

North Polk Community School District Report to Board of Education

Phase I of Special Education Program Audit: Interview Results and Initial Recommendations

September 19, 2019 (Work completed July & August 2019)

It was my honor to be entrusted with the important request to seek information on the condition of the special education program and make initial recommendations to move the program to a model that the North Polk CSD and community can be proud of. Staff and parents appreciated this opportunity to discuss their experiences, ideas and concerns regarding the education of students with IEPs. All participants valued the School Board's desire to improve programming and hope their participation in this process results in action taken in areas identified. Twenty-six of thirty-seven individuals accepted invitations to contribute to this process and the following interviews were conducted per this request:

- ⇒ Parents of 11 of 21 students (4HS; 3MS; 2 Central; 2 West)
- ⇒ 4 of 4 Special Education Associates (1HS; 1MS; 1 Central; 1 West)
- ⇒ 5 of 6 Special Education Teachers (2HS; 1MS; 1 of 2 Central; 1 West)
- ⇒ 3 Principals (HS, MS, Central)
- ⇒ 3 District Administrators; Director of Special Programs, Director of Teaching & Learning, and the Superintendent

In addition to the interviews, the following documents were reviewed:

- ⇒ The 2018-19 Weighted Enrollment Report
- ⇒ The District Special Education Service Delivery Plan
- ⇒ North Polk Community School District (4779) Profile Iowa FFY 2017 (2017-2018): Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B
- ⇒ A previous review of the North Polk Community School completed in 2016 by Roxanne Cumings
- ⇒ The Comprehensive School Improvement Site Visit conducted by the Iowa Department of Education April 2015
- ⇒ Associate Handbook 2014 & IASB Sample Job Description for a Para Educator
- ⇒ Director of Special Programs, Job Posting
- ⇒ Current Diploma Requirements & Grading Practices were not reviewed

Included in this report are proposals for revisions, changes, and actions to improve experiences and outcomes for students, parents and staff based on understandings gained through interviews, conversations and documents provided. Suggestions are based on almost 40 years of experience in the Des Moines Public School district as a Special Education Teacher, K-12 (8-12; 9-12) Special Education Consultant, Special Education Curriculum Facilitator working on the District curriculum team, and on the middle and high school special education directors' lead teams. I have been a member of teams to establish District Policy, researched evidence-based curriculum, determined needs and provided professional development.

Strengths of the General Education Instructional Framework for Students with Disabilities

Students with IEPs are first and always general education students. In conversations with staff it was not clear that students with an IEP are general education students first with access to the general education curriculum. The general education curriculum includes the curriculum expected of all children. In Iowa that may include the Iowa Core, Iowa Core Essential Elements, the Iowa Early Learning Standards and school-based expectations that may be evident in social emotional standards, student handbooks etc. To the maximum extent possible students should be served in general education by *adapting as appropriate to the needs of the individual learner, the content, methodology or delivery of instruction to address his/her unique needs that result from a disability and to ensure access to the general curriculum, so that he/she can meet the educational standards that apply to all children* (IAC 41.39) *These special education and related services must be designed to meet the learner's unique needs and prepare them for future education, employment and independent living* (CFR 300.1; IAC 41.1) Signs that students with an IEP are considered general education students first is in inclusive student first language and practices that assume students will be included in general education and taught by general education teachers with justification for services and instruction that require them to be removed due to their unique needs.

Practices that impact universal instruction and intervention systems impact learners with disabilities as well. All District initiatives should include planning for all students including English Learners, “At Risk”, those involved in MTSS, students with 504 Plans and IEPs. When determining how to teach essential standards and design formative assessments Core Content PLC decisions should be inclusive. One way to do this is to embrace Universal Design for Instruction which includes multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement to meet the access needs and learning styles of all students.

Many District initiatives listed below will benefit students with IEPs and other struggling learners (may include students who are English Learners, At Risk, have 504 Plans, and those involved in MTSS). The first step to improving services and instruction for students with IEPs is to strengthen the Universal Tier and MTSS System to ensure all students have access to instruction to master foundational skills.

