Special Education Review

Haldane Central School District

Executive Summary

October 2023

PUBLIC CONSULTING GROUP

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I. Purpose of the Study and Methodology

Purpose of the Study

In November 2022, Haldane Central School District (HCSD) engaged with Public Consulting Group LLC (PCG) to conduct an independent review of its special education services. This report describes the current state of the special education program in HCSD and is designed to guide the District toward continuous improvement.

The study examined the following guiding questions:

- **Curriculum and Instruction**
  - To what extent does HCSD implement a rigorous process to systematically monitor the educational benefit of special education services to students?
  - Is there a consistent "golden thread", or supporting body of evidence, that connects the existence of a student's disability with Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance statement, identified learner characteristics, inclusion needs, and selected accommodations for instruction and assessment?
  - How do Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams determine services and placement?

- **Systems and Structures**
  - How is the district's continuum of services organized? To what degree do students with disabilities have access to general education curriculum? How are inclusive practices employed?
  - What variations exist between the elementary school, the middle school, and the high school regarding service delivery and documentation? To what extent are individual schools meeting compliance and outcomes requirements?
  - To what extent does HCSD meet federal and state compliance regulations?
  - How has HCSD's school and district leadership fostered a culture that is focused on improving outcomes and post-secondary preparation?

- **Family and Community Engagement**
  - What are the strengths and opportunities for improvement with respect to the district's Learning Differences Committee and partnership with the school district?

- **Budget and Staffing**
  - What are the cost drivers of the district's special education budget? Where have there been notable changes over the past three school years?
  - How does the district's expenditures for students with IEPs, per pupil, compare with peer districts?
  - How does the district staff its special education programs at the elementary school, the middle school, and the high school?

Methodology

Over the course of the 2022-23 school year, PCG conducted a mixed-methods study of the special education program in HCSD. The findings and recommendations related to programs, policies, and practices resulted from a comprehensive analysis of several data sources. Sources included 1) Data and Document Analysis, 2) Organizational Focus Groups and Interviews and Student File Review Focus Groups, 3) a Staff Survey and a Parent Survey, and 4) Classroom Observations. These components

were drawn from Research and Practice Literature to inform the findings and recommendations. PCG used publicly available achievement and financial information to compare key HCSD statistics against local district, state, and national data. The method and sources of data are triangulated to increase the validity of the conclusions, in this case, regarding program implementation, identification of gaps, and recommendations for the continued improvement of HCSD's special education programs and continuum of services. Details of each data source are included in the full report.

II. District Context

Haldane Central School District (HCSD), located in the lower Hudson Valley, overlooking the Hudson River in the historic Village of Cold Spring, is part of a thriving community. The surrounding community is described as both tight-knit and vibrant. HCSD is regarded as having an "outstanding academic reputation" and "the campus environment, coupled with small class sizes, create a strong sense of connection among HCSD's faculty, staff, students, and their families, and the surrounding community."[1] The district reported a K-12 enrollment of 788 students: 100 students with disabilities (13%), 144 students identified as economically disadvantaged (18%), and 15 students identified as English Language Learners (2%).[2] The majority of the student population is identified as White (82%) followed by Hispanic or Latino (10%), Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (4%), Black or African American (2%), and Multiracial (2%).[3] Over the past several years, the district has experienced shifts in the diversity of the student body as well as administration changes. District leadership initiated the development of a Strategic Coherence Plan in response to the evolving landscape of HCSD.

The HCSD Strategic Coherence Planning Team aimed to answer the following questions regarding how K-12 teaching and classroom experiences facilitate the practice of the district's most important student skills and attributes:[4]

1. How is the district measuring its success and using that K-12 data to create accountability and continuous improvement of student performance in those areas?
2. How do budgets and education plans ensure that all K-12 work is designed to increase the number of children who leave school ready to perform and succeed at a high level?
3. What are the most important tasks that we must undertake to ensure that all our systems are aligned for student success?

