



SUPERINTENDENT E. XIOMARA HERMAN, ED.D.

DECEMBER
2024

REPORT OF ENTRY FINDINGS



AMHERST REGIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

 www.arps.org

 hermanx@arps.org

 170 Chestnut Street,
Amherst MA 01002

L.E.A.D. WITH LOVE

LISTEN, LEARN, ENGAGE, ARTICULATE, DELIVER

Superintendent E. Xiomara Herman, Ed.D.



Superintendent Dr. Xi

One Superintendent



THREE DISTRICTS

AMHERST

Demographics

- **1,019 Students**
 - 12.1% African American
 - 12.4% Asian
 - 17.2% Hispanic
 - 0.2% Native American
 - 44.9% White
 - 0.3% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
 - 13.2% Multi-Race

PELHAM

Demographics

- **128 Students**
 - 5.5% African American
 - 3.9% Asian
 - 10.2% Hispanic
 - 1.6% Native American
 - 64.3% White
 - 0.0% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
 - 14.1% Multi-Race

REGION

Demographics

- **1,183 Students**
 - 8.7% African American
 - 11.0% Asian
 - 6.8% Hispanic
 - 0.2% Native American
 - 54.7% White
 - 0.1% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
 - 18.6% Multi-Race

Selected Populations

ELL	13.6%
Disabilities	21.7%
High Needs	49.4%
Low-Income	34.4%

Selected Populations

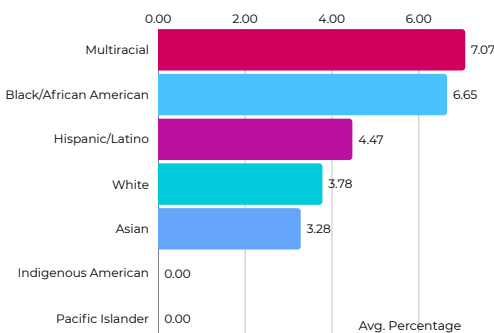
ELL	2.3%
Disabilities	24.8%
High Needs	42.6%
Low-Income	26.4%

Selected Populations

ELL	6.4%
Disabilities	26.3%
High Needs	44%
Low-Income	29%

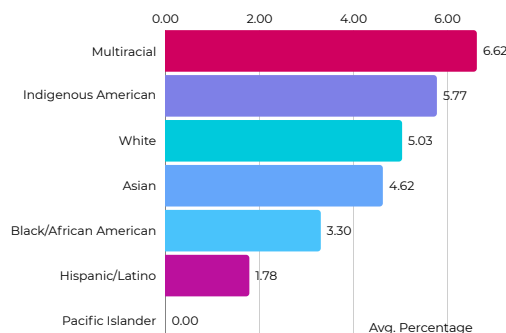
> Attendance Data

Average % of School Missed
Overall: 3.61%



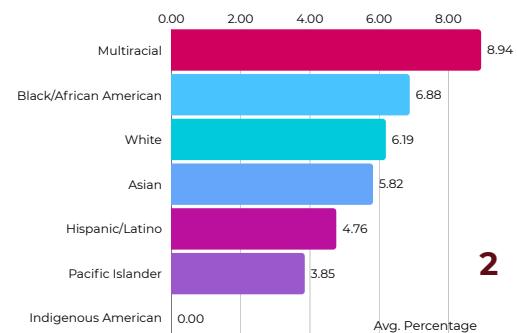
> Attendance Data

Average % of School Missed
Overall: 3.87%

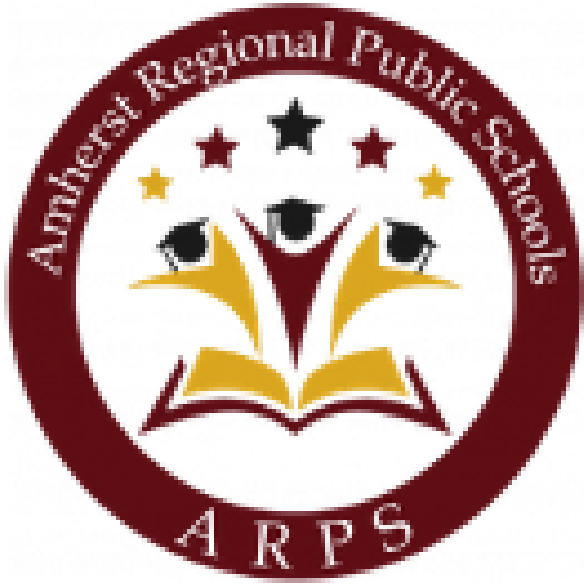


> Attendance Data

Average % of School Missed
Overall: 5.21%



Amherst, Pelham, & Regional Staffing



5. Clerical: 35

Manage administrative tasks to ensure smooth school operations.

6. Cafe Workers: 21

Prepare and serve nutritious meals to students and staff.

7. Custodial/Maintenance: 44

Ensure safe, clean, and operational school facilities.

8. Committee Action: 29

Lead district-wide initiatives and strategic decision-making.

1. Principals: 7

Oversee instructional leadership and school operations.

2. Administrators & APs: 10

Support principals in leadership, student management, and staff development.

3. Professional Staff: 332

Deliver high-quality instruction and support student learning.

4. Paras: 165

Provide instructional and behavioral support to students and teachers.



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- A. Major Themes
- B. District Strategies

CHAPTER 1:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."
— Nelson Mandela

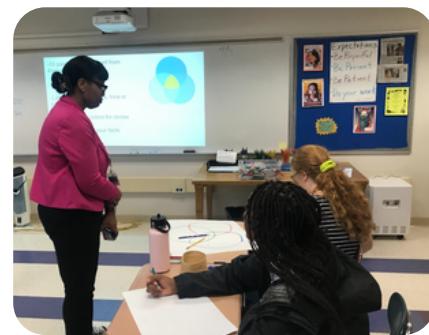


Executive Summary



Entry Findings for Amherst, Pelham, and Amherst-Pelham Regional School Districts

When I assumed the role of Superintendent for the Amherst, Pelham, and Amherst-Pelham Regional School Districts on July 1, 2024, I was both excited and apprehensive. Walking into a district that had endured years of turmoil—characterized by high leadership turnover, unresolved cases, and fractured relationships—was daunting. Yet, I was drawn to the resilience of this community and the opportunity to lead transformational change. “A shattered foundation isn’t the end—it’s the chance to rebuild stronger,” I reminded myself. Over the past few months, I’ve worked to understand the complexities of ARPS, listening to educators, students, families, and stakeholders. I understand it is not about quick fixes; **it’s about sustainable change, transparency, and trust**—values that must underpin our shared work moving forward. This report reflects the challenges, the opportunities, and the collective resolve I’ve seen to create a district where every child can thrive.



Key Areas of Concern and Insight

The challenges facing ARPS are both systemic and deeply entrenched. Across the district, there is a reliance on "past practice," leaving a gap in written protocols that undermines transparency, accountability, and the ability to hold individuals to consistent standards. As one stakeholder shared, "It feels like we're making up the rules as we go." This lack of procedural clarity has undermined trust, particularly in disciplinary processes where impartiality is difficult to achieve without an appeals process or written guidelines.

Communications

Communication breakdowns are another significant barrier. The disconnect between Central Office, schools, families, and School Committees has fostered mistrust and frustration. This sentiment was echoed by a stakeholder who stated, "We need transparency and honesty—not surprises." Without clear, consistent messaging, misunderstandings fester, and tensions rise, particularly in areas involving race, gender, and sexuality. While addressing bias remains a priority, it's critical to ground these discussions in practice and accountability to move beyond blame and toward solutions.

Finance

Financial management is another area requiring urgent attention. Payroll errors, unclear budgeting practices, and supplemental contracts improperly folded into base salaries have eroded confidence in the district's fiscal oversight. For example, stipends for additional tasks have been paid without evidence of completion, raising questions about transparency. "We need to know where every dollar is going," I emphasized during a recent budget meeting. Addressing these issues will require implementing audit recommendations and overhauling current systems to ensure accountability.

Operations

Operational inefficiencies compound these challenges. Many processes remain paper-based, hindering proper record-keeping and data collection. Key departments, including IT and Facilities, are underfunded and understaffed, leaving critical functions vulnerable. Deferred maintenance across schools continues to impact safety and learning environments, while specialized positions, such as custodians and trades people, are difficult to fill. As another stakeholder put it, "We're patching holes, not fixing the roof."

Executive Summary

Key Areas of Concern and Insight:

“

Perhaps most concerning is the culture of skepticism that has developed due to frequent Leadership turnover. A pattern of “waiting out” leadership has emerged, accompanied by a playbook of strategies to discredit and remove leaders. This cycle stifles progress and creates a sense of instability that permeates the district. Breaking this cycle will require not only building trust but also establishing systems that outlast individual leaders. “We can’t fear change just because it disrupts comfort,” I’ve said repeatedly. True progress requires collective effort and resilience.

Dr. E. Xiomara Herman
Superintendent of Schools



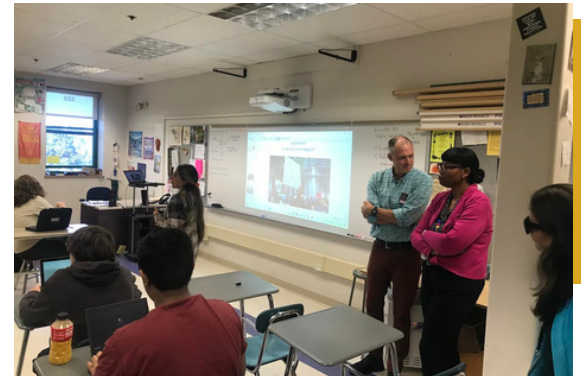
KEY AREAS OF GROWTH AND POSITIVITY



Despite these challenges, ARPS is rich with a wealth of strengths and opportunities that provide a foundation for growth. The district boasts a cadre of talented and dedicated educators whose deep commitment to their students is reflected in their achievements and outcomes. These achievements reflect the hard work of teachers who refuse to let systemic challenges hinder their mission—a testament to both teacher dedication and student resilience.

Equity

Equity remains a guiding principle across the district, with staff and community members committed to fostering inclusive practices. While tensions around race, gender, and sexuality remain high, there is a shared recognition that these issues must be addressed head-on. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The time is always right to do what is right.” This collective focus on equity is both a challenge and an opportunity for ARPS to lead with integrity.



Student Centered

The creativity and resilience of this community are perhaps its greatest strengths. Community support for programs is strong, and there is a shared desire to see ARPS thrive. Students, in particular, are a source of inspiration. They are intelligent, passionate, articulate, and unafraid to share their perspectives. They value opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions and help shape the district’s future. As I’ve often said, “Our students are our most valuable resource —they’re the reason we’re here.”



Relationships



Relationships within the district also provide a solid foundation. Leaders have built trust with staff, fostering collaboration and shared purpose. Additionally, School Committees have shown a willingness to embrace change, demonstrating resilience in the face of challenges. The district also benefits from reciprocity, with former students returning as professionals to give back to the system that shaped them.

Development of Whole Child

ARPS is deeply committed to nurturing the whole child, recognizing that academic success is only one part of a student's development. Through a rich offering of interest-based programs, music, arts, and sports, the district provides students with opportunities to explore their passions and talents. From vibrant music ensembles to dynamic theater productions and competitive athletic teams, ARPS fosters environments where students can thrive beyond the classroom. Additionally, the district prioritizes social-emotional wellness, offering robust support systems and programs designed to help students build resilience, self-awareness, and healthy relationships. This holistic approach ensures that every child is not only educated but also empowered to become a well-rounded individual prepared for life's challenges and opportunities.

Educational Landscape Innovation

ARPS continues to lead in educational innovation, adapting to meet the changing needs of its students and the community. The district embraces creativity in teaching, integrating project-based learning, technology, and collaborative approaches that inspire critical thinking and problem-solving. Programs like the Caminantes dual-language program and the integration of iReady in K-3 classrooms demonstrate ARPS's commitment to evolving its instructional practices to better serve diverse learners. This forward-thinking mindset positions the district as a model for progressive education, ensuring that students not only meet today's standards but are also prepared to excel in the dynamic, interconnected world of tomorrow.



Executive Summary

Key Areas of Growth and Positivity:

“

ARPS stands at a pivotal moment—a chance to rebuild stronger systems rooted in trust, equity, and collaboration. By addressing challenges head-on and leveraging our community's creativity, resilience, and dedication, we can create a district that serves all students with excellence and integrity. Together, we will rise to this challenge and build a future we can all be proud of. As the saying goes, "Alone we can do so little; together, we can do so much." Let's harness the strength of this community to build a district that shines brighter than ever before.

Dr. E. Xiomara Herman
Superintendent of Schools



Executive Summary

CONCLUSION

This report marks the beginning of a new chapter for ARPS. It reflects both the challenges we face and the tremendous potential we have to rebuild a stronger, more equitable district. ***The path forward will require courage, collaboration, and a shared commitment to the work ahead.*** While the foundation of ARPS may have been shaken in recent years, it is clear to me that the collective resolve of this community is stronger than any challenge we face. As I've said many times, "We are not defined by our struggles but by how we rise from them." The findings presented here offer a roadmap for that rise, drawing on data, conversations, and shared aspirations.

I encourage every reader to engage deeply with these findings, recognizing the collective resolve and potential within this community. ***With trust, accountability, and collaboration as our guiding principles, I firmly believe ARPS can become a model for excellence in public education.*** Together, we can rebuild not just what was lost but something greater—a district that truly serves all children.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ARPS?

Chapter 1

REFLECTIONS



Highlights from the findings reveal areas of success and key trends impacting the district.

GROWTH AREA



Identified challenges provide opportunities for meaningful improvement and innovation.

LOOKING AHEAD



A foundation for collaborative efforts to achieve equitable and student-centered outcomes.

1

- ARPS is at a turning point after years of instability, unresolved issues, and fractured relationships.
- Cracks in our foundation are opportunities to rebuild stronger systems for the future.
- The commitment of educators, students, and families gives me hope and confidence in our shared ability to move forward.
- "A shattered foundation isn't the end—it's the beginning of a rebuild."

2

- Communication must improve across Central Office, schools, families, and School Committees to rebuild trust.
- Financial systems need immediate attention, including addressing payroll errors, unclear budgeting, and outdated processes.
- Equity challenges must be tackled head-on, ensuring bias is addressed through reflection and action rather than assumption.
- Transparent systems, written protocols, and consistent accountability must replace reliance on "past practice."

3

- Establish systems and protocols that outlast leadership changes to ensure stability and sustainability.
- Strengthen teams by addressing staffing shortages, investing in professional development, and supporting educators.
- Modernize operations by eliminating inefficiencies and prioritizing equity in all practices.
- Leverage ARPS's strengths—creativity, dedication, and resilience—to rebuild a district that serves all students with excellence.
- "We are not defined by our struggles but by how we rise from them"—this is ARPS's moment to rise.

TOGETHER, WE WILL REBUILD ARPS INTO A STRONGER, MORE
EQUITABLE DISTRICT THAT EXCELS FOR ALL STUDENTS.

CHAPTER 2:

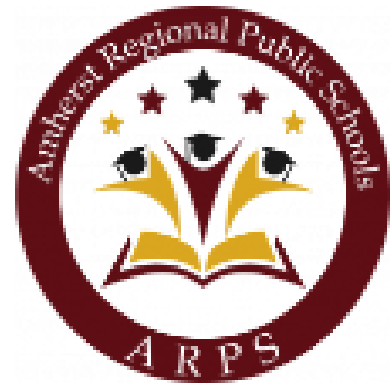
"Without data, you're just another person with an opinion."
— W. Edwards Deming



> My Reflections

We are ARPS!

ARPS is a diverse and resilient district that balances local needs with regional priorities across Amherst, Pelham, and the Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools. Students consistently excel, with MCAS scores above state averages, thanks to dedicated teachers and engaging programs that foster academic and personal growth. Despite its complexity, the district thrives on its community's commitment to providing equitable and innovative education for all.

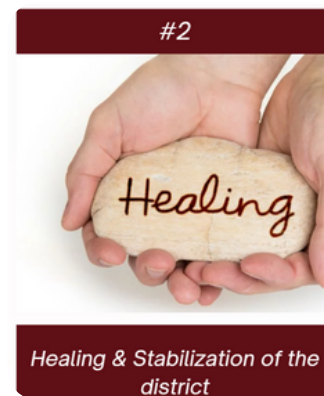


Tensions

The decentralized structure of ARPS has led to communication breakdowns, inconsistencies in curricular implementation, and inequities in resource distribution. Disparities in MCAS data among subgroups and outdated facilities further highlight systemic challenges. These tensions reflect the urgent need to rebuild trust, streamline processes, and ensure equitable access across all schools.

Surprises

ARPS has a remarkable level of student engagement and passion for learning across all three districts. Despite operational challenges, students express enthusiasm for hands-on projects, creative clubs, and future-oriented opportunities like arts, sports, and leadership activities. The district's structure, while complex, supports robust programs that foster identity development and holistic growth.



Worries

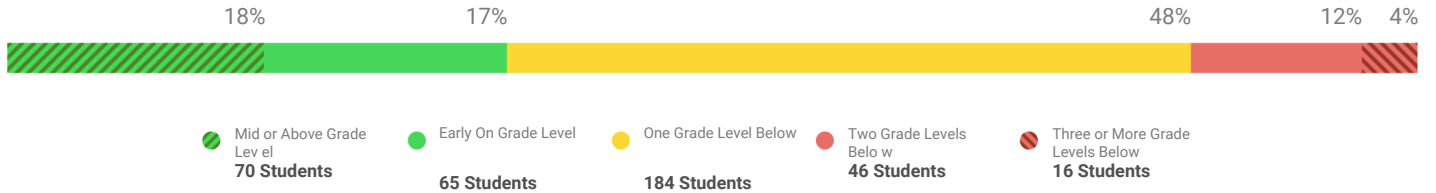
Attendance inconsistencies, achievement gaps, and limited resources strain the ability of ARPS's districts to meet all students' needs. The districts' complex fiscal and curricular structures create inefficiencies in implementation and decision-making, compounding these challenges. Addressing these issues will require clear protocols, improved coordination, and a unified commitment to equity and sustainability.

School: All Schools
 Subject: Reading
 Academic Year: 2024 - 2025
 Diagnostic: Most Recent
 Prior Diagnostic: None

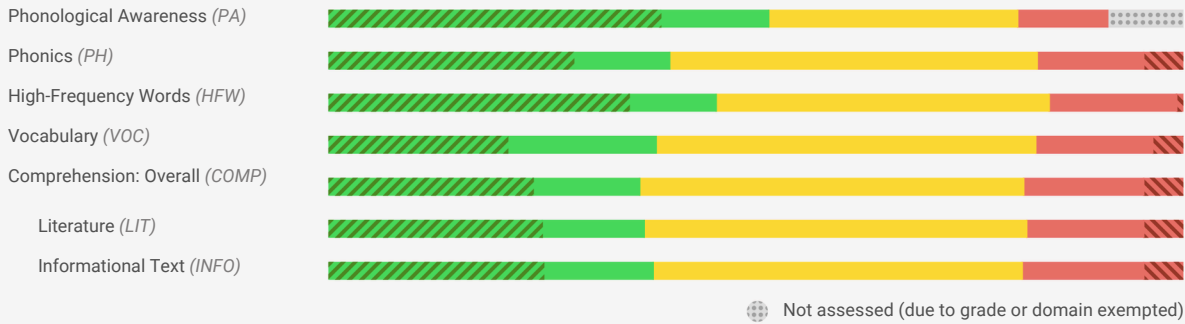
Criterion Referenced

Overall Placement

Students Assessed/Total: 381/1,122



Placement by Domain



Switch Table View

Choose to Show Results By

Placement Summary

School

Showing 4 of 4

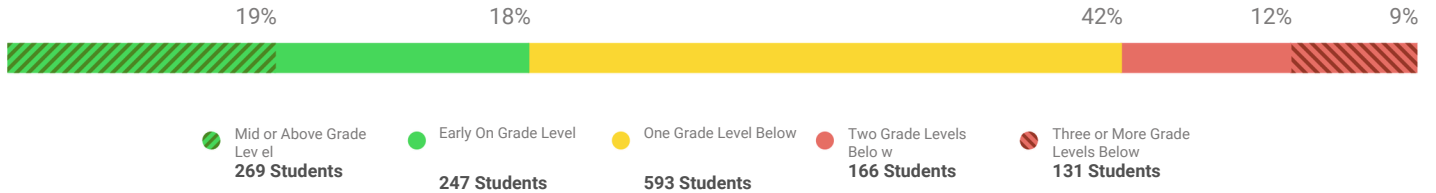
School	Overall Grade-Level Placement	Mid or Above Grade Level	Early On Grade Level	One Grade Level Below	Two Grade Levels Below	Three or More Grade Levels Below	Students Assessed / Total
CROCKER FARM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		17%	19%	52%	8%	3%	126/302
FT RIVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		23%	15%	37%	20%	6%	123/375
PELHAM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		5%	10%	81%	5%	0%	21/129
WILDWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		17%	18%	50%	10%	5%	111/316

School: All Schools
 Subject: Math
 Academic Year: 2024 - 2025
 Diagnostic: Most Recent
 Prior Diagnostic: None

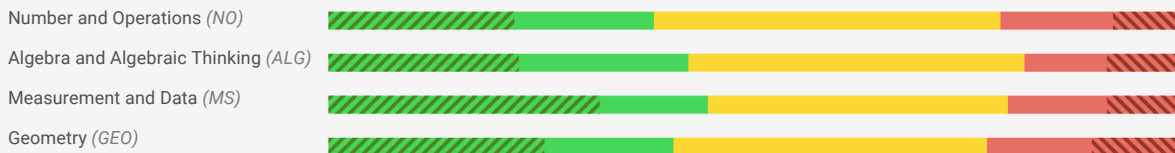
Criterion Referenced

Overall Placement

Students Assessed/Total: 1,406/1,454



Placement by Domain



Switch Table View

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Placement Summary

School

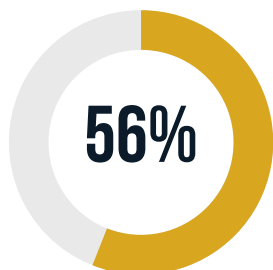
Showing 5 of 5

School	Overall Grade-Level Placement	Mid or Above Grade Level	Early On Grade Level	One Grade Level Below	Two Grade Levels Below	Three or More Grade Levels Below	Students Assessed / Total
AMHERSET-PELHAM REGIONAL MIDDLE SCHOOL		16%	23%	31%	9%	21%	306/332
CROCKER FARM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		26%	21%	40%	10%	3%	300/302
FT RIVER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		14%	14%	49%	14%	8%	367/375
PELHAM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		20%	19%	51%	7%	3%	129/129
WILDWOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL		21%	12%	43%	15%	8%	304/316

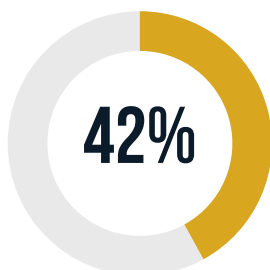
2024 MCAS DATA

AMHERST

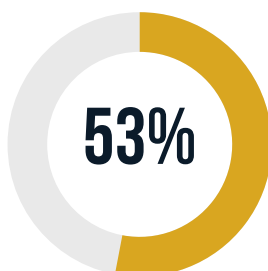
ELA: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



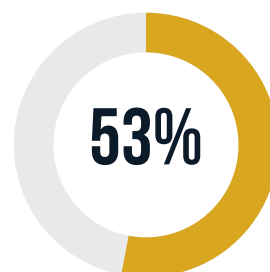
Grade 3



Grade 4

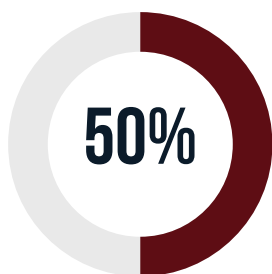


Grade 5

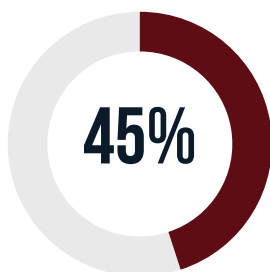


Grade 6

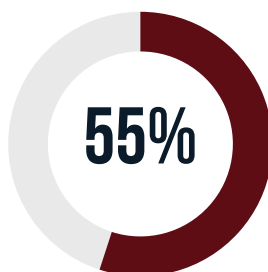
MATH: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



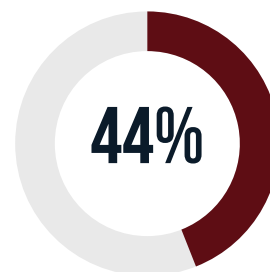
Grade 3



Grade 4

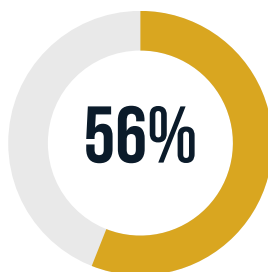


Grade 5



Grade 6

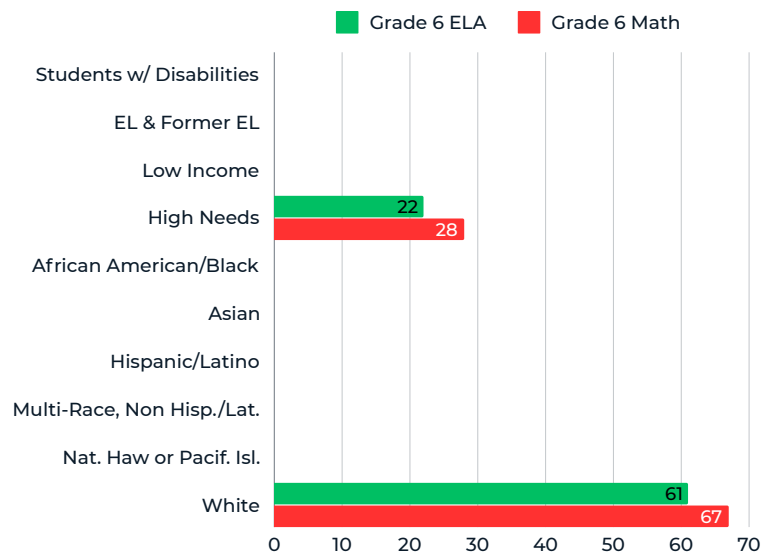
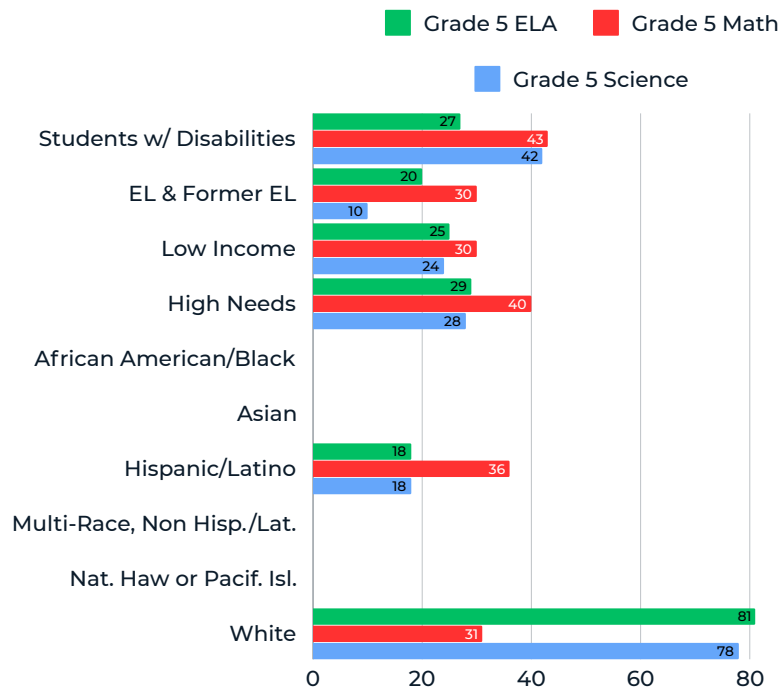
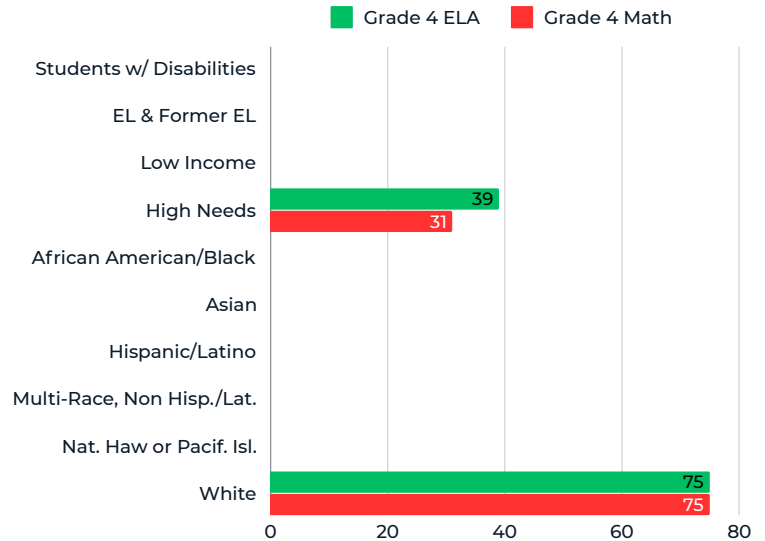
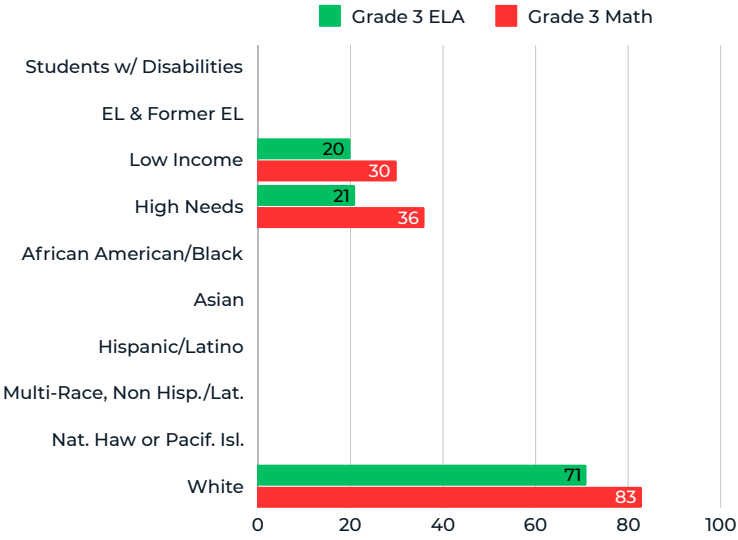
SCIENCE: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



Grade 5

CROCKER FARM

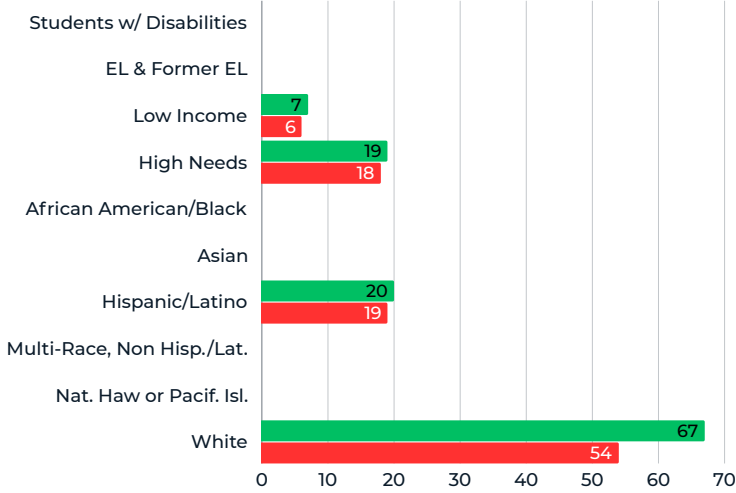
Percent of Meets & Exceeds



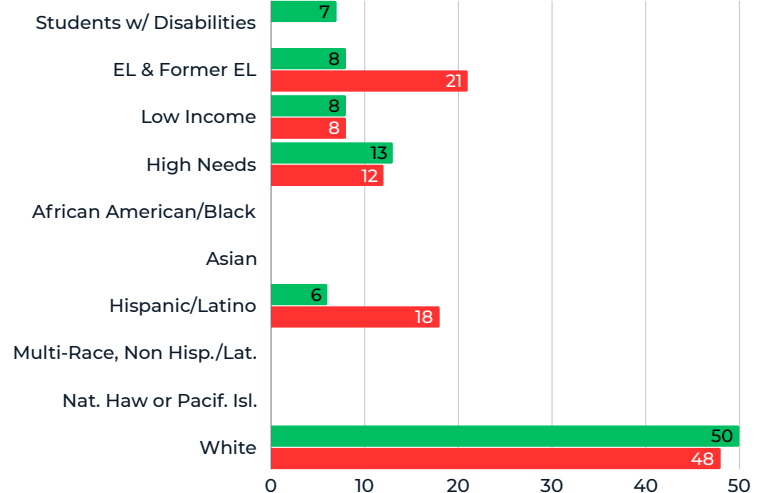
FORT RIVER

Percent of Meets & Exceeds

Grade 3 ELA Grade 3 Math

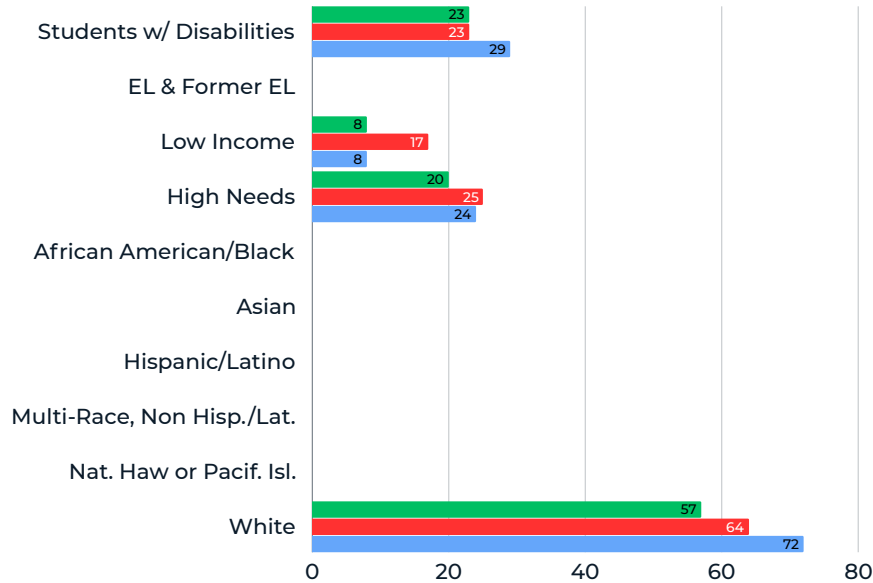


Grade 4 ELA Grade 4 Math

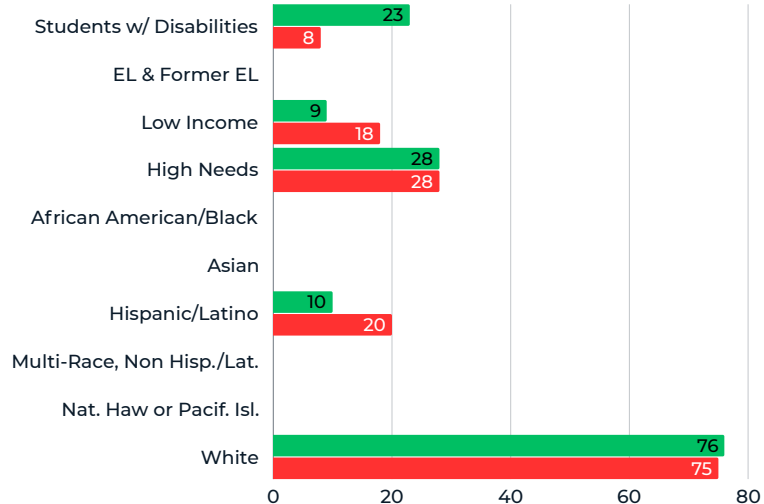


Grade 5 ELA Grade 5 Math

Grade 5 Science

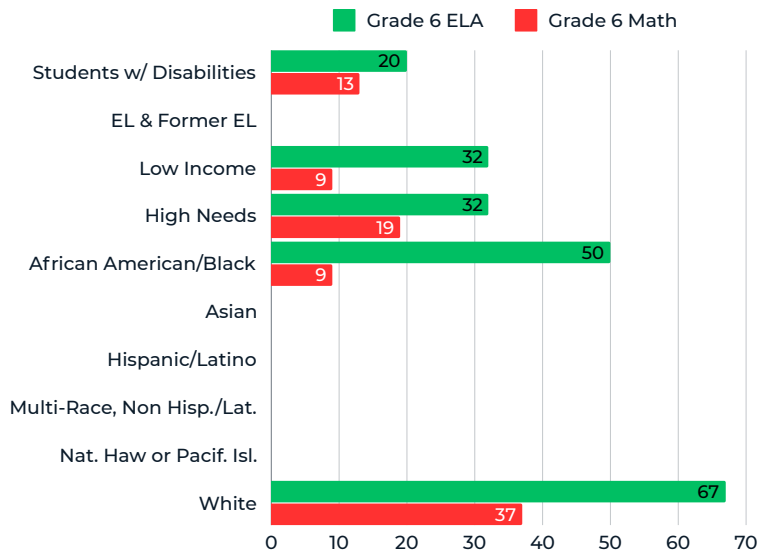
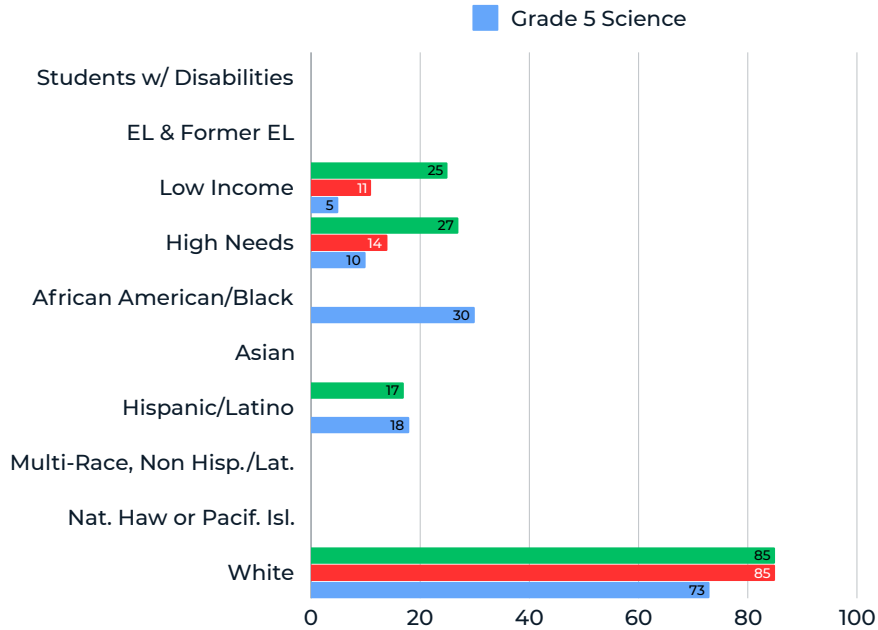
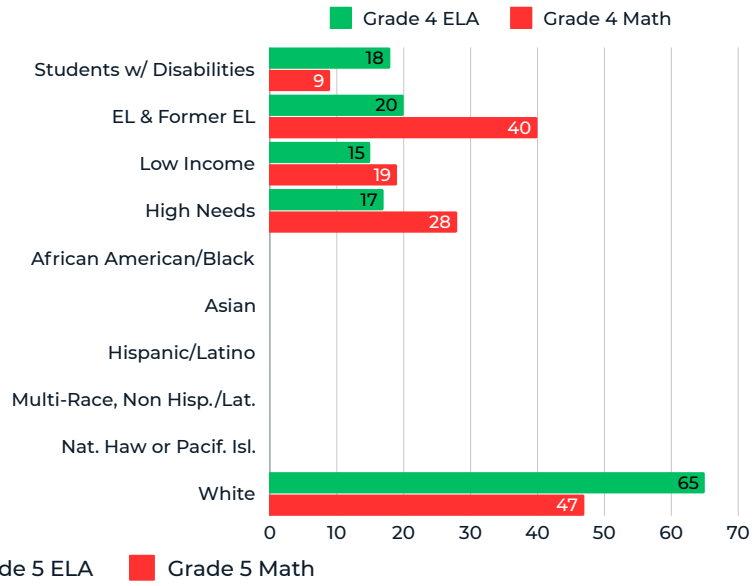
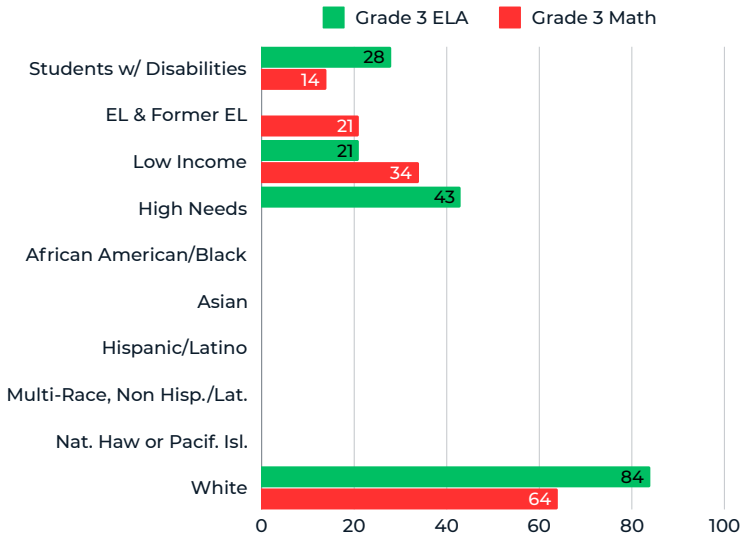


