:9 + 5 TAs (shared)					
0 Partial Inclusion teachers (Severe disability teachers teach partial inclusion students)					
2 Substantially Separate teachers PreK = 1:9 = 3.5 TAs; Grades 1&2 = 1:7 + 1 TA					

The **Westport Elementary School (WES)** educates students in grades 3 through 6 and offers the following educational programs.

Grades 3 through 6.

- One substantially separate classroom is provided for grades 3-6. At this writing there are no grade three students requiring this level of placement. This classroom has one teacher certified to teach students with severe special needs, multiple disabilities and medical frailties. Special programming is available for children with autism. The classroom is supported by three TAs. Students are integrated in to the general education setting with grade level peers each day for lunch, recess, and any other school activities or events.
- The WES has one resource room staffed with one teacher and two TAs. The resource room provides students with targeted instruction in areas of academic weakness in order to build skills and meet IEP goals and progress academically. Students with full or partial inclusion programs may benefit from resource room instruction.
- Students in full inclusion programs are placed in the appropriate co-taught grade level classroom whenever possible. The District calls these classrooms *co-taught* classrooms because each is assigned one special education teacher who teaches the special education students in collaboration with the classroom teacher to provide modified targeted instruction as indicated in the student's IEP. Grades three and four are each assigned addition TA support. In addition, the school has one paraprofessional 'floater'. Students new to the district may be placed into a regular education class if the class size limit has been reached. In this case, services are provided by the special education staff by either 'pushing in' to the regular class room or pulling the student out as indicated.

School- WES 36% of the District's Special Education Students Grade	Enrollment (not including out-of-district placements)	# Students with IEPs	# Full Inclusion	# Partial Inclusion (Resource)	# Substantially Separate
3	121	25	16	1	0
4	108	30	15	3	2
5	121	24	15	5	1
6	151	24	18	4	3
Westport Elementary Teacher to Student Ratio (average) (1:1 support not included) 4 Full Inclusion teachers (1 per grade level) = 1:16 + 2.5 TAs (grades 3& 4) + 1Para (floater) 1 Resource Room teacher = 1:13 + 2TAs (average # of students per period = 10) 1 Severe Disabilities teacher = 1:6 + 3 TAs					

Westport Junior Senior High School educates students in grades 7 through 12 and offers the following special education programs:

- A substantially separate Life Skills program for students with severe physical and significant intellectual disabilities, serving 8-10 students up to age 22 in grades 9-12, which offers a modified curriculum with a focus on pre-vocational experience and adaptive living skills.
- A substantially separate classroom for students in grades 7-8 with severe, often multiple disabilities and/or medical frailties. The program includes necessary medical equipment.
- A Resource Room (ELA and Math) program serving 10-12 students with moderate special needs in grades 7-8, who require substantially separate programs with modifications to the facility access to core content.
- Study Skills programs - Resource Room for students with moderate special needs in grades 9-12, each serving 10-12 students. Focus on executive functioning, remediation, educational planning, and becoming independent learners.
- Team Core Academic Classes (ELA, Math, Science, History/Social Sciences). Students are team-taught (*co-taught*) by general educators and special educators within the general education setting. The Language Based Learner program is one such example.
- School Adjustment Counseling programs for students in grades 7-12 offers students with individual/ small group counseling, social skills/social thinking development, and crisis management support.

School- WJSHS 30% of the District's Special Education Students	Enrollment (not including out-of-district placements)	# Students with IEPs	# Full Inclusion	# Partial Inclusion (Resource)	# Substantially Separate
Grade					
Jr High					
7	117	15	10	3	2
8	114	19	14	1	3
High School					
9	92	15	9	4	1
10	58	10	3	5	1
11	93	16	9	3	0
12	64	9	1	3	3
Junior High Teacher to Student Ratio (average) (1:1 support not included)					
2 Full Inclusion teachers = 1:12 ratio					
1 Resource Room teacher = 1:4 +1 Para					
1 Substantially Separate teacher = 1:5 +1 TA					
Senior High Teacher to Student Ratio (average) (1:1 support not included)					
4 Full Inclusion teachers = 1:12.5					
1 Resource Room teacher = 1:15 + 3 TAs (average students per period = 10)					
1 Substantially Separate Teacher = 1:5 + 3 TAs					

