

# Comprehensive Program Review of Special Education Executive Summary

White Plains City School District

January 2025



**PUBLIC**  
CONSULTING GROUP

White Plains City School District  
Comprehensive Special Education Review  
January 2025

*Acknowledgments*

The PCG team thanks the many individuals who contributed to this special education review for WPCSD. Their efforts were critical to our ability to obtain a broad and detailed understanding of the system so that we could present the best possible roadmap for improving special education and related services for WPCSD's students. This review would not have been possible without the support of Superintendent of Schools Dr. Joseph Ricca, Assistant Superintendent for Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services, Deb Augarten, Director of Special Education – Elementary, Susan LeCointe-Dorsett, and Director of Special Education – Secondary, Ybelize Pilarte, in addition to the Board of Education and other members of the senior leadership team and the Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services department staff.

The project team organized all components of the data collection efforts, provided all the documents and data we needed to do our work, and organized the logistics for our data collection activities. Their commitment to this endeavor and partnership throughout the review process was admirable.

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Public Consulting Group LLC

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY</b> .....	<b>4</b>
Purpose of the Study .....	4
Methodology.....	4
PCG Foundational Approach .....	8
Special Education Effectiveness Domains .....	9
Terminology .....	9
<b>II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>12</b>
Background on White Plains City School District .....	12
Key Findings .....	13
<b>III. STATE PERFORMANCE PLAN (SPP) AND WPCSD’S RESULTS DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY (RDA)</b> .....	<b>25</b>
Overview .....	25
Summary and Implications.....	26
<b>IV. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND SPECIALIZED SERVICES</b> .....	<b>28</b>
Overview .....	28
Summary and Implications.....	29
<b>V. HIGH EXPECTATIONS</b> .....	<b>31</b>
Overview .....	31
Summary and Implications.....	32
<b>VI. HUMAN CAPITAL AND LEADERSHIP</b> .....	<b>33</b>
Overview .....	33
Summary and Implications.....	34
<b>VII. SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES</b> .....	<b>35</b>
Overview .....	35
Summary and Implications.....	35
<b>VIII. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT</b> .....	<b>37</b>
Overview .....	37
Summary and Implications.....	38
<b>IX. RECOMMENDATIONS</b> .....	<b>39</b>
1. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support .....	39
2. Inclusive Practices .....	40
3. Specially Designed Instruction and Professional Development .....	41
4. Redefine the Continuum of Alternative Placements .....	43

5.	Academic Optimism, Rigor, and High Expectations .....	44
6.	Policies and Procedures in Special Education .....	45
7.	Improve District Leadership Transparency and Collaboration.....	46
8.	Parent Partnerships .....	47
	From Strategy to Execution .....	48

# I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

## Purpose of the Study

In February 2024, White Plains City School District (WPCSD) engaged with Public Consulting Group (PCG) to conduct an independent review of its special education program and services. This report describes the current state of the special education program in WPCSD and is designed to guide the District toward continuous improvement.

This study examined the following guiding research questions:

### ***Learning Environment and Specialized Services***

- To what extent is the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) employed to support students requiring academic and/or behavioral interventions?
- How is the continuum of services organized to support a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)?
- Is there a consistent “golden thread,” or supporting body of evidence, that connects the student’s disability with present levels, learner characteristics, goals, progress, placement, and selected accommodations for instruction and assessment?

### ***High Expectations***

- How does WPCSD perform with regards to student outcomes and transition for students with disabilities?

### ***Human Capital and Leadership***

- How does WPCSD organize and utilize its human capital resources?
- How does WPCSD support teacher pedagogy and provide professional learning?

### ***Systems and Structures***

- Do current staffing allocation procedures and practices allow for special education staff to adequately meet the needs of students with disabilities in WPCSD?
- How does WPCSD allocate resources in a way that facilitates a maximum return on district investment? How does budget management occur? How are grant funds accessed and used?

### ***Family and Community Engagement***

- To what extent are parents of children with IEPs satisfied with their child’s educational program?
- How do community relations and customer service function for parents of students with disabilities in WPCSD?

## Methodology

PCG conducted a mixed-methods study of the special education program in WPCSD. The findings and recommendations related to programs, policies, and practices resulted from a comprehensive review of several data sources. Sources included 1) Data and Document Analysis, including an Independent IEP Review; 2) Organizational Focus Groups/Interviews; 3) Staff and Parent Surveys; 4) Classroom

Observations; and 5) Student Shadowing. 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 WPCSD statistics against local, district, state, and national data. The method and sources of data were triangulated to increase the validity of the conclusions regarding program implementation, identification of gaps in services and programming, and recommendations for the continued improvement of WPCSD's special education programs and continuum of services.

Details of each data source are included below.

## ***Data and Document Analysis***

### ***Population Trends, Programs, and Achievement and Outcomes Analysis***

PCG analyzed special education population trends, programs, and achievement outcomes. Through analysis of assessment data, educational setting data, and other indicators, the team compared student identification rates and outcomes by disability, ethnicity, gender, and other demographic variables. Data included in the report also compared students with IEPs to their general education peers.

### ***Document Review***

PCG analyzed over 75 documents for information related to district and school structures, programs, policies, and practices. The documents were coded for themes that aligned with the focus group and interview findings. Documents reviewed were from the following categories:

- Organizational structure, staffing, and resource allocation
- Description of academic programs, services, interventions, and activities
- Documents regarding instruction and professional learning
- District procedures and guides
- Compliance and due process complaints
- Fiscal information, including budget documents

### ***Independent IEP File Review***

PCG conducted an independent, virtual IEP student file review. The protocol used for this review was based on PCG's Golden Thread protocol which connects the student's disability with present levels, learner characteristics, goals, progress, inclusion needs, and selected accommodations for instruction and assessment. In total, 25 student files were reviewed following this protocol, which focused on present levels, goals, services and placement, and student progress. Additional information about the structure of the Golden Thread protocol can be found later in the report.

### ***Organizational Focus Groups and Interviews***

To understand how special education programs operate within the District, organizational focus groups and interviews were designed to include a range of stakeholders. These focus groups included a variety of central office staff, school-based staff, family participants, and Board members. PCG worked closely with WPCSD to determine the best outreach and communication methods for focus groups and interview participation to ensure participation selection was voluntary and unbiased.

WPCSD staff focus groups consisted of between two and ten participants, while interviews were typically held 1:1 with study participants. Overall, there was a cross-section of staff that participated in focus groups to provide a strong sampling of staff in WPCSD from both the district level and building level. As part of this review, supervisors did not participate in the same focus groups or interview sessions with those staff members they supervised to allow all staff to speak candidly and honestly. PCG provided a sample schedule and list of positions to participate in these groups to the WPCSD leadership team to ensure all stakeholders were included. School-based focus group participants were selected at random

by PCG staff after indicating an interest to participate in a focus group. Three (3) parent focus groups were also held in both virtual and in-person formats to maximize parent participation. Language translation was made available for parent focus group participants. In total, PCG held 36 focus groups with a variety of stakeholders.

### **Staff and Parent Surveys**

An online survey process was implemented to collect data on stakeholder perceptions of the quality and effectiveness of WPCSD’s special education services. PCG collaborated with WPCSD to vet survey items and disseminate two surveys: one to staff and one to parents of students with IEPs.

### **Survey Items**

Survey items were drawn from the research and practice literature in special education and clustered to acquire data from each stakeholder group regarding the extent to which these groups perceived that policies and practices shown in the literature support effective programming, parent involvement, and positive results for students with disabilities in WPCSD.

WPCSD reviewed the survey items to verify their relevance and to add items where appropriate. The survey incorporated five-point rating scales, yes/no questions, and included open-ended text areas. For reporting purposes, the five-point rating scale was consolidated into three categories: agree (which includes strongly agree and agree), disagree (which includes strongly disagree and disagree), and don’t know or prefer not to say (where this option was provided to respondents). In some cases, survey data was broken down by the role of the respondent when there was significant variation among respondents by their role type.

### **Survey Process and Analysis**

PCG worked collaboratively with WPCSD to facilitate a survey process that would result in the highest possible rate of return. To encourage participation, all parents of students with an IEP were informed of the survey’s purpose and provided instructions for accessing it via email. WPCSD sent an email invitation to participate in the survey and reminder emails were sent to participate.

A total of 695 parents (49.8%) completed or partially completed the online survey. Of the parents that fully completed the survey, 5 parents identified as American Indian or Alaska Native, 18 Asian, 36 Black/African American, 3 Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 170 White, 130 Hispanic or Latino and 4 preferred not to say. A total of 767 WPCSD staff (79.8%) completed or partially completed the online staff survey, including 91 special education teachers, 216 general education teachers, 38 student support services personnel, and 19 school building administrators.

Survey responses from staff included the following roles with the percentage of staff by role that responded to the survey:

<b>Respondents by Role</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
General Education Teachers	34.1%
Special Education Teachers	14.4%
School Building Administrators	3%
Teacher Aides	9.3%
Student Support Services (Psychologist, Nurse, Counselor, BCBA, Behavior Interventionist)	6%

Related Service Providers	.5%
Specials/Electives Teacher	7.6%
Other School-Based Staff	9.9%
Prefer Not to Say	13.2%

Responses to this survey included staff from all the above-mentioned groups and provided a representative sample of staff in WPCSD.

### **School Visits**

In October 2024, PCG visited all elementary and middle schools and one high school in WPCSD over three days, observing approximately 50 classrooms. During these visits, classes were observed for 10-30 minutes depending on the subject area and programming. To select those designated for visits, PCG requested a list of classrooms in which there were students with IEPs and the level, subject area, and placement designation. The intent was to ensure all placement settings were represented across all the District schools.

PCG’s School Observation protocol was designed to collect qualitative information about the school building and individual classrooms, it is not designed to evaluate teachers. It focused on several key areas: 1) Classroom Staffing, 2) Classroom Environment, 3) Specially Designed Instruction, and 4) Data Collection Methods. PCG observed all instructional/service delivery settings (e.g., consultant teacher classrooms, integrated co-teaching (ICT), specialized instruction/resource room, and special classes) across a wide representation of grades. The overall school environment, including non-instructional spaces such as the lunchroom, office, and hallways, was also observed.

The resulting data from all school visits are categorized and aggregated to inform impressions of the special education system districtwide and indicate areas in which professional learning in special education practices may be considered. Using aggregated data across classroom level and type adheres to the agreement to not identify specific schools or staff. Furthermore, this information is used primarily as another set of data for overall triangulation.

### **Student Shadowing**

Over the span of two days in October 2024, PCG conducted student shadowing observations. Three PCG staff members shadowed a total of eight students for across 4 schools that included elementary, middle, and high schools. The areas of observation included: Safe and Accessible Environment; Functions and Elements of Explicit Instruction; Specifically Designed Instruction. These areas are in alignment with the classroom visit protocol.

The goal of the student shadowing was two-fold:

- To document, for each student, the access they had to high quality instruction, the fidelity of IEP implementation, the continuity of services, and the overall experience as a student receiving special education services, and
- To assess the degree to which the student’s schedule is followed, how the student receives his/her services, how lessons are differentiated, and how integrated the student is within the larger school environment (e.g., lunchroom, recess, elective classes).

WPCSD obtained consent forms from parents to be shadowed as part of this study. PCG selected eight students from the sample of students with IEPs that included a wide cross-section of grades/ages,



gender, and disability categories. Student files included in the IEP Review conducted by PCG were excluded from the student shadowing observation list. PCG requested each student's IEP including student name, relevant demographics, disability type, services and accommodations, goals and placement. PCG also received each student's schedule and a detailed map of the school, including room numbers.

## PCG Foundational Approach

PCG's approach to its work with state, county, and district organizations is one of thought partnership. That is, we act as an outside agent, with an objective perspective, who works alongside educational entities to identify challenges and provide recommendations for improvement.<sup>1</sup> We follow a mixed-method collaborative program evaluation model that is systematic, based upon qualitative and quantitative research methods, and produces credible and valid data that proactively inform program implementation, determine gaps, and offer recommendations for the continued improvement of the system. We value the importance of developing trust and open communication and fostering collaboration between the review team and program staff.

Our philosophy for improving student outcomes in schools and districts is driven by the U.S. Department of Education's Results Driven Accountability (RDA) structure and rooted in our Special Education Effectiveness Domains framework.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA) states the following:

*“Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.”<sup>2</sup>*

One purpose of IDEA is to assess and ensure the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities. This is done through accountability measures established by the federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), state special education agencies, and, at times, special education case law.

While compliance indicators remain important, under the RDA framework, OSEP has sharpened its focus on what happens in the classroom to promote educational benefit and improve outcomes and results for students with disabilities.<sup>3</sup> This change was based on data showing that the educational outcomes of America's children and youth with disabilities have not improved as expected, despite significant federal efforts to close the achievement gap. The accountability system that existed prior to RDA placed substantial emphasis on procedural compliance, but it often did not consider how requirements affected the learning outcomes of students.<sup>4</sup> This shift is having a great impact in guiding priorities of special education systems nationwide, including in WPCSD. Districts nationwide are working to raise the level of and access to rigor in the classroom and generate a culture of academic optimism.<sup>5</sup>

These issues became even more significant with the March 22, 2017, U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*.<sup>6</sup> In this decision, the Court updated its prior standard for

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<sup>1</sup> Donnis-Keller, C., Meltzer, J., & Chmielewski, E. (2013, February). The Power of Collaborative Program Evaluation. [https://www.publicconsultinggroup.com/media/1272/pcg\\_collaborative\\_evaluation.pdf](https://www.publicconsultinggroup.com/media/1272/pcg_collaborative_evaluation.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *About IDEA*. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (n.d.). <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>

<sup>3</sup> *Office of Special Education Program's Results Driven Accountability Home Page*. U.S. Department of Education. (2024). <https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/osers/osep/office-of-special-education-programs-results-driven-accountability-home-page>

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*.