Grade 6 ELA Grade 6 Math



WILDWOOD

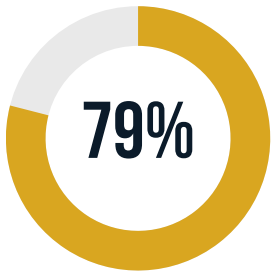
Percent of Meets & Exceeds



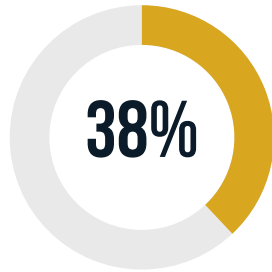
2024 MCAS DATA

PELHAM

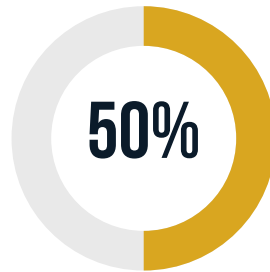
ELA: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



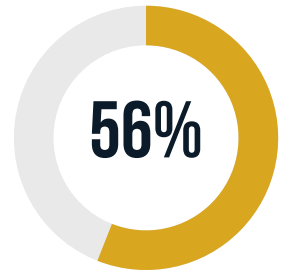
Grade 3



Grade 4

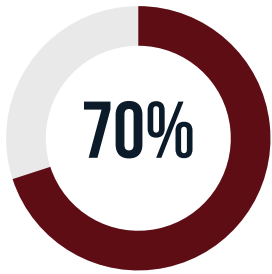


Grade 5

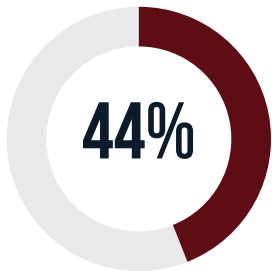


Grade 6

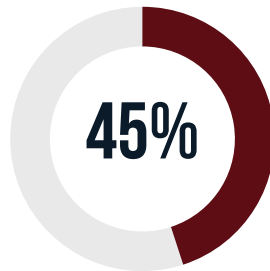
MATH: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



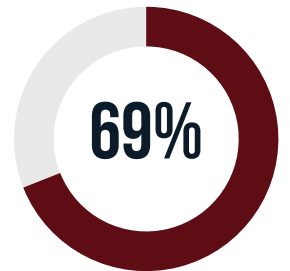
Grade 3



Grade 4

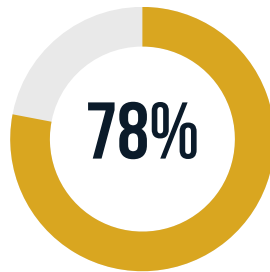


Grade 5



Grade 6

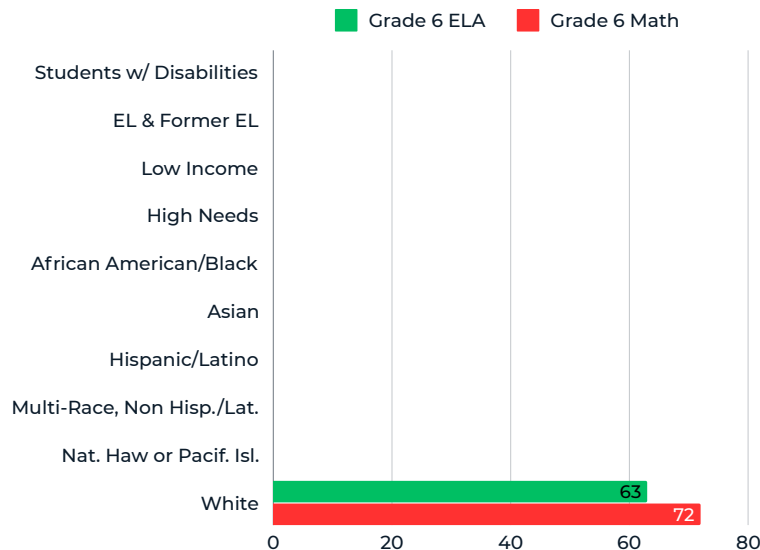
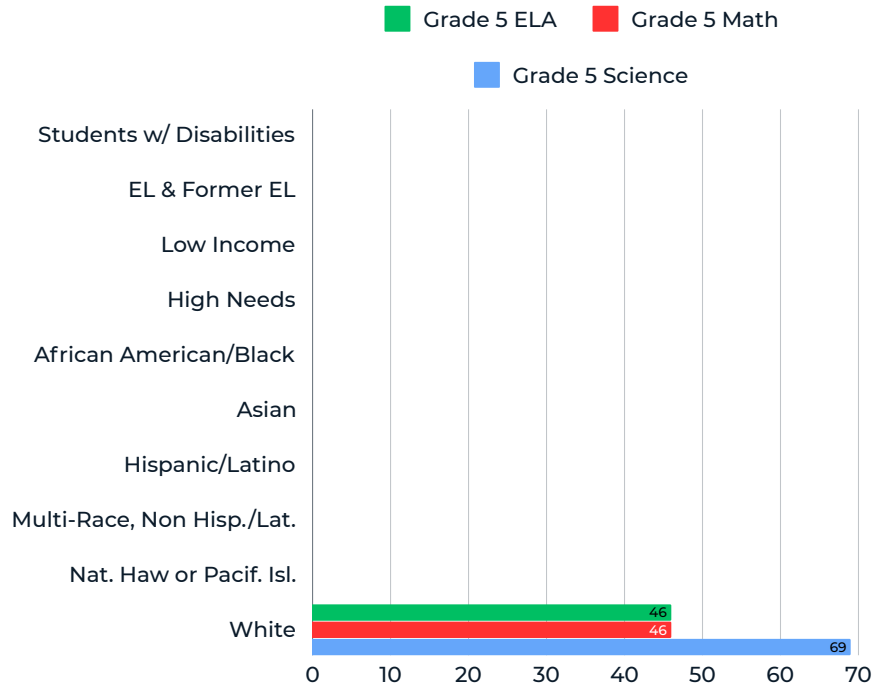
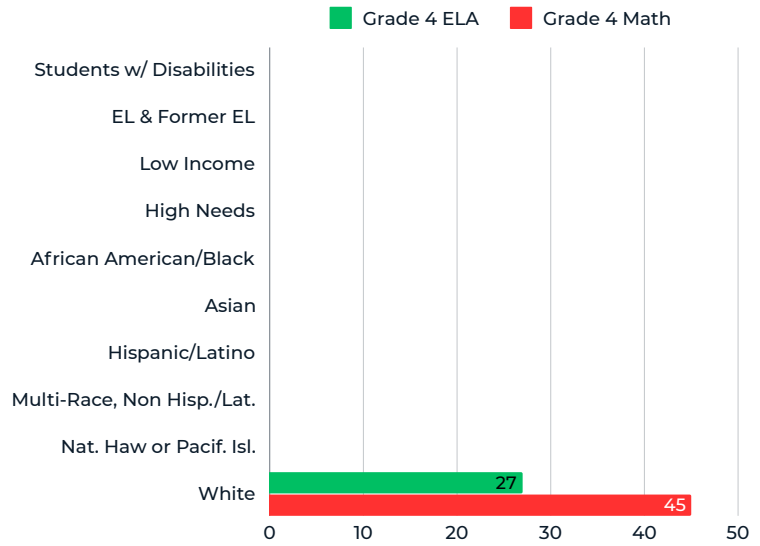
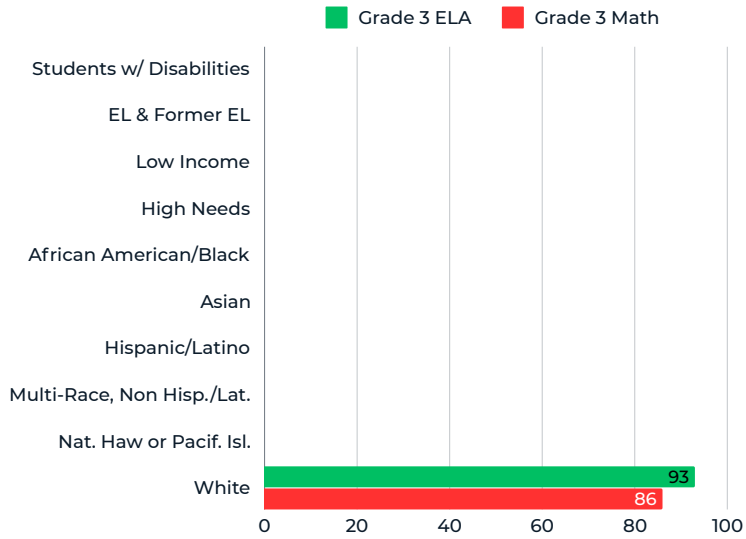
SCIENCE: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



Grade 5

PELHAM

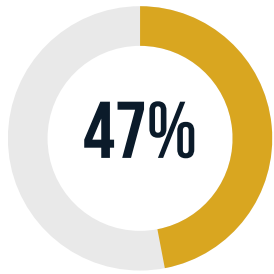
Percent of Meets & Exceeds



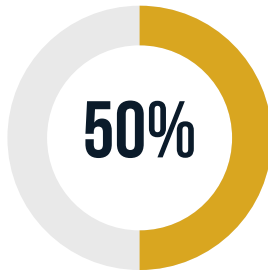
2024 MCAS DATA

AMHERST-PELHAM REGIONAL (7TH - 12TH)

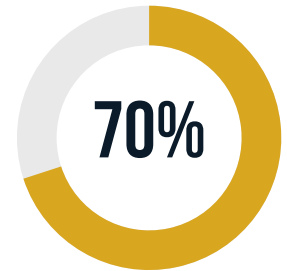
ELA: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



Grade 7

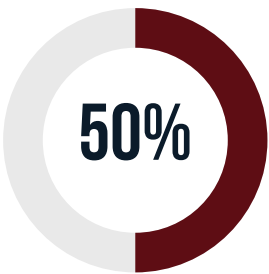


Grade 8

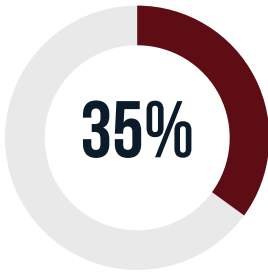


Grade 10

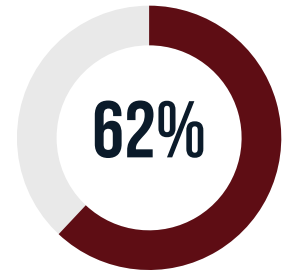
MATH: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



Grade 7

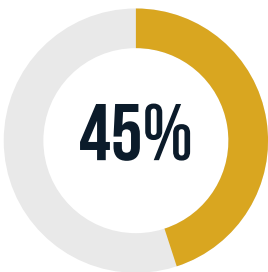


Grade 8

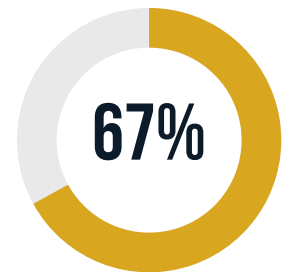


Grade 10

SCIENCE: MEETING & EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS



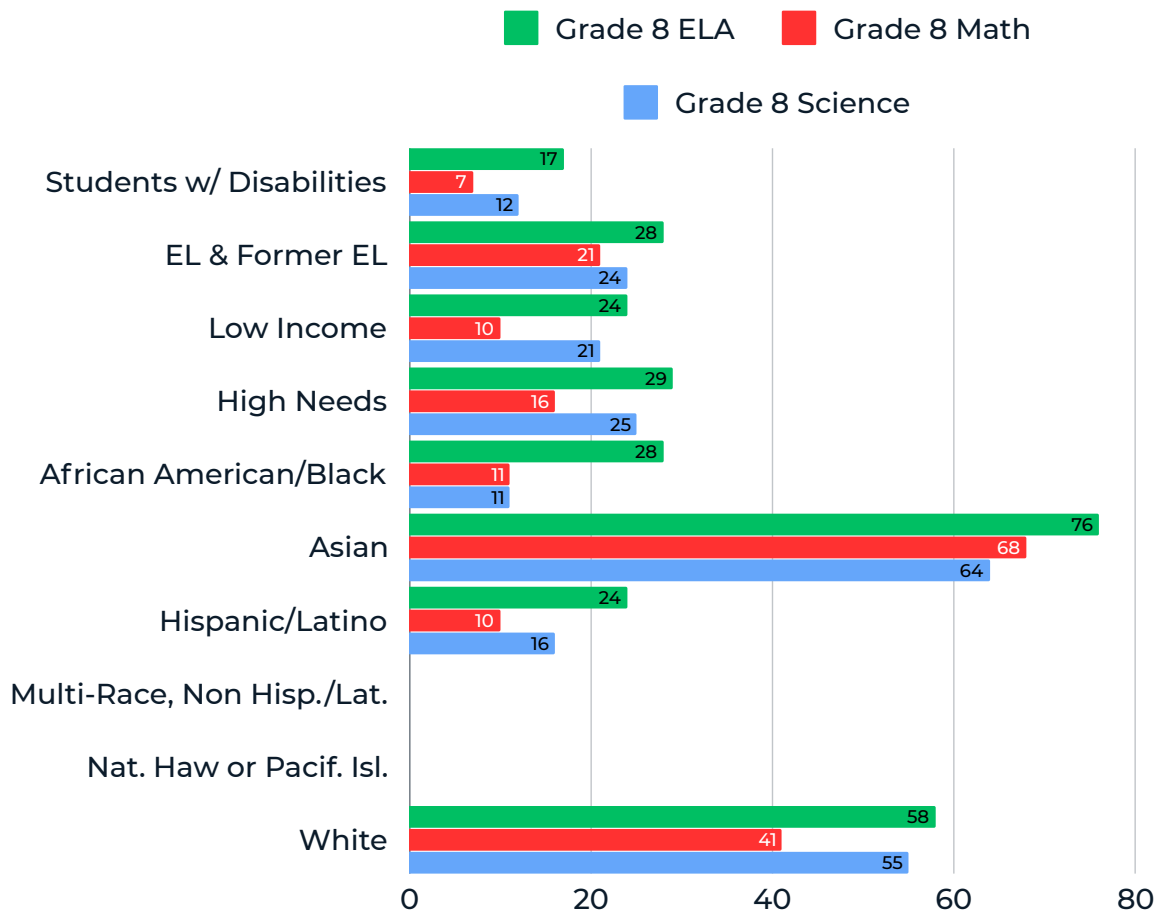
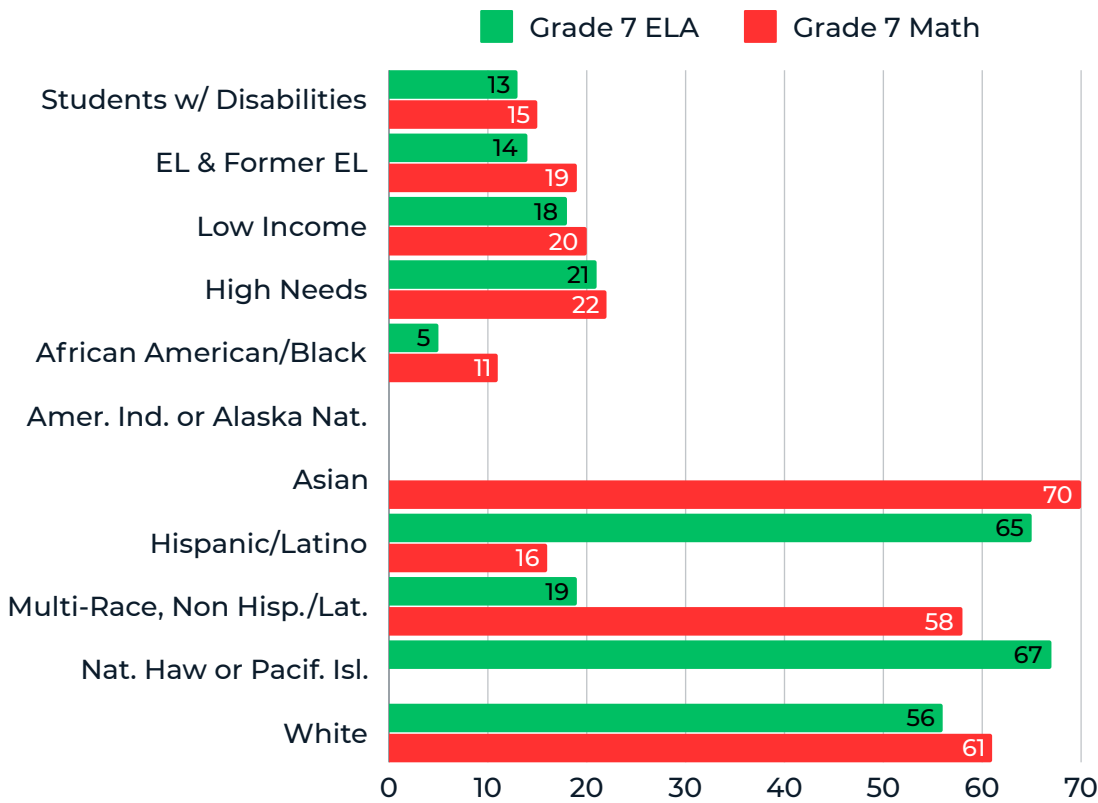
Grade 8



Grade 10

AMHERST REGIONAL MIDDLE

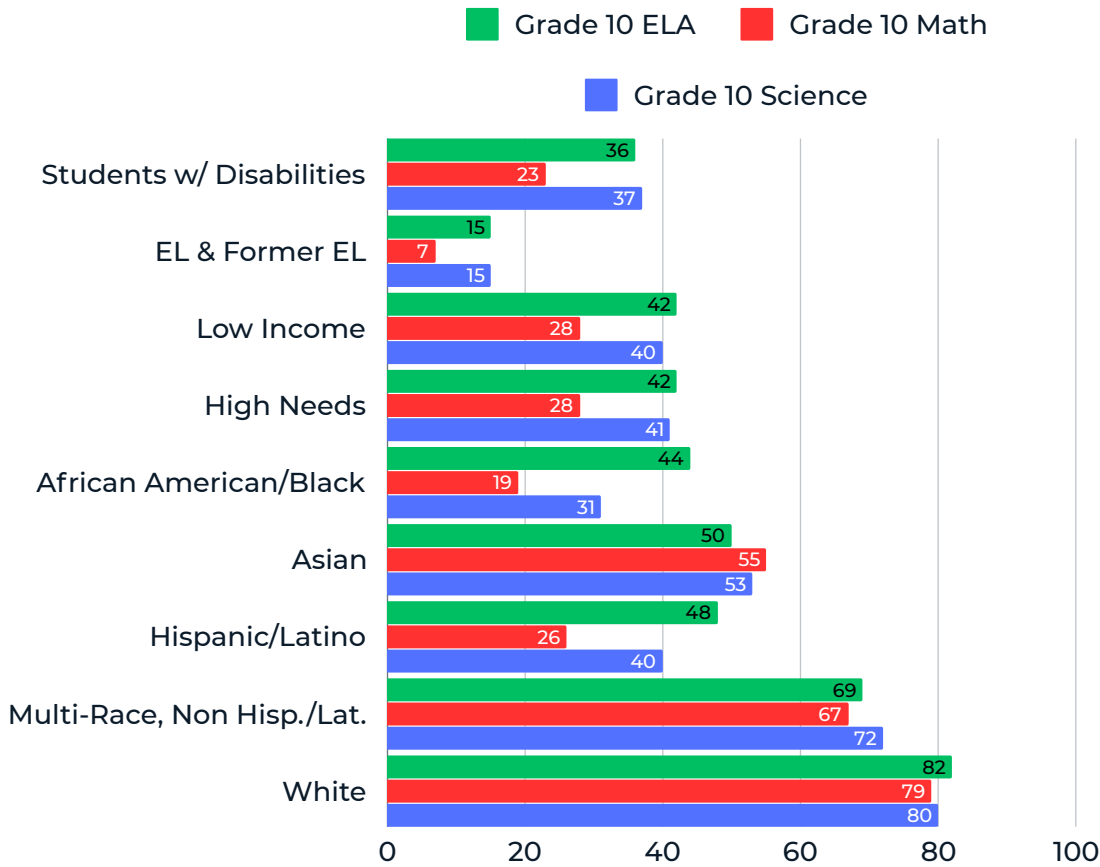
Percent of Meets & Exceeds



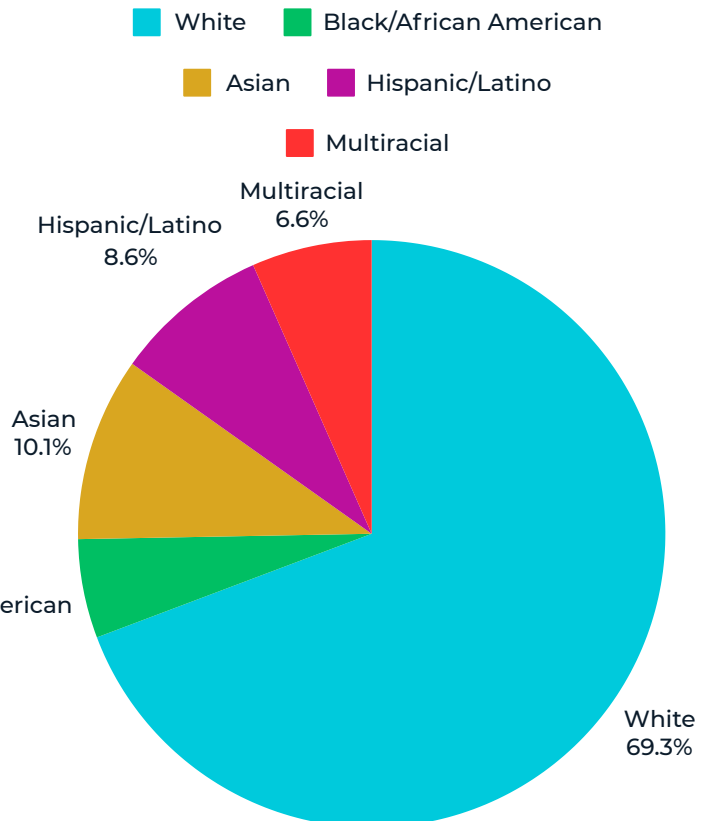
Accountable
Respectful
Motivated
Safe

AMHERST REGIONAL HIGH

Percent of Meets & Exceeds



AP COURSE ENROLLMENT



Student Survey Summaries



Elementary School Students (4th Graders)

Elementary students across the districts shared varied perspectives on what motivates them, what could improve their school experience, and their favorite aspects of school. Core themes revealed the importance of community-building, creative learning, teacher support, and interactive experiences. Many students also emphasized their desire for improved facilities, enhanced academic resources, and meaningful peer and teacher interactions to make their school life more enriching and enjoyable.

Middle School Students (8th Graders)

The middle school survey responses reveal key themes about what drives student engagement, their preferred improvements for a better school experience, and their favorite activities. Students emphasize academic achievement, family influence, and future aspirations as primary motivators, while expressing a desire for flexible, supportive, and engaging learning environments. Activities like sports, creative clubs, and interactive classes are highlighted as significant sources of joy and connection at school.

High School Students (11th Graders)

High School students emphasized the importance of future-oriented ambitions, supportive teachers, and meaningful learning environments in their academic journeys. They value breaks for well-being, inclusive curricula, and timely feedback on assignments. Extracurriculars, teacher relationships, and individualized opportunities deeply shape their growth and engagement in school life.



OVERALL VOICE

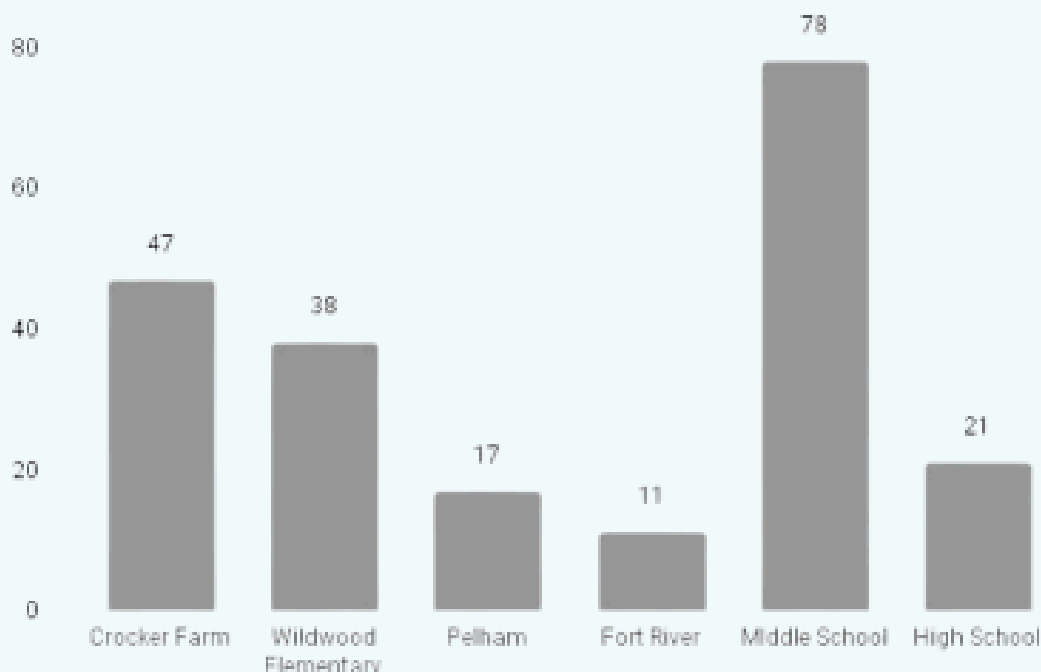
ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

About the Initiative

The Amherst Regional Public School community is vibrant and rich with possibilities. The education children receive is a valuable district asset and we need your help to determine the best way to support our staff moving forward.

Providing input on the district's climate and culture includes an opportunity to highlight the strengths of the district and share opportunities for growth.

Representation by School



SURVEY RESPONSES



113

ELEMENTARY

78

MIDDLE

21

HIGH SCHOOL

Elementary Schools

COMMUNITY AND BELONGING

- Students thrive in environments with frequent class events, group activities, and a sense of camaraderie.
- Friendships and peer collaboration significantly enhance their motivation and enjoyment of school.

ENGAGING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

- Interactive projects, hands-on experiments, and creative lessons are preferred over traditional methods.
- Students express excitement for personalized learning experiences and practical applications.

TEACHER AND PEER SUPPORT

- Positive teacher-student relationships, encouragement, and accessibility foster better learning outcomes.
- Peers play a crucial role in emotional and academic support, strengthening social bonds.

FACILITY AND PROGRAM IMPROVEMENTS

- Requests for better recreational spaces, enhanced dining options, and diverse extracurricular activities indicate a desire for holistic development opportunities.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEYS

Encouragement and Support from Teachers:

Responses indicate that teachers play a significant role in motivating students to do their best in school. Many students highlighted the encouraging nature of their teachers, noting that positive reinforcement and recognition of achievements, such as earning C.A.R.E tickets or punches for good work, significantly boost their motivation. This theme underscores the importance of supportive educational success, fostering a growth mindset and a desire to achieve more.

MOTIVATION

PROMPT

What are some things that make you excited to do your best in school?

THEMES

- Community and Class Events
- Engaging and Interactive Learning
- Encouragement and Support from Teachers
- Academic Challenges and Personal Growth
- Peer Motivation and Friendships

IMPROVEMENTS

PROMPT

What could make your school day even better?

THEMES

- Enhancing Lunch and Meal Options
- Increased Outdoor and Recess Time
- More Creative and Engaging Learning Activities
- Additional Reading and Writing Time
- Improved Social Interactions and Friendships

Interactive and Engaging Learning:

Responses reflect an appreciation for interactive learning methods in comparison to more traditional, independent study approaches. Students enjoy hands-on experiences where they can collaborate with peers and participate actively in their learning journeys. Whether it's through group projects, technology integration, or engaging lesson plans, the desire for a dynamic classroom environment is evident. This theme shows that students thrive in settings that offer opportunities for interaction, creativity, and movement, making learning more enjoyable and effective.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEYS

BEST TIMES

PROMPT

What is your favorite thing to do at school and why?

THEMES

- Sports and Physical Activities
- Arts and Creative Expression
- Interactive and Engaging Learning
- Reading and Literature
- Technology and Modern Learning

Inclusion and Acceptance:

Another prominent theme was the importance of feeling included and accepted in the school community. Many students recounted how peers and teachers helped them feel welcomed, especially during transitions, such as starting a new school. Specific examples included friends who made an effort to engage with newcomers and teachers who offered guidance and warmth on the first day. This sense of inclusion not only eased the fear and uncertainty that often accompany such changes but also reinforced the value of kindness and community in the school environment.

Enhancing Lunch and Meal Options:

Many students expressed a desire for improved lunch experiences, indicating that food quality and variety significantly impact their school day. Responses highlighted a craving for “five star meals” and better overall food options, including vegetarian alternatives and more sweet treats. Students noted that their current lunches often leave them feeling hungry, which affects their concentration and enjoyment of the school day. A common sentiment was that a more appetizing and diverse cafeteria menu would create a more positive atmosphere, helping them feel satisfied and ready to learn.

HELPING HAND

PROMPT

Can you tell me about a time at school when someone really helped you a lot?

THEMES

- Supportive Teachers
- Friendship and Peer Support
- Emotional Assistance
- Inclusion and Acceptance
- Collaboration and Teamwork

Middle School

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

- Students are motivated by grades and aspirations for college and future success.
- Peer competition and personal standards fuel efforts toward high performance.

ENVIRONMENTAL AND STRUCTURAL IMPROVEMENTS

- Requests for flexible seating, more breaks, and engaging lessons highlight the need for supportive and diverse learning methods.
- Better food options and outdoor time are seen as important for well-being.

ENRICHING ACTIVITIES AND CLUBS

- Creative and hands-on clubs such as art, drama, and sports offer joy and opportunities for growth.
- Positive teacher interactions enhance engagement and enjoyment in both classes and extracurriculars.



MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEYS

Academic Achievement:

A predominant theme that emerges from the survey responses is the strong motivation derived from academic achievement, particularly the drive to attain good grades. Many students explicitly mention that grades serve as a primary source of inspiration, with phrases such as “I want to get good grades,” “the joy of learning,” and “I try my best to get A’s” reflecting a clear emphasis on academic performance. This focus on grades showcases a competitive environment where students recognize that achieving high marks is not only an accomplishment but also a gateway to future opportunities. The responses suggest an intrinsic desire to learn, paired with the extrinsic motivation of achieving academic excellence.

MOTIVATION

PROMPT

What inspires or motivates you to try your best at school?

THEMES

- Academic Achievement
- Family Influence
- Future Aspirations
- Peer Influence
- Extrinsic and Intrinsic Rewards

IMPROVEMENTS

PROMPT

What changes could make your school experience more enjoyable or help you learn better?

THEMES

- Flexibility in Learning Environment
- Increased Breaks and Outdoor Time
- Improvement of School Food Quality
- Abolishing Day 7 Schedules
- Supportive and Engaging Teacher Interactions

Abolishing Day 7 Schedules:

A common complaint was about the Day 7 schedule, which many students believe disrupt their learning experience. Numerous respondents expressed that this day is disorienting and takes away valuable time needed to complete the homework and study effectively. By advocating for the removal of this schedule component, students hope to have a more coherent and manageable daily routine that fosters a conducive environment for learning. This sentiment indicates a larger theme of needing organization and structure within the school day to facilitate better educational outcomes.

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEYS

BEST TIMES

PROMPT

What's your favorite club class or activity at school and what do you enjoy most about it?

THEMES

- Peer Interaction and Socialization
- Supportive and Engaging Educators
- Enjoyment of Creative and Hands-On Activities
- Academic Interests and Challenges
- Club Involvement and Leadership Opportunities

Club Involvement and Leadership Opportunities:

Students highlighted the value they find in being part of various clubs, especially in terms of civic engagement and leadership. Clubs like the student council and POCU serve as platforms for students to express their opinions, connect with their peers, and became involved in school-wide-matters. This theme illustrates that many students enjoy taking on responsibilities, planning events, and advocating for their fellow students, suggesting a desire to make an impact in their school community.

More Supportive and Engaging Teaching Practices:

Students voiced the need for teaching methods that encourage active learning rather than passive listening. Many expressed frustration with teachers who tended to lecture excessively, thus reducing valuable time for practical work and discussions. There were suggestions for a more interactive curriculum that offers varied instructional strategies, allowing students to take an active role in their education. This shift could help cater to diverse learning styles and improve student engagement.

SOMETHING NEW

PROMPT

If you could advocate for one improvement at your school what would it be and how could it benefit students?

THEMES

- Improved Scheduling and Class Structure
- Enhanced Outdoor and Break Opportunities
- Improved Food Options and Quality
- More Supportive and Engaging Teaching Practices
- Focus on Resources and Facilities Improvement

HIGH SCHOOL



FUTURE AMBITIONS & SUPPORTIVE TEACHERS

- Students are motivated by college and career aspirations and the guidance of inspiring educators.
- Effective teacher-student connections foster a positive and engaging learning atmosphere.

EXTRACURRICULAR IMPACT

- Arts, sports, and leadership activities contribute to identity development and community building.
- Students appreciate opportunities to explore their passions beyond academics.

SCHEDULING & CURRICULUM NEEDS

- Students seek more strategic class breaks and inclusive, representative course content.
- Curriculum relevance and inclusive narratives are viewed as critical for meaningful education.

IMPROVED SCHOOL POLICIES

- Requests for policy adjustments, like revised phone usage and extended breaks, reflect a desire for balanced, supportive environments.
- Inclusive practices and accessible facilities further enhance their sense of belonging.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEYS

Scheduling Conflicts and Restrictions:

Despite the appreciation for flexibility, several students express frustration with the restrictions placed on them during the Flex Block period. Issues arise when respondents have multiple obligations or classes overlapping in the same time frame. For instance, some students mention needing to attend a required music class or facing conflicts with existing tests that fall during Flex time, which limits their ability to access help from various teachers. The perception of being “locked in” to certain classes or requirements can detract from the intended purpose of Flex Block and lead to added stress.

FLEX BLOCK

PROMPT

Use the space below to comment on the structure of the overarching schedule specifically FLEX Block period.

THEMES

- Flexibility and Student Choice
- Scheduling Conflicts and Restrictions
- Senior Privileges and Autonomy
- Impact on Academic Stress
- General Sentiment Toward Structure

IMPROVEMENTS

PROMPT

What could be changed or improved to make school more effective or meaningful for you?

THEMES

- Need for Breaks and Class Structure Adjustments
- Relevance and Inclusivity of Curriculum
- Timeliness of Feedback and Assessment
- Enhanced Community Building and Engagement
- Improved Social Interactions and Friendships

Relevance and Inclusivity of Curriculum:

A significant number of students voiced concerns regarding the inclusivity and relevance of the school curriculum. While the school promotes values such as anti-racism and inclusivity, some students felt that the actual content did not reflect these ideals. Specifically, they pointed to examples in history classes where critical topics were superficially addressed or glossed over. These students emphasized the need for a curriculum that truly represents diverse perspectives and incorporates significant historical events in a meaningful way, calling for lessons that allow all students to see themselves reflected in the education they receive.

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT SURVEYS

BEST TIMES

PROMPT

What's your favorite extracurricular or class at school and what impact has it had on you?

THEMES

- Impact of Arts on Identity and Community
- Academic Influence and Career Direction
- Team Spirit and Community in Sports
- Teacher Influence and Engagement
- Personal Growth through Extracurriculars

Teacher Influence and Engagement:

The role of teachers emerged as a crucial theme in shaping student's academic experiences and interests. Many responses praised specific educators who inspired and engaged them in their subjects, such as AP Biology and art classes. The enthusiasm and commitment of teachers not only made learning enjoyable but also motivated students to explore their interests further and develop a passion for their fields. This theme highlights the pivotal role that effective and dedicated educators play in fostering student engagement and success within the classroom.

Support for Diverse Learning Needs:

Responses stressed the need for better accommodations for students with disabilities, particularly those on the autism spectrum. Many students reported feelings of neglect due to a lack of tailored support and the lengthy processes required to secure necessary educational plans. By prioritizing individual learning needs and implementing effective support systems, the school could enhance the educational experience for all students, making learning more accessible and encouraging a wider range of talents and abilities to flourish.

SOMETHING NEW

PROMPT

If you could advocate for one improvement at your school what would it be and how could it benefit students.

THEMES

- Improved School Policies on Personal Devices
- Enhanced Breaks and Reduced Burnout
- Greater Inclusivity in the Curriculum
- Improved Facilities and Accessibility
- Support for Diverse Learning Needs

Teacher & Staff Survey Summary



The 2024 Amherst Culture and Climate Survey for staff revealed critical insights into the strengths and challenges within the district. Staff members highlighted a strong sense of community, appreciation for leadership support, and dedication to student success as key positives. Respondents valued genuine recognition, collaboration, and the equitable distribution of resources. However, concerns emerged around transparency, workload management, and the need for more consistent communication and leadership practices. The findings emphasize the importance of fostering a supportive, inclusive environment where staff feel respected, empowered, and equipped to meet the diverse needs of students.

ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

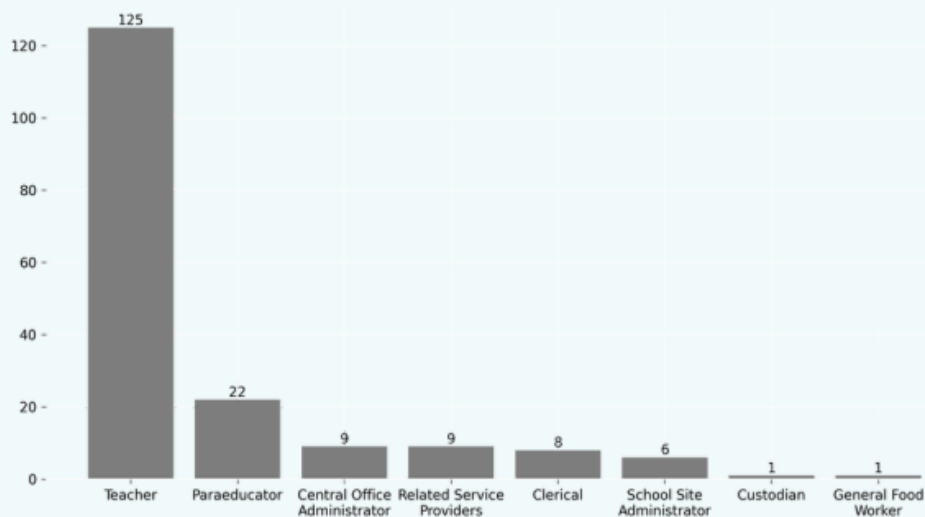
About the Initiative

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Providing input on the district's climate and culture includes an opportunity to highlight the strengths of the district and share opportunities for growth.



Representation: Role



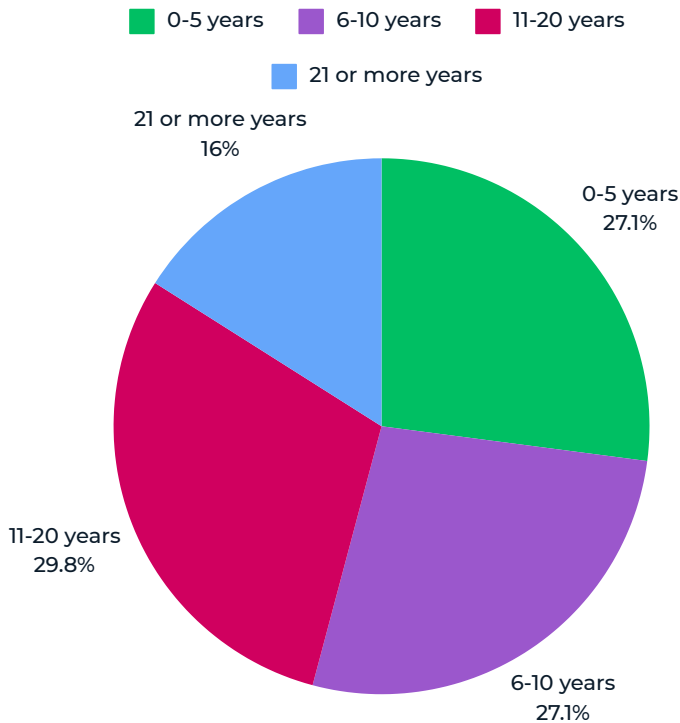


INN  VATE | K12

Key Findings:

- Strong sense of community.
- Leadership support and recognition valued.
- Areas for growth include workload balance and communication.

