

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Dallas Independent School District (ISD) provides specialized services and accommodations to students with disabilities. Federal laws and State of Texas accountability systems provide a framework that helps shape and guide special education (SPED) programming within the district. The total budget for 2019-20 Dallas ISD SPED services was \$61,597,547, an increase from \$60,210,915 in 2018-19. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the district transitioned to at-home learning beginning after spring break on March 23, 2020. As a result, district operations and support functions were modified accordingly, and most state and district assessments were cancelled for the year.

The purpose of this report was to describe the SPED program, to summarize trends in the characteristics and academic performance of students served by SPED with a focus on indicators related to state and federal accountability systems, and to summarize feedback from SPED teachers, principals, and evaluators to identify SPED program-related challenges, successes, and areas for improvement. In particular, this evaluation aimed to achieve the following objectives for 2019-20: 1) report funding and budget information; 2) summarize district performance on the Texas Education Agency Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) report; 3) summarize the characteristics of SPED students; 4) summarize the characteristics of SPED teachers and the SPED professional development they were offered; 5) report trends in academic achievement for SPED students; 6) report trends in the dropout rates and attendance rates of SPED students; and 7) summarize stakeholder perceptions of program-related components.

Changes to SPED Evaluations and Supports During At-Home Learning

Because of the COVID-19-related transition to districtwide at-home learning on March 23, 2020 and the nature of the SPED evaluation process, which necessitates in-person interaction with students, SPED student evaluations were suspended in spring 2020 once districtwide at-home learning began. However, annual Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings and three-year re-evaluations were required to continue virtually during this time. In addition, completion of Individual Education Program (IEP) amendments was required for each SPED student outlining the SPED services the district could continue to provide to students during at-home learning.

SPED service modifications for at-home learning varied and depended on the nature of each student's disability, the level of student and parent engagement during this period, appropriate technological device availability and provision, and the limits of the nature of technology inherent to distance-learning. The SPED department also provided resources for parents of SPED students during this time, including through the Dallas ISD SPED department website,¹ which listed (in both English and Spanish) organizations and contact information for additional parent and community support.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS/OUTCOMES

How did the SPED program perform on the 2019 RDA Report?

Table 1 provides a summary of Dallas ISD SPED-related performance levels (PLs) for the past three years, as indicated in the respective PBMAS²/RDA reports. In summary, three areas on the 2017 Dallas ISD SPED program PBMAS report were assigned a PL indicator of zero, and seven program areas were assigned a PL indicator of three or above.³ By 2019, more program areas were assigned a PL of zero ($N=5$), and fewer were assigned a PL of three or above ($N=5$) than in previous years. These results indicated some improvement. However, in both 2018 and 2019, eight areas were assigned PLs of two, and the number of PLs three or greater⁴ remained steady.

Table 1: 2017-2019 Dallas ISD Special Education Related PBMAS/RDA Performance Level Assignments

PL Assignment	2017	2018	2019
0	3	2	5
1	5	5	4
2	5	8	8
3 or SD Year 3	7	5	5

Source: Texas Education Agency 2017, 2018, and 2019 Dallas ISD PBMAS/RDA reports.

Note: Details about calculation and assignment of PLs can be found in the 2019 TEA RDA Manual available on the TEA website.

The RDA system identified three SPED areas as 2019 areas of concern: 1) the SPED African American student representation rate (ages 3-21) in the primary disability category of Emotional Disturbance, 2) the SPED African American student Out-of-School Suspensions (OSS) ≤ 10 Days rate (ages 3-21), and 3) the SPED African American

¹ See: <https://www.dallasisd.org/sped>. Link retrieved 07/07/2020.

² PBMAS=Performance-Based Monitoring Accountability System (of the Texas Education Agency). PBMAS was replaced by RDA in 2019.

³ A PL of zero indicates that the state standard was met; the higher the PL number, the greater the concern regarding the program area.

⁴ "Or greater" includes the SD (significant disproportionality) PL assignment. Additional detail on SD including its definition, background, and use can be found at <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/2019%20SD%20Information.pdf>.

student OSS ≥ 10 Days rate (ages 3-21). As required by law, in 2019-20 the district planned how to address these issues in upcoming years.

What were the characteristics of students served by SPED?

The SPED population in the Dallas ISD totaled 14,478 students (9.4% of district enrollment). The number and percentage of students served in the Dallas ISD SPED program has increased each year since 2014-15, when SPED student enrollment totaled 11,722 (7.3% of district enrollment). This rise has persisted despite a downward trend in overall districtwide enrollment since 2014-15.

Similar to 2018-19, a higher percentage of African Americans received SPED services (28.4%, Table 2) relative to their representation in general education enrollment (20.5%). Although males and females were equally represented in the general education population, two-thirds of special education students were male (67.3%). While more than a third (38.0%) of special education students were English learners (EL), this rate was lower than the rate of ELs in the general education population (46.5%).