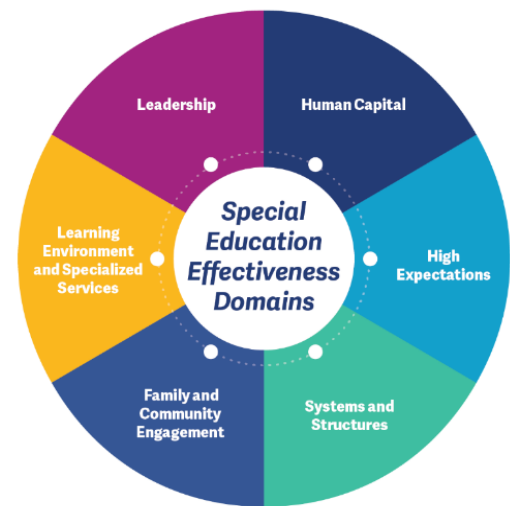
<sup>5</sup> Hoy, W.K., Tarter, C.J., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2006). Academic optimism of schools: A force for student achievement. Working Paper. The Ohio State University. <http://www.waynehoy.com/school-academic-optimism/>

<sup>6</sup> *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District RE-1*, 580 U.S. (2017)

determining a school district’s provision of an appropriate education for students with disabilities. This case centered on the importance of establishing ambitious and challenging goals that enable each student to make academic progress and functional advancement and progress from grade to grade. Progress for a student with a disability, including those receiving instruction based on alternate academic achievement standards, must be appropriate in light of the student’s circumstances. Furthermore, yearly progress must be more demanding than the *de minimis* standards that had been used by some lower courts. The Court made it clear that IDEA demands more. In *Andrew*, the Court reached a balance between the standard established by the 10th Circuit and other circuits, more than *de minimis*, and the higher standards promoted by Andrew’s parents with the goals of providing students with disabilities opportunities to achieve academic success, attain self-sufficiency, and contribute to society in a manner substantially equal to the opportunities afforded children without disabilities. The *Andrew* decision’s most significant impact at the school level is seen in (1) the design and development of rigorous individualized education programs (IEPs), (2) the implementation of students’ IEPs with fidelity, and (3) increased progress monitoring of IEP goals.

## Special Education Effectiveness Domains

Building on extensive research and our collective experience and expertise serving school districts and state departments of education nationwide, PCG has developed this Special Education Effectiveness Framework to assist school districts in catalyzing conversations about, and reviewing and improving the quality of, their special education programs.<sup>7</sup> It is designed to provide school district leaders with a set of practices to strengthen special education services and supports; to highlight the multidisciplinary, integrated nature of systemic improvement; and to clearly establish a pathway for districts to move toward realizing both compliance and results. An intentional focus on improving outcomes for students with disabilities leads to improved outcomes for ALL students.



When implemented with a systems-thinking approach, the six domains of our Special Education Effectiveness Framework help superintendents and district leaders improve educational and functional outcomes for students with disabilities.

The findings and recommendations provided in this report are organized around these domains and are oriented toward extending WPCSD’s focus on outcomes for students with disabilities.

## Terminology

There are several terms used throughout this report that require definition and clarification within the WPCSD context.

**Committee on Special Education (CSE).** The CSE is a multidisciplinary team appointed by the Board of Education. The CSE is authorized to identify students in need of services by determining eligibility, developing an Individualized Education Program (IEP), placing the student in the least restrictive environment in which they can succeed and provide appropriate services to meet the child’s educational

<sup>7</sup> Meller, J. et al., (n.d.). PCG’s Special Education Effectiveness Framework. [https://publicconsultinggroup.com/media/3347/special-education-effectiveness-framework\\_policy-paper.pdf](https://publicconsultinggroup.com/media/3347/special-education-effectiveness-framework_policy-paper.pdf)

needs. The team meets at least annually to review a child's IEP and determine programming from that point forward.

**Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE).** The CPSE is a multidisciplinary team appointed by the school board to determine eligibility and the appropriate level of services for preschool children ages 3-5 years old. The CPSE conducts meetings to develop, review, or revise the Individualized Education Program (IEP) of a preschool student with a disability.

**Consultant Teacher (CT) Services.** Consultant Teacher services are direct or indirect services provided by a special education teacher to assist students with disabilities in general education classes. These services are intended to support students in accessing the general education curriculum and achieving their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals.

**Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT).** Integrated Co-Teaching involves a general education teacher and a special education teacher working together to provide instruction to a mixed group of students with and without disabilities in a general education setting. The goal is to ensure that students with disabilities can access the general education curriculum alongside their peers.

**Intellectual Disability (ID).** *Intellectual disability* means significantly subaverage general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a student's educational performance.<sup>8</sup> Some data sources reviewed as part of this study utilized terminology no longer recognized within the literature. All data referenced within will refer to the term “intellectual disability.”

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) Continuum.** The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) continuum refers to the range of educational placements and services available to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The continuum ensures that students with disabilities are educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, with supplementary aids and services as necessary.

Placements on the LRE continuum range from general education classrooms with minimal supports to more restrictive environments such as self-contained special education classes, specialized schools, or homebound instruction. Placement decisions are based on the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and are designed to provide access to the general curriculum while meeting individual learning and support needs.

**Low Incidence Disabilities.** Low incidence disabilities refer to a category of disabilities that affect a relatively small percentage of the population. These disabilities are characterized by their infrequent occurrence or low prevalence rates. As a result, individuals with low incidence disabilities may be relatively rare within a given population or community. Examples of low incidence disabilities include certain developmental disorders, rare genetic conditions, and severe physical or sensory impairments. Although the prevalence of autism has significantly increased, it is still often referred to as a low incidence disabilities.

**Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).** MTSS is a framework for delivering evidence-based academic, behavioral, and social-emotional interventions tailored to the needs of all students. MTSS uses a proactive, data-driven approach to identify and support students through a continuum of services organized into three tiers:

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<sup>8</sup> New York State Education Department's Regulations of the Commissioner of Education: Part 200. <https://www.nysed.gov/special-education/section-2001-definitions>

1. *Tier 1 (Universal Supports)*: High-quality instruction and interventions provided to all students in the general education setting.
2. *Tier 2 (Targeted Supports)*: Small-group interventions for students who need additional support beyond what is provided universally.
3. *Tier 3 (Intensive Supports)*: Individualized interventions for students with significant or persistent needs.

**Nondisabled Peers.** This term is generally used in data tables where the original data source uses this nomenclature. At times, the terms “students without disabilities” (SWOD) or “typically developing peers” are also used.

**Parents.** In the context of this report, a parent is defined as natural or adoptive parents of a child, a guardian, a parent acting in the place of a parent (such as a grandparent or stepparent with whom the child lives, or a person who is legally responsible for the child’s welfare) or a surrogate parent. The term “parent” is inclusive of families as well.

**Special Class.** Special Classes are self-contained classrooms that exclusively serve students with disabilities who require more intensive and specialized instruction than can be provided in a general education setting.

**Students Receiving Special Education Services.** References are made to students receiving special education services. They will also be referred to as students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or students with disabilities (SWDs). The terms are intended to be interchangeable. This categorization does not include students with disabilities who exclusively have 504 Plans.

**SAIL Program (Strategies for Adult Independent Living).** These courses provide students with an understanding of how the community, the job site and the home function. It enables students to engage in activities to further their skills and knowledge to function independently at home, on the job and in the community. Administrative approval is required for admission.

**Teaching Assistants/Aides.** The terms Teaching Assistants and Aides are used interchangeably in the body of this report. Additionally, references are made to the role of Paraprofessionals which is equivalent to the roles of Teaching Assistants and Aides in respect to this report.

## II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background on White Plains City School District

Founded in 1683, White Plains is a vibrant city in Westchester County, New York. The city encompasses a wide range of beautiful parks, and its proximity to the Hudson River and Hutchinson Trail makes it a hot spot for travelers from all around New York. White Plains has a rich history rooted in the evolution of education, dating back to the early 1700s.<sup>9</sup> The White Plains Central School District (WPCSD) is dedicated to delivering high-quality, exceptional education to its diverse student body.

White Plains Central School District has a clear mission which is to: “educate and inspire all students while nurturing their dreams, so they learn continually, think critically, pursue their aspirations and contribute to a diverse and dynamic world.”<sup>10</sup> Recognizing the uniqueness of each student, WPCSD is committed to offering a comprehensive range of educational and extracurricular programs. The District places a strong emphasis on fostering relationships with parents and the community, making civic engagement and partnerships integral to its success. Currently, WPCSD serves over 7,000 students and supports a community of more than 57,000 residents.

According to the 2022-2023 School Report Card provided by the NYSED, WPCSD has a diverse student population, with 51 percent male and 49 percent female students. Hispanic students represent the largest demographic at 59 percent, followed by 22 percent White students and 11 percent Black students. Multi-racial and Asian students account for less than 6 percent of the population. Notably, more than half of the District’s students (56%) are economically disadvantaged with 2 percent facing homelessness. Additionally, 18 percent of the student body are English Language Learners, whereas students with disabilities make up 17 percent. In 2022-2023, WPCSD reported a commendable 90 percent four-year graduate rate. In the previous school year, 85.2 percent of students with disabilities graduated, exceeding the state target of 72 percent or higher.<sup>11</sup>

WPCSD encompasses five elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools. Referring to the 2022-2023 School Report card, WPCSD has 19 school counselors, 598 teachers, 10 social workers, and 8 principals. Teacher attendance rate is 96 percent with turnover being 8 percent for all teachers.

Each year, the WPCSD school district partners with volunteer stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, and community members, for a comprehensive strategic planning session. The WPCSD District website outlines the process as, “identifying the district’s strengths along with any areas that may be potentially strengthened” resulting in “the annual refinement of a new plan focused on student achievement and access.”<sup>12</sup> Annual approval of the revised plan is conducted by the Board of Education.

The WPCSD Strategic Plan 2024-2026 identified its guiding Vision, Mission, and Priorities as:<sup>13</sup>

*“Vision: We aspire to unlock the infinite and unique potential of each student, every day.”*

*“Mission: Education and inspire all students while nurturing their dreams, so they can continually think critically, pursue their aspirations, and contribute to a diverse, and dynamic world.”*

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<sup>9</sup> History of White Plains. (n.d). City of White Plains. <https://www.cityofwhiteplains.com/469/History-of-White-Plains>

<sup>10</sup> Strategic Plan. (n.d). White Plains Public Schools. <https://www.whiteplainspublicschools.org/about/strategic-plan>

<sup>11</sup> White Plains City School District Data. (n.d). data.nysed.gov. <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000034913>

<sup>12</sup> WPCSD school district website (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.whiteplainspublicschools.org/about/strategic-plan>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

*“Priorities: 1) Educate: Ensure engaging and innovative learning experiences; 2) Support: Provide necessary structures and resources; and 3) Partner: Collaborate with students, families, and community.”*

Seven Core Beliefs drive the implementation of WPCSD’s Strategic Plan. The District believes that:<sup>14</sup>

1. All people have intrinsic value,
2. Celebrating and embracing diversity enrich life,
3. All people can learn, grow, and contribute,
4. Every choice matters, and that people are responsible for their choices,
5. Respect, honesty, and trust empower,
6. When people serve the community, both the individuals and the community benefit, and
7. High expectations promote high achievement.

The District’s Strategic Plan serves as a pivotal foundation for the adoption of high-leverage, evidence-based practices that yield positive outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.

## Key Findings

Throughout the course of this report, PCG has analyzed the complex, often interconnected root causes that have impacted the achievement of students with disabilities and highlighted areas in which the District either needs to accelerate its efforts or change course. PCG’s focus for this report is to help WPCSD leverage the District’s strengths to enhance academic and functional outcomes for students with disabilities.

WPCSD has placed an emphasis on inclusive practices that are well complimented with staff who are passionate about serving students with disabilities and their families. The District has embraced the adoption of interventions and varying specially designed instructional models to address existing performance gaps for students with disabilities. District leadership and the Board have expressed an openness to continuing to adopt practices that promote growth for all students, including students with disabilities. Although WPCSD recognizes the need to strengthen systems to ensure success for students with disabilities, it faces challenges in five key areas. These areas are supported by evidence throughout this report and serve as the basis for the recommendations provided at the end of this report.

### **1) Special Education is a Service, Not a Place**

The Office of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services has a vision that emphasizes inclusion and the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities. As noted on the Office’s webpage:

*Our office provides programs and services for students ages 3 - 21. We strive to build an inclusive school setting where students with learning differences receive their specialized instruction, to the extent possible, alongside their general education peers. Collaboration with district staff, parents and community ensures quality programs and services.*

WPCSD’s special education leadership has made significant strides in expanding opportunities for students with disabilities to learn in more inclusive settings. Over the past decade, there has been a notable shift from a model where students with moderate to significant disabilities often spent the majority of their time in more restrictive environments. The District’s LRE continuum, in years past, emphasized program-specific placements, primarily within self-contained classrooms. There has been a transition toward greater inclusion which some participants in this study have interpreted as leaning heavily toward

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

a “full inclusion model.” It is important to note that WPCSD has not adopted a “full inclusion model”, where all students with disabilities are served in the general education setting, as described in the literature.<sup>15</sup> Not all staff who participated in this study demonstrated agreement with the transition towards more inclusive practices. Several study participants advocated for a return to a more self-contained model, similar to that implemented in previous years, believing it better meets the needs of some students.

The chart below highlights how WPCSD has evolved to promote inclusive practices for students with disabilities from the 2014-2015 school year to the 2021-2022 school year. Each educational setting, measured by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), demonstrates tremendous improvements. Additionally, the number of students with disabilities who were being served in out-of-district placements decreased by almost 50 percent from 95 to 45 students. WPCSD made considerable investments in expanding the LRE continuum through the creation of 35 integrated co-teaching classrooms. These efforts are commendable.