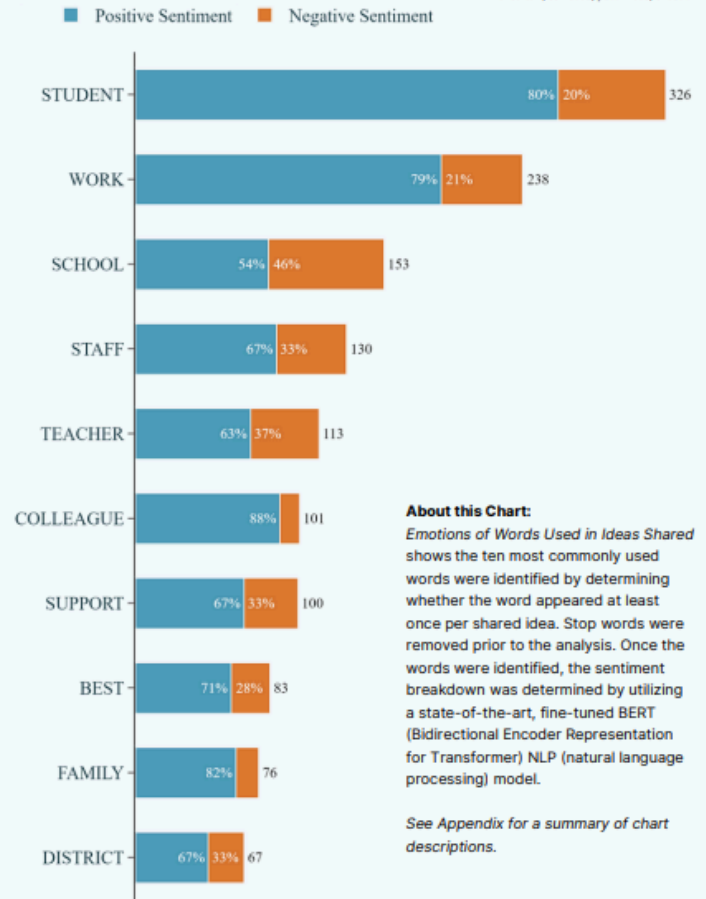
Years of Service
(181 respondents)



The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Overall Input

***Emotions Scale**
 Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.
 Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



About this Chart:
Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared shows the ten most commonly used words were identified by determining whether the word appeared at least once per shared idea. Stop words were removed prior to the analysis. Once the words were identified, the sentiment breakdown was determined by utilizing a state-of-the-art, fine-tuned BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representation for Transformer) NLP (natural language processing) model.

See Appendix for a summary of chart descriptions.

The 2024 Amherst Culture and Climate Staff Survey provides a snapshot of the district's strengths and areas for growth, as seen through the lens of its educators and staff. This document summarizes key themes and insights from the survey, offering a data-driven foundation to enhance collaboration, communication, and staff well-being. The results underscore the district's commitment to fostering an inclusive, equitable, and supportive workplace that prioritizes the success of both educators and students.

TEACHER & STAFF SURVEYS

STAGING FOR SUCCESS

PROMPT

How can we (your leadership) best support you this year to ensure your success?

THEMES

- Advocating for Program Restoration
- Communication and Collaboration
- Professional Development and Recognition
- Support for Staff Well-Being and Workload Management
- Building Trust and Appreciation

Communication and Collaboration

Open communication emerged as a crucial theme, with teachers emphasizing the importance of being included in decision-making processes that affect their work. They expressed a desire for leadership to ask for feedback, celebrate successes, and grant support when requested. Teachers also highlighted the need for transparent and clear communication regarding processes, expectations, and roles in the district, emphasizing the significance of being involved in problem-solving and decision-making.

CONCERNS

PROMPT

My biggest concern regarding my experience with Amherst Public Schools is....

THEMES

- Lack of Transparency and Accountability
- Impact on Educational Outcomes
- Student Behavior and Discipline
- Equity and Inclusivity
- Staff Morale and Burnout

Lack of Transparency and Accountability

Respondents highlighted concerns regarding the lack of transparency and accountability within Amherst Public Schools. Issues such as inconsistent leadership, nepotism, favoritism, and retaliation have pointed to a culture where decisions are made without clear communication and equitable treatment. The absence of a shared vision, concrete guidance, and reluctance to address persistent disruptive behavior without consequences contribute to a sense of mistrust among staff members. Furthermore, the high turnover in administration and inadequate training for new educators exacerbate the challenges faced in maintaining a cohesive and supportive educational environment.

Caregiver & Community Survey Summary



The 2024 Caregiver and Community Survey provided valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of families within the Amherst-Pelham Regional School District. Respondents highlighted the importance of timely and transparent communication, strong teacher-student relationships, and a safe and inclusive learning environment. Families expressed appreciation for the district's efforts to foster community, inclusivity, and diverse extracurricular opportunities. However, concerns about academic rigor, support for neurodivergent students, and clarity around school policies were also noted. These findings underscore the critical role of caregiver and community feedback in shaping district priorities and strengthening the home-school connection.

ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

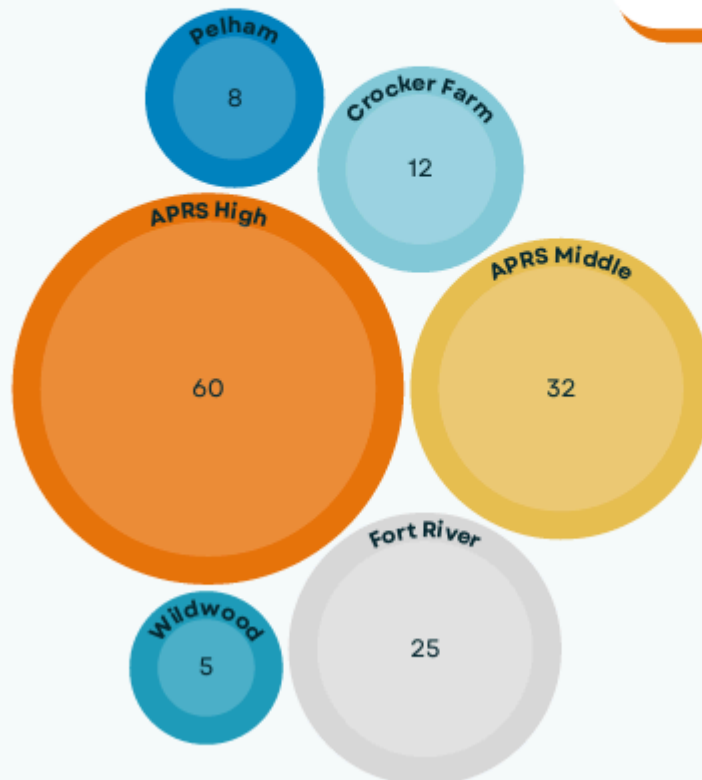
About the Initiative

This analysis reflects the voice of parents of ARPS students. Any thriving school system values the home-school coconnection.



142

SURVEY RESPONSES



Representation: by School

SUPPORTING ACADEMICS

PROMPT

Please explain how the district might help you better support your child's academics at home.

THEMES

- Need for Improved Communication
- Balance Between Homework and In-Class Work
- Focus on Differentiated Instruction and Learning Styles
- Reduced Dependence on Technology
- Support for Academic Challenges and Enrichment Opportunities

Need for Improved Communication:

Survey responses highlighted a significant desire for enhanced communication between schools and parents. Respondents expressed that consistent and clear updates from teachers regarding classroom activities, homework expectations, and student progress are essential for parents to support their children's learning at home.

Many parents reported feeling uninformed about what their children are learning, making it challenging to reinforce academic concepts outside of school.

There were requests for regular newsletters, emails, and specific details on assignments and class objectives to foster a stronger partnership between families and educators.

PROMPT

The communication I value most regarding my child is...

THEMES

- Importance of Timely Communication
- Continuous PD and Self-reflection
- Frequency and Consistency of Updates
- Communication During Emergencies and Critical Situations
- Recognition of Positive Developments

Insufficient Support for Neurodivergent Students:

A considerable number of responses highlighted apprehensions regarding the treatment and support of neurodivergent students within the district. Parents articulated their dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of understanding from staff about learning disabilities, resulting in inadequate accommodations and individualized support, particularly for students with IEPs. There is strong sentiment that behavior management approaches in the school are more punitive than supportive, failing to recognize behavior as a form of communication. Concerns were raised about staff qualifications and their ability to provide the necessary understanding and support for students with diverse learning needs.

Direct and Honest Communication:

A recurring theme among survey respondents is the desire for direct and honest communication from teachers and school staff. Parents want straightforward answers to their inquiries, particularly when it concerns incidents or changes that may affect their child. This includes concerns about behavior, academic performance, and safety issues. Such transparency helps restore trust that may have been diminished in past interactions. The need for a clear line of communication, especially regarding specific instances affecting their children, was seen as critical to rebuilding and maintaining a collaborative relationship between families and the district.

PROMPT

My biggest concern regarding my child's educational experience with Amherst, Pelham, Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools is....

THEMES

- Concerns about Academic Rigor and Individualization
- Insufficient Support for Neurodivergent Students
- Inconsistent Communication and Transparency
- Social and Emotional Well-being of Students
- Financial Constraints and Its Impact on Educational Quality

CAREGIVER & COMMUNITY SURVEYS

PROMPT

My biggest praise regarding my child's educational experience with Amherst, Pelham, Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools is....

THEMES

- Outstanding Teachers and Staff
- Strong Community and Inclusivity
- Rich Extracurricular and Program Variety
- Personalized Student Support
- Positive Academic Environment

Outstanding Teachers and Staff

Survey respondents consistently praised the quality of teachers and staff within Amherst Pelham Regional Public Schools. Many comments highlighted individual educators, such as Diane Chamberlain and Ms. Cuffee-Gray, who were acknowledged for their dedication and ability to connect with students personally. Parents appreciated the effort teachers put into supporting their children's diverse needs, mentioning instances of teachers going above and beyond to create a nurturing learning environment, especially within special education programs. The warmth, kindness, and commitment these educators demonstrate not only in their teaching but also in their daily interactions with students have created a supportive atmosphere that many parents feel fortunate to be part of.

Personalized Student Support

Many of the survey responses emphasized the individualized attention and support students receive, particularly those with unique learning needs. Parents appreciated the responsiveness and dedication of staff members who work tirelessly to help students succeed. The individualized support and tailored communication through mechanisms such as 504 plans and the AIMS program were recognized as vital to ensuring a positive educational experience. Additionally, parents valued the efforts made by counselors and special educators who took the time to understand their children's challenges and worked collaboratively to meet those needs, demonstrating a commitment to inclusive education.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ARPS?

Chapter 2

REFLECTIONS



Highlights from the findings reveal areas of success and key trends impacting the district.

1

- Achievement gaps in MCAS data highlight inequities for ELLs, students of color, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.
- Chronic absenteeism rates are significantly higher among marginalized groups, indicating barriers to engagement.
- Surveys reveal a need for clearer communication, more inclusive curricula, and stronger culturally responsive practices.
- Students want curricula that reflect diverse identities and lived experiences, signaling gaps in representation.

GROWTH AREA



Identified challenges provide opportunities for meaningful improvement and innovation.

2

- Redesign instructional practices to include differentiated strategies targeting underperforming subgroups.
- Implement a district-wide attendance intervention plan with improved transportation, family outreach, and school-based supports.
- Provide staff with training on equity-focused instruction and culturally responsive teaching to address bias effectively.
- Update curricula to include diverse perspectives and inclusive content across all grade levels.

LOOKING AHEAD



A foundation for collaborative efforts to achieve equitable and student-centered outcomes.

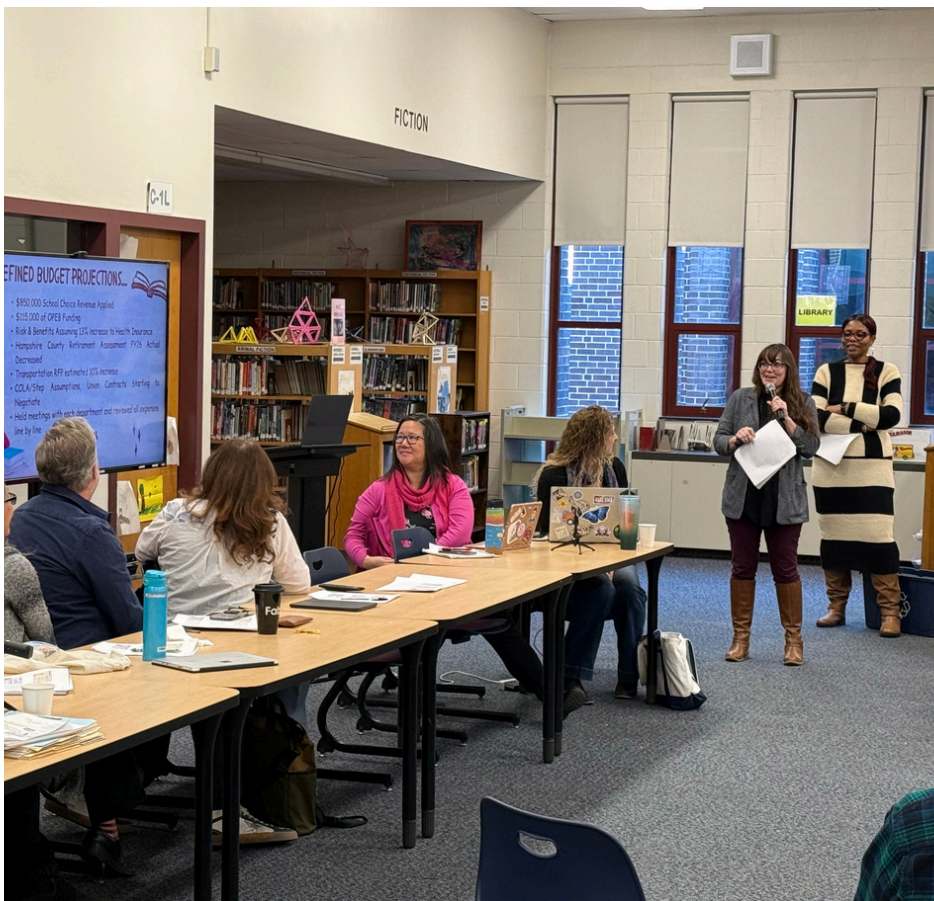
3

- Consider data-driven lesson planning to close equity gaps and monitor subgroup progress.
- Investigate an attendance tracking system to identify and address chronic absenteeism early.
- Conduct ongoing equity audits to ensure improvements in achievement, attendance, and stakeholder engagement.
- Foster collaboration with families and students to build trust, enhance engagement, and create culturally relevant learning environments.

TOGETHER, WE CAN TURN CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES AND ENSURE SUCCESS FOR ALL ARPS STUDENTS.

CHAPTER 3:

"If we always do what we've always done, we'll always get what we've always got." — Henry Ford



DIVISION AUDITS

School-Level Insights



Crocker Farm Elementary
Derek Shea, Principal

- **Strengths:** High student engagement and creative learning opportunities; positive teacher-student relationships fostering a welcoming school climate.
- **Areas for Growth:** Address facility needs and improve communication with families regarding academic and social supports.
- **Path Forward:** Discuss building community partnerships to collaboratively explore ways to attract and support a more diverse and inclusive student population.



Fort River Elementary
Tamera Sullivan-Daley,
Principal

- **Strengths:** Robust Caminantes dual-language program fostering bilingualism and cultural inclusivity.
- **Areas for Growth:** Disparities in student achievement among subgroups and inconsistent attendance rates.
- **Path Forward:** Consider developing a school-wide attendance improvement plan and strengthen targeted academic interventions for ELLs and economically disadvantaged students.



Pelham Elementary
Micki Darling, Principal

- **Strengths:** Small, close-knit school fostering strong teacher-student relationships; high parent involvement.
- **Areas for Growth:** Limited access to diverse extracurricular activities and STEM resources.
- **Path Forward:** Collaborate on building partnerships to enhance extracurricular offerings and integrate more STEM opportunities into the curriculum.



Wildwood Elementary
Allison Estes, Principal

- **Strengths:** High teacher dedication and creativity in lesson delivery; strong sense of community and inclusion
- **Areas for Growth:** Address disparities in subgroup performance on standardized assessments; improve communication with families from marginalized communities.
- **Path Forward:** Examine implementing consistent evidence-based strategies and expand equity-focused professional development for staff.

School-Level Insights



Early Education Center
Elizabeth Burns,
Preschool Administrator

- **Strengths:** High-quality early learning programs and strong teacher-student relationships.
 - **Areas for Growth:** Expand outreach to underserved families and improve facilities for early learners.
 - **Path Forward:** Investigate increasing access to early education programs and invest in updated classroom spaces.
-



Amherst Regional Middle
Michael Sullivan,
Interim Principal

- **Strengths:** Diverse student population and strong participation in extracurricular activities.
 - **Areas for Growth:** Address gaps in social-emotional learning supports and improve transitions between grade levels.
 - **Path Forward:** Consider developing SEL programs and provide consistent communication about academic expectations.
-



Amherst Regional High
Talib Sadiq, Principal

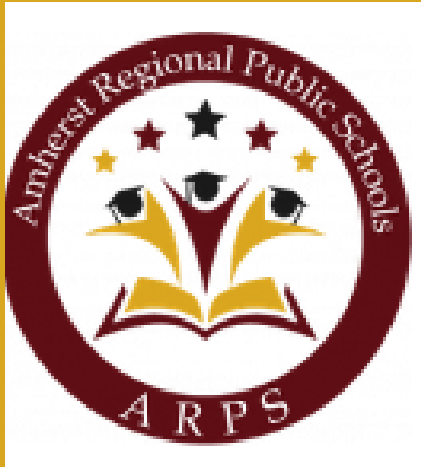
- **Strengths:** High graduation rates and strong AP course participation; active student leadership and clubs.
 - **Areas for Growth:** Persistent achievement gaps and access to advanced coursework access for marginalized students; need for inclusive curricular representation.
 - **Path Forward:** Discuss how to expand access to AP and honors courses and integrate culturally relevant materials across all subjects.
-



Summit Academy
David Slovin, Principal

- **Strengths:** Specialized support for students with unique learning needs; staff expertise in therapeutic interventions.
- **Areas for Growth:** Limited access to broader extracurricular opportunities and post-graduation planning resources.
- **Path Forward:** Brainstorm partnerships to enhance extracurriculars and strengthen college and career readiness pathways.

DISTRICT OFFICES KEY FINDINGS



- ➔ **ARPS Family Center**
Dr. Marta Guevara, Director
- ➔ **Business Office**
Shannon Bernacchia, Interim Director
- ➔ **Facilities**
Rupert Roy-Clark, Director
- ➔ **Food Services**
Mike Gallo O'Connell, Director
- ➔ **Human Resources**
Jennifer Ortiz, Director
- ➔ **Mental Health & Behavioral Services**
Maureen Fleming, Director
- ➔ **Office of Teaching & Learning**
Tonya McIntyre, Director
- ➔ **Student Services Office**
Doreen Reid, Director
- ➔ **Technology & Information Systems**
Jerry Champagne, Director

ARPS Family Center



→ Key Findings

- Family Center staff demonstrate versatility and adaptability, but clearer role definitions would enhance efficiency and impact.
- The center has a solid foundation for serving families, with opportunities to expand its programs and services to meet its full capacity and align with the district's strategic goals.
- Collecting more detailed demographic data would provide valuable insights to ensure equitable access and effectiveness.
- Integrating Family Center operations more closely with school-based initiatives could amplify direct support for families.

→ Strengths

- Dedicated staff committed to supporting families and fostering positive relationships within the school community.
- Family liaisons provide valuable support to caregivers, helping them navigate educational resources and services.
- The Center is viewed as a trusted resource by families who rely on its programs for connection and assistance.

→ Areas of Growth

- Improve equity in service delivery by ensuring all families across schools and districts have access to programs and resources.
- Implement a data-tracking system to evaluate the impact of programs and guide decision-making for future initiatives.
- Assess School-based staffing opportunities to reduce workloads and provide more comprehensive, individualized support for families.



Business Office

→ Key Findings

- Financial practices are being improved, but current budget processes reveal inconsistencies and lack of alignment with district priorities.
- Fiscal management has been impacted by unclear integration between budgeting practices and operating software, increasing susceptibility to errors and inefficiencies.
- Poor documentation of contracts and supplemental pay processes has led to overpayments and compliance risks.
- Paper-based systems, while functional, hinder accuracy and create challenges in record-keeping and timely decision-making.
- Cross-departmental communication on budgetary decisions requires strengthening to ensure alignment with district goals.

→ Strengths

- Business Office staff are dedicated and responsive, demonstrating a willingness to improve systems and processes.
- Foundational systems for budget and fiscal management exist, offering a strong starting point for modernization and improvement.
- There is recognition within the office of the need to adopt best practices and implement sustainable financial solutions.

→ Areas of Growth

- Transition to modernized, integrated software systems to align budgeting and fiscal management processes, reducing errors and inefficiencies.
- Standardize budgeting practices and strengthen internal controls to improve transparency and accountability.
- Provide professional development and training to enhance staff expertise in budgeting and fiscal compliance.
- Establish clear documentation and procedures to address gaps in contract management and payroll practices.
- Foster stronger cross-departmental collaboration to align financial decisions with district priorities, ensuring equitable and strategic resource allocation.



Facilities & Transportation

→ Key Findings

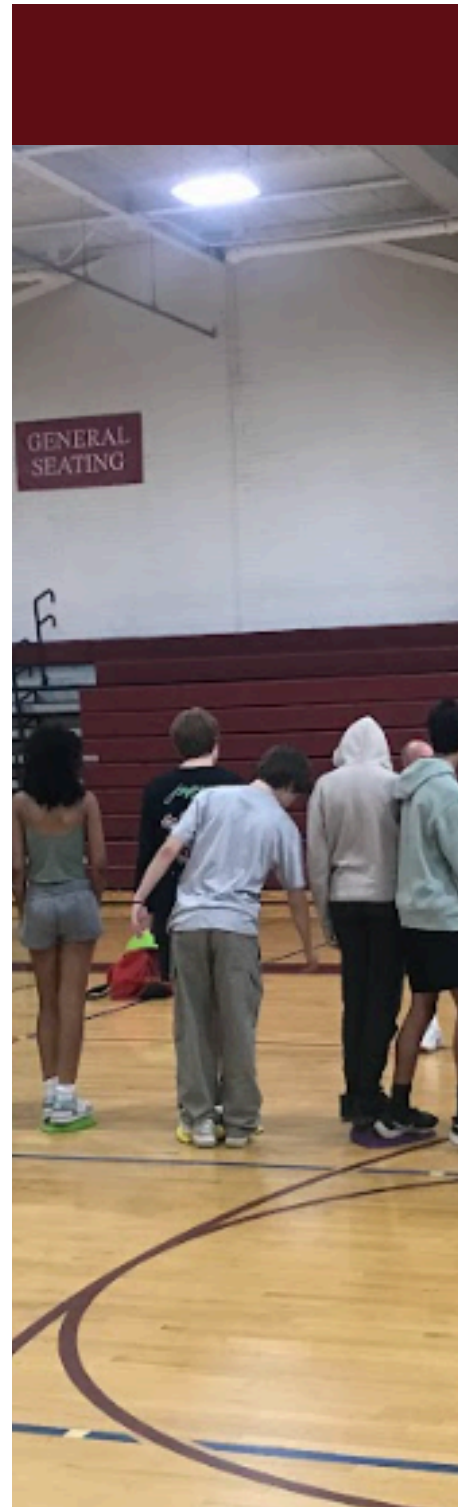
- Division faces staffing shortages, particularly for bus drivers and tradespersons, affecting schedule reliability and building maintenance.
- Facility rental management practices require greater oversight and coordination to optimize usage and revenue.
- Custodial staffing levels are insufficient to adequately clean and maintain buildings, impacting overall cleanliness and functionality.
- Current routing and scheduling systems for transportation could be optimized to improve efficiency and reduce delays.
- Underfunding of transportation and facilities operations impacts fleet maintenance, custodial services, and the ability to address deferred maintenance projects.

→ Strengths

- Transportation and facilities staff are highly dedicated, maintaining operational continuity despite staffing and funding challenges.
- Maintenance efforts ensure vehicles and buildings remain functional, demonstrating staff commitment to keeping services running.
- Opportunities exist to modernize processes for routing, scheduling, and facilities rental management, which could improve efficiency and fiscal outcomes.

→ Areas of Growth

- Address underfunding: Advocate for increased funding to support essential transportation and facilities operations, including staffing, vehicle maintenance, and custodial services.
- Strengthen recruitment and retention: Focus on hiring and retaining bus drivers, tradespersons, and custodial staff to reduce overtime costs and operational disruptions.
- Optimize fiscal management: Implement improved facilities rental processes to maximize revenue and reinvest in district operations.
- Modernize systems: Invest in routing software and tools to improve transportation efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance family communication.
- Develop a long-term plan: Align transportation and facilities strategies with district goals for sustainability, equity, and fiscal responsibility.



Food Services

→ Key Findings

- The department demonstrates strong fiscal management, ensuring resources are allocated effectively while maintaining cost-efficiency.
- Accurate and consistent data collection practices support tracking of meal participation rates and program impact.
- Students have expressed a desire for more diverse, high-quality meals that align with cultural preferences and provide lasting nourishment.
- Staff shortages in key roles limit the department's ability to operate at full capacity.
- Facilities and equipment in some schools require updates to improve efficiency and food preparation quality

→ Strengths

- Fiscal management practices are robust, with careful monitoring of budgets to ensure operations remain sustainable and compliant with federal and state guidelines.
- Comprehensive data collection provides valuable insights into participation trends, helping to adjust services to meet student needs effectively.
- Food service staff are committed to delivering nutritious meals and adapting to student dietary preferences where possible.
- The department has a strong foundation for compliance with state and federal regulations, ensuring program eligibility and funding stability.

→ Areas of Growth

- Address staffing shortages to ensure consistent service across all schools and reduce strain on existing personnel.
- Invest in updating kitchen facilities and equipment to improve efficiency and enhance the quality of meal preparation.
- Respond to student feedback by introducing more diverse and culturally relevant menu options that are both filling and appealing.
- Expand data collection efforts to include feedback on meal satisfaction and opportunities for menu diversification to better meet student needs.



Human Resources

→ Key Findings

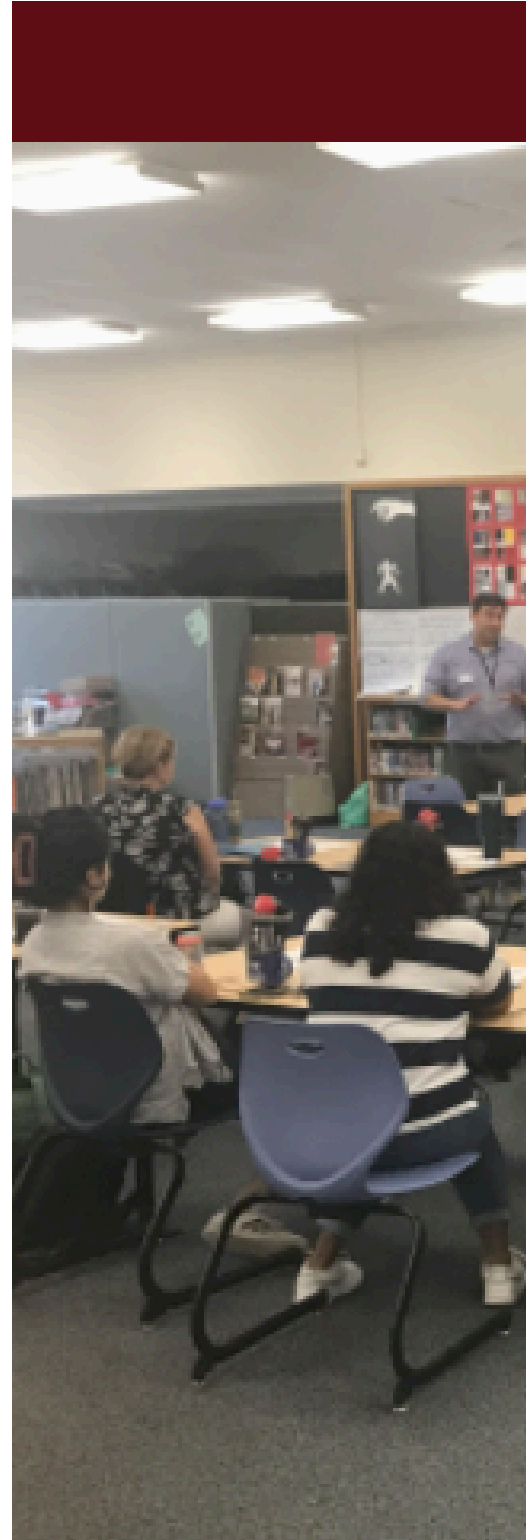
- Trust between Human Resources and the district is the most broken of all divisions, significantly impacting relationships and operational effectiveness.
 - High staff turnover has created challenges in maintaining institutional knowledge and consistency across the district.
 - The absence of a centralized system for handling labor relations and investigations increases workload and delays resolution timelines.
 - Professional development opportunities are inconsistently aligned with staff needs and district goals, reducing their overall impact.
-

→ Strengths

- HR staff demonstrate dedication and resilience in navigating the complexities of district hiring and compliance needs.
 - Recent efforts to consolidate roles and enhance operational efficiency are laying a foundation for improved practices.
 - The department supports diverse hiring practices, aligning with ARPS's commitment to equity and inclusivity.
 - Proactively seeking grants to increase and support teacher diversification.
-

→ Areas of Growth

- Rebuild trust between Human Resources and the district through transparent communication, clear processes, and consistent follow-through on commitments.
- Develop clear, standardized protocols for recruitment and onboarding to ensure timely and efficient hiring processes.
- Enhance data collection and management systems to better track employee performance, certifications, and compliance with district requirements.
- Strengthen retention strategies by addressing high turnover rates and providing targeted support for staff satisfaction and growth.



Mental Health & Behavioral Services

→ Key Findings

- The Mental Health & Behavioral Services Division is newly developed, providing a foundation for addressing critical student needs.
- Policies and procedures are in early stages and require firming up to ensure consistency and clear operational guidelines.
- Data tracking for student progress and program effectiveness is currently underdeveloped, though the need for services is evident across all schools.
- Strong potential exists for this division to play a key role in fostering student well-being and addressing behavioral challenges holistically.
- The dynamic nature of mental health support requires fluidity and consistent updates to remain responsive to student and community needs.

→ Strengths

- The division's establishment reflects a forward-thinking approach to addressing students' mental health and behavioral needs proactively.
- Staff demonstrate a deep commitment to supporting student well-being and creating safe, inclusive environments for learning.
- Initial collaboration with schools and families has laid the groundwork for building strong relationships and community trust.
- Opportunities exist to align the division's goals with district-wide equity initiatives, ensuring services reach all students effectively.

→ Areas of Growth

- Develop and formalize comprehensive policies and procedures to guide the division's operations and service delivery.
- Establish data collection and tracking systems to measure program effectiveness and student progress, enabling informed decision-making.
- Invest in ongoing professional development for staff to ensure alignment with best practices in mental health and behavioral support.
- Build capacity within the division to address increasing demand for services, including adding specialized roles and resources.
- Create a structure for regular review and updates to policies, ensuring the division remains responsive to evolving student needs and research.



Office of Teaching & Learning

→ Key Findings

- The Office of Teaching and Learning (OTL) has been instrumental in supporting the district's instructional practices, curriculum implementation, and professional development.
- The audit revealed inconsistencies in curriculum implementation, a lack of coherence across schools, and varied use of data to inform instruction.
- Critical positions within OTL are not full-time, limiting the department's capacity and increasing costs for critical summer work.
- OTL has assumed responsibilities more appropriately managed by schools or other departments, further constraining its ability to focus on strategic district-level initiatives.

→ Strengths

- OTL is supported by a dedicated team with strong grant-writing capabilities, securing resources that benefit the entire district.
- The department collaborates effectively with other central office teams and consistently provides direct support to schools.
- Recent efforts to implement high-quality instructional materials in elementary schools demonstrate the department's commitment to equity and improving student outcomes.

→ Areas of Growth

- Enhance communication between OTL and schools to improve collaboration and clarity.
- Refine processes for consistent curriculum implementation across schools.
- Align staff responsibilities with the department's mission to maximize efficiency and impact.
- Increase the use of data to drive equitable instructional practices and support decision-making.
- Address gaps in Tier 1 instruction to ensure all students have access to high-quality, culturally responsive learning experiences.



Student Services Office

→ Key Findings

- Student Services provides essential support for special education, 504 plans, and related services, ensuring compliance with state and federal regulations.
- A high number of students receive 1:1 services, raising questions about the effectiveness of scaffolded interventions and supports prior to IEP identification.
- Staffing shortages, particularly among special education teachers and related service providers, limit the division's capacity to meet student needs effectively.
- Processes for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans require greater consistency and documentation to improve efficiency and ensure equity in service delivery.
- Data systems for monitoring student progress and evaluating service effectiveness could be better utilized to increase opportunities for program improvement.

→ Strengths

- Staff are highly dedicated to supporting students with diverse needs and ensuring access to necessary resources and accommodations.
- The division demonstrates a strong commitment to meeting the needs of neurodivergent students, fostering inclusive practices and tailored supports that promote their success.
- The division demonstrates strong foundational knowledge of legal compliance and diligently adheres to federal and state mandates.
- Recent efforts to collaborate with families and schools are fostering stronger partnerships and trust.
- A focus on equity aligns with district-wide goals to address disparities and provide inclusive support for all learners.

→ Areas of Growth

- Strengthen scaffolded interventions and tiered supports to reduce over-reliance on 1:1 services and improve pre-IEP identification processes.
- Address staffing shortages in special education and support roles through targeted recruitment and retention strategies.
- Standardize IEP and 504 plan processes to ensure equitable and efficient service delivery.
- Implement robust data systems to track student outcomes, evaluate services, and guide decision-making.
- Expand professional development to equip staff with best practices for interventions and special education compliance.



Special Education Program Review

Effectiveness and Efficiency of Special Education Supports

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District

Identifying Need and Purpose of a Paraprofessional:

As a result of this program review, the evaluators have questions about when there are actual needs for a paraprofessional in some classrooms, as outlined in the observation findings. Therefore, it is recommended that the district review DESE's guidance on hiring a paraprofessional and review the samples outlined on their website

Technology Devices:

Paraeducators could be more effective if they had Chromebooks to respond to emails, collect in-time data, and report situations to their direct supervisors. It would benefit the district if the administration could consider an approach to support this request, if not Chromebooks, perhaps another device that can help with today's technological needs.

Roles and Responsibilities of Educators:

Given that ALL educators receive a license through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Massachusetts educational system expects all licensed educators to teach students of various abilities. Various responses from the educator survey participants showed that not all educators know how to implement differentiated instruction. Therefore, the district administration should support this requirement for all educators and create a system to hold all licensed educators accountable. One example is the expectation that all educators have a differentiated instruction goal as part of their annual professional practice goal. Another recommendation may be to create a yearly building-based goal and ask individual educators how they will impact that goal.

Scheduling and Planning - Collaboration:

When observing classrooms, there was a clear identification of overstaffing in some classrooms. Planning must determine where and when paras could support students within the school. students are not in a classroom with a teacher and three (3) paraeducators, for instance, when there may only be the need for one (1) paraeducator. This shift in practice will allow the paraeducators to support more classrooms over a given period.



Technology & Information Systems

→ Key Findings

- The division is hard-working and responsive, maintaining operational continuity despite resource challenges.
- Limited staffing capacity offers room to expand and develop specialized roles to better meet the district's technological needs.
- IS staff bring diverse skills and strengths, providing a foundation for future innovation and growth.
- Underfunding presents an opportunity to prioritize investments in technology infrastructure and resources to align with district goals.

→ Strengths

- IS staff demonstrate dedication, adaptability, and a strong commitment to ensuring smooth daily operations across the district.
- The varied skills within the team allow for innovative problem-solving and support for critical functions.
- Effective management of existing systems has ensured operational stability and provided a baseline for improvement.
- There is significant potential to align IS advancements with instructional and operational district-wide goals, fostering long-term efficiency and innovation.

→ Areas of Growth

- Prioritize modernizing systems to improve operational efficiency, security, and scalability.
- Expand staffing with specialized roles to ensure the division can meet the district's growing technological demands.
- Increase funding to support infrastructure updates, staff training, and the adoption of cutting-edge tools.
- Provide ongoing professional development to enhance staff expertise and keep pace with technological advancements.
- Develop a comprehensive district-wide technology plan to align IS strategies with instructional and operational goals.



WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ARPS?

Chapter 3

REFLECTIONS



Highlights from the findings reveal areas of success and key trends impacting the district.

1

- ARPS departments are staffed with dedicated, hard-working individuals committed to supporting students, despite resource limitations.
- Inconsistent processes, staffing shortages, and underfunding across divisions hinder operational efficiency and equity.
- Legacy systems and outdated practices limit progress in financial management, technology, and service delivery.
- Trust between key departments in Central Office and stakeholders, such as Human Resources and the broader district, requires intentional rebuilding.

GROWTH AREA



Identified challenges provide opportunities for meaningful improvement and innovation.

2

- Modernize systems and processes in IS, transportation, facilities, and financial management to improve efficiency and accountability.
- Address staffing shortages and strengthen recruitment and retention strategies for critical roles, including custodial, special education, and IS staff.
- Develop standardized protocols and data systems across divisions to ensure equity, transparency, and informed decision-making.
- Expand communication and engagement efforts to rebuild trust with families, staff, and the community.

LOOKING AHEAD



A foundation for collaborative efforts to achieve equitable and student-centered outcomes.

3

- Invest in infrastructure and technology upgrades to support district-wide operational and instructional goals.
- Align departmental practices with strategic priorities to ensure resources are equitably allocated and services effectively delivered.
- Provide ongoing professional development to enhance staff capacity and support district goals.
- Foster collaboration across divisions to create cohesive, forward-thinking systems that promote long-term sustainability and success.

CHAPTER 4

"Strength doesn't come from what you can do; it comes from overcoming the things you once thought you couldn't." —
Rikki Rogers



STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES





STRENGTHS

ARPS thrives due to the collective dedication of its staff, students, and community. As a district, ARPS is committed to academic excellence, equity, and inclusivity, demonstrated by consistently high student performance, strong community engagement, and a focus on providing a well-rounded educational experience. As Maya Angelou once said, “We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value,” a sentiment that reflects ARPS’s commitment to nurturing every student’s unique strengths and fostering an environment where all can thrive.

CREATIVE AND RESILIENT

STUDENTS:

Students actively participate in shaping their educational experience through leadership, advocacy, and innovative contributions.

EQUITY-FOCUSED VISION:

Many in the district and community prioritizes inclusivity and diversity, striving to create equitable opportunities for all students.

STRONG COMMUNITY SUPPORT:

Active engagement from families, local organizations, and alumni strengthens programs and builds a collaborative culture.

STAFF EXPERTISE AND

ADAPTABILITY:

Teams across the districts bring diverse skills and adaptability, ensuring continuity and creative problem-solving in challenging conditions.

CREATIVE PROGRAMS:

Robust arts, music, and extracurricular offerings engage students and nurture the development of the whole child.

DEDICATED LEADERSHIP:

School Committee members as well as school and district leaders are committed to fostering collaboration, transparency, and student-centered decision-making.

CHALLENGES

ARPS faces several challenges that reflect both the complexity of its structure and the evolving needs of its community. From addressing gaps in equity and accountability to modernizing systems and fostering a culture of continuous growth, these hurdles are opportunities to strengthen the district. As John F. Kennedy once said, “Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try.” ARPS is well-positioned to tackle these issues head-on, leveraging the dedication of its staff, students, and families to transform challenges into meaningful progress for all.

AGING INFRASTRUCTURE:

Deferred maintenance and outdated facilities hinder the ability to provide safe, modern, and effective learning environments.

ESTABLISHING CLEAR PROTOCOLS:

The absence of updated policies and procedures creates inconsistencies, highlighting the need for a more structured and transparent system.

BUILDING A CULTURE OF

ACCOUNTABILITY AND INTEGRITY:

The district faces challenges in ensuring consistent professionalism, responsibility, and confidentiality, to include protecting the privacy of students and staff, which are essential for fostering trust and collaboration across all levels.

BUDGET & FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY:

The current budget requires innovative solutions to sustain district operations and ensure resources are equitably allocated.

CLOSING ACHIEVEMENT GAPS:

Advancing students without ensuring mastery of grade-level skills has widened disparities, particularly for marginalized groups, emphasizing the need for targeted support.

EMBRACING CHANGE AND EQUITY WITH UNIFIED VISION:

ARPS faces resistance to change, where some stakeholders prioritize familiar approaches or individual interests over broader district goals. This dynamic is compounded by a preference for maintaining the status quo, reluctance to confront hard truths, and a focus on protecting personal priorities rather than fostering equitable or equal services. Addressing these challenges requires building a shared commitment to innovation, transparency, and a collective focus on what best serves all students and the community.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ARPS?

Chapter 4

REFLECTIONS



Highlights from the findings reveal areas of success and key trends impacting the district.

