

2017-18 Evaluation of Special Education Program

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At-a-Glance

Special education provides services and supports designed to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities. When parents or instructional staff suspect a student might have a disability, the student is referred for evaluation. An Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee is formed to review data and determine eligibility for special education services. Once a student is determined eligible for special education services, the ARD committee develops an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) articulating learning goals, services and supports, accommodations and modifications, and progress measurements.

Purpose and Methods of the Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to examine the student characteristics and academic performances of Dallas Independent School District (ISD) special education students during the 2017-18 school year. In addition, input from special education teachers, special education teacher assistants, principals, assistant principals, and evaluators was collected and summarized to identify potential challenges and areas for improvement. Student characteristics, *State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR)* 3-8 performance data, and *STAAR End of Course (EOC)* performance data were extracted from district databases.

Two online surveys were administered with SurveyMonkey, an online survey development software, to understand the experiences and perceptions of special education educators, principals, assistant principals, and special education evaluators. The first survey was sent to all special education evaluation diagnosticians and licensed specialists in school psychology (LSSP) to understand their activities and thoughts regarding evaluating students for disabilities. This survey was sent out on March 26, 2018 and remained open until April 6, 2018. The response rate for the survey was 82.2 percent (N = 88). The second survey was designed to understand the methods, nature, and quality of communication between special education teachers, special education teacher assistants, principals, and assistant principals in the district. The survey was made available between April 2, 2018 and April 27, 2018. The response rate for the survey was 64.8 percent (N = 1,519).

What were the characteristics of students served in special education?

As of October 27, 2017, the special education population for the district was 12,871 and represented 8.2 percent of the district population. This was an increase in enrollment from last year (12,154, 7.7%). The percentage of students served in special education has increased by almost one percentage point since the 2014-15 school year (7.3%). A higher percentage of African Americans received special education services (30.4%) relative to their percentage in general education enrollment (22.5%). In addition, although males and females were equally represented in the general education population, two-thirds of special education students were male (67.5%). Over one-third (35.5%) of special education students were English Learners (EL) which was less than the general education percentage of EL students (45.0%).

Table 1: Characteristics of Special Education Students: 2017-18

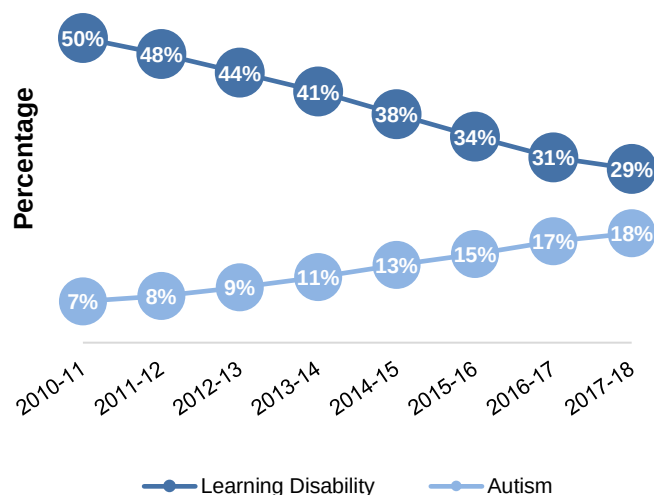
Group	Special Education		General Education	
	N	%	N	%
English Learner	4,570	35.5	64,703	45.0
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	8,035	62.4	109,810	70.0
African American	3,918	30.4	35,209	22.5
White	658	5.1	7,798	5.0
Asian	102	0.8	2,139	1.4
Gender				
Female	4,188	32.5	76,805	49.0
Male	8,683	67.5	79,999	51.0

Source: Data extracted from district student database reflecting the October 27, 2017 student snapshot.

Note: Native American, Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races not included in this table.