Related Services

The District provides or arranges for the provision of all related services required by regulation. These include the following which are provided by certified professionals directly to the student in the educational setting to assist the student to benefit from special education and/or access the general curriculum. In addition to individual treatments, related service providers work with students in groups and may provide consultation to teachers and parents. These services are an integral part of the special education programs for children placed in substantially separate classrooms who have autism or severe health disabilities.

- Speech and Language Therapy – 144 students
- Vision Services – 7 students
- Orientation & Mobility – 1 student
- Physical Therapy- 22 students
- Occupational Therapy – 34 students
- Counseling – 22 students
- Behavioral Therapy - 6 students

An additional related service provider who does not generally provide direct services, but is integral to the special education program is the School Psychologist. Through a variety of assessments, the psychologist provides the IEP team with the determination of the need for special education, the disability area supporting the determination, information relating the impact of the disability on performance and progress. The psychologist lastly summarizes this information and gives suggestions to teachers, staff and providers for approaches to teaching the student, given strengths, weaknesses and learning style.

Findings

Based on record and observation information, teacher and administrator interviews, and the finding of the District's CRP report, the Westport Community school's special education program demonstrates compliance with the legal standard of all special education regulations related to services to assigned students regarding documentation, instructional content, methodologies, and related services provided. The ratios of students with IEPs to those without are appropriate. The instruction is reflective of equitable sharing of instructional responsibilities and effective application of accommodations and modifications. At all levels, staff, administrators, and parents expressed a strong interest in further developing inclusion opportunities for students.

Most special education students are placed in full inclusion programs which are co-taught by one regular education classroom teacher in collaboration with one special education teacher. Students are provided modified targeted instruction as indicated in the student's IEP. At this writing (May, 2018), the District has a total enrollment of 1441 and 282 special education students which equals 19.5% special education compared to a state average of 17.7%. However, of this number, 75% are in full inclusion programs and only 3.5% are placed out of the district.

Teacher assistants and paraprofessionals may be assigned to work with students in inclusion classrooms, and are an important element of all special education classrooms. Support staff appear to be utilized effectively in their services to students and can be an important adjunct to the inclusion programming. Although, the district has moved to hiring TAs to support special education classrooms, there is a small number of paraprofessionals effectively assisting the support of some special education classrooms.

The District's resource programs are an important intervention model for students on IEPs requiring direct special education instruction. This is an appropriate service model and is very effective when teaching or reinforcing specialized intervention required by students on an individualized or small group basis. Of note, is that the resource room at the WES is accessed by four grade levels all of which are on different teaching schedules resulting in the possibility of up to eight students being in the room working on unrelated IEP goals and several different levels. The Principal is aware of the situation and hopes to increase efficiency and effectiveness of the classroom in the next school year by using an unfilled teacher position to add a teacher, creating two grade-based levels of instruction.

Related services are provided with a combination of district staff and contactors by highly qualified professional staff and are effective, appropriate, follow the IEP, and are of high caliber. Vision, psychological testing and behavioral consultation are contracted at this writing and the special education office is committed to hiring an in-district psychologist and is currently interviewing candidates.

Programs and services for severely disabled students are of superior quality in regards to teachers, related service providers and support staff. Programs are well equipped and classrooms designed and prepared specifically to meet the needs of these students at all levels.

C. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Description

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) refers to the individual student placement. It is reflected in the school assignment, instructional setting, and access to the general curriculum and school related activities. The school climate, leadership, inclusive vision for the school, disposition of staff, resources, and communications are linked to LRE.