The Haldane Essentials were established by the planning committee as a foundation for the Strategic Coherence Plan.[5] The six Haldane Essentials include: Critical Thinking, Problem Solving, Communication, Growth Mindset, Emotional Intelligence, and Wellness.[6] The coherence planning process followed four key phases resulting in five strategies focused on improving outcomes for all students in HCSD:[7]

Strategy One: Create a system that ensures the ongoing development and implementation of vertically and horizontally aligned curriculum that supports the attainment of The Haldane Essentials

Strategy Two: Design and implement a professional learning plan that purposefully enhances the faculty and staff's capacity to support The Haldane Essentials.

Strategy Three: Align and connect all goal-setting processes so they systemically support the District's Mission, Beliefs, and the attainment of The Haldane Essentials.

Strategy Four: Ensure that all students, including those from historically underserved or vulnerable populations, have high expectations for success and equitable access to opportunities to learn.

[1] Haldane Central School District Strategic Coherence Plan, March 2020
[2] https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment.php?year=2021&instid=800000039703
[3] id.
[4] Haldane Central School District Strategic Coherence Plan, March 2020
[5] id.
[6] id.
[7] id.

Strategy Five: Enhance communication with stakeholders regarding the District's Mission, Beliefs, and The Haldane Essentials.

PCG was contracted to provide an objective view of the special education program in HCSD and has identified both strengths and areas of improvement, or root causes, that require focus in the coming years. These root causes emerged from our analysis of data we collected and are discussed in detail in this report. While these root causes will require significant attention, the recommendations at the conclusion of this report serve as a roadmap to address them, leading to the future growth of the special education program and a path to help HCSD to create the world-class services we know it desires.

II. Summary of Strengths and Opportunities for Improvement

The following section highlights the strengths and opportunities for improvement in each area reviewed as part of this evaluation.

State Performance Plan (SPP) and HCSD's Results Driven Accountability (RDA)

Strengths

- **Educational Setting.** HCSD educates students with disabilities 80 percent or more of the day in the general education setting at rates higher than the state target.
- **Graduation Rate.** HCSD's 100% four-year graduation rates for students with disabilities meets or exceeds the state rate for students with disabilities and those without for the past two years.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Achievement outcomes.** The district's proficiency rates for students with disabilities in ELA and math are significantly lower than those of their nondisabled peers.
- **Risk Ratios for Overidentification.** HCSD exceeds the 2.5 threshold for Hispanic students identified under the disability category of speech/language (3.20) and of other health impairment (2.82).
- **Risk Ratios for Educational Setting.** HCSD exceeds the 2.5 threshold for Hispanic students educated 40-79% of their time in the general education setting (2.67).
- **Educational Setting.** HCSD students are educated in separate settings at a higher rate than the state target.

Summary and Implications

The data in this chapter showcase both positive trends in HCSD as well as areas that require further analysis. HCSD received a Results Driven Accountability (RDA) determination of "Meets Requirements" and met or exceeded the state target across most indicators for the 2020-21 school year. It is notable HCSD has a 100% four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities which is higher than the state average (69%). Additionally, HCSD educates students with disabilities 80 percent or more of the day in the general education setting (76.4% in the 20-21SY) when compared to the state average (58.3%).

There are some concerning trends, however, related to the achievement gap in reading and math for students with IEPs. Between 2016-17 and 2018-19, a larger percentage of HCSD students in grades 4 and 8 without disabilities scored proficient on the ELA assessment when compared to the state. However, a substantially smaller percentage of HCSD students with disabilities scored proficient. The gap between HCSD students with disabilities and students without disabilities averaged 44 percent over the three years analyzed. This gap was higher than the state achievement gap between students without disabilities and those with disabilities (29 percent) over the same period.

Similar to performance on the ELA assessments, between 2016 – 2019, the percentage of HCSD students without disabilities who scored proficient on the grades 4 and 8 math assessments was higher than the state average. The percentage of HCSD students with disabilities who scored proficient was also higher than the state average during the period analyzed. Additionally, HCSD students with disabilities who scored proficient increased 13 percentage points between 2016-2019. While there was improvement made during that time period, the achievement gap between HCSD students without disabilities and with disabilities was 29 percent, higher than the state achievement gap (25 percent). This is an area HCSD should further investigate to determine why students with IEPs are experiencing an achievement gap in math and reading assessment performance.

