

## 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. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the district transitioned to at-home learning beginning after spring break on March 23, 2020. In 2020-21, Dallas ISD delayed the start of the 2020-21 school year until September 8, 2020 and implemented at-home learning districtwide for the first four weeks. On October 22, 2020, the district announced that campuses would offer in-person and virtual learning (both synchronous and asynchronous learning activities) throughout the rest of the school year. The total budget for 2020-21 SPED services in the Dallas ISD was \$65,877,857, an increase from \$61,597,547 in 2019-20 and from \$60,210,915 in 2018-19.

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, and to summarize feedback from stakeholders. In particular, this evaluation aimed to: 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.

## EVALUATION QUESTIONS/OUTCOMES

## How did the SPED program perform on the 2020 RDA Report?

Table 1 provides a summary of Dallas ISD SPED-related performance levels (PLs) for the past three years<sup>1</sup>. In summary, two areas on the 2018 Dallas ISD SPED program PBMA<sup>2</sup>s report were assigned a PL indicator of zero, and five program areas were assigned a PL indicator of three or above (Significant Disproportionality, or SD is considered more severe than numeric PL assignments). In the 2019 RDA report, more program areas were assigned a PL of zero ( $N=5$ ), while five were again assigned PLs of three or above. In the 2020 RDA report, Dallas ISD SPED program

areas addressing SPED student STAAR performance received no PL assignment because of the suspension of the administration of the STAAR in 2019-20.

The 2020 RDA report showed one SPED program area assigned a PL of zero (SPED Regular Class  $\geq 80\%$  Rate Among Ages 6 to 21), while three SPED program areas received a PL indicator of three or higher: 1) SPED Representation: African American, Identified with Emotional Disturbance as a Primary Disability; 2) SPED Out of School Suspensions and Expulsions  $\leq 10$  Days Rate Among Ages 3 to 21; and 3) SPED Out of School Suspensions and Expulsions  $>10$  Days Rate Among Ages 3 to 21.

**Table 1: 2018-2020 Dallas ISD Special Education Related PBMA/RDA Performance Level Assignments**

| PL Assignment  | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|----------------|------|------|------|
| 0              | 2    | 5    | 1    |
| 1              | 5    | 4    | 2    |
| 2              | 8    | 8    | 2    |
| 3 or SD Year 3 | 5    | 5    | 3    |

*Source:* Texas Education Agency 2018, 2019 and 2020 Dallas ISD PBMA/RDA reports.

*Note:* SD = Significant Disproportionality. Detailed information about the calculation of rates and assignment of performance levels can be found in the 2020 TEA RDA Manual available on the TEA website.

## What were the characteristics of students served by SPED?

The SPED population in the Dallas ISD totaled 14,095 in 2020-21 (9.7% of district enrollment). The number and percentage of students served in the program increased each year between 2014-15 and 2019-20 (from 7.3% to 9.4%). Although both districtwide and SPED enrollment counts dipped in 2020-21, the percentage of students enrolled in SPED continued to increase in 2020-21.

Similar to 2019-20, a higher percentage of African Americans received SPED services (27.5%, Table 2) relative to their representation in general education enrollment (20.2%). Although males and females were equally represented in the general education population, two-thirds of special education students were male (67.0%). While more than a third (38.0%) of special education students were English learners (EL), this rate was lower compared to ELs in the general education population (46.9%).

<sup>1</sup> A performance level of zero indicates that the state standard was met. Areas not meeting the standard are assigned PLs of one to three, with higher numbers indicating areas of greater concern.

<sup>2</sup> PBMA=Performance-Based Monitoring Accountability System (of the Texas Education Agency). PBMA was replaced by RDA in 2019.

