Edmonds School District Special Education Program Review

Summary Report

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Contents

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Executive Summary

Edmonds School District (ESD) contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to conduct a third-party, independent special education program review. The purpose of this review was to examine special education practices impacting climate, staffing, and communication within ESD. The review aims to identify strengths and areas of need for district leadership to better understand and improve their current system. AIR conducted this review over a 7-month period between October 2022 and May 2023.

AIR began by gathering information from extant data available at the district level, reviewing websites (e.g., ESD website), documents (e.g., board policies and procedures, student services employees' exit interview notes), and data (e.g., numbers of special education staff no longer working in ESD by year). In addition to reviewing the extant data, AIR conducted a staff survey, 10 interviews, and seven focus groups.

In this report, we provide a brief description of background information leading to the commissioning of this study, followed by a description of our methods. We then present our results, which include areas of strength and specific areas in need of improvement. We conclude with recommendations that are grounded in the results and our knowledge of best practices supported by research and that are being implemented successfully in similar districts nationwide. Appendices A-C present additional supporting data.

Background

Per the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) report card, Edmonds School District (ESD), located north of Seattle, serves approximately 20,524 students across 34 schools. Of these, 16%, or 3,255 students, are students with disabilities who receive special education services. The request for an independent evaluation was made by the then-interim superintendent after hearing of listening sessions conducted in spring of 2022 and staff concerns regarding climate, several instances of staff turnover in the district office, and communication. The ongoing concern prompted the district to authorize an independent review investigating the validity of staff concerns and requesting recommendations for improvement. Thus, the overarching purpose of the special education program review in ESD was to gather data on the current status and perspectives of multiple stakeholders in the district about climate, staff turnover, and communication to help district leadership make decisions about activities to enhance the special education program, prioritize resources, and inform planning by the new superintendent to achieve the district's mission of "advocat[ing] for

each and every student by providing learning environments that embrace their cultural and linguistic diversity as an asset that will prepare them for success as lifelong learners and responsible world citizens."

ESD has the following vision and commitment: "Equity, engagement, and excellence for each and every student." Engaged, supported staff are ultimately who will make this vision possible for ESD students. In support of this vision and in collaboration with the district, ESD and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) identified the following research questions to guide the review:

Area 1. District and School Climate
a) How do special education administrators, building administrators, and special education staff perceive the climate and culture related to special education instruction in ESD?
b) What factors do special education administrators, building administrators, and special education staff identify as facilitators of a positive climate and culture related to special education at the school level?
c) What factors do special education administrators, building administrators, and special education staff identify as barriers that inhibit a positive climate and culture related to special education at the school level?

Area 2. Staffing
a) What factors impact special education staff retention? What factors contribute to special education staff turnover?
b) Do current staffing allocation procedures and practices allow for special education staff to adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities in ESD?
c) To what extent are district resources and supports for special education staff adequate to meet their needs in providing appropriate services to students with disabilities?

Area 3. Communication
a) What district- and school-level communication practices do administrators and special education staff perceive as effective?
b) What communication practices do administrators and staff perceive as ineffective or inefficient?

Methods

AIR gathered data from multiple sources, including (a) extant data on recruitment, staffing practices, communication efforts, and retention; (b) an AIR-administered survey made available to all school staff; and (c) interviews and focus groups with the superintendent, assistant superintendent, director of special education, district administrators, school administrators, general

and special education staff, certified support staff (e.g., related service providers, school psychologists, other specialists), and noncertified support staff (e.g., paraprofessional/support staff, transportation staff).

Using these data sources, the research team generated results for this report through an iterative process that involved (a) descriptive synthesis and coding of each data source; (b) collective review of evidence across all data sources to identify emerging overall themes; (c) identification of preliminary results based on emerging themes; (d) in-depth, follow-up review of select data sources to confirm supporting evidence for preliminary results; and (e) finalization of results statements and associated supporting evidence.

Results

The summary of results includes both areas of strength and opportunities for growth. Strengths identified in the report will enable ESD to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and implement the report's recommendations more effectively. These strengths include the following:

Strength 1: A focus on best serving all students and their families.

Strength 2: Generally effective communication among staff and administrators at the building level.

Strength 3: At all levels, staff acknowledge that ESD possesses a strong, qualified group of special education teachers and certified support staff.

Strength 4: Recognition that ESD was and is a well-regarded school district that families locate to so their children can receive a high-quality education and special education services.

The data yielded the following challenges related to current climate, staffing, and communication:

Result 1: A pervasive "us versus them" culture at all levels of the district.

Result 2: A perceived lack of respect for staff (especially special education staff).

Result 3: "A culture of segregation" related to special education.

Result 4: A perceived lack of resources by building-level administrators and staff, and concerns about how these limited resources affect student placements.

Result 5: Many staff (especially special education staff) describe a poor morale and feelings of burnout, anger, or resignation.

Result 6: Many staff feel overwhelmed by their workloads and the distribution of their job responsibilities; additional responsibilities continue to be added without acknowledgement or input from affected staff.

Result 7: A lack of staff is felt in many schools across the district.

Result 8: Some staff are concerned for their safety while performing their daily job duties and do not believe appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure it.

Result 9: Many staff are interested in additional professional development.

Result 10: Many building-level staff experience a lack of response or follow-through among district staff.

Result 11: Communication is generally perceived to be ineffective at the district level.

Result 12: Perceived unilateral decision making by district staff.

Result 13: Lack of trust on behalf of many staff, at all levels.

These findings have a potentially significant impact on students; nearly half of all staff completing the staff survey reported concerns regarding student placements and legal compliance, questioning equity, appropriateness, and consistency. A review of individualized education programs (IEPs) and student placements was beyond the scope of this program review, so AIR is unable to confirm or disprove staff concerns about placements.

Recommendations

We offer seven recommendations to address the results outlined in this report and to improve climate, staffing, and communication in ESD.

Recommendation 1: Establish a cross-district advisory committee for special education to address priority concerns.

Recommendation 2: Create a dedicated special education director position whose sole responsibility is to oversee special education.

Recommendation 3: Develop a plan to implement relationship-building strategies in addition to communication.

Recommendation 4: Set expectations for administrative visits to classrooms and responding to e-mails and phone calls. Ensure that there are enough visits to meet those expectations.

Recommendation 5: Immediately reinstitute job-alike meetings.

Recommendation 6: Review full-time equivalent (FTE) staff allocated to the teaching program versus itinerant services to determine appropriate staffing and areas that can flex.

Recommendation 7: Implement a culture shift.

ESD has taken an important step toward strengthening the culture, staffing, and communication among its schools by commissioning this review. AIR commends the district's educators and leaders for their commitment to prioritizing and addressing the needs of their staff. We also commend the many staff members who enthusiastically and candidly voiced their concerns to our research team and offered many excellent suggestions for improving ESD's special education program. With continued commitment on the part of ESD leadership and meaningful engagement from staff in implementing the recommendations, ESD is well positioned to see positive change.

Introduction

ESD contracted with AIR to conduct a third-party, independent special education program review. The purpose of this review was to examine special education practices impacting climate, staffing, and communication within ESD. The review aims to identify strengths and areas of need for district leadership to better understand and improve their current system. AIR conducted this review over a 7-month period between October 2022 and May 2023.

AIR began by gathering information from extant data available at the district level, reviewing websites (e.g., ESD website), documents (e.g., board policies and procedures, student services employees' exit interview notes), and data (e.g., numbers of special education staff no longer working in ESD by year). In addition to reviewing the extant data, AIR conducted a staff survey, 10 interviews, and seven focus groups.

This report aims to identify strengths and areas of need for district leadership to better understand and improve their current system. In this report, we provide a brief description of background information leading to the commissioning of this study, followed by a description of our methods. We then present our results, which include areas of strength and specific areas in need of improvement. We conclude with recommendations that are grounded in the results and our knowledge of best practices supported by research and that are being implemented successfully in similar districts nationwide. Appendices A-C present additional supporting data.

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ESD has the following vision and commitment: "Equity, engagement, and excellence for each and every student." Engaged, supported staff are ultimately who will make this vision possible for ESD students. In support of this vision and in collaboration with the district, ESD and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) identified the following research questions to guide the review:

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d) What factors impact special education staff retention? What factors contribute to special education staff turnover?

e) Do current staffing allocation procedures and practices allow for special education staff to adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities in ESD?

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c) What district- and school-level communication practices do administrators and special education staff perceive as effective?

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Methods

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Using these data sources, the research team generated results for this report through an iterative process that involved (a) descriptive synthesis and coding of each data source; (b) collective review of evidence across all data sources to identify emerging overall themes; (c) identification of preliminary results based on emerging themes; (d) in-depth, follow-up review of select data sources to confirm supporting evidence for preliminary results; and (e) finalization of results statements and associated supporting evidence.

Data Sources

Extant Data

The AIR team reviewed publicly available ESD documents and webpages as well as data shared with us by the district. Publicly available data included the following:

- Websites
  - ESD website
  - ESD special education website
- Documents

- o Weekly 2021–22 memo
- o Edmonds Education Association collective bargaining agreement (2022–25)

Data shared with us upon request to give background context included the following:
- Documents
    - o Board policies and procedures
    - o E-mail communications protocol
    - o Listening session notes (taken March and April 2022)
    - o Special education newsletter from October 2022
    - o Organizational lists
    - o Current vacancies related to special education
    - o Student services employees' exit interview notes
- Data
    - o Numbers of special education staff no longer working in ESD (including retirement, resignation, termination, and death)
    - o Current employee totals (by role)

Interviews and Focus Groups

AIR conducted seven 1-hour virtual focus groups with district-level administrators, building administrators, certified support staff (e.g., related service providers, school psychologists), special education teachers, general education teachers, and noncertified support staff (e.g., transportation staff, paraeducators). Many staff indicated interest in joining the focus groups; we received 223 total sign-ups. Individuals were ultimately nominated by a program that selected registrants at random, validated employment, and considered diversity of roles, schools, and school levels among the final sample. We spoke with 60 staff total, with an average focus group size of nine members.

Ten interviews were conducted that included current and former ESD staff serving in the district office. Roles interviewed included the superintendent, assistant superintendent, itinerant services program manager, director of student support services, director of special education, manager of special education programs, director of psychology and counseling, deaf and hard of hearing program director, as well as president of Edmonds Education Association and uniserv representative at Washington Education Association.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted by AIR staff, and all focus group/interview protocols were reviewed and approved by ESD leadership prior to conducting the focus groups and interviews. The interview and focus group protocols can be found in Appendix C.

Staff Survey

All staff in ESD (school level and district level) were invited to complete a survey developed by AIR. The estimated response time was 15–20 minutes. According to the total numbers shared with our team by ESD, the district has a total of 3,023 employees, including 50 principals, 1,497 teachers, and 552 paraeducators. A total of 1,205 staff (40% of all staff) consented to take the survey, indicated that they had worked in ESD during the 2021–22 school year, and shared their role. Of this total, 417 (35%) were general education teachers; 308 (26%) were noncertified support staff (including paraeducators); 151 (13%) were related service providers, psychologists, or other certified support staff; 119 (10%) were special education teachers; 28 (2.3%) were school administrators; 18 (2%) were district administrators; 12 (1%) were transportation staff; and 152 (13%) identified as "other." Individuals who selected "other" were asked to specify their role, and responses included, but were not limited to, roles such as custodian, music specialist, food service worker, substitute teacher, and American Sign Language interpreter. Several certified roles, such as English learner teacher, behavior and emotional support specialist, and certificated nurse, selected "other" as well.

Individuals were given the option to identify what setting(s) they worked in, but it was not required. Eight hundred and ten respondents (71%) indicated that they worked in an elementary (Grades PK–6) setting, 24% indicated that they worked in a middle school (Grades 7–8) setting, and 29% indicated that they worked in a high school (Grades 9–12) setting.

The survey was administered via SurveyMonkey and included 33 Likert-scale items aligned with the research questions guiding the review, seven open-ended response questions, and six multiple-choice questions. ESD disseminated and promoted the survey by various means, including e-mailing staff, publishing the link to the district website dedicated to the review, and incorporating it in talking points for the superintendent and other district leaders. The survey was open for 2 weeks in January 2023 (January 9–24).

Data Analysis

All survey, interview, and focus group data were cleaned and prepared for analysis. For the staff survey, AIR staff ran descriptive summary statistics and prepared tables providing overall statistics for each item. In addition, AIR staff ran weighted means on each of the Likert-scale questions in the surveys. For the survey's open-ended questions, AIR staff coded the responses according to codes already established in focus groups and interviews when appropriate; new codes were added for new questions and topics. Team members reviewed the coded responses to generate emergent themes.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted over Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. One team member used MAXQDA qualitative analysis software to code the transcripts according to the

themes chosen for this review (See Research Questions). The AIR team reviewed the data and recorded emanating patterns that appeared. These patterns are included in the results.

The AIR team engaged in intensive collaborative data review and ongoing follow-up analyses. Coded data and summaries from each data source were reviewed to identify pieces of evidence that aligned with each of the broad indicators guiding this review. The team then looked for areas in which evidence aligned across multiple data sources around a common theme. These themes served as the starting point for developing results.