Intervention Support and Referral Process

Strengths

- **Multi-Tiered System of Student Supports (MTSS).** The district has a well-established framework for MTSS procedures, including guidance, entry criteria, intervention resources, and progress monitoring strategies.
- **Confidence in Special Education Processes.** HCSD staff consistently report feeling fluent in special education processes from referral through IEP development.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Transitioning from MTSS to a Special Education Referral.** District staff have an orientation to provide support for students; however, this may result in students spending a considerable amount of time receiving informal supports before a formal referral process begins.
- **Educational Evaluations.** Educational evaluations are not consistently regarded as high quality or timely. Parents are often seeking private evaluations in lieu of district initiated evaluations.

Summary and Implications

Although district leadership has made strides in building out intervention guidance and resources, the perception continues to exist that students get “stuck” between MTSS and special education. Inconsistencies in special education processes and procedures have resulted in students with disabilities having highly variable experiences. For example, the practice of parents believing access to special education services is contingent upon independent educational evaluations, coupled with educational evaluators completing evaluations secondarily to their current roles. Limitations in special education guidance related to referral, assessment, and evaluation practices should remain an area of focus for HCSD.

Specialized Services and Supports

Strengths

- **Prioritizing Inclusion.** District leadership has prioritized being inclusive and promoting a growth mindset for students with disabilities in HCSD.
- **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) Expansion.** HCSD staff have demonstrated a commitment to expansion of placements and continuum of services.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Limited LRE.** Limited continuum of services resulting in restrictive specially designed instruction service provision and need to use out of district placements at a higher rate.
- **Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) Instructional Model.** Overreliance on ICT as a primary instructional model and limiting beliefs that this is the most effective model to support specially designed instruction for students with disabilities.

- **IEP Development Guidance.** No formal guidance exists for HCSD to utilize when drafting, updating, and modifying IEPs.

Summary and Implications

HCSD prioritizes inclusion of students with disabilities through the implementation of various instructional models across all grade levels. However, at the same time, as learned through interviews and focus groups and witnessed during classroom visits, the district has demonstrated an overreliance on a singular instructional model as best practice (ICT). The perspective that ICT is the most appropriate instructional model for supporting students with disabilities in the general education setting was acknowledged in most focus groups. This model has not adhered to best practices that promote general education teacher/special education teacher partnerships and frequent collaboration. Subsequently, this has created limiting beliefs that the district must adopt ICT in all courses and hire a considerable number of special educators (1:1 for all grade levels). Further, there is an explicit need to design and offer specialized programs from preschool through high school for students with more significant disabilities. The size of the district makes this a complex issue, yet creating a cooperative model in partnership with other districts is a promising approach.

The survey findings, coupled with qualitative data analysis and classroom visit data, support less reliance on the ICT instructional model for specially designed instruction provision and a greater focus on utilizing teaching moments effectively. Scheduling impacts, fostering meaningful co-planning, and maximizing instructional opportunities will yield greater outcomes for students with disabilities in lieu of extending an existing model that may not be as effective as it was perceived to be.

Special Education Leadership

Strengths

- **New Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) Leadership.** The district recently hired a new Director of PPS bringing many positive changes in process and culture.
- **PPS Budget Commitments.** The PPS Department leadership has made bold commitments to expanding the LRE continuum and strategizing to maximize outcomes for students with disabilities.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **PPS Leadership Changes.** Special education leadership changes resulting in struggling initiative implementation and consistency in vision.
- **Strategic Planning.** The district has intentions to build out a strategic plan for special education in alignment with budget commitments.

Summary and Implications

Consistency in special education leadership and the creation of a district-wide vision for students with disabilities in HCSD will be transformational. Prioritizing the development, training, and monitoring strategies for standard operating procedures will eliminate existing barriers for students with disabilities. It is critical that the district establish a special education vision and standard operating procedures to be implemented by district leadership, as well as a plan that allows for leadership growth of special education staff that supports their development in addition to building a structure that enhances the capacity of the PPS Director.