**Exhibit 1. Least Restrictive Environment Setting Evolution in WPCSD**

<b>Least Restrictive Environment Setting Evolution<sup>16</sup></b>		
	<b>2014-2015 SY (Place)</b>	<b>2021-2022 SY (Service)</b>
<b>80% or higher</b>	44.2%*	72%
<b>40-79%</b>	28.9%	23.1%
<b>Less than 40%</b>	18.2%	5.6%
<b>Separate Setting</b>	5.7%	4.1%
<b>Other Setting(s)</b>	3%	3.6%
<b># of Students Out of District</b>	95	45
<b># of Self-Contained (Elementary-12:1:2) Classrooms</b>	6	3
<b># of Self-Contained (Autism, Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities) Classrooms</b>	8	13
<b># of ICT Elementary Classrooms</b>	0	18
<b># of ICT Secondary Classrooms</b>	0	17 (Multiple sections)

High retention rates of teaching staff in WPCSD are a valuable asset to the District providing continuity and deep institutional knowledge. For some long-time staff who are accustomed to previous programming models, such as more program-specific, self-contained classrooms, the transition to more inclusive practices has been an adjustment. The changes implemented, as outlined above, align with current best practices and federal regulations under IDEA. Some participants expressed apprehension about what they perceived as an overreliance on Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT) and Consultant Teacher (CT) settings as well as a lack of collaboration and clarity in placement decision-making processes.

<sup>15</sup> Clouser, L. (n.d.). *Core principles: Full inclusion of all students with learning disabilities*. Learning Disabilities Association of America. <https://ldaamerica.org/core-principles-full-inclusion-of-all-students-with-learning-disabilities/>

<sup>16</sup> Board of Education Meeting Presentation by the Dept of Special Education and Pupil Services, September 2024

District leadership has emphasized that decisions regarding student placement are guided by IDEA regulations and the New York State “Blueprint for Improved Results for Students with Disabilities” which prioritize data-driven decision-making when considering LRE for students with disabilities. Leadership has also highlighted that self-contained programming remains available for students whose needs cannot be met in more inclusive settings indicating that “full inclusion” is not the District’s intention. The recent investment in opening additional special classes affirms the District’s priority of offering a robust continuum of services designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Despite these assurances, some staff have expressed the feeling that their input, even when supported by data, does not always influence placement decisions. This has led to a perception among some that students with disabilities remain in inclusive settings even when more restrictive environments might be appropriate. Addressing these concerns through transparent communication and reinforcing collaborative practices can help bridge the gap between staff perceptions and District policies, fostering greater trust and alignment across all stakeholders.

The District has demonstrated a strong commitment to promoting inclusive practices, as evidenced by the increased percentage of students with disabilities spending 80% or more of their day in general education settings. This growth, reflected in District data, highlights significant progress toward inclusion but also requires a carefully planned, strategic approach to sustain and expand these efforts.

To promote consistency and compliance, WPCSD has established standardized procedures for evaluations, eligibility determinations, and the development of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Participants in this study with a strong background in legal interpretation of IDEA noted that procedural errors are rare in the District, highlighting its commitment to diligently following these standards.

The District has established responsibilities for key Committee on Special Education (CSE) processes to be primarily led by teachers serving on special assignments. The teachers serving in this capacity work closely with district level peers (e.g., Instructional Coaches) and special education leaders in the Office of Special Education & Pupil Personnel Services. While this approach ensures procedural fidelity, it has also contributed to perceptions among some that decision-making lacks school-based nuance. This structure has led some stakeholders to articulate a disconnect between the District’s inclusive intentions involving all stakeholders and what is perceived to be a centralized decision-making structure.

Study participants expressed varying levels of agreement on the oversight of special education in WPCSD, particularly placement decisions. The division in perspectives was apparent in survey responses:

- **Perceptions about the statement, “Placements for students with disabilities are based on student need and not by disability category and/or other demographic factors” vary across stakeholder groups:** 55 percent of Student Support Services staff (e.g., psychologists, nurses, BCBAs), 46 percent of school building administrators, 40 percent of related service providers, 39 percent of special educators, and 31 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**
- **Perceptions about the statement, “Students with IEPs in my school(s) receive instruction and services in general education classes to the maximum extent possible” are largely positive across stakeholder groups:** 91 percent of school building administrators, 89 percent of related service providers, 86 percent of special educators, and 74 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**
- **Perceptions about the statement, “General education teachers are provided adequate training in effectively supporting the needs of students with IEPs” vary across stakeholder groups:** 30 percent of related service providers, 27 percent of school building administrators, 25 percent of Student Support Services staff (e.g., psychologists, nurses, BCBAs), 21 percent of special educators, and 18 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**



- **Perceptions about the statement, “The special education program/services at my school(s) are of high quality”** vary across stakeholder groups: 82 percent of school building administrators, 70 percent of related service providers, 64 percent of special educators, 55 percent of Student Support Services staff (e.g., psychologists, nurses, BCBAs), 38 percent of teaching assistants, and 37 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**
- **Perceptions about the statement, “My district has an overall vision that explicitly addresses the needs of students with disabilities”** vary across stakeholder groups: 80 percent of school building administrators, 58 percent of related service providers, 46 percent of special educators, 33 percent of Student Support Services staff (e.g., psychologists, nurses, BCBAs), and 29 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**
- **Perceptions about the statement, “My district has established goals and an action plan for improving outcomes for students with disabilities”** vary across stakeholder groups: 70 percent of school building administrators, 50 percent of related service providers, 43 percent of special educators, 29 percent of Student Support Services staff (e.g., psychologists, nurses, BCBAs), and 22 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**
- **Perceptions about the statement, “My district offers a continuum of services to meet the needs of all students with IEPs”** vary across stakeholder groups: 82 percent of school building administrators, 67 percent of Related Service Providers, 55 percent of Student Support Services staff (Psychologist, Nurse, BCBA, etc.), 52 percent of special educators, and 40 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**

The snapshot of survey responses highlights the polarity in perspectives amongst school-based staff. Similar themes of feedback were also provided by central office leaders; however, their collective perspective could be characterized as more positive. The differences between school-based staff and district leadership is likely to impact how individuals, by role, perceive the provision of special education and related services for students with disabilities.

Most parents of students with IEPs in WPCSD who participated in the study shared positive feedback on their experiences of special education in the District. High percentages of parents indicated receiving timely feedback on concerns (86%) and forming positive relationships with their child’s teacher(s) (85%). A small number of study participants shared that a divide exists between school-based staff in WPCSD and central office leadership. While it did not emerge as a key finding, it is important to note there is a perception of this among some parents.

Special education is not a place, but a service designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities whether in inclusive classrooms, resource settings, or other appropriate environments. Much of the data analyzed reflects an outdated emphasis on determining where to place students, rather than focusing on how to provide the services and supports needed to thrive within the least restrictive environment. This perspective is not supported by research, which underscores the importance of delivering special education services in a manner that promotes access to the general education curriculum and inclusive practices.

To address these challenges, the District must develop and implement clear frameworks for placement decisions that prioritize collaboration during CSE meetings and align with current best practices. Equally important is fostering a cultural shift among school-based staff to embrace the understanding that special education is a flexible and dynamic service, not confined to a specific setting, but tailored to meet each student’s individual needs.

## 2) Enhancing General and Special Education Collaboration through Principal Voice

Principals play a pivotal role in creating inclusive school communities, and research on school reform highlights effective strategies they can use to drive this change. Specifically, principals who focus on fostering an inclusive vision, building the capacity of school staff through professional development, and creating collaborative work environments are better positioned to support instructional accommodations, modifications, and progress monitoring.<sup>17</sup> These efforts are essential for ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, have equitable access to meaningful educational opportunities.

According to Hoppey and McLeskey:

*Principals of inclusive schools should be those with the skills, knowledge, and qualities to deliver effective leadership. Without the leadership and support of the principal, schools would struggle to meet the challenging requirements of providing varied services that meet the needs of diverse student populations. Therefore, principals must be aware of the requirements of inclusive schools, which should be effectively established to support teachers and the larger school community.*<sup>18</sup>

The responsibility of fostering an inclusive school community does not solely rely on a school-based administrator; however, their leadership is instrumental in the success of inclusive practices within their buildings. Some study participants described the execution of inclusive practices as varying from campus to campus.

School-based staff survey participants shared their perspectives of inclusion on their campus:

- **Perceptions about the statement, “Students with disabilities at my school(s) are treated with respect by staff and students”** were consistently mostly positive across all stakeholders: 100 percent of school building administrators, 95 percent of general educators, 93 percent of teaching assistants, 90 percent of Student Support Services staff (e.g., psychologists, nurses, BCBAs), 86 percent of special educators, and 67 percent of related service providers **agree with this statement.**
- **Perceptions about the statement, “My school(s) provides an inclusive environment for students with disabilities”** were consistently mostly positive across all stakeholders: 100 percent of school building administrators, 89 percent of special educators, 87 percent of general educators, 85 percent of Student Support Services staff (e.g., psychologists, nurses, BCBAs), 79 percent of teaching assistants, and 78 percent of related service providers **agree with this statement.**

Feeling accountable for the academic success and social emotional well-being of all students is the hallmark of district level and school-based leadership. It is important to note that according to focus group and interview participants principals and assistant principals are advocating for both the needs of students with disabilities and the staff serving them. Staff survey data referenced above affirms that WPCSD staff believe students with disabilities are treated with respect and schools are fostering an inclusive environment. The spirit of inclusion is present in buildings; however, the execution of inclusionary practices varies by building according to study participants. There is great potential for campus-based leaders in WPCSD to foster truly inclusive communities for all students and to leverage their influence to bridge the communication divide.

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<sup>17</sup> Billingsley, B. S., McLeskey, J., & Crockett, J. B. (2017). Principal Leadership: Moving Toward Inclusive and High-Achieving Schools for Students With Disabilities. CEEDAR.

<sup>18</sup> Hoppey, D., and McLeskey, J. A. (2013). A case study of principal leadership in an effective inclusive school. *J. Spec. Educ.* 46, 245–256. doi: 10.1177/0022466910390507

There is a perceived gap in communication and collaboration between District-level special education leadership and building-level staff, which has created challenges in fostering a unified and supportive working environment. Data from focus groups and surveys highlight that some staff members feel their voices are not fully heard, and there are concerns about potential repercussions for advocating for students' needs. While these perceptions reflect underlying concerns, it is important to acknowledge the significant strides District leadership has made in implementing necessary changes and improvements to support students with disabilities, particularly around inclusive practices. Changes of this scale can often be met with resistance, as staff may feel uncertain or apprehensive about new processes or shifts in expectations and seek support in making sure these changes have positive impacts for students.

The District leadership has established a clear vision for enhancing special education services and an inclusive practices implementation framework. These changes demonstrate a commitment to improving outcomes for students with disabilities. However, as with any systemwide transformation, it is natural for staff to experience some level of uncertainty or discomfort, particularly if they feel disconnected from the decision-making process. This divide between District leadership and building-level staff can hinder collaboration and reduce the effectiveness of new initiatives. It is essential to recognize that the success of these changes depends on the active involvement of all stakeholders, particularly those who work directly with students on a daily basis. All district leadership have a shared responsibility in the execution of special education services as students with disabilities are general education students first.

The process of change must include staff as partners in shaping and implementing solutions, rather than simply receiving directives. By bringing building-level staff to the table, leadership can ensure that their input and expertise are valued, which in turn will strengthen the collective commitment to shared goals. When staff feel empowered to contribute and collaborate, the overall working environment improves, making it easier to implement effective strategies for students with disabilities.

Moving forward requires a concerted effort from both District leadership, within and outside of special education, and building-level staff to work together cohesively. Leadership must continue to set the direction for the District and ensure that staff are included in the process, making them active participants in decision-making. This collaborative approach will help to create a culture where all staff feel valued and engaged, contributing to a positive and effective learning environment for students with disabilities.

### **3) Addressing Challenging Behavior and the Impact on Instruction**

WPCSD continues to innovate programmatically to support students struggling with behavioral challenges. Onsite observational data did not highlight any observable concerns in this area. Excellent behavior management techniques and strong classroom management practices were observed in many classrooms visited. Both school-based staff and District leadership have acknowledged an increase in mental health concerns resulting in challenging behavior and have stressed the importance of allocating more resources for counseling across all schools, including elementary. The analysis of documentation submitted by the District provided insight into their responsiveness to the needs in this area.

The District proactively conducted an audit of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) readiness in WPCSD through CASEL and has adopted Responsive Classroom for SEL support across schools. Responsive Classroom is an evidence-based approach to teaching that focuses on integrating social and emotional learning with academic instruction. It emphasizes creating a positive classroom environment through practices such as morning meetings, collaborative problem-solving, and proactive classroom management. By fostering a strong sense of community and promoting student engagement, Responsive Classroom aims to support students' social, emotional, and academic development.<sup>19</sup> A series of PD offerings and resources around behavior management, mindfulness, trauma informed practices and other

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<sup>19</sup> Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Sawyer, B. E. (2004). Primary grade teachers' self-reported practices and beliefs about responsive classroom. *The Elementary School Journal*, 104(4), 321-341. <https://doi.org/10.1086/499761>

behavioral focused learning opportunities have been offered in WPCSD to support teachers with developing the skills needed to help students struggling with behavior. Additionally, WPCSD leadership created a tiered system of support for behavior as part of their MTSS framework.