- The NP CSD is working to implement DuFour’s Professional Learning Communities Model. It was reported that all schools worked last year to answer the first question; “What is it we want all students to learn?” Reportedly PLCs worked on determining a viable curriculum by identification of the essential standards with definition of what students will know, understand, and be able to do related to each standard from the Iowa Common Core for each course, grade level and unit of instruction. Interviewees indicated that this year PLCs will work on formative assessments to answer the second question, “How will we know if each student has learned the essential knowledge and skills?” This process is critical to ensuring that all students have access to continued learning opportunities for the third question in the process, “What happens in our school when a student does not learn? What happens at the Universal Tier, in MTSS, and then in SDI?”
- Reportedly, elementary PLCs are working towards a standards-based report card. Competency based grading practices and reporting provides clarity in the expected learning and a road map to identify and respond to the needs of struggling learners including those with special education services. This supports teachers having the specific data to track learning for each student and close gaps.
- Interviewees indicated that the District is working towards *Marzano’s Levels of Operation for a High Reliability School* with Culture and Climate currently focused on Level 1 “*Safe and Collaborative Culture.*” The subsequent steps on the hierarchy will greatly benefit all struggling learners including those receiving special education services as the District works towards Effective Teaching in Every Classroom, Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum, Standards-Referenced Reporting, and Competency-Based Education at Level 5. All students benefit from clearly understandings their personal competencies in pursuit of further education and work upon graduation considering 1 in 4 students does not return to college after the first year and business and industry express a lack of confidence in the competencies a diploma represents. For a student with an IEP starting at age 14 the development of a solid Transition Plan at graduation is dependent on students knowing, being able to communicate, and demonstrate their personal competencies.

Progress Towards Meeting the Unique Needs of Students with IEPs

We are all familiar with the quote, “people don’t care what you know, until they know how much you care.” This has to be the strongest positive expressed by parents of students interviewed. Parents overwhelmingly indicated that they felt that the Superintendent, principals, teachers, and associates cared a great deal for their children and wanted to do what is right. When asked, parents declined knowing the Special Education Director. Parents feel that their children are well cared for and safe including the provision of safety plans when needed.

- All staff spoke highly of the accessibility and responsiveness from Stacey Volmer, Regional AEA Director.
- Elementary and middle school staff spoke positively about support from the AEA Consultants.
- An effort was made during the 2017-2018 School year to initiate co-teaching in English/Language Arts and Math classes in the two secondary buildings as recommended by the Department of Education Site Visit in 2015 and Roxanne Cumings in 2016. The previous Director of Special Programs reportedly provided professional development and some teams of general and special education teachers observed co-teaching in Johnston. Co-teaching in English/Language Arts and Math began Spring 2018.

- An additional teacher has been hired to help address student transition needs in the areas of Career & Technical Education, Work Experience, and 4-Plus Programing.
- Work Experience locations for students with disabilities have been secured in the community.
- Nine associates have completed training to work as job coaches.
- Newly hired associate principals at middle school and high school will have responsibilities to support special education programing and attend IEP Meetings.
- The Administrative Team is having conversations and exploring improving data collection, storage, and use as a basis for instructional decision making and early intervention.
- The Director of Special Programs reported plans to follow up on two recommendations from Roxanne Cumings in 2016:
 1. The Director plans to add a tab to the North Polk District's website introducing herself and providing information on the programs she is responsible for as well as links to resources through Heartland AEA including the Procedural Safeguards Manual in Special Education, The Transition Resource Guide, and to the Parent Educator Connection page.
 2. The Director of Special Programs is looking into how special education associates are utilized in the District and is interested in defining the minutes more clearly during the IEP process including plans indicating when to fade the associate assistance.

Priority Areas of Concern

In conversations with parents, teachers and members of the administrative team concerns were expressed about the reactive nature of policy decisions, service provision, teacher and associate training, responses to requests for additional staff and expertise to implement IEP requirements. More than one administrative team member mentioned that there were no Administrative Team Meetings over the summer to address policy or set goals for Instruction and that often Administrative Team Meetings are spent on nuts and bolts as opposed to making decisions directly related to student learning and services. There are decisions that are best made at the building level; however, these decisions ideally would align with and be guided by the vision set by District level leadership.

