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Edmonds School District (ESD) Special Education Program Review: Project Summary

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Purpose

- The purpose of this proposed special education program review was to examine special education practices that impact 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.

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Method

1. Reviewed 8 documents/websites, including the following:

   a. ESD website

   b. ESD special education website

   c. Board policies and procedures

   d. Email communications protocol

   e. Listening session notes (taken March and April 2022)

   f. Weekly 2021-22 Memo

   g. SpEd Newsletter from October 2022

   h. Edmonds Education Association Collective Bargaining Agreement (2022 -2025)

Method (Continued)

1. Conducted 10 interviews
    a. Included current and former Edmonds staff serving in the district office

2. Conducted 7 focus groups
    a. 223 total signups; individuals were 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 9 members.
        i.   District Administrators & Central Office Staff
        ii.   Building Administrators
        iii. Certified Support Staff
        iv.   Special Education Teachers
        v.   General Education Teachers
        vi.   Non-Certified Support Staff

3. Staff survey with 45% participation among all district staff
    a. 1,358 responses received from 3,023 total staff in district

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Three Priority Areas of the Review

1. District and School Climate

2. Staffing

3. Communication

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Area One: District and School Climate

1. How do special education administrators, building administrators, and special education staff perceive the climate and culture related to special education instruction in ESD?

2. 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?

3. 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?

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Area 2. Staffing

1. What factors impact special education staff retention? What factors contribute to special education staff turnover?

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

3. 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?

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Area 3. Communication

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

2. What communication practices do administrators and staff perceive as ineffective or inefficient?

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Results

Do you give consent for AIR to use the data collected from this survey?
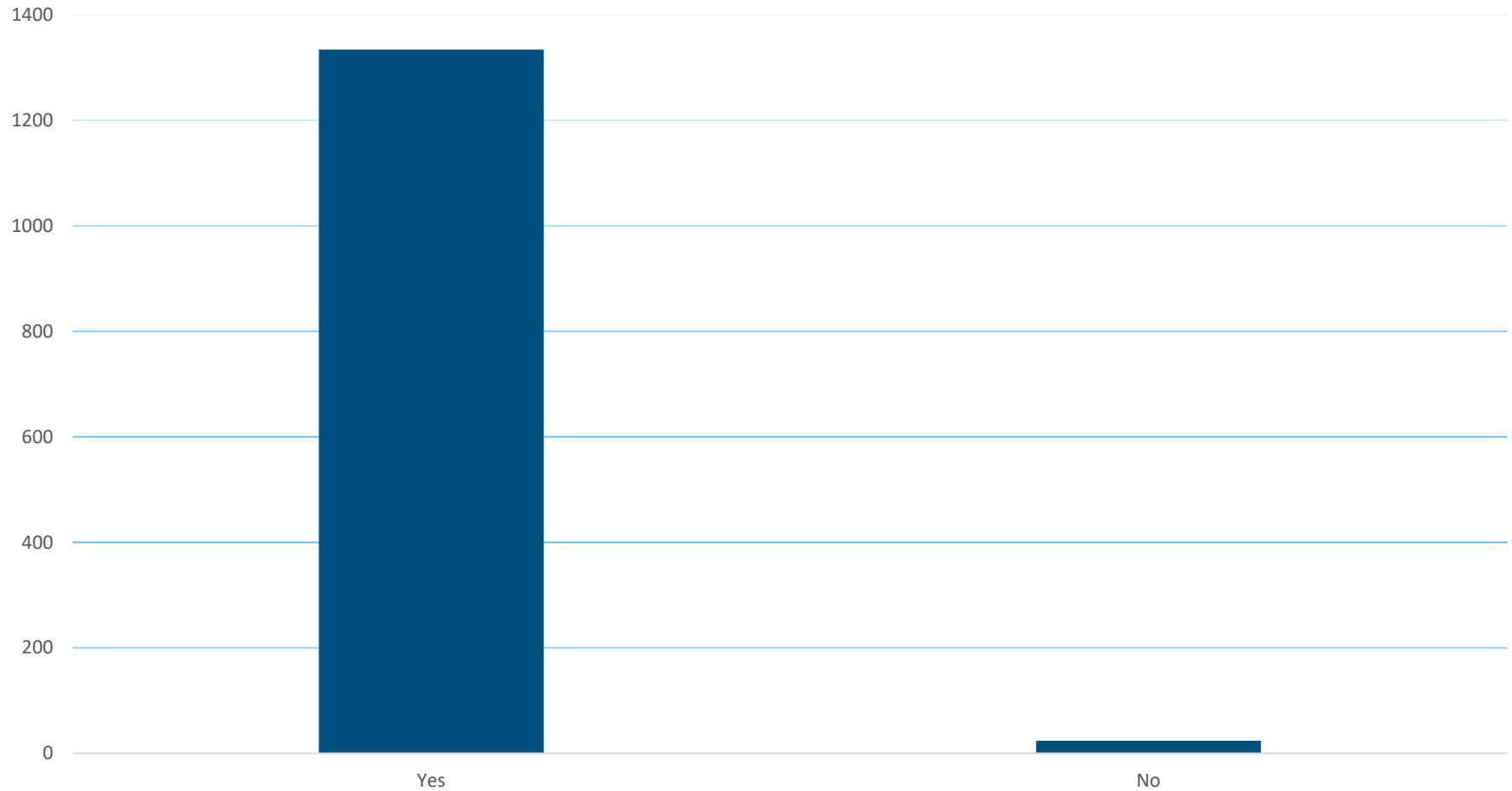
N= 1358; Yes = 1334, No = 24