Table 2: 2019-20 Characteristics of SPED Students

Group	Special Education (N=14,478)		General Education (N=139,016)	
	n	%	n	%
Ethnicity				
Hispanic	9,233	63.8	98,830	71.1
African American	4,110	28.4	28,517	20.5
White	717	5.0	7,109	5.1
Other	418	2.9	4,560	3.3
Sex				
Female	4,730	32.7	70,246	50.5
Male	9,748	67.3	68,770	49.5
Student Groups				
Econ Dis	12,558	86.7	116,885	84.1
English Learner	5,498	38.0	64,673	46.5
Homeless	223	1.5	2,300	1.7

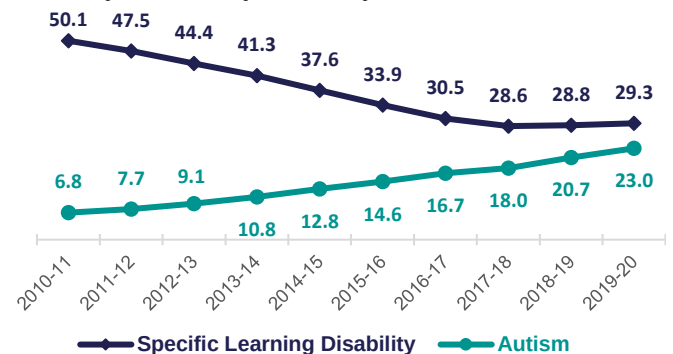
Source: District PEIMS snapshot demographic data file for 10/28/19 (2019-20).

Note: Econ Dis=Economically Disadvantaged, PEIMS=Public Education Information Management System.

Specific learning disability and autism were the two most common primary disabilities of SPED students overall in 2019-20. As shown in Figure 1, the overall percentage of SPED students identified with a specific learning disability as a primary disability declined since 2010-11, while the rate of those identified with autism steadily rose, more than tripling between 2010-11 and 2019-20, from 6.8 percent to 23.0 percent. Several studies and government entities have reported similar increases in autism spectrum disorder cases (Blumberg et al., 2013), relating increases to changes in the diagnostic criteria of behaviors constituting the

disorder (Wazana, Bresnahan, and Kline, 2007) and better monitoring and diagnosis of the disorder, rather than to a “de facto” rise in the number of children who fall on the autism spectrum.⁵ However, the topic of factors contributing to the marked rise in autism spectrum disorders over the past few decades is one of intense debate at the national and international level, and more research is needed to better understand both the causes and effective treatments of those identified on the autism spectrum.

Figure 1: 2010-11 to 2019-20 Percentage of Dallas ISD SPED Students with Autism and Specific Learning Disability as Primary Disability



Source: District PEIMS snapshot demographic data file for 10/28/19 (2019-20) and Mejan, 2019 (2010-11 to 2018-19).

What were the characteristics of SPED teachers?

A total of 1,129 SPED teachers served the district in 2019-20. Over four years the rate of district SPED teachers increased by 2.3 percentage points; the number of general education teachers decreased by 2.3 percentage points.

More than 77 percent of 2019-20 district SPED teachers were female. A smaller percentage of SPED teachers were Hispanic (11.2%) compared to general education teachers (31.3%), while a higher percentage of SPED teachers were African American (53.6%) compared to general education teachers (31.9%). A higher percentage of SPED teachers held a master's degree (31.2%) compared to general education teachers (20.9%). The average length of teaching experience of district SPED teachers was 8.7 years.

What professional development opportunities did the SPED department offer in 2019-20?

From data provided by program leadership listing 2019-20 SPED professional development and other training provided to campus staff members, the evaluator identified 69 unique 2019-20 session topics. Examples of training themes included policy and procedures, skills acquisition, classroom organization, technology, and supporting students with various disabilities, for example. During spring 2020 at-home learning, professional learning committee (PLC) meetings were held online weekly to address a variety of concerns related to at-home learning.

⁵ See <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html> for more information.

What were stakeholder perceptions regarding the SPED department?

The evaluator collaborated with SPED program leadership in 2019-20 to design and administer an online survey titled the SPED Customer Service Survey to solicit feedback from district SPED teachers, SPED teacher assistants, principals, and assistant principals. The survey addressed a range of issues that included the customer service experience with the SPED department and understanding of SPED policy, procedures, and resource access, both before and during at-home learning. The response rate was 60 percent (teachers: 65%, $N=1,243$; administrators: 45%, $N=289$).

Perceptions About Student Support Teams (SSTs)

The campus Student Support Team (SST) is integral to the effective functioning of the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and the SPED student evaluation processes. A higher percentage of campus administrators than SPED teachers agreed (agreed or strongly agreed) that campus SSTs met regularly to discuss student concerns (teachers: 57%; administrators: 85%), and that SSTs met regularly specifically to discuss, recommend, and review progress on appropriate interventions before referring students for an initial SPED evaluation (teachers: 55%; administrators: 85%). Survey findings also indicated a low rate of SPED teacher awareness of the presence and activities of campus SSTs, possibly indicating some under-engagement of SPED staff members at the campus level.

Core 4

Ratings of the SPED department prior to at-home learning on all Core 4 domains (Focused, Fast, Flexible, and Friendly) were generally positive (range: 75% to 91%), an improvement from 2018-19. During at-home learning, SPED customer service ratings were comparable and often higher than before the transition.