When state requirements change, a timely response is critically important, three priority areas currently leaving the District open to potential liability are in the areas of:

1. Reading Instruction: not implementing changes to the Universal Tier, MTSS and SDI for reading instruction based on current research and requirements in response to the 2012 Literacy Legislation and 2014 legislation that defines Dyslexia as "a specific and significant impairment in the development of reading, including but not limited to phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension that is not solely accounted for by intellectual disability, sensory disability or impairment or lack of appropriate instruction." This is applicable to all students, not just those with an IEP.
2. Transition Planning: Ensure secondary teachers understand and implement Transition Planning requirements for all students with IEPs including assessment, work experience and 4+ Programing.
3. Diploma Policy: Address changes to regular diploma requirements caused by changes to IDEA by ESSA indicating a student can no longer obtain a regular diploma solely by completion of their IEP (initial notice from the DE December 2017)

Central Vision, Clarity and Action Planning

In review of previous recommendations made in the 2015 Site Visit and the clear and thoughtful suggestions made by Roxanne Cumings in 2016, it seems that there is a disconnect with the action planning and implementation of suggestions that would improve the quality of services to students with IEPs and other struggling learners in the North Polk Community School District. In reflection on the information gathered from parents and staff it was difficult to make sense of the lack of responsive action and frustration that was described in various situations. Past experiences caused some parents and staff members to express a lack of optimism moving forward even when the district has made progress towards addressing their area of concern.

Consider using a model such as the one below to ensure planning includes all components for success.

A SIMPLE MODEL FOR MANAGING COMPLEX CHANGE					
VISION (a formal statement that expresses the aspirations and goals of a company or organization)	SKILLS (the ability to do something well, usually gained through training or experience)	INCENTIVES (something that encourages or motivates somebody to do something)	RESOURCES (somebody or something that is a source of help or information)	PLAN (a method of doing something that is worked out in advance)	= CHANGE (to become different, or make something or somebody different)
	Skills	Incentives	Resources	Plan	=Confusion
Vision		Incentives	Resources	Plan	=Anxiety
Vision	Skills		Resources	Plan	=Gradual Change
Vision	Skills	Incentives		Plan	=Frustration
Vision	Skills	Incentives	Resources		=False Starts

Source: American Productivity and Quality Center, 1993

When you have a clear vision, the skills to complete the task, an incentive to complete the task, the resources and a clear plan you get Change. When there is no clear vision you get Confusion. When you do not have skills to complete the task you get Anxiety. When you lack incentives for the individual to complete the task you get gradual change. When you lack the resources to complete the task you get Frustration. When you lack a plan, you get false starts.

As suggestions in this report are considered, I would recommend that the Administrative Team develop a Districtwide Vision to improve services and instruction to students with IEPs in the school district to guide building level implementation. Through this process address beliefs regarding students' ability to learn, mindset, what access to the general education curriculum means and opportunities for skill development. The Simple Plan for Change can be used for action planning on identified priorities if responsibilities are assigned and a timeline is set. As the vision is enacted parents and staff will benefit from a system that is proactive as opposed to reactive. Another opportunity to consider is to not think of specialized instructional expertise in silos in terms of planning for students with IEPs, English Learners, students involved in MTSS, and some "At Risk" students. Recognize that "what" students need to learn in reading, writing, math, and behavior has commonalities between students in need of intervention and encourage teachers to participate in professional development together and share some materials and strategies. The instructional planning "How" teachers deliver instruction and the strategies incorporated may vary greatly dependent on their student population (English Learners vs Students with IEP goals) as will the intensity of the instruction needed.

11 Opportunities for Growth Based on Initial Impressions

1. Improve Literacy Instruction

Prioritize the Literacy Legislation in 2012 and Dyslexia Legislation in 2014 that require changes in reading instruction and implementation of the FAST, the State universal screening and progress monitoring tool. What changes have been made to Universal Instruction at Tier 1 and through MTSS for reading, and SDI in response? Ensure that literacy leaders have accurate information, in conversations with parents, teachers and administrators there is misinformation and misguided beliefs regarding progress monitoring fluency and reading instruction that will adversely impact the instruction students receive.