**Table 2: 2020-21 Characteristics of SPED Students**

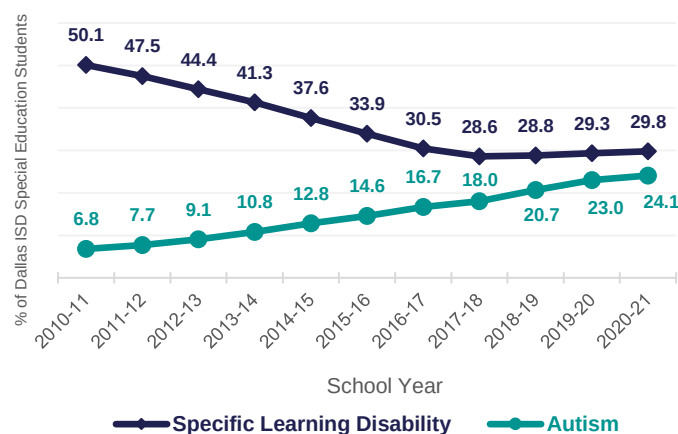
| Group                 | Special Education<br>(N=14,095) |      | General Education<br>(N=131,625) |      |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------|----------------------------------|------|
|                       | n                               | %    | N                                | %    |
| <b>Ethnicity</b>      |                                 |      |                                  |      |
| Hispanic              | 9143                            | 64.9 | 93,678                           | 71.2 |
| African American      | 3873                            | 27.5 | 26,595                           | 20.2 |
| White                 | 624                             | 4.4  | 6,598                            | 5.0  |
| Other                 | 455                             | 3.2  | 4,754                            | 3.6  |
| <b>Sex</b>            |                                 |      |                                  |      |
| Female                | 4,656                           | 33.0 | 66,831                           | 50.8 |
| Male                  | 9,439                           | 67.0 | 64,794                           | 49.2 |
| <b>Student Groups</b> |                                 |      |                                  |      |
| Econ Dis              | 12,193                          | 86.5 | 111,103                          | 84.4 |
| English Learner       | 5,551                           | 39.4 | 61,771                           | 46.9 |
| Homeless              | 286                             | 2.0  | 2,713                            | 2.1  |

Source: District PEIMS snapshot demographic data file for 10/30/20 (2020-21).

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

In 2020-21, specific learning disability and autism were the two most common primary disabilities of SPED students. 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 between 2010-11 and 2020-21, from 6.8 percent to 24.1 percent (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: 2010-11 to 2020-21 Percentage of Dallas ISD SPED Students with Autism and Specific Learning Disability as Primary Disability**



Source: District PEIMS snapshot demographic data file for 10/30/20 (2020-21) and Mejia, 2020 (2010-11- to 2019-20).

### What were the characteristics of SPED teachers?

A total of 1,208 SPED teachers served the district in 2020-21. Over four years, the rate of district SPED teachers increased by 2.2 percentage points; the number of general education teachers decreased by 2.2 percentage points.

Seventy-seven percent of 2020-21 district SPED teachers were female. A smaller percentage of SPED teachers were Hispanic (11.3%) compared to general education teachers

(35.4%), while a higher percentage of SPED teachers were African American (53.9%) compared to general education teachers (32.7%). A higher percentage of SPED teachers held a master's degree (30.6%) compared to general education teachers (21.1%). The average length of teaching experience of district SPED teachers was 8.5 years.

### What professional development opportunities did the SPED department offer in 2020-21?

From data provided by program leadership, the evaluator identified 68 unique topics covered in SPED professional development sessions provided during 2020-21. Themes included 1) SPED policy and compliance issues, 2) early childhood/prekindergarten SPED needs, 3) classroom organization for specialized SPED programs, 4) SPED technology rollout, 5) new SPED teacher orientation, 6) Review 360, 7) assistive technology, 8) accommodations, 9) behavior issues, 10) virtual teaching and learning, 11) academic assessments, and 12) data entry and analysis (across multiple SPED-related platforms).

### What were stakeholder perceptions regarding the SPED department?

An online survey was administered in 2020-21 to solicit feedback from district SPED teachers, SPED teacher assistants, principals, and assistant principals on issues including the customer service experience with the SPED department and understanding of SPED policy, procedures, and resource access, both before and during at-home learning. Of the 2,674 individuals invited to complete the SPED Customer Service Survey, 1,363 (1,087 teachers or teacher assistants, 274 principals or assistant principals, and two who identified as "other – unspecified") at least partially completed the survey, for an overall response rate of 51 percent.