The most commonly reported primary disabilities of students enrolled in special education during the 2016-17 school year were learning disability (28.6%), autism (18.0%), other health impairment (16.3%), speech impairment (14.3%), and intellectual disability (13.5%). The top two primary disabilities of students enrolled in special education were compared between the 2010-11 school year and the 2017-18 school year to identify trends (Figure 1). The percentage of students identified to have autism nearly tripled from 6.8 percent in the 2009-10 school year to 18.0 percent in the 2017-18 school year. During this period, the percentage of students identified as having a learning disability has declined from half (50.1%) of all special education students to twenty-nine percent (28.6%).

Figure 1: Percentage of Special Education Students by Primary Disability and School Year: 2010-11 to 2017-18



What were teacher and principal perceptions of special education program communication and support?

Feedback from special education teachers, special education teacher assistants, principals, and assistant principals about communication and support with the Special Education Department was generally positive. Over 85 percent of applicable survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed to the statements: 'I understand the district's expectations in providing special education services', 'I understand the district's special education policies and procedures', and, 'I know how to get help with special education related matters'. Approximately two-thirds of applicable respondents indicated that there was an improvement in the delivery of special education services this year (2017-18) compared to last year (2016-17), and, the process of evaluating students for special education services improved this year (2017-18) compared to last year (2016-17). Almost eighty percent (79.8%) of survey respondents agreed to the statement: 'the special education department responded to me in a timely manner.' Over three quarters (76.9%) of applicable respondents were satisfied with the customer service they received from the Special Education Department.

What were the activities and perceptions of special education evaluators?

In contrast to the positive feedback from special education teachers and principals, feedback from evaluators regarding their transition to campus-based work spaces was generally negative. Approximately sixty percent of evaluators disagreed that the transition to campus based locations had been a positive change or benefited students and their families. Over seventy percent of survey respondents (71.6%) believed that

the transition to campus based locations had not improved the response time in conducting evaluations. Sixty-one percent (61.4%) of respondents indicated that they did not have adequate access to the professional resources (e.g. software, assessments, forms, etc.) needed to complete their work duties. About half of evaluators did not believe that their physical work space was appropriate for fulfilling their work duties.

One quarter (25.4%) of non-bilingual evaluators 'frequently' or 'always' had trouble finding an interpreter to communicate with non-English speaking students. Only 3.4 percent of evaluators indicated that more than half of initial referral folders included adequate RTI interventions. Almost ninety percent (89.7%) of evaluators indicated that less than a quarter of initial referral folders included adequate RTI interventions.

How did the special education program perform on the 2017 PBMAS Report?

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) Performance-Based Monitoring staff developed the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS), an automated data system that reports annually on the performance of school districts and charter schools. Program area performance indicators are analyzed and assigned numeric performance levels ranging from zero to three with higher numbers signifying areas of concern. The special education program of each school district is staged for interventions based on the average of all PBMAS special education performance levels. The 2017 Dallas ISD PBMAS report average of all special education performance level indicators (zero to three) was 1.8 which resulted in a rating of stage three, requiring interventions. The average of all performance level indicators on the state-level 2017 PBMAS State Report was 1.5.

Over the past three years, the district has improved on 15 of 20 special education performance indicators. The indicators that showed decline were: the 'special education STAAR EOC passing rate' in science (51.2% to 48.8%), and English Language Arts (26.2% to 22.4%), the STAAR Alt 2 participation rate (16.6% to 20.7%), the 'special education regular class less than 40 percent rate' (7.7% to 16.7%), and the special education annual dropout rate (2.1% to 2.2%).

What were the academic performances of students served in special education?

TerraNova is a norm-referenced achievement test designed to provide achievement data for students in kindergarten through grade two. Special education students were assessed in reading and mathematics on *TerraNova*. Compared to all students in the district, there was a lower percentage of special education students who were at or above grade level on

TerraNova reading (41.8% versus 68.1%) and mathematics (34.9% versus 59.2%). Since 2015-16, the percentage of special education students who were at or above grade level increased 3.7 percentage points in reading and 5.6 percentage points in mathematics.