The team used the following guidelines to identify a result: (a) result is supported by evidence across multiple data sources; (b) result reflects a theme that comes up frequently in one or more data source; (c) result reflects a theme or issue that is highly salient for ESD stakeholders; and (d) result reflects a need that, if addressed, is likely to lead to improved outcomes for staff and students with disabilities in ESD. Following the initial analysis and review, the team members again carefully reviewed the evidence supporting each result, then combined result statements that were overlapping or similar. The final results, and the evidence that supports them, are described in the following section.

Results

Our results include both areas of strength and opportunities for growth. We begin by describing overall results of the staff survey and move to emergent themes from the open-ended survey responses, focus groups, and interviews. We then outline four areas of strength, which are notable and will be important for ESD to leverage as it moves forward with implementing a plan of action following this review. Strengths identified in the report will enable ESD to improve outcomes for students with disabilities and implement the report's recommendations more effectively. We conclude with a summary of findings that strongly inform the Recommendations section of this report.

Survey Results

Because this review focused on climate, culture, and communication related to special education, we compare special education teachers and certified support staff with an overall average of all staff for Likert-scale items. Likert-scale items were coded on a scale ranging from 1.0 to 5.0, with a score of 1.0 corresponding to "Strongly disagree," a score of 3.0 corresponding to "Not sure/I don't know," and a score of 5.0 corresponding to "Strongly agree." Themes generated by all staff are provided for open-ended response questions.

The survey was divided into the following six categories designed to thoroughly answer our research questions identified in the Background section of this report:

1. Staff Collaboration and Professional Development

2. Data-Driven Decision Making

3. Equitable Access

4. Systems and Organizational Structures for Providing Coordinated Districtwide Support

5. Communication

6. Climate

Survey Consent

Ninety-eight percent (*N* = 1334) of ESD staff who completed the staff survey provided consent to AIR to use the data collected from the survey. Just 2% (*N* = 24) of respondents indicated they did not give consent. If a respondent did not give consent to complete the survey, they did not proceed with answering any further survey questions and were thanked for their time. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. Do you give consent to the American Institutes for Research to use the data from this survey?
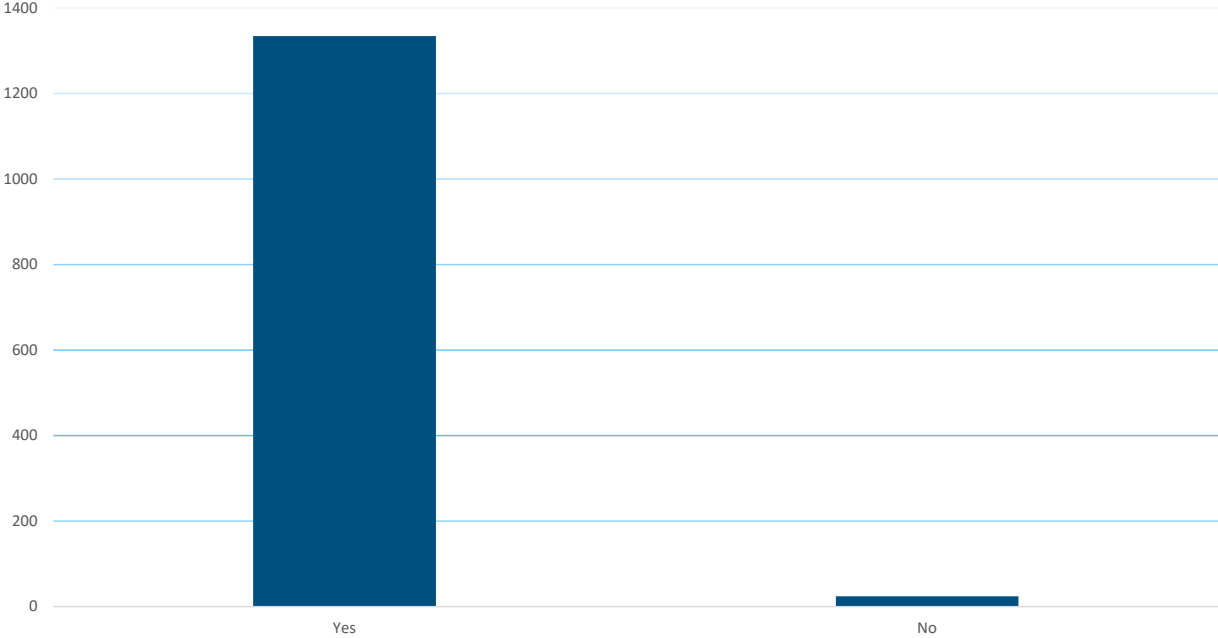
Note. N= 1,358; Yes = 1,334, No = 24.

Did you work in Edmonds School District in 2021–22?

This special education program review was prompted by climate, staffing, and communication concerns identified by staff during the 2021–22 school year. As such, we wanted to ensure that those staff's voices and concerns were prioritized in this review. Given several changes in leadership before the 2022–23 school year began, new staff starting in the 2022–23 school year could not offer the same perspective as more tenured staff. If respondents answered "no" to this question, they did not progress in the survey and were thanked for their time. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Did you work in Edmonds School District in 2021–22?
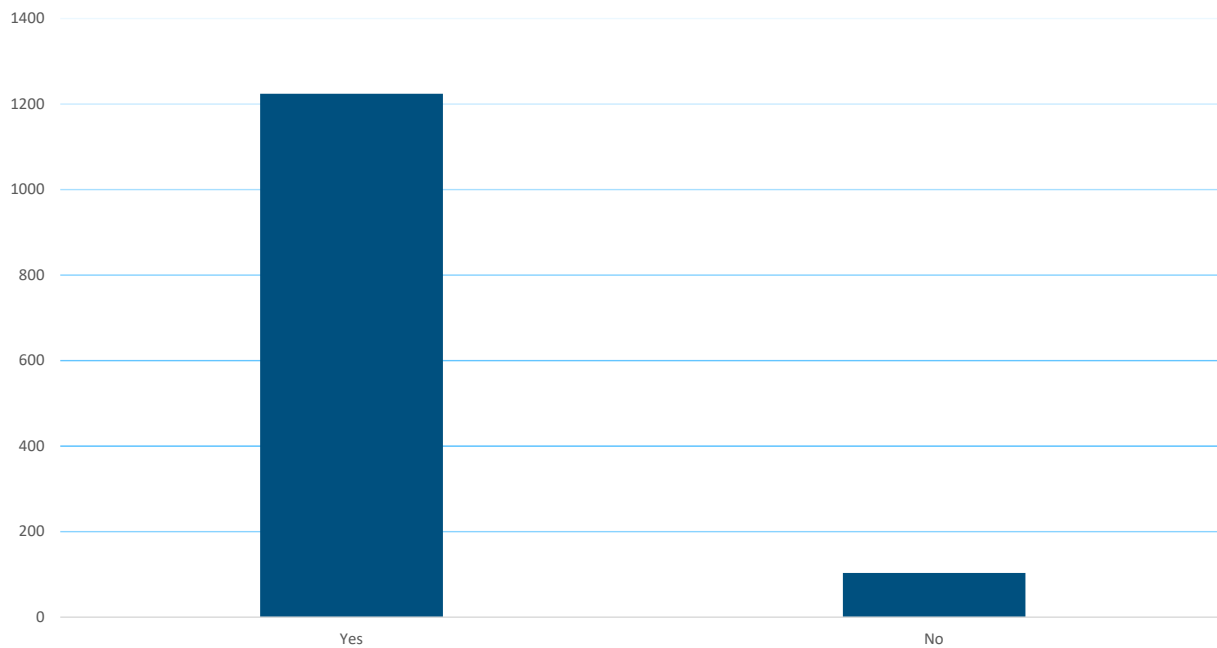
Note. N = 1,327; Yes = 1,224, No = 103.

Please select a primary role describing your work with Edmonds Public Schools during the 2021–22 school year. Select the answer that is most accurate.

Respondents were required to self-select from the following list of roles:

- School administrator
- Special education teacher
- General education teacher
- Related service provider, psychologist, or other certified specialist
- Noncertified special education teacher, support staff, or paraprofessional

- Transportation staff

- District administrator

- Other

Individuals who selected "other" were asked to specify their role, and responses included, but were not limited to, roles such as custodian, music specialist, food service worker, substitute teacher, and American Sign Language interpreter. Several certified roles such as English learner teacher, behavior and emotional support specialist, and certificated nurse selected "other" as well.

A total of 1,205 staff (40% of all staff) consented to take the survey, indicated that they had worked in ESD during the 2021–22 school year, and shared their role. Of this total:

- 417 (35%) were general education teachers and 308 (26%) were noncertified support staff (including paraeducators);

- 151 (13%) were related service providers, psychologists, or other certified support staff;

- 119 (10%) were special education teachers;

- 18 (2%) were district administrators;

- 12 (1%) were transportation staff; and

- 152 (13%) identified as "other."

Findings are depicted in Exhibit 3.

Exhibit 3. Please select a primary role describing your work with Edmonds Public Schools during the 2021–22 school year. Select the answer that is most accurate.
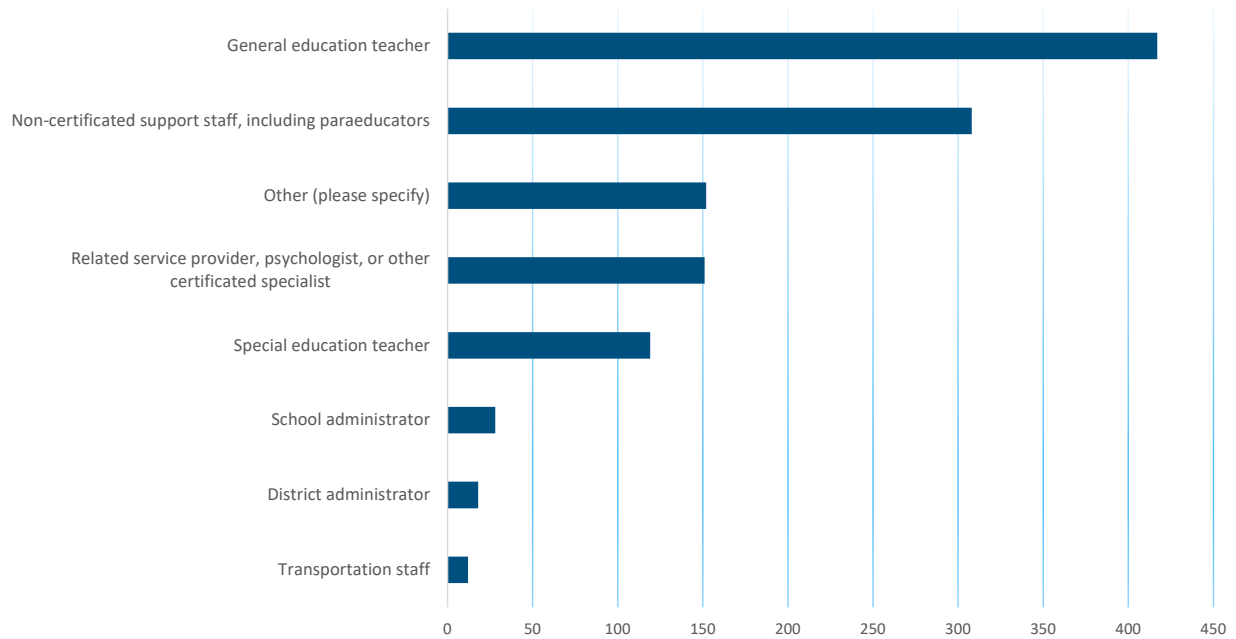
Note. N = 1,205.

What grade levels are included at the site(s) in which you taught/worked in 2021–22? (Check all that apply.)

Individuals were given the option to identify which setting(s) they worked in, but this was not required. Eight hundred and ten respondents (71%) indicated that they worked in an elementary (Grades PK–6) setting, 24% indicated they worked in a middle school (Grades 7–8) setting, and 29% indicated they worked in a high school (Grades 9–12) setting. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 4.