### Perceptions About Student Support Teams (SSTs)

A higher percentage of campus administrators than SPED teachers agreed or strongly agreed that campus SSTs met regularly to discuss student concerns (teachers: 45%; administrators: 76%), and that SSTs met regularly specifically to discuss, recommend, and review progress on appropriate interventions before referring students for an initial SPED evaluation (teachers: 44%; administrators: 74%). 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 on all Core 4 domains (Focused, Fast, Flexible, and Friendly) were generally positive (range: 78% to 89%). Approximately 90 percent of respondents from both participant groups agreed or strongly agreed both in 2020-21 and in 2019-20 that staff members at the SPED central office were friendly.

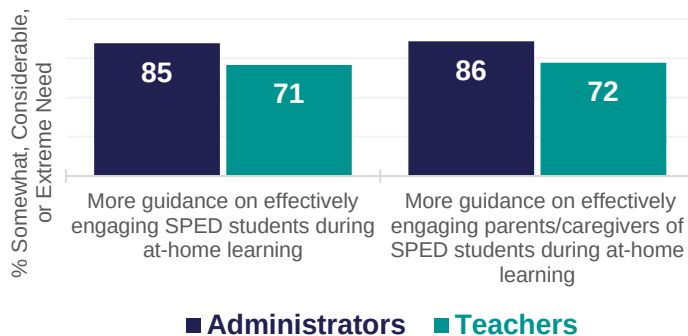
## Technology and Online Platforms: Levels of Need

Seventy percent of SPED teacher and 85 percent of administrators 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. These rates were similar to those found for spring of 2020.

In addition, administrators and SPED teachers indicated that students needed more reliable internet connectivity (teachers: 71%; administrators: 75%), and technology (hardware) resources (teachers: 64%; administrators: 69%). Higher rates of SPED teachers (60%) than administrators (53%) needed more reliable technology (hardware) and internet connectivity (teachers: 51%, administrators: 43%) for themselves.

Both SPED teachers and campus administrators expressed a need for more guidance on engaging students and parents during at-home learning (71% to 86%, Figure 2).

**Figure 2: 2020-21 SPED Student and Parent Engagement Needs**



Source: 2020-21 SPED Customer Service Survey.

## What were the activities and perceptions of SPED evaluators?

The evaluator collaborated with SPED program leadership to design and administer an online survey to solicit feedback on the activities and perceptions of 2020-21 SPED evaluators (diagnosticians and LSSPs). Of the 114 invited to participate in this Survey, 71 completed the survey at least partially (63%).

## Parent Referrals for SPED Evaluations and MTSS Interventions in Referrals

The percentage of SPED evaluators reporting that at least half of the referrals they received for initial individual evaluations were made through parent requests in 2020-21 remained at a rate of around two out of every three referrals, though there was some improvement from 2019-20, at 64 percent in 2020-21, down from 70 percent in 2019-20. Also, and similar to 2018-19 and 2019-20 survey findings, a high rate of respondents (82%) reported that few (25% or fewer)

referral folders for 2020-21 initial individual evaluations showed adequate MTSS interventions (2019-20: 76%; 2018-19: 82%)

## Workspace on Campus

The proportions of evaluators who agreed or strongly agreed that they had space on campus to conduct student evaluations with fidelity was comparable to 2019-20 (62% in 2020-21, down from 68% in 2019-20). Fewer evaluators in 2020-21 also reported having an assigned workspace on campus compared to 2019-20 (44% in 2020-21 versus 60% in 2019-20). In 2020-21, 32 percent indicated that they were frequently asked to support their campus in matters unrelated to their job as an evaluator (21% in 2019-20).

## Supplies on Campus

Most SPED survey respondents indicated that they could reasonably fulfill their printer- and copy-related needs on campus with their Secure Print Cards (83%) and that they had reasonable access to the assessment kits needed to complete their work duties (76%). These rates were slightly lower in 2019-20 (a 7-percentage-point decrease for each). A notably smaller rate of respondents (41%) shared that they had reasonable access to the protocols (such as the *WISC*<sup>3</sup>) needed to complete their job duties. This rate was also a decrease from the rate (57%) reporting adequate access to protocols in 2019-20.