STAAR 3-8 and STAAR EOC assessments were available to special education students in two versions: STAAR and STAAR Alternative 2 (Alt 2). Special education students who were tested with the STAAR Alt 2 version outperformed students who tested with the STAAR version. As shown in Table 2, the percentage of special education students at Approaches Grade Level or Above has increased in every STAAR 3-8 subject and STAAR EOC exam.

Table 2: Percentage of Special Education Students at Approaches Grade Level or Above: 2015-16 through 2017-18

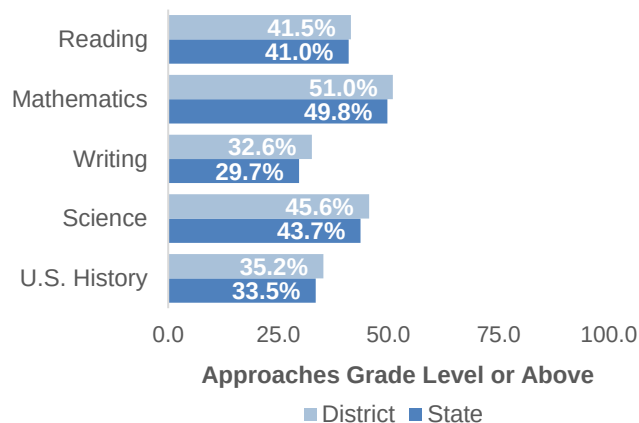
Subject	2015-16*	2016-17	2017-18
STAAR 3-8			
Reading	32.7	36.2	41.5
Mathematics	36.7	44.4	51.0
Writing	29.3	29.8	32.6
Science	38.0	42.1	45.6
Social Studies	25.8	31.8	35.2
STAAR EOC			
Algebra I	36.1	42.7	47.6
English I	20.8	18.2	21.4
English II	22.7	20.9	21.5
Biology	43.7	47.9	51.8
U.S. History	56.4	58.1	63.2

Source: District STAAR 3-8 database: 8/12/16; 6/22/17; 6/20/18. Data reflects STAAR and STAAR Alt 2 versions of the Spring (first administration) STAAR 3-8 results combined. District STAAR EOC database: 6/20/2018; 4/30/2018; 2/15/2018. Data reflects the results of all versions of STAAR EOC exams (including retests) combined.

Note: *The STAAR A version of the STAAR 3-8 exam was administered for the last time in December 2016. Caution should be taken when comparing STAAR results prior to 2016-17. Although all scores are included, some students' test scores in 2017-18 may have been adversely affected by online testing issues.

The performances of Dallas ISD special education students on STAAR 3-8 exams were compared to special education students at the state level in Figure 2. A slightly higher percentage of Dallas ISD special education students were at Approaches Grade Level or Above on all STAAR 3-8 subjects than special education students in the state.

Figure 2: Percentage of Dallas ISD and State Special Education Students at Approaches Grade Level or Above on STAAR 3-8 Exams: 2017-18



Source: District STAAR 3-8 database: 6/20/18. Data reflects STAAR and STAAR Alt 2 versions of the Spring 2018 (first administration) STAAR 3-8 results combined.

Note: Although all scores are included, some students' test scores may have been adversely affected by online testing issues.

As shown in Table 3, Dallas ISD special education students performed at a higher level of achievement than Houston ISD and San Antonio ISD special education students on every subject of the STAAR 3-8 exam. A slightly higher percentage of El Paso ISD special education students were at Approaches Grade Level or Above on all STAAR 3-8 exams except social studies compared to Dallas ISD students. Similarly, Austin ISD special education students performed at a higher level of achievement than Dallas ISD special education students on all STAAR EOC exams. However, a higher percentage of Dallas ISD special education students were at Approaches Grade Level or Above than special education students in San Antonio ISD, El Paso ISD, and Houston ISD on almost all STAAR EOC exams.