Family and Community Engagement

Strengths

- **Engaged Parents.** The Learning Differences Committee and parents of students with disabilities are active partners in HCSD's special education initiatives and serve as strong advocates for students and their families.
- **Close-knit Community.** HCSD is a small, close knit district allowing staff to create long-term and meaningful relationships with students and parents.
- **Staff Dedicated to Partnership.** Special and general education staff demonstrate a commitment to collaborating to promote positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Expectations and Services.** A proportion of parents of students with IEPs believe the district can improve on services (continuum, instruction, extracurriculars) offered.
- **Communication.** Parents report that communication breakdowns exist between school and home and district and home about IEP implementation, transitions, and student progress.

Summary and Implications

HCSD has a great resource in the parents and families of students with disabilities. There is work that needs to be done to improve the perceptions of parents who believe the district is limiting access to in district opportunities for students with more significant manifestations of their disabilities and how multiple instructional models are deployed throughout the district to support students with disabilities. To set the stage, HCSD will need to continue to emphasize collaborative relationship building, and communication that strengthens the connection between school and home. These are attainable through structured expectations for communication and shared accountability in ensuring students with disabilities are appropriately served by HCSD.

Budget and Staffing

Strengths

- **Student-Centered Budgeting.** Schools take a student-centered approach to scheduling special education services and to allocating resources to support their needs.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Out of District Placements.** Out of district placements are the biggest cost driver for PPS's budget.
- **Cooperative District Partnerships.** HCSD has explored partnering with neighboring districts to share costs for a specialized class.

Summary and Implications

HCSD has a strong professional development structure in place to address the diverse needs of students with and without disabilities. Teaching assistants and aides participating in professional development opportunities is a unique approach to best maximize the efforts of these team members within the context of their roles. Individuals serving in this role would benefit from a formalized professional learning structure.

HCSD is overall well-resourced financially and makes significant contributions to instruction and related services staffing. When reviewing special education instruction costs per student with disability, HCSD falls in the middle of the six districts reviewed in its special education costs. For HCSD to meet RDA/SPP targets,

effective, high-yield collaborative practices will be needed. To implement these practices district-wide, an effective inclusive education teacher allocation model will need to be in place. HCSD's allocations formula does currently account for the expansion of inclusive practices. The district is partnering with an outside agency to support master scheduling across the three schools. This initiative has the potential to make significant positive impacts on HCSD time and better utilization of instructional resources to promote positive outcomes for students with disabilities. Further, the district will need to continue to explore more cost-effective options to supporting students with significant disabilities, such as through partnerships with neighboring districts.

IV. Recommendations

PCG saw ample evidence that HCSD has a solid foundation on which to build. HCSD has many notable strengths, including its passionate and knowledgeable staff and its willingness to undertake this review and act on the recommendations as part of a continuous improvement cycle.

The following recommendations are considered priority recommendations. Each is interrelated and will require a significant investment on the part of HCSD to undertake. Implementation of these recommendations will set the foundation for all other action steps that emerge from this report. The action steps listed under each recommendation below are organized in a manner that provides a comprehensive view of the activities required to initiate change. Although components of the action steps can be implemented within a shorter timeframe, full-scale implementation of the recommendations may take three to five years. Action steps corresponding to the recommendations are included below.

1. Districtwide Vision for Special Education

- **Collaborative vision.** With representatives of district leadership, HCSD staff as well as parents of students with disabilities, create a collaborative, districtwide vision for special education. Based on these discussions, create a core belief vision statement of agreed-upon ideals. Share it with other stakeholders to build momentum for the cohesive approach for special education provision.

2. Universal Design for Learning

- **Training**. Provide clear guidance and training for all district and school leaders, and teachers on the principles of UDL and how these principles can be applied in the development of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Leverage staff who previously received UDL training to help guide training content based on their lessons learned and to actively support the training process.