ESD Special Education Program Review

Exhibit 4. What grade levels are included at the site(s) in which you taught/worked in 2021–22? (Check all that apply.)
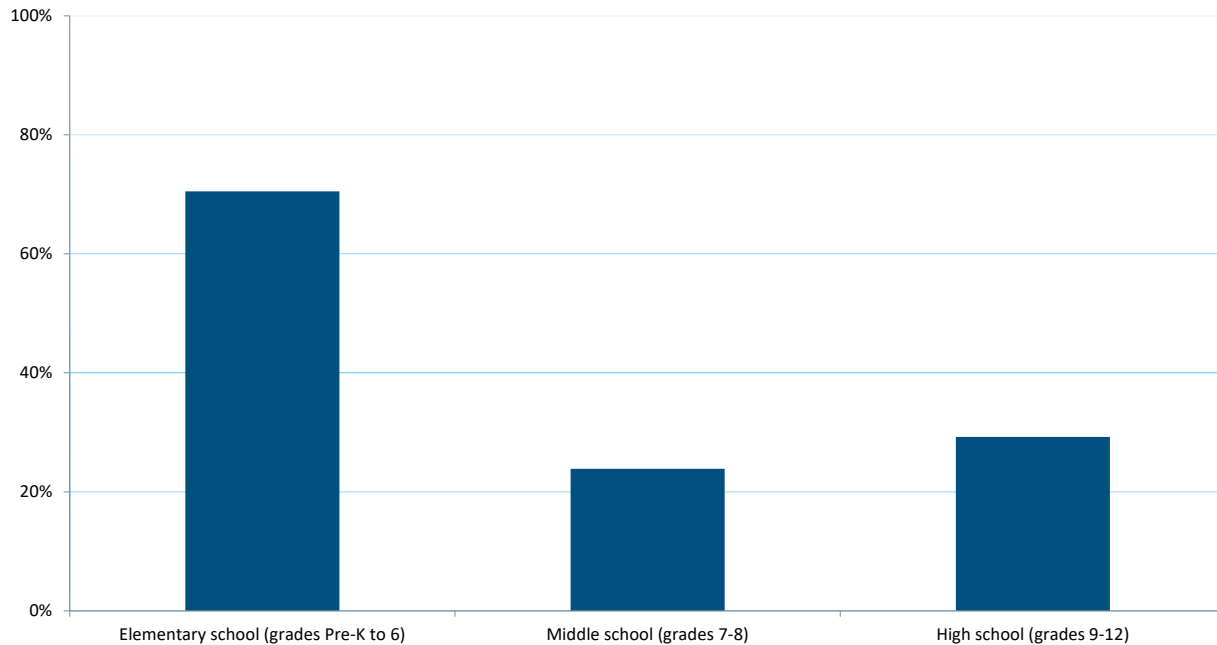
Note. N = 1,149.

Staff Collaboration and Professional Development

In this section, staff were asked to use a Likert scale to rate their level of agreement with five statements and indicate professional development formats they were currently aware of as well as those they found effective. Last, respondents were asked which professional development topics they were most interested in learning more about.

All findings for this section's Likert-scale survey items are depicted in Exhibit 5.

"I feel sufficiently prepared to teach students with disabilities."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "I feel sufficiently prepared to teach students with disabilities." As could be reasonably expected, special education teachers and certified support staff feel more prepared than other staff roles to teach students with disabilities in ESD. The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.5. The average rating for certified staff was 3.3. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.9 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 5.

"School and district leaders have ensured that staff members (special education and general education) who teach students with disabilities have the appropriate knowledge/training to support them."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "School and district leaders have ensured that staff members (special education and general education) who teach students with disabilities have the appropriate knowledge/training to support them." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.2. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.9. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.5 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 5.

"School and individual professional development plans reflect professional growth needs related to students with disabilities."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "School and individual professional development plans reflect professional growth needs related to students with disabilities." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.4. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.8. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.7 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 5.

"Teachers new to the profession or new to teaching students with disabilities receive additional, specialized support."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Teachers new to the profession or new to teaching students with disabilities receive additional, specialized support." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.1 The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.8. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.3 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 5.

"There are sufficient professional development options for my role."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "There are sufficient professional development options for my role." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.1 The average rating for certified staff was higher, at 3.1. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.4 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 5.

Exhibit 5. Staff Collaboration and Professional Development

Staff Collaboration & Professional Development
Special Education Teachers & Related Service Providers compared to the overall average

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Certified Support Staff
- Overall Average

	I feel sufficiently prepared to teach and support students with disabilities.	School and district leaders have ensured staff members (special education and general education) who teach students with disabilities have the appropriate knowledge/training to support them.	School and individual professional development plans reflect professional growth needs related to students with disabilities.	Teachers new to the profession or new to teaching students with disabilities receive additional, specialized support.	There are sufficient professional development options for my role.
Special Education Teacher	3.5	2.2	2.4	2.1	2.1
Certified Support Staff	3.3	2.9	2.8	2.8	3.1
Overall Average	2.9	2.5	2.7	2.3	2.4

Note. *N*s are weighted averages. *N* = 1,121.

What type of professional learning opportunities has the district made available to you to improve your knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities? (Check all that apply.)

Staff were asked to indicate all the different forms of professional learning they were aware of that are currently available to them. Answer choices included the following:

- On-site professional development
- Virtual professional development
- Job-embedded coaching
- Staff meetings
- Professional learning communities (e.g., Learning Palooza)
- Book studies
- None
- Other

The top three types of learning identified by special education teachers were as follows:

1. Virtual professional development (70%; $N = 80$)
2. Staff meetings (40%; $N = 46$)
2. On-site professional development (40%; $N = 46$)
3. Book studies (21%; $N = 24$)

The top three types of learning identified by certified support staff were as follows:

1. Staff meetings (59%; $N = 85$)
2. Virtual professional development (45%; $N = 65$)
3. Book studies (26%; $N = 37$)

The top three types of learning identified by all staff were as follows:

1. Staff meetings (42%; $N = 457$)
2. Virtual professional development (41%; $N = 444$)
3. On-site professional development (26%; $N = 283$)

Noteworthy to mention is that among all staff, "none" was the top fourth option selected by a quarter of respondents (25%; $N = 271$). Respondents who indicated "other" provided additional responses that usually clarified the options available (e.g., a special educator attending a book study open to general education teachers and not specifically offered by the special education department or identifying various departmental meetings). Others indicated state trainings or

specific program trainings, such as AVID or LETRS. A few indicated that no trainings were available and/or that they would simply "learn as [they] go."

Findings among all staff are depicted in Exhibit 6.

Exhibit 6. What type of professional learning opportunities has the district made available to you to improve your knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities? (Check all that apply.)
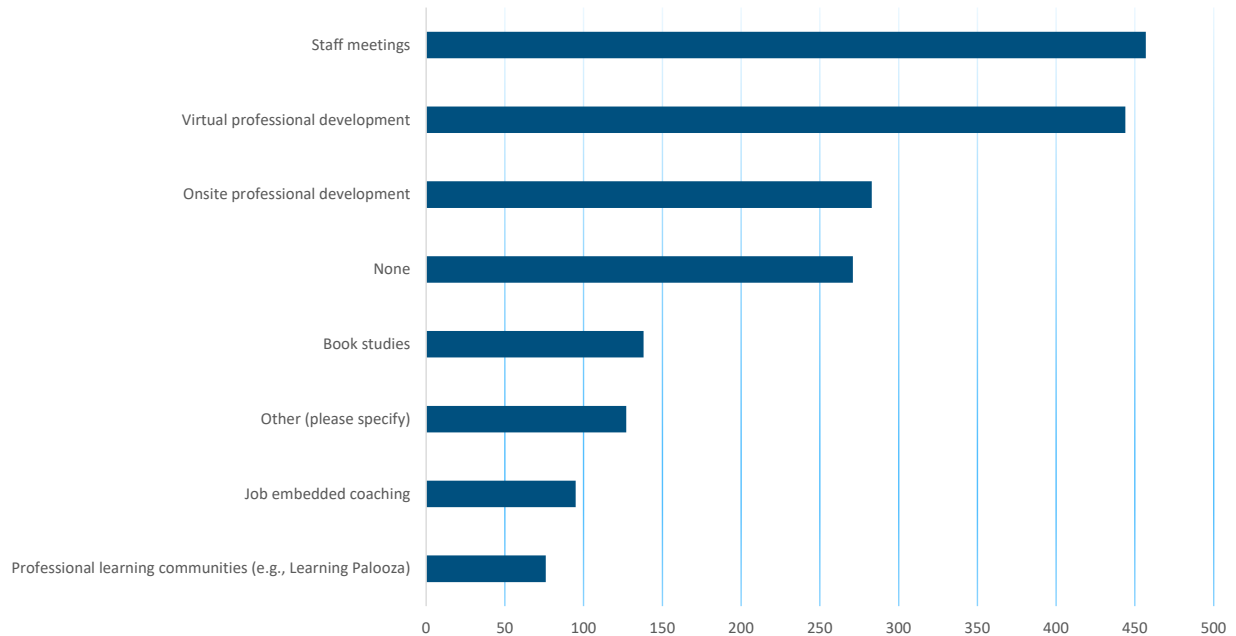
Note. N = 1,078.

What type of professional opportunities are most effective (or would be most effective if not presently offered) in helping you successfully support students with disabilities?

Staff were asked to indicate all the different forms of professional learning they believed were or would be most effective in helping them successfully support students with disabilities. Answer choices included the following:

- On-site professional development
- Virtual professional development
- Job-embedded coaching
- Staff meetings
- Professional learning communities (e.g., Learning Palooza)
- Book studies
- Other

The top three types of learning identified by special education teachers were as follows:

1. On-site professional development (73%; N = 84)
2. Job-embedded coaching (46%; N = 53)
3. Staff and leadership meetings (43%; N = 49)

The top three types of learning identified by certified support staff were as follows:

1. On-site professional development (81%; N = 118)
2. Job-embedded coaching (55%; N = 80)
3. Virtual professional development (46%; N = 66)

The top three types of learning identified by all staff were as follows:

1. On-site professional development (72%; N = 773)
2. Job-embedded coaching (48%; N = 521)
3. Virtual professional development (39%; N = 420)

On what topic(s) would you like to receive more professional development?

Respondents were asked to indicate which topics they would be most interested in receiving further professional development training in; 652 responses were received. The most requested topic was "Managing challenging behaviors" (134), followed by "Autism" (65) and "IEPs" (53). More information about these topic categories and other categories is included in

Exhibit 7; although not exhaustive (many responses requested multiple topics), the exhibit touches on all broadly appealing topical categories.

Exhibit 7. On what topic(s) would you like to receive more professional development?

Topic Categories and Number of Requests	Explanation
Managing challenging behaviors (134)	This topic category included learning more about behavioral disabilities, de-escalation strategies, behavior management techniques, and generally managing behavioral issues in the classroom.
Autism (65)	This category included learning how to support students diagnosed with autism as well as students believed to be on the spectrum but without IEPs.
Individualized education programs (IEPs) (53)	Respondents who wanted additional professional development on IEPs were particularly interested in IEP trainings, language to be used in IEPs, writing IEPs to be compliant with the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction Safety Net review, guidance on facilitating IEP meetings, and writing IEP progress reports.
Social-emotional learning (SEL) (51)	This category included requests to learn more about the process for supporting students exhibiting SEL needs as well as how to help those with specific goals related to SEL in IEPs.
Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (34)	This category included learning how to support students diagnosed with ADHD.
Inclusive classroom (27)	This category included how to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom and how to best modify the curriculum for students with IEPs, including requests for specific Universal Design for Learning strategies.
Dyslexia (24)	Individuals were interested in strategies for identifying and supporting students with dyslexia.
Trauma-informed practices (24)	Respondents were interested in learning more about trauma-informed practices. Understandably, many also connected this with an interest in SEL.

Topic Categories and Number of Requests	Explanation
Learning disabilities (14)	Individuals were interested in learning more generally about learning disabilities.
Multilingual learners (13)	Respondents were interested in methods to support English learners.
Executive functioning (11)	Respondents were interested in strategies to support students with challenges related to executive functioning.
Transition (8)	Respondents were interested in transition planning and transitioning students between classrooms.
Intensive supports (7)	This category requested strategies for teaching students with significant cognitive disabilities.
Identifying students with disabilities (5)	Respondents were interested in learning how to identify students with disabilities.

Data-Driven Decision Making

In this section, staff were asked to use a Likert scale to rate their level of agreement with five statements. If they "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" with any statements, they were asked to explain why.

All findings for this section's Likert-scale survey items are depicted in Exhibit 9.

"Placement decisions are based on the needs of the student and NOT the location of the school, disability category, or parent preference."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Placement decisions are based on the needs of the student and NOT the location of the school, disability category, or parent preference." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.0. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.3. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.6 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 9.

"Placement decisions are made consistently across IEP teams and schools."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Placement decisions are made consistently across IEP teams and schools." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 1.8. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.0. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.4 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 9.

"Staff members consistently use data to make decisions about placement, provision of services, and IEP goals."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Staff members consistently use data to make decisions about placement, provision of services, and IEP goals." The average ratings among both special education teachers and certified support staff for this statement were the same, 3.0. This compares with a slightly higher average score of 3.1 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 9.

"The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to parents/guardians."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to parents/guardians." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.2. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.4. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.7 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 9.

"The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to teachers and principals."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to teachers and principals." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.0. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.3. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.5 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 9.

If you answered "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to any of the questions above, please explain why.

Respondents were asked to explain their choice if they "disagree[d]" or "strongly disagree[d]" with any of the statements on data-driven decision making. Responses touched on many similar themes, detailed in Exhibit 9. Themes are listed in no particular order.

Exhibit 8. If you answered "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to any of the questions above, please explain why.

Theme	Explanation
Inappropriate placements	Many noted that placements appeared to be determined by location rather than appropriateness, as deemed by special education teachers and certified support staff (self-identified in the response).
	Many believed that student placements were too restrictive and that students were not learning in the appropriate, least restrictive environment.
Lack of equity	Teachers reported being explicitly told "not to refer black and brown students for special education services."
Poor data	Data collection was reportedly "random" and "nonspecific."
	Staff mentioned feeling "excluded" from individualized education program (IEP) meetings and the placement process for students. Several noted meetings being held without key staff present.
Physical access	Students with mobility challenges struggled with physical access in their placements, leading staff to believe the placement was inappropriate.
District intervention	Related to inappropriate placements, many staff believed district administrators inappropriately intervened in student placement decisions, prioritizing "busing" or "admin bottom lines" over the decisions of IEP teams and students and their families.

