

2018-19 Evaluation of the Special Education Program

Monique C. Mejan, M.A.

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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, and if Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) interventions have yielded inadequate progress, 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, 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 student characteristics and academic performances of Dallas Independent School District (ISD) special education students during the 2018-19 school year as well as trends across years. In addition, input from campus staff was collected and analyzed to identify potential challenges and areas for improvement. Student characteristics, *State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) 3-8* performance data, *STAAR End of Course (EOC)*, *TerraNova* and *SUPERA* performance data were extracted from district and state databases and analyzed.

The evaluator administered two online surveys during the spring of 2019 through SurveyMonkey, a survey development tool. The first survey was sent to all special education evaluation diagnosticians and licensed specialists in school psychology (LSPs) to understand their activities and opinions regarding the process for evaluating students with possible disabilities. The second survey was designed to understand the methods, nature, and quality of communication between the Special Education department and campus staff as well as other support-related issues.

What were the characteristics of students served in special education?

As of October 26, 2018, the special education population in the district was 13,877 and represented 8.9 percent of the total district population. This was an increase in enrollment from 2017-18 (12,871, 8.2%). The percentage of students served in special education has increased by more than one and a half percentage points since the 2014-15 school year (when it was 7.3%).

Similar to 2017-18, a higher percentage of African Americans received special education services (28.9%, Table 1) relative to their representation in general education enrollment (21.0%). Although males and females were equally represented in the general education population, two-thirds of special education students were male (67.4%). More than a third (37.1%) of special education students were English Learners (EL) (45.5% in the general education population).

Table 1: Characteristics of Special Education Students, 2018-19

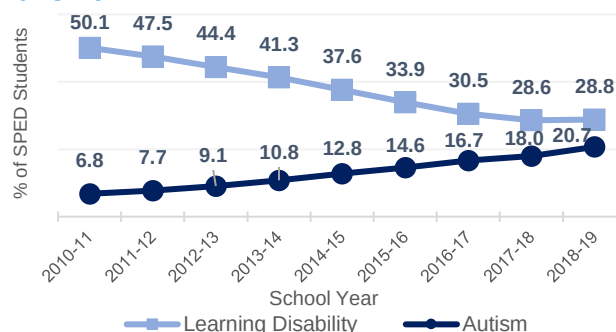
Group	Special Education		General Education	
	N	%	N	%
English Learner	5,144	37.1	64,312	45.5
Econ Disadv	12,223	88.1	121,727	86.1
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	8,790	63.3	99,595	70.5
Afr American	4,014	28.9	29,649	21.0
White	700	5.0	7,269	5.1
Asian	114	0.8	1,968	1.4
Gender				
Female	4,526	32.6	71,502	49.0
Male	9,351	67.4	69,857	51.0

Source: PEIMS district demographic data file dated 10/26/18.

Note: Native American, Pacific Islander, and Two or More Races not included in this table. Econ Disadv=Economically Disadvantaged, Afr American=African American. See the 2018-19 Evaluation of Special Education full report for additional detail on demographics. PEIMS=Public Education Information Management System.

The most commonly identified primary disabilities among students enrolled in special education during the 2018-19 school year were learning disability (28.8%), autism (20.7%, Figure 1), and other health impairment (16.2%).

Figure 1: Percentage of Special Education Students by Primary Disability and School Year, 2010-11 to 2018-19



Source: PEIMS district demographic data file dated 10/26/18 (2018-19), and 2017-18 Evaluation of Special Education Report (2018) for school years 2010-11 through 2017-18.

Note: PEIMS=Public Education Information Management System. SPED=Special Education.

As Figure 1 highlighted, the percentage of special education students identified with autism more than tripled from 6.8 percent in the 2010-11 school year to 20.7 percent in the 2018-19 school year. During this period, the percentage of students identified with a learning disability declined from half (50.1%) of all special education students to twenty-nine percent (28.8%) of all special education students. Further discussion on the increasing percentage of students identified with autism can be found in the full *2018-19 Evaluation of the Special Education Program* report.