- **Implementation**. Use UDL principles consistently so that all students can access grade-level material and can help close achievement gaps between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

3. Disproportionality Monitoring

- **Tracking disproportionality in disability identification and educational setting**. At least quarterly, use the risk ratio to measure the identification rates of students with IEPs by race/ethnicity and other important indicators, such as educational setting, language status, free and reduced lunch status, giftedness, etc., to identify any student group that it is two and a half times more likely than peers to be identified as being over-identified and/or placed in a more restrictive setting (i.e., risk ratios).

- **Data review and hypotheses**. With a cross-departmental group of leaders and staff, use this data to develop hypotheses for identified disproportionate risk ratios for any group of students, delays in the evaluation referrals and completions, and/or schools with disproportionately high new identification rates.

- **Follow-up action**. Based on these hypotheses, develop any additional written guidance needed to clarify procedures and practices, consider any additional resources and strategies needed along with a written plan, if appropriate, and provide training to support implementation. For example, identification disproportionality training would include the implications of race/ethnicity/language, socio-economic status, and culture constructs for school-based teams when considering students for an evaluation.
- **Monitoring**. Based on the areas of practice identified through the above activities, identify data to be collected and monitored, along with any practices to be monitored, to support consistent implementation across HCSD and to identify schools needing additional support or intervention.

4. Inclusive Practices

- **Inclusive education framework**. Develop and use a structured framework/model that will help promote and support the consistent implementation of best practices for inclusive education including the provision of high yield collaborative teaching, specially designed instruction and related services.
- **Implementation guide**. Develop a clearly articulated district/school implementation guide based on the inclusive education framework with expected guidance, procedures and practices. Determine the role of schools to adapt the framework to their unique needs versus HCSD requirements. This process could also include HCSD's advance approval for a school to adapt the framework with deviations the district defines as significant.
- **Scheduled time for collaboration**. Establish written guidance for the use of inclusive master school schedules, which establish common planning time for collaborative teaching, co-teaching, and other activities for general educators with special education and other personnel. Develop various scheduling models that schools could use and/or adapt.
- **Cross-department collaboration**. Through intentional collaboration between PPS and Curriculum and Instruction, further study achievement gaps between students with IEPs and their typically developing peers on state standardized assessments, and between students with IEPs by race/ethnicity, English learner status, social economic status, gender, etc. Use this information to inform discussions about improving HCSD's continuum of services, including making inclusive instruction more effective.

5. Instructional Model and Service Delivery Continuum

- **Reconstruct instructional models.** Based on this program review, identify if the district wants to explore a full-time ICT model for all courses or if a more diversified approach, such as consultative teaching, can be explored. Furthermore, do not limit resources to a particular instructional model. Instead allow for flexibility so learning materials and other resources are allocated based on student need and not dictated by a particular model. Document the models with written information to inform professional development and resource needs.
    - **Co-taught instruction.** Draft guidance for the delivery of co-taught instruction based on the most effective model for instruction purposes and use of the special educator. Based on the developed guidance, provide intensive professional development and follow-up coaching and modeling to give co-teachers the information and support they need to be true partners in the planning and delivery of classroom instruction. Monitor implementation through classroom walk through activities that are guided by observation protocol for this purpose.
    - **Consultative teaching.** Draft guidance for the delivery of consultative teaching to support students with disabilities. Under this model, special educators (e.g., special educator, reading specialist, EL teacher) provide direct and/or indirect services to students with disabilities in the general education setting. Based on the developed guidance, provide intensive

professional development and follow-up coaching and modeling to give general and special educators the information and support they need to be true partners in the planning and delivery of classroom instruction. Monitor implementation through classroom walk through activities that are guided by observation protocol for this purpose.

- **Professional development.** Provide professional development for all personnel associated with the newly developed models of instruction. As part of the more generalized professional development specified in these recommendations, pair general and special educators to understand how differing perspectives impact instructional models and influence inclusivity.
- **Assess placements.** Based on the data above, at least annually review trends and how HCSD can reconfigure its human and material resources to provide students with significant manifestations of their disabilities more supportive, flexible in-district options for students.
- **General education classroom composition.** Establish a maximum student classroom ratio for students with and without disabilities for general education and monitor the ratio to ensure these configurations are not "inclusion in name only" and do not comprise a majority of students with IEPs and 504 Plan taught solely by general education teachers.