GROWTH AREA



Identified challenges provide opportunities for meaningful improvement and innovation.

LOOKING AHEAD



A foundation for collaborative efforts to achieve equitable and student-centered outcomes.

1

- ARPS is driven by a committed community of staff, students, and families, dedicated to academic success and equity.
- Strong foundational programs, student achievement above state averages, and innovative initiatives highlight the district's potential.
- Resistance to change, inconsistent accountability, and underdeveloped systems reveal areas where trust and collaboration must be strengthened.

2

- Strengthen accountability and transparency by establishing clear policies, professional standards, and equitable practices.
- Modernize systems, including IS, facilities, and financial processes, to improve efficiency and support district-wide goals.
- Address staffing shortages in critical roles and ensure professional development aligns with evolving district needs.

3

- Embrace innovation and collaboration to address challenges and create systems that prioritize equity and sustainability.
- Develop a unified vision for change that focuses on what best serves all students, balancing individual needs with district-wide goals.
- Leverage existing strengths to build a stronger, more cohesive foundation for lasting success.

"TOGETHER, WE CAN TURN CHALLENGES INTO STEPPINGSTONES TOWARD A STRONGER, BRIGHTER FUTURE." - UNKNOWN

CHAPTER 5:

"Success doesn't come from what you do occasionally, it comes from what you do consistently." — Marie Forleo



MAJOR THEMES

Student-Centered Focus:

Prioritizing holistic student development through academic, social-emotional, and extracurricular programs that meet diverse needs.

Strengthening Accountability and Transparency:

Establishing clear policies, consistent standards, and equitable practices to rebuild trust and foster collaboration.

Sustaining Financial Stability:

Addressing budget constraints with innovative solutions to ensure the district can maintain and expand its programs effectively.

Embracing Change and Innovation:

Shifting mindsets to embrace new ideas and systems that prioritize equity, efficiency, and sustainability.

Addressing Operational Efficiency:

Modernizing outdated systems in IT, facilities, transportation, and financial processes to improve functionality and align with district goals.

Fostering Equity and Inclusion:

Expanding culturally responsive practices, addressing achievement gaps, and ensuring equitable access to resources and services for all students.

Enhancing Communication and Engagement:

Improving transparency and collaboration with families, staff, and the broader community to strengthen relationships and shared purpose.

Building Capacity and Resilience:

Tackling staffing shortages, supporting professional development, and leveraging the dedication of staff to meet the district's evolving needs.



DISTRICT STRATEGIES

The Amherst, Pelham, and Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools faces an exciting opportunity to address its challenges by aligning district strategies with key themes and findings from recent reviews. By focusing on equity, accountability, and innovation, the districts can build a stronger foundation to support its students, staff, and community. These strategies aim to unify efforts across educational and operational systems, ensuring that every decision aligns with the district's commitment to excellence and inclusivity. As we reflect on the district's strengths and areas for growth, these approaches represent a pathway toward a more efficient, equitable, and future-focused educational system that prepares all students for success.

Building a Unified Definition of Equity:

Exploring ways to develop a unified understanding of equity and its connection to student success through initiatives such as *Portrait of a Graduate, Portrait of an Educator, and District Improvement Plan* to guide future practices.

Enhancing Educational Supports:

Explore opportunities to strengthen tiered interventions, culturally responsive practices, and inclusive discipline to address achievement gaps and expand access to advanced learning opportunities.

Leveraging Data for Equity:

Explore implementing robust systems to track student performance, resource allocation, and program outcomes, providing data-driven insights to guide equitable decisions.

Right-Size the Organization & Streamline Administrative Structures:

Assess and optimize staffing, roles, and resources to align with priorities, eliminate redundancies, and enhance efficiency and accountability in supporting student success.

Modernizing Systems and Processes:

Evaluate the potential for updating District-wide (e.g. IT, financial, student enrollment, and facilities management) systems to improve efficiency, reduce errors, and support district-wide priorities.

Strengthening Fiscal Sustainability:

Assess budgeting practices to ensure resources are allocated effectively and explore innovative strategies to maintain financial sustainability while aligning spending with district priorities.

Engaging Families and Community Partners:

Consider strategies to strengthen collaboration with families, local organizations, and stakeholders to support transparency, trust, and shared responsibility in achieving district goals.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR ARPS?

Chapter 5

REFLECTIONS



Highlights from the findings reveal areas of success and key trends impacting the district.

1

- ARPS has a strong foundation of dedicated staff, students, and families who are committed to the district's mission and values.
- Challenges in operational efficiency, accountability, and resource allocation highlight the need for greater alignment and clarity across the district.
- There is a clear opportunity to build a shared vision of equity and excellence to guide the district's growth and improvement.

GROWTH AREA



Identified challenges provide opportunities for meaningful improvement and innovation.

2

- Streamline central office and administrative functions to improve efficiency, eliminate redundancies, and ensure alignment with district priorities.
- Develop a unified definition of equity through collaborative processes such as a Portrait of a Graduate and a District Improvement Plan to guide decision-making and set a clear direction for the future.
- Address fiscal sustainability by aligning budgeting practices with district priorities, optimizing resource allocation, and exploring innovative revenue generation strategies.

LOOKING AHEAD



A foundation for collaborative efforts to achieve equitable and student-centered outcomes.

3

- Build transparency and trust by fostering collaboration among stakeholders, ensuring all voices are included in shaping the district's goals and strategies.
- Invest in modernizing systems and processes to improve operational efficiency, align with best practices, and support district-wide priorities.
- Create a sustainable, equity-focused framework that prepares all students for success, grounded in a shared vision of accountability and continuous improvement.

"EQUALITY IS GIVING EVERYONE A SHOE. EQUITY IS GIVING EVERYONE A SHOE THAT FITS." – DR. NAHEED DOSANI

THANK YOU!

Thank you for taking the time to read my Report of Entry. This comprehensive document represents my initial findings and reflections on the Amherst, Pelham, and Amherst-Pelham Regional School Districts. While it captures a broad overview of the challenges, strengths, and opportunities within our districts, it only begins to scratch the surface of the depth and breadth of these unique and vibrant communities.

From the dedication of our staff and the resilience of our students to the support of families and community partners, ARPS holds immense potential for growth and transformation. The themes presented here highlight opportunities to strengthen our shared commitment to equity, streamline systems for greater efficiency, and build sustainable practices that ensure every student thrives.

I am deeply grateful for the collaboration and trust I have experienced thus far.

Together, we have the opportunity to address challenges, embrace innovation, and establish a collective vision for the future. This report is just the starting point for what I hope will be ongoing dialogue, thoughtful planning, and unified action to ensure ARPS remains a district of excellence and inclusivity.

Thank you for your engagement and commitment as we move forward in this important work. It is an honor to serve these communities, and I am excited to continue partnering with you to shape a stronger, more equitable future for all.

Dr. E. Xiomara Herman
Superintendent of Schools



WE ARE...

A

Accountable

1. **Transparency:** Always keep everyone in the loop about what's happening.
2. **Responsibility:** Do what you say you will and finish on time.
3. **Performance:** Set goals and use feedback to get better.
4. **Integrity:** Be honest and do the right thing.

R

Respectful

1. **Inclusivity:** Embrace diverse perspectives.
2. **Collaboration:** Work well with others and be a team player.
3. **Empathy:** Be kind and understanding to everyone.
4. **Professional Conduct:** Treat everyone with respect and fairness.

P

Professional

1. **Excellence:** Always try your best and keep learning.
2. **Ethical Behavior:** Be trustworthy and keep private information safe.
3. **Communication:** Speak and listen clearly and respectfully.
4. **Responsiveness:** Respond timely.
5. **Dress Code:** Wear appropriate clothes that show you're ready to work and help others.

S

Student-Centered

1. **Prioritizing Students:** Focus on student well-being and success.
2. **Equity:** Make sure everyone gets what they need to succeed.
3. **Engagement:** Create fun and welcoming places to learn.
4. **Support:** Be there for students, staff, and families, encouraging everyone to do their best.

Appendix



This appendix provides supplementary information to support the findings and recommendations presented in this report. It includes definitions of acronyms and terms, details on the survey methodology, additional data sources, acknowledgments, and resources for further reference. The appendix is intended to offer deeper insights and transparency into the processes and data that informed our analysis.

Student Voice In ARPS - pg. 69

The Student Voice in ARPS Survey was administered to 4th, 8th, and 11th-grade students to gather their perspectives on school climate, learning experiences, and opportunities for engagement. The survey aimed to highlight students' priorities, identify areas for growth, and ensure that student input informs decision-making across the district.

Culture & Climate Amongst Staff - pg. 123

The Culture and Climate Amongst Staff Survey was designed to capture the experiences and perceptions of educators and staff across the district. The survey focused on key themes such as workplace environment, leadership support, professional collaboration, and recognition. Responses provided valuable insights into the strengths of the district, including a strong sense of community and commitment to student success, as well as areas for growth, such as equitable workload management, transparent communication, and resource distribution.

Caregivers & Community Survey - pg. 148

The Caregiver and Community Survey was designed to gather input from families and community members about their experiences and perceptions of the district. The survey focused on areas such as communication, school climate, and family engagement.

Special Education Program Review - pg. 171

The Amherst-Pelham Regional School District conducted a review of its Special Education department to evaluate the efficacy and efficiency of resources and programming. The review focused on ensuring that staff were appropriately supporting students and that resources were aligned with student needs.

Paraeducator Program Action Plan - pg. 394

This action plan outlines the steps needed to review and potentially sunset 1:1 paraeducator services for special education students in accordance with Massachusetts Department of Education laws and regulations, while maintaining alignment with best practices and ensuring student success.

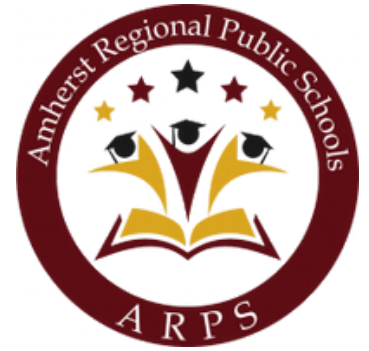
Payroll Audit - pg. 424

The Payroll Audit reviewed payroll processes and allocations to ensure efficiency, transparency, and alignment with district priorities, identifying areas for improvement to support operational integrity and goals.

District Study: Supporting and Retaining School Leaders- pg. 433

A 2022 external investigation identified systemic challenges like role clarity and support systems as key factors in ARPS's leadership turnover, offering recommendations to enhance stability and retention.

STUDENT VOICE IN ARPS



Prepared for Amherst Regional Public Schools
December, 2024

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OVERALL VOICE

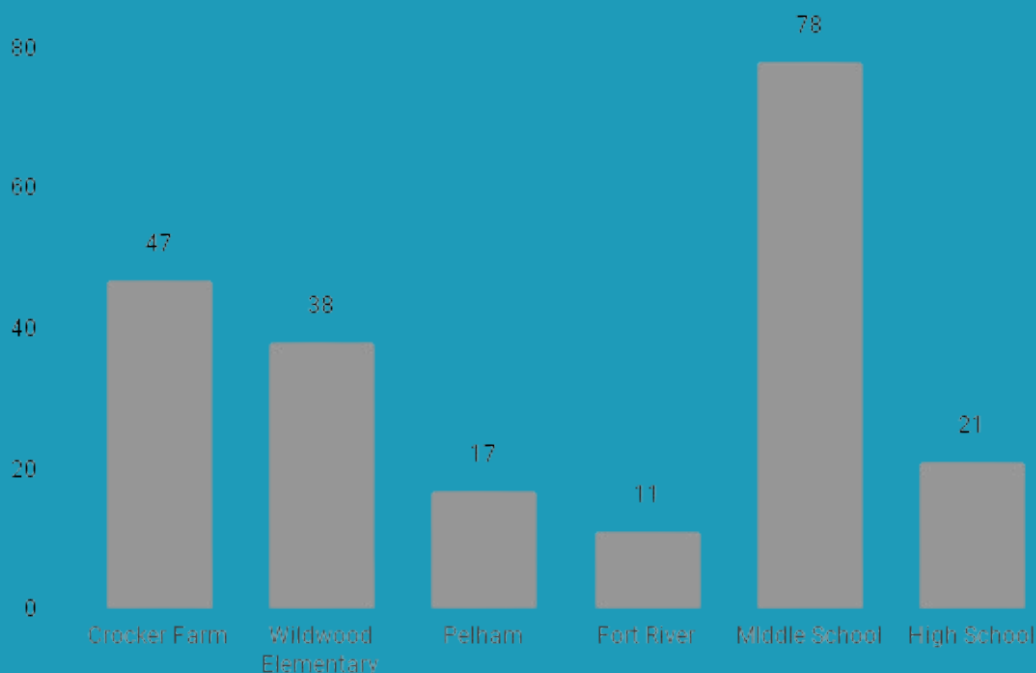
ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

About the Initiative

The Amherst Regional Public School community is vibrant and rich with possibilities. The education children receive is a valuable district asset and we need your help to determine the best way to support our staff moving forward.

Providing input on the district's climate and culture includes an opportunity to highlight the strengths of the district and share opportunities for growth.

Representation by School



SURVEY RESPONSES



113

ELEMENTARY

78

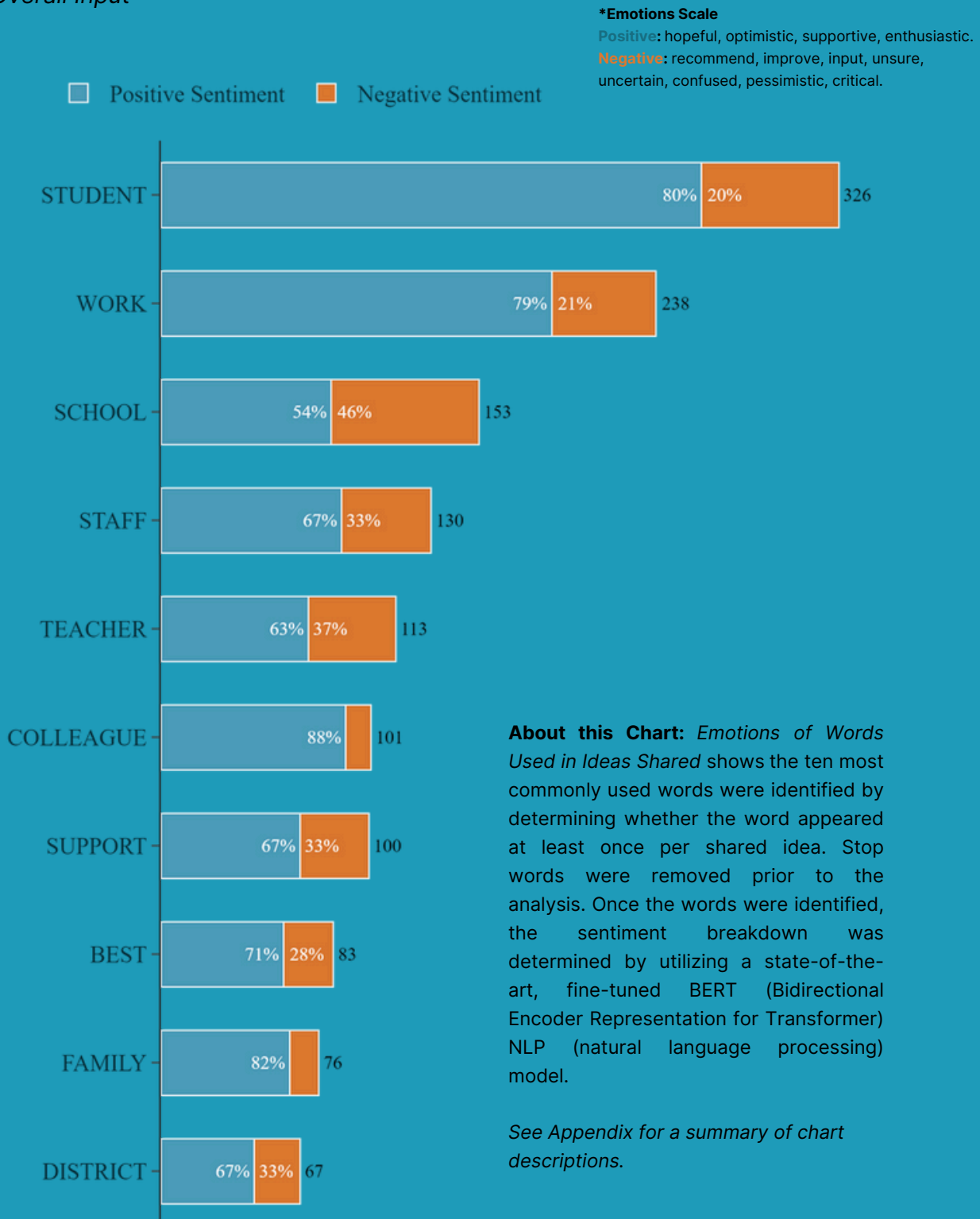
MIDDLE

21

HIGH SCHOOL

The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Overall Input





PART I

ELEMENTARY VOICE



INNOVATE | K12

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

ELEMENTARY VOICE

The Frequency of Words Expressed

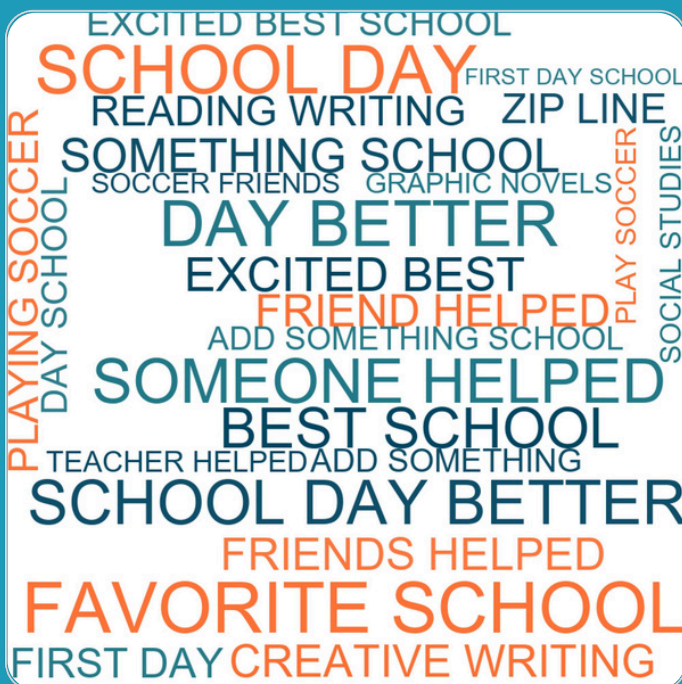


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MOTIVATION

PROMPT

What are some things that make you excited to do your best in school?

THEMES

- **Community and Class Events**
- **Academic Challenges and Personal Growth**
- **Engaging and Interactive Learning**
- **Peer Motivation and Friendships**
- **Encouragement and Support from Teachers**

Community and Class Events

Survey responses highlight the excitement generated by community and class events, which foster a sense of belonging and camaraderie among students. Many students expressed their enthusiasm for shared experiences, such as field day, class celebrations, and collaborative projects. The opportunity to participate in events not only allows students to engage socially but also provides a platform for them to showcase their skills and achievements alongside classmates. This sense of community motivates students to work harder collectively and celebrate individual and group accomplishments, reinforcing the idea that school is a positive and enjoyable place to learn.

Engaging and Interactive Learning

Another prevalent theme is the importance of engaging and interactive learning activities. Students expressed excitement about lessons that involve hands-on participation, such as math games, creative writing projects, and scientific experiments. These interactive elements transform traditional learning into a dynamic experience, allowing students to better connect with the material and retain information. Many noted that fun activities, such as typing club or working on art projects, inspire them to excel academically because they feel more involved and invested in their education.

Encouragement and Support from Teachers

Responses indicate that teachers play a significant role in motivating students to do their best in school. Many students highlighted the encouraging nature of their teachers, noting that positive reinforcement and recognition of achievements, such as earning C.A.R.E. tickets or punches for good work, significantly boost their motivation. This theme underscores the importance of supportive educational environments where teachers provide constructive feedback and celebrate student success, fostering a growth mindset and a desire to achieve more.

Academic Challenges and Personal Growth

Students expressed a strong appreciation for academic challenges as a source of motivation. Many indicated that striving to overcome difficult subjects, particularly math and reading, excites them and drives them to improve. This desire to challenge themselves is tied to their ambition for personal growth and mastery of skills, illustrating that students find purpose in the struggle that comes with learning. They take pride in their ability to learn new concepts and strategies, leading to increased self-esteem and satisfaction when they achieve their goals.

Peer Motivation and Friendships

The presence of friends and peer interactions emerged as a vital aspect of students' enthusiasm for school. Many responses reflect how friendships inspire students to perform better, as they feel motivated by their classmates' accomplishments and support. This peer influence translates into a healthy competitiveness where students strive to keep up with one another, pushing each other to achieve their personal best. Additionally, students enjoy collaborating with friends on projects and activities, which enhances their overall educational experience and makes school more enjoyable.



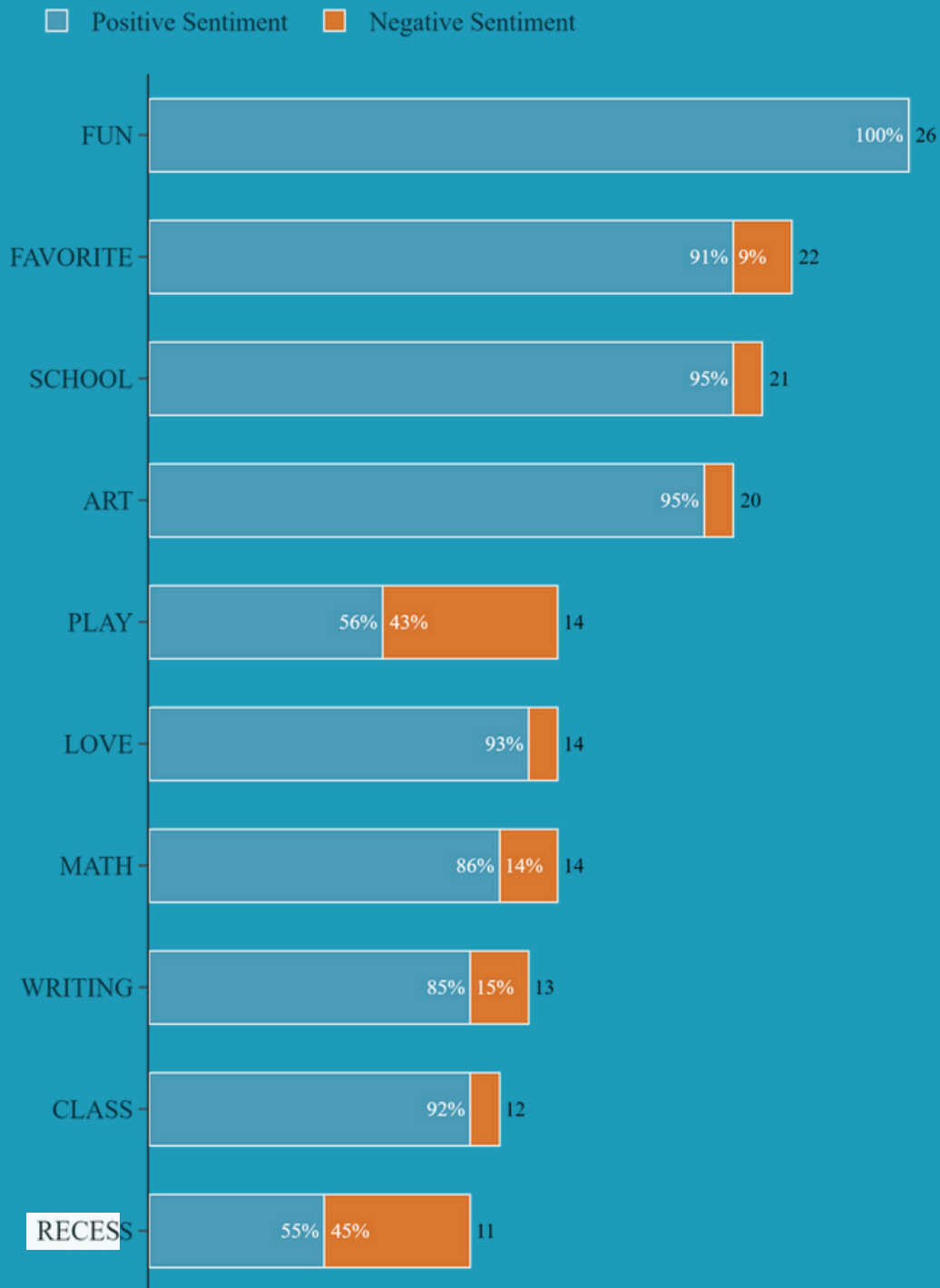
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Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

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See appendix for methodology.



IMPROVEMENTS

PROMPT

What could make your school day even better?

THEMES

- **Enhancing Lunch and Meal Options**
- **Additional Reading and Writing Time**
- **Increased Outdoor and Recess Time**
- **Improved Social Interactions and Friendships**
- **More Creative and Engaging Learning Activities**

Enhancing Lunch and Meal Options

Many students expressed a desire for improved lunch experiences, indicating that food quality and variety significantly impact their school day. Responses highlighted a craving for "five star meals" and better overall food options, including vegetarian alternatives and more sweet treats. Students noted that their current lunches often leave them feeling hungry, which affects their concentration and enjoyment of the school day. A common sentiment was that a more appetizing and diverse cafeteria menu would create a more positive atmosphere, helping them feel satisfied and ready to learn.

Increased Outdoor and Recess Time

A significant theme emerging from the responses was the longing for more opportunities to play outside and enjoy fresh air. Many students noted that extra recess or outdoor breaks would enhance their school experience, allowing them to unwind, socialize, and engage in physical activity. The suggestion was made for additional recess periods and more time outside as essential components for combating boredom and maintaining energy levels throughout the day. Students believe that a greater connection with nature and playtime would improve their overall well-being and satisfaction with their school day.

More Creative and Engaging Learning Activities

Students expressed a strong desire for more creative learning methods, including art, music, and hands-on projects. They suggested incorporating additional art and music lessons, as well as more interactive and fun learning activities that go beyond traditional desk work. Many highlighted that engaging in creative writing or arts and crafts would not only make learning more enjoyable but would also allow them to express themselves and explore their talents. Respondents indicated that interactive learning opportunities would foster a love for education and motivate them to participate more actively in their classes.

Additional Reading and Writing Time

A recurring theme among respondents was the plea for more time dedicated to reading and writing. Many students indicated a passion for these subjects, suggesting that additional periods for free reading and creative writing would allow them to develop their skills further. Adding "extra reading time" or "more writing time" was seen as a means to facilitate greater academic success and personal expression. Students mentioned a preference for being able to read graphic novels or engage in typing and writing exercises, emphasizing the importance of literacy in enhancing their overall educational experience.

Improved Social Interactions and Friendships

The importance of social dynamics in school life was clearly articulated by multiple respondents, with many expressing a desire for more time with friends and suitable group arrangements for collaborative work. Students suggested that working with peers they are comfortable with can enhance engagement and productivity. They also pointed out the need for more team-building activities and inclusive environments where friendships can thrive. Emphasizing friendship and positive social interactions, the students conveyed that feeling connected and supported at school greatly enhances their day-to-day experience and motivation to learn.



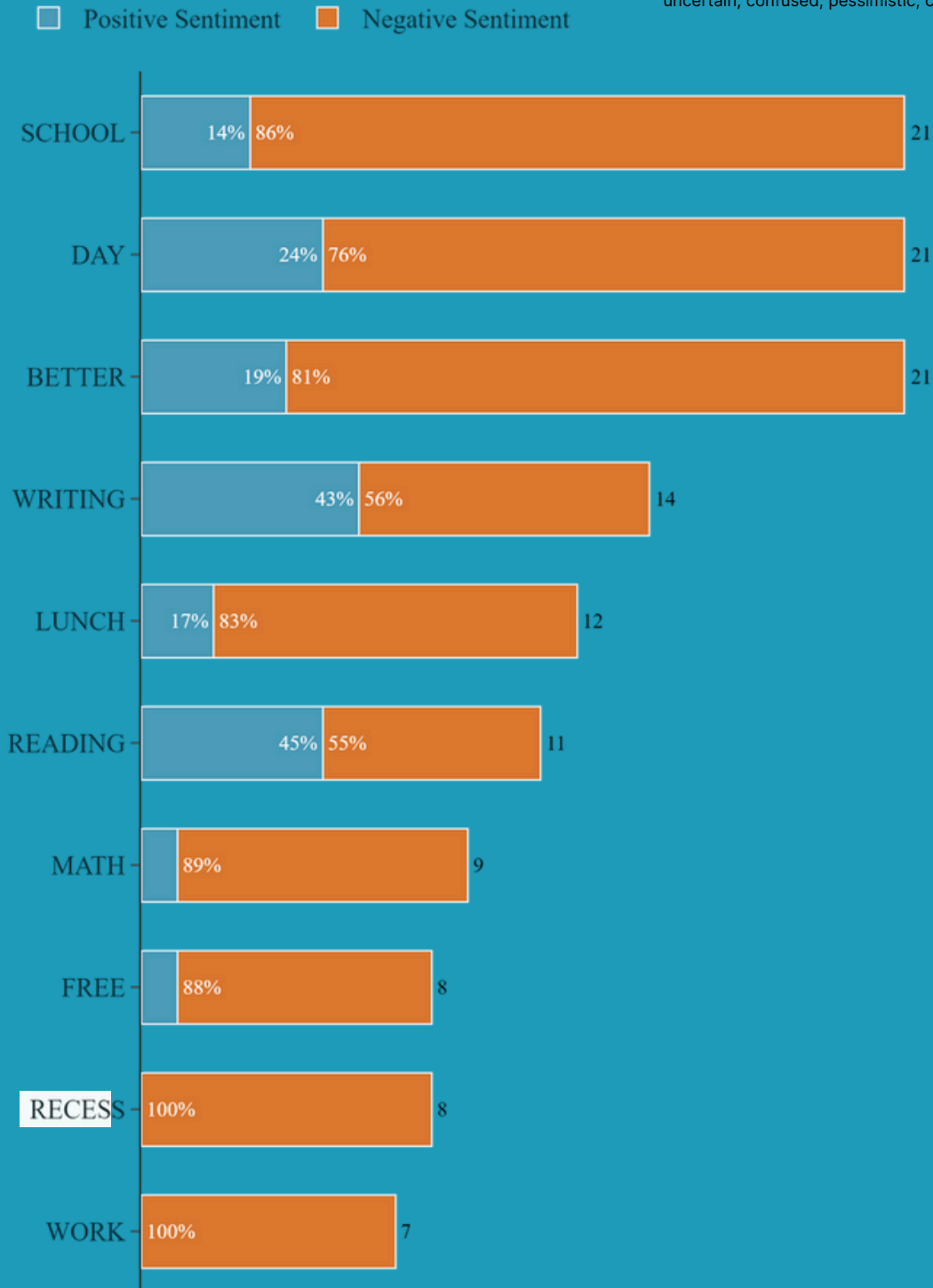
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BEST TIMES

PROMPT

What is your favorite thing to do at school and why?

THEMES

- Sports and Physical Activities
- Arts and Creative Expression
- Interactive and Engaging Learning
- Reading and Literature
- Technology and Modern Learning

Sports and Physical Activities

Many students express a strong preference for engaging in sports and physical activities at school. Recess is frequently highlighted as a favorite time because it provides opportunities to play soccer, dodgeball, and capture the flag, allowing students to stay active and socialize with friends. Activities such as PE (Physical Education) classes are particularly loved as they offer various games and exercises that make learning fun. The emphasis on physical activities reveals a desire for movement and teamwork, fostering important social connections while promoting a healthy lifestyle.

Arts and Creative Expression

A significant number of responses show a passion for arts, with subjects like art class and music lessons being frequently mentioned. Students appreciate the chance to engage in activities that allow them to explore their creativity, such as drawing, crafting, and playing instruments. The joy of making art and participating in creative projects is a common thread, indicating that these classes not only provide an outlet for self-expression but also contribute to students' excitement about learning. Enthusiasm for additional art opportunities, like wishes for earlier art blocks, underscores a strong desire for more creative experiences in their education.

Interactive and Engaging Learning

Responses reflect an appreciation for interactive learning methods in comparison to more traditional, independent study approaches. Students enjoy hands-on experiences where they can collaborate with peers and participate actively in their learning journeys. Whether it's through group projects, technology integration, or engaging lesson plans, the desire for a dynamic classroom environment is evident. This theme shows that students thrive in settings that offer opportunities for interaction, creativity, and movement, making learning more enjoyable and effective.

Reading and Literature

Reading emerges as a favored activity among students, with many expressing their enjoyment of selecting books and the feeling of immersion in stories. Book groups and independent reading time are appreciated for the freedom they provide to explore various genres, thereby enhancing students' literacy skills in a fun and engaging way. The importance of reading, not just for academic success but for personal enjoyment, indicates a strong connection students have with literature, often as a means of escape or exploration of new ideas and worlds.

Technology and Modern Learning

Students show a keen interest in technology and its role in their education, indicating a preference for tech classes that incorporate coding, games, and creative projects. The ability to use technology to explore information and undertake new forms of learning excites students, demonstrating an understanding of its relevance in today's world. They appreciate how technology allows them to be creative and collaborative, reinforcing the notion that integrating modern tools into the classroom enhances their overall learning experience and prepares them for a tech-driven future.



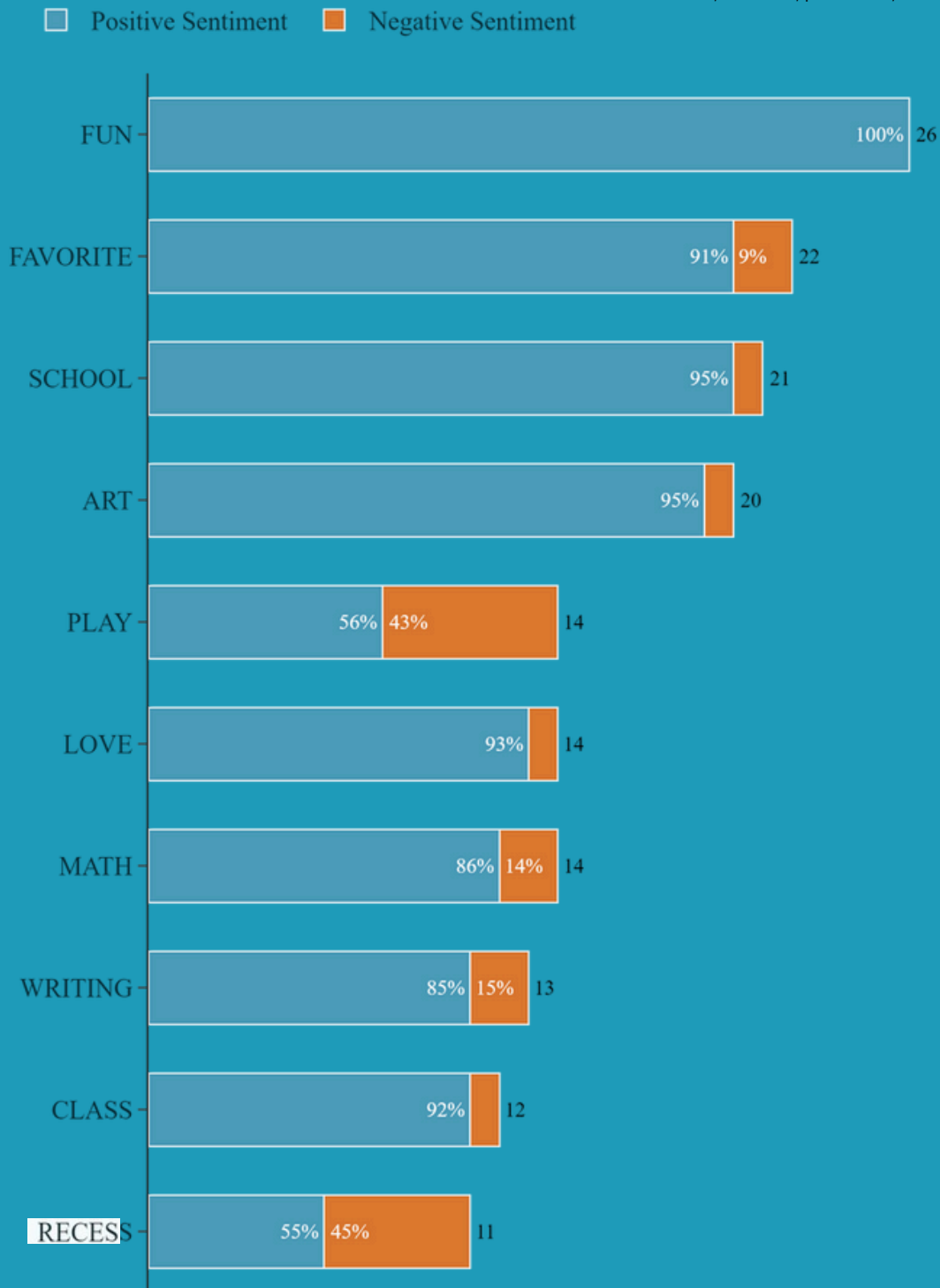
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HELPING HAND

PROMPT

Can you tell me about a time at school when someone really helped you a lot?

THEMES

- Supportive Teachers
- Friendship and Peer Support
- Emotional Assistance Support
- Inclusion and Acceptance
- Collaboration and Teamwork

Supportive Teachers

Many survey respondents highlighted the significant role teachers play in their school experiences, particularly during challenging times. Respondents mentioned teachers who offered assistance with academic subjects, such as math and writing, providing clarity on difficult concepts and boosting their confidence. Furthermore, teachers were recognized for their emotional support, like comfort during anxiety episodes or encouragement after a fall. The caring nature and consistent availability of teachers not only helped students academically but also fostered a sense of security and belonging in school.

Friendship and Peer Support

Peer relationships emerged as a key theme in the responses, illustrating how friendships can provide vital support during the school experience. Many students described their friends helping them in various situations, from providing comfort during tough times to assisting with homework or other subjects. Specific anecdotes included friends helping one another up after falls or offering companionship on the first day of school. The importance of having friends who are willing to lend a hand created a shared sense of solidarity and community among students.

Emotional Assistance

Respondents frequently pointed out that assistance at school often transcended academic help and included emotional support. Many described experiences where classmates or teachers checked in on them during moments of distress or sadness, offering a listening ear or words of encouragement. For instance, students noted instances where friends helped alleviate their feelings of anxiety or loneliness, showcasing how vital emotional connections are within the school environment. The ability to share vulnerabilities and receive compassion from peers or adults significantly contributed to their well-being.

Inclusion and Acceptance

Another prominent theme was the importance of feeling included and accepted in the school community. Many students recounted how peers and teachers helped them feel welcomed, especially during transitions, such as starting at a new school. Specific examples included friends who made an effort to engage with newcomers and teachers who offered guidance and warmth on the first day. This sense of inclusion not only eased the fear and uncertainty that often accompany such changes but also reinforced the value of kindness and community in the school environment.

Collaboration and Teamwork

Collaboration was frequently mentioned in responses, underscoring the benefits of working together to achieve common goals. Students expressed gratitude for their classmates who assisted them in tackling difficult assignments, like complex math problems or group projects. The spirit of teamwork was evident in shared activities such as sports, where encouragement and mutual support were highlighted. These experiences illustrated how collaboration fostered not only academic success but also social connections, reinforcing the importance of working together and helping each other throughout the school journey.