What were campus staff's perceptions of communication with and support from the Special Education department?

A survey constructed to understand the methods, nature, and quality of communication between the Special Education department and special education teachers and teacher assistants, as well as campus administration during the 2018-19 school year indicated generally positive experiences with the Special Education department. In all, 91 percent of respondents indicated they understood the district's expectations in providing special education services; 86 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to get help with special education related matters, and 77 percent indicated that they had adequate access to classroom materials needed to provide special education. Regarding the district's "Core 4" tenets of customer service (Fast, Flexible, Focused and Friendly), positive responses on each tenet accounted for between 77 percent and 87 percent of all responses.

What were the activities and perceptions of special education evaluators?

Feedback from special education evaluators, particularly concerning their transition from a central office to campus-based workspaces, was mixed. In all, of 63 percent of special education evaluators agreed or strongly agreed that their "physical workspace is appropriate for fulfilling [their] work duties." This was an increase from the 53 percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement in 2017-18. However, 62 percent indicated (agreed or strongly agreed) that they were "frequently interrupted by campus staff when conducting [their] work," (59% in 2017-18). Forty-four percent of evaluators agreed or strongly agreed that they had adequate access to professional resources (such as software, assessments and forms) needed to complete their work duties in 2018-19 (39% in 2017-18). Thirty-eight percent indicated that they had adequate access to office supplies (printers, copiers, ink, paper) needed to complete their work (42% in 2017-18).

Forty-two percent of special education evaluators agreed or strongly agreed that the transition to campuses has benefitted students and their families.

Approximately one in three evaluators agreed or strongly agreed that the transition had improved response time in conducting evaluations, and approximately one in three agreed or strongly agreed that the transition has – overall – been a positive change. This was an increase from the 2017-18 finding of 19.3 percent who indicated an overall positive change with the transition.

A high percentage of respondents indicated that very few of their initial referral folders included adequate MTSS interventions. Approximately 82 percent of these evaluators indicated that "none" to only up to 25 percent of the initial referral folders they received included adequate MTSS interventions (89% in 2017-18).

How did the special education program perform on the 2018 PBMS Report?

The 2018 average of all Dallas ISD special education performance level indicators was 1.5 (out of a range of zero to three, with three being the lowest performance level), which resulted in the district's special education program being rated stage three, requiring interventions. The program also received a stage three rating in 2017. Though the 2018 average performance level indicator of 1.5 was an improvement from the 1.8 average on the 2017 report, 1.5 still fell within 2018's (more stringent) stage three rating parameters.

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

Since the 2016-17 school year, the percentage of district special education students (in grades kindergarten through two) that scored at or above grade level on *TerraNova* has increased 4.5 percentage points in reading and 6.2 percentage points in mathematics. Grade-level-specific results from 2017-18 to 2018-19, however, were mixed.

Looking at *SUPERA* reading performance across 2016-17 to 2018-19, the evaluator found that the percentage of special education students that performed at or above grade level decreased overall (-4.7 percentage points, from 57.4% to 52.7%) in kindergarten through grade two. Grade two students showed a notable 15.1 percentage point drop since 2016-17 in those scoring at or above grade level (51.1% in 2016-17 to 36.0% in 2018-19).

STAAR 3-8 and *STAAR EOC* assessments were available to special education students in two versions: *STAAR* and *STAAR Alternate 2*. Special education students who were tested with the *STAAR Alternate 2* version performed better than students who tested with the *STAAR* version. As shown in Table 2, the percentage of special education students scoring at Approaches Grade Level or Above (Approaches+) has increased in every *STAAR* 3-8 and *STAAR EOC* exam

since 2016-17, except English 1 (on which there was a slight dip from 2017-18).