Findings

At every level of the district, special education staff, administrators, and parents report that LRE is consistently reflected in the program of instruction, in the school assignment, in student access to the general curriculum, and student access to school related activities. Parents particularly noted that despite the challenges presented by the students' disabilities, inclusion results in peers and others in Westport knowing the students and vice versa, it helps students refocus, and there is less interruption to curriculum flow than when services are provided outside the regular classroom.

Within the District, support for inclusion, both academically and socially, is established at the PreK level with an integrated model which provides an opportunity for special and regular education children to learn together in an academically nurturing setting, devoid of stigma. Another PreK classroom, a substantially separate classroom for students with severe disabilities has successfully included children in regular education classes. Some of these students have successfully achieved permanent placement in these inclusion settings. In all schools, special and regular education students are integrated in all non-academic activities such as recess, lunch, assemblies, etc., and in academics as indicated on the IEP.

The district has established its strongest and most effective commitment to Least Restrictive Environment by developing high quality programming for its severely disabled population at all levels. Students with autism, who are medically fragile, and developmentally disabled are able to receive programs and services that exceed those provided in out-of-district schools. A large part of the success to this initiative is the availability of in-district related services staff who are highly trained and committed to the inclusive model. The availability of high quality, specialized services and programming for children with severe disabilities, makes it possible for them to receive an appropriate education in their community school with friends and siblings, and the

proximity to home which allows students and parents a greater opportunity to participate in the school community. This approach to special education has significantly decreased the number of student placed in private schools.

The Westport Community School District has a small, but consistent population of students with severe or moderate disabilities who exhibit extreme behaviors such that their needs are more appropriately met in specialized private school programs. Each year placement needs are reviewed to determine if the district can meet the students' needs within the district.

D. Staffing and Organization

Description and Findings

A staffing grid for each school is incorporated in the **Programs and Services** section of this document. The special education program is compliant with regulations in this area and in some cases exceeds minimum standards because staffing is rightly determined by student need.

The special education administrative staff consists of a director, an executive secretary, and a student services supervisor who is the primary liaison to all schools and chairs IEP meetings. In addition, a secretary is assigned to each school to facilitate IEP activities within the schools. Instructional staff consists of 22 teachers, 40 teacher assistants, and 9 licensed related service professionals (specialists). Related services are provided in the areas of speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, nursing, behavior, and counseling. Services for vision, orientation and mobility, and autism are contracted to private providers. Psychological services are currently contracted with the expectation that two in-district staff be hired for the 2018-2019 school year. Special education teachers are professionally qualified and are supported by teacher assistants and paraprofessionals as appropriate. All staff are trained to work with students who have a variety of disabilities.

The district uses co-teaching with a special and regular education teacher working together in the same classroom as the preferred model for inclusion programming. Some teachers reported that they felt that having too many special education students had a negative impact on regular education because teachers progressed through the curriculum at a slower pace. However, the model appears effective for the special education students, both socially and academically, and is a demonstration of the commitment to inclusive practices.

Teachers, specialists, and teacher assistants, to a lesser degree, believe they are not provided with sufficient structured time for collaboration and planning to address the needs of students on IEPs. When it does occur, it is often informally arranged. Some surveys also cited a need for additional administrative staff to be located on-site in schools as a resource to teachers and parents and to facilitate all aspects of the IEP process. Responders also cited the need for time for teachers (special and regular education) to collaboratively review the accepted IEP and coordinate instruction/ methods.

E. Professional Development

Description and Findings

The district offers professional development opportunities for special educators that are responsive to the range of disabilities the students enrolled and compliant with regulations. Offerings are consistent with those provided to regular educators, and meet state requirements.

All staff responding to surveys cited the importance of staff development and the desire for more. However, some teacher/specialist responders were strident in their appeal for an ongoing training program repeated annually with opportunities, planned or as needed, for informing staff of regulation or practice changes and additional individual or group guidance as needed during the course of the school year. It was also suggested that regular education teachers be invited to the special education offerings. The desired expressed goal of the training program is a common understanding of expectations and requirements resulting in consistent practices.