The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

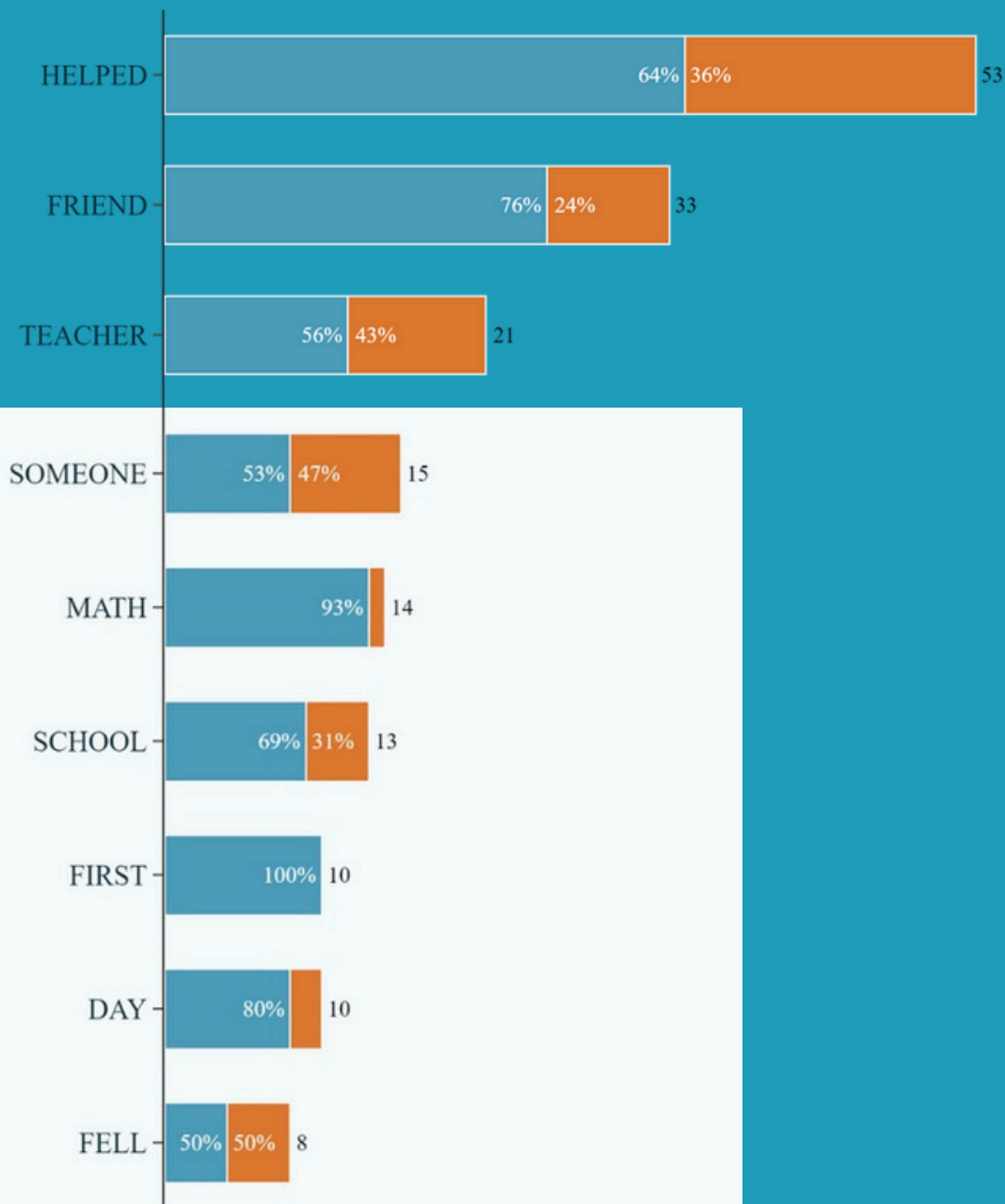
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□ Positive Sentiment □ Negative Sentiment



See appendix for methodology.



SOMETHING NEW

PROMPT

If you could add something new to your school what would it be and why?

THEMES

- **Enhanced Recreational Facilities**
- **Increased Academic Support and Resources**
- **Parent and Community Engagement**
- **Diverse Extracurricular Opportunities**
- **Improved Food and Dining Experience**

Enhanced Recreational Facilities

Many respondents expressed a desire for improved recreational spaces within their school, highlighting the importance of play and physical activity in their daily routines. Suggestions included a new and more engaging playground, with features such as zip lines, trampolines, and climbing walls. There were calls for a swimming pool to facilitate swim lessons and provide a fun, alternative activity during recess. Overall, enhancing these recreational facilities was viewed as a way to boost enjoyment, promote physical health, and foster social interactions among students.

Increased Academic Support and Resources

Students voiced a strong interest in expanding academic offerings and support systems that cater to diverse learning needs. The need for additional tutoring, specialized classes such as Spanish, and clubs focusing on STEM or arts were frequently mentioned. Many respondents highlighted the desire for more time spent on subjects they enjoy, such as science, reading, and writing, proposing that a variety of academic programs could better engage students and stimulate their curiosity.

Parent and Community Engagement

A recurring theme in the responses was the desire for greater parent involvement in school activities. Students expressed the need for initiatives like "Bring Your Parent to School" days to showcase their learning experiences and foster relationships between families and the school community. This theme also touched on creating a welcoming atmosphere that encourages parental support in educational endeavors, ultimately enhancing the overall school experience for both students and their families.

Diverse Extracurricular Opportunities

The survey responses indicated a strong demand for more extracurricular clubs and activities to cater to varied interests among students. Requests for arts-based programs, sports clubs, and performance arts such as theater classes were common. Respondents believed that expanding these extracurricular options would provide opportunities for students to explore their passions, build social connections, and develop new skills outside of the standard curriculum, making school a more enriching environment.

Improved Food and Dining Experience

Responses also expressed concerns about the quality of food provided in the school cafeteria. Many students suggested that enhancing the dining experience with healthier, tastier meal options or introducing event-themed days such as "movie day" lunches would significantly uplift their school experience. Moreover, ideas like offering snacks in classrooms and creating a more enjoyable lunchtime environment underscored the students' desire for a positive atmosphere that caters to their needs, strengthens social interactions, and makes meals something to look forward to.



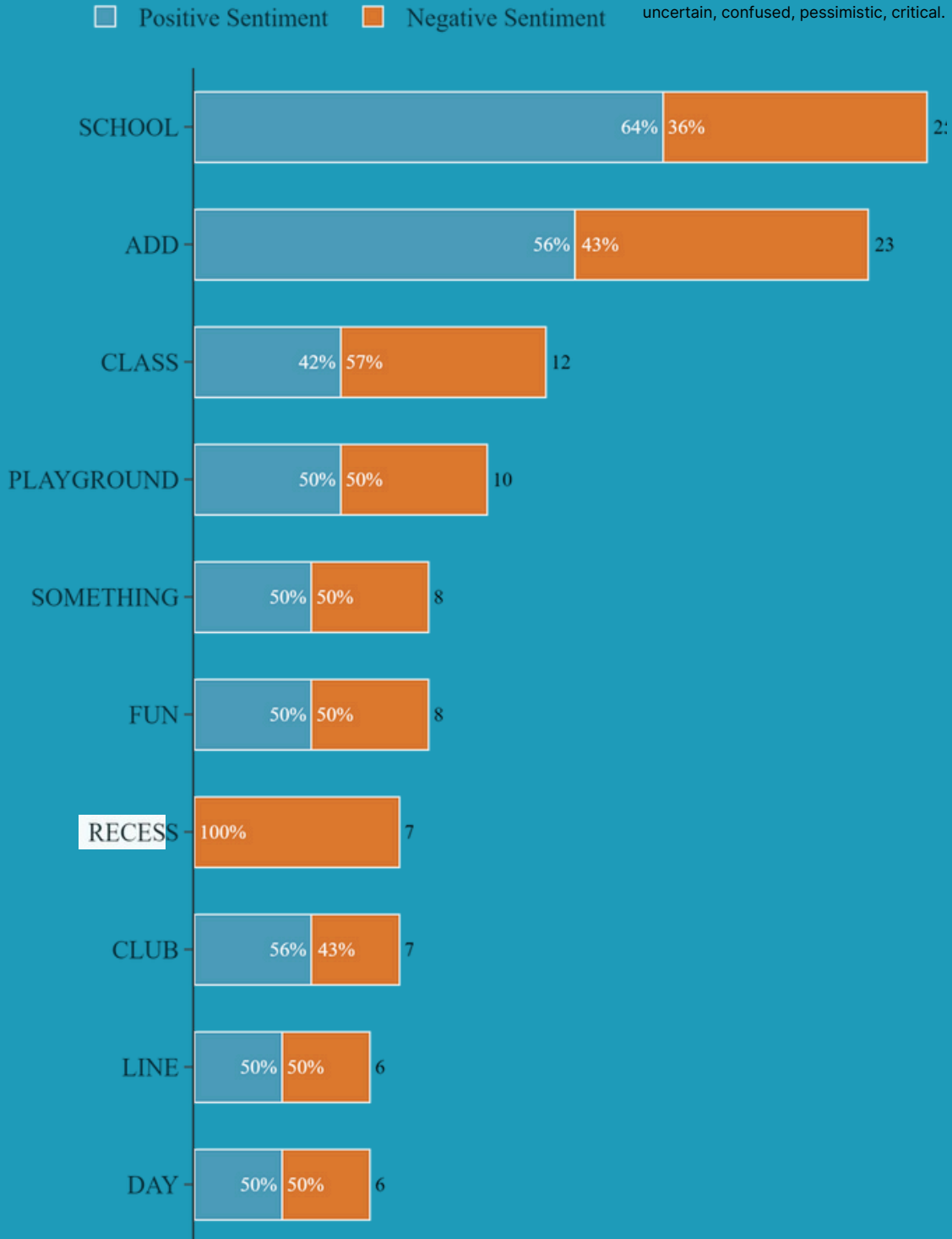
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PART II

MIDDLE SCHOOL VOICE



INNOVATE | K12

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS MIDDLE SCHOOL VOICE

The Frequency of Words Expressed

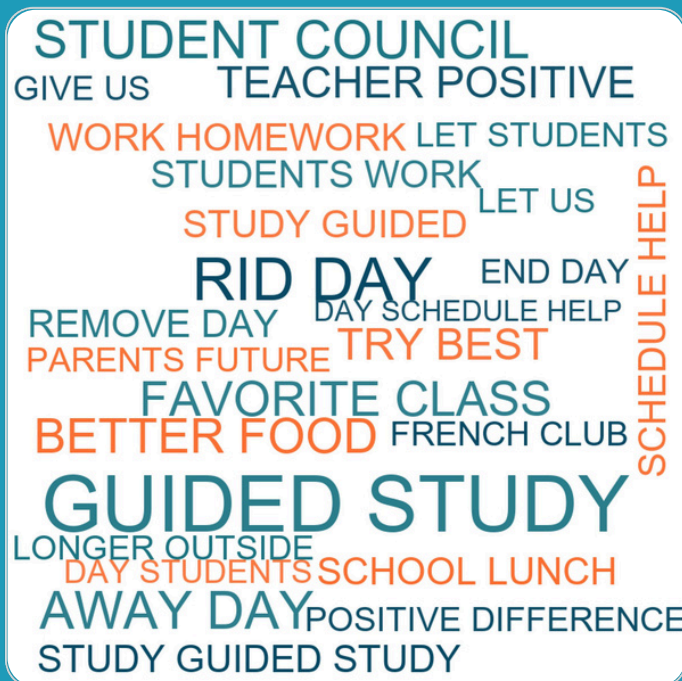


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MOTIVATION

PROMPT

What inspires or motivates you to try your best at school?

THEMES

- Academic Achievement
- Family Influence
- Future Aspirations
- Peer Influence
- Extrinsic and Intrinsic Rewards

Academic Achievement

A predominant theme that emerges from the survey responses is the strong motivation derived from academic achievement, particularly the drive to attain good grades. Many students explicitly mention that grades serve as a primary source of inspiration, with phrases such as "I want to get good grades," "the joy of learning," and "I try my best to get A's" reflecting a clear emphasis on academic performance. This focus on grades showcases a competitive environment where students recognize that achieving high marks is not only an accomplishment but also a gateway to future opportunities. The responses suggest an intrinsic desire to learn, paired with the extrinsic motivation of achieving academic excellence.

Family Influence

Family plays a significant role in motivating students, with many responses highlighting parental expectations and support as a driving force. Students mention their parents' approval and the impact of family on their academic efforts, often stating that they strive to make their parents proud or meet their expectations. The connection between family and education is underscored in comments about parental guidance reminding them to work hard for a better future. This theme illustrates the importance of familial relationships in shaping students' motivation, reinforcing the idea that support from loved ones can deeply influence academic endeavors.

Future Aspirations

A clear theme present is the aspiration for a successful future, with many students articulating their desire to excel academically in pursuit of long-term goals such as attending college or securing a stable career. Phrases like "I want to perform well so that I can have a promising future" and "achieving the best grades will lead to success later on" highlight the forward-thinking mindset among students, suggesting that their current efforts in school are intrinsically linked to their visions for adulthood and professional aims. This forward-looking attitude serves as a powerful motivator, as students connect their daily academic tasks to their ultimate ambitions.

Peer Influence

The role of peers in motivating students to perform at their best is another recurring theme in the feedback, with many mentioning that friends act as a source of inspiration and encouragement. Comments regarding competitiveness among peers, the desire to keep up with friends, or wishing to connect through shared experiences indicate that social relationships significantly affect educational outcomes. This influence suggests that the school environment further fosters motivation through collaboration and competition, where students feel propelled to excel not just for themselves but also to align with the aspirations of their peers.

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Rewards

Responses reflect a blend of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations that drive students' efforts in school. While many students refer to the desire to avoid negative consequences, like having privileges limited (e.g., being able to hang out with friends or keeping their phone), others highlight the personal satisfaction and joy of learning as powerful motivators. This theme captures the complexity of student motivation where external rewards, such as good grades and college admission, coexist with internal drives, like a genuine love for knowledge and the aspirations to improve oneself. This duality emphasizes the multifaceted nature of educational motivation, showcasing how both types of motivations can coexist and affect student performance.



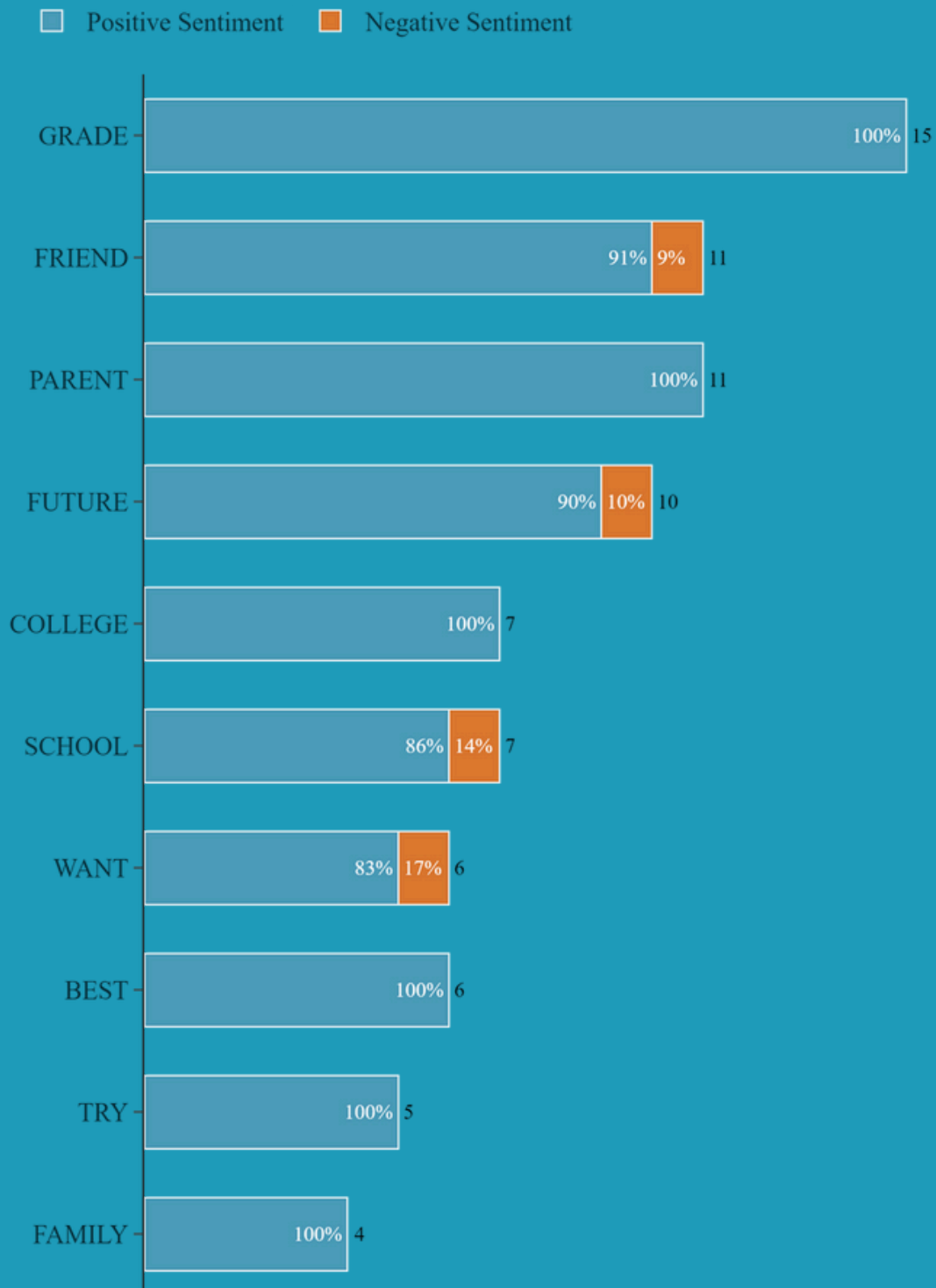
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IMPROVEMENTS

PROMPT

What changes could make your school experience more enjoyable or help you learn better?

THEMES

- Flexibility in Learning Environment
- Increased Breaks and Outdoor Time
- Improvement of School Food Quality
- Abolishing Day 7 Schedules
- Supportive and Engaging Teacher Interactions

Flexibility in Learning Environment

Survey responses reveal a strong desire for a more flexible learning environment that accommodates students' preferences and promotes engagement. Many students expressed the need for options like choosing their seats in class, which could enhance comfort and social interaction. Additionally, there are requests for a more interactive classroom experience where teachers guide students through material multiple times, especially in challenging subjects like math and language. This flexibility is seen as vital for creating an enjoyable atmosphere that caters to diverse learning styles while helping students feel more capable and supported.

Increased Breaks and Outdoor Time

A consistent theme among the responses is the desire for additional breaks and more time spent outdoors. Students have noted that extended outdoor periods can help them relax, recharge, and interact with friends, leading to improved focus during lessons. Requests for longer lunch breaks and more opportunities to take a break during rigorous academics indicate the importance of mental breaks for student wellness and productivity. Giving students the chance to unwind is perceived as beneficial not only for their educational outcomes but also for their overall enjoyment of the school experience.

Improvement of School Food Quality

Many responses highlighted dissatisfaction with the quality of food available in schools. Students expressed the need for better, more nourishing meals, with some even suggesting options like snacks and candy during class. The connection between food and energy levels was evident, as students noted that eating well positively impacts their focus and productivity. Enhancing the school lunch program is recognized as a straightforward adjustment that could significantly improve overall student satisfaction and learning effectiveness.

Abolishing Day 7 Schedules

A common complaint was about the Day 7 schedule, which many students believe disrupts their learning experience. Numerous respondents expressed that this day is disorienting and takes away valuable time needed to complete homework and study effectively. By advocating for the removal of this schedule component, students hope to have a more coherent and manageable daily routine that fosters a conducive environment for learning. This sentiment indicates a larger theme of needing organization and structure within the school day to facilitate better educational outcomes.

Supportive and Engaging Teacher Interactions

Students emphasized the need for a kinder and more supportive environment fostered by teachers. Many responses stressed the importance of teachers being approachable, understanding, and willing to offer help without judgment. A nurturing classroom culture is viewed as essential for fostering connections and improving motivation across different subjects. Additionally, students requested more engaging, hands-on learning experiences, recognizing that when teachers integrate fun, varied activities into lessons, students are more likely to excel and enjoy their time at school.



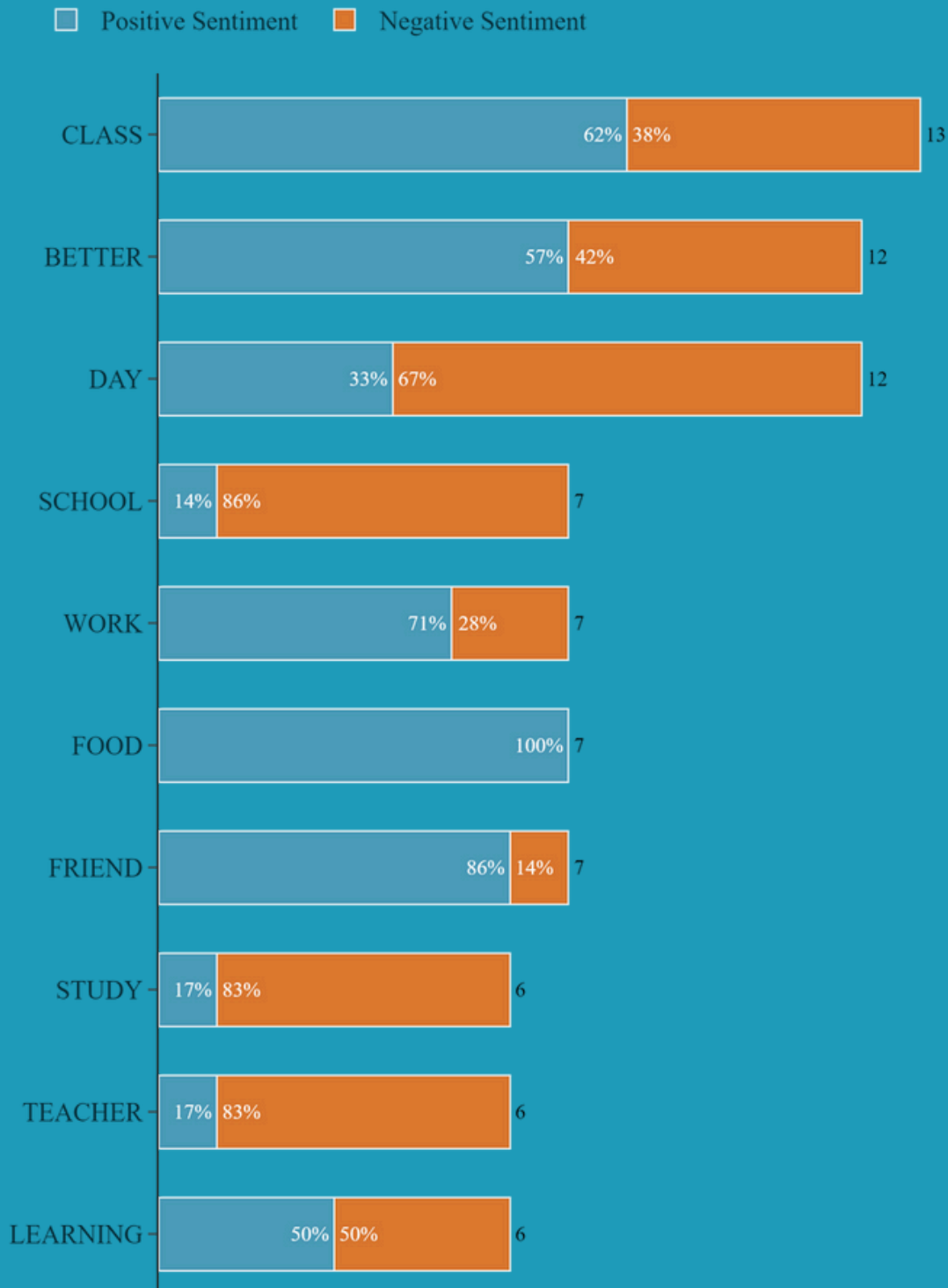
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BEST TIMES

PROMPT

What's your favorite club class or activity at school and what do you enjoy most about it?

THEMES

- Peer Interaction and Socialization
- Supportive and Engaging Educators
- Enjoyment of Creative and Hands-On Activities
- Academic Interests and Challenges
- Club Involvement and Leadership Opportunities

Peer Interaction and Socialization

Many students expressed their appreciation for clubs and classes that provide opportunities for social interaction and camaraderie. Activities such as lunch, gym, and team sports like JV soccer and basketball allow students to connect with friends and build new relationships. For instance, students enjoy PE because it's a chance to let loose and hang out with peers. Clubs like the student council are also valued for facilitating connection with classmates who are not in their regular classes, highlighting the importance of social dynamics in the school experience.

Supportive and Engaging Educators

A recurring theme in the survey responses is the positive impact that enthusiastic and supportive teachers have on students' enjoyment of classes. Teachers like Mr. Suzuki in orchestra and Mr. Ferro in science were frequently mentioned for making learning enjoyable and engaging. Students appreciate when instructors foster a positive classroom environment, as seen with clubs and classes where the educator transforms the space into one of joy and creativity, encouraging students to express themselves and explore their interests.

Enjoyment of Creative and Hands-On Activities

Responses indicate a strong preference for classes and clubs that involve hands-on learning or creativity. Activities like art club, science experiments, and drama games received praise for their engaging nature. Students find joy in activities where they can express themselves, such as drawing or building projects out of random objects. This theme reflects an appreciation for experiential learning, demonstrating that many students thrive in environments that allow them to be creative and physically involved rather than strictly theoretical.

Academic Interests and Challenges

Several students indicated their favorite classes based on personal academic interests or the level of challenge they provide. For example, subjects like English and science were mentioned not only for their content but also for the enjoyment of the challenge they present. Students enjoy English particularly for the creativity involved in writing and reading, while science is appreciated for its hands-on experiments. This reveals that students often seek out classes that stimulate their intellectual curiosity and provide them a way to engage with learning actively.

Club Involvement and Leadership Opportunities

Students highlighted the value they find in being part of various clubs, especially in terms of civic engagement and leadership. Clubs like the student council and the POCU serve as platforms for students to express their opinions, connect with their peers, and become involved in school-wide matters. This theme illustrates that many students enjoy taking on responsibilities, planning events, and advocating for their fellow students, suggesting a desire to make an impact in their school community.



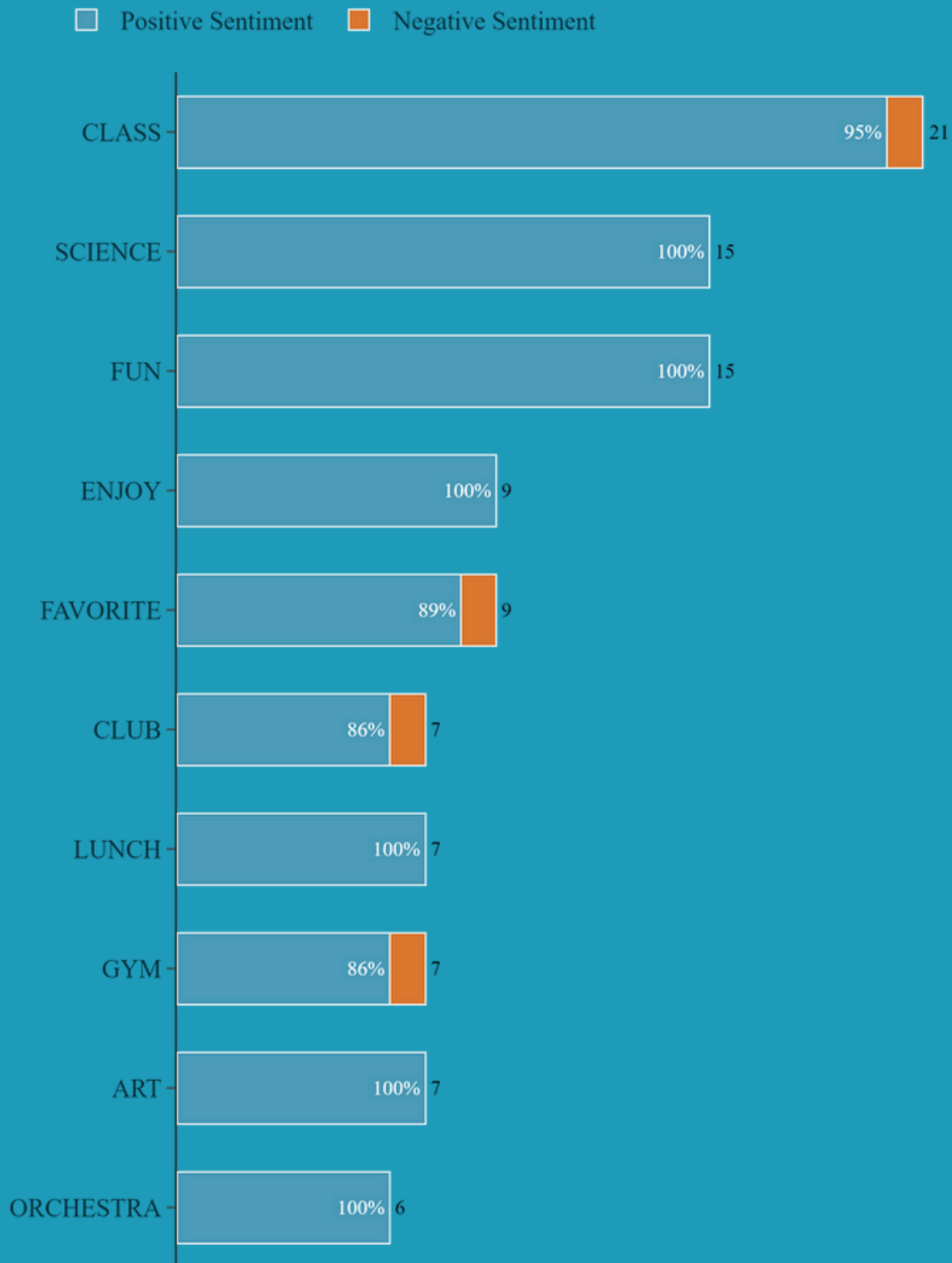
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EDUCATOR INFLUENCE

PROMPT

Can you share a memory of a teacher who made a positive difference in your life?

THEMES

- Support and Understanding
- Encouragement and Motivation
- Fun and Engaging Learning Environments
- Personalized Instruction and Attention
- Lasting Influence Beyond the Classroom

Support and Understanding

A recurring theme in the survey responses is the significant support and understanding provided by teachers. Many respondents highlighted how their teachers were not only academic instructors but also emotional support systems. For example, a teacher named Mrs. Oliver was remembered for helping a student through their ADHD diagnostic process, showcasing the role of educators in recognizing and accommodating diverse learning needs. Similarly, students expressed gratitude for teachers like Ms. S-F and Mr. Hunter, who created a nurturing environment where they felt comfortable asking questions and seeking help. The compassionate and empathetic approaches of these educators made a profound impact on students' confidence and overall educational experiences.

Encouragement and Motivation

Another prominent theme is the encouragement and motivation many teachers imparted to their students. For instance, Mr. Hunter was praised for challenging students to take on more difficult work in math, leading to improved grades and a greater sense of achievement. Students recounted how their teachers, including Ms. Jensen and Mr. Ferro, encouraged them to explore subjects like Latin and math in-depth, often going the extra mile to provide additional help outside of standard curriculum time. This motivating atmosphere inspired students to strive for personal bests and embrace their educational journeys with enthusiasm.

Fun and Engaging Learning Environments

Several responses emphasized the importance of having fun and engaging learning environments created by their teachers. Many students found joy in the educational experiences provided by teachers like Mr. Ferro, who allowed outdoor activities at the end of class, and Ms. Lyons, who organized enjoyable activities while ensuring students learned effectively. These positive interactions transformed the classroom into a space of exploration and joy, making learning memorable and effective. The ability of teachers to blend enjoyment with education played a vital role in fostering a love for learning among their students.

Personalized Instruction and Attention

A significant number of memories centered on the theme of personalized instruction, where teachers went out of their way to address the unique needs of individual students. For example, Ms. Blais was commended for her supportive approach in offering students the opportunity to redo quizzes and providing one-on-one explanations for complex topics. This tailored attention allowed students to feel recognized and valued, contributing greatly to their understanding and success in subjects like Latin and math. Educators who adapted their teaching strategies to meet the varied needs of their students left lasting impressions and significantly impacted their academic lives.

Lasting Influence Beyond the Classroom

Many respondents reflected on the enduring influence their teachers had on their lives beyond just academic accomplishments. Remarkably, several mentioned that the skills and values instilled by their teachers had long-term effects, such as the ability to enjoy reading and writing or understanding complex subjects. Some cited specific instances where teachers taught them practical life skills, like setting a table or recognizing action words, which remained with them beyond their school years. This theme highlights the transformative role educators play in shaping not only the intellectual abilities but also the personal growth and future aspirations of their students.



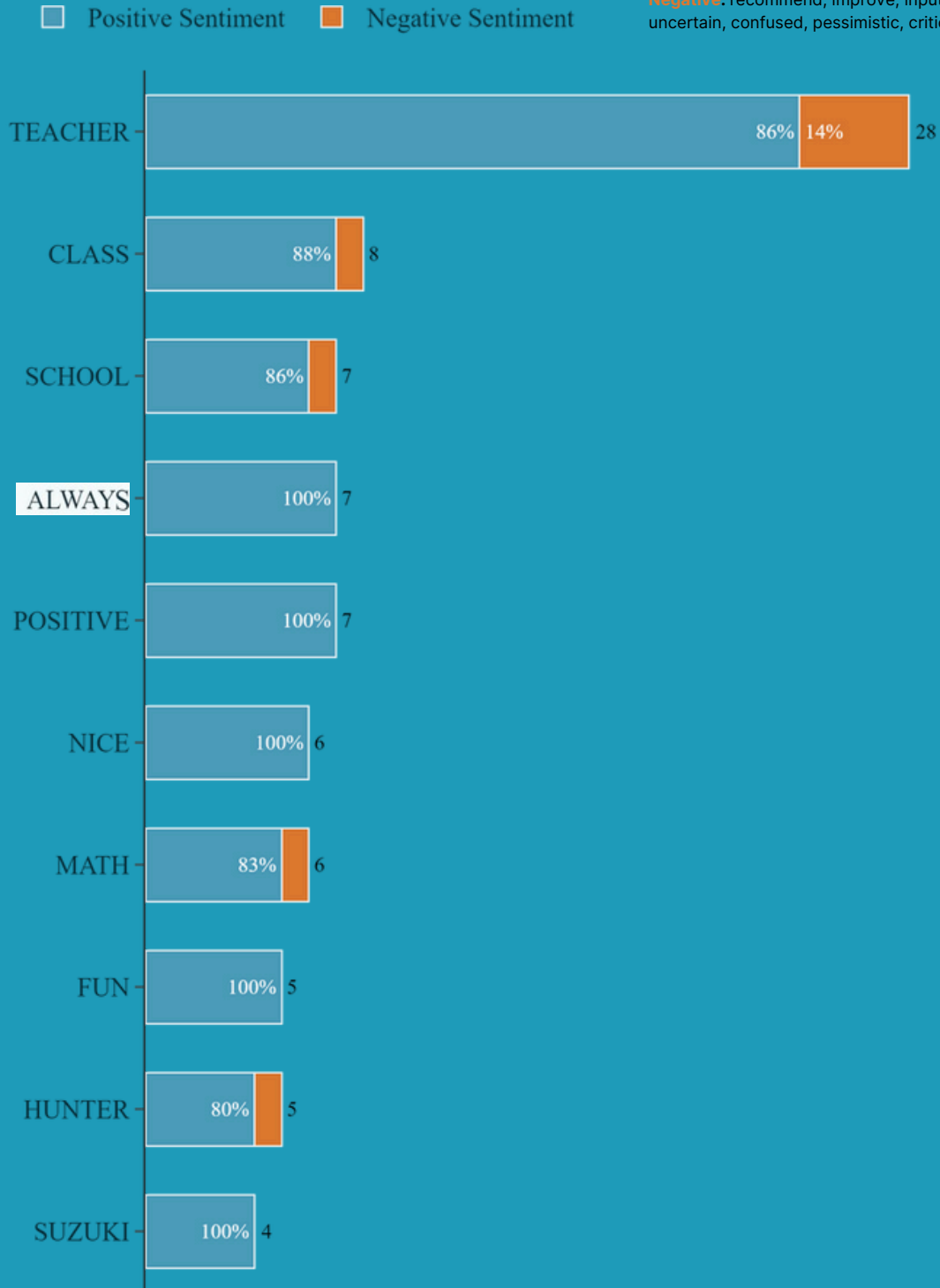
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See appendix for methodology.



SOMETHING NEW

PROMPT

If you could advocate for one improvement at your school what would it be and how could it benefit students?

THEMES

- Improved Scheduling and Class Structure
- Enhanced Outdoor and Break Opportunities
- Improved Food Options and Quality
- More Supportive and Engaging Teaching Practices
- Focus on Resources and Facilities Improvement

Improved Scheduling and Class Structure

Responses indicated a strong sentiment toward revising the school's class schedule, particularly the elimination of "Day 7." Many students expressed that Day 7 disrupts their study routines and makes managing extracurricular activities challenging. They suggested that a consistent guided study period would allow them to stay on top of assignments and reduce stress related to homework. Additionally, there were calls for a rotating schedule that would facilitate more engagement with their peers and teachers, thereby promoting a collaborative learning environment.

Enhanced Outdoor and Break Opportunities

A recurring theme was the need for more time spent outdoors and additional breaks during the day. Students articulated that extended outdoor periods could alleviate feelings of being "stir-crazy" from sitting inside all day. Fresh air, they argued, would not only refresh their minds but also enhance focus in class. By advocating for longer breaks, they believed the school could foster improved concentration and overall well-being, which are crucial for academic success.

Improved Food Options and Quality

Multiple responses highlighted dissatisfaction with the quality and variety of the school's lunch offerings. Students felt that better and more nutritious meals could lead to increased energy and motivation throughout the school day. They proposed having more food options and even vending machines filled with healthy snacks as a way to meet their dietary needs, emphasizing that when students enjoy their meals, they are more likely to engage in their studies.

More Supportive and Engaging Teaching Practices

Students voiced the need for teaching methods that encourage active learning rather than passive listening. Many expressed frustration with teachers who tended to lecture excessively, thus reducing valuable time for practical work and discussions. There were suggestions for a more interactive curriculum that offers varied instructional strategies, allowing students to take an active role in their education. This shift could help cater to diverse learning styles and improve student engagement.

Focus on Resources and Facilities Improvement

The condition of school facilities and available resources emerged as a significant concern. Respondents mentioned the need for better building upkeep, including renovations and maintenance to address mold and infrastructure issues. Additionally, they advocated for more funding for educational materials and supplies, which they believe are critical for effective learning. Ensuring that the environment is conducive to learning can greatly impact students' comfort, health, and academic performance, making it a priority for advocacy.



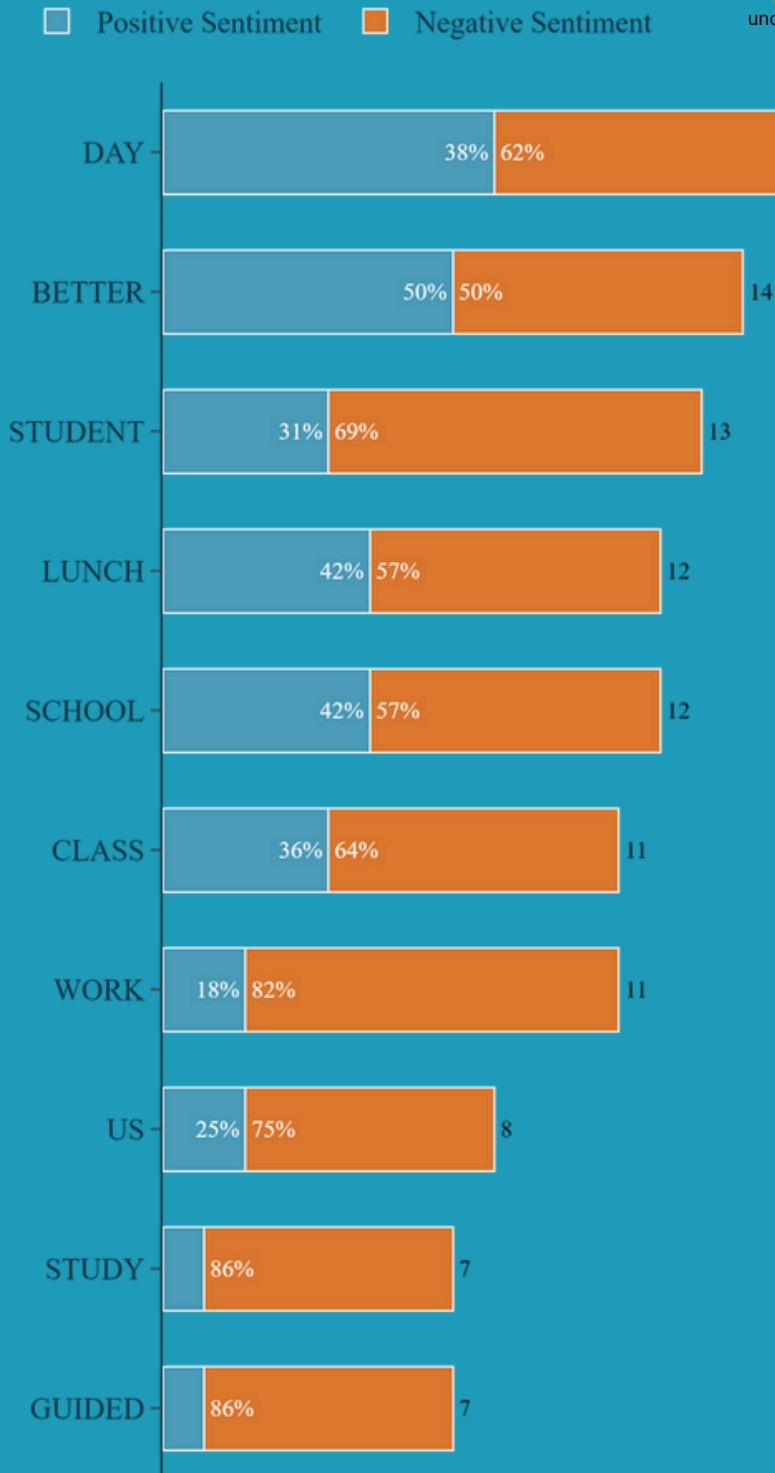
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Prompt: If you could advocate for one improvement at your school what would it be and how could it benefit students?

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See appendix for methodology.