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Did you work in Edmonds School District in 2021-2022?
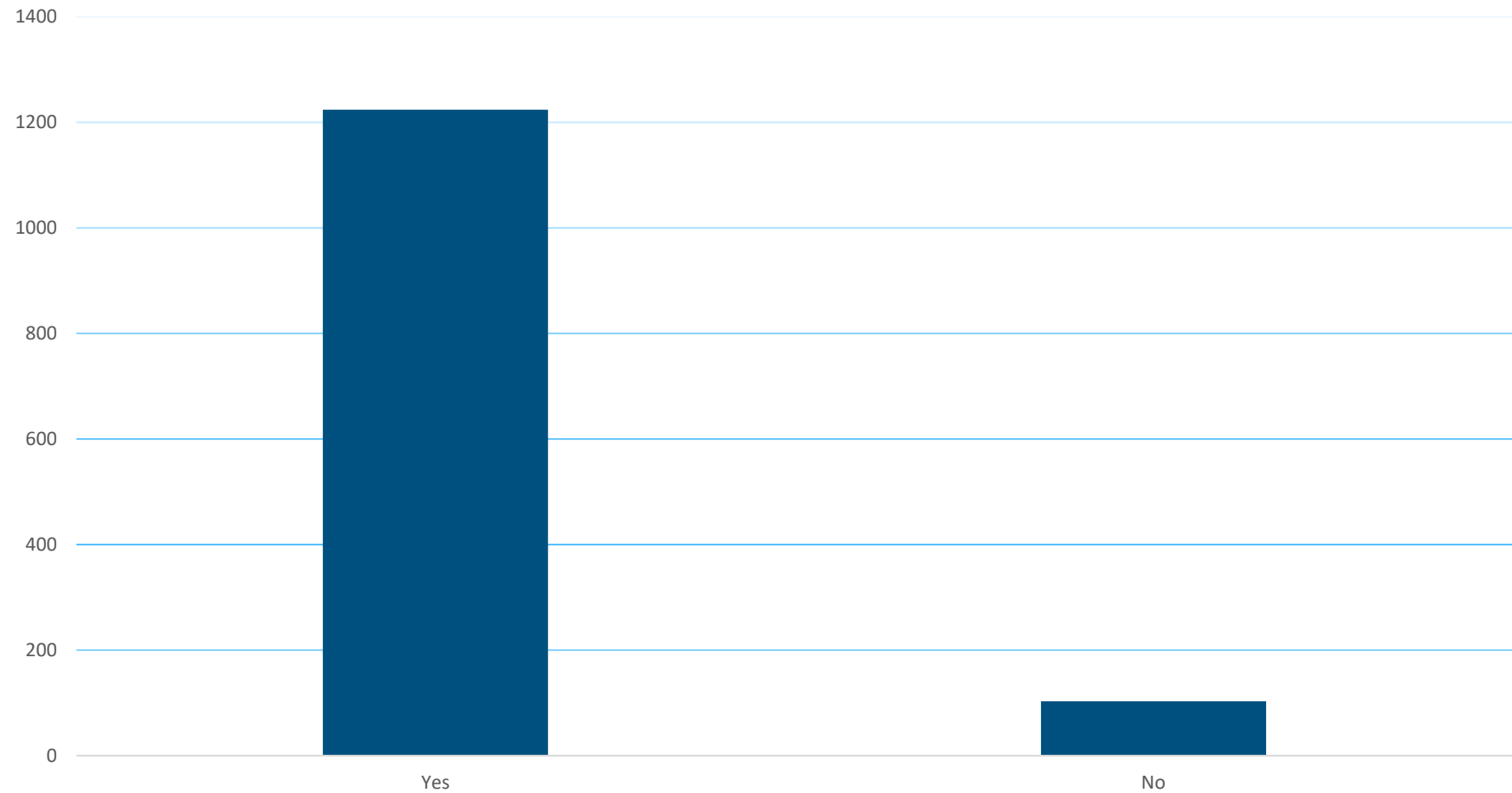
N = 1327; Yes = 1224, No = 103

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.