Exhibit 9. Data-Driven Decision Making

Data-Driven Decision Making
Special Education Teachers & Related Service Providers compared to the overall average

Measure Names
- ■ Special Education Teacher
- ■ Certified Support Staff
- ■ Overall Average

	Placement decisions are based on the needs of the student and NOT the location of school, disability category, or parent preference.	Placement decisions are made consistently across IEP teams and schools.	Staff members consistently use data to make decisions about placement, provision of services, and IEP goals.	The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to parents/guardians.	The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to teachers and principals.
Special Education Teacher	2.0	1.8	3.0	2.2	2.0
Certified Support Staff	2.3	2.0	3.0	2.4	2.3
Overall Average	2.6	2.4	3.1	2.7	2.5

*Note. N*s are weighted averages. *N* = 1,046. IEP = individualized education program.

Equitable Access

In this section, staff were asked to use a Likert scale to rate their level of agreement with two statements.

All findings for this section's items are depicted in Exhibit 10.

"Students with disabilities at my school are *placed* in settings with their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible and consistent with least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements as specified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Students with disabilities at my school are *placed* in settings with their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible and consistent with least restrictive environment (LRE) requirements as specified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)." The average rating for both special education teachers and certified staff for this statement was 3.4. This rating compares with an average score of 3.6 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 10.

"Students with disabilities at my school have adequate *access* to the core curriculum, instruction, and social and extracurricular activities."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Students with disabilities at my school have adequate *access* to the core curriculum, instruction, and social and extracurricular activities." The average rating for special education teachers and certified staff for this statement was 3.1. This rating compares with a slightly lower average score of 2.9 among all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 10.

Exhibit 10. Equitable Access

Equitable Access
Special Education Teachers & Related Service Providers compared to the overall average

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Certified Support Staff
- Overall Average

Students with disabilities at my school are placed in settings with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible and consistent with Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements as specified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

	Special Education Teacher	Certified Support Staff	Overall Average
Score	3.4	3.4	3.6

Students with disabilities at my school have adequate access to core curriculum, instruction, social, and extra-curricular activities.

	Special Education Teacher	Certified Support Staff	Overall Average
Score	3.2	3.2	3.4

Note. *N*s are weighted averages. *N* = 1,028. IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Systems and Organizational Structures for Providing Coordinated Districtwide Supports

In this section, staff were asked to use a Likert scale to rate their level of agreement with eight statements.

All findings for this section's items are depicted in Exhibit 11.

"District and school leadership support the varied needs of all demographic groups and communities within ESD."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "District and school leadership support the varied needs of all demographic groups and communities within ESD." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.4. The average rating for certified staff was higher, at 2.9. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.9 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.

"Leaders make it clear that educating students with disabilities to high standards is a priority in schools."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Leaders make it clear that educating students with disabilities to high standards is a priority in schools." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.5. The average rating for certified staff was higher, at 3.1. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.9 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.

"My school consistently uses a clearly defined process for identification and provision of special education services."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "My school consistently uses a clearly defined process for identification and provision of special education services." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.3. The average rating for certified staff was lower, at 2.5. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.2 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.

"The code of student conduct is applied fairly and equitably to all students."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "The code of student conduct is applied fairly and equitably to all students." The average rating for both special education teachers and certified staff for this statement was 2.8. This rating compares with an average score of 2.9 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.
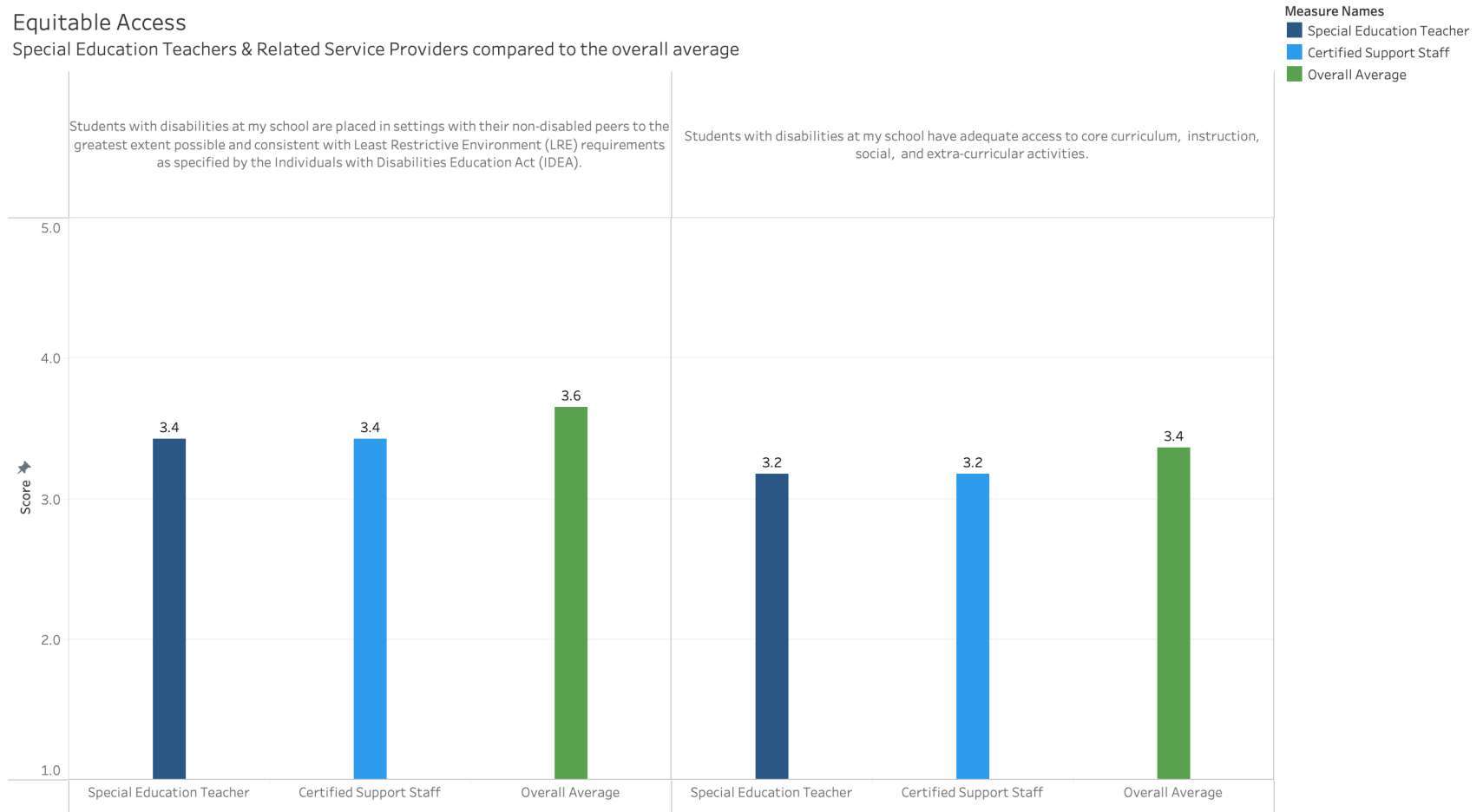
"The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to noncertified support staff."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to noncertified support staff." The average rating of special education teachers for this statement was 1.9. The average rating for certified staff was higher, at 2.4. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.3 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.

"The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to teachers and certified support staff."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to teachers and certified support staff." The average rating of special education teachers for this statement was 2.1. The average rating for certified staff was higher, at 2.5. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.3 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.

"There are sufficient special education teachers and staff available to meet the needs of students with disabilities in my school."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "There are sufficient special education teachers and staff available to meet the needs of students with disabilities in my school." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 1.8. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 2.0. These ratings compare with an average score of 1.9 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.

"Values of equity, fairness, and inclusion are modeled by all school staff."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Values of equity, fairness, and inclusion are modeled by all school staff." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.8. The average rating for certified staff was lower, at 2.1. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.2 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 11.

Exhibit 11. Systems and Organizational Structures for Providing Coordinated Districtwide Support

Systems & Organizational Structures for Providing Coordinated Districtwide Support
Special Education Teachers & Related Service Providers compared to the overall average

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Certified Support Staff
- Overall Average

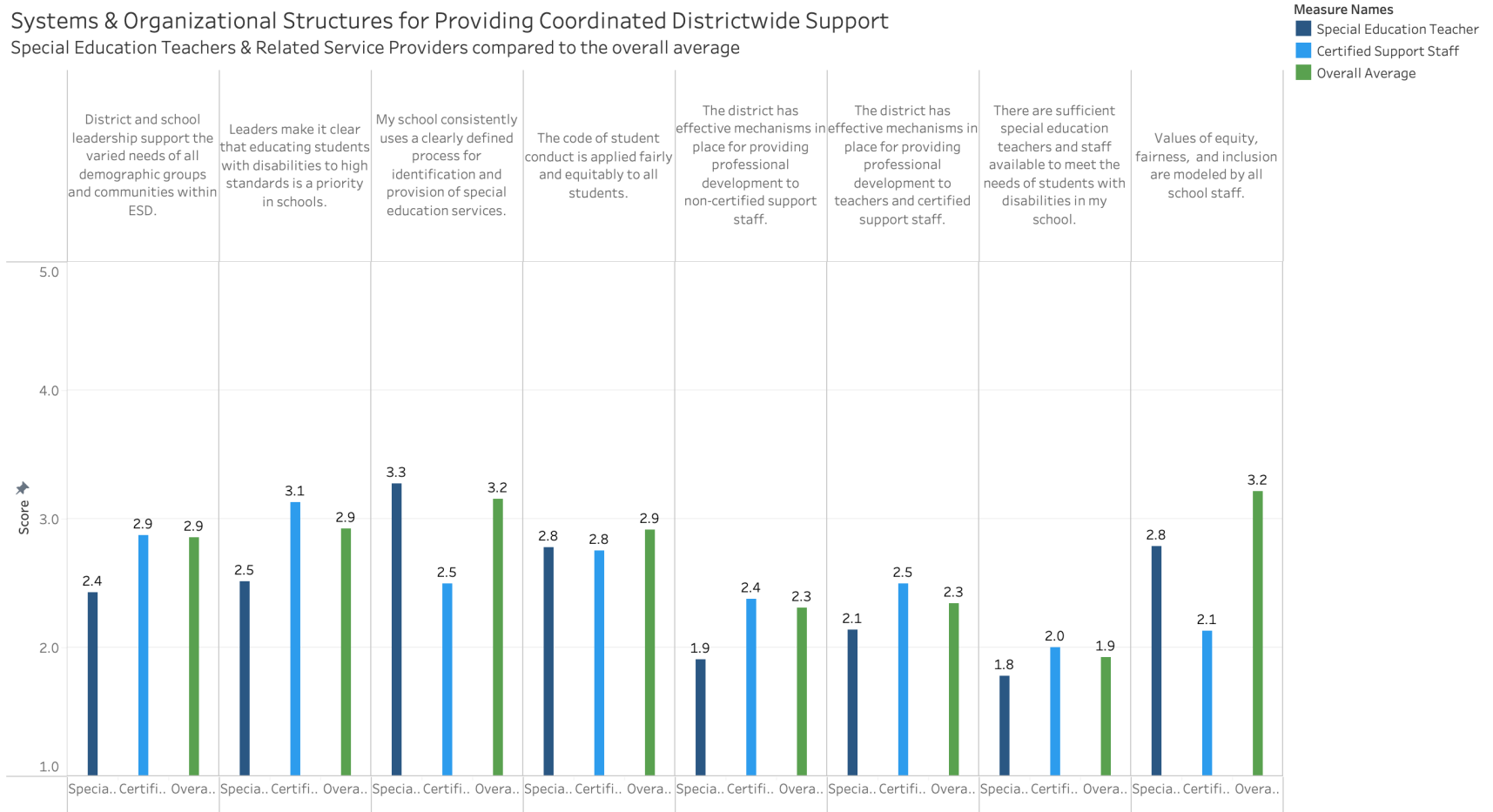| Measure	Special Education Teacher	Certified Support Staff	Overall Average
District and school leadership support the varied needs of all demographic groups and communities within ESD.	2.4	2.9	2.9
Leaders make it clear that educating students with disabilities to high standards is a priority in schools.	2.5	3.1	2.9
My school consistently uses a clearly defined process for identification and provision of special education services.	3.3	2.5	3.2
The code of student conduct is applied fairly and equitably to all students.	2.8	2.8	2.9
The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to non-certified support staff.	1.9	2.4	2.3
The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to teachers and certified support staff.	2.1	2.5	2.3
There are sufficient special education teachers and staff available to meet the needs of students with disabilities in my school.	1.8	2.0	1.9
Values of equity, fairness, and inclusion are modeled by all school staff.	2.8	2.1	3.2

Note. Ns are weighted averages. N = 1,013. ESD = Edmonds School District.

Communication

In this section, staff were asked to use a Likert scale to rate their level of agreement with six statements.

All findings for this section's items are depicted in Exhibit 12.