WPCSD school-based staff, and leadership, acknowledged concerns with the increase of challenging behavior in the classroom and the District's approach to addressing challenging behavior. WPCSD staff survey results indicate:

- **Perceptions about the statement, “My school uses positive behavior and intervention supports to support student behavior as part of a multi-tiered system of support”** vary across stakeholder groups: 100 percent of school building administrators, 60 percent of Related Service Providers, 50 percent of special educators, 48 percent of Student Support Services staff (Psychologist, Nurse, BCBA, etc.), and 46 percent of general educators **agree with this statement.**
- **Perceptions about the statement, “There is a well-articulated approach and support in my school(s) to address the behavioral needs of students with disabilities”** vary by stakeholders: 73 percent of school building administrators, 25 percent of Student Support Services staff (Psychologist, Nurse, BCBA, etc.), 21 percent of special educators, 10 percent of Related Service Providers, and 6 percent of general educators **agree with this statement. Overall, 17 percent of all WPCSD agree with this statement.**

All staff must be equipped to support students with behavioral challenges and to recognize that behavior is a form of communication for all students. To achieve this, training on behavioral support strategies should be embedded within the District's tiered system of support, ensuring that both general education and special education leadership and staff are actively involved in fostering inclusive practices. Staff have emphasized the importance of clear and consistent guidelines on acceptable behaviors and how they should be addressed without compromising instructional time. Many have expressed a need for further clarity on what is considered "allowable" when managing behaviors that impact the learning environment. Feedback from focus groups and surveys suggests that some staff are struggling to implement existing behavior management protocols and supports effectively.

The District's current behavioral support model includes a Behaviorist who collaborates with school teams addressing challenging student behavior. In this consultative role, the Behaviorist provides strategies, interventions, and guidance on data collection and analysis while intervening directly with challenging behaviors when needed. Since the 2015-2016 school year, WPCSD has developed clear protocols and structures for the Behaviorist's role and continues to refine these supports to adapt to changing needs. Regular professional development on behavioral strategies, including Crisis Prevention Institute (CPI) training, is consistently offered to staff.

Behaviorists primarily operate on a consultative basis, offering one-on-one guidance and coaching to educators and Pupil Personnel Services (PPS) staff, including school social workers, school psychologists, and building-level support teams. They model strategies to help school teams support students with challenging behaviors, guide PPS staff in conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs), analyze data, and develop Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs). Behaviorists also collaborate directly with classroom teachers by modeling BIP implementation, demonstrating interventions, and providing feedback. While this approach offers valuable hands-on learning, some staff have expressed a desire for more in-classroom collaboration with Behaviorists. Staff felt this would allow them to observe and practice replicating these strategies and foster greater ownership of behavioral supports in their own classrooms. Behaviorists in WPCSD do provide this support, however, it is important to note that the role of the behaviorist is to consult and support school teams with the day-to-day implementation of any behavior strategies, interventions and BIPs while building the capacity of teachers and PPS staff on campuses to play this role when the behaviorist is not present.

The District's staffing model, which includes school psychologists, social workers, and other campus-based staff, provides wraparound support to address the needs of both students and staff. To enhance this model, Behaviorists should continue to build PPS staff capacity in a way that allows them to focus on demonstrating strategies multiple times as needed, ensuring fidelity of implementation and offering opportunities for adjustment to the behavior intervention plan when staff encounter challenges. The goal of these practices should be to increase the skill set of teachers' responsibility to manage, support and intervene with challenging behaviors. This approach would help educators develop the skills and confidence needed to independently manage challenging behaviors, while continuing to have direct Behaviorist support for persistent issues.

Clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all staff who support students with challenging behaviors could address staff perceptions and align efforts. Revisiting established structures and responsibilities can further ensure shared ownership of student behavior management. A phased approach may be necessary to implement this shift effectively, beginning with intensive modeling and support from PPS staff, followed by collaborative practice, and eventually independent application by classroom staff. This progression would allow educators time to build capacity and establish consistent, effective practices. Ultimately, this approach could address staff concerns, create a unified system of behavioral support, and strengthen the District's ability to meet the individualized needs of its students.

An analysis of WPCSD discipline data from the 22-23SY indicated a total of 168 student suspensions. Suspension data referenced within is representative of "out of school" suspensions ranging from 1-10 days. Students with IEPs represented slightly less than half (41.1% or 69 students) of all students suspended during the 22-23SY. WPCSD's districtwide identification rate of students with disabilities is 17 percent. Students with IEPs were suspended at a higher rate than anticipated given the total percentage of students with IEPs in the District. Further discussion and analysis of suspension by subgroups will be discussed later in this report.

Addressing behavioral challenges in schools requires a shift away from punitive measures, such as suspensions and expulsions, which research consistently shows are ineffective in resolving the root causes of such behaviors.<sup>20</sup> Punitive approaches can exacerbate issues, leading to repeated misbehavior, disengagement from learning, and diminished self-esteem.<sup>21</sup> These effects are particularly pronounced for students with disabilities, whose behaviors often stem from unmet needs or difficulties with communication, self-regulation, or processing environmental demands.

Instead, proactive and restorative approaches that focus on teaching and reinforcing appropriate behaviors, addressing underlying causes, and fostering relationships within the school community are far more effective. Embedding these practices into a districtwide tiered system of support ensures that all staff have the skills and tools needed to address behavioral challenges equitably. A key component of this work is ensuring that all staff—general and special education alike—are trained to recognize behavior as a form of communication and are equipped to support students with and without disabilities in inclusive environments.

As the District advances its inclusive practices, it is essential to prioritize support over punishment. This shift not only reduces the risk of disproportionate disciplinary actions for students with disabilities but also fosters an environment where all students feel valued and respected. Professional development and coaching opportunities have been provided to help staff manage challenging behaviors effectively while maintaining a safe and productive classroom. These supports, such as access to behavioral specialists, are designed to empower educators to implement strategies, not for direct intervention with students.

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory, A., Clawson, K., Davis, A., & Gerewitz, J. (2016). The promise of restorative practices to transform teacher-student relationships and achieve equity in school discipline. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 26(4), 325-353.

<sup>21</sup> Losen, D. J., & Gillespie, J. (2012). *Opportunities suspended: The disparate impact of disciplinary exclusion from school*. The Civil Rights Project, University of California, Los Angeles.

However, feedback suggests a need for further communication, training, and clarity to ensure staff feel adequately supported in working with students with behavioral challenges.

A critical next step is ensuring that data collection activities related to behavior are implemented with fidelity and clearly aligned with their intended purpose. The District emphasizes that data collection should inform programming and interventions, not serve as a mechanism for moving students with disabilities from less restrictive to more restrictive settings. Providing clarity on the purpose and outcomes of these activities as part of behavioral support and coaching will strengthen WPCSD's capacity to create inclusive environments that meet the needs of all students.

#### **4) Eligibility and Academic Performance of English Language Learners (ELLs) with IEPs**

A key finding of this study is the belief that English Language Learners (ELL) students may be under-identified for special education and related services. This issue stems from several critical factors noted in our data analysis of focus groups and surveys, including delays in referrals for evaluation at school-based Individual Support Team (IST) meetings, insufficient access to appropriate interventions addressing both academic needs and language acquisition, placement decisions along the continuum of services, misalignment between the volume of services on IEPs and student needs, and limited parent access to translated IEPs.

Most of these factors fall within the scope of general education rather than special education. The referral process for special education begins in general education, and it is essential that tiered interventions, including academic and behavioral supports, be implemented and documented within the MTSS framework before making a referral to special education. For ELL students, this process should include a focus on data collection and analysis to ensure that challenges are not related to language acquisition, cultural differences, or gaps in education, rather than a disability.

District-level leadership has an opportunity to collaborate with building leaders to ensure that the academic, social, and behavioral needs of ELL students are effectively addressed within general education. Strengthening initiatives within general education, such as MTSS and ESOL services, can help ensure that ELL students receive appropriate support early on, reducing the likelihood of misidentification or delays in accessing necessary services. This collaborative approach reinforces the importance of equitable practices and ensures that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

While some staff believe that ELL students are under-identified for special education services, the quantitative data analyzed for this study does not support that perception. Feedback from focus groups and surveys indicates that staff perceive a significant gap between the number of ELL students they feel should be referred for special education and the number currently receiving those services. Survey responses align with focus group feedback, highlighting staff concerns about meeting the needs of students who are both ELL and identified for special education:

- **Perceptions about the statement, “Services for English Learner students with disabilities at my school(s) are meeting student needs” vary by stakeholder: 15 percent of Student Support Services staff (Psychologist, Nurse, BCBA, etc.), 27 percent of school building administrators, 0 percent of Related Service Providers, 19 percent of special educators, 28 percent of teaching assistants, and 13 percent of general educators agree with this statement. Overall, less than 20 percent (18%) of all WPCSD staff survey respondents agree with this statement.**

While ELL students make up 19 percent of the total student body in WPCSD, they account for 28 percent of students with IEPs, compared to 10 percent in New York state and approximately 2 percent nationally.

22 Nationally, the number of dually identified students—those who are both ELLs and have disabilities—increased by 30 percent from the 2011-12 to 2019-20 school years, 23 while New York state saw a 6.7 percent increase during the same period. 24 Results from the 2022-23 New York State English as a Second Language Assessment Achievement Test (NYSESLAT) showed English proficiency levels ranging from 2 percent in 1st grade to 22 percent in 6th grade. 25<sup>26</sup> These trends reflect the ongoing challenge in WPCSD, as in New York state and across the nation, of balancing accurate identification of ELL students for special education services while ensuring equitable access to and progress within the general education curriculum.

The New York State Education Department's (NYSED) Blueprint for English Language Learner (ELL) Success provides a framework for ensuring equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities for ELLs, including those with disabilities. The Blueprint emphasizes culturally responsive practices and accurate identification procedures to distinguish between language acquisition challenges and potential disabilities. Misidentification of ELLs as students with disabilities—or overlooking their needs entirely—can impede their academic progress. To mitigate this, NYSED highlights the importance of comprehensive assessments that include evaluations in the student's home language, culturally and linguistically appropriate tools, and collaboration between ESL and special education professionals.<sup>27</sup> By ensuring all staff, including general education staff, understand this Blueprint, WPCSD can provide tailored supports that address both language development and individual learning needs, aligning with federal mandates under IDEA and ESSA to ensure non-discriminatory practices.

Increased clarity around WPCSD's shared vision related to serving ELL students, including ELL students with IEPs, is critical. Strengthening intervention practices prior to referrals for special education, through an MTSS framework, can positively impact ELL students. It is critical that building-level leaders and school-based ELL instructors prioritize clarifying expectations for general and special education initiatives. Specifically, guidance should be provided on the intersection of second language acquisition and expected academic gains for students with minimal formal school exposure and/or gaps within a student's first language development.

### **5) Increasing Academic Rigor for Students with Disabilities**

The persistent achievement gaps between WPCSD students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers signal a need for intensified academic rigor and enhanced instructional supports at the Tier 1 level. Survey data indicates that District staff value high expectations for SWDs, with 67 percent agreeing their school effectively communicates this importance, 64 percent believing leadership holds high expectations, and 74 percent affirming that staff themselves maintain high expectations. However, the gap between these perceptions and student outcomes points to a critical need to align these expectations with actionable strategies to drive improvement.

Approximately, 72 percent of school-age students with disabilities in WPCSD are educated in the general education setting more than 80 percent of the time. Longitudinal data from 2020-21SY through 2022-23SY indicated WPCSD school-age students with disabilities were educated increasingly more often in

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<sup>22</sup> IDEA (2022). OSEP Fast Facts: Students with Disabilities who are English Learners (ELs) Served under IDEA. <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-fast-facts-students-with-disabilities-english-learners>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Data retrieved from NYSED website: <https://data.nysed.gov/>

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Education (2013). *IDEA Part B Child Count and Educational Environments Collection* EDFacts Data Warehouse (EDW). <https://data.ed.gov/dataset/71ca7d0c-a161-4abe-9e2b-4e68ffb1061a/resource/be8653e8-3c4f-476e-bf57-db028c9cad97/download/bchildcountandedenvironments2012.csv>

<sup>27</sup> New York State Education Department. (2014). *Blueprint for English language learner (ELL) success. Blueprint for English Language Learner Success*

an inclusive general education setting.<sup>28</sup> Since 2020-21, the percentage of students with disabilities in the general education setting more than 80 percent of the time increased by approximately 13 percentage points. For the past three years of data analyzed, WPCSD met the state target for educating students less than 40 percent of the time in the general education setting and in separate settings.

Students with disabilities in WPCSD continue to demonstrate lower academic outcomes compared to their non-disabled peers in both the District and statewide averages for students with disabilities. These disparities suggest that placement in general education settings, with access to varying degrees of high-quality differentiated instruction, is insufficient for driving academic progress. While standardized tests are only one measure of success, they provide valuable insights into areas requiring improvement to close achievement gaps. Based on the data analyzed across several years, it appears WPCSD is moving in the right direction by developing inclusive educational services that allow students to access grade-level curriculum. By continuing to align high expectations with high-quality core instruction and targeted supports, WPCSD can sustain its commitment to improving outcomes for all students with disabilities.

High school students with disabilities consistently performed higher on the Regents exams compared to the performance of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade WPCSD students with IEPs. In 2018-2019SY, WPCSD high school students with IEPs demonstrated proficiency at 81 percent and non-disabled peers demonstrated proficiency at 94 percent on the ELA Regents exam. Non-disabled WPCSD high school students performed remarkably well on the ELA Regents exam with levels of proficiency ranging from 93 to 97 percent from 2017-2018SY to 2022-2023SY. High school students with and without IEPs in WPCSD demonstrated astounding performance, each year, on this exam. It is worthwhile for WPCSD curriculum and instructional leaders to dive deeper into the high-leverage practices being implemented in high school ELA classes to replicate where possible.

A correlation between having greater access to effective instructional models and specialized core content has been established for WPCSD students with IEPs. An analysis of access to instructional models across grade bands was conducted as part of this study. Elementary students with IEPs are primarily served through the CT model, ICT model, and special classes. High school students are more likely to be served through the ICT models and receive services in subject area special classes. If general education classrooms lack robust Tier 1 practices students with disabilities are more likely to disengage or fail to access the grade-level content required for academic growth.<sup>29</sup> Research also highlights that insufficient teacher preparation and limited professional development in inclusive practices can exacerbate these inequities, further hindering the academic success of students with disabilities.<sup>30</sup> The quality of Tier 1 instruction is critical, especially in the elementary setting with three primary service delivery models, recognizing special education is only as strong as the general education foundation supporting it.