N = 1205

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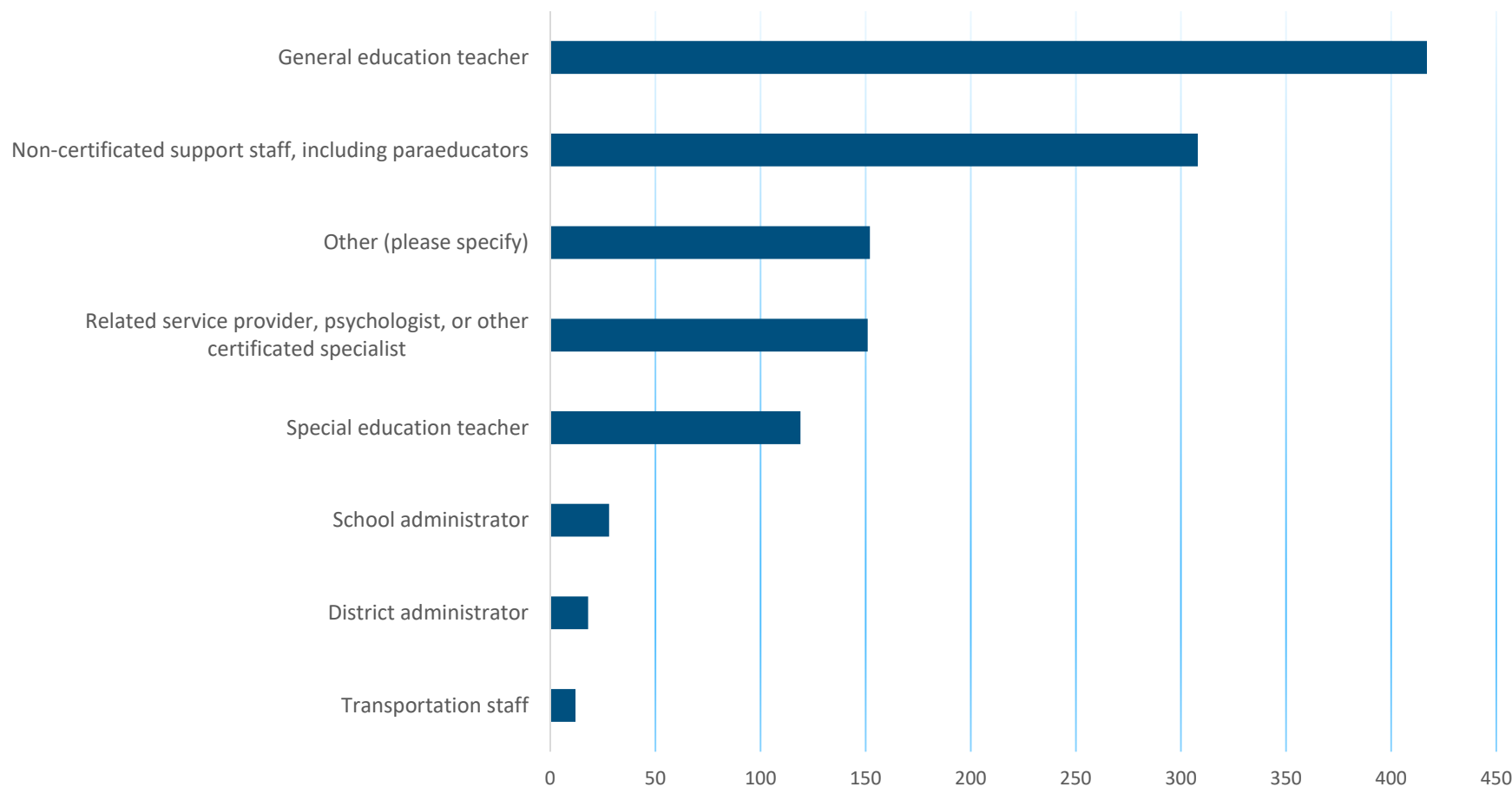
What grade levels are included at the site(s) in which you taught/worked in 2021-2022? (Check all that apply)