"Current communication procedures and practices between and among leadership, special education staff, and general education staff in my building are effective in allowing us to work in tandem to meet the needs of students with disabilities."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Current communication procedures and practices between and among leadership, special education staff, and general education staff in my building are effective in allowing us to work in tandem to meet the needs of students with disabilities." The average rating for both special education teachers and certified staff for this statement was 2.5. This rating compares with an average score of 2.6 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 12.

"District administrators communicate effectively with teachers and staff."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "District administrators communicate effectively with teachers and staff." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 1.7. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 1.9. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.3 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 12.

"My school effectively involves families in decisions about how to address individual student needs."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "My school effectively involves families in decisions about how to address individual student needs." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.6. The average rating for certified staff was slightly less, at 3.4. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.5 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 12.

"My school uses an effective system for communicating with families of struggling students and students with disabilities."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "My school uses an effective system for communicating with families of struggling students and students with disabilities." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.4. The average rating for certified staff was slightly less, at 3.3. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.2 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 12.

"There is consistent communication from the *district* to parents of students with disabilities."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "There is consistent communication from the *distric*t to parents of students with disabilities." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.0. The average rating for certified staff was higher, at 2.3. These ratings compare with an average score of 2.6 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 12.

"There is consistent communication from the *school* to parents of students with disabilities."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "There is consistent communication from the *school* to parents of students with disabilities." The average rating for both special education teachers and certified staff for this statement was 3.3. This rating compares with the same average score of 3.3 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 12.

Exhibit 12. Communication

Communication
Special Education Teachers & Related Service Providers compared to the overall average

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Certified Support Staff
- Overall Average

| | Current communication procedures and practices between and among leadership, special education staff and general education staff in my building are effective in allowing us to work in tandem to meet the needs of students with disabilities. | District administrators communicate effectively with teachers and staff. | My school effectively involves families in decisions about how to address individual student needs. | My school uses an effective system for communicating with families of struggling students and students with disabilities. | There is consistent communication from the district to parents of students with disabilities. | There is consistent communication from the school to parents of students with disabilities. |

Scores:
- Current communication procedures: Special E. 2.5, Certified 2.5, Overall A. 2.6
- District administrators: Special E. 1.7, Certified 1.9, Overall A. 2.3
- My school effectively involves families: Special E. 3.6, Certified 3.4, Overall A. 3.5
- My school uses an effective system: Special E. 3.4, Certified 3.3, Overall A. 3.2
- There is consistent communication from the district: Special E. 2.0, Certified 2.3, Overall A. 2.6
- There is consistent communication from the school: Special E. 3.3, Certified 3.3, Overall A. 3.3

*Note. N*s are weighted averages. *N* = 998.

Climate

In this section, staff were asked to use a Likert scale to rate their level of agreement with six statements.

All findings for this section's items are depicted in Exhibit 13.

"My professional opinions are valued by fellow staff and school/district leadership."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "My professional opinions are valued by fellow staff and school/district leadership." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 2.9. The average rating for certified staff was higher, at 3.2. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.3 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 13.

"My supervisor and/or building administrator care about me as a person."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "My supervisor and/or building administrator cares about me as a person." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.9. The average rating for certified staff was lower, at 3.7. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.9 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 13.

"My supervisor and/or building administrator encourages my professional development."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "My supervisor and/or building administrator encourages my professional development." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.9. The average rating for certified staff was lower, at 3.7. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.9 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 13.

"My supervisor and/or building administrator respects the opinions of others."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement ""My supervisor and/or building administrator respects the opinions of others." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.7. The average rating for certified staff was slightly less, at 3.6. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.8 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 13.

"Safety is a priority for students and staff at my school."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Safety is a priority for students and staff at my school." The average rating for both special education teachers and

certified staff for this statement was 3.6. This rating compares with an average score of 3.7 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 13.

"Teachers in this school are empowered to help students when they are having problems."

Staff were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Teachers in this school are empowered to help students when they are having problems." The average rating for special education teachers for this statement was 3.3. The average rating for certified staff was slightly higher, at 3.4. These ratings compare with an average score of 3.5 across all ESD staff. Findings are depicted in Exhibit 13.

Exhibit 13. Climate

Climate
Special Education Teachers & Related Service Providers compared to the overall average

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Certified Support Staff
- Overall Average
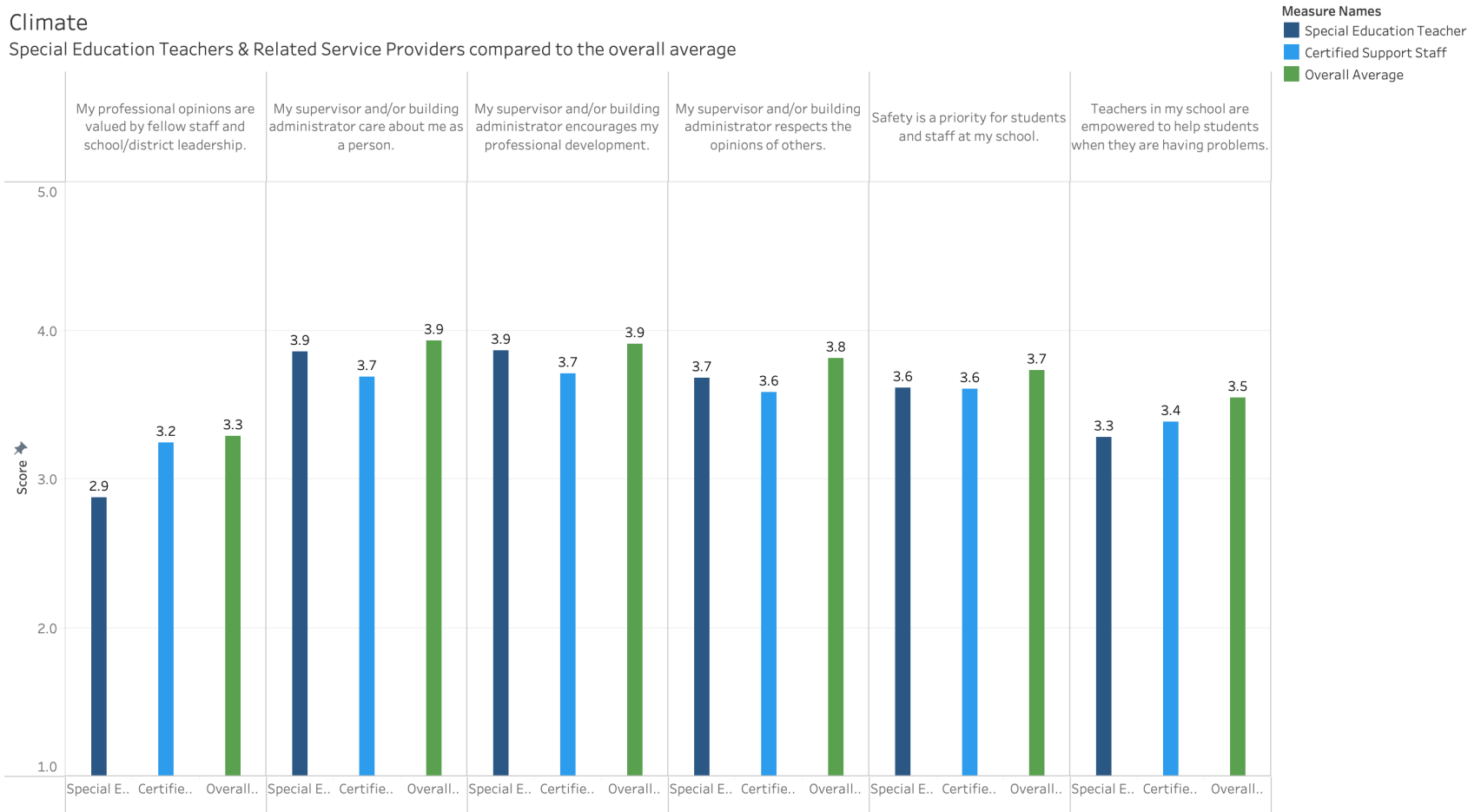
*Note. N*s are weighted averages. *N* = 991.

Open-Ended Survey Questions & Focus Group and Interview Findings

Many of the same themes emerged across the open-ended survey questions, focus group transcripts, and interview transcripts. The exhibits below summarize, in no particular order, findings in the domains of our review: climate, staffing, and communication.

Climate

Exhibit 14. Climate Barriers

Theme	Explanation
Lack of support	An analysis of open-ended survey responses showed that general education teachers, building administrators, and noncertified support staff feel unsupported in the classroom. This is not to say that other staff roles did not mention this as well, but comments were particularly concentrated among the aforementioned groups. Focus groups and interviews revealed that staff acknowledge the reality of personnel shortages but would like more recognition for the roles they pick up because of continued staff shortages.
Lack of communication	Communication barriers are explored in greater depth in Exhibit 17, but staff generally recognized poor communication as a climate barrier. Across all focus groups and interviews, as well as open-ended survey responses, staff view district administrators' current communication efforts as lacking.
Pay	This finding did not arise in the focus groups and interviews except when discussing the pay of paraeducators. Analysis of the open-ended survey responses revealed special education teachers discussing extra pay for training and job-related duties outside of their day-to-day work. Transportation staff mention similar comments.
Lack of leadership	In the focus group, interview, and open-ended response data, respondents indicated that district administrators are suffering from "absentee leadership" and lack of "a shared vision." Almost all staff roles mention a lack

Theme	Explanation
	of district-level leadership in the open-ended survey responses but to a lesser degree than district administrators.
Lack of resources	This theme emerged in interviews and focus groups but to a lesser degree in the open-ended survey responses. Special education teachers, certified support staff, noncertified support staff, and building administrators alike cited a lack of district resources as the reason given to them when they made requests to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Several cited data requirements being used "as a weapon."
Negative feelings	Several described the current climate in ESD as "toxic" in interviews, focus groups, and open-ended responses. Adversarial relationships were detailed in interviews and focus groups at all levels of ESD—among district office staff, between district office staff and building administrators, between district office staff and special education teachers/certified support staff, and between noncertified support staff and their building administrators. Several also mentioned apathetic attitudes being problematic in interviews and focus groups.
Lack of respect	One staff member in a focus group described district staff as having an "assumption of incompetence before [they] even ask[ed] a question." Another noncertified support staff member said their opinions were overlooked despite their familiarity with students and their cases. Staff report being left out of individualized education program meetings and other important decisions affecting their work and the students they care about, which is interpreted as a lack of respect for their professional opinions.

Exhibit 15. Climate Facilitators

Theme	Explanation
Accessible facilities	Focus groups and open-ended survey responses discussed as facilitators universal accessible design for bathrooms, playgrounds, classrooms, and other locations throughout the district that students with disabilities frequent.
Time	Time is a precious resource in ESD. In all interviews, focus groups, and many open-ended survey responses, staff discussed limited time and how additional time would be appreciated. General education teachers want more time to collaborate with special education staff. Paraeducators mentioned not having time to eat lunch. District staff discussed struggling to keep up with their workloads.
Responsiveness	Staff discussed not getting the answers they need in the time they need them, and students and their families suffering because of it. Staff in all roles acknowledged that responsiveness from the individuals they contact with questions would greatly help their day-to-day experience.
Awareness	In focus groups, interviews, and open-ended survey responses, staff discussed how awareness from others would help. Awareness can refer to others' knowledge of job responsibilities, workloads, schedules, or particular subject matters, such as general education teachers wanting to be more aware of individualized education programs, inclusive classrooms, and special education more broadly.
Clear mission, processes, and protocols	Staff at all levels (district and school) are confused about who to go to for direction. The current system is described as "decentralized," which has some staff concerned about personal interpretations of processes and legal compliance. A clear mission, process, and protocols (and proactive, consistent communication about

Theme	Explanation
	them) would be positively received by all staff.
District representation	Staff want district administrators to visit their classrooms, see students, and discuss their work and questions. Staff discuss placement decisions being made by district administrators based on years' old classroom setups. In many focus groups, interviews, and open-ended survey responses, staff noted ESD leadership saying something will be done but not following through with the initiative.
Transparency	Staff wish to know why decisions are made from district leadership. Lack of transparency was frequently coded alongside feelings of a lack of respect.

Staffing

Exhibit 16. Staffing Themes

Theme	Explanation
Safety	Noncertified support staff in roles such as transportation staff and paraeducators worry most about safety on the job. This theme emerged in the open-ended survey responses as well as the noncertified support staff focus group.
Distribution of responsibilities/feeling overwhelmed	ESD staff at all levels discussed feeling overwhelmed by their daily responsibilities. Whether it is the number of e-mails to attend to, more students with behavioral issues in classrooms to manage, or building administrator time primarily being devoted to handling special education matters, staff are feeling overwhelmed by the number of responsibilities to attend to in a day.
Lack of staff	Staff may be feeling overwhelmed because they are having to cover multiple roles. In interviews, focus groups, and open-ended survey responses, individuals discussed being impacted by a lack of staff.

Theme	Explanation
Staff turnover	Staff generally acknowledged the amount of staff turnover that ESD had in the district office during the 2021–22 school year and how that affected them.