Districts who have made changes to reading instruction based on scientific, evidence-based reading research including those implementing the Iowa SDI Instructional Framework report that middle and high school students recognize and value explicit instruction to improve word level reading as what they need to increase automaticity, can make accelerated progress, close the gap, become proficient readers and exit their reading goal(s).

Teachers reported that the Universal Tier and MTSS use Guided Reading and Reading Recovery. Research on the science of how people learn to read has caused a shift across the United States and Iowa away from whole Language in favor of programs that provide explicit instruction on word-level reading skills

with attention to phonological core deficits. Whole Language approaches such as Guided Reading and Reading Recovery *that use strategies promoted by the three cueing systems model parallel how poor readers approach text rather than how skilled readers approach text. Most students survive this type of approach. Liberman & Liberman (1990) estimate that about 75% of students will learn to read “no matter how unhelpful the instruction.” (Hempenstall, 2002; Liberman & Liberman, 1990).*

The evidence suggests the three cueing systems approach is not effective with weak and at-risk readers, and it may actually be counterproductive with such students. (Tunmer et al., 2001)

It appears that the three-cueing systems model simply reinforces the kinds of habit that naturally occur among children who struggle in reading. It provides no avenue for weak readers to close the gap with their same-age peers. (Kirkpatrick 2015)

Commonalities in research on the science of reading and what does work supports what Orthographic Mapping Theory would suggest; intensive phonemic awareness training to the advanced level: intensive phonetic decoding training; and substantial opportunity for reading connected text. Fluency is a byproduct of having instant access to most words on the page which supports a focus on building a student’s orthographic lexicon. (Kirkpatrick 2015)

Interviewees reported that three years ago the Director of Teaching and Learning and Director of Special Education were considering purchasing evidence-based instructional programs in reading, specifically, the 95% Group for the Universal Tier and MTSS with the Wilson Reading Program for Special Education. 95% Group is a solid choice as it is an intensive reading program based on orthographic mapping theory. Elementary and the middle school teachers reported attending initial training to begin implementing the Wilson Reading Program through the AEA this summer and that a beginning set of materials was purchased for each school. This is a fantastic start to providing intensive phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, a least one high school teacher needs to be included. Some parents are aware of this and excited about the possibilities but expressed lack of confidence that the Wilson Reading Program would be implemented with fidelity. Due to the multi-sensory, systematic, cumulative instruction needed by students with deficits in reading and writing the District might want to consider asking the AEA for implementation fidelity checklists so that coaches and principals can support the success of using this program.

The Wilson Reading Program has many levels and requirements for ongoing trainings. At least one teacher indicated not having the right level for all students. Establish a plan for reading instruction that includes the required ongoing training and securing the levels of the program needed for student instruction. If the cost of materials and training to implement the Wilson Reading Program with fidelity is prohibitive, there are programs available that focus on the required methodology without the investment in materials.

2. Transition Planning

The first step is to involve secondary counselors and principals in addition to teachers to ensure that students with IEPs have access to post-secondary planning provided to all students including involvement with Future Ready Iowa. Parents want the District to be experts and provide options and guidance in the area of Transition Planning including Work Experience, and 4+ Programing. Ideally, the Director of Special Programs would lead this work and provide needed professional development to ensure that high school staff involved with the IEP Team understand their responsibilities and the role of adult service agencies including Vocational Rehabilitation Services. The Director of Special Programs needs to become a reliable leader, provide the necessary resources including staff, build a quality program and support implementation. The IEP starting the year a student reaches age 14 becomes a Transition Plan focused on the 10 areas of Transition need in living, learning, and working evolving until the student receives a diploma or reaches age 21. The Transition Plan guides decisions on core instruction, alterations, quality SDI, aligned electives, and work experience. Middle and High school teachers expressed a need for professional development to access and use assessments in living, learning, and working. Providing data from these assessments at IEP Meetings is the basis for decision making and writing meaningful goals.