N = 1149

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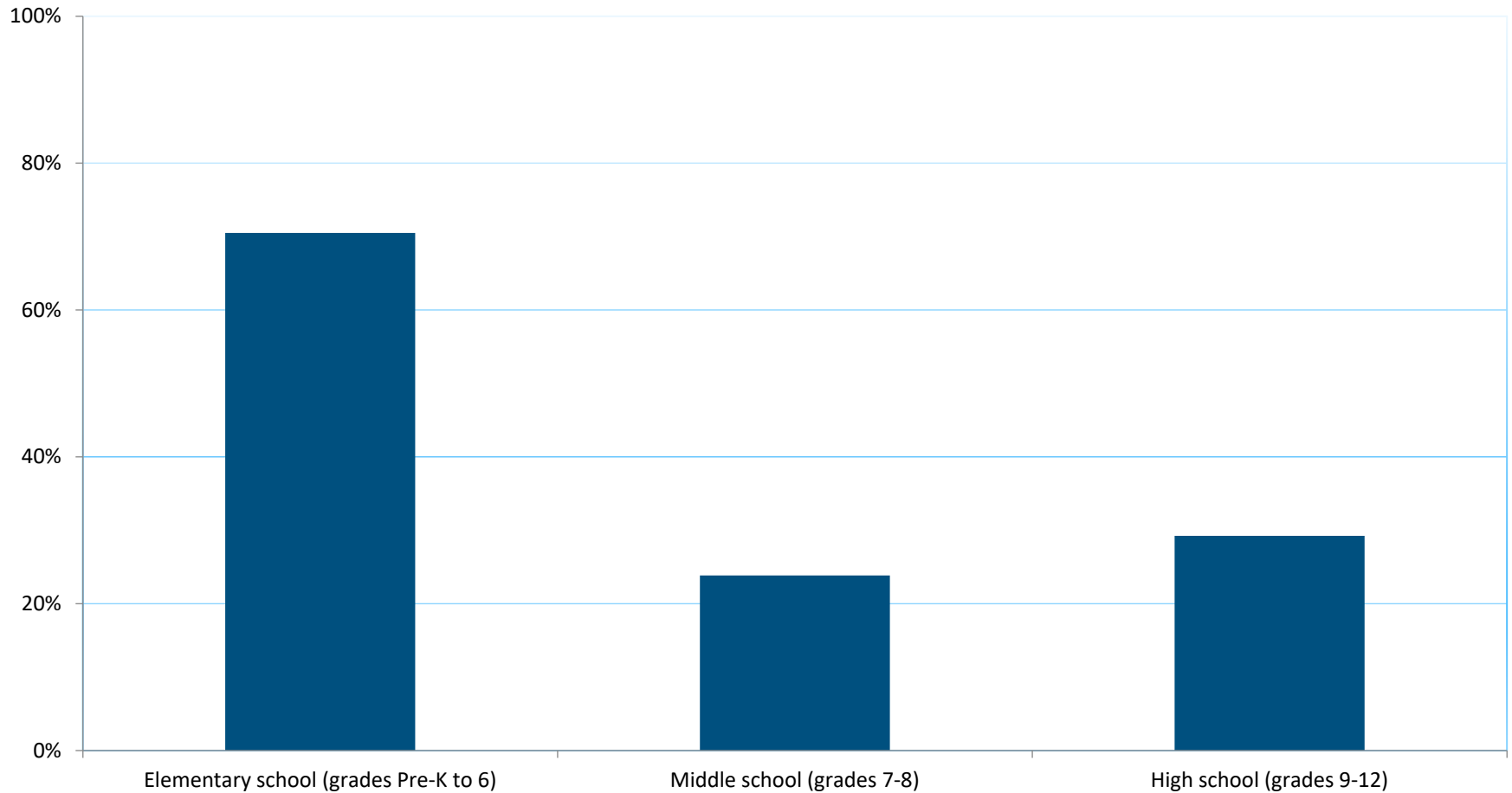
What type of professional learning opportunities has the district made available to you to improve your knowledge and skills to support students with disabilities? Check all that apply.
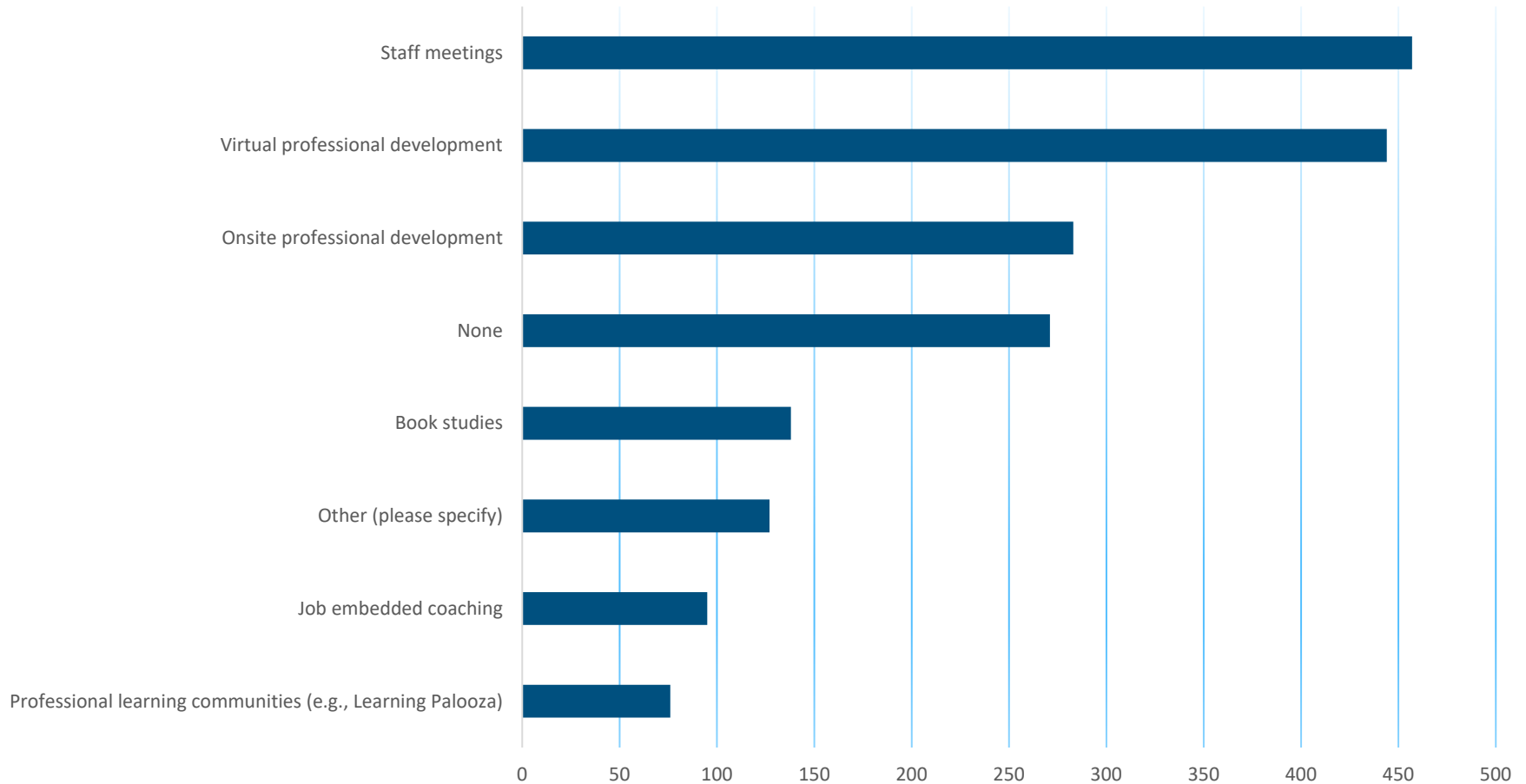
Note: The n's between this and the next slide are very different. Fewer total respondents indicated opportunities were available. N = 1078.