Communication

Exhibit 17. Ineffective Communication Practices

Theme	Explanation
District-level communications	Individuals generally believed that ESD district staff communication methods are ineffective. When they have case-related questions or questions related to newsletter or memo content, they are unable to reach district staff by phone or e-mail and report being required to wait undue amounts of time to receive a response (if a response is received). Staff generally pinpointed a breakdown in communication from the district during the 2021–22 school year, when ESD experienced a large turnover in the district office.
Phone calls and e-mails	Staff generally disliked outreach by phone calls and e-mails in the open-ended survey response data, instead preferring in-person district representation.
Robocalls	Open-ended survey responses identified robocalls as an annoyance.
Lack of responsiveness	In focus groups and open-ended survey responses, staff indicated needing answers to important, time-sensitive questions but not receiving a response in time (usually from district staff).

Exhibit 18. Effective Communication Practices

Theme	Explanation
Effective at the school level	Staff of all levels generally agreed in focus groups, interviews, and open-ended survey responses that communication was most effective at the building level.
ParentSquare app	The ParentSquare app was well liked by general educators as an effective tool to communicate with parents in the open-ended survey response data.
Job-alike meetings	Staff mentioned these in both focus groups and open-ended survey responses as useful venues to hear important updates and connect with colleagues. Certified support staff and special education teachers were more likely to mention them in their open-ended survey responses.
Newsletters	Newsletters were generally regarded positively by all staff roles, but staff in focus groups noted that they are sent out inconsistently. Staff generally recommended that newsletters be employed in tandem with other communication strategies. Weekly schoolwide newsletters were well regarded in open-ended survey responses.

Communication Recommendations

Responses to this question from the survey and focus groups were considered in the Recommendations section. See the Recommendations section of this report for specific suggestions.

Strengths of ESD

Strengths of ESD supported by the data include the following:

Strength 1: A focus on best serving all students and their families.

In every focus group and interview, staff mentioned wanting to give the best education to *all* students in the district. For students with disabilities, this means a legally compliant, high-quality education in the least-restrictive environment allowable agreed upon by the student's IEP team. Students who come from less vocal, less-resourced homes deserve the same, high-

quality education as every other student in ESD, and staff acknowledge this. When speaking critically on various matters, several staff made a point of mentioning they were "not a negative person" and frequently related their criticisms to how they ultimately hurt students with disabilities and their families.

This focus on families is reflected in the survey as well. Staff awarded some of their highest ratings to staff's ability to involve families in decisions about student needs (3.9 weighted average across all staff surveyed). Staff also rated highly their school's ability to communicate consistently and effectively with families of students with disabilities (3.5 weighted average across all staff surveyed).

Strength 2: Generally effective communication among staff and administrators at the building level.

Staff at both the district and school levels acknowledged that communication between staff and building administrators is generally effective at the building level. Most staff in focus groups and interviews expressed that they had positive working relationships with their colleagues and building administrators, and frequently wished they had more time to communicate and work together. There were exceptions to this, primarily with paraeducators, which we explore in greater depth in the Result 1 section.

In the survey, staff awarded high ratings to their direct supervisors, agreeing with the statements that "[their supervisor/building administrator] cares about them as a person" (3.9 weighted average across all staff surveyed), "[their supervisor/building administrator] respects the opinions of others" (3.9 weighted average), and "[their supervisor/building administrator] encourages [their] professional development" (3.8 weighted average).

Strength 3: At all levels, staff acknowledge that ESD possesses a strong, qualified group of special education teachers and certified support staff.

This was another recurring theme across our focus groups and interviews. Except for a few individuals, staff generally regarded themselves and their colleagues as competent and well suited to their job responsibilities.

This was echoed in the survey as staff awarded a higher rating to the statement "I feel sufficiently prepared to teach and support students with disabilities" (3.5 weighted average among special education staff and 3.3 weighted average among certified support staff).

Strength 4: Recognition that ESD was and is a well-regarded school district that families locate to so their children can receive a high-quality education and special education services.

Individuals recognized this when speaking about why they feel personally invested in seeing the best outcomes for students with disabilities and their families. To a lesser extent, individuals also recognized this when speaking about professional development opportunities offered to them, acknowledging ESD as an excellent district for teachers to begin their careers because of the professional development opportunities, climate, and culture offered by the district.

Summary of Results

Analysis of all data yielded the following challenges related to current climate, staffing, and communication:

Result 1: A pervasive "us versus them" culture at all levels of the district.

Result 2: A perceived lack of respect for staff (especially special education staff).

Result 3: "A culture of segregation" related to special education.

Result 4: A perceived lack of resources by building-level administrators and staff, and concerns about how these limited resources affect student placements.

Result 5: Many staff (especially special education staff) describe a poor morale and feelings of burnout, anger, or resignation.

Result 6: Many staff feel overwhelmed by their workloads and the distribution of their job responsibilities; additional responsibilities continue to be added without acknowledgement or input from affected staff.

Result 7: A lack of staff is felt in many schools across the district.

Result 8: Some staff are concerned for their safety while performing their daily job duties and do not believe the appropriate mechanisms are in place to ensure it.

Result 9: Many staff are interested in additional professional development.

Result 10: Many building-level staff experience a lack of response or follow-through among district staff.

Result 11: Communication is generally perceived to be ineffective at the district level.

Result 12: Perceived unilateral decision making by district staff.

Result 13: Lack of trust on behalf of many staff, at all levels.

Recommendations

We offer seven recommendations to address the results outlined in this report and improve climate, staffing, and communication in ESD. Each recommendation includes a rationale and enumerated steps for implementation.

ESD is a community of stakeholders dedicated to inclusive education and success for all students and families. Given this, it will be important for the district to analyze what is currently occurring in the district, student outcomes resulting from existing efforts, and what best practices are for inclusive education. For example, the book *High-Leverage Practices in Special Education* offers a vetted and approved (by the Council for Exceptional Children) list of instructional practices that should be employed for students with disabilities to truly progress in school. These practices have decades of research supporting them and would be an important first step in providing professional learning for all teachers of students with disabilities. The companion book *High-Leverage Practices for Inclusive Classrooms* offers in-depth explanations of how to implement these practices in classrooms and provides core knowledge that all educators in inclusive settings should be aware of.

As ESD considers implementation of the following recommendations, we offer a bit of caution. Failure to prepare adequately for implementation of large-scale change can lead to inefficient use of resources, augmented frustration among staff, and, worse, poor student outcomes. It will take time to build the district and school infrastructure necessary to prepare staff to implement changes adequately and ensure ongoing fidelity to these changes. For systemic changes, implementation science suggests that schools and districts invest at least 3–6 months to build stakeholder buy-in and another 6–12 months to prepare adequately (e.g., resource development or access, professional development, communication, infrastructure changes) for full implementation (https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/module-1/implementation-stages).

Using a validated, systematic approach to implementing and monitoring these recommendations will lead to efficient and effective use of resources, greater adherence to established processes, and, most importantly, sustained improvement in climate, staffing, communication, and student outcomes.

In addition, although implementing each recommendation on its own is possible, we suggest a comprehensive approach to system change, integrating all seven recommendations to maximize outcomes and opportunities for staff and students with disabilities alike.

Recommendation 1: Establish a cross-district advisory committee for special education to address priority concerns.

Establishing a cross-district advisory committee for special education is a proactive and inclusive approach to address priority concerns and improve the educational experiences of students with special needs. This committee would bring together key stakeholders from across the district, including educators, administrators, parents, community members, and experts in the field of special education. By fostering collaboration and shared decision making, the committee should aim to identify, discuss, and develop strategies to address the specific challenges faced by students with disabilities.

The committee's primary purpose should be to create a platform for open dialogue, information sharing, and problem solving regarding special education issues. By convening regular meetings, members can discuss and analyze the priority concerns affecting students with special needs, such as curriculum adaptations, teacher training, inclusive practices, resource allocation, and parental involvement. These discussions would provide a holistic understanding of the challenges and allow committee members to brainstorm innovative solutions.

The cross-district advisory committee would serve as a valuable resource. By pooling together their collective expertise and experiences, committee members can develop best practices, share successful initiatives, and collaborate on the implementation of evidence-based interventions. This exchange of knowledge would help the district enhance its special education program and improve outcomes for students with special needs.

The committee also can play a crucial role in advocacy and policy development. Through their collaborative efforts, committee members can identify gaps in existing policies, propose amendments or new policies, and advocate for equitable opportunities and resources for students with special needs. Their collective voice would carry more weight when addressing policymakers, as they represent multiple districts and have a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by students with special needs at a broader level.

In addition, the advisory committee can facilitate professional development opportunities for educators and administrators. By organizing workshops, training sessions, and conferences, committee members can disseminate research-based practices, provide ongoing support, and enhance the knowledge and skills of special education professionals. This would ensure a consistent and high-quality educational experience for students with special needs, regardless of which school they attend.

Furthermore, the committee can actively involve parents and caregivers in the decision-making process. Including parent representatives in the committee ensures that their voices are heard, their concerns are addressed, and their invaluable insights are considered when developing

policies and interventions. This collaborative approach would strengthen the partnership between schools and families, leading to better outcomes for students with special needs.

Overall, establishing an advisory committee for special education would enable the district to work together in a coordinated and strategic manner. By addressing priority concerns collectively, sharing best practices, advocating for policy changes, and facilitating professional development, the committee would create a platform for continuous improvement and ensure that students with special needs receive the support and resources they need to succeed academically and personally.

Recommendation 2: Create a dedicated special education director position whose sole responsibility is to oversee special education.

Creating a dedicated special education director position whose sole responsibility is to oversee special education is an important step in ensuring that students with special needs receive the support and resources they require. This position would play a crucial role in managing and improving special education programs within the district, addressing the unique needs of students with disabilities, and advocating for their rights.

Following are some key activities that could be included in the responsibilities of a dedicated special education director:

Program Development and Implementation

The special education director would be responsible for developing and implementing comprehensive special education programs. This would involve collaborating with teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders to design curriculum modifications, accommodations, and IEPs that meet the specific needs of each student.

Compliance With Regulations and Standards

The director would ensure the special education programs adhere to all relevant regulations, laws, and standards. They would stay updated on federal, state, and local guidelines, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and work to ensure that the district is in compliance with these regulations.

Staff Training and Support

The director would offer ongoing training and professional development opportunities for teachers and support staff working with students with disabilities. This could involve organizing workshops, seminars, and resources to enhance the skills and knowledge of educators in special education practices, differentiated instruction, and behavior management techniques.

Collaboration and Communication

The special education director would serve as a liaison between various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, students, and community organizations. They would facilitate effective communication and collaboration to ensure that the needs of students with disabilities are met in a coordinated manner.

Evaluation and Assessment

The director would oversee the evaluation and assessment processes for students with disabilities, including recommending assessments, monitoring progress, and adjusting interventions as needed. They also would ensure the availability of appropriate assistive technologies and resources to support students in their learning and development.

Resource Allocation and Budgeting

The director would play a role in budget planning and resource allocation for special education services. They would advocate for adequate funding and resources to support the implementation of effective programs and interventions for students with special needs.

Continuous Improvement

The special education director would stay informed about current research, best practices, and innovations in the field of special education. They would use this knowledge to continuously improve programs, policies, and practices within the institution, aiming to provide the highest quality education and support for students with disabilities.

By creating a dedicated special education director position, the district can ensure that the unique needs of students with disabilities are given the attention they deserve. This position would be instrumental in fostering an inclusive learning environment and promoting the academic, social, and emotional growth of students with special needs.

Recommendation 3: Develop a plan to implement relationship-building strategies in addition to communication.

Developing a plan to implement relationship-building strategies in addition to communication is essential for fostering positive connections and strengthening bonds within any personal or professional interaction within the district. Although effective communication is crucial, it is equally important to engage in activities and strategies that go beyond mere information exchange. Following are some steps to develop such a plan:

1. Identify the Stakeholders

Determine the individuals or groups with whom you want to build relationships. These could include administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, school

psychologists, transportation providers, parents, and community members. Understanding your target audience will help tailor your strategies accordingly.

2. Set Relationship-Building Goals

Define specific goals you want to achieve through relationship building. For instance, the district may aim to enhance collaboration, trust, loyalty, or mutual support. Clear objectives will guide your efforts and allow you to measure progress.

3. Foster Open, Transparent Communication

Although communication is distinct from relationship building, it serves as its foundation. Establish channels for open and transparent communication, such as regular team meetings, feedback sessions, or informal conversations. Encourage active listening, empathy, and respect among all participants.

4. Understand Individual Needs

Recognize that each person has unique needs and preferences when it comes to building relationships. Take the time to understand the values, motivations, and expectations of your stakeholders. This knowledge will help the district tailor strategies to suit their specific requirements.

5. Develop Trust and Rapport

Trust is a fundamental element of any successful relationship. Demonstrate integrity, reliability, and consistency in your actions and words. Be supportive and responsive to the needs of others. Building rapport also can be achieved through informal social activities, such as team outings, lunches, or virtual coffee chats.

6. Show Appreciation and Recognition

Expressing appreciation for others' contributions and achievements strengthens relationships. Recognize and acknowledge the efforts and successes of the stakeholders. This can be done through public recognition, personalized messages, or small tokens of appreciation.

7. Collaborate and Offer Assistance

Actively seek opportunities for collaboration and cooperation. Offer your assistance when others face challenges or require support. By being a helpful resource, the leadership of the district can build trust and establish itself as a valuable team member or partner.