PART III

HIGH SCHOOL VOICE

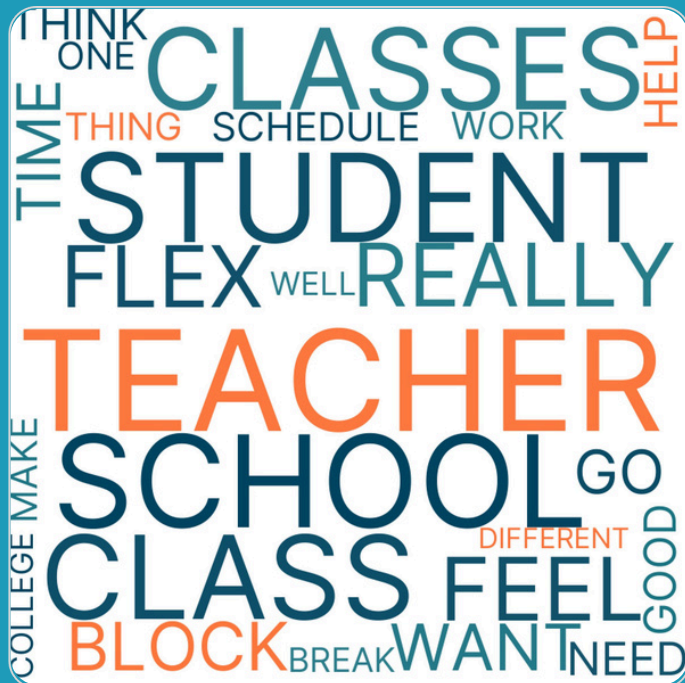


INNOVATE | K12

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

HIGH SCHOOL VOICE

The Frequency of Words Expressed

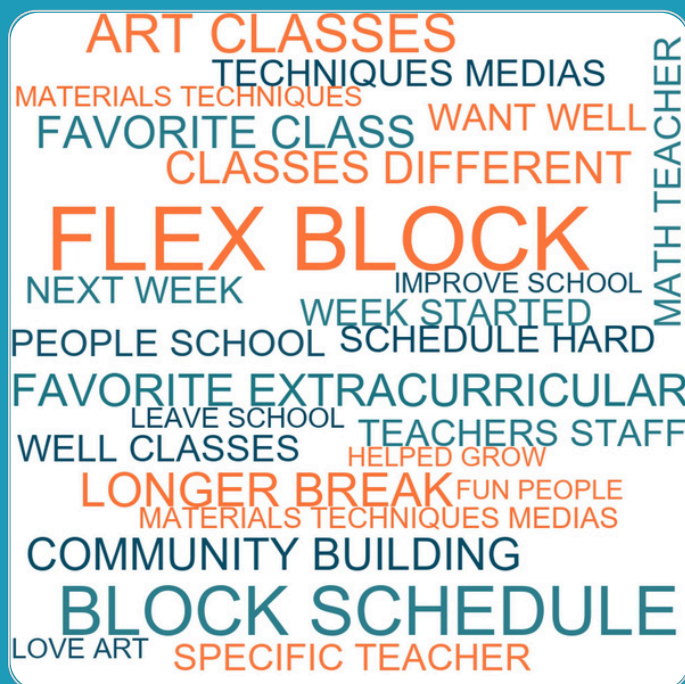


About this Chart:

Frequency of Words Expressed show the top words used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The less frequently used words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.

See Appendix for a summary of chart descriptions.

The Frequency of Language Patterns



About this Chart:

Frequency of Language Patterns show the top word groups used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The groups of words were identified using bigram and trigram analysis (continuous sequences of 2 and 3 words, respectively). The less frequently used clusters of words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.





THOSE WHO EXCEL

PROMPT

What drives you to excel in your classes and activities at school?

THEMES

- **Future Ambitions**
- **Supportive Teachers and Environment**
- **Personal Accountability and Self-Motivation**
- **Pressure from Parents and College Aspirations**
- **Enjoyment of Learning and Diverse Activities**

Future Ambitions

Many students express that their future ambitions drive them to excel in their classes and extracurricular activities. The desire to attend college and achieve career goals is a central motivator. Students recognize that the efforts they put into their education today will directly impact their opportunities tomorrow, leading them to prioritize their grades, especially in subjects aligned with their desired fields of study. This forward-looking perspective emphasizes the significance of educational achievements as stepping stones toward long-term success.

Supportive Teachers and Environment

Responses highlight the crucial role of supportive teachers in motivating students to excel. Students appreciate educators who are caring, understanding, and respectful, as these qualities create a positive learning atmosphere. The presence of inspiring teachers can ignite passion in students, encouraging them to engage deeply with the material. Additionally, a quiet and conducive learning environment is often mentioned as essential for academic success, illustrating that both personal and external factors shape students' motivation to excel.

Personal Accountability and Self-Motivation

A theme of personal accountability emerges in the responses, where students emphasize the importance of self-driven motivation in their academic performance. Many articulate a sense of control over their future, recognizing that their actions and dedication directly influence their educational outcomes. This mindset not only fosters a determination to achieve high grades but also fosters resilience and a proactive approach to learning, as students seek to understand their subjects thoroughly and take advantage of available resources.

Pressure from Parents and College Aspirations

The survey responses indicate that parental expectations and college admissions pressure significantly influence students' motivations to excel. Many students feel a responsibility to reflect well on their families through their academic achievements, leading them to fiercely pursue high grades. This external pressure, combined with their aspirations for college, shapes their academic endeavors and encourages them to engage with their studies earnestly, underscoring the delicate balance between support and pressure in the pursuit of success.

Enjoyment of Learning and Diverse Activities

Students also draw motivation from their genuine enjoyment of learning and participation in various activities. Those who express a passion for their subjects report that engagement in their classes makes the effort feel worthwhile. The opportunity to explore different areas—whether through academic subjects or extracurricular involvement—adds to the appeal of schooling. This intrinsic motivation, combined with the desire for academic success, creates a dynamic where students actively seek knowledge and experiences that contribute to their overall growth and development.



The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

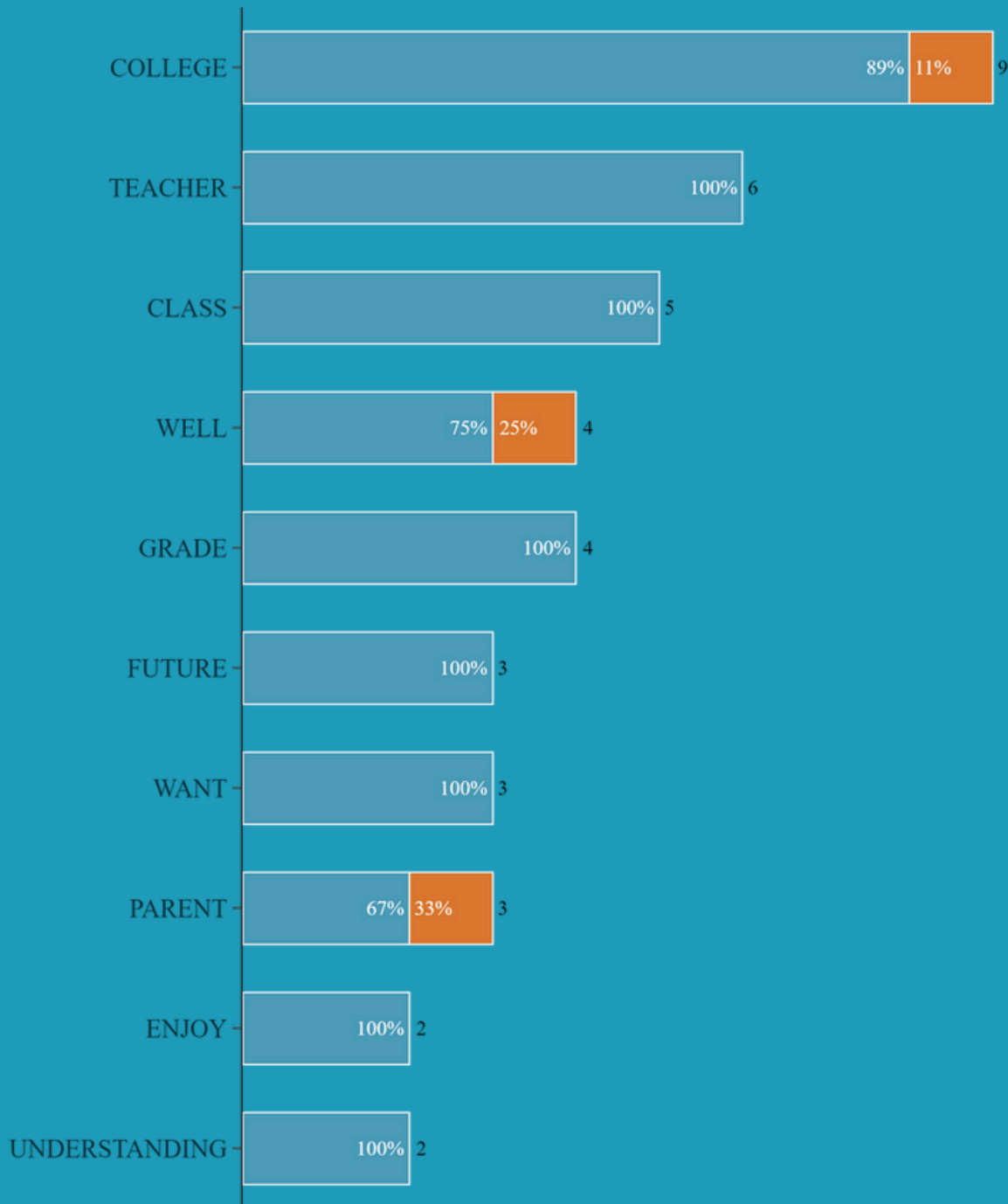
Prompt: What drives you to excel in your classes and activities at school?

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Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.

□ Positive Sentiment ■ Negative Sentiment



See appendix for methodology.



IMPROVEMENTS

PROMPT

What could be changed or improved to make school more effective or meaningful for you?

THEMES

- **Need for Breaks and Class Structure Adjustments**
- **Enhanced Community Building and Engagement**
- **Relevance and Inclusivity of Curriculum**
- **Improved Social Interactions and Friendships**
- **Timeliness of Feedback and Assessment**

Need for Breaks and Class Structure Adjustments

Many students expressed a desire for more frequent breaks and a reconsideration of the class duration. The current model of 80-minute classes with only a lunch break can be overwhelming, especially for teenagers who struggle with focus and attention. Several responses highlighted that shorter class times or mandatory breaks would better accommodate students' learning styles and mental health, allowing them to recharge and engage more effectively with the material. The idea of introducing additional breaks or modifying the class schedule to reduce back-to-back sessions was a consistent theme, indicating that students feel fatigued and unable to perform at their best under the current structure.

Relevance and Inclusivity of Curriculum

A significant number of students voiced concerns regarding the inclusivity and relevance of the school curriculum. While the school promotes values such as anti-racism and inclusivity, some students felt that the actual content did not reflect these ideals. Specifically, they pointed to examples in history classes where critical topics were superficially addressed or glossed over. These students emphasized the need for a curriculum that truly represents diverse perspectives and incorporates significant historical events in a meaningful way, calling for lessons that allow all students to see themselves reflected in the education they receive.

Timeliness of Feedback and Assessment

Another prevalent theme in the responses was the desire for more timely feedback on assignments and assessments. Students expressed frustration over delayed grading and a lack of immediate relevance to their learning process. They indicated that receiving grades sooner would help them understand their strengths and areas for improvement before moving on to new topics. This desire for quicker feedback reveals a need for a more responsive educational environment where students feel their efforts are recognized and can apply constructive criticism effectively.

Enhanced Community Building and Engagement

Several students highlighted the importance of fostering a stronger sense of community within their schools. They noted that social events and opportunities for collaborative projects could enhance the overall school experience. Many felt isolated and suggested that organized activities centered around shared academic interests could help build relationships among peers. This need for community and collaboration suggests that students are looking for environments where they feel connected to one another and invested in collective learning experiences beyond the traditional classroom setup.

Improved Social Interactions and Friendships

Students expressed a desire for greater flexibility in course offerings and scheduling. Many indicated that they wanted more diverse academic choices to cater to their interests and career aspirations, emphasizing that some subjects are only available in later years, thus limiting their educational paths. Furthermore, a preference for traditional semester schedules over block schedules was referenced, particularly by those involved in subjects like music or languages, which they felt would benefit from longer, continuous engagements rather than being split into shorter semesters. This theme points to a need for schools to adapt their scheduling to better meet the varied needs and interests of students.



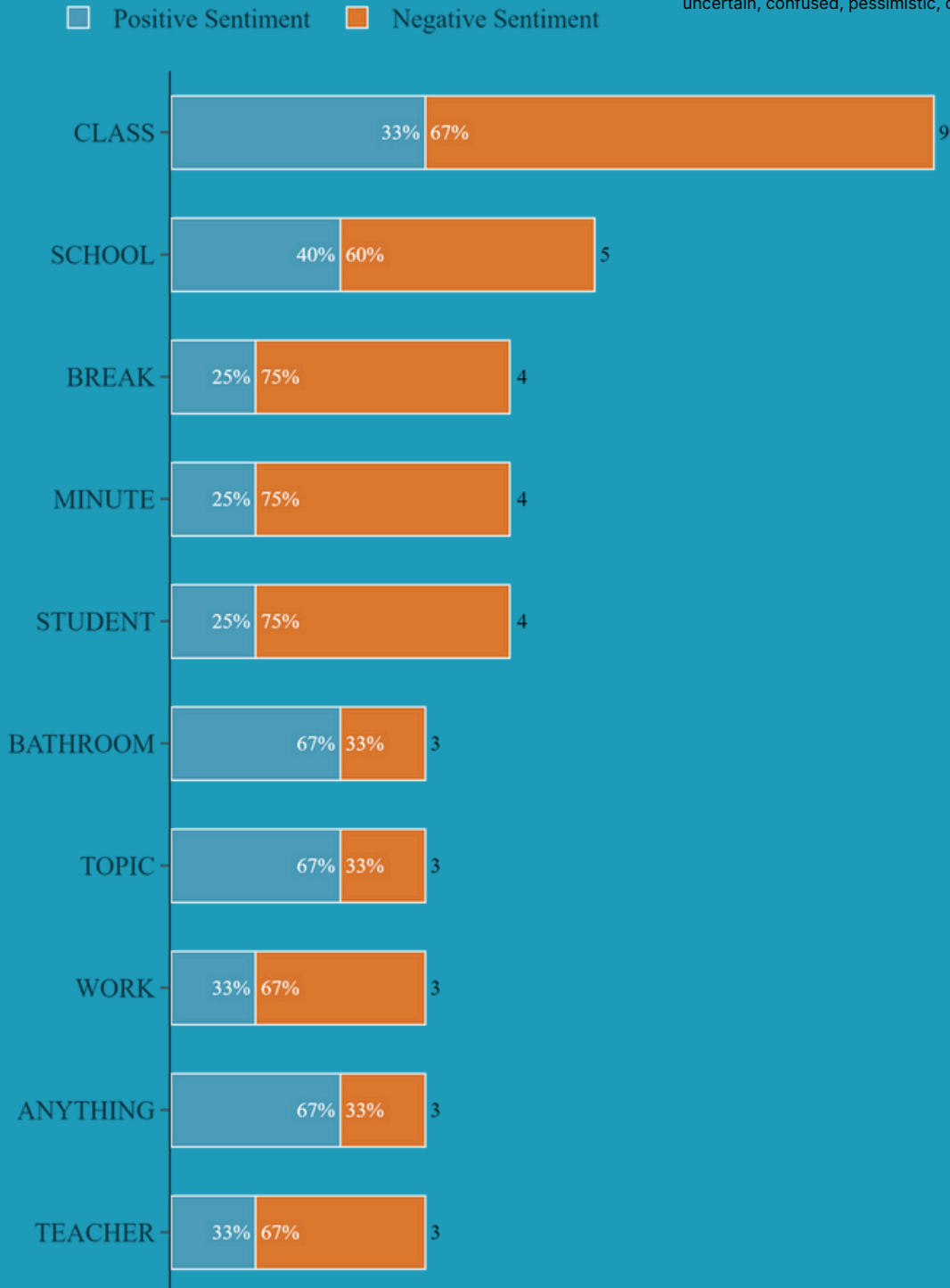
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

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See appendix for methodology.



BEST TIMES

PROMPT

What's your favorite extracurricular or class at school and what impact has it had on you?

THEMES

- **Impact of Arts on Identity and Community**
- **Academic Influence and Career Direction**
- **Team Spirit and Community in Sports**
- **Teacher Influence and Engagement**
- **Personal Growth through Extracurriculars**

Impact of Arts on Identity and Community

Many students highlighted how their involvement in arts classes and extracurricular activities, such as theater and various art forms, has significantly impacted their sense of identity and belonging. Responses revealed that being part of the theater program allowed individuals to make lasting friendships and provided them with a supportive environment that helped overcome personal challenges like stage fright. Additionally, students expressed appreciation for the variety of art classes available, noting that experimenting with different materials and techniques fostered creativity and self-expression. This theme underscores the importance of artistic engagement in helping students feel more connected to their peers and in cultivating a positive school culture.

Academic Influence and Career Direction

Several survey participants indicated that specific academic classes played a crucial role in shaping their futures and career aspirations. For instance, students noted that their experiences in subjects like biology and electrical engineering sparked a newfound interest in scientific fields, prompting them to consider careers in biology or technology. This theme emphasizes the impact of high-quality teaching and engaging class content in guiding students toward their professional paths, suggesting that meaningful academic experiences can significantly influence their educational trajectories and future endeavors.

Team Spirit and Community in Sports

Responses regarding sports highlighted the strong sense of community and teamwork fostered through athletic involvement. Many students expressed how being part of sports teams, such as swimming and field hockey, provided them with a sense of belonging and motivation to succeed. The camaraderie and support from teammates were central to their positive experiences, reinforcing the idea that sports are not just about competition but also about cultivating friendships and collaboration. This theme illustrates the importance of sports in enhancing school culture and promoting personal growth through teamwork.

Teacher Influence and Engagement

The role of teachers emerged as a crucial theme in shaping students' academic experiences and interests. Many responses praised specific educators who inspired and engaged them in their subjects, such as AP Biology and art classes. The enthusiasm and commitment of teachers not only made learning enjoyable but also motivated students to explore their interests further and develop a passion for their fields. This theme highlights the pivotal role that effective and dedicated educators play in fostering student engagement and success within the classroom.

Personal Growth through Extracurriculars

Extracurricular activities such as student council and various clubs have been pivotal in promoting personal growth among students. Participants shared how engaging in these activities helped them develop leadership skills, challenge themselves, and build confidence. For example, early morning clubs not only improved students' sleep schedules but also provided them with structured opportunities to interact with peers and take on responsibilities. This theme underscores the vital role that extracurriculars play in enhancing students' self-esteem, social skills, and overall educational experience.



The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

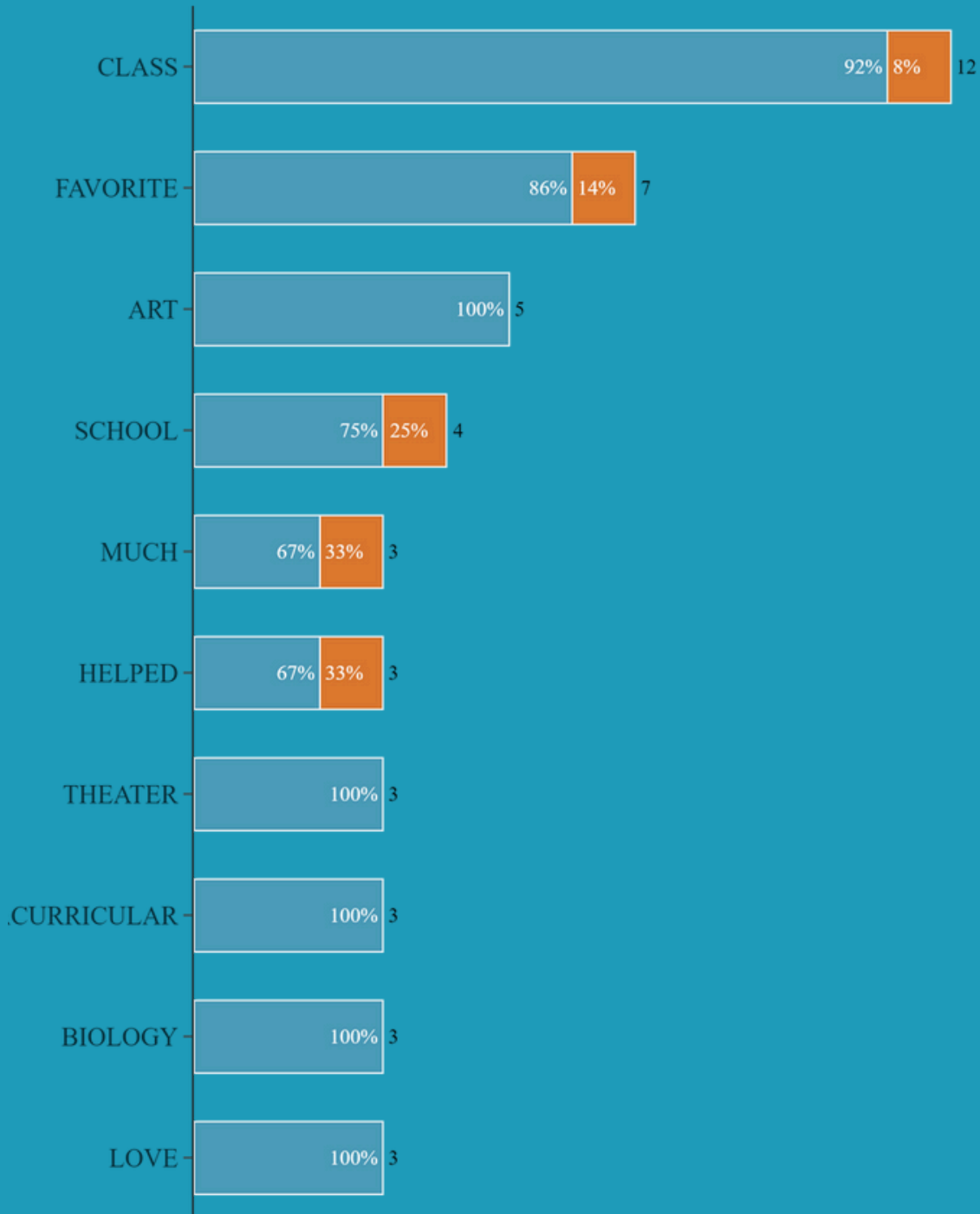
Prompt: What's your favorite extracurricular or class at school and what impact has it had on you?

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Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.

Positive Sentiment Negative Sentiment



See appendix for methodology.





EDUCATOR INFLUENCE

PROMPT

Describe a time when a teacher's support or guidance helped you see things differently or grow as a person.

THEMES

- **Teacher Support in Academic Understanding**
- **Emotional and Social Growth**
- **Encouragement of Individual Passions**
- **Creating an Inclusive and Accepting Environment**
- **Motivation and Accountability**

Teacher Support in Academic Understanding

Many respondents shared experiences where teachers provided crucial support in understanding academic subjects, helping them grasp complex concepts and inspiring them to engage more deeply with their studies. For instance, a geometry teacher, Rudy Cassidy, assisted a overwhelmed student who struggled with proofs, making concepts more understandable. Similarly, another student expressed gratitude towards Mr. Cardozo for transforming a challenging subject into an enjoyable experience, highlighting the importance of patient instruction and creating a positive learning atmosphere. These testimonies underscore how educators can significantly influence students' academic success and self-confidence.

Emotional and Social Growth

Survey responses often highlighted the role teachers played in fostering emotional growth and creating a supportive environment where students felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and feelings. A respondent mentioned a specific teacher who offered a listening ear and unconditional support, allowing the student to confide openly about personal difficulties. This kind of trust not only helped the student feel valued but also emphasized the importance of strong teacher-student relationships in promoting mental well-being. Additionally, several students described how guidance from teachers led to a greater understanding of their own behaviors and perspectives, ultimately facilitating personal growth.

Encouragement of Individual Passions

Several students recounted experiences where teachers helped ignite their passions and talents beyond the standard curriculum. For example, Todd Fruth, a music teacher, was noted for pushing students to reach their full potential as singers, demonstrating how personalized encouragement can fuel a student's pursuit of their interests. Others mentioned English and engineering teachers who nurtured their literary and technical aspirations, respectively, by connecting them with professionals in those fields. These instances illustrate the significant impact educators have in helping students explore and develop their individual interests, leading to a more fulfilling educational experience.

Creating an Inclusive and Accepting Environment

A common thread in the responses was the appreciation for teachers who cultivated an inclusive and accepting classroom environment. Students expressed gratitude for teachers who were open-minded and tolerant of diverse opinions, which allowed for richer discussions and a sense of community in the classroom. A respondent emphasized how one English teacher was particularly impactful in making a typically disliked subject enjoyable by fostering an atmosphere that encouraged participation and respect for all viewpoints. Such an environment not only enhances learning but also promotes social cohesion among students.

Motivation and Accountability

The survey responses reflected a strong desire for accountability and motivation from educators, showing that certain teachers have positively influenced students' approaches to their work and personal responsibilities. For instance, a student recounted being called out by Mr. Fricke for disrespectful behavior, which prompted self-reflection and growth. Others mentioned the motivation they received from teachers regarding their health and priorities, indicating how educators can play a pivotal role in shaping students' attitudes toward their academic responsibilities and overall well-being. This theme highlights the broader impact teachers have in instilling a sense of responsibility and ambition in their students.



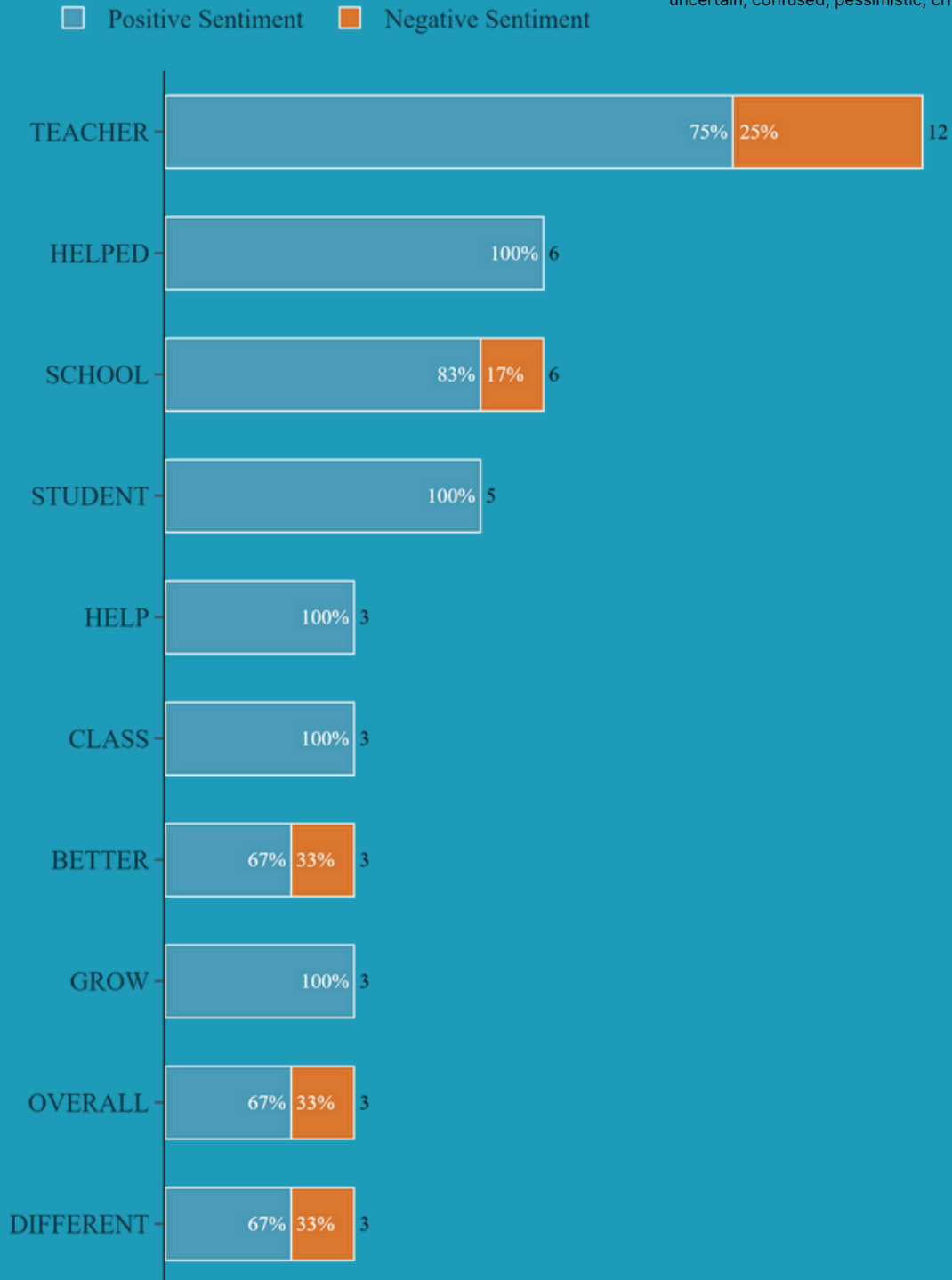
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Prompt: Describe a time when a teacher's support or guidance helped you see things differently or grow as a person.

*Emotions Scale

Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



See appendix for methodology.



FLEX BLOCK

PROMPT

Use the space below to comment on the structure of the overarching schedule specifically FLEX Block period.

THEMES

- Flexibility and Student Choice
- Scheduling Conflicts and Restrictions
- Senior Privileges and Autonomy
- Impact on Academic Stress
- General Sentiment Toward Structure

Flexibility and Student Choice

Many survey respondents appreciate the flexible nature of the Flex Block period, noting that it allows them to decide where to go based on their individual workloads and needs. This autonomy is seen as beneficial, as it promotes a more tailored learning experience during a time that would typically be dedicated strictly to a specific subject. Students enjoy the option to seek help from different teachers or use the time for club activities and personal work. This blend of structure and choice empowers them to manage their time more effectively, which is particularly significant in a rigorous academic environment.

Scheduling Conflicts and Restrictions

Despite the appreciation for flexibility, several students express frustration with the restrictions placed on them during the Flex Block period. Issues arise when respondents have multiple obligations or classes overlapping in the same time frame. For instance, some students mention needing to attend a required music class or facing conflicts with existing tests that fall during Flex time, which limits their ability to access help from various teachers. This perception of being "locked in" to certain classes or requirements can detract from the intended purpose of Flex Block and lead to added stress.

Senior Privileges and Autonomy

A recurring theme in the responses is the call for different treatment based on grade levels, particularly for seniors. Some survey participants argue that seniors, who may have jobs or external commitments, should have the option to make Flex Block an optional period. This suggestion speaks to a broader desire for autonomy as students approach graduation and prepare for life after high school. By granting seniors greater freedom during Flex Block, the district could acknowledge their developing independence and varied responsibilities outside of school.

Impact on Academic Stress

Another common sentiment is the way the Flex Block schedule interacts with students' academic pressures. Several respondents note that having tests scheduled across multiple classes on the same day leads to heightened stress levels. Despite appreciating the Flex Block's potential for assistance and extra study time, the tight knit of the academic calendar can contribute to an overwhelming workload that diminishes the benefits of having that extra time. Survey respondents suggest that the structure of Flex Block might need to be revisited to better accommodate students' needs and mitigate stress.

General Sentiment Toward Structure

Overall, responses reflect a blend of positive and negative sentiments toward the overall structure of the Flex Block. Many students have grown to appreciate its benefits over previous scheduling models, noting an improvement in their ability to engage with their studies. However, the strict nature of attendance and mandatory participation, even when students feel they have no obligations, has prompted mixed emotions. Respondents seem to desire a balance where flexibility is maintained while still recognizing the individual needs and circumstances of each student.



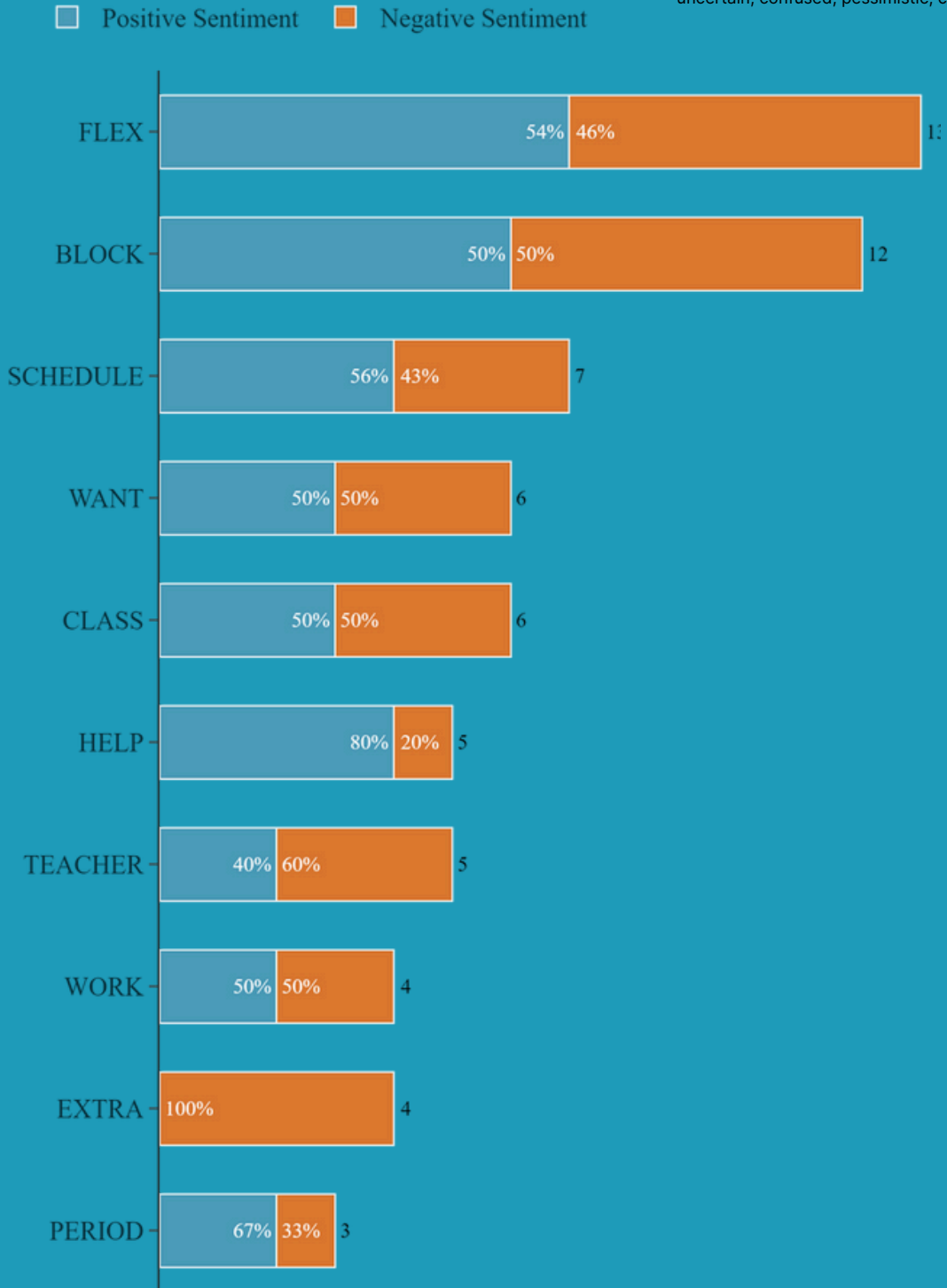
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See appendix for methodology.



SOMETHING NEW

PROMPT

If you could advocate for one improvement at your school what would it be and how could it benefit students.

THEMES

- **Improved School Policies on Personal Devices**
- **Enhanced Breaks and Reduced Burnout**
- **Greater Inclusivity in the Curriculum**
- **Improved Facilities and Accessibility**
- **Support for Diverse Learning Needs**

Improved School Policies on Personal Devices

Many students expressed frustration over the school's restrictive phone policy, arguing that a complete ban does not address underlying issues, such as safety and communication. Instead, they believe a more lenient approach could empower students to use their devices responsibly while fostering a more open environment. By reconsidering policy constraints, the school could potentially create a sense of trust among students and improve their overall sense of security and belonging.

Enhanced Breaks and Reduced Burnout

Several respondents highlighted the importance of longer breaks and more downtime within the school day, suggesting that the current schedule contributes to student burnout and stress. Acknowledging the pressure students face academically, proponents believe that increased break times would not only lead to a more balanced school experience but also promote better mental health. This change could enhance students' focus and productivity, resulting in a happier and more engaged school community.

Greater Inclusivity in the Curriculum

Calls for a more inclusive history curriculum were prevalent, with students expressing the need for recognition of various societal perspectives, particularly regarding issues of race, gender, and social justice. Survey participants noted that current educational materials often ignore the historical context of controversial authors and their views, which can perpetuate outdated ideologies. By integrating more diverse narratives and encouraging critical thinking about such topics, the school can cultivate an informed student body better equipped to engage with the complexities of contemporary society.

Improved Facilities and Accessibility

A significant number of students raised concerns regarding inadequate facilities, particularly bathrooms, which were described as unsafe and unhygienic due to strict usage policies. Students felt that the limitations placed on bathroom access not only hindered their comfort but also reflected a broader issue of safety and inclusivity within the school environment. Advocating for accessible and open bathrooms would demonstrate a commitment to student well-being and create a healthier atmosphere for all.

Support for Diverse Learning Needs

Responses stressed the need for better accommodations for students with disabilities, particularly those on the autism spectrum. Many students reported feelings of neglect due to a lack of tailored support and the lengthy processes required to secure necessary educational plans. By prioritizing individual learning needs and implementing effective support systems, the school could enhance the educational experience for all students, making learning more accessible and encouraging a wider range of talents and abilities to flourish.



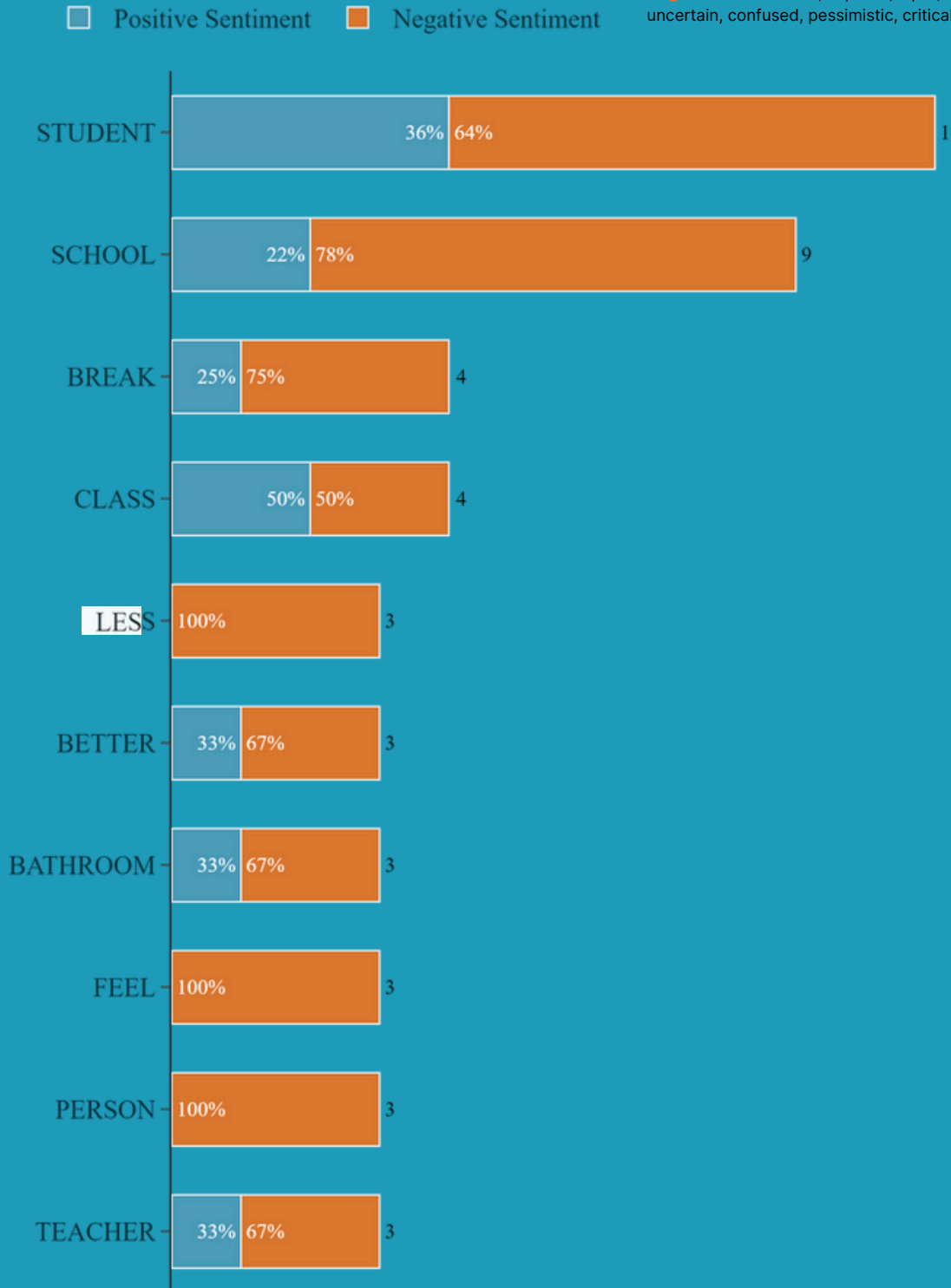
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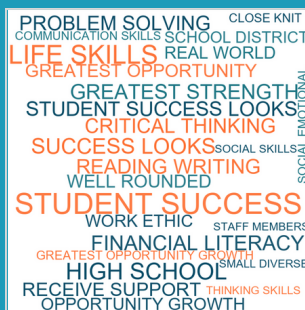
APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY



The Frequency of Words Expressed

This figure shows the top words used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The less frequently used words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.