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? Check all that apply.
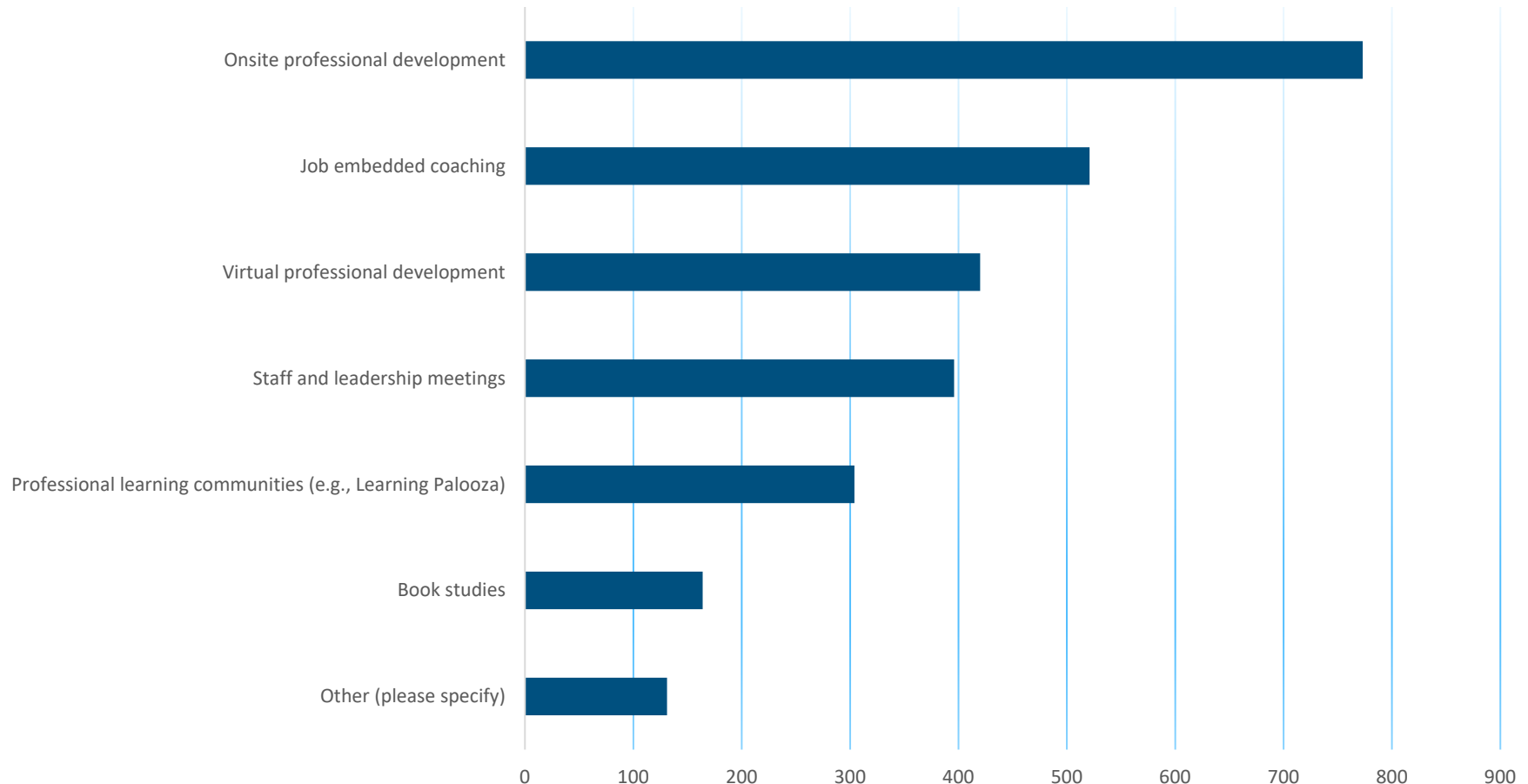
Note: The n's between this and the previous slide are very different. More total respondents indicated opportunities they were interested in/would be effective. N = 1078.

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Staff Collaboration & Professional Development

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

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

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Related Service Provider
- Overall Average

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

	Special Education Teacher	Related Service Provider	Overall Average
	2.0	2.3	2.6

Placement decisions are made consistently across IEP teams and schools.