8. Invest in Personal Development

Continuously invest in personal development to enhance relationship-building skills. Have staff attend workshops, seminars, or training sessions related to communication, emotional

intelligence, and interpersonal skills. The more the district grows, the more effective it will be in building and maintaining relationships.

9. **Seek Feedback and Act Upon It**

    Regularly seek feedback from stakeholders regarding their perception of relationship-building efforts. Listen attentively to their suggestions and concerns and take appropriate actions to address them. This demonstrates the commitment to improvement and reinforces the importance you place on their opinions.

10. **Evaluate and Adjust**

    Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of your relationship-building strategies. Assess whether goals are being met and make adjustments as necessary. Relationships are dynamic, so staying flexible and adaptable is crucial for long-term success.

    Remember that relationship building is an ongoing process requiring time, effort, and genuine interest in others. By incorporating these strategies into the plan and consistently implementing them, the district will be well on its way to developing strong and meaningful relationships.

Recommendation 4: Set expectations for administrative visits to classrooms and responding to e-mails and phone calls, and ensure that there are enough visits to meet expectations.

Set administrators up for success by establishing the following expectations around classroom visits, communication, and job performance.

Setting Expectations for Administrative Visits to Classrooms

Frequency

Clearly define how often administrative visits will occur in classrooms. Consider factors such as the size of the school, the number of classrooms, and the availability of administrative staff. For example, you may set the expectation for administrators to visit each classroom at least once a month.

Purpose

Specify the purpose of administrative visits to classrooms, such as observing teaching practices, providing support and feedback to teachers, assessing student engagement, or monitoring the implementation of curriculum and policies. By clarifying the purpose, administrators and teachers will have a common understanding of what to expect during these visits.

Duration

Determine the expected duration of each classroom visit. This can vary depending on the purpose of the visit and the specific objectives. For example, some visits may require longer observation periods, while others may focus on brief check-ins. Communicate the anticipated time frame to teachers to ensure they are prepared and can plan their lessons accordingly.

Feedback

Communicate the process for providing feedback following the classroom visits. Specify whether feedback will be provided immediately after the visit or through a formal meeting. In addition, outline the format of the feedback, such as written reports, verbal discussions, or a combination of both. Clear guidelines on feedback will help teachers understand how their performance will be evaluated and supported.

Responding to E-Mails and Phone Calls

Timeliness

Establish expectations for the response time to e-mails and phone calls. This should consider the workload of administrators and urgency of the communication. For instance, you may set the expectation for administrators to respond to e-mails within 24 hours and phone calls within the same school day whenever possible.

Communication Channels

Specify the preferred channels for communication, such as e-mail, phone calls, or online platforms. This ensures that teachers and staff know the appropriate means to reach administrators and receive timely responses. It is important to consider the accessibility and reliability of each communication channel.

Delegation

If necessary, define the process for delegating e-mail and phone call responses. In cases where administrators are unavailable or overwhelmed with other responsibilities, designate alternate personnel who can handle communication in their absence. Clear guidelines on delegation prevent delays in responses and ensure that inquiries are addressed promptly.

Professionalism and Courtesy

Emphasize the importance of maintaining professionalism and courtesy in all e-mail and phone call interactions. Administrators should be clear, concise, and respectful in their responses.

Encourage administrators to provide helpful information or direct the individual to the appropriate resources when necessary.

Meeting Expectations

Adequate Staffing

Ensure that there are enough administrative staff members to handle the expected workload. Assess the number of classrooms, the volume of e-mails and phone calls, and the capacity of the administrative team. If necessary, consider reallocating resources or hiring additional staff members to meet expectations effectively.

Time Management

Administrators should effectively manage their time to fulfill expectations. This may involve scheduling regular classroom visits in advance, dedicating specific time slots for responding to e-mails and phone calls, and prioritizing tasks based on urgency and importance. Encourage administrators to utilize time management techniques and tools to stay organized.

Communication and Collaboration

Foster open communication and collaboration among administrators to ensure that expectations are being met consistently. Encourage sharing best practices, discussing challenges, and supporting one another in meeting the demands of classroom visits and communication responsibilities. Regular meetings or check-ins can be helpful in maintaining alignment and identifying areas for improvement.

Continuous Improvement

Regularly review and assess the effectiveness of established expectations. Seek feedback from administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders to identify areas of improvement and make necessary adjustments. By continuously evaluating and refining expectations, the administrative team can provide better support and meet the needs of the school community more effectively.

Recommendation 5: Immediately reinstitute job-alike meetings.

Immediately reinstating job-alike meetings refers to the practice of organizing meetings or gatherings that bring together individuals who hold similar positions or work in similar roles within the district. These meetings are aimed at facilitating collaboration, knowledge sharing, and professional development among employees who share common job responsibilities or face similar challenges.

Expanding on this concept, following are some key points to consider:

Purpose and Benefits

Job-alike meetings serve several important purposes. First, they create a platform for district employees to connect and network with colleagues who are engaged in similar work. This fosters a sense of community and allows for the exchange of ideas, best practices, and lessons learned. By coming together, participants can gain insights into different approaches, problem-solving strategies, and innovative techniques that can be applied to their own work. These meetings also provide opportunities for mentoring and peer support, enhancing overall job satisfaction and professional growth.

Knowledge Sharing

Job-alike meetings facilitate the sharing of knowledge and expertise within specific job roles or functions. Participants can discuss common challenges, share successful strategies, and brainstorm solutions to improve their work processes. This exchange of ideas can lead to increased efficiency, improved productivity, and enhanced outcomes. Moreover, by pooling their collective knowledge, district employees can develop new techniques, refine existing practices, and stay abreast of the latest trends and advancements in their respective fields.

Skill Development

Reinstituting job-alike meetings allows the district to prioritize skill development within specific job roles. These gatherings can include workshops, training sessions, or presentations delivered by experts in the field or experienced employees. By focusing on the unique needs and requirements of a particular job function, the district can provide targeted professional development opportunities. This helps employees refine their skills, stay updated on industry standards, and enhance their overall competency, resulting in a more skilled and capable workforce.

Collaboration and Teamwork

Job-alike meetings promote collaboration and teamwork among individuals who share similar responsibilities. These gatherings offer a platform for district employees to form cross-functional connections and build relationships beyond their immediate teams. By engaging in open discussions and collaborative activities, participants can leverage each other's strengths, learn from diverse perspectives, and explore new approaches to problem solving. This fosters a culture of cooperation and synergy, leading to improved teamwork and overall organizational effectiveness.

Employee Engagement and Satisfaction

Reinstituting job-alike meetings demonstrates an organization's commitment to employee development, growth, and engagement. Providing employees with opportunities to connect with peers who face similar challenges and to actively participate in their professional community can significantly enhance job satisfaction. By investing in these meetings, organizations convey that they value their employees' expertise, recognize their contributions, and support their ongoing development. This, in turn, can contribute to higher levels of employee engagement, retention, and overall organizational success.

In conclusion, immediately reinstituting job-alike meetings can have numerous positive effects for the district. By bringing together employees who share similar job roles, the district can foster collaboration, facilitate knowledge sharing, promote skill development, enhance teamwork, and increase employee engagement. These meetings serve as valuable platforms for professional growth, improving job satisfaction, and ultimately driving organizational excellence.

Recommendation 6: Review full-time equivalent (FTE) staff allocated to the teaching program versus itinerant services to determine appropriate staffing and areas that can flex.

When reviewing the FTE staff allocated to a teaching program versus itinerant services, it is essential to assess the staffing requirements and identify areas where flexibility can be exercised. This evaluation allows for optimizing resource allocation and ensuring the most efficient use of personnel in the education system. The following are recommended:

Assess the Teaching Program

Begin by examining the teaching program's scope and requirements. Determine the number of students, grade levels, subjects, and any specialized programs or initiatives involved. This analysis will help establish the baseline FTE staff needed for the teaching program.

Evaluate the Itinerant Services

Next, assess the itinerant services, such as specialized support staff, therapists, or consultants, which serve multiple schools or students with specific needs. Identify the nature and extent of the services required, including the number of students receiving support, their needs, and the frequency of service provision.

Analyze Workload Distribution

Compare the workload distribution between the teaching program and itinerant services. Consider factors such as instructional time, planning periods, administrative duties, and professional development requirements for teachers. Similarly, evaluate the service hours, travel time, documentation, and collaboration needs for itinerant service providers. This analysis will help identify potential areas of workload overlap or gaps.

Determine Appropriate Staffing Levels

Based on the workload analysis, determine the appropriate staffing levels for both the teaching program and itinerant services. Consider the student-to-teacher ratios, the level of support required for individual students, and any legal or regulatory guidelines that define staffing requirements. Aim to strike a balance between providing quality instruction in the teaching program and meeting the needs of students receiving itinerant services.

Identify Areas for Flexibility

Once appropriate staffing levels have been determined, identify areas within both the teaching program and itinerant services where flexibility can be exercised. This involves examining the nature of tasks and responsibilities that could be shared or adjusted among staff members without compromising quality or student support. For example, certain administrative tasks or noninstructional duties could be redistributed, allowing staff members to focus more on direct instruction or specialized services.

Consider Alternative Staffing Models

Explore alternative staffing models that can enhance flexibility without sacrificing educational outcomes. For instance, consider employing part-time or shared positions, using technology for remote or virtual instruction, or leveraging community partnerships to provide additional support. These approaches can optimize the allocation of FTE staff while adapting to changing student needs or resource constraints.

Regularly Review and Adjust

Keep in mind that staffing needs and student requirements may evolve over time. Establish a regular review process to monitor the effectiveness of the allocated FTE staff and identify areas where adjustments may be necessary. Solicit feedback from teachers, itinerant service providers, and other stakeholders to ensure that staffing decisions remain aligned with the overall goals of the educational institution.

By conducting a comprehensive review of FTE staff allocation to the teaching program versus itinerant services and considering areas for flexibility, educational institutions can optimize staffing and resources, improve student support, and enhance overall educational outcomes.

Recommendation 7: Implement a culture shift.

A culture shift refers to a significant and transformative change in the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a society or specific group of people. It involves a fundamental reorientation in the way that individuals and communities perceive and interact with the world around them. A culture shift is often necessary when the existing cultural norms, practices, or mindsets no longer align with the changing needs and realities of society. This was evident as a part of our interactions with staff members during this evaluation.

A culture shift can manifest itself in various areas, such as social, economic, political, or environmental spheres. It requires a collective effort to challenge established paradigms and embrace new perspectives, ideas, and approaches. Following are some key features that may be part of a culture shift:

Values and Beliefs

A culture shift begins with a reassessment of the core values and beliefs that shape the collective identity of a group or society. It involves questioning existing assumptions and considering alternative viewpoints that promote inclusivity, empathy, sustainability, and social justice.

Awareness and Education

Increasing awareness and education is vital in driving a culture shift. It requires disseminating accurate information, challenging misconceptions, and fostering critical thinking skills. By promoting knowledge and understanding, individuals can develop a broader perspective and make informed decisions based on evidence and reason.

Mindsets and Attitudes

Changing cultural attitudes and mindsets is a crucial component of a culture shift. This involves challenging biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory behaviors, and cultivating attitudes of openness, respect, tolerance, and acceptance. It also may involve promoting a growth mindset that encourages adaptability, innovation, and lifelong learning.

Social Norms and Practices

Culture is often embedded in social norms and practices. A culture shift entails reevaluating and reshaping these norms to align with the desired changes.

Institutional and Policy Changes

A successful culture shift requires changes at the institutional and policy levels. This involves revisiting existing laws, regulations, and practices to ensure they reflect the new values and priorities. Institutions, organizations, and governments play a crucial role in driving and sustaining cultural transformation by creating inclusive policies, promoting diversity, and supporting initiatives that foster positive change.

Collaboration and Engagement

Engaging various stakeholders, including individuals, communities, organizations, and leaders, is essential for a culture shift. Collaboration encourages collective action, shared responsibility, and the mobilization of resources toward a common goal. It creates spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and the exchange of ideas, fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants.

Long-Term Commitment

Culture shifts are not instant or short-lived. They require a long-term commitment and sustained effort from all members of society. Patience, persistence, and resilience are necessary to overcome resistance, setbacks, and challenges that may arise during the transformative process.

A culture shift is a complex and multifaceted process that requires reevaluating and transforming the values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of a society or group. It necessitates an inclusive and collaborative approach, driven by awareness, education, and a commitment to positive change. By embracing new perspectives, challenging existing norms, and aligning cultural practices with the evolving needs of society, a culture shift can pave the way for a more equitable, sustainable, and progressive future.

Final Remarks

ESD has taken an important step toward strengthening the culture, staffing, and communication in its schools by commissioning this review. AIR commends the district's educators and leaders for

their commitment to prioritizing and addressing the needs of their staff. We also commend the many staff members who enthusiastically and candidly voiced their concerns to our research team and offered many excellent suggestions for improving ESD's special education program. With continued commitment on the part of ESD leadership and meaningful engagement from staff in implementing the recommendations, ESD is well positioned to see positive change.

Appendix A. Staff Survey

Introduction

The Staff Survey for the Edmonds School District (ESD) Special Education Program Review is designed to capture information on policies and practices influencing teaching and learning for students with disabilities and students identified as at-risk in ESD. The Special Education Program Review for ESD is being conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR).