Instruction is then provided focused on the student's strengths, interests, preferences and goals identified by the team aligned to the student's Transition Plan. Ensure teams prioritize the academic competencies required for success with Transition Plans as the priority of high school instruction; meeting course requirements does not always translate to increased independent competencies resulting in students learning at their highest level. Support for transition planning can be obtained through the AEA and the State Transition Consultant, Kirsten Lane at the State Department of Education.

3. Diploma requirements

Address changes to IDEA by ESSA regarding graduation requirements for students with IEPs to earn a regular diploma. Developing a district diploma policy that accounts for this change may involve changes to grading and transcript guidance. Best practice would be to determine policies in advance, communicate the requirements and practices, and apply them consistently. Then make decisions on an individual student basis. The initial letter of Notification was sent from Barbara Guy, State Director of Special Education, December 2017 with additional guidance documents Fall 2018 and a Webinar January 2019.

The Director of Special Programs and Superintendent have expressed intentions to begin discussions with secondary principals in September 2019. The current 10th grade class eligible to graduate June 2022 is impacted by the changes to graduation requirements and must meet 4.3.3.3 and PE requirements at a minimum to earn a regular diploma. Beginning with this class, students may not be awarded a regular diploma solely on completion of their IEP. If students did not take a year of English during their 9th grade school year, there may be students who have a year of study in English to make up to be eligible for a diploma.

The current PLC work in every course to identify essential standards with clear definition of exactly what students are expected to know, understand, and do including the required level and proficiency needs to be clearly communicated so that students and IEP Teams will be able to determine if meeting the course requirements and minimum competencies (levels/proficiency) is a reasonable expectation for a student. The standards and proficiency levels are also needed for IEP Teams to determine if an alteration for a student with an IEP is needed and dependent on what is being measured by the standard if the alteration is an accommodation or a modification. In simplest terms the accommodation helps the student access the standard and a modification changes the standard.

The school board will need to determine if and how much modification will be allowed to courses eligible for credit towards a regular diploma or regular diploma plus IEP. If a Certificate of Completion or another lesser exit document is issued, students remain eligible for FAPE until age 21.

4. Specially Designed Instruction

The North Polk Community School District vision should account for vertical alignment and continuity of purposeful, targeted instruction and services from the time that a student is identified as needing intervention through MTSS until the student demonstrates proficiency in goal areas and no longer needs an IEP, the student receives a diploma, or reaches age 21. Students in high school are reportedly not provided with instruction on foundational reading and math skills even though the need has been identified for some students. High school staff indicated a need for more AEA support to understand and implement transition requirements, develop and provide behavior services, and teach foundational skills in reading, writing, and math.

Develop systems for instruction in reading, writing, math, and behavior/social skills and align professional development, resources, coaching and support. Based on conversations with parents and teachers there is a need to grow the knowledge and expertise of teachers to diagnostically assess and plan instruction. Some parents interviewed expressed a lack of confidence in teachers' knowledge of current research on the science of instruction for students with Learning Disabilities. A few of these parents expressed disappointment in not being able to afford to pay for private, specialized instruction for their children due to the instruction their student needs not being available through the District.

Consider developing teams who can collaborate across grade levels to provide continuity of systematic, cumulative instruction to students for as long as Specially Designed Instruction, SDI, is needed with the intensity needed to eliminate the achievement gaps. Teachers interviewed self-identified areas of instructional strength and preference with some unproductive inconsistencies in their instructional knowledge. These teachers could be encouraged as teams to participate in professional development and with support from the AEA build a system of expertise and be a resource for each other to provide SDI as a Literacy Team, Math Team, and Behavior intervention Team with a minimum of one teacher with specialized expertise in each school.

The Department of Education is scaling up to clarify expectations and provide support through Iowa's Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) Framework which is in the 4th year of a 5-year federal grant. The SDI Framework provides a profile of critical features and effective practices to diagnose, design, and deliver effective SDI and engage learners. This was discussed with the Director of Special Programs and the Superintendent who plan to inquire through the AEA if the NP Special Education Program could be included in the current pilot. Even if involved in the SDI Framework, teachers will need instructional expertise and training to implement evidence-based tools and materials.