	Special Education Teacher	Related Service Provider	Overall Average
	1.8	2.0	2.4

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

	Special Education Teacher	Related Service Provider	Overall Average
	3.0	3.0	3.1

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

	Special Education Teacher	Related Service Provider	Overall Average
	2.2	2.4	2.7

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

	Special Education Teacher	Related Service Provider	Overall Average
	2.0	2.3	2.5

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

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Related Service Provider
- 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).

Students with disabilities at my school demonstrate appropriate progress in academic and social outcomes, compared to their nondisabled peers.

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

Score ★

	Special Education T..	Related Service Pro..	Overall Average	Special Education T..	Related Service Pro..	Overall Average	Special Education T..	Related Service Pro..	Overall Average
Score	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.1	3.1	2.9	3.2	3.2	3.4

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

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Related Service Provider
- Overall Average

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Communication

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

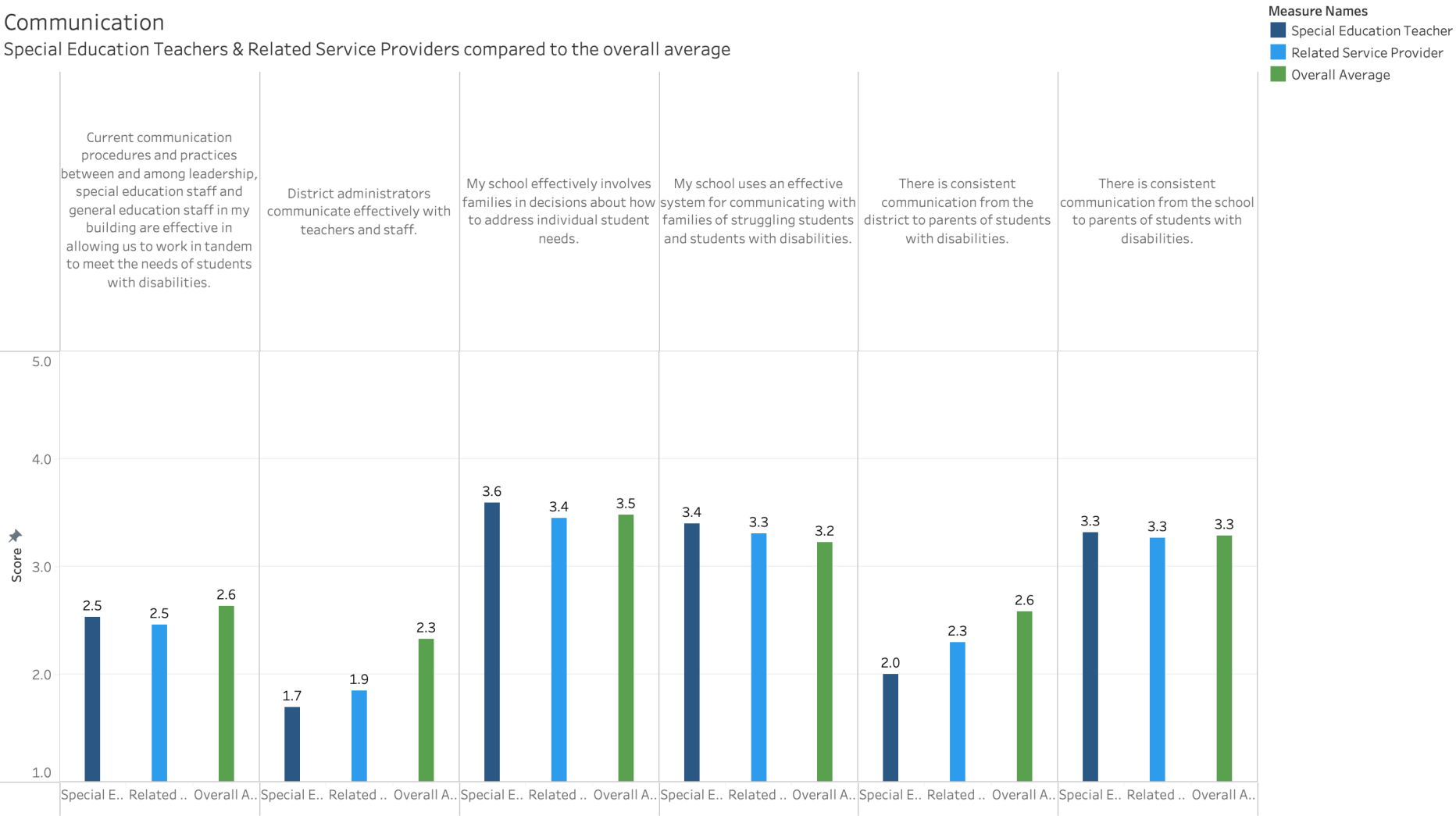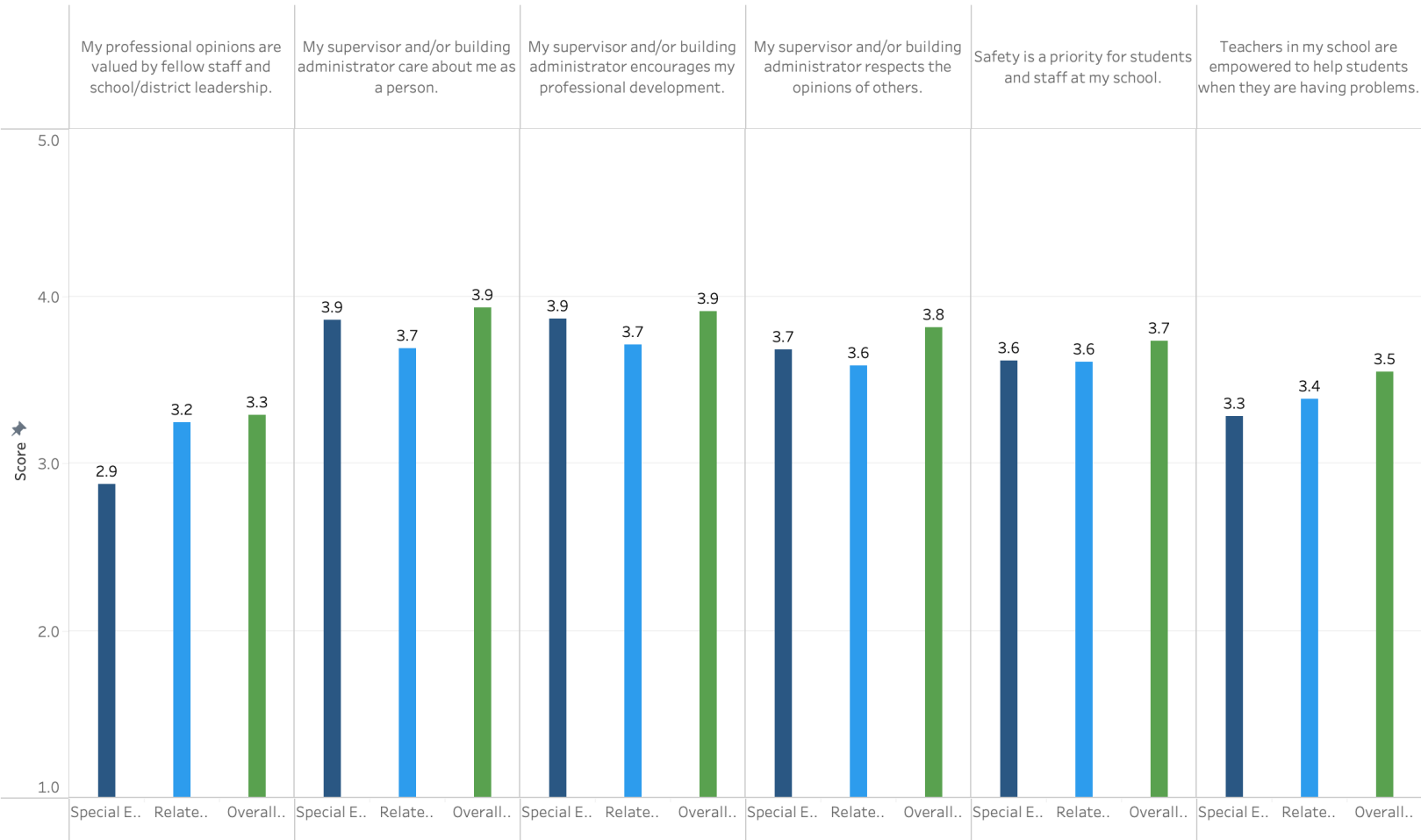|	Current communication procedures and practices between and among leadership, special education staff and general education staff in my building are effective in allowing us to work in tandem to meet the needs of students with disabilities.	District administrators communicate effectively with teachers 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.
Special Education Teacher	2.5	1.7	3.6	3.4	2.0	3.3
Related Service Provider	2.5	1.9	3.4	3.3	2.3	3.3
Overall Average	2.6	2.3	3.5	3.2	2.6	3.3