High-quality core instruction is foundational to the success of all students, including those with disabilities. For students with disabilities to benefit fully from inclusive settings, general education teachers must be equipped to implement instructional practices that are accessible, differentiated, and grounded in the principles of UDL.<sup>31</sup> Research consistently shows that inclusive education leads to better outcomes for all students when general education classrooms foster high expectations, effective collaboration between general and special education staff, and intentional use of evidence-based practices.<sup>32</sup> However, the

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<sup>28</sup> State and District data obtained from Special Education School District Data Profile available at: <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district>. LRE data unavailable for 2019-20.

<sup>29</sup> Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L. S., & Vaughn, S. (2010). *Response to intervention: A framework for reading educators*. International Reading Association.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> CAST. (2018). *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2*. <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>

<sup>32</sup> Hehir, T., Schifter, L. A., Grindal, T., Ng, M., & Eidelman, H. (2016). *A summary of the evidence on inclusive education*. Abt Associates. <https://www.abtassociates.com>



success of Tier 1 instruction is contingent on the capacity of general education systems to meet the diverse needs of their learners.


Inclusion extends beyond physical presence; it encompasses equitable participation and access to rigorous learning opportunities. To close the outcome gap for students with disabilities, WPCSD must prioritize strengthening Tier 1 general education instruction as the foundation of inclusive practices. This ensures that all students, including those with disabilities, have the opportunity to thrive within the general education environment.

The presence of instructional coaches in WPCSD offers a valuable resource for promoting the consistent implementation of high-leverage practices (HLPs) and evidence-based practices (EBPs). These coaches play a critical role in supporting staff and fostering high-quality special education practices. Currently, instructional coaching in WPCSD is a voluntary process focused on preparing teachers, rather than providing direct intervention for students. While some focus group participants expressed a preference for direct student intervention, such an approach addresses immediate concerns but does not build the long-term capacity of instructional staff to meet the diverse and evolving needs of their students. Engaging fully in the existing professional development opportunities offered by the District allows staff to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to implement effective inclusive practices. By doing so, WPCSD can enhance the quality of instruction and improve outcomes for all students.

### III. State Performance Plan (SPP) and WPCSD’s Results Driven Accountability (RDA)

#### Overview

The essential question we answer in this chapter is:



How does WPCSD perform on student outcomes and transition for students with disabilities?

Below are the overarching strengths and opportunities within the data reviewed on WPCSD’s State Performance Plan (SPP) and Results Driven Accountability.

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Early Childhood (EC) Educational Environment.</b> There are improvements in the percentage of students in regular early childhood classes from 2022 to 2023.</li> <li>• <b>Educational Environment.</b> In 2023, 72 percent of students spend 80 percent or more of their school day in general education. WPCSD continues to steadily increase this percentage.</li> <li>• <b>High School ELA Regents Outcomes.</b> All WPCSD students consistently outperform the state averages for students with and without disabilities on the high school ELA Regents exam. Students with disabilities demonstrated double-digit levels of proficiency on the ELA Regents exam prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic.</li> <li>• <b>High School Algebra I Regents Outcomes.</b> WPCSD students consistently outperformed the state averages for students with disabilities in the 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 school years. Despite instructional impacts during the COVID-19 pandemic, WPCSD high school students demonstrated perseverance in a 5 percentage point increase in 2021-2022SY.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Achievement Gap.</b> There continues to be a substantial achievement gap for students with disabilities compared to all students in the District across all subject areas on statewide assessments.</li> <li>• <b>Eligibility for Free or Reduced Lunch for Students with IEPs.</b> In WPCSD, approximately 70 percent of students with IEPs qualify for free or reduced lunch compared to approximately 53 percent of non-disabled peers. The trend continues when disaggregating suspension data. Of the 69 students with IEPs suspended during the 22-23SY, 54 students or 78.26 percent, qualified for free or reduced lunch in WPCSD.</li> <li>• <b>Four- Year Graduation Rates for Students with Disabilities.</b> Students with disabilities are 23 percentage points below all students in the District for four-year graduation rates.</li> <li>• <b>Early Childhood (EC) Educational Environment.</b> The percentage of preschool students with disabilities in regular early childhood classes steadily decreased from 2021-2022SY to 2022-2023SY.</li> <li>• <b>Grade 4 and 8 ELA &amp; Math Outcomes.</b> Students with disabilities consistently performed lower than the NY state average of students with disabilities in all 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and Math assessments from</li> </ul>

	2017-2018 to 2022-2023SYs except for 8 <sup>th</sup> grade Math in 2018-2019. The achievement gap percentage is substantial between students with and without disabilities in WPCSD on both the ELA and Math state-wide assessments in grade 4 and 8.
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## Summary and Implications

WPCSD offers a robust continuum of services for preschoolers with disabilities, including SEIT services and special classes in integrated settings. SPP indicator 6 monitors the percent of children with IEPs, aged 3, 4, and 5 who are enrolled in a preschool program attending a: (A) Regular early childhood program and receiving the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program, (B) Separate special education class, separate school, or residential facility, or (C) Receiving special education and related services in the home.

WPCSD preschoolers with disabilities who spent the majority of their time in regular education early childhood programs (LRE A) steadily decreased from 2020-2021SY to 2022-2023SY. WPCSD almost met the NY state target of 39.5 percent for this setting with 35.6 percent of preschoolers with disabilities in LRE A. Over the next two school years, the percentage of WPCSD preschoolers with disabilities in LRE A decreased by approximately 5 percentage points each year (30.6 percent in 2021-2022SY and 24.9 percent in 2022-2023SY). Alternatively, the percentage of preschoolers with disabilities being educated in a separate setting (LRE B) increased from 29.8 percent in 2020-2021SY to 34.3 percent in 2022-2023SY. With the exception of the 2020-2021SY which aligns with the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, WPCSD was well within the state target for preschoolers with disabilities receiving services in their homes. Analysis of data from this study did not yield specific correlational or causal findings associated with LRE education setting decision-making for preschoolers with disabilities in WPCSD.

School-age peers with disabilities in WPCSD are educated in the general education setting more than 80 percent of the time is considerably higher than percentage of preschoolers with disabilities in LRE A, 72 percent (school-age) and 35.6 percent (preschool) respectively. Longitudinal data from 2020-21 through 2022-23 indicated WPCSD school-age students with disabilities were educated increasingly more often in an inclusive general education setting<sup>33</sup> Since 2020-21, the percentage of students with disabilities in the general education setting more than 80 percent of the time increased by 13.2 percentage points. For the past three years of data analyzed, WPCSD met the state target for educating students less than 40% of the time in the general education setting and in separate settings.

As of October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023, WPCSD reported serving students with IEPs in the following service settings by disability classification. Several key findings were noted in the analysis of this data. Students with intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism are considerably less likely to receive services in the Integrated Co-Teach (ICT) setting. ICT and Consultant Teacher (CT) service models primarily serve students with speech and language impairments, students with learning disabilities, or students with other health impairments. Students with speech and language impairments and learning disabilities were served in special classes at rates higher than what is typically observed. Lastly, the number of students with autism served in special classes (94 students) is almost double the number of students with autism served in the other three service settings combined (ICT: 35 students, CT: 8 students, and Resource: 5 students). WPCSD District leadership serving in general and special education capacities can continue to

<sup>33</sup> State and District data obtained from Special Education School District Data Profile available at: <http://data.nysed.gov/lists.php?type=district>. LRE data unavailable for 2019-20.

monitor how students with disabilities are appropriately accessing inclusive instructional models to ensure exposure to grade level curriculum and academic rigor alongside non-disabled peers.

The achievement gap between students with disabilities and those without, at both the state and District level, was substantial across all grades in WPCSD. High school students with disabilities consistently performed higher on the Regents exams compared to the performance of 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade WPCSD students with IEPs. A correlation between students with IEPs having greater access to grade level curriculum and ICT classroom programming can be established based upon these results.

WPCSD students with disabilities in high school taking the ELA Regents exam performed consistently higher than NY state averages for students with disabilities from 2017-2018 through 2022-2023. When comparing the performance of WPCSD high school students with disabilities to their non-disabled peers on the ELA Regents exam, the achievement gap ranged from 13 percent in the 2018-2019SY to 38 percent in the 2021-2022SY, and an average of 29 percent.

In 2018-2019SY, WPCSD students with IEPs demonstrated proficiency at 81 percent and non-disabled peers demonstrated proficiency at 94 percent. Non-disabled WPCSD high school students performed remarkably well on the ELA Regents exam with levels of proficiency ranging from 93 to 97 percent from 2017-2018SY to 2022-2023SY. High school students with and without IEPs in WPCSD demonstrated astounding performance, each year, on this exam. It is worthwhile for WPCSD curriculum and instructional leaders to dive deeper into the high-leverage practices being implemented in high school ELA classes to replicate where possible.

In WPCSD, 18.6 percent of students are English language learners (ELLs). Of students with IEPs, 27.7 percent are ELLs. Of students with IEPs, 40 percent of students eligible under speech language impairment are ELLs, 35 percent of students with a specific learning disability are ELLs, and 28 percent of students with an intellectual disability. These percentages are consistent with national eligibility trends for ELL students eligible for special education and related services.<sup>34</sup> A narrative exists in WPCSD that ELL students may not have equitable access to special education services. The quantitative data referenced within this chapter negates this perception. The perceived access barriers, such as being recommended for special education eligibility evaluations or participating in academic MTSS processes, are general education initiatives. It is critical that WPCSD staff increase familiarity with the intersections of general education and special education efforts in WPCSD to appropriately route concerns for ELL students.

Lastly, 55.7 percent of students in WPCSD are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. Of students with IEPs, 69.7 percent are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch. Data presented in a subsequent chapter of this report highlights the connections between students with IEPs who are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch and rates of suspension. Almost 80 percent (78.26%) of students with IEPs suspended in the 2022-2023SY were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The constellation of data points correlating around potential food insecurity, eligibility for special education services, and likelihood of suspension for students with disabilities should be explored further on a school-by-school basis in WPCSD. This would serve as a collective effort within WPCSD as each of the areas for exploration are likely led by different departments.

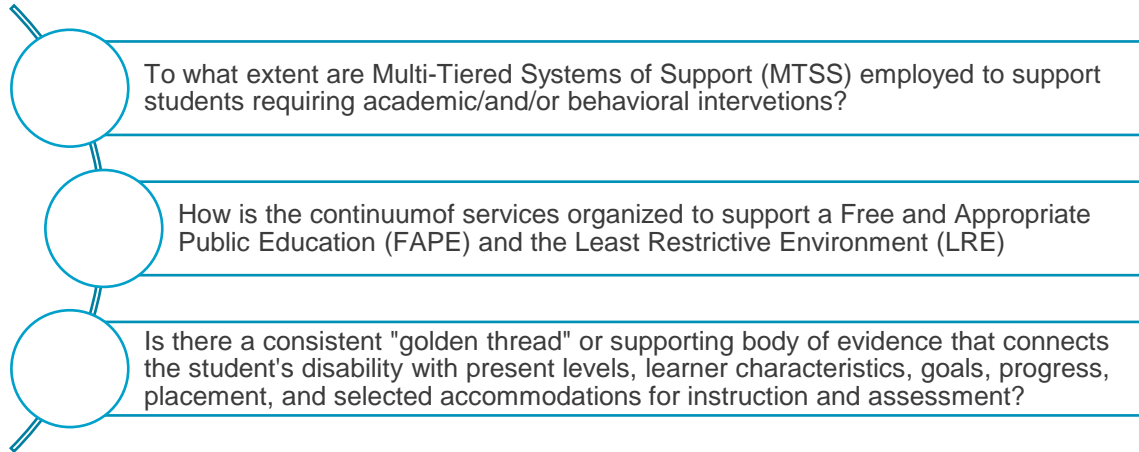
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<sup>34</sup> WIDA University of Wisconsin-Madison. (2023). WIDA Focus Bulletin: Identifying Multilingual Learners with Specific Learning Disabilities: Data, Advice, and Resources for School Teams. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System.

## IV. LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND SPECIALIZED SERVICES

### Overview

The essential questions we answer in this chapter are:



Below are the overarching strengths and opportunities for improvement within the Learning Environment and Specialized Services domain of PCG's Special Education Effectiveness Framework.

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Safe and Accessible Environment.</b> WPCSD has created an inclusive and accessible environment for students.</li> <li>• <b>Access to the General Education Curriculum.</b> All students have access to and follow the general education curriculum.</li> <li>• <b>IEP Compliance.</b> File review revealed that the District has implemented practices to ensure that IEP compliance is a priority.</li> <li>• <b>Therapeutic Wraparound Program.</b> White Plains High School implements an integrated approach to support students in this environment.</li> <li>• <b>District Commitment to Inclusive Practices.</b> WPCSD has shown a commitment to shifting towards more inclusive practices.</li> <li>• <b>District Referral Process.</b> The WPCSD special education department has created and published written procedures and guidance for CSE referrals.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS).</b> There are inconsistencies in the implementation of MTSS practices in the general education setting.</li> <li>• <b>Supporting Students with Behaviors through SDI.</b> Students with disabilities exhibit higher rates of challenging behavior and the impact on instruction are an area of concern for WPCSD staff.</li> <li>• <b>Universal Design for Learning (UDL).</b> Campus based teams have not developed consistent practices across the District related to UDL implementation.</li> <li>• <b>IEP Development.</b> Placement Considerations/LRE data, from onsite and via file review, revealed that there is inconsistency around placement and LRE decisions across the District.</li> <li>• <b>Integrated Co-Teaching throughout the District.</b> WPCSD currently lacks consistent</li> </ul>

	<p>and cohesive collaborative structures for co-teaching throughout the District.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>ELL students with IEPs:</b> WPCSD staff remain concerned about ensuring appropriate interventions are implemented before special education referrals for ELL students and that ELL students are accurately referred to and identified by CSE teams.</li></ul>
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## Summary and Implications

The expansion of inclusive practices in WPCSD has been a long-term initiative, beginning in the 2014-15 school year and gradually progressing toward more inclusive services for students with disabilities. This evolution, while positive, has not been without its challenges. WPCSD special education leadership has undertaken significant efforts to adjust and refine practices districtwide to support this shift. As highlighted in other sections of this report, WPCSD staff continue to reflect on how the transition to more inclusive practices has influenced their work and perceptions in supporting increasingly diverse classrooms. The wide range of academic and behavioral needs in more inclusive settings has required staff to adapt and implement best practices collaboratively within classrooms and teaching pairs, reflecting their commitment to meeting the needs of all learners. WPCSD special education leadership has heavily invested in standardizing IEP development to ensure both compliance and quality. Findings of the IEP review affirm that the District's efforts have come to fruition.