Staff development topics specifically mentioned are as follows.

- Special education regulations, IEP process, writing, and content, including goals and objectives, progress reports and how mastery is measured, ESY eligibility, MCAS accommodations
- Distribution of information on topics and best practices in special education
- School Brains, with ongoing consultation
- Training in technology - iPads, Apps, are outdated and inaccurate
- OG (or other language-based) training for special education teachers
- Training with a focus on moderate disabilities: strategies and modifications for ELA and math, and tips from reading specialists and math interventionists.
- Methods and resources to assist teachers to develop modified content for all subjects.
- Improving student management skills and understanding student behavior.
- Effective communications with parents.

F. Compliance

Description and Findings

The program evaluation was conducted consistent with state and federal regulations governing special education services and programs. Interviews, classroom observations, and student record reviews were continuously reflective of mandated requirements. Student instructional grouping requirements were being met at all levels of the district. In the student records the following elements are examined: demographics, type disability, type placement, Team meeting dates, IEP services and duration, assessments, progress reports, IEP accommodations, transition, procedural notices and timely requirements, parent IEP responses, and access log. Assessment reports were well developed, and progress reports were specific to student goals and benchmarks and indicated student objectives being met. Records reviewed by this evaluator and the results of the 2018 CPR demonstrate compliance with all record requirements.

The District has experienced recent difficulty in securing and maintaining in-district school psychology services and has had to contract out testing services as it concurrently advertises and interviews for full time testing staff. While the District has been successful in finding persons to provide testing services as requests are accepted, the high caseload and limited availability of the psychologists has proven to be a challenge at each of the schools.

G. Coordination of Special Education Services

Description

There is a unique expertise required of the special education director in every school district. Not only is the Director responsible for the program implementation for all students on IEPs from age 3 to 22, but the Director is responsible for the “school system” subset of special education within the district – student evaluations and IEP meetings, program and curriculum coordination, state and federal regulations implementation, budget management, grantsmanship, data coordination and system reporting, staffing and personnel management, professional development, and parent and staff communications. Outside the district the Director is responsible for student placements and is the primary district linkage to DESE in carrying out all facets of program implementation.

The evaluator was asked to address the coordination of special education services and procedures between and within buildings, and with central office special education. This was done primarily through staff surveys and discussion with Principal and special education administration. Survey outcomes resulted fervent responses in the areas of interaction/ communication, and concerns about student transition between schools. Knowledge of special education regulations, formal procedures, and management of the IEP Team process are closely associated with the coordination of services.

Findings

The special education director is assisted by an executive secretary, and the student services supervisor who has a regular schedule in each school as the chairperson of all IEP meetings, leaving little time for other interactions. Each school houses a special education secretary who schedules meetings and monitors the timely submission of paperwork. Presently there is no additional administrative support, such as a special education liaison to assist in the coordination of services within the schools. Teachers surveyed cited lack of sufficient administrative support at the school level. School psychologists, a valuable resource and crucial to the coordination of services because so much of the eligibility process and IEP development utilizes their input, are currently individually contracted for services which limits their commitment to the district. Two psychologists are in the process of being hired at this writing.

Building Principals provide the administrative link to special education within the schools as

defined in the special education regulations (603 CMR 28.03). This link appears to be operative in Westport as evidenced in several examples reported by principals and special education administration. principals have the lead in implementing programs and services that are part of everyday school operations.

One such program is Response to Intervention (RTI), a process designed to meet the regular education requirement to develop and provide instructional support services for failing and struggling students. At the conclusion of the RTI process which includes intensive targeted interventions specifically designed to close gaps in learning, the RTI team makes data-based recommendations for the continuation of the student's academic programming. If the recommendation is a referral to special education, the RTI process can provide special education evaluators and teachers with valuable input and knowledge to facilitate the IEP process. Survey results expressed a value in the process, but noted inconsistent scheduling of RTI meetings, delays in the start of recommended interventions, and a misconception about the goal of the process. Some responders believe RTI is being used as a fast track to a special education referral and not to provide support and instruction for weaknesses.