Teachers expressed concerns over lack of instructional materials in math and behavior/social skills, that are aligned to standards and that include formative assessments that can be used diagnostically to inform targeted instruction. Many quality programs are available that would fulfill this need.

5. Associate Assistance

Teachers reported that general education teachers and counselors often press for students to have associate assistance. Parents and staff expressed concern that with current associate assistance students are not developing age appropriate responsibility and independence as students reach upper elementary grades and secondary schools. Parents also expressed concern over the stigma and embarrassment to older students of having an associate assist them resulting in the student being uncooperative or refusing to ask for the help they need because they are expected to ask the associate as opposed to the teacher. Interviewees indicated that associates are assigned to:

- watch and notice when students are agitated, anxious or stressed and intervene by offering a break from the classroom
- prompt students to remain on task
- practice skills with materials prepared by the teacher (elementary)
- clarify expectations
- assist with organization
- read text and tests to students
- assist with and ensure completion of homework

When asked parents of students receiving these services could identify what their student would need to be able to do in order to fade the associate assistance. The missing piece appears to include assessment of the best way to accommodate student needs; a plan to instruct students to achieve independence with using their accommodations; and a clear, shared understanding of the function of homework. The AEA can assist with identifying accommodations that are matched to helping students access the general education curriculum independently and when and if the students' instructional needs are beyond an accommodation and modification is necessary.

For example:

- As opposed to having associates read to students, assessments such as the U-PAR can be used to determine if a students' comprehension is higher when they read independently, with an adult reader or an e-reader. Many students' comprehension will be highest with an e-reader. Assistive Technology services through the AEA can help identify what type of technology is most efficient for the student and staff can teach the student to use the technology independently. If a student's comprehension is not higher when read to by an adult or an e-reader, then text could be provided at a lower reading level.

- Functional and social/behavioral assessments are available along with curriculums to teach Executive Functioning Skills and Social-Behavioral Skills to help students be self-sufficient, maintain self-control and demonstrate self-management. In addition, routines can be established that students follow independently to improve executive functioning and gain assistance when desired for students needing emotional/behavior support.

The District would benefit from clarifying the role of homework at the secondary level as a part of improving grading practices. By definition homework is characterized by tasks that students can complete independently to practice skills or reinforce learning as a follow-up to class instruction. One has to question the purpose of homework completed with adult assistance. Homework or work completion in general is often over-valued by staff and parents if homework completion is required to earn grades as opposed to allowing and encouraging multiple ways and opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know, understand, and can do to meet standards. Consider that preparing students for success after high school relies more on the competencies a student independently demonstrates than the number of tasks completed, especially tasks completed with assistance.

6. Progress Monitoring

As indicated in Roxanne's 2016 report, teachers continue to express concerns regarding progress monitoring tools and procedures that warrant District level guidance. As teachers use data to plan instruction and report progress the data gained needs to be valid, reliable, and aligned to other District assessments. One improvement would be to use Lexile Leveled text as opposed to Guided Reading Levels or Jamestown in secondary programs. Teachers did not respond with consistent answers regarding levels of these materials and use for progress monitoring. Progress monitoring needs to be specific enough to show growth on the diagnosed deficit in each goal area from fall to winter and winter to spring so that instruction can be adjusted accordingly. In addition, over time and across grade levels data resulting from successful instruction should show students increasing their proficiency. Consider following through with this solid recommendation from Roxanne in 2016: *There is a desire, among teachers to examine current best practice regarding progress monitoring in math, reading, writing and behavior/social programming and to standardize procedures around progress monitoring. I suggest the District develop a North Polk Progress Monitoring Handbook to outline possible progress monitoring tools for each content area, to outline the protocol/procedures for utilizing each tool and to suggest, within the Manual, possible instructional approaches/materials that might be utilized based on student data. Once completed, the Progress Monitoring Manual would address special education goal areas in reading, writing, math and behavior/social programming.*