Table 3: Percentage of Special Education Students at Approaches Grade Level or Above by School District: 2017-18

Exam	Austin	San Antonio	El Paso	Houston	Dallas
STAAR 3-8					
Reading	42.8	31.8	43.1	36.3	40.9
Mathematics	49.1	38.6	50.8	43.9	49.9
Writing	29.7	24.5	32.2	26.6	32.1
Science	44.7	32.7	48.9	39.3	45.2
Social Studies	31.4	25.2	30.3	30.3	34.7
STAAR EOC					
Algebra I	54.2	31.8	42.7	30.8	39.6
English I	23.1	10.7	13.2	15.2	16.2
English II	27.4	11.2	13.4	18.5	17.0
Biology	61.9	35.4	39.9	38.3	45.0
U.S. History	67.4	54.1	53.0	53.7	60.7

Source: Texas Assessment Management System (TAMS) website: texasassessment.com: 7/12/18.

Note: Although all scores are included, some students' test scores may have been adversely affected by online testing issues.

What were the dropout, graduation, and attendance rates of special education students?

The four-year longitudinal dropout rate, the percentage of students who began ninth grade in the 2013-14 school year and dropped out within four years, for Dallas ISD special education students was 11.7 percent. Dallas ISD special education students had a higher dropout rate than the dropout rate of all students in the district (7.9%). This rate is identical to last school year (11.7%), although, the four-year longitudinal dropout rate is almost half of the 2009-10 rate (22.7%). Special education students, on average, attended school three fewer days than general education students. On average, the percentage of enrolled days that special education students attended (93.8%) was lower than general education students (95.2%).

Recommendations

- **Communicate the necessity of following RTI procedures to teachers and campus-based staff.** Evaluators indicated that only a small percentage of initial referral folders included adequate RTI interventions. RTI intervention documentation can identify if special education evaluation is necessary or whether other services are appropriate. In addition, teacher initiated referrals, which include RTI interventions, reduce the workload of evaluators allowing for more timely and appropriate placements of eligible students into special education services.
- **Recruit more bilingual special education diagnosticians and LSSPs.** A relatively low percentage of special education evaluators conduct bilingual evaluations (23.9%). Survey results showed that a quarter (25.4%) of non-bilingual evaluators 'frequently' or 'always' had trouble finding an interpreter to communicate with non-English speaking students. More bilingual diagnosticians and LSSPs should be hired to reduce linguistic barriers in conducting special education evaluations and increase efficiency.
- **Promote opportunities for evaluators to collaborate and receive professional support.** Special education evaluators transitioned to campus-based work areas during the 2017-18 school year. In informal meetings, some evaluators mentioned difficulty in collaborating and receiving support from other evaluators after the transition. When evaluators were asked on a survey how the district can improve evaluation, one of the most common open-ended responses was: establish a central location for resources, collaboration, and support.
- **Ensure special education evaluators have adequate campus support and resources to carry out their duties.** Approximately sixty percent of evaluators indicated on a survey that they did not have adequate access to the professional resources or office supplies needed to complete their work duties. When evaluators were asked how the district can improve evaluation, a common open-ended response was: increase access to professional resources (e.g. test scoring software, testing materials, protocols, etc.).
- **Investigate the increasing STAAR Alt 2 participation rate.** The percentage of special education students who were tested with a STAAR Alt 2 version of a STAAR 3-8 or STAAR EOC exam has increased from 16.6 on the 2015 PBMAS report to 20.7 on the 2017 PBMAS report resulting in a performance level of three for this performance indicator. Causes for this expansion should be investigated.

References

2017 Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System Report (Rep.). (2017). doi:<http://tea.texas.gov/pbm/PBMASManuals.aspx>

Grimberg, N. Z. (2017). 2016-17 Evaluation of Special Education Program (Dallas Independent School District, Evaluation Services, Evaluation and Assessment).

An electronic version of this report as well as the full 2017-18 report can be found at www.dallasisd.org/Page/888. For more information, please contact Program Evaluation at evaluation@dallasisd.org.

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