## Professional Support and Collaboration

In 2019-20, 86 percent of SPED evaluators indicated that monthly SPED collaboration meetings addressed their need for professional collaboration adequately; this percentage declined in 2020-21 (69%).

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

### STAAR

For *STAAR* 3-8 Reading, from 2018-19 to 2020-21, all grade levels except grade eight showed declines in the percentages of SPED students achieving the Approaches Grade Level or Above (Appr+) performance standard (grade 8 students showed a 1.0 percentage point increase). The largest decline was seen for grade four students in Reading, where in 2018-19, 42.3 percent of SPED students achieved the Appr+ performance standard while 35.5 percent did so in 2020-21.

The percentage of SPED students achieving the Appr+ performance standard in Mathematics in 2020-21 showed larger declines from 2018-19 compared to the declines for Reading. In Mathematics, grade eight SPED students showed the largest decline from 2018-19 in the percentage achieving at the Appr+ level (54.0% in 2018-19 down to 37.9% in 2020-21). Declines in the percentage of SPED students in Writing, Science, and Social Science in 2020-21

<sup>3</sup> *WISC* stands for *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children*

ranged from 6.6 percentage points from 2018-19 (grade 7 Writing) to 11.7 percentage points (grade 5 Science).

Results for *STAAR EOCs* were more mixed compared to those for *STAAR 3-8*. Algebra I, Biology, and US History each showed declines from 2018-19 in the percentages of students scoring at the Appr+ level (-8.5, -4.1, and -7.5 percentage points, respectively, Table 15). However SPED students did show increases on the percentages scoring at Appr+ for both English 1 (5.9 percentage points) and English II (7.9 percentage points).

Compared to SPED students statewide, Dallas ISD SPED students did better in 2020-21 in terms of percentages achieving at the Appr+ level in all *STAAR 3-8* and *STAAR EOC* subjects except US History.

### **Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth**

SPED student performance on *MAP* Reading and Mathematics assessments showed patterns similar to performances on *STAAR* in these subject areas: average CGPs were higher in Mathematics for all grade levels compared to Reading, with the exception of grade two, where students showed better performance in Reading (average CGP for Reading in grade two was 48.1, compared to 44.5 for Mathematics).

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

The SPED annual dropout rate for the Class of 2019 was 15.4 compared to districtwide rate of 10.6. The dropout rate for the class of 2018 was 11.2 percent. The overall attendance rate among SPED students (early childhood through grade 12 for 2020-21 was 92.0 (93.1% for 2019-20). General education students showed an overall attendance rate of 92.3 in 2020-21 (94.4% in 2019-20).

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Continue to stress to all campuses the importance of regular SST meetings for the identification of students needing services.** Thirty-eight percent of SPED teachers did not have enough information to rate their SST, suggesting possible under-engagement of SPED staff members in SST campus activities (43% in 2019-20). Stressing the crucial role that regular SST meetings play in the effective and efficient functioning of MTSS may also help to address the finding that a high percentage of referrals for initial evaluations came from parents.

**Continue working to ensure that SPED evaluators have workspaces they need on campuses.** Less than half (44%) of SPED evaluators reported they had an assigned workspace on campus (60% in 2019-20), indicating that approximately 40 percent would benefit from improved on-campus space allocation to serve students properly.

**Continue working to ensure that SPED evaluators have needed supplies.** Forty-one percent (down from 57% in 2019-20) of SPED evaluators reported they had reasonable access to needed protocols (e.g., *WISC*). This finding indicates 59 percent of respondents needed improved access to supplies.

**Work to ensure more opportunities for professional collaboration for SPED evaluators.** In 2020-21, 69 percent of SPED evaluators indicated that monthly SPED collaboration meetings addressed their need for professional collaboration adequately (86 percent in 2019-20). Ensuring adequate professional collaboration for SPED evaluators with one another and with other integral SPED staff members will help ensure that current and potential SPED students and their families are effectively and efficiently supported.

**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 (70%, up from 61% in 2019-20) and campus administrators (85%, up from 74% in 2019-20) reported needing more effective online teaching resource options for at-home learning and more guidance on effective use of Microsoft Teams and Google Classrooms. Other needs mentioned included more reliable internet connectivity and more reliable, age-appropriate technology (hardware) resources for students.

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