7. District Developed Service Delivery Plan and Roles

Define roles and responsibilities of staff in support of students with IEPs including the Director of Special Programs, The Director of Teaching and Learning, General Education Teachers, Special Education Teachers, Associates, Associate Principals, Principals and assign tasks and timelines accordingly to bring the District Vision to action. Students with IEPs are general education students first and always. "High-quality general education instruction is the responsibility of general education, including assistance to students who need additional support. [41.111(2)] However, Iowa's Rules recognize that special education personnel may have strategies, techniques, insights, and lesson plans that might be of assistance to general educators. That is the origin of the rule allowing special education personnel to provide "occasional and incidental" assistance to general educators or their students." (Special Education Procedures July 2019)

- ⇒ Some special education teachers expressed concern that they provide the interventions for general education students in MTSS and then do not have sufficient time to plan and provide quality SDI.

- ⇒ Secondary special education teachers report that staff and some parents view their role as to help general education teachers by providing all accommodations, modifications and ensure students meet general education expectations for task completion regardless of individual student competency levels.
- ⇒ Some teachers reported that the point system described in the DDSDP for Case Management was no longer used.
- ⇒ Other teachers reported that the Case Management Point System was used but did not adequately account for the time required to develop modifications to curriculum.

8. Communication

Conversations with parents indicate that they value frequent, timely, transparent and factual communication. Positive examples include daily communication sheets, collaborative planning to achieve student's IEP goals, and very highly spoken of was transition meetings to plan for student success in moving from building to building. (ex. preschool to elementary). Non-examples include teachers describing students as fun, cute and driven while being evasive about the student's progress. Parents reported principals being not accessible due to their meeting schedules in elementary and high school. Communication was reported to be best at middle school with the principal, counselors, and teachers working collaboratively with parents to help students achieve their goals.

9. IEP Process

Improve collaborative decisions at IEP meetings and ensure all of the required/desired participants are welcomed and present to identify the right balance for each student in terms of what instruction will occur, where it will occur, who will provide it, defining accommodations, modifications, the exact function of associate assistance and other services. Ensure that parents and staff are clear on the expectations of the decisions made and leave the meeting with a common understanding.

- ⇒ Several instances were given regarding changes in programming occurring without "Prior Written Notice" to parents such as the addition of Reading Recovery or changes in goals.
- ⇒ Parents understand that teachers may reuse "good language" in IEPs but other student's names and inaccurate information was reported to be on students IEPs too frequently.
- ⇒ Parents wonder if enough data and the right data is collected and would like more time spent talking about instruction.
- ⇒ Parents do not believe administration understands the transition process and believe there is a push for students to graduate and move to adult services.
- ⇒ Teachers report that the Director of Special Programs does not respond to questions or responds weeks later and declines invitations to IEP Meetings where additional expertise or teacher support is requested.
- ⇒ Parents of older students indicate that staff would benefit from increased understanding of the social/emotional implications of disabilities as students reach higher grades and have not mastered foundations skills required for success in courses that might look like lack of cooperation, effort, flexibility or focus. Many students with Learning Disabilities especially are master compensators. Parents believe that students would be engaged and cooperative if instruction was "working."
- ⇒ Teachers report inconsistencies in opportunities for IEP training. Outside of monthly data meetings where updates and changes to IEP requirements are discussed, teachers are expected to seek training on their own.
- ⇒ Secondary teachers indicated a need to further understand their responsibilities regarding transition planning and service provision.
- ⇒ High school teachers indicated that they need more support from AEA consultants to diagnose, design and deliver SDI.

- ⇒ The Director of Special Programs indicated that she sees it as the principals responsibility to attend IEP meetings, would like to observe teachers facilitating IEP Meetings, and that her focus is on compliance currently related to progress monitoring.

10. Collaboration and Co-teaching

Many parents expressed concerns that collaboration time specified in their student's IEPs did not happen and as a result associates were providing instruction without proper training and making accommodation and modification decisions.

- ⇒ Associates reported that they had access to the IEP Summary for each student but not adequate time to look them over or ask questions to fully understand expectations.
- ⇒ Associates reported that there is a pay differential for completion of the paraeducator certification and professional learning opportunities have included autism training, de-escalation training through CPI, and a book study on *The Behavior code* with the Director of Special Programs.
- ⇒ Associates reported going directly to an AEA Consultant for advice regarding how to respond to students' behavior.
- ⇒ Associates reported frequent schedule changes and sometimes being pulled to work with students they do not know.
- ⇒ Special education teachers report being responsible to direct the work of 1-9 associates without collaboration time to train and instruct them to implement services consistently.