School to school student transition is also under the purview of the Principal. Some special education students may have a transition plan written into the IEP. However, adjustment to a new setting can be a challenge to any student, regular or special education. Concerns regarding the preparedness of transitioning students were noted by survey responders. It was suggested that changes in the configuration of grade levels with the closing of the junior high school has had a negative impact on student preparedness for the next grade up in the new school. Transitioning grades under the current structure are grades 2, 6, and 8. All survey responders from receiving schools report that students are generally not prepared for requirements of the operational or academic expectations of the new setting and grade level. Sending schools acknowledge a problem. Although the transition from 8 to 9 is mitigated by the eighth grade already being located in the high school building, students still need to adjust to a new set of expectations. Teachers noted that students from substantially separate classrooms in the eighth grades who are put into inclusion classes in the ninth, come with, what teachers report as, insufficient classroom support or transition time. New ninth graders also may not understand high school expectations completion of homework and attendance. Students and parents need to be made aware that the consequences of non-compliance are real. That is, the student will not be passed to the next grade if s/he fails, may need to retake classes, and will not graduate if requirements are not met.

Teacher/Provider surveys contained feedback that expressed a discernible level of frustration concerning the coordination of special education services and communication with administrative staff. There were several common areas of concern expressed by a number of teacher responders regarding the communication, direction and feedback provided, and alliance they feel they are not getting from the central special education administration. These teachers state that they do not feel that they are allowed to be constructive members of the IEP teams. They believe their input is not heard or not considered, resulting in decisions that have not been agreed upon as a Team. Other responders identified the need for designated time for teachers, special and regular education, to meet after the IEP has been accepted to ensure understanding and discuss teaching strategies and modifications.

Survey responders linked the coordination issue to regular education by noting the difficulty in assigning grades that are reflective of the actual level of performance and progress on a modified curriculum. They report that special education grades will most likely be in the context of actual grade level expectations, which confuses students and parents. In situations such as this it is important that there are consistent, identified guidelines. Lastly, Special education teachers requested that principals provide for teacher substitute coverage for IEP meetings.

Nineteen out of twenty parents responding reported satisfaction with the special education program and services provided to their children. The one outlier was of the opinion that teachers did not follow or read the IEPs. Other parents suggested the need for back-up for teachers with students with behavioral issues, more and better communication between parents and teachers (regular and special education) - don't wait for parent-teacher conferences if there are issues.

H. The District's Plan to Support Special Education Administration

The district is currently in the process of interviewing a new Superintendent for the 2018 school year. It is expected that the incoming Superintendent will continue to be as supportive to the district's special education program as the outgoing Superintendent has been during her tenure. Additional new administrative staff may be entering the district. It is crucial that administrators work in concert toward solutions that not only benefit individual schools, but create a continuum of programs and services aligned with district goals.

The current Superintendent's interest and constructive support of the special education program has resulted in the improvement and expansion of services and staff and has strengthened the inclusive practices model of service provision. The enhanced special education program proposed for the new Junior Senior High School is evidence of the district's commitment to the future of its special education students. If implemented, programs and services for grades 5-12 will provide programming designed to support skills and experiences for a successful preparation for the like after high school. Proposed programs and supports include transition from school to work, life skills apartment model, sensory room for occupational therapy, new class for students with high functioning autism, additional severe classroom for students with autism, therapeutic classroom for students with high anxiety, school phobia and other emotional disorders that may impede progress, and additional administrative support at the high school level.

Principal report and survey reporters express that the forced relocation of grades due to the closing of the junior high school has impacted the entire school structure, not just transitioning grades whose levels have changed. Each school is addressing the issue to ensure academic and social readiness and to minimize adjustments to organizational differences. It is important that principals from all levels, teachers and special education staff are included planning process and consider the systemic impact of the plans and how they can be functionally linked.