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The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

The ten most commonly used words were identified by determining whether the word appeared at least once per shared idea. Stop words were removed prior to the analysis. Once the words were identified, the sentiment breakdown was determined by utilizing a state-of-the-art, fine-tuned BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representation for Transformer) NLP (natural language processing) model.

CULTURE AND CLIMATE AMONGST STAFF

Prepared for Amherst Regional Public Schools
October 2024



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OVERALL INPUT

ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

About the Initiative

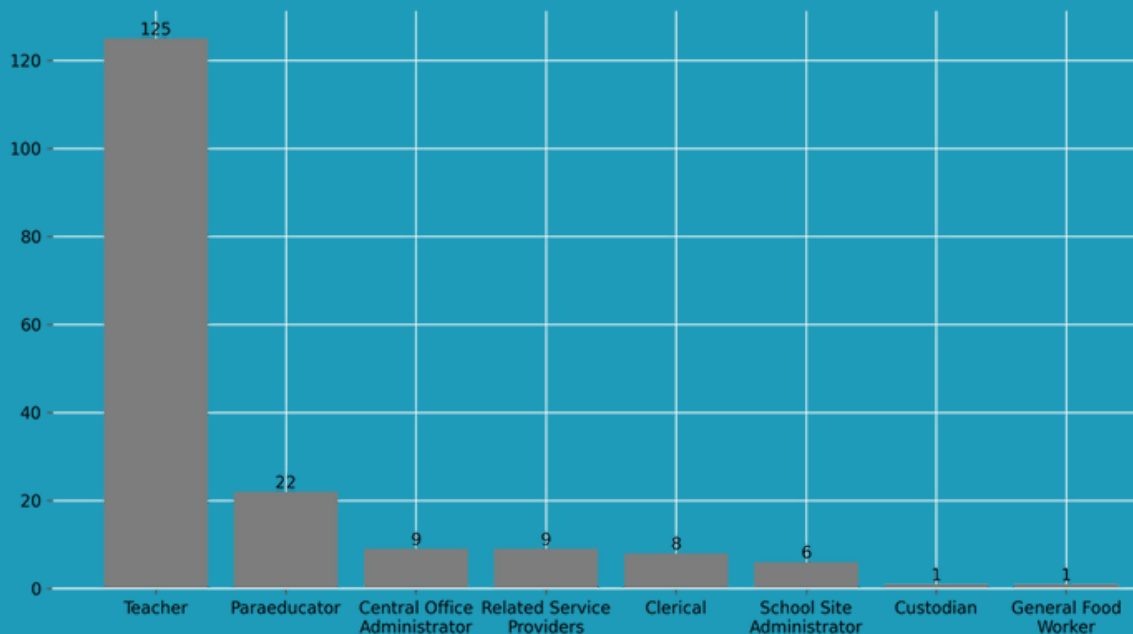
The Amherst Regional Public School community is vibrant and rich with possibilities. The education children receive is a valuable district asset and we need your help to determine the best way to support our staff moving forward.

Providing input on the district's climate and culture includes an opportunity to highlight the strengths of the district and share opportunities for growth.



181
SURVEY RESPONSES

Representation: Role

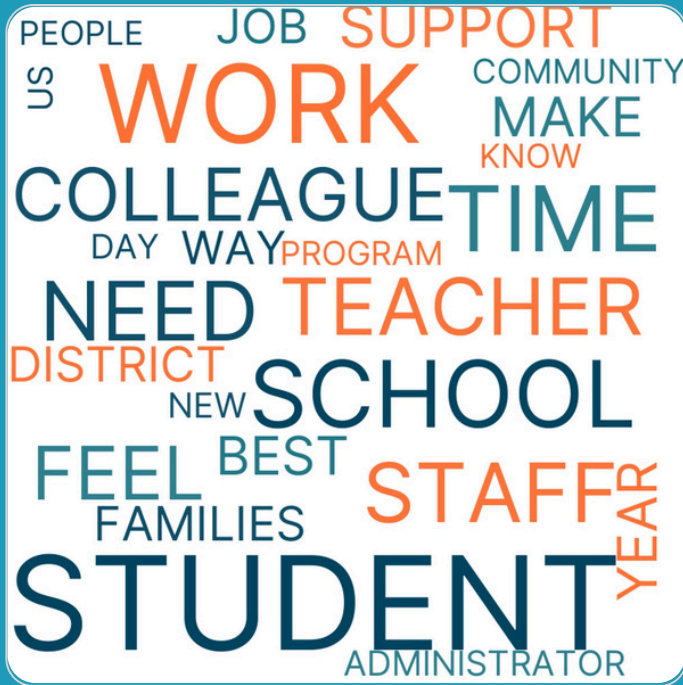


n = 181

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

OVERALL INPUT

The Frequency of Words Expressed

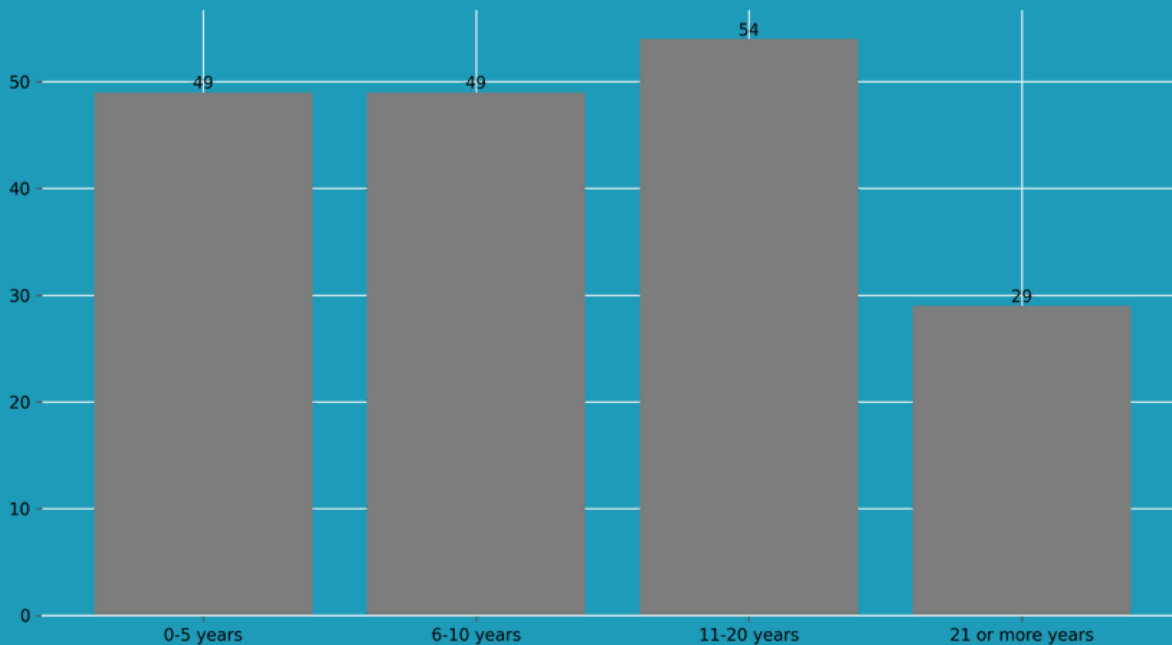


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See Appendix for a summary of chart descriptions.

Representation: Years of Service to Amherst Regional Public Schools



n = 181



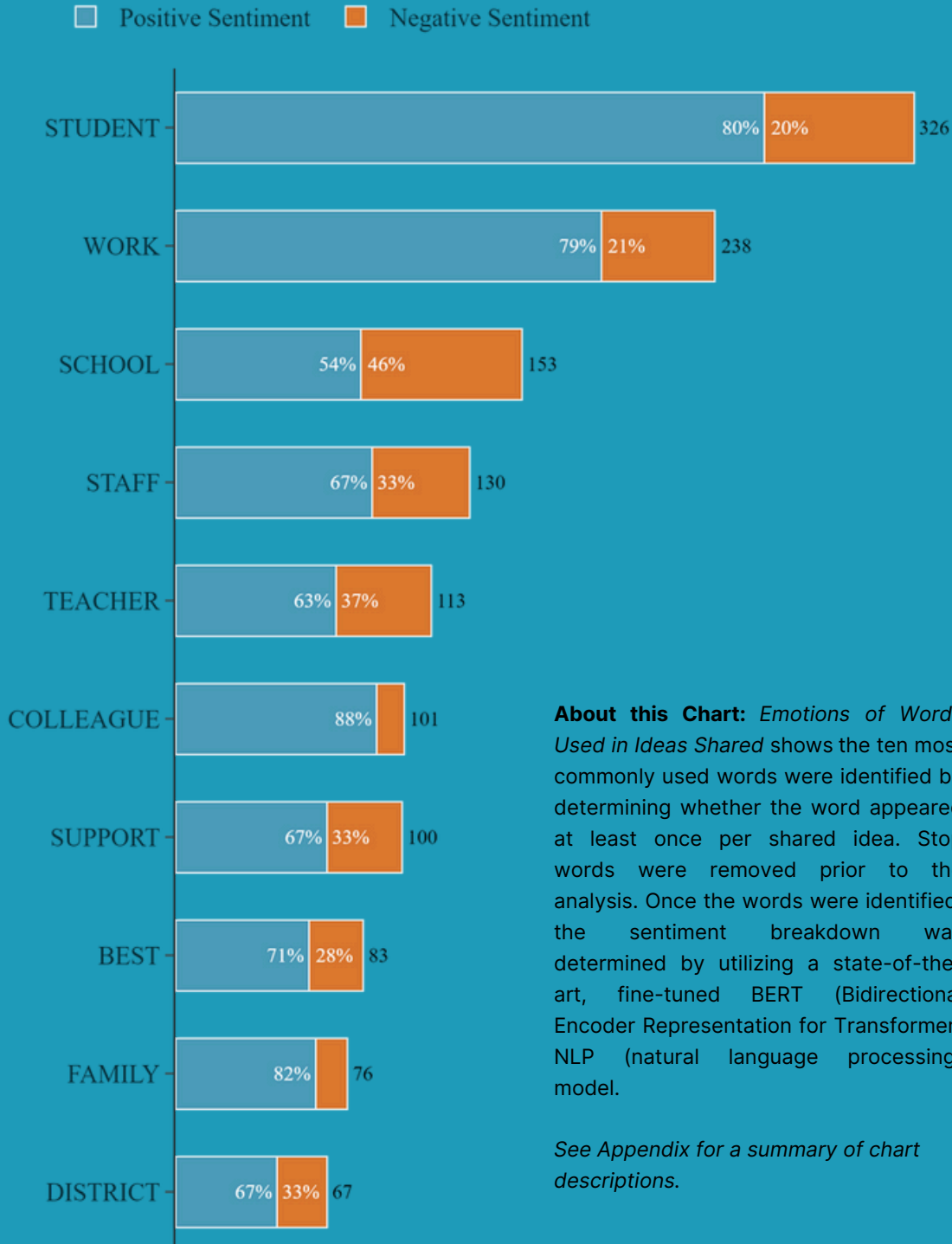
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Overall Input

*Emotions Scale

Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



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APPRECIATION

PROMPT

I feel the most appreciated for the work I do when...

THEMES

- Acknowledgment of Expertise and Trust
- Respect and Professional Validation
- Genuine Recognition and Appreciation
- Equitable Work Environment
- Impact on Students and Families

Acknowledgment of Expertise and Trust

Survey respondents express feeling appreciated when their strengths and expertise are acknowledged and valued by colleagues, students, parents, and administrators. They find it rewarding when their work is trusted and carried over by staff. Additionally, receiving feedback and recognition for their contributions in enhancing student learning and engagement is crucial to feeling valued.

Genuine Recognition and Appreciation

Genuine recognition and appreciation for their efforts in improving students' educational experiences is greatly valued across the board. Whether it is through specific feedback from supervisors, administrators, or peers, a simple "thank you" or acknowledgment of hard work is meaningful. Respondents appreciate validation for the time and energy they invest in their roles.

Impact on Students and Families

Feeling appreciated is closely linked to the impact educators have on students and families. Knowing that their contributions lead to positive outcomes, such as student growth, confidence building, and academic progress, plays a significant role in how valued educators feel. Personal notes of gratitude from parents and students further validate their efforts.

Respect and Professional Validation

Educators feel most valued when they are respected as professionals and their unique roles are acknowledged and supported within the school community. Being included in decision-making processes, receiving invitations to engage and offer suggestions, and being consulted on teaching and learning strategies contribute to their sense of worth and validation.

Equitable Work Environment

A vital aspect of feeling appreciated is the presence of an equitable work environment where workload, resources, and support are distributed fairly. Educators appreciate when their time is respected, they are compensated appropriately, and their roles are not overlooked or burdened with additional expectations. Having the necessary resources and staffing to fulfill their responsibilities contributes to feeling valued.



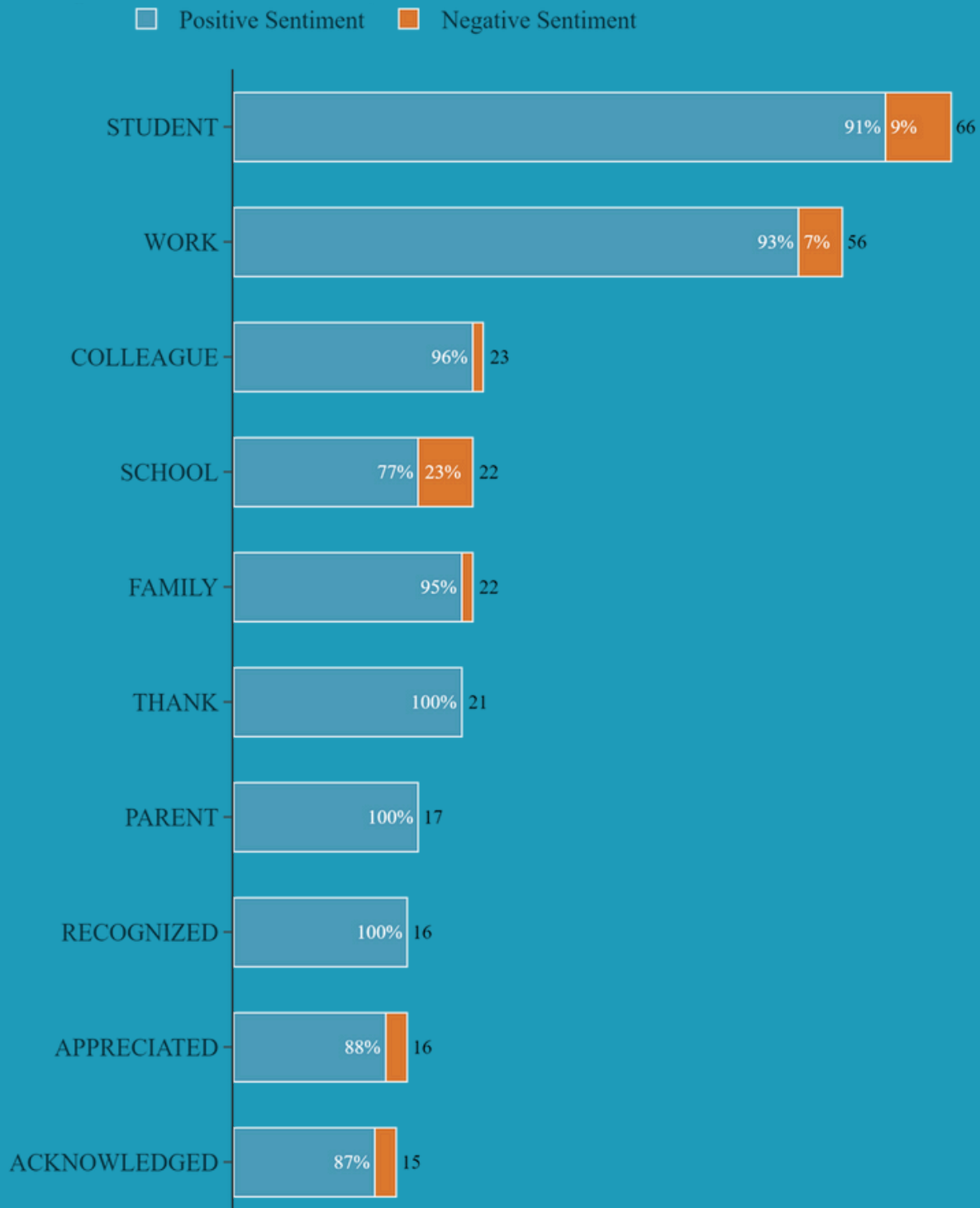
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Prompt: *I feel the most appreciated for the work I do when...*

*Emotions Scale

Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



See appendix for methodology.



LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

PROMPT

I feel the most supported by administrators (your leadership) when...

THEMES

- Recognition and Appreciation
- Responsive Communication
- Collaboration and Support
- Clear Expectations and Consistency
- Trust and Respect

Recognition and Appreciation

Educators value and feel the most supported when administrators recognize their hard work, acknowledge their efforts, and express gratitude for their dedication to the students and the school community. Simple gestures such as saying thank you and acknowledging the challenges faced by educators go a long way in making them feel valued and appreciated. Administrators who follow through with initiatives, give candid feedback, and recognize the extra work put in by educators contribute to a sense of recognition and appreciation that fosters a positive and supportive work environment.

Collaboration and Support

The most support is felt by educators when administrators actively engage in collaboration, listen to their concerns, and provide the necessary resources and time to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. Supportive administrators work collaboratively with educators to problem-solve challenges, develop strategies, and make student-centered decisions. This collaborative approach, along with open communication and feedback, creates a supportive environment where educators feel empowered to contribute their expertise and make meaningful contributions to student success.

Trust and Respect

A crucial theme that emerges from the survey responses is the importance of trust and respect in fostering a supportive relationship between administrators and educators. Educators value administrators who trust their professional judgment, respect their expertise, and treat them as equal colleagues. When administrators demonstrate trust, respect educators' autonomy, and provide the necessary support without micromanaging, educators feel empowered and motivated to excel in their roles.

Responsive Communication

Effective communication is essential for creating a supportive environment in school districts. Educators appreciate administrators who are accessible, responsive to communication, and proactive in addressing concerns or questions. When administrators listen, respond promptly to emails, and engage in open dialogue with educators, it fosters a sense of transparency, trust, and support within the school community.

Clear Expectations and Consistency

Setting clear expectations, maintaining consistency in policies and procedures, and providing a framework for addressing challenges or professional development opportunities is greatly valued by educators. When administrators establish clear guidelines, adhere to consistent standards, and hold all stakeholders accountable to the same expectations, it creates a structured and supportive work environment where educators can focus on their professional growth and student success.



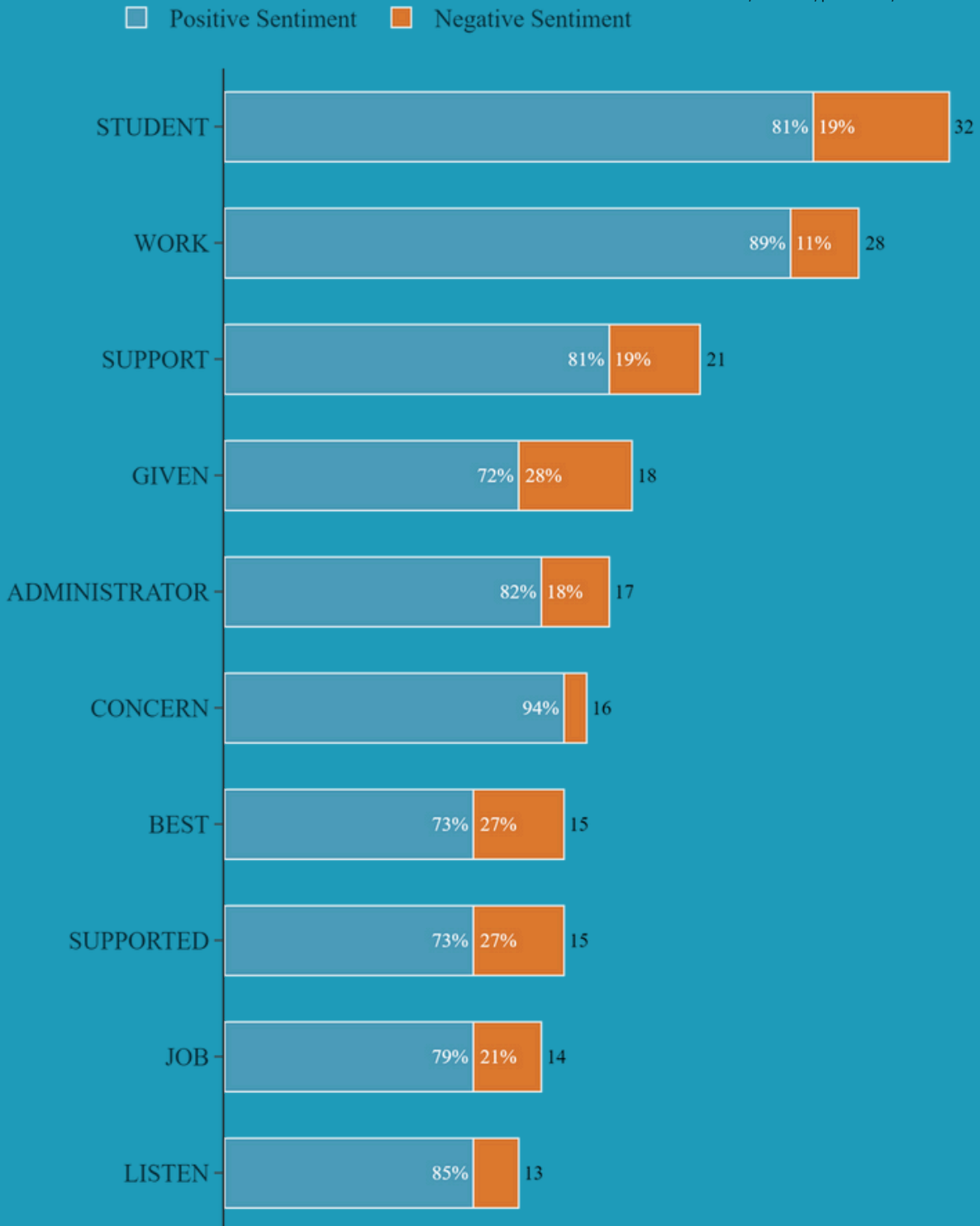
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Prompt: I feel the most supported by administrators (your leadership) when...

*Emotions Scale

Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



See appendix for methodology.



STAGING FOR SUCCESS

PROMPT

How can we (your leadership) best support you this year to ensure your success?

THEMES

- **Advocating for Program Restoration**
- **Communication and Collaboration**
- **Professional Development and Recognition**
- **Support for Staff Well-Being and Workload Management**
- **Building Trust and Appreciation**

Advocating for Program Restoration

Teachers expressed a strong desire for leadership to actively fight for the restoration of important programs lost, due to lack of funding. Teachers cited the need for adequate staffing, supplies, and support to maintain the uniqueness and autonomy of their programs, such as the new IEP program. There was a clear call for increased mental and behavioral support for students, as well as a need for administrative assistance to ensure smoother operations and better outcomes.

Communication and Collaboration

Open communication emerged as a crucial theme, with teachers emphasizing the importance of being included in decision-making processes that affect their work. They expressed a desire for leadership to ask for feedback, celebrate successes, and grant support when requested. Teachers also highlighted the need for transparent and clear communication regarding processes, expectations, and roles in the district, emphasizing the significance of being involved in problem-solving and decision-making.

Professional Development and Recognition

Respondents emphasized the importance of relevant professional development opportunities, resources to address diverse student needs, and being included in decision-making processes for student success. They highlighted the need for recognition of their expertise, experience, and dedication, as well as the significance of valued feedback to improve practice and ensure they are on the right track. Providing time for collaboration, team building, and training was also underscored as essential for growth and development.

Support for Staff Well-Being and Workload Management

Ensuring a healthy work environment, mental stability, and adequate rewards for performance were key concerns raised by teachers. They articulated the need for support in dealing with student behavior, holding students accountable, and helping with workload management to prevent burnout and ensure a balanced workload. Teachers also expressed the importance of respecting schedules, providing adequate staffing, and compensating appropriately to support staff well-being.

Building Trust and Appreciation

Trust and appreciation emerged as critical factors in fostering a supportive environment for teachers. Building trust by validating insights, honoring requests for support, and advocating for teachers were seen as essential for success. Acknowledging the hard work of teachers, respecting their time, and valuing their contributions were highlighted as ways to create a positive and empowering work culture. Clear communication, empathy, trust, and respect for teachers' expertise and efforts were emphasized as key elements in fostering a supportive and collaborative educational community.



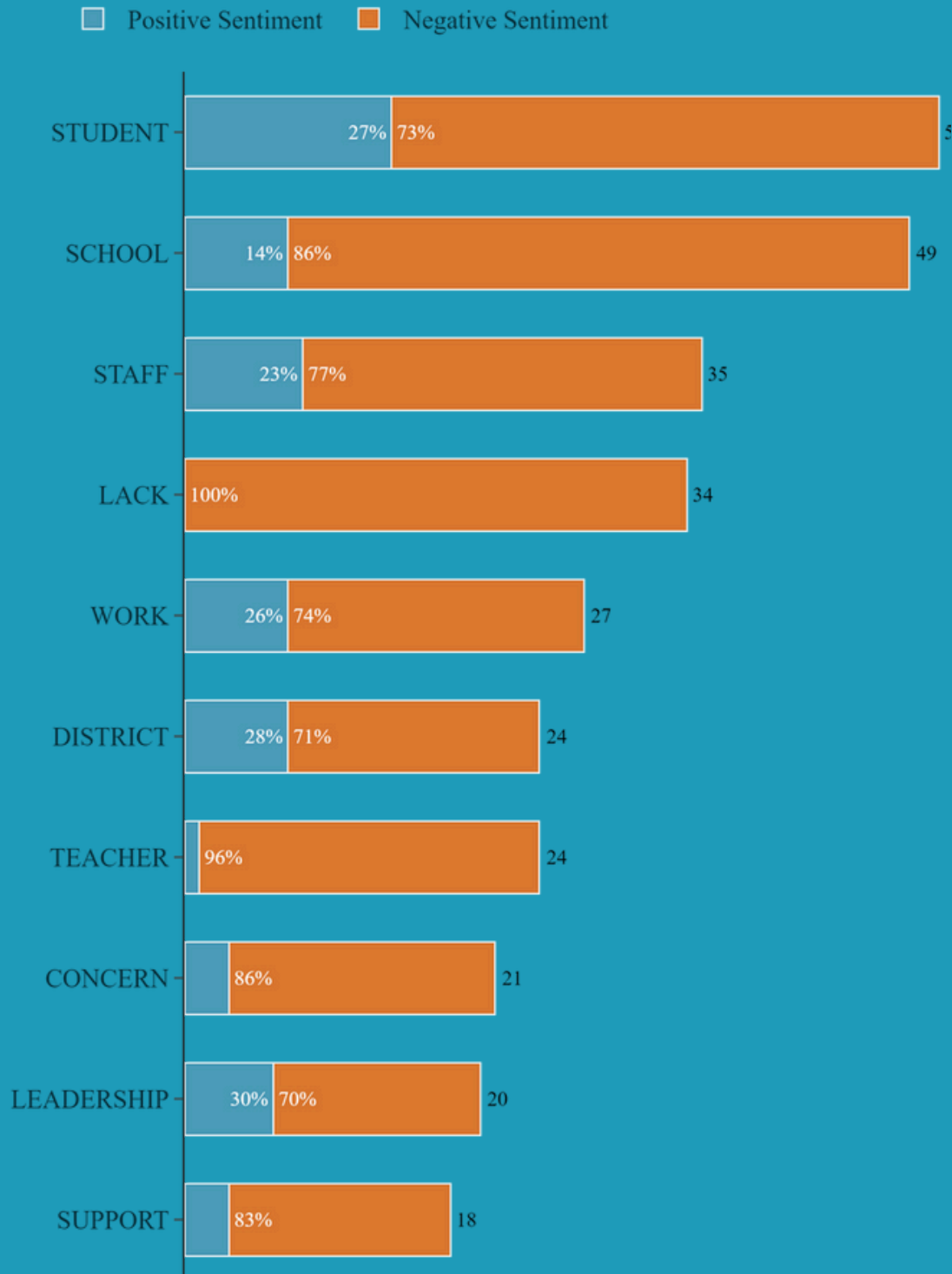
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See appendix for methodology.

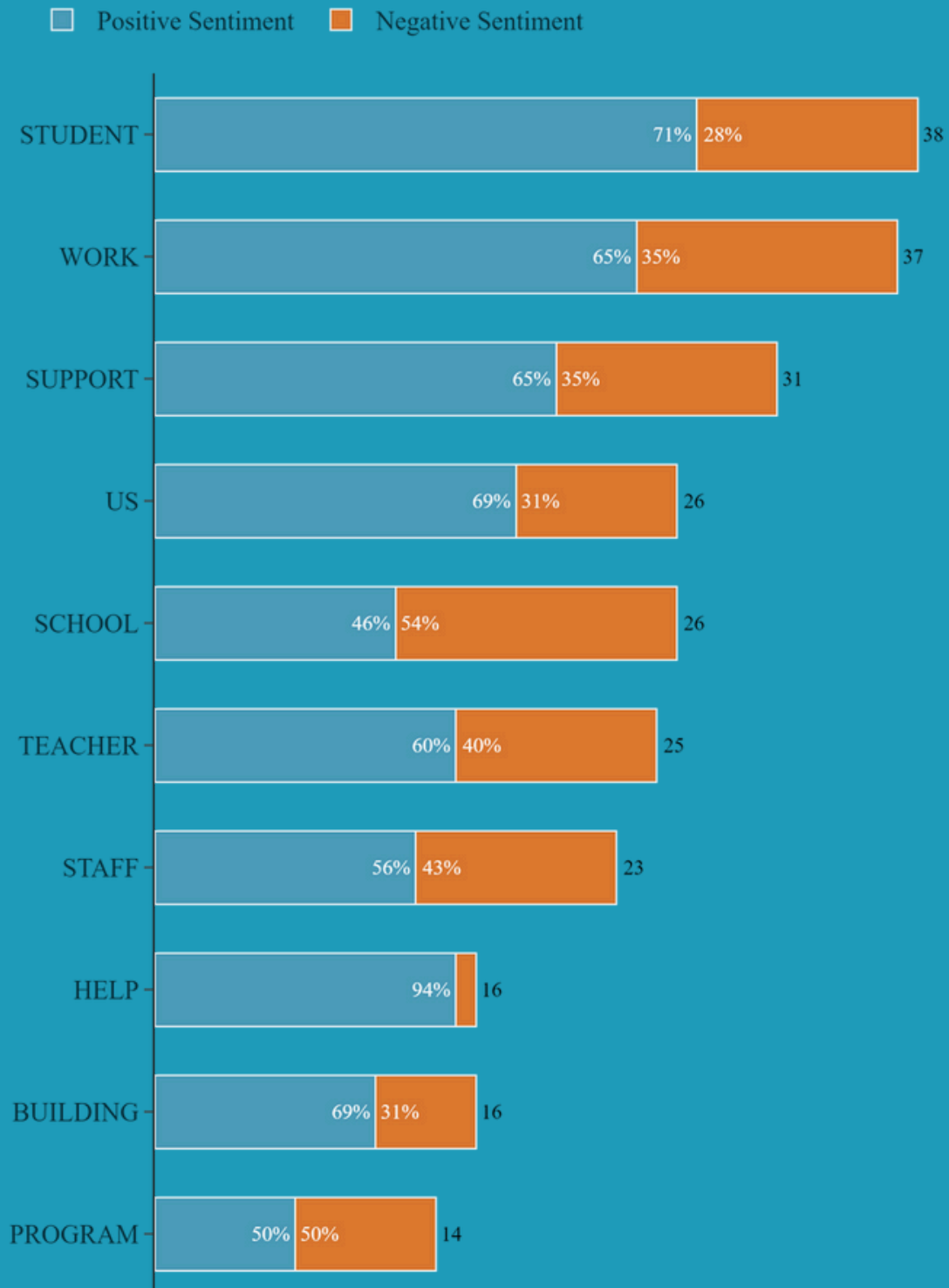
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See appendix for methodology.



ACTION STEPS

HOW CAN WE BEST SUPPORT YOU THIS YEAR TO ENSURE YOUR SUCCESS?
BASED ON RESPONSES, RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS



Funding and Advocacy

Leadership should actively advocate for increased funding to restore important programs lost due to lack of funding. Adequate staffing and supplies are crucial to supporting quality education. By fighting for increased resources, leadership can ensure that schools have the necessary support to provide high-quality education to students.

Support Special Education Programs



Leadership should prioritize open communication with staff, provide access to relevant professional development opportunities, and allocate resources to address the diverse needs of students. By including staff in decision-making processes that affect their work, leadership can empower teachers to contribute more effectively to student success.



Communication and Professional Development

Leadership should prioritize open communication with staff, provide access to relevant professional development opportunities, and allocate resources to address the diverse needs of students. By including staff in decision-making processes that affect their work, leadership can empower teachers to contribute more effectively to student success.



Streamline Processes and Procedures

To ensure efficient operations within the district, leadership should work on making processes, procedures, and expectations more clear to all staff members. Clear communication and transparency about roles and responsibilities can help mitigate confusion and increase overall productivity.



Address Staffing Needs

Leadership should work on hiring the necessary staff to meet the demands of the school district. Ensuring adequate staffing levels, especially in critical roles such as para-educators, will prevent overload, improve support for students, and create a positive working environment for staff members.



PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

PROMPT

How do you hold yourself to the highest standard of professionalism in the workplace?

THEMES

- **Dedication to Students' Growth and Well-being**
- **Continuous PD and Self-reflection**
- **Respectful and Collaborative Work Ethic**
- **Student-centered Approach**
- **Accountability, Integrity, and Ethical Conduct**

Dedication to Students' Growth and Well-being

Many survey respondents emphasized their commitment to supporting students' learning and growth as the primary motivation for holding themselves to a high standard of professionalism. They expressed a dedication to treating all students as they would their own, setting clear expectations, and prioritizing students' needs above all else. This theme highlights a deep sense of responsibility towards nurturing students and creating a safe, thriving educational environment.

Continuous Professional Development and Self-reflection

Another prominent theme was the emphasis on ongoing professional development and self-reflection. Educators mentioned actively participating in workshops, seeking additional education, and regularly reflecting on their practices to ensure they provide the best care and support to students. This dedication to growth and improvement showcases a proactive approach to enhancing teaching skills and staying current with best practices in education.

Respectful and Collaborative Work Ethic

Many respondents highlighted the importance of respecting colleagues, students, and families, and fostering a collaborative work environment. They mentioned treating everyone with kindness, listening attentively, and valuing diverse perspectives within the school community. This theme underscores the significance of respectful communication, teamwork, and positive relationships in maintaining a professional work culture.

Student-centered Approach

A significant number of educators emphasized the importance of prioritizing student needs and well-being in their professional practice. They mentioned tailoring lessons to students' learning styles, building strong relationships with students, and creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment. This student-centered approach reflects a deep caring for students' academic and emotional growth.

Accountability, Integrity, and Ethical Conduct

Several survey responses highlighted the values of accountability, integrity, and ethical conduct in maintaining a high standard of professionalism. Educators mentioned following through on commitments, accepting responsibility for mistakes, and upholding ethical guidelines in their work. Teachers and staff expressed the importance of ethical decision-making, honesty, and accountability in fostering a culture of integrity within school districts.



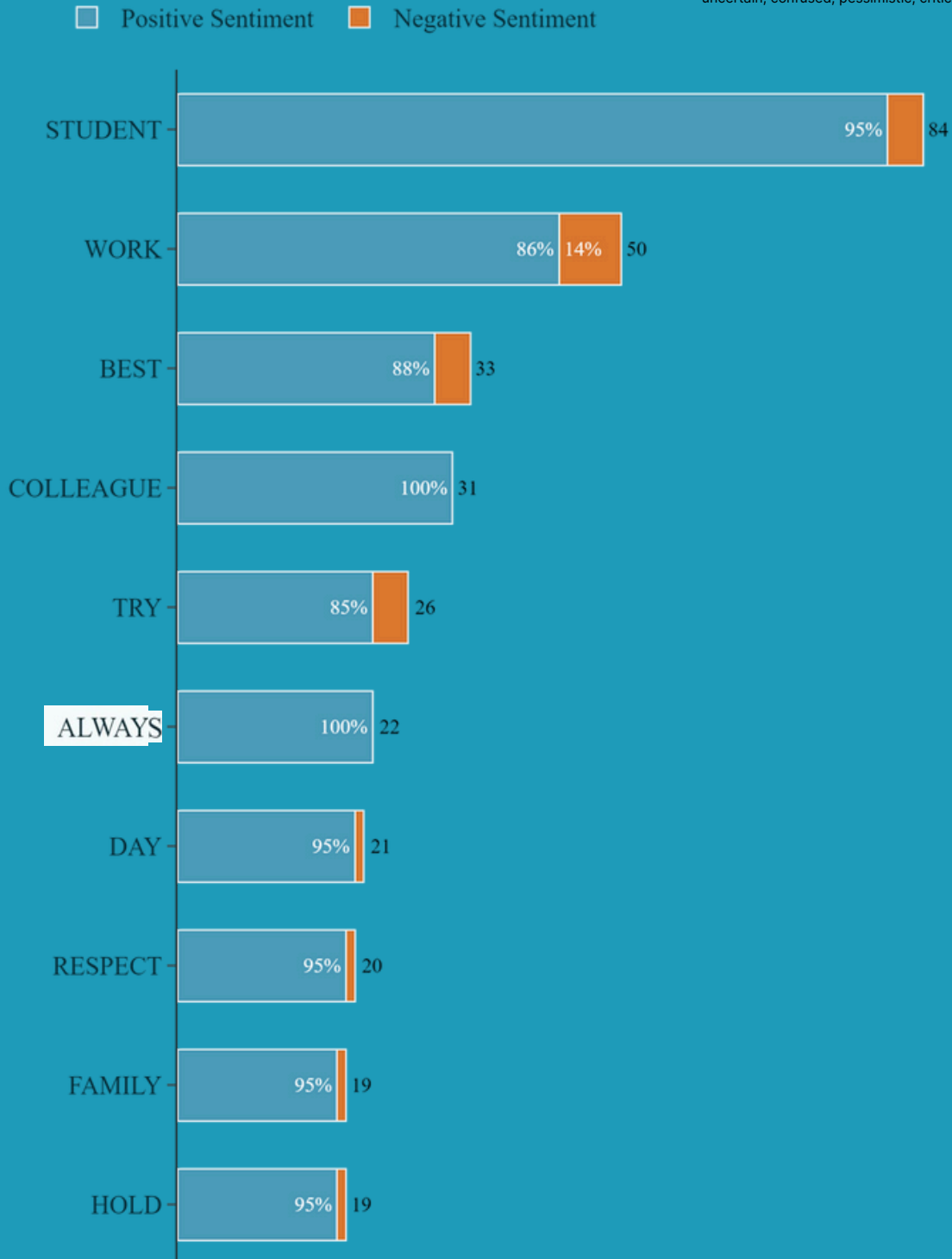
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See appendix for methodology.



CONCERNS

PROMPT

My biggest concern regarding my experience with Amherst Public Schools is....

THEMES

- Lack of Transparency and Accountability
- Impact on Educational Outcomes
- Student Behavior and Discipline
- Equity and Inclusivity
- Staff Morale and Burnout

Lack of Transparency and Accountability

Respondents highlighted concerns regarding the lack of transparency and accountability within Amherst Public Schools. Issues such as inconsistent leadership, nepotism, favoritism, and retaliation have pointed to a culture where decisions are made without clear communication and equitable treatment. The absence of a shared vision, concrete guidance, and reluctance to address persistent disruptive behavior without consequences contribute to a sense of mistrust among staff members. Furthermore, the high turnover in administration and inadequate training for new educators exacerbate the challenges faced in maintaining a cohesive and supportive educational environment.

Impact on Educational Outcomes

The impact on educational outcomes emerges as a prevalent theme. Concerns revolve around unstable leadership, chronic underfunding, cuts to support services for marginalized students, and a lack of discipline affecting the learning environment. The inconsistency in discipline, professional development, and leadership at the building level is noted as significant barriers to providing quality education. The shift in curricula without proper understanding and preparation also raises worries about the effectiveness of teaching practices and educational outcomes for students.