Table 2: Percentage of Special Education Students at Approaches Grade Level or Above, 2016-17 through 2018-19

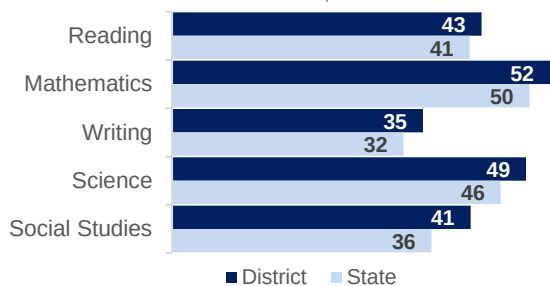
Exam	2016-17 %	2017-18 %	2018-19 %
STAAR 3-8			
Reading	36.2	41.5	42.9
Mathematics	44.4	51.0	52.4
Writing	29.8	32.6	34.8
Science	42.1	45.6	49.1
Social Studies	31.8	35.2	41.4
STAAR EOC			
Algebra I	42.7	47.6	55.2
English I	18.2	21.4	20.9
English II	20.9	21.5	24.2
Biology	47.9	51.8	53.2
U.S. History	58.1	63.2	65.5

Source: District STAAR 3-8 data files: 6/22/17; 6/20/18, 6/13/19. STAAR 3-8 results (all grades combined). District STAAR EOC data file: 6/20/18; 4/30/18; 6/04/19.

Note: Data reflect STAAR and STAAR Alternate 2 versions of the Spring (first administration) STAAR=State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness; EOC=End of Course. Data reflect the results of all versions of STAAR EOC exams combined (including retests).

The performances of Dallas ISD special education students on STAAR 3-8 exams were compared to special education students at the state level (Figure 2). A higher percentage of Dallas ISD special education students scored at Approaches+ on all STAAR 3-8 subjects compared special education students statewide.

Figure 2: Percentage of Dallas ISD and State Special Education Students at Approaches Grade Level or Above on STAAR 3-8 Exams, 2018-19



Source: District STAAR 3-8 data file: 07/01/2019 and Texas Assessment Management System (TAMS) website: texasassessment.com: retrieved 07/02/19.

Note: Data reflect STAAR and STAAR Alternate 2 versions of the Spring 2019 (1st administration) STAAR 3-8 results (grades combined). STAAR=State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness.

Among five large urban school districts across Texas (Austin, El Paso, Houston, and San Antonio), Dallas ISD special education students performed at a higher level of achievement compared to those at each of the other districts in science and social studies, and tied with Austin ISD for the highest percentage of special education students scoring at Approaches+ in reading,

and with El Paso ISD for the highest percentage at Approaches+ in mathematics. On the STAAR EOC subject exams, special education students in Austin ISD performed at a higher level of achievement in every subject compared to the four other districts.

Table 3: Percentage of Special Education Students at Approaches Grade Level or Above by School District, 2018-19

Exam	Austin %	San Antonio %	El Paso %	Houston %	Dallas %
STAAR 3-8					
Reading	43	32	42	37	43
Mathematics	48	38	51	45	51
Writing	35	22	34	31	34
Science	44	33	43	37	49
Social Studies	36	28	27	32	40
STAAR EOC					
Algebra I	59	58	33	46	51
Biology	60	47	45	46	48
English I	20	19	11	10	12
English II	28	15	18	13	15
U.S. History	72	66	59	55	65

Source: Texas Assessment Management System (TAMS) website: texasassessment.com: retrieved 07/02/19.

Note: STAAR=State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness; EOC=End of Course. STAAR 3-8 percentages include STAAR Alternate 2; STAAR EOC percentages represent scores from the standard STAAR version alone.

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

The four-year longitudinal dropout rate, the percentage of students who began grade nine in the 2014-15 school year and dropped out within four years, for Dallas ISD special education students was 11.2 percent. Dallas ISD special education students had a higher dropout rate than that of all students in the district (9.0%). However, this rate is lower than the last school year (11.7%) and is less than half of the 2009-10 rate (22.7%) for district special education students. The graduation rate (four-year longitudinal, class of 2018) among district special education students was lower compared to the districtwide rate (72.1% and 86.7%, respectively). On average, the percentage of days that special education students attended (93.9%) was lower than general education students (95.3%).