The MAC has learned from its experience with the relocation of grade from kindergarten to second grade. It has been difficult for the staff to make the shift from providing a closed, strictly supervised environment to one which has the added responsibility of teaching independent skills to first and second graders in preparation for the third grade. The Principal's plan for the upcoming school year is to increase the expectations of the first and second graders, allow more

independent movement within the school and teach second graders that they need to set an example for younger students with the goal of developing confidence and social skills expected in the elementary school. Academic readiness will be addressed by changing the teaching paradigm from a whole class to a workshop model. The Principal also hopes to use interventionists creatively by creating an Enrichment Room where targeted tier instruction can be provided in ELA and math.

The elementary school has noted and improvement in the readiness of entering third graders this year and was able to reduce the duration of remedial services at the start of the 2017-2018 school year. It was noted that the receipt of second grade reading level data for the 2017-2018 school year would help third grade teachers prepare for the incoming students. The elementary school addressed transition readiness from 6th to 7th grade by adopting the junior high model of identifying two teachers in each grade and designating the subjects they will teach. This allows students to experience switching teachers and classrooms for some classes, having the day divided into definitive blocks or periods, and a feeling of familiarity and needing fewer adjustments when they do move up.

The special education director would like to resolve teacher concerns regarding training, communication and coordination. She is aware that all survey responders identified the lack of opportunities for staff to collaborate and constructively address ideas, concerns and expectations. Previously, grant money was available to support staff in these areas. This is no longer the case. These issues have been identified as a priority by the department.

I. Summary and Recommendations

1- The evaluator commends the District for its ongoing commitment to inclusive practices. When a district makes a commitment to inclusive practices, it is also making a commitment for a model which is intrinsically based on a close collaboration of all members of the organization. *Therefore, the reader will note descriptions and comments on programs and services that are not primarily part of the special education department, but have an impact on special education students or activities and vice versa..*

2 - At this writing, the District has a total enrollment of 1441 and 282 special education students which equals 19.5% special education compared to a state average of 18%. However, of this number, 82% (196- 70%) (231) are in full inclusion programs and only 3.5% are placed out of the district.

3- The 2018 Coordinated Program Review, conducted every six years by the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education reported no deficiencies of compliance to IEP process regulations. However, the District has identified the need to use contracted psychological services as a stop-gap to hiring district staff. The District is actively interviewing to fill the position. State regulations are specific regarding the timelines for the completion of the eligibility determination/redetermination processes including assessments and meeting dates. It is

crucial that the special education department successfully conclude its search for a certified School Psychologist who is prepared to work on resolving the backlog eligibility determinations and other responsibilities. This evaluator would suggest retaining the current contracted psychologist, in addition to the new hires, for the period of time needed for the district to be firmly in adherence to eligibility timelines.

4- Response to Intervention (RTI) is a regular education program, administered by school principal through a team process. It is intended to develop and provide instructional support services for failing and struggling students for a defined period of time culminating in recommended “next steps” for each student. Survey results expressed a value in the process, but noted inconsistent scheduling of RTI meetings, delays in the start of recommended interventions, and a misconception about the goal of the process. Some responders believe RTI is being used as a fast track to a special education referral and not to provide support and instruction for weaknesses. The RTI process is time and staff intensive. It is suggested that the District provide staff development to reinforce the purpose of the RTI process and reestablish its commitment to the program if the plan is to keep it.

5- Building principals manage the transition from school-to-school for all students and collaborate with special education administrators and staff to alleviate adjustment issues that may be of greater concern for special education students. Individual transition plans may be part of an IEP and are implemented in conjunction with regular education strategies. Currently, building moves pertain to students moving up in grades 2 to 3, and 6 to 7. Grade 8 does not move to another building for grade 9, but still need to adjust to a new set of high school expectations. Principals and receiving teachers responding to the survey report that students are generally not prepared for requirements of the operational or academic expectations of the new setting. As described in the section on **Coordination of Services**, principals are working on solutions and are collaborating with special education administration as indicated. Responders to the surveys offered the following suggestions to alleviate some of the issues which the evaluator believes should be given serious consideration for incorporation into actions presently being taken:

- Provide clear specific information to parents and students regarding school rules and academic expectations. Students will not be ‘passed along’ to the next grade, if requirements are not met, this includes graduation. This is particularly important for students/ parents entering the 9th grade.
- Limit 1:1 assistants following students as they progress. This practice can be a barrier to the development of independent skills.
- Grade level meetings should take place at least 2X during the school year with sending and receiving schools and there should be one meeting that includes parents.
- Grading should be consistent. This was noted as a particular issue going from 8th to 9th grade
- Receiving school set up a ‘buddy system’/student mentors to help new students.
- Parents should be more involved with transition.

Although the distribution of grades is expected to be realigned to its previous configurations when the new school opens, the transition issues will not go away as many noted that the issue

existed prior to the junior high closing, just with a different set of grade levels. The district should take this opportunity to act while more staff are experiencing its effects, making it a topic of interest. The evaluator further recommends that a working committee, including parent members, might be helpful in providing practical, workable solutions.

6- There are additional transition-related considerations related to learning environment. The consolidation of grade levels has resulted in fewer classrooms containing more students. The addition of five or six students to a classroom can have an impact on learning. The consequence of students and materials occupying what functionally becomes a much smaller space, is a setting which is more prone to distraction and less conducive to learning. The therapy rooms at the MAC are markedly overcrowded with essential supplies and equipment. All staff and students have to make the best of space constraints until the new school opens and operations and operations return to ‘normal’.

7- Out-of-district placements have been reduced consistently over the years to 10 students at this writing. This is a commendable accomplishment which can be traced to thoughtful program development and hiring in-district related services providers with high qualifications and innovative thinking. The district has programs and services that are appropriate for almost all students who enter into PreK or K with special education needs, as well as those identified as they progress through the district. These programs and related services surpass those available in most private schools with the added priceless benefit of educating the children in their community schools with friends and family.

8- The district provides relevant professional development opportunities for its staff several times during the school year. The special education staff development offerings are in compliance with department requirements and state regulations. All survey responders welcomed any additional training that could be provided. Details and specific topics requested are listed in the section on **Professional Development** and should be considered for inclusion in the development of next year’s program (2108-2019).

9- Principal and teachers were strident in their request for a forum for ongoing communication directly related the IEP process, and access to the expertise of the special education office as needed. Some staff were clearly frustrated, stating they felt their concerns were not heard or not considered. Responders to the surveys provided ideas for consideration in addressing the problem.

- Training for new hires on the IEP Process and special education regulations, and their role.
- Annual review of the IEP process with a focus on quality of documentation (specified: data-based goals and progress notes).
- Remedial instruction if indicated.
- Special education liaison assigned to each building.
- Monthly staff meetings in each school, open to regular educators.

This evaluator recommends that the special education administrator explore ways to address the solutions listed above as resources allow. Regular meetings might be possible through the

Professional Learning Committees which meet monthly at each school. Ongoing communication from the special education office could take a variety of forms, i.e. by individual or group email to provide staff with updates, suggestions for improvement, and recognition of good work. It is important that clear, open lines of communication exist within the special education department.

10- In conclusion, this evaluator found that the hard-working staff and conscientious leadership of the special education department are credits to the district. The evaluator appreciates the director's candor at the start of the evaluation process, which demonstrated a keen awareness of the strengths and weakness of the department and her commitment to improvement. Lastly, kudos to the central and building administrators and all instructional staff for providing the support required to make the following accomplishments possible.

- outstanding compliance with special education regulations (Coordinated Program Review 2018),
- continuing enhancement of a comprehensive array of services and programs,
- applying the rule of least restrictive environment to maximize inclusive practices,
- steady reduction in out-of-district placements
- sustaining high quality programming for severely disabled children which allows them to be educated in their community school, and
- securing additional staff and resources for related services.