Technology and Online Platforms: Levels of Need During At-Home Learning

A high percentage of SPED teacher (61%) and administrator (74%) respondents indicated a need for more effective online teaching resources for at-home learning. More than half of both groups reported a need for more training on Microsoft Teams and Google Classrooms.

In addition, the highest percentage of administrators and SPED teachers indicated that students needed more reliable internet connectivity (teachers: 71%; administrators: 81%), and technology (hardware) resources (teachers: 64%; administrators: 73%). Higher rates of SPED teachers (49%) than administrators (34%) needed more reliable technology (hardware) and internet connectivity (teachers: 39%, administrators: 32%) for themselves.

Finally, both SPED teachers (66%) and administrators (82%) expressed a need for more guidance on engaging students and parents during at-home learning.

What were the activities and perceptions of SPED evaluators?

The evaluator also collaborated with SPED program leadership to design and administer an online survey to solicit feedback on the activities and perceptions of 2019-20 SPED evaluators (diagnosticians and LSSPs), including during spring 2020 districtwide at-home learning. Of the 119 SPED evaluators invited to participate in this SPED Evaluator Survey, 111 at least partially completed the survey (93%).

Parent Referrals for SPED Evaluations

Similar to 2018-19, 2019-20 SPED evaluators reported high rates of parent requests for initial evaluations, but the rate of respondents indicating all evaluations were parent requests decreased from 24 percent in 2018-19 to 14 percent in 2019-20.

Workspace on Campus

Many SPED evaluators reported they had space on campus to conduct student evaluations with fidelity (68%) and to conduct job-related duties (60%), but these numbers mean 32 to 40 percent lacked adequate workspace on campus.

Supplies on Campus

SPED evaluators reported that their printer- and copy-related needs were met on campuses (90%) and they had reasonable access to needed assessment kits (83%), but fewer (57%) reported they had reasonable access to the protocols needed [e.g. *Wechsler Intelligence Test for Children (WISC)*] to complete their work duties.

Professional Support and Collaboration Before and During At-Home Learning

Ratings of professional support and collaboration prior to at-home learning improved in all areas compared to the previous year, with notable increases in ratings for regularity and usefulness of collaboration meetings.

Ratings of professional support and collaboration during at-home learning were also very high, and many evaluators remarked that virtual meetings during this time were more time and energy efficient compared to in-person meetings.

What was the academic performance of students served in special education?

Because of the 2019-20 statewide COVID-19-related STAAR cancellation, 2019-20 STAAR outcomes could not be reported.

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

Dropout, graduation, continuation, and Texas Certificate of High School Equivalency (TxCHSE) information is calculated and published by the TEA. These data (lagged

one year for 2018-19) were not provided by the TEA in summer 2020, so outcomes were not reported.

The overall attendance rate among SPED students as of the fourth six-week period was 93.1 percent, a lower rate than the districtwide rate of 94.4 percent. Among SPED students, rates were highest in the middle and elementary grades, with the highest attendance rate in grade four (94.9%) and the lowest attendance rate in grade nine (88.2%). Attendance rates among high school SPED students were higher in each consecutive grade level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue to stress to all campuses the importance of regular SST meetings for the identification of students needing services. Although 55 percent of SPED teachers agreed that campus SSTs met regularly to discuss, recommend, and review progress on appropriate interventions before referring students for an initial SPED evaluation, 43 percent of SPED teachers were aware of an SST on their campuses but did not have enough information to rate their SST, suggesting possible under-engagement of SPED staff members in SST campus activities. Stressing the crucial role that regular SST meetings play in the effective and efficient functioning of MTSS may also help to address the finding persisting over three years that a high percentage of referrals for initial evaluations came from parents.

Continue working to ensure that SPED evaluators have the workspace they need on campuses. While many SPED evaluators reported having adequate space on campus to conduct evaluations (68%) and to carry out work duties effectively (60%), these findings indicated that 32 to 40 percent would benefit from improved on-campus space allocation to serve students properly.

Continue working to ensure that SPED evaluators have needed supplies. Although 57 percent of SPED evaluators reported they had reasonable access to needed protocols (e.g., *WISC*), this finding indicates 43 percent of respondents need improved access to supplies.

Review and enhance the technological resources of teachers and students to ensure uninterrupted SPED services during possible future periods of at-home learning. Many SPED teachers (61%) and campus administrators (74%) reported needing more effective online teaching resource options for at-home learning and more guidance on effective use of Microsoft Teams (teachers: 51%; administrators: 59%) and Google Classrooms (teachers: 55%; administrators: 57%). Other needs mentioned included more reliable internet connectivity and more reliable, age-appropriate technology (hardware) resources for students. Attention to correcting these technological shortcomings will improve the ability to more seamlessly provide SPED services virtually, when necessary.

Consider virtual meetings as a year-round option to improve efficiency. Many SPED evaluators remarked that virtual meetings during this time were more time and energy efficient compared to in-person meetings. Stakeholders should consider whether virtual meetings would also improve communication and engagement with SPED students and their families, when appropriate.

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