WPCSD has expanded its continuum of alternative placements (services) aimed at offering more inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities. The continuum has evolved to ensure that students with disabilities receive the necessary services and support to access and make progress in the general education curriculum. The trend towards a more inclusive approach to special education in the District has presented challenges with specialized programming leading to confusion among staff, particularly in terms of placement. Despite WPCD special education leadership providing guidance and procedures, the perception is that WPCSD has not formalized placement criterion for each continuum option. Study participants described collecting data to demonstrate the need for a more restrictive setting. It was reported that data collected was often not leveraged in changing placements resulting in some staff feeling confused about the intention of gathering this information.

The WPCSD SOPM specifies clear data points needed for a more restrictive placement change. The level of influence data gathered has on the CSE decision to change placement cannot be standardized as this is an individualized decision. WPCSD special education leadership should continue to highlight and train on the purposes of data collection and analysis, which is to guide instruction and provide supports for students within their current setting and not to utilize the data as a sole means of changing placement until all options have been exhausted.

WPCSD continues to innovate programmatically to support students struggling with behavioral challenges. Onsite observational data did not highlight any observable concerns in the area of behavior. Excellent behavior management techniques and strong classroom management practices were observed in many classrooms visited. Both school-based staff and District leadership have acknowledged an increase in mental health concerns resulting in challenging behavior and have stressed the importance of allocating more resources for counseling across all schools, including elementary. The analysis of documentation submitted by the District provided insight into their responsiveness to the needs in this area which includes several professional learning opportunities for staff in responsive classrooms,

trauma-informed practices, and other behavioral management techniques that can support staff with managing student behaviors.

Focus group and survey participants reported instances of physical harm experienced by WPCSD staff due to student behavior. The impact of challenging behavior on staff morale was acknowledged by a number of study participants. Staff emphasized the importance of prioritizing their safety and the safety of other students when assessing the overall well-being of the classroom. Additionally, staff requested greater clarity on what constitutes “allowable behavior” and how disruptive behaviors impacting classroom instruction should be addressed. However, these perceptions conflict with the professional development opportunities provided by the District and the observations of PCG staff during onsite visits, where behavioral supports were evident. This disparity highlights the need for stronger collaboration and ongoing support to help staff effectively implement best practices following professional learning. Ensuring alignment between district-provided training, observed practices, and staff perceptions will be crucial for addressing behavioral challenges and enhancing classroom environments.

A key finding of this study is the belief that English Language Learners (ELL) students may be under-identified for special education and related services. This issue stems from several critical factors noted in our data analysis of focus groups and surveys, including delays in referrals for evaluation at school-based Individual Support Team (IST) meetings, insufficient access to appropriate interventions addressing both academic needs and language acquisition, placement decisions along the continuum of services, misalignment between the volume of services on IEPs and student needs, and limited parent access to translated IEPs.

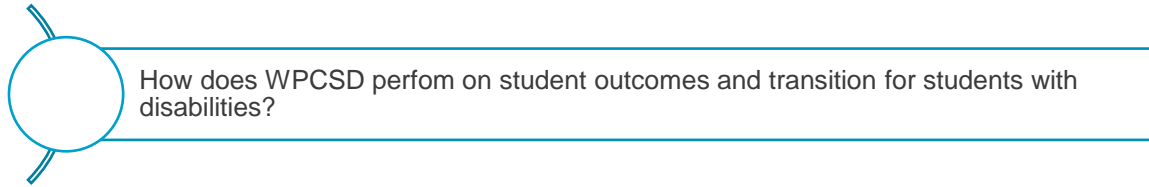
Most of these factors fall within the scope of general education rather than special education. The referral process for special education begins in general education, and it is essential that tiered interventions, including academic and behavioral supports, be implemented and documented within the MTSS framework before making a referral to special education. For ELL students, this process should include a focus on data collection and analysis to ensure that challenges are not related to language acquisition, cultural differences, or gaps in education, rather than a disability.

District-level leadership has an opportunity to collaborate with building leaders to ensure that the academic, social, and behavioral needs of ELL students are effectively addressed within general education. Strengthening initiatives within general education, such as MTSS and ESOL services, can help ensure that ELL students receive appropriate support early on, reducing the likelihood of misidentification or delays in accessing necessary services. This collaborative approach reinforces the importance of equitable practices and ensures that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

## V. HIGH EXPECTATIONS

### Overview

The essential question we address in this chapter is:



Below are the overarching strengths and opportunities for improvement within the High Expectations domain of PCG’s Special Education Effectiveness Framework.

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Graduation Rate.</b> From 2019-2020 to 2022-2023, WPCSD’s average 4-year graduation rate for students with disabilities (77%) exceeded the state average of 66%.</li> <li>• <b>Dropout Rate.</b> From 2019-2020 to 2022-23, WPCSD’s average dropout rate for students with disabilities was 3%, significantly lower than the state average of 7.75%.</li> <li>• <b>Elementary ICT.</b> Most ICT classes showed evidence of collaborative teaching models.</li> <li>• <b>Science of Reading (SOR) Initiative.</b> There is clear evidence of SOR initiative for literacy across general and special education.</li> <li>• <b>Utilization of Teaching Assistants.</b> Across settings, Teaching Assistants were used in an effective way to support students in the classroom.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Specially Designed Instruction (SDI).</b> Not all classrooms showed clear evidence of SDI to meet the needs of all learners in the classroom.</li> <li>• <b>Consultant Teacher (CT) model.</b> In many cases it was not clear how the special education teacher was effectively utilized in the general education setting in the CT model.</li> <li>• <b>Collaborative Teaching Structures.</b> Stronger collaborative teaching structures are needed to enhance collaboration between general and special education staff.</li> <li>• <b>Special Classes.</b> There were no guiding criteria for how students qualified for Special Classes and which students belonged in 8:1:3, 8:1:2, 12:1:1, or 12:1:2 and no clear methodology for these programs to help staff understand which students are appropriate for these settings</li> <li>• <b>Accommodations and Modifications.</b> Accommodations and modifications were not clearly observed across settings for special education students in general education settings outside of adult support.</li> </ul>



## Summary and Implications

The data from WPCSD's 2022-23 SPP/APR provides a comprehensive overview of the District's performance in supporting students with disabilities. Several key accomplishments highlight the District's dedication to improving educational outcomes for students with IEPs, including an impressive graduation rate of 85.2 percent—far exceeding the state target—and a significantly lower dropout rate. Middle school Math proficiency, particularly in Grade 8, reflects the District's ability to set and achieve high expectations in certain academic areas. These successes underscore the District's potential to build upon these strengths and broaden their impact across additional grade levels and subject areas.

Despite these achievements, the data also revealed areas that require targeted intervention, especially in ELA and Math at elementary and high school. Proficiency rates for students with disabilities in WPCSD fall below state targets. This trend, along with gaps in alternate academic achievement standards, points to the need for a districtwide effort to enhance academic rigor and ensure that students with disabilities are receiving adequate support to succeed academically. These findings suggest that while WPCSD is capable of high performance, there is an urgent need to extend this success to additional academic areas and grade levels to close achievement gaps.

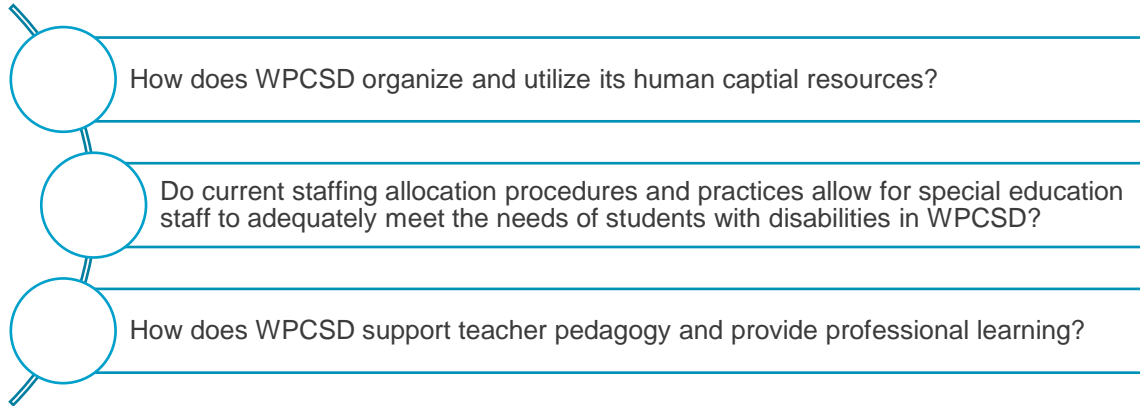
Onsite observations revealed a range of strengths in WPCSD's inclusive settings, particularly at the elementary level. There was evidence of strong co-teaching practices at the elementary level, including safe and well-managed classroom environments where students were actively engaged in instruction. ICT classrooms demonstrated effective instructional practices and specialized reading support for students was also a notable strength

Opportunities for growth were identified in increasing the use of SDI in some ICT and CT settings and further incorporating UDL principles to ensure all students can access lessons through multiple entry points. While there was evidence of effective practices, inconsistencies were noted in the implementation of assistive technology/AAC, accommodations, and modifications across classrooms, particularly in Special Classes. Building greater consistency in high-quality, differentiated instructional practices will be critical to fully meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities and ensuring equitable access to the curriculum.

## VI. HUMAN CAPITAL AND LEADERSHIP

### Overview

The essential questions we answer in this chapter are:



Below are the overarching strengths and opportunities for improvement within the Human Capital and Leadership domains of PCG’s Special Education Effectiveness Framework.

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Staff Retention and Tenure.</b> Of the staff members interviewed, the majority held tenure. Overall, the District has low turnover rates for staff.</li> <li>• <b>Collaboration.</b> Staff expressed their desire to work with one another and value their coworkers' professional experience.</li> <li>• <b>High Quality Staff.</b> Districtwide, WPCSD has compassionate and caring staff aiming to support the needs of students with disabilities.</li> <li>• <b>Students with IEPs to Special Educator Ratios.</b> Student to special educator ratios in WPCSD are all in alignment with NY state guidance.</li> <li>• <b>Students with IEPs to Paraprofessional Ratios.</b> Student to paraprofessional ratios in WPCSD are all in alignment with NY state guidance. Some classrooms and/or buildings have assignments of paraprofessionals exceeding state requirements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Staffing Perceptions Related to Inclusive Practices.</b> Varying perspectives exist in WPCSD between special education leadership and building staff when implementing the District’s vision of inclusive practices.</li> <li>• <b>Professional Development.</b> The District should optimize the use of time during professional development workshops by focusing on practical, classroom-ready resources and training. Workshops should prioritize actionable strategies over introductory or theoretical sessions to better support educators' immediate needs.</li> <li>• <b>Class Sizes for ICT at MS/HS.</b> The class sizes for ICT at middle school and high school are within state expectations. However, the variability in student needs, both academically and behaviorally, are difficult to address adequately.</li> <li>• <b>Restructure of Administrative Leadership in WPCSD.</b> Additional administrators are necessary to support long-term, sustainable execution of special education policies and initiatives.</li> </ul>

	CSE/CPSE chair roles should be converted to year-round positions along with 2 new administrator roles as part of the leadership restructuring.
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## Summary and Implications

Although WPCSD has made significant investments in a range of professional development workshops and training opportunities for its staff, there remains a critical need for specialized implementation support. Survey responses and focus group discussions revealed gaps in the current PD offerings in WPCSD. Specific requests for support included direct, 1:1 intervention for students and instructional modeling in the classroom. Current instructional and behavioral coaching professional development models in WPCSD focus on building the capacity of educators. To address these gaps, the District can integrate teachers' voices and feedback into decision-making regarding upcoming professional development offerings.

Analysis of data gathered for this section of the report has yielded two key findings: 1) staff genuinely care about students across all roles and levels, and 2) District leadership strived for transparency and buy-in from staff when rolling out student-focused initiatives.

Findings from this study concluded that increased collaboration between WPCSD District leadership and school-based staff is critical. Forward momentum to foster collaboration and establish expectations around the implementation of inclusive practices is paramount. Additionally, the District special education leadership team should continue to prioritize responding to concerns and facilitating ongoing communication within and between individual buildings.



The data indicates a lack of collaboration and communication between special education leadership and building level staff. While some structures exist, challenges persist in ensuring effective communication and collaboration between special education leadership and building administrators regarding the provision of special education and related services in their respective buildings. Clarity amongst all District leaders will be essential in successfully executing inclusive practices. It is recommended that WPCSD leadership and staff prioritize facilitating a culture that is student-centered, supports all stakeholder voices, and recognizes that special education is a service not a place.

Considering these findings, it is recommended that the District take proactive measures to establish clear, collaborative structures to facilitate effective communication and coordination among District and building-level teams. By fostering a culture of collaboration and ensuring consistent messaging across all levels of the organization, the District can better support the needs of students with disabilities and promote inclusive practices districtwide in alignment with the District's vision.

## VII. SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES

### Overview

The essential questions we answer in this chapter are:

-  How does WPCSD allocate resources in a way that facilitates a maximum return on district investment?
-  How does budget management occur? How are grant funds accessed and used?