6. Out of District Placements

- **Monitor placements of students trending towards an out of district placement.** Develop a system to monitor the progress of students who are trending towards an out of district placement. The district must continue to track projections of students requiring an out of district placement to inform in district programming and address parent concerns of "outsourcing" special education for students with more significant manifestations of their disabilities.
- **Parent outreach**. Talk with parents and CSE teams who sought or required an out of district placement to better understand their motivations and limitations on offering an LRE to meet all student needs in district.
- **School assessment**. Visit or obtain other information about the most common out of district placements to ascertain how these resources are different from any currently available for any student in HCSD schools.
- **Cost analysis.** Analyze the cost of out of district placements, including costs associated with transportation and complaint/due process resolutions, and how this money can be used instead to provide these and other resources within HCSD schools or in partnership with neighboring districts. Use this information to develop the instructional models described in the above recommendations.

7. IEP Development

- **Written procedures.** Include in HCSD's written special education guidance standards and examples for IEP development processes that are appropriate and consistent across the district. Guidance would include but not be limited to Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP) and data use within; IEP goals; accommodations; and progress reporting. Include a procedure for discussing additional material and human resources than those currently available to meet a particular student's needs, including those needed for students who would otherwise be placed out of district.
- **IEP goals.** Ensure IEP goals are based on student needs identified within the PLAAFP ensuring that goals are not being created or influenced by district limitations within HCSD's current continuum of services.

- **Monitoring IEPs.** Establish and implement a process for periodically reviewing student IEPs for their consistency with expected standards. Consider using a school-based process, which would include an impartial HCSD facilitator to review, analyze and discuss IEPs with teachers and related service providers.

- **Collaboration.** Foster positive collaboration by creating more planning time between general education and special education teachers; ensuring adequate time and coverage for staff participating in CSE meetings; and transparent processes around timelines, data, and information sharing with parents to enhance trust and partnership among all CSE members. Provide interpreters for parents who are non-native English speakers and translate IEP documents.

8. Special Education Policy and Procedure Manual

- **Policy and Procedures Manual.** Develop an interactive, web based HCSD special education manual to support user-friendly and transparent access to procedures/practices relevant to the management and operations of special education and to which school staff can be held accountable for implementing. Streamline resources so that school teams can easily access relevant information and use embedded hyperlinks to provide information for staff as needed. Update the manual on a routine basis. Include criteria, procedures, and practices for each area in the manual relevant to the implementation of these recommendations, e.g., criteria for child find; MTSS progress criteria to support the referral of students for special education evaluations; inclusive instruction; revised continuum of services; transportation protocol; etc.

9. Expanding the Role of Special Education and Student Services Staff

- **Conduct an In-Depth Analysis of Special Education and Student Services Staff.** Evaluate the current evaluation team model (diagnostic professionals and special education stipend staff) and assess the extent to which current staffing supports the intended outcomes of effective assessment and evaluation practices along with service delivery. Engage a broad group of stakeholders to develop and review them. Review personnel ratios and caseload data included in this study, reallocate, or add resources to ensure that HCSD expectations regarding the provision of special education services are met. Specifically, identify how practitioner responsibilities being led by the PPS Director can be distributed to ensure that role is focused on leadership and management expectations. Make the revised formula transparent and evaluate needed changes for the short and long term.

- **Schedule Efficiently and Monitor Caseloads of School Personnel.** Maximize the use of the personnel resources available in schools to provide behavioral and mental health supports/interventions, related services, or specially designed instruction to students with disabilities by scheduling, monitoring, and adjusting the caseloads to better utilize the existing resources with greater efficiency.

- **Cross-functional teams**. Cross-train individuals from different divisions/departments to maximize their knowledge and skills in mental health and behavioral support to leverage their collective resources to provide direct support, mentoring, coaching, and technical assistance to principals and teachers.



Solutions that Matter