This survey provides an opportunity for all school staff to express their views related to the climate and culture in Edmonds School District. Survey questions were custom designed for ESD based on the topics that arose in interviews and focus groups AIR facilitated in December 2022. The survey's results will be analyzed and reported alongside analyses of several other data sources, including the interviews and focus groups with district- and school-level staff.

Your participation in the survey is voluntary. The survey should take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete.

The effectiveness of the survey will depend on your candid and honest responses. **Your responses to survey questions will remain confidential.** Respondent names and workplaces are not collected. All data are aggregated to the district level; therefore, no schools or individuals will be identified in the analysis or the report.

We appreciate your time and contribution. Thank you for your participation! If you have any questions about this survey, contact David Bateman by e-mail at dbateman@air.org.

Do you give consent for AIR to use data from this survey?

- YES (proceeds to first question)

- NO (survey ends)

Did you work in Edmonds Public Schools in 2021-2022?

- YES (proceeds to first question)

- NO (survey ends)

About You

Please respond to each question in this section considering your experience during the 2021-2022 school year. If your role requires that you work at more than one school, please answer for the school where you spent the most time in 2021-2022 or are most familiar with the school's 2021-2022 policies and practices.

1. Please select a primary role describing your work with Edmonds Public Schools during the 2021-2022 school year. Select the answer that is most accurate.

   ❑ School administrator

   ❑ Special education teacher

   ❑ General education teacher

   ❑ Related service provider, psychologist, or other certificated specialist

   ❑ Non-certificated support staff, including paraeducators

   ❑ Transportation staff

   ❑ District administrator

   ❑ Other (please specify)

2. What grade levels are included at the site(s) in which you taught/worked in 2021-2022? (Check all that apply)

   ❑ Elementary school (grades Pre-K to 6)

   ❑ Middle school (grades 7-8)

   ❑ High school (grades 9-12)

Staff Collaboration and Professional Development

For this section *only*, please respond to each question considering your professional development experiences provided by Edmonds Public Schools at any time during the past three years (2019-2022).

3. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about district-provided professional development (PD) opportunities related to teaching students with disabilities from 2019 through 2022?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure/ I don't know

a. School and district leaders have ensured staff members (special education and general education) who teach students with disabilities have the appropriate knowledge/training to support them.					
b. Teachers new to the profession or new to teaching students with disabilities receive additional, specialized support.					
c. School and individual professional development plans reflect professional growth needs related to students with disabilities.					
d. There are sufficient professional development options for my role.					
e. I feel sufficiently prepared to teach and support students with disabilities.					

4. What type of professional learning opportunities has the district made available to you to improve your knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities? *Check all that apply.*

❑ Onsite professional development

❑ Virtual professional development

❑ Job embedded coaching

❑ Staff meetings

❑ Professional learning communities (Learning Palooza)

❑ Book studies

❑ None

❑ Other

5. What type of professional opportunities **are most effective (or would be most effective if not presently offered)** in helping you successfully support students with disabilities?

❑ Onsite professional development

❑ Virtual professional development

❑ Job embedded coaching

❑ Staff and leadership meetings

❑ Professional learning communities (e.g., Learning Palooza)

❑ Book studies

❑ None

❑ Other

6. On what topic(s) would you like to receive more professional development? (open-ended)

Data-Driven Decision Making

7. Based on your experience and knowledge of school-wide practices about using data to make decisions regarding student placement, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure/ I don't know
a. The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to **teachers and principals**.					
b. The process for making special education placement decisions is clear and communicated to **parents/guardians.**					

c. Placement decisions are based on the needs of the student and NOT the location of school, disability category, or parent preference.					
d. Placement decisions are made consistently across IEP teams and schools.					
e. Staff members consistently use data to make decisions about placement, provision of services, and IEP goals.					

If you answered "disagree" or "strongly disagree" to any of the questions above, please explain why.

Equitable Access

8. Based on your experience in the 2021-2022 school year, to what extent do you agree with the following statements about placement and access for students with disabilities?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure/ I don't know
a. Students with disabilities at my school are **placed** insettings with their non-disabled peers to the greatest extent possible and consistent with Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements as specified by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).					
b. Students with disabilities at my school have adequate **access** to core curriculum, instruction, social and extra-curricular activities.					

	c.					

Systems and Organizational Structures for Providing Coordinated Districtwide Supports

9. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure/ I don't know
a. There are sufficient special education teachers and staff available to meet the needs of students with disabilities in my school.					
b. Leaders make it clear that educating students with disabilities to high standards is a priority in schools.					
c. My school consistently uses a clearly defined process for identification and provision of special education services.					
d. The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to teachers and certified support staff.					
e. The district has effective mechanisms in place for providing professional development to non-certified support staff.					
f. The code of student conduct is applied fairly and equitably to all students.					
g. Values of equity, fairness, and inclusion are modeled by all school staff.					
h. District and school leadership support the varied needs of **all**					

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure/ I don't know
demographic groups and communities within ESD.					

Communication

10. With respect to communication during the 2021-2022 school year, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure/ I don't know
a. District administrators communicate effectively with teachers and staff.					
b. Current communication procedures and practices between and among leadership, special education staff and general education staff in my building are effective in allowing us to work in tandem to meet the needs of students with disabilities.					
c. My school uses an effective system for communicating with families of struggling students and students with disabilities.					
d. My school effectively involves families in decisions about how to address individual student needs.					
e. There is consistent communication from the **district** to parents of students with disabilities.					
f. There is consistent communication from the **school** to parents of students with disabilities.					

Climate

11. With respect to the 2021-2022 school year, to what extent do you agree with the following statements about climate in ESD?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Not Sure/ I don't know
a. Teachers in this school are empowered to help students when they are having problems.					
b. My professional opinions are valued by fellow staff and school/district leadership.					
c. My supervisor and/or building administrator care about me as a person.					
d. My supervisor and/or building administrator respects the opinions of others.					
e. My supervisor and/or building administrator encourages my professional development.					
f. Safety is a priority for students and staff at my school.					

Conclusion (Open ended responses)

12. Considering your school, what factors do you believe are presently or would be facilitators of a positive climate and culture related to special education?

13. Considering your school, what factors, if any, do you believe are barriers that inhibit a positive climate and culture related to special education?

14. Considering both district- and school-level communications, which practices do you perceive as effective?

15. Considering both district- and school-level communications, which practices do you perceive as ineffective or inefficient?

16. What recommendations do you have for improving communication practices in Edmonds Public Schools?

Appendix B. Focus Group and Interview Description

Edmonds School District Special Education Program Review

Study Information: Edmonds School District (ESD) is working with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to evaluate special education practices impacting climate, staffing, and communication. This review aims to identify strengths and needs for district leadership to better understand and improve the current system.

AIR will gather information in two main ways: focus groups and a staff survey.

Focus Groups: In November and early December 2022, AIR staff will convene multiple focus groups with stakeholders across different roles related to special education as one way to examine current strengths and needs. We would like to hear about your experiences as a staff member of ESD. Your voice is valuable and can help us learn more about the strengths of current special education climate, staffing, and communication practices - and any areas where you believe improvements can be made. Each focus group will include approximately 10 participants and will last approximately 75 minutes. Focus groups will prioritize participation from various stakeholders related to special education program delivery (e.g., teachers, support staff, district administrators, building-level administrators, and central office staff).

Survey: After conducting the focus groups, AIR staff will develop and disseminate a survey to broader staff and community members of ESD. All stakeholders, including those who did *and* those who did not have the opportunity to participate in the focus groups, will be asked to provide feedback via the survey. It is expected the survey will be disseminated in early January 2023.

Outcomes: Your feedback will inform a final report and presentation to district leadership summarizing the experiences and opinions of stakeholders throughout the ESD. *All data collected from focus groups and surveys will be de-identified. No personally identifying details will be included in the report, and comments from focus groups or surveys will not be connected to individuals in any way.*

We appreciate your participation and look forward to hearing your perspective regarding the ESD special education program. Any questions about this study can be directed to Nick Coukoulis at ncoukoulis@air.org or 202-403-5609.

Appendix C. Focus Group and Interview Protocol

Edmonds School District Interview Protocol

Introduction Paragraph

Hello, I'm _____ with the American Institutes for Research. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me and my colleague, Nick. Before we start, I'd like to provide a little background on our work and answer any questions you might have for me. As the external evaluator, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) was contracted by Edmonds School District (ESD)to conduct an independent special education program review examining special education practices that impact climate, staffing, and communication within ESD. As part of this evaluation, AIR will conduct several interviews and focus groups with administrators, instructional leaders, teachers, and support staff chosen by the district. The purpose of the interviews and focus groups is to understand your perspective of the successes and challenges in special education in your district, as well as to shape recommendations for improvement.

I'd like to go over some logistics with you first and then we will get started.
First, we anticipate today's focus group to take approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes. Throughout the conversation, we will ask you a series of open-ended questions. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, so please feel free to express yourself openly. Our goal is to understand your personal opinions and viewpoints on each of the topics.

Next, I wanted to let you know that for all focus groups, we follow a careful process to keep your identity and the information you share confidential. For example, in our reports, we will not attribute shared information to unique individuals or in ways that one's identity could be inferred by site location or job position. Instead, a summary and themes from what we learn here today and in other focus groups will be shared with the district.

Finally, we will be using a couple of strategies to ensure we capture all information that is shared. First, we will employ the use of a jamboard to encourage participation of members of the group. For those who have not used a jamboard previously, we will be reviewing the process prior to getting started. Second, we will also be recording each focus group to ensure accuracy and efficiency in transcription. This also allows us to have a conversation without having to

pause (for corrections). Neither the recording nor jamboard will be shared with district staff and all content will be deleted once the discussion is transcribed and coded.

Does anyone have any concerns with this focus group being recorded?

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Start recording and say, "Today is [Month Day Year], I'm [name of self] and I am facilitating a focus group with administrative staff from the Edmonds School District 15.

How do we define school climate and culture? Why are they important and what's the difference?

Understanding the similarities and differences between climate and culture is important because it gives us a more precise instrument by which we can improve organizations.

What is climate?

School climate has come to be understood to represent the **attitude** of an organization. The collective mood, or morale, of groups has become a topic of concern for many organizations. Happy staff is considered better staff, which is believed to influence the quality of work. Climate stimulants are traditionally thought of in terms of **extrinsic** rewards (e.g., pay, bonuses, or other benefits with monetary value) but they can also be **intrinsic** (e.g., an internal sense of passion, enjoyment, purpose, appreciation, empowerment).

According to the Safe and Supportive Schools Model, which was developed by a national panel of researchers and other experts, positive climate in schools involves but is not limited to:

- **Engagement**. Strong relationships between students, teachers, families, and schools and strong connections between schools and the broader community.
- **Safety**. Schools and school-related activities where students and staff are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and controlled-substance use.
- **Environment**. Appropriate facilities, well-managed classrooms, available school-based health supports, and a clear, fair disciplinary policy.

What is culture?

When a group of people spend a significant amount of time together, they develop a common set of expectations, beliefs, and behaviors. These evolve into unwritten rules group members conform to in order to remain in good standing with their colleagues.

How do culture and climate interact?

Think of culture as the personality of an organization and climate as an organization's attitude.

The relationship between the two can be demonstrated in our typical attitude toward days of the week: Mondays are miserable, Fridays are fun. Coming into work on Monday morning and being excited about the week ahead is typically considered unusual. We expect the climate to be more somber on a Monday than on a Friday. This is a cultural phenomenon unique to America, taught and learned by each generation, usually by elementary age. When climate is negative, as is often the case on Monday mornings, it is culture that dictates how members of a group should feel. Culture tells us we're supposed to feel miserable on Monday morning.

We've provided these definitions to hopefully demonstrate that implementing a strategy designed to change our mood or climate, is not the same as one that targets our belief systems, or culture. Please keep these differences in mind as we proceed with discussing your experience with the climate and culture in Edmonds School District.

Questions

Area 1. District and School Climate

1a. How do you perceive the climate and culture related to special education instruction in ESD?
- *What works well in the decision-making process for providing appropriate services to students with disabilities? Is there anyone whose input is excluded? If so, whose and how is it excluded?*
- *Describe the relationships between administrators and staff? Staff and parents? Staff and students?*

1b. What factors do you identify as facilitators of a positive climate and/or culture related to special education at the school level?

1c. What factors do you identify as barriers that inhibit a positive climate and/or culture related to special education at the school level?

Area 2. Staffing

2a. What factors do you believe impact special education staff retention? What factors do you believe contribute to special education staff turnover?

2b. Thinking of your experience this year and/or last year, have district supports for special education staff been adequate to meet the needs of students with disabilities and provide them with appropriate services?

Area 3. Communication

3a. What district- and school-level communication practices do you perceive as effective?

- How well do you think your current practices are working to communicate initiatives policy and guidance changes, expectations, and other important information in the district related to students with disabilities? Why?

3b. What communication practices do you perceive as ineffective or inefficient?

Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not asked about?

References

American Institutes for Research . (n.d.). *School Climate Improvement*. National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE). Retrieved November 15, 2022, from https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate-improvement

Gruenert, S. (2008). School climate: School culture, They are not the same thing. Principal, 56-59.

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