Below are the overarching strengths and opportunities for improvement within the Systems and Structures domain of PCG's Special Education Effectiveness Framework.

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Vision.</b> Teaching staff and building administrators believe in a vision of inclusive education for many students receiving special education services.</li> <li>• <b>Standard Operating Procedures.</b> The District has a robust standard operating procedures manual available on SharePoint for all District employees to access.</li> <li>• <b>Special Education School Based Expenditures.</b> Pupil expenditures for students with disabilities are consistent with comparison districts in Westchester County.</li> <li>• <b>Financial Commitment to Expanding the Continuum of Services.</b> The District is opening additional classrooms for students with autism, with plans to open another 12:1:2 classroom for kindergarteners with level 2:3 autism in the coming year. This marks the third consecutive year of opening such classrooms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Vision Implementation.</b> Teaching staff and building administrators deviate from the inclusive vision for students with significant disabilities.</li> <li>• <b>Awareness and Use of Standard Operating Procedures.</b> Staff awareness and use of Standard Operating Procedures is limited.</li> <li>• <b>Progress Monitoring Data.</b> There are inconsistent systems and repositories for student progress monitoring data.</li> <li>• <b>MTSS Data Collection.</b> Data collection occurring across buildings is inconsistent.</li> <li>• <b>Data Collection Expectations for CSE Referrals.</b> There is inconsistent understanding around data collection between CSEs and teachers for referrals.</li> </ul>

### Summary and Implications

The Office of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services' vision for inclusion has been widely adopted throughout the District, but only for some students receiving special education services. Focus groups and surveys revealed that some study participants believe students with more significant disabilities currently in less restrictive settings should be placed in more restrictive environments. This belief undermines the District's vision for inclusion and promotes an "us versus them" structure between

some staff and the Office of Special Education and Pupil Personnel Services. The structure of the implementation of the District's inclusive vision suggests a need for continuity across the District.

While the special education budget shows increases in tuition for out-of-district programming, overall special education per-pupil expenditures are consistent with comparable Westchester County school districts with similar characteristics. The District has also continued to expand its continuum, including ICT classrooms. As the District continues to expand its continuum within its schools, an effort that requires additional personnel, it will need to continue to factor these considerations into its future budgets.



The District has a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures Manual (SOPM) located on the department's SharePoint site, but it is underutilized by most staff. The underutilization of the SOPM points to an opportunity to improve awareness and utilization of this resource.

Additionally, while the District has a repository for its MTSS data, the data collection process could be more consistent across buildings. Furthermore, teachers and CSE members appear to have different expectations regarding data collection for CSE referrals. Inconsistencies in MTSS data collection practices highlight the need for standardized protocols and clearer communication of expectations between teachers and CSE members.

## VIII. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

### Overview

The following essential questions we answer in this chapter are:

-  To what extent are parents of children with IEPs satisfied with their child's educational program?
-  How do community relations and customer service function to support parents in the special education process?

Below are the overarching strengths and opportunities for improvement within the Family and Community domain of PCG's Special Education Effectiveness Framework.

Strengths	Opportunities for Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Parent Satisfaction with IEP Services.</b> Most parent survey respondents (72%) are satisfied with their child's IEP services.</li> <li>• <b>Teachers Dedication and Care.</b> Most parents feel their child's teacher(s) are caring and committed.</li> <li>• <b>Parent Voice at CSE Meetings.</b> Most parents feel their input is considered at CSE meetings and feel comfortable asking questions about their child's program.</li> <li>• <b>Special Education Trainings.</b> The District offers a variety of special education trainings for parents at the elementary and secondary level and for parents that attended special education trainings or information sessions provided by the District, most felt they provided valuable information</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Communication with Families.</b> Parents expressed concern about not being informed when service providers change, leading to frustration and disruption in services.</li> <li>• <b>Increase Transparency from District Leadership.</b> Parents felt lack of follow-through and transparency in decision-making hinders collaboration between parents and the District.</li> <li>• <b>Related Service Delivery.</b> There is a perception that related services appear to be driven by staff availability rather than student needs, raising concerns about equity in provision.</li> <li>• <b>Transition Planning.</b> Not all parents feel their child's transition plan contains individualized goals that are preparing them for life after high school.</li> <li>• <b>Progress Reports.</b> Some parents reported they did not receive progress reports on their child's progress toward their IEP goals.</li> <li>• <b>Staff Perception of Parent Engagement and Support.</b> Many staff feel they have not been properly trained to communicate with parents/caregivers of students with IEPs</li> </ul>

	<p>and lack support from district-level leadership in working with parents/caregivers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Access.</b> Special education trainings for SY24-25 are offered during the day which impacts the ability for more families to attend sessions.</li></ul>
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## Summary and Implications

Parents of children with IEPs expressed a mixed level of satisfaction with WPCSD’s special education program. While 72 percent of parents reported being satisfied with the IEP services, many pointed out areas needing improvement. Parents generally praised their children’s teachers, describing them as caring and dedicated to meeting student needs. Concerns were raised about the adequacy of service delivery, particularly related services, which some parents felt were based more on staff availability than on students’ actual needs. While the District clarified this is not the case, greater transparency around related services and staffing could help to shift this perception. Additionally, issues like lack of follow-through from leadership, and insufficient training for general education staff contributed to frustration among some families. These gaps left parents of students with IEPs feeling that WPCSD isn’t always prioritizing their child’s education.

A common theme in the feedback was the inconsistency of communication and service delivery across families. While some parents reported positive interactions with teachers and staff, others felt that WPCSD’s lack of transparency—especially around changes in service providers and missed services—hindered collaboration. For example, several parents shared they are not informed when their child’s provider changes multiple times during the school year, which disrupts continuity of services and raises concerns about the quality of support. There is an opportunity for District and building leadership to collaborate in developing a protocol that can be managed at the building level, so parents are informed of changes in staffing and/or missed services to increase transparency. The need for better training for general education staff to ensure proper IEP implementation and foster a more inclusive environment for students with disabilities is also an area of consideration for the District that should include both general and special education leadership.

Community relations and customer service play an important role in supporting parents through the special education process. Programs like *Friends of White Plains Schools – Parent Support Workshop*, which offers workshops on parenting and emotional support in both English and Spanish, demonstrate WPCSD’s effort to engage parents. Survey data showed that only 23 percent of parents attended sessions, even though 79 percent of attendees found them helpful. Parents who did not attend cited scheduling conflicts, particularly for working families, as a barrier. Many recommended that WPCSD survey parents better to align training times and topics with their needs. While 61 percent of parents acknowledged that the District offers special education-related sessions, there is a clear opportunity to improve outreach, increase attendance, and provide more targeted special education-specific trainings based on feedback from a parent survey to help parents engage more with these opportunities.

## IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

PCG was contracted to provide an objective view of the special education program in WPCSD and has identified in this report both strengths and areas of improvement that require focus in the coming years. PCG saw ample evidence that WPCSD has a solid foundation on which to build. WPCSD has many notable strengths, including its commitment to inclusive practices for students with disabilities and its willingness to undertake this review and act on the recommendations as part of a continuous improvement cycle.

The recommendations listed below serve as a roadmap to address areas of improvement, leading to the future growth of the special education program. Each is interrelated and will require a significant investment on the part of WPCSD. 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.

### LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND SPECIALIZED SERVICES

#### 1. Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

- **Establish a districtwide MTSS team.** This team should include representation of all staff and support personnel (district-level staff, school-based administrator, general education teacher, special education teacher, support personnel, school psychologist, counselors, etc.). This team should focus on both academic and behavioral interventions as it relates to a comprehensive MTSS model. It is recommended this team meet monthly to ensure fidelity to the process and consistency across the District.
- **Entry and Exit Criteria for MTSS:** Identify timeframes and criteria that clearly outline entry and exit MTSS interventions. Align with special education referral processes to clarify for staff the functional differences between MTSS and special education and related services. District level general education and special education leadership publish a shared statement, and additional guidance as needed, to clarify the transition from an MTSS to a CSE referral.
- **Implement Universal Design for Learning.** Provide clear guidance and mandatory training for all staff on the principles of UDL and how these principles can be applied in the development of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. A greater understanding and implementation of UDL can make learning accessible to all students and can help close opportunity gaps between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers while building inclusive classrooms.
- **Expectations.** Establish, communicate, support, and monitor clear expectations for MTSS, with clear lines of accountability and responsibility across departments and schools, aligning them with relevant standards and guidelines. Develop additional guidance and shared expectations related to serving ELL students within the MTSS framework.



## 2. Inclusive Practices

- **Expand on the Foundation.** Build upon current inclusive practices using the steps below to establish structures that align with the District’s overarching instructional framework and include best practices for developing inclusive schools with District leaders, building leaders, and all staff.
- **Create a Districtwide Inclusive Practices Leadership Team.** Develop a districtwide inclusive practices leadership team to include representation of staff and support personnel (central office staff, school-based administrator, general ed teacher, special ed teacher, support personnel, related services, etc...) that meets regularly to ensure adherence to the plan and monitor implementation goals and strategies across the District. This team should also focus on shifting the mindset from education being a place where students go for services, to services being brought to a student.
- **Inclusive Practices Continuous Improvement Plan.** Task the leadership team with creating an Inclusive Practices Continuous Improvement Plan, in alignment with the “Three Year Inclusive Practices Expectations framework. This will be ongoing over a several year period and will include measurable goals, objectives, timelines, and staff responsibilities to be reviewed and monitored regularly with the inclusive practices’ leadership team.
- **Implementation Guide.** Build a clearly defined District inclusive practices implementation guide, in alignment with the “Three Year Inclusive Practices Expectations framework, including guidance on expected procedures and practices.
  - Engage the leadership team in determining the role of schools to adapt the guidance to their unique needs including master scheduling procedures, common planning time for co-teaching/co-serving, and engagement with professional learning communities.
  - Utilize the model classroom strategy to demonstrate how WPCSD peers are successfully implementing inclusive practices and demonstrating high-yield academic gains for all students, including students with disabilities.
- **Scheduled Time for Collaboration.** Expand upon dedicated time for collaboration, especially grade-level or content area planning that is shared between the general education and special education teachers.
- **Strengthen Collaborative Structure for General Educators, Special Educators, and Related Services Providers.**
  - Foster collaborative structures that enhance the relationship and coordination between general and special education staff to improve student outcomes. Implement dedicated time for collaborative planning and co-teaching sessions, focusing on shared goals and joint responsibilities.
  - Encourage cross-department professional development opportunities, including training in collaborative practices and communication strategies.
  - Develop feedback loops where teachers can provide feedback on the effectiveness of collaborative practices and suggest areas for improvement.

- **Highlight Principal Voice in the Expansion of Inclusive Practices throughout WPCSD.** Prioritize the role of principals when creating “pathways for inclusion through the distribution of leadership responsibilities” aligned to the execution of inclusive practices.
  - Adopt the perspective that creating a high performing, inclusive school requires principals to “[call upon school staff to support inclusive reform and to distribute leadership responsibility to enhance school capacity to serve all children.](#)”<sup>35</sup>

### 3. Specially Designed Instruction and Professional Development

- **Enhance SDI Guidance for Behavioral Services and Support.** Enhance current SDI guidance and resources available to help teachers and administrators make stronger connections on where SDI is addressed in the IEP process for students with behavioral challenges, including how to utilize the information from FBAs to inform the development of high-quality BIPs that are continuously monitored and adjusted based on students’ responses to interventions.
- **Enhance Specialized Programming and Develop Entry and Exit Guidance.**
  - Review current evidence-based methodologies and curricula to support student outcomes for students that require highly specialized programming, including a more current understanding of “[functional life skills.](#)”<sup>36</sup>
  - Establish clear and transparent guidance for special education placements so that student placement aligns with individual needs, program goals, and appropriate methodologies.
  - Regularly review and update placement guidance to reflect best practices and meet evolving student needs.
- **Provide Clarity on the District’s Approach on Challenging Behavior in the Classroom.**
  - Create a uniform set of positive behavioral expectations to use districtwide with research-based interventions available for staff to reference and use.
  - Develop internal practices to monitor and discuss the overlap between suspension rates for students with disabilities and eligibility for free and reduced lunch.
  - Create a tiered approach to supporting behavior challenges prior to special education referral.
  - Offer more training and PD around positive behavior strategies and behavior management that includes classroom modeling for educators.
  - Clarify expectations for classroom and building staff for the purpose(s) of gathering data on challenging behavior. Established shared expectations prior to data-gathering on the potential outcomes to avoid confusion.

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<sup>35</sup> “Clearing a Path for Inclusion” Distributing Leadership in a High Performing Elementary School.” (2015). DeMatthews, David, E. <https://mcie.org/download/clearing-a-path-for-inclusion-distributing-leadership-in-a-high-performing-elementary-school/?wpdmdl=908>

<sup>36</sup> “21<sup>st</sup> Century Functional Life Skills: Educating Learners who need Intensive or Extensive Supports. A Historical View and Implications for Schools.” Maryland Coalition of Inclusive Education. 2022.