Parents expressed similar concerns regarding minutes in the IEP for collaborative consultation between special education teachers and general education teachers. Special Education teachers reported sharing the IEP Summary, BIP and Page F through a one drive file.

- ⇒ Elementary teachers report regular collaboration meetings and one teacher reported communication through a shared document in a one-drive file often eliminating the time to meet.
- ⇒ Middle and high school teachers reported that they do not collaborate during Core Content PLCs.
- ⇒ Secondary teachers report less formal collaboration and that there needs to be a change in the expectations of the role of special education away from homework completion towards the provision of intensive skill instruction.
- ⇒ High school teachers reported that it is difficult to get students to remain in general education classes as they are sent out by general education teachers and students often ask to leave class.
- ⇒ The high school principal and special education teachers report that there is a history in NP of special education students attending core classes for instruction the first half of the class period and then leaving during independent work time or during testing. This results in students avoiding class and showing up in the resource room throughout the day disrupting instruction.

Iowa's Collaborative Teaching Guidance requires the core content teachers and special education teachers to have "regular and frequent" consultation. A review of the state guidance and increased transparency with parents in terms of how and when collaboration happens with documentation is advised. Consider improving collaborative consultation in English, math, science, and social science embracing elements of Universal Design with emphasis on planning for all students to access instruction with a focus on allowing students to demonstrated what they know as opposed to meeting course requirements not directly related to competencies on the essential standards for each class. Help general education teachers understand their responsibility to differentiate instruction and implement alterations.

Co-Teaching needs more intentional support to be set up for success, I have provided Co-Teaching Professional Development for the AEA and The Des Moines Public School District and recommend

prioritizing English prior to other subjects. Many of the Literacy Standards require students to “read and...” Collaboration in PLCs can include modifications for lack of grade level reading ability by providing e-text if the IEP indicates that the student will have the modification of listening comprehension or text at lower levels as long as the text complexity exists to demonstrate the skills in the standard. With text access students are able to benefit from the same instruction as their general education peers. It is important to support the co-teaching teams with common planning and define the individual and joint responsibilities of the team members. Frequently students need a “More” Class for reading instruction in addition to ELA in upper elementary and secondary grades because the deficit is not comprehension, but, a deficit requiring explicit instruction exists in one or more of the other four components of reading development. Consider moving toward a “Core Plus More” model to allow opportunities for quality reading and math instruction for as long as needed. Current research acknowledges that lack of a conceptual understanding of foundational math skills often cannot be compensated for in higher level math classes and will need systematic instruction.

11. Special Education Advisory Committee

Consider reviving the Special Education Advisory Committee and include the AEA Parent Education Partners. This was valued by parents and is a positive way to work collaboratively to understand expectations and improve programming for students with IEPs. As the North Polk Special Education Service Delivery Plan is revised, this group would be a great source of input. This group could also work together to explore community resources and learn about adult services.

Conclusion

Developing a vision to improve services and instruction for students in the NP CSD with IEPs is a part of the overall Instructional Framework for all students including struggling learners. The NP CSD is applauded for overall achievement scores above the state and AEA average. How does “Every Student Succeed” if the majority of students are over-achievers but then there is a group of students cared for but not held to high expectations. Data from the last three years shows 50% or fewer students with IEPs in 8th and 11th grades are proficient in reading. Improving systems involves leadership, goal setting, and action planning that provides the professional development to ensure staff has the skills, resources and support needed to implement instruction and services. Advance preparation will give staff flexibility to individually design instruction and cater to individual student’s uniqueness.

If NP CSD has not already, I strongly suggest a study of “Growth Mindset” as defined by Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D. The basic principle is that people with a “Fixed Mindset” believe that intelligence is static and those with a “Growth Mindset” believe intelligence can be developed. The mindset of educators that students interact with greatly impacts their opportunities to reach their potential.