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Climate

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

Measure Names
- Special Education Teacher
- Related Service Provider
- Overall Average

	My professional opinions are valued by fellow staff and school/district leadership.	My supervisor and/or building administrator care about me as a person.	My supervisor and/or building administrator encourages my professional development.	My supervisor and/or building administrator respects the opinions of others.	Safety is a priority for students and staff at my school.	Teachers in my school are empowered to help students when they are having problems.
Special Education Teacher	2.9	3.9	3.9	3.7	3.6	3.3
Related Service Provider	3.2	3.7	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.4
Overall Average	3.3	3.9	3.9	3.8	3.7	3.5

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Summary

Focus Groups & Interviews

- Current climate and culture
  - Perceived lack of respect for staff
  - Adversarial
  - Belief in being immediately surrounded by a "strong group" of colleagues
  - Diversity, Equity, Inclusion (DEI) missing
    - » "A culture of segregation" relating to special education
  - Poor morale
    - » Feelings of anger, burnout, resignation
    - » "Toxic"
  - Lack of district resources
    - » Building admins and staff talk about these in deficit terms, while district admins admit to being well-resourced
    - » How these relate to placements
  - Recognition the district was previously well regarded by staff and families alike

*Visualization was amended on 6/14/23 to omit staff names. The original presentation can still be accessed in the recording AIR delivered to the ESD School Board during the study session on 4/19/23.