What were the findings of the 2018-19 contracted special education program follow-up review?

Collier Educational Consulting conducted a follow-up review of the district's special education program in 2018-19 to examine the level of progress the district had made on program recommendations provided in the 2016-17 program review (also conducted by Collier Educational Consulting). The follow-up review revealed evidence of at least some implementation progress on

11 of the 16 recommendations made in the 2016-17 report.

More detail on findings from the 2019 Collier follow-up review can be found in Appendix C of the full *2018-19 Evaluation of the Special Education Program* report.

Recommendations

- **Ensure that Special Education central staff interacting with campus staff are trained adequately to handle policy and other support-related questions, and that guidance is provided in a timely manner.** Feedback on the Special Education Customer Service Survey showed that one in three principals and assistant principals and one in five special education teachers and teacher assistants felt inadequately supported by Special Education central staff when they reached out for assistance. Ensuring that central staff are adequately prepared to handle questions of policy and other guidance requests in a timely manner will help foster a supportive environment for both students and staff.
- **Communicate to teachers and other campus-based staff the necessity of following MTSS procedures.** Similar to findings in 2017-18, special education evaluators indicated that only a small percentage of initial referral folders included adequate MTSS interventions. MTSS intervention documentation can identify if special education evaluation is necessary or whether other services are appropriate, and can reduce the workload of evaluators, allowing for more timely and appropriate placements of eligible students into special education services. Half (50%) of all responding evaluators in 2018-19 indicated that 75 to 100 percent of their initial evaluations were referred through parent requests rather than through teacher requests, including MTSS documentation. While this is a 13-percentage point decrease from 2017-18 (62.5%), this remains an area for continuous improvement.
- **Increase efforts to recruit more bilingual special education diagnosticians and LSPs.** A relatively low percentage of special education evaluators indicated that they conducted bilingual evaluations (29.8%; up from 23.9% in 2017-18). Survey results showed that almost one in three (30.5%) monolingual evaluators 'frequently' or 'always' had trouble finding an interpreter to communicate with non-English speaking students, an increase from 25.4 percent indicating this in 2017-18. Additional bilingual diagnosticians and LSPs should be hired to reduce linguistic barriers in conducting special education evaluations and to increase efficiency.

- **Ensure that additional, regular opportunities are provided for special education evaluators to collaborate and receive professional support.** Feedback from the 2017-18 Special Education Evaluator Survey indicated that, in the wake of their transition from a central office to campuses, evaluators lost regular opportunities to collaborate with one another in person on special education evaluation-related issues. To address this loss, the Special Education department indicated that they began scheduling meetings in 2018-19 to facilitate such collaboration. In the 2018-19 survey, fewer than half of respondents indicated that collaboration meetings were held regularly, and that these meetings addressed evaluators' needs for professional collaboration adequately.
- **Conduct a needs assessment among special education evaluators to determine what supplies they require to fulfill their job duties.** A recurrent theme throughout feedback on the Special Education Evaluator Survey (both in 2017-18 and 2018-19) was that, in the wake of their workspace transition to campuses, a large percentage of evaluators found themselves with inadequate access to the professional material resources (e.g., assessments, forms, software, etc.) and office supplies (printers, copiers, ink, etc.) needed to fulfill their work duties. Ensuring adequate provision of these resources will help ensure more efficient provision of services.

References

- 2018 Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System Report (2018). <http://tea.texas.gov/pbm/PBMASManuals.aspx>
- Grimberg, N. Z. (2018). 2017-18 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 2018-19 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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Dallas ISD
Department of Evaluation and Assessment
H. B. Bell School Support Service Center
2909 N. Buckner Blvd.
Box 10
Dallas, TX 75228