- **Strengthen Instructional Differentiation in all Classrooms.**
  - Strengthen instructional differentiation practices to meet the needs of all learners, creating personalized support for students that enhances their academic growth. Offer coaching for general and special education teachers on effective differentiation strategies, such as tiered assignments, flexible grouping, and scaffolded supports.
  - Conduct collaborative (general education and special education district specialists) regular classroom observations to support teachers in implementing and refining differentiation techniques. Utilize [research-based resources](#)<sup>37</sup> to inform how high-leverage practices and evidenced-based practices are being implemented simultaneously to increase academic achievement in classrooms.
  - Leverage existing data points and supports, such as coaches, to determine which instructional practices are yielding the greatest academic gains for students with disabilities in the inclusive setting.
  - Prioritize building strong foundational skills in ELA and Mathematics for all students in early years to proactively minimize critical gaps impacting more complex skill mastery.
- **Increase Implementation of Accommodations and Modifications in the General Education Setting.**
  - Maintain consistent use of accommodations and modifications in general education classrooms to enable special education students to access the curriculum effectively. Provide professional development on accommodations and modifications for both general and special education teachers, highlighting techniques that promote student independence.
  - Establish a system for monitoring the application of accommodations and modification in classrooms, with regular feedback to teachers. Include accommodations and modifications as a topic in collaborative meetings between general and special education staff to reinforce consistency and support.
  - Utilize resources such as, “[Specially Designed Instruction and More: Adaptations and Modifications Supplementary Aids and Services Accommodations](#)”, to clarify expectations for implementing accommodations and modifications.
- **Post-Secondary Transition Planning.**
  - Strengthen transition planning by developing both individualized transition plans and meaningful goals that effectively prepare students for life after high school.
  - Create individualized transition plans with input from parents, focusing on realistic and measurable goals for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living.
  - Offer parent workshops focused on transition planning and available community resources for post-high school options. Regularly update parents on their child’s progress toward transition goals and revise plans as necessary.

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<sup>37</sup> McCray, E.D. et al., (2017). High-Leverage Practices and Evidence-Based Practices: A Promising Pair. CEEDAR. <https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/HLPs-and-EBPs-A-Promising-Pair.pdf>

## 4. Redefine the Continuum of Alternative Placements

- **Offer the Continuum of Services on each Campus to the Greatest Extent Possible.**
  - Conduct a workload analysis for all special educators, at each building, to determine if an expansion of the continuum of services is feasible. This will likely impact how caseload assignments are made particularly at the secondary level.
  - At the secondary level, reconceptualize the resource room setting for students who are in there for task completion.
    - Determine the need for special educators to provide specially designed instruction within the “Strategies for Success” model.
  - Audit service options to ensure that what is offered is meeting the needs of students vs. what is available.
  - Use data and support to improve postsecondary outcomes for students graduating with IEPs.
- **Expand Behavior Services for Students with IEPs.**
  - Duplicate behavior services from the secondary level down to elementary level and support students struggling with behaviors in this manner with consistent structure and strategies.
  - Assign a dedicated behavior support team to campus to provide support and wraparound services.
  - Offer support and services that differentiate behavior from mental health needs.
  - Ongoing monitoring of suspension and expulsion rates for students with disabilities by school.
- **Optimize the Consultant Teacher Model.**
  - Increase the effectiveness of the consultant teacher model by defining roles and responsibilities, focusing on integrating special education teachers in the general education setting.
  - Clarify the role of the consultant teachers in general education settings, emphasizing strategies that enhance the instructional quality for all students.
  - Provide training for consultant teachers on strategies to maximize their impact in the general education classroom and review scheduling for consultant teachers to allow for direct instruction for students with disabilities.
  - Leverage findings from the workload analysis to optimize scheduling for special educators serving in the Consultant Teacher capacity.
  - Use existing formative data points to inform instructional practices and student growth. Current data suggests students with disabilities in the CT model at some schools are making considerably more progress than peers in assessments when beginning the school year at comparable levels.

## ACADEMIC OPTIMISM, RIGOR, AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

### 5. Academic Optimism, Rigor, and High Expectations

- **Strengthen Culture to Support Inclusive Practices.** Emphasize during trainings and support provided to principals the importance of building structures and processes in their schools to increase academic optimism and nurture a climate of high expectations and opportunity for all students, underscoring that special education is service and not a place for students with disabilities. This includes prioritizing academic rigor for all students with disabilities to ensure there is a laser focus on closing the performance gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.
- **Increase Performance of SWDs on Statewide Assessments.**
  - Monitor and refine general education supports and specially designed instruction (SDI) to effectively address the achievement gap for students with IEPs in Grades 4 and high school, focusing on building proficiency in ELA and math to meet state targets.
  - Regularly review and adjust the SDI provided in IEPs to ensure alignment with grade-level expectations and individual learning needs in ELA and Math.
  - Implement ongoing progress monitoring of students' response to general education supports and SDI, making necessary adjustments based on data from IEP goal progress and formative assessments.
  - Facilitate collaborative planning sessions between general and special education teachers, where they can coordinate supports, share effective strategies, and discuss student progress towards IEP goals and grade-level standards.
- **Provide Outcome-Driven Professional Development.**
  - Design all professional development so that it is coherent, relevant, and useful professional learning that is measurable by indicators and provides professional learning and ongoing support, beyond compliance, to support instruction and transfer that learning to practice.
  - Enhance the skillset of resource teachers and those in specialized programs so that they can work together to extend the opportunities for students with significant needs to access and succeed in more inclusive settings.
- **Implement Evidence-Based Practices that Enable Student Success.** Implement evidence-based instructional practices that will impact increasing expectations, provide high levels of engagement, and integrate appropriate support and scaffolding to increase students' motivation. This includes scheduling for students with disabilities served in the general education setting to have a balance between mastery of foundational skills and consistent access to Tier 1 instruction.
- **Discuss Instructional Beliefs and Practices.** Consider creating opportunities for school-based staff to discuss instructional beliefs and practices related to inclusion using resources such as, "[Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments](#)."<sup>38</sup> This can provide opportunities for WPCSD staff to begin working collaboratively to evolve perspectives on the District's approach to inclusion.

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<sup>38</sup> "Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging- Supportive Learning Environments" (2021). Healey and Stroman. <https://mcie.org/download/structures-for-belonging-2021/?wpdmdl=1463>

## LEADERSHIP AND HUMAN CAPITAL

### 6. Policies and Procedures in Special Education

- **Encourage the Use of Standard Operating Procedures.**
  - Promote adherence and accountability to the District’s special education standard operating procedures.
  - Require all teaching staff to review and acknowledge receipt of Standard Operating Procedures. Include training on standard operating procedures as part of annual back-to-school orientation for teachers.
  - Continue to highlight how the District’s Standard Operating Procedures are in alignment with state expectations set for in the “Blueprint for Improved Results for Students with Disabilities.”
  - Establish consistency in messaging and practice between general and special education leadership on the use of Standard Operating Procedures for supporting students with disabilities in WPCSD.
  
- **Align and Improve Data Collection Procedures.**
  - Adopt consistent practices around the progress monitoring of IEP goals and the storing of progress monitoring data.
  - Assess how the IEP case management system presently supports the documentation of progress monitoring of IEP goals.
  - Adopt and adhere to standard protocols around the progress monitoring of IEP goals, and the storing of that data, including how it can be stored within the District’s IEP Direct case management system.
  
- **Special Education Referrals.**
  - Ensure all staff adhere to the Standard Operating Procedures Manual when making a CSE referral, ensuring necessary qualitative and quantitative data are collected and that referrals are data informed.
  - Conduct professional development for general education teachers and school leaders on data-informed CSE referrals and best practices around data collection for CSE referrals per the Standard Operating Procedures manual.
  - Provide nuanced feedback on each referral that is not moving forward to evaluation.
  - Create opportunities for discussion in referral practices.
  - Clarify expectations for the transition from an MTSS to a CSE referral, and other avenues for CSE referral generation.
  
- **Staffing Allocations.**
  - Conduct a workload analysis for all special educators, at each building, to determine if current caseload structures best meet the needs of students with disabilities. This will likely impact how caseload assignments are made particularly at the secondary level.
    - Leverage workload analysis findings to determine how staffing allocations can be maximized when comparing the various service delivery models available across all grade bands within WPCSD.

- Utilize [high-quality tools](#)<sup>39</sup> to maximize the impact of paraprofessionals supporting students with disabilities throughout WPCSD.
- Consider flexible staffing models that are fluid to remain responsive to the needs of students with disabilities. This would include a balance between maintaining a primary mode of specially designed instruction delivery for special educators when possible (e.g., CT or ICT) and maximizing special educator availability within the Master Schedule.
- Prioritize scheduling students with disabilities in classrooms when creating the Master Schedule at both the elementary and secondary level. Include special educators in building level teams responsible for Master Schedule development.
  - Leverage resources such as the “[Inclusive Practice Tool: A Master Schedule Review](#)” created by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.
- Align related services with student needs rather than staff availability.
- Train service providers and CSE Chairs on equitable service provision to ensure all students have access to necessary services.
- Communicate the scheduling process for related services to parents to promote transparency and address concerns about availability.

## 7. Improve District Leadership Transparency and Collaboration

- **Prioritize Improving the Relationships between District Leaders and School-based Staff.**
  - Restructure the roles of CSE/CPSE chairs to year-round positions. School-based team members would benefit from the assignment of a District special education leader to provide clarity on regulations, WPCSD special education processes, and to prioritize relationship building.
  - Add two full-time administrator positions within the Special Education & Pupil Personnel Services District office. These roles would be designed to provide differentiated levels of support to building leadership and support a more equitable distribution of the workload currently managed by CSE/CPSE chairs. That is critical to ensure CSE/CPSE chairs have the opportunity to facilitate relationship building.
  - Hold forums where District level general and special education leaders share updates and discuss long-term goals for inclusive practices including the progress on the “Three Year Inclusive Practices” framework and action steps from this report.
  - Consider hosting in person CSE meetings at schools to positively influence relationship building between District and school-based teams supporting students with disabilities.
- **Mediate Special Education Concerns.** Partner with a neutral, third-party mediator for District special education leaders and school-based staff to discuss how to collectively move forward in the pursuit of inclusive practices.

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<sup>39</sup> Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education. (n.d.). Paraprofessional Roles & Responsibilities. <https://mcie.org/?wpdmdl=1479>

## FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

### 8. Parent Partnerships

- **Clarify Parent Communication Expectations.**
  - Develop a tracking system for parent inquiries and concerns to ensure timely responses and resolution.
  - Establish clear and consistent communication protocols between parents and service providers.
  - Create a notification system to inform parents when there is a change in service providers or services.
  - Send out regular updates to parents on their child's IEP service delivery that highlights any potential delays or staffing changes when these changes occur.
  - Develop a system that allows for periodic check-ins with parents to address any concerns and ensure continuity of special education services.
  - Ensure all WPCSD staff are aware of and engage in these processes, as needed, to mitigate concerns surrounding parent engagement.
  
- **Parent Communication Plan.** Implement a comprehensive plan to improve communication and collaboration between staff and the parents/caregivers of students with disabilities. This plan should focus on increasing staff capacity through targeted professional development and strengthening communication systems that foster trust and responsiveness.
  
- **Family Engagement Task Force with a Focus on Bilingual Families.** Create a family a Family Engagement Task Force that includes District leaders, school staff, and parent representatives to meet regularly and review the effectiveness of the District's family engagement practices. This group can offer real-time feedback on challenges and successes, helping to continuously improve communication systems between staff and families.



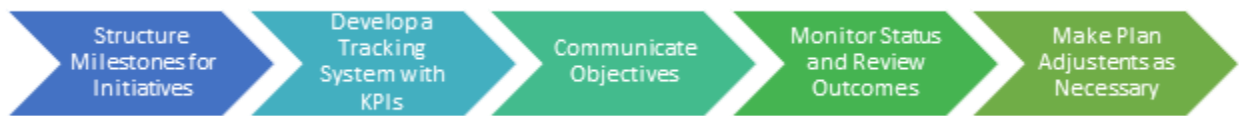
## From Strategy to Execution

The secret to successful strategy execution is in translating strategies into actions. Further, tracking progress made on an organization’s strategy execution is integral to understanding whether it will reach its desired future state. From our experience, the most challenging part of a comprehensive program evaluation for a school district is moving from the recommendations to a concrete action plan, then to a change in practice. These steps require significant focus, in addition to organization, communication, and collaboration across departments. Implementing change across often siloed and independent departments, with differing priorities and reporting structures, requires out-of-the-box thinking and a commitment to approaching issues and solutions in a new light.

While there are different approaches that school districts take to managing this process, the most successful ones create a sustainable structure, with internal and external accountability measures and strong cross-departmental advocates. PCG recommends a five-step Strategy Execution process, which we have found results in grounded, sustainable change within an organization.

PCG recommends that WPCSD address each component of our Strategy Execution Process to position the district to make lasting and impactful changes.

### Exhibit 2. PCG's Strategy Execution Process



#### Structure Milestones for Initiatives

Action plans must include concrete, measurable milestones that can be assessed regularly. These milestones break down initiatives into manageable steps and timelines. This structure is essential, especially given the school year cycle and the urgency by which WPCSD would like to move these critical initiatives forward. At a minimum, given the nature of the initiatives, progress toward milestones should be reviewed monthly through the 2025-26 and 2026-27 school years.

#### Develop a Tracking System with KPIs

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) must be established for each measurable milestone. Reviewing these KPIs will help WPCSD assess where each initiative stands. By monitoring these KPIs frequently, WPCSD will be able to assess barriers and adjust plans early in the process if needed. It is often the case that defining metrics or KPIs is the step that allows teams to recognize challenges within the theory of action that undergirds their action plan.

#### Communicate the Objectives

To implement new policies and procedures, organizational changes, or new approaches, stakeholders need a solid grasp of the initiatives, the objectives, and the benefits the plan will bring to bear. Communicating progress made on each key initiative is equally important to ensure continued support from those impacted by the changes, as well as the associated stakeholders.

#### Monitor Progress and Review Outcomes

Action plans are more likely to succeed when staff are deeply involved with the implementation process and there are monthly status checks on progress made toward established objectives. It is also critical at this point to celebrate real progress and hold individuals who have not “delivered” accountable.

### **Make Plan Adjustments as Necessary**

An action plan is not an unchangeable document. It is a fluid plan that should be revised and updated as the WPCSD environment changes and grows. Openness to revising the action plans will enable WPCSD to adjust to shifting fiscal and regulatory realities as well as changing priorities. If WPCSD's core leadership team sees progress on certain initiatives falling short of expectations, a reevaluation of the original objectives and approach may be needed. However, it is also important to assess the causes of discrepancies between actual and planned results.



**Solutions that Matter**