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Focus Groups & Interviews

- Staffing
  - Distribution of job responsibilities/feeling overwhelmed
  - Requests for additional professional development (PD) training
  - Lack of staff
  - Staff turnover
  - Staff safety

Focus Groups and Interviews

- Communication
  - Perceived lack of response and/or follow through among district staff
  - Ineffective at the district level
  - Perceived unilateral decision-making by district staff
  - Lack of trust
    » "I'll ask anyone before I ask my supervisor"
    » District administrators report loss of trust in building staff as well as among those in their own department
  - Hierarchal structures as barriers
  - Effective at the building level

Focus Groups & Interviews

- Concerns around student placements and legal compliance
  - Equity
  - Appropriateness
  - Consistency of placements

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Recommendations

Priorities to Address

1) **Communication**
   a. Strategies to improve it
   b. Expectations for administrators
2) **Review of administrative structure**
   a. Are there enough staff to manage and support the program adequately?
3) **Clear policies and procedures-** Standard Operating Procedures
4) **Administrators in classrooms**
5) **Relationship building with staff**
   a. Listening to staff
   i. Top-down perception not shared by the individuals working with the students

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Recommendations

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

   a. May be able to leverage existing committee but should include teaching staff and other stakeholder membership for input.

   b. Staff on the committee should include special education teachers from different programs/levels across the district to incorporate their input.

   c. Develop a Special Education Manual of standard operating procedures. Should include legally mandated components for clarity. Base the manual on the district vision and commitment to draw attention to it. *How are we ensuring equity, engagement, and excellence for every student?*

   d. Develop plan for improving communication within the district, particularly systems to support adequate and appropriate communication.

   e. May need a subcommittee to review preschool structure and communication with staff and parents.

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Recommendations

f. Develop a curriculum for existing staff to reference and provide to new staff.

g. Provide processes for determining things like when a student needs a more restrictive environment and placing them in a self-contained classroom.

    i. When and what paperwork is required from a team before considering a more restrictive environment.

    ii. Focus on training general education teachers to work to address least restrictive environment principles.

    iii. Focus on training principals to address least restrictive environment principles.

Recommendations

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

   a. Review current administrative structure and chain of command organizational chart; restructure or add program supervisory positions as appropriate
      i. Ensure that those who are in the positions have some direct experience in special education, preferably in a position directly related to those they are supervising as much as possible. Example- psychologist supervisor over psychologists, instructional supervisor over teachers of higher incidence, life skills over life skills.
      ii. Lead on IEP development and monitoring.
      iii. Lead on special education budgets.
      iv. Direct access to the superintendent, but is the point person for all things special education.

Recommendations

- 3**. Develop plan to implement relationship building strategies in addition to communication.**

    a. Relating to communications: develop policies, clearer organization chart

    b. Other attraction, preparation, retention strategies to maintain high quality staff

- 4. **Set expectations for administrative visits to classrooms and responding to emails and phone calls. Ensure there are enough of them to meet those expectations.**

    a. Meetings should be held on a regular basis

        i. Consider using representatives for a group to attend full staff meetings if staff time is limited

        ii. Bargain with union for teachers so that there is an expectation to attend meetings and get information from them

        iii. To discuss important issues with staff, meetings should be held instead of emailing

- 5**. Immediately reinstitute job alike meetings.**

- 6. **Review FTE allocated to the teaching program vs. itinerant services to determine appropriate staffing and areas that can flex**.

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Recommendations

7. **Culture shift**
    a. Shift away from believing ISSD positions aren't "as hard" as teaching and providing teachers with more supports because of that belief.
    b. Understanding existing workloads/assignments. Everyone's job is important – no one individual's is more important than another's.
    c. Ensuring the law is consistently applied and followed, rather than prioritizing issues by what will get the district or particular individuals in trouble.
    d. Rebuilding trust in staff in the central office.

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Clear Expectations

1. **Set clear expectations**: provide employees with clear performance standards, including deadlines and goals. Make sure they understand the expectations and have the necessary tools and resources to do their job.

2. **Establish a good relationship**: establish a good relationship with employees. Listen to their ideas, praise their successes, and provide feedback.

3. **Monitor performance**: monitor performance on a regular basis. Provide feedback and coaching to help employees reach their goals.

4. **Provide resources**: provide the resources and support needed to help employees do their best work. This may include training, coaching, and guidance.

5. **Set consequences**: set clear consequences for not meeting expectations. Ensure that employees understand the consequences and that consequences are fair and consistent.

6. **Be flexible**: be flexible and willing to make adjustments when needed.

7. **Lead by example**: model the behavior you expect from employees. Show respect, be ethical, and demonstrate a commitment to excellence. Critically important to credibility of leadership.

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Conclusion

- 1. Change is not easy.

- 2. Change will not happen overnight.

- 3. Steps are necessary to move forward. Progress not perfection!

- 4. Work together. Representative teams of stakeholders accomplish more.

- 5. Implement good, strong, researched-based and respected programming, based on best practices.

- 6. Commit to understanding others and moving forward.

- 7. **Keep the focus on the students and their families.**

Next Steps

Final Report Coming mid-May 2023

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