Student Behavior and Discipline

There is significant apprehension regarding student behavior and discipline within Amherst Public Schools. The challenges in managing disruptive behavior, lack of enforcement of rules, and a culture that allows students to circumvent consequences for their actions are highlighted as key concerns. Issues with chronic absenteeism, lack of supervision, and faculty high rates of absenteeism are seen as hindrances to creating a conducive learning environment that supports student success.

Equity and Inclusivity

Equity and inclusivity emerge as critical themes. Educators and staff underscore the need to address systemic inequities, lack of representation for diverse staff and students, and the impact of institutional memory on progress. The need for equitable pay, opportunities for professional growth, and a welcoming environment for all individuals regardless of job title or background are emphasized as crucial factors in fostering a more inclusive and supportive educational community.

Staff Morale and Burnout

Staff morale and burnout are significant concerns. Issues such as excessive workload, lack of recognition, low pay, and challenging work conditions contribute to demoralization among staff members. The toxic work environment, high turnover in administrative roles, and the impact of negative press or community interactions on staff well-being are noted as factors affecting overall morale and job satisfaction. Efforts to address staff support, recognition, and working conditions are essential in mitigating burnout and promoting a positive work culture.



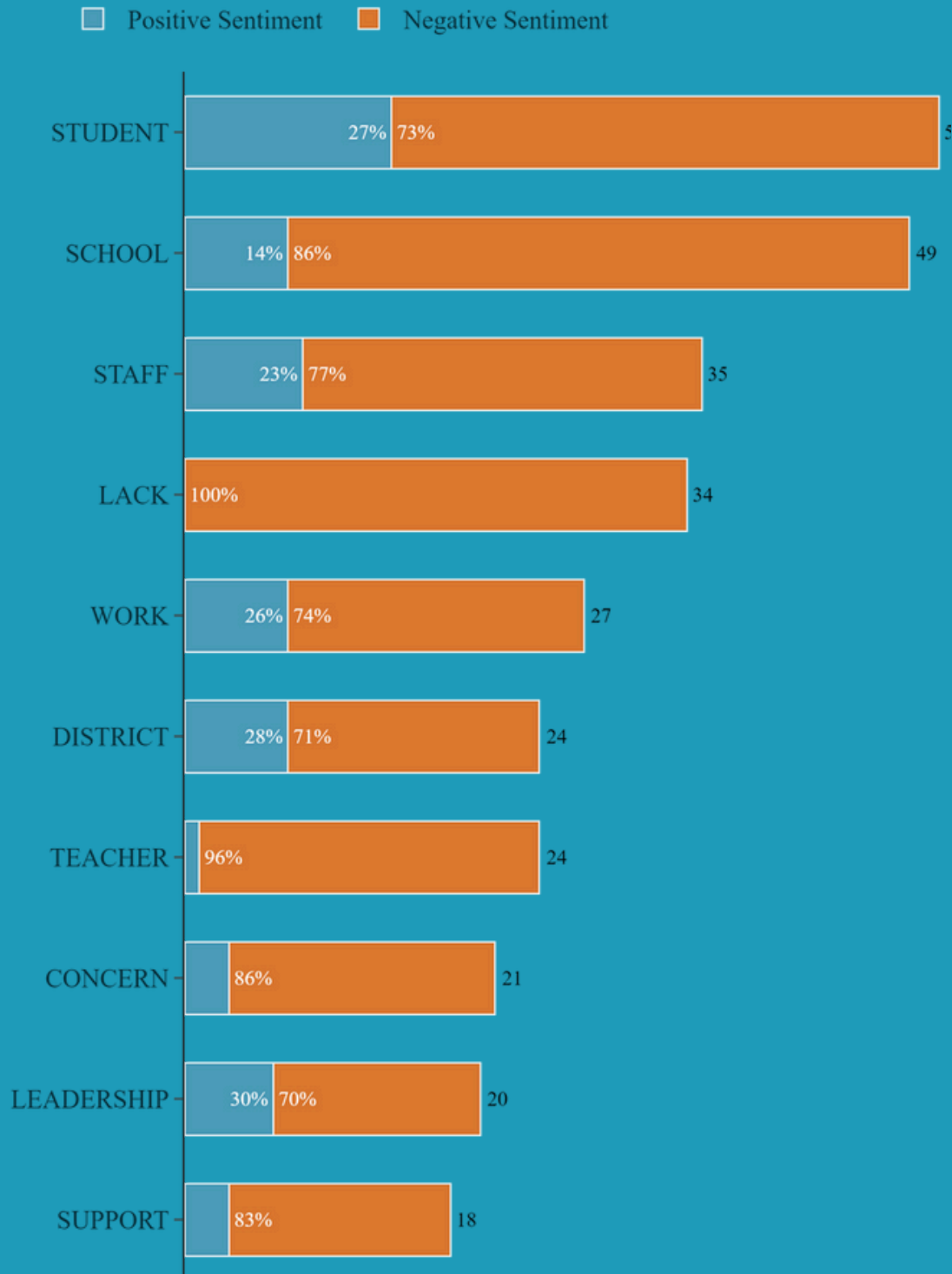
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See appendix for methodology.



PRAISE

PROMPT

My biggest praise regarding my experience with Amherst Public Schools is....

THEMES

- Supportive and Caring Community
- Culture of Professionalism and Collaboration
- Commitment to Student Success
- Recognition of Leadership and Support
- Emphasis on Diversity and Equity

Supportive and Caring Community

The survey responses highlight a strong sense of community within the Amherst Public Schools, with an emphasis on the supportive relationships among colleagues, administrators, and students. Educators appreciate the collaborative environment, where they feel valued, respected, and supported in their professional growth and decision-making processes. This cohesive culture fosters a sense of belonging and teamwork, allowing educators to focus on student success and well-being. The importance of relationships, trust, and camaraderie within the school community emerges as a key theme from the survey responses.

Commitment to Student Success

A prevalent theme is the unwavering dedication to student success and well-being. Educators in Amherst Public Schools are praised for their commitment to providing high-quality education, supporting students' diverse needs, and creating a positive learning environment. Teachers are recognized for going above and beyond to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students, showing care, empathy, and creativity in their teaching practices. The focus on student-centered education and a supportive, nurturing environment is evident in the responses, highlighting a shared dedication to helping students thrive.

Emphasis on Diversity and Equity

The commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is a significant theme in the responses about the Amherst Public Schools. Educators appreciate the district's efforts to promote diversity among students, staff, and curriculum, recognizing the value of diverse perspectives and experiences in enriching the educational environment. There is a sense of pride in the inclusive culture of the schools, where students from various backgrounds feel welcomed, supported, and empowered. The focus on equity and social justice principles underscores the district's aim to create a fair and accessible educational experience for all learners.

Professionalism and Collaboration

A culture of professionalism and collaboration within the Amherst Public Schools is highlighted. Educators commend the high level of expertise and dedication among their colleagues, acknowledging the wealth of knowledge and skills they bring to their roles. There is an emphasis on working together as a team, sharing ideas, supporting one another, and continuously striving for excellence in teaching and learning. The sense of mutual respect, shared goals, and a commitment to professional growth through collaboration resonate throughout the responses, reflecting a cohesive and dynamic professional community.

Recognition of Leadership and Support

Respondents express appreciation for the leadership and support provided by administrators within the Amherst Public Schools. Principals and supervisors are recognized for their advocacy, responsiveness, and dedication to creating a positive work environment for educators. The support and guidance offered to teachers, along with opportunities for autonomy, growth, and professional development, are highlighted as strengths of the district. The importance of effective leadership in fostering a supportive and empowering culture within the schools emerges as a key theme from the survey responses.



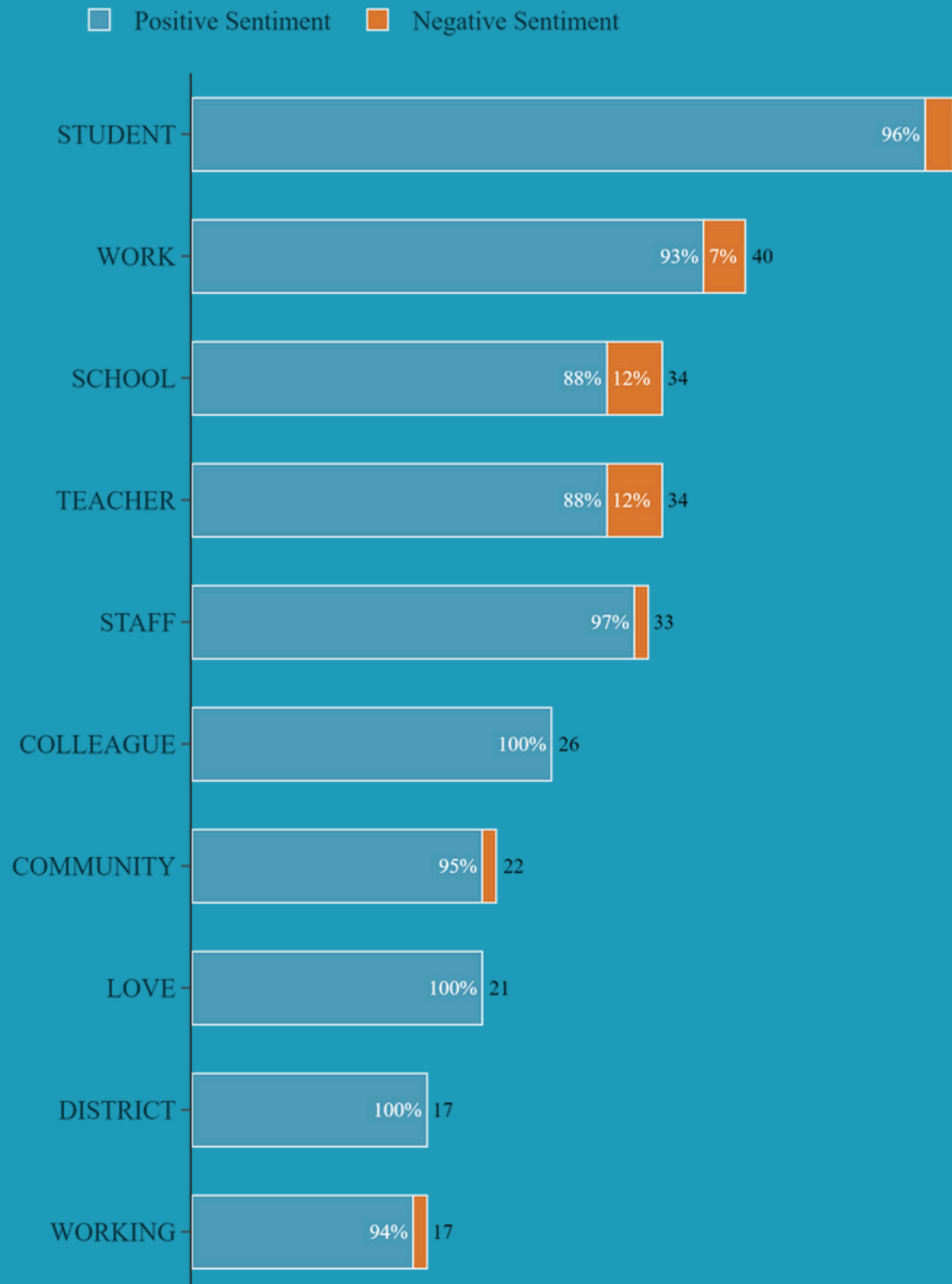
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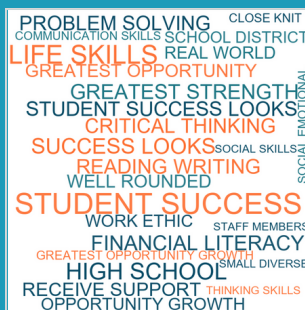
APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY



The Frequency of Words Expressed

This figure shows the top words used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The less frequently used words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.



The Frequency of Language Patterns

This figure shows the top word groups used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The groups of words were identified using bigram and trigram analysis (continuous sequences of 2 and 3 words, respectively). The less frequently used clusters of words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.



The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

The ten most commonly used words were identified by determining whether the word appeared at least once per shared idea. Stop words were removed prior to the analysis. Once the words were identified, the sentiment breakdown was determined by utilizing a state-of-the-art, fine-tuned BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representation for Transformer) NLP (natural language processing) model.

CULTURE AND CLIMATE AMONGST PARENTS

Prepared for Amherst Regional
Public Schools
October 2024



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Safety and Security	11
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Concerns	17
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OVERALL INPUT

ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

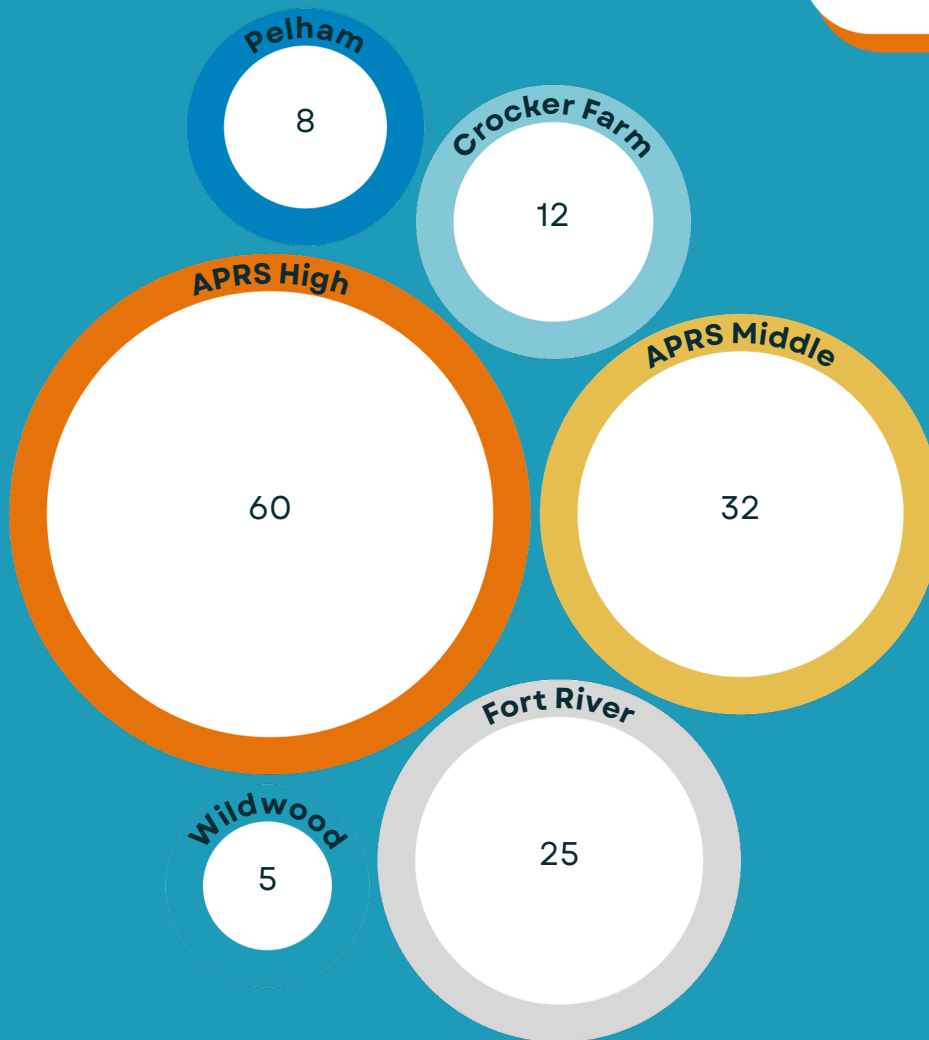
About the Initiative

This analysis reflects the voice of parents of ARPS students. Any thriving school system values the home-school coconnection.



142

SURVEY RESPONSES



Representation: by School

SENTIMENT ANALYSIS

OVERALL INPUT

The Frequency of Words Expressed



About this Chart:

Frequency of Words Expressed show the top words used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The less frequently used words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.

See Appendix for a summary of chart descriptions.

The Frequency of Language Patterns



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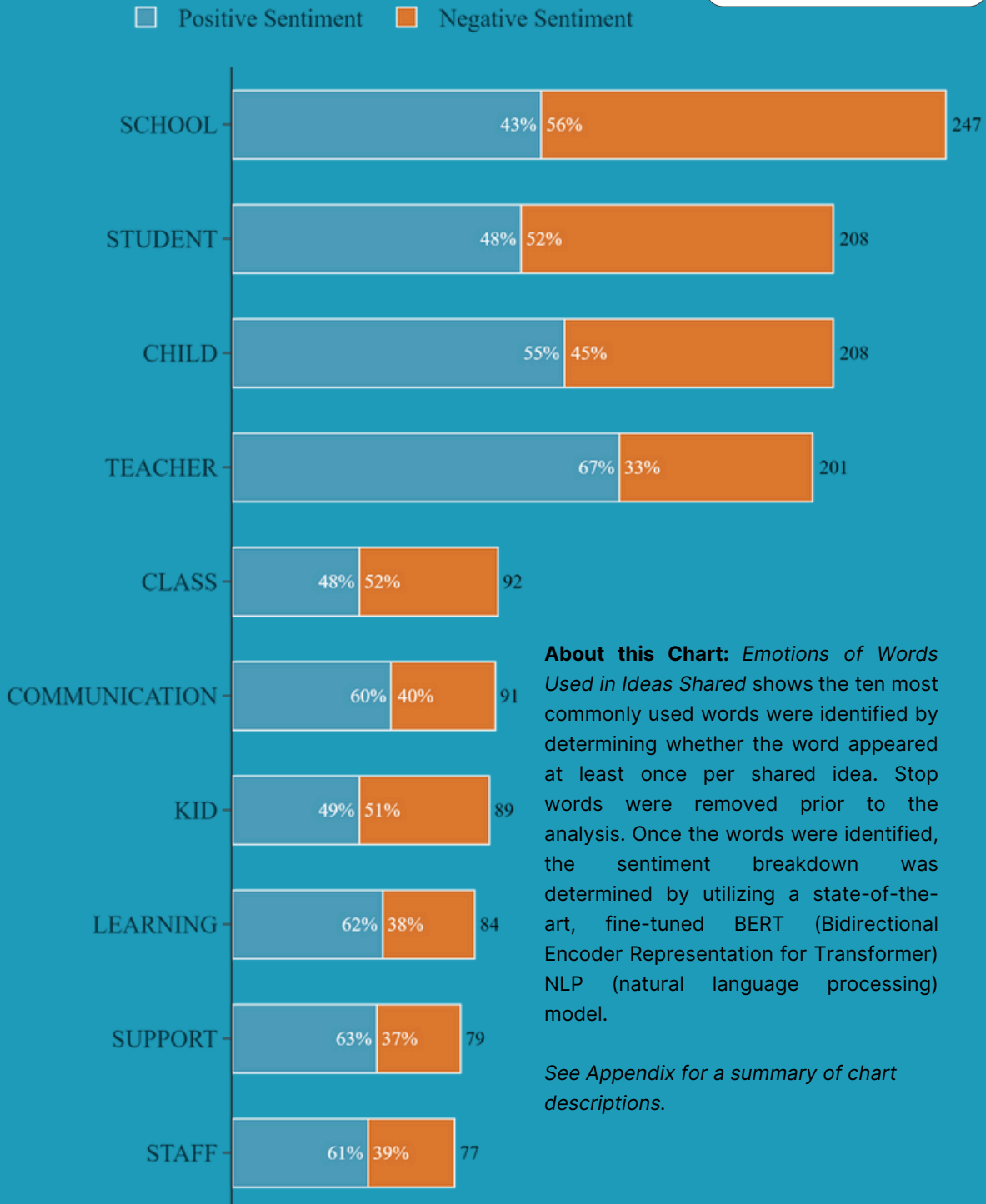
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Overall Input

***Emotions Scale**

Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



About this Chart: *Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared* shows the ten most commonly used words were identified by determining whether the word appeared at least once per shared idea. Stop words were removed prior to the analysis. Once the words were identified, the sentiment breakdown was determined by utilizing a state-of-the-art, fine-tuned BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representation for Transformer) NLP (natural language processing) model.

See Appendix for a summary of chart descriptions.





SUPPORTING ACADEMICS

PROMPT

Please explain how the district might help you better support your child's academics at home.

THEMES

- **Need for Improved Communication**
- **Balance Between Homework and In-Class Work**
- **Focus on Differentiated Instruction and Learning Styles**
- **Reduced Dependence on Technology**
- **Support for Academic Challenges and Enrichment Opportunities**

Need for Improved Communication

Survey responses highlighted a significant desire for enhanced communication between schools and parents. Respondents expressed that consistent and clear updates from teachers regarding classroom activities, homework expectations, and student progress are essential for parents to support their children's learning at home. Many parents reported feeling uninformed about what their children are learning, making it challenging to reinforce academic concepts outside of school. There were requests for regular newsletters, emails, and specific details on assignments and class objectives to foster a stronger partnership between families and educators.

Balance Between Homework and In-Class Work

A prevalent theme in the responses was the ongoing debate around homework policies. Several parents noted that their children complete most of their assignments in school, with minimal work to reinforce learning at home, raising concerns about preparedness for future academic challenges.

Collaboration and Support (continued)

Respondents suggested that there should be a balance whereby homework is meaningfully assigned to promote independent study habits without overwhelming students. Additionally, some parents called for clarification on homework expectations and periodic reviews to establish good habits for students over time.

Focus on Differentiated Instruction and Learning Styles

Many survey respondents expressed the need for more differentiated instruction tailored to various learning styles within the classroom. Parents noted that their children are often unchallenged by the standard curriculum, resulting in boredom and disengagement. There were requests for more personalized learning experiences that allow advanced students to explore topics at a deeper level while also providing support for those who may struggle. Respondents emphasized the importance of recognizing and accommodating diverse learning needs to foster a more inclusive educational environment.

Reduced Dependence on Technology

A significant number of parents conveyed their concerns about the increasing reliance on technology in the classroom. They expressed a preference for less screen time and more hands-on, experiential learning opportunities. Respondents advocated for using physical books, writing tools, and outdoor education to foster deeper engagement and understanding of subject matter. Many parents suggested that reducing the use of digital platforms like Chromebooks could help students better manage their time and focus on core academic skills.

Support for Academic Challenges and Enrichment Opportunities

Parents highlighted a strong desire for more support tailored to students who face academic challenges or require enrichment. Many expressed concern about the adequacy of current programs to assist students with learning difficulties and the need for greater resources for gifted students. Respondents suggested enhancing programs that address these disparities, such as tutoring, mentoring, and specialized workshops. They also advocated for clearer pathways to advanced classes and enrichment activities to ensure that all students are appropriately challenged and supported in their educational journey.



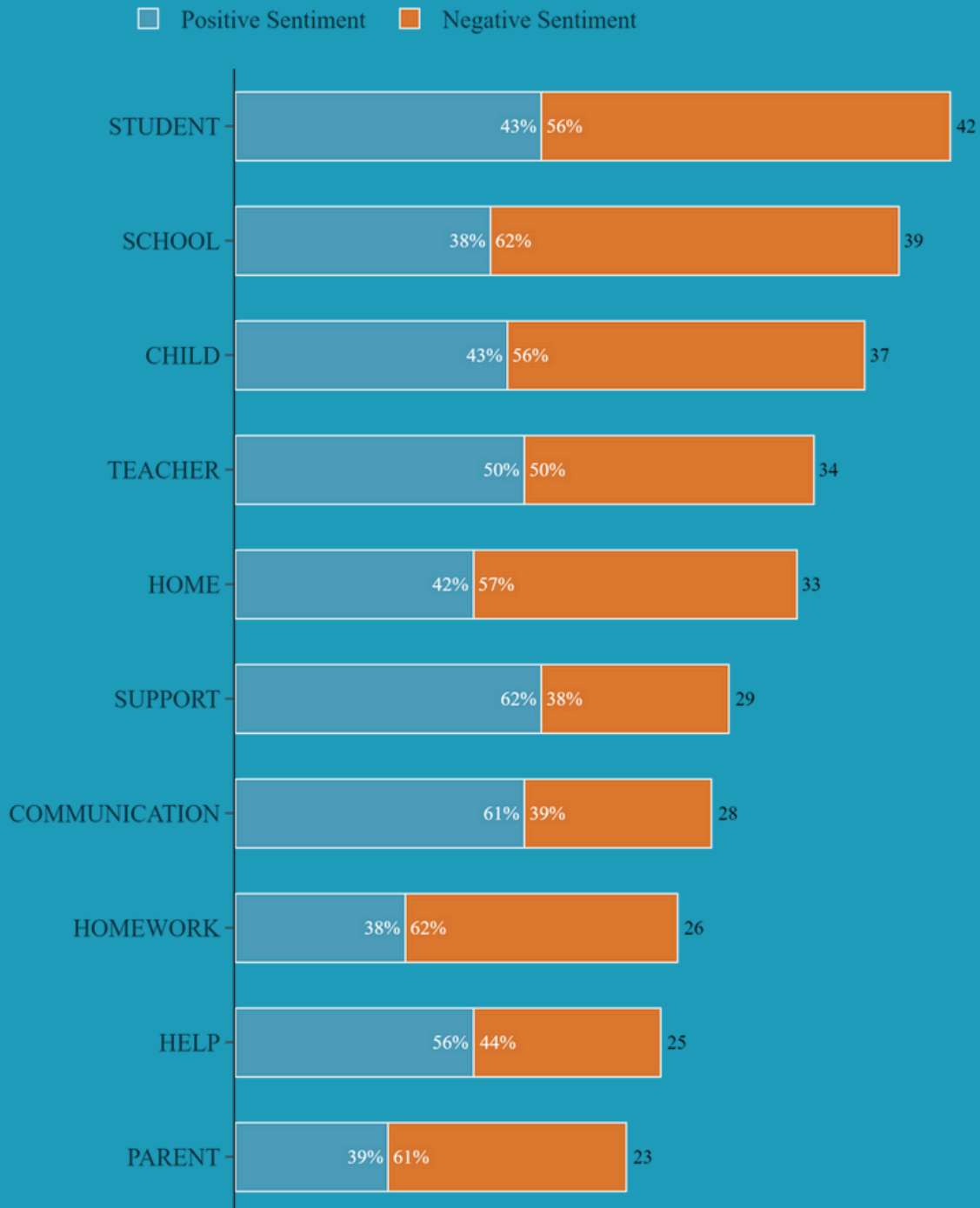
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*Emotions Scale

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See appendix for methodology.



STAFF IMPACT

PROMPT

The staff members that have made the biggest impact on my child do these things.

THEMES

- **Relationship Building**
- **High Expectations and Accountability**
- **Inclusive and Supportive Environments**
- **Engaging Instructional Practices**
- **Effective Communication**

Relationship Building

Survey responses consistently highlighted the importance of staff members building personal connections with students. Teachers and staff who take the time to know their students as individuals, understand their interests, and celebrate their successes were noted to have the most significant positive impact. This relationship fosters a sense of belonging and safety within the classroom, allowing students to feel valued and recognized not merely for their academic performance, but as whole individuals. Parents emphasized that when teachers show genuine care and interest in their children, it leads to increased engagement and motivation in learning.

Inclusive and Supportive Environments

The creation of a safe, inclusive environment emerged as a key theme in the responses. Many parents appreciated staff members who normalize neurodiversity and adapt their teaching methods to accommodate different learning styles. Educators who are flexible, responsive to individual student needs, and who foster an atmosphere where all students feel welcomed and accepted were particularly impactful. This includes recognizing and addressing the challenges faced by students with learning differences and ensuring that they have the support and resources necessary to succeed academically.

Effective Communication

Clear and consistent communication between staff and parents was highlighted as crucial for positive educational outcomes. Respondents noted that effective communication includes not only regular updates on student progress and classroom activities but also open avenues for addressing concerns. Teachers who frequently provided feedback, both academic and behavioral, helped parents understand their child's needs and achievements. This collaborative communication helped to empower parents to engage with their children's education actively.

High Expectations and Accountability

The theme of maintaining high expectations while providing support resonated throughout the responses. Parents expressed appreciation for staff who challenge their children academically while also holding them accountable for their behavior and work. Educators who set clear expectations regarding assignments and assessments, coupled with encouragement and constructive feedback, were often mentioned as motivating influences on students. Parents noted that this balanced approach helps instill a sense of responsibility and fosters growth in their children.

Engaging Instructional Practices

Respondents emphasized the importance of dynamic and engaging teaching methods in facilitating impactful learning experiences. Staff members who utilized project-based learning, hands-on activities, and creative lesson planning captured students' interest and made subjects more relatable. These practices not only enhanced student understanding and retention but also sparked enthusiasm for learning. Parents appreciated educators who varied their instructional techniques to cater to different learning styles, which helped create an engaging and enriching classroom atmosphere.



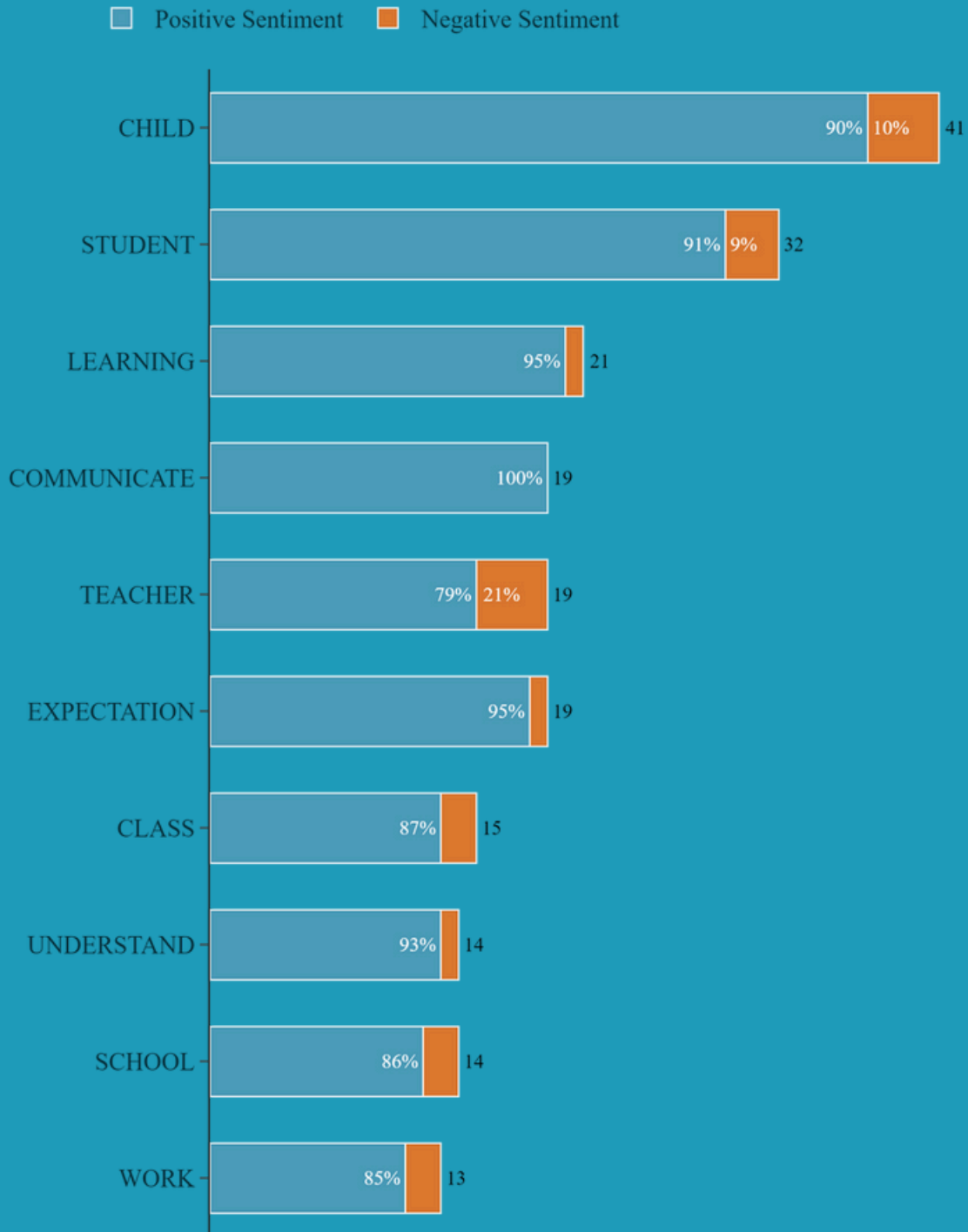
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See appendix for methodology.



SAFETY AND SECURITY

PROMPT

What is the most critical factor for you in determining the level of safety and security provided for your child at school and why?

THEMES

- **Bullying and Emotional Safety**
- **Physical Security Measures**
- **Communication and Transparency**
- **Supervision and Responsiveness**
- **The Balance Between Safety and Freedom**

Bullying and Emotional Safety

Parents express profound concerns about the school's inadequate response to bullying and harassment. Many believe that while the physical safety of the school might be satisfactory, the emotional safety for students, especially those who are neurodivergent or identify as LGBTQ+, demands improvement. Numerous parents shared instances of bullying, emphasizing the need for staff training in neurodiversity and stronger intervention policies to protect vulnerable students. There is a strong desire for a culture of care, where students can report harassment without fear of repercussions or being dismissed by adults.

Physical Security Measures

The responses indicate a significant worry about physical safety at school, particularly in light of rising concerns regarding gun violence and school shootings. Many parents advocate for enhanced physical security measures such as locked doors, visitor screenings, and actively monitored entryways. Some parents express dissatisfaction with existing protocols, stating that anyone could potentially access the building under vague pretexts. Clear communication regarding the school's response to threats and regular emergency drills for staff and students are also major requests from parents seeking assurance that safety measures are in place and effectively implemented.

Communication and Transparency

Effective communication is repeatedly highlighted as a crucial element in fostering a safe school environment. Parents feel that timely and transparent communications about safety incidents, responses to bullying reports, and the specifics of safety protocols are essential. They express frustration over not receiving detailed updates regarding their children's safety or school policies. Parents wish for a stronger dialogue between school officials and families, wherein they can feel informed and engaged about the safety measures in place and any developments that might affect their children.

Supervision and Responsiveness

Survey responses reveal a strong concern about the level of supervision and responsiveness from school staff during unstructured times such as lunch and recess. Parents believe that many incidents of bullying and inappropriate behavior occur in these less monitored periods, advocating for increased staff presence to ensure student safety. Additionally, many parents emphasize the need for swift intervention when safety issues arise, arguing that a prompt response can prevent escalation and build a more trusting environment for students.

The Balance Between Safety and Freedom

A significant theme among the responses involves the tension between ensuring safety and maintaining an environment that does not feel overly restrictive. Parents express a desire for schools to implement safety measures without creating a sense of fear or imprisonment among students. There is a clear call for practices that ensure vigilance while simultaneously promoting a comforting and welcoming atmosphere where students feel free to express themselves. This balance is crucial for fostering well-being and emotional health, which parents feel are just as important as physical safety in the school environment.



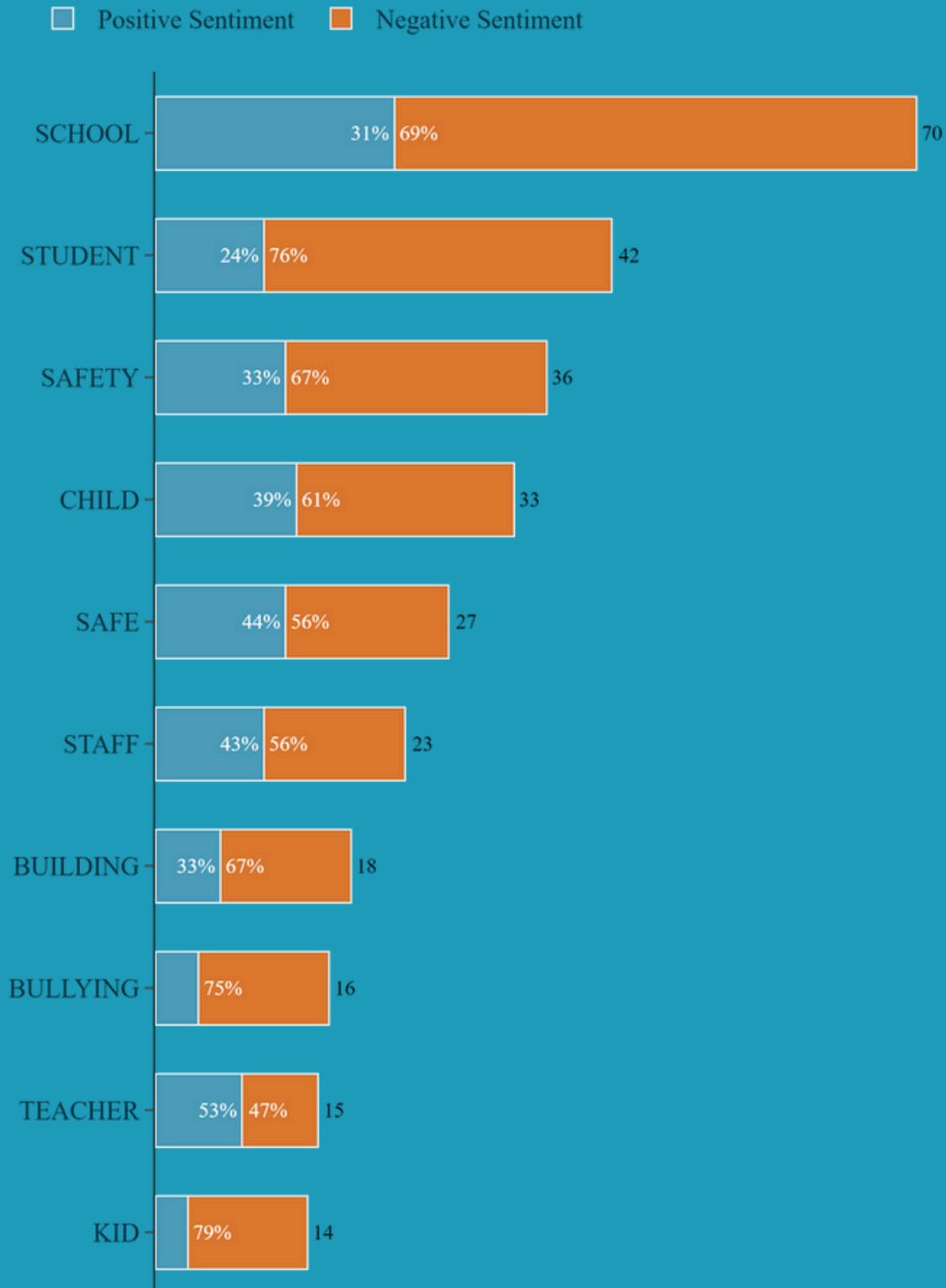
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See appendix for methodology.

COMMUNICATION



INNOVATE | K12

PROMPT

The communication I value most regarding my child is...

THEMES

- Importance of Timely Communication
- Communication During Emergencies and Critical Situations
- Continuous PD and Self-reflection
- Recognition of Positive Developments
- Frequency and Consistency of Updates

Importance of Timely Communication

Many parents highlighted the critical role of timely communication from teachers regarding their children's academic progress and behavioral issues. Offsetting negative experiences in the district, parents expressed a strong preference for early notifications about their child's challenges, such as missing assignments or social-emotional struggles, rather than waiting until problems escalate. Regular updates, especially relating to their child's wellbeing and academic performance, were deemed essential in fostering trust and allowing parents to provide adequate support at home. Parents emphasized that being kept in the loop prevents surprises and helps them assist their children before issues become more complicated.

Direct and Honest Communication

A recurring theme among survey respondents is the desire for direct and honest communication from teachers and school staff. Parents want straightforward answers to their inquiries, particularly when it concerns incidents or changes that may affect their child. This includes concerns about behavior, academic performance, and safety issues. Such transparency helps restore trust that may have been diminished in past interactions. The need for a clear line of communication, especially regarding specific instances affecting their children, was seen as critical to rebuilding and maintaining a collaborative relationship between families and the district.

Frequency and Consistency of Updates

Parents expressed that consistent and frequent updates from teachers are greatly appreciated and vital for effective involvement in their children's education. While many acknowledged the value of occasional parent-teacher conferences, the infrequency of these meetings leads to a feeling of disconnect. Regular communication, whether through emails, newsletters, or online platforms, allows parents to stay informed about classroom activities, curriculum changes, and their child's individual performance and needs. The call for a more structured approach to ongoing communication underscores parents' desire for a continuous dialogue rather than sporadic interactions.

Communication During Emergencies and Critical Situations

Responses indicated that communication becomes especially crucial during emergencies or critical situations affecting students' safety and well-being. Parents expressed the need for immediate and clear messaging during incidents such as health emergencies, safety threats, or significant school changes. They prefer to receive information directly from the school to prevent misinformation and anxiety stemming from rumors or social media. Accurate and timely updates help families navigate concerns and understand how their children are being supported during potentially distressing events.

Recognition of Positive Developments

While addressing concerns is vital, parents also want to hear about their children's successes and positive developments from teachers. They appreciate affirmations and feedback about their child's strengths and achievements, which not only reinforces the child's progress but also helps parents engage in meaningful discussions at home. Parents expressed that positive communication fosters a sense of connection and promotes a supportive relationship with educators. Regularly sharing good news, alongside concerns, can create a balanced narrative that reflects the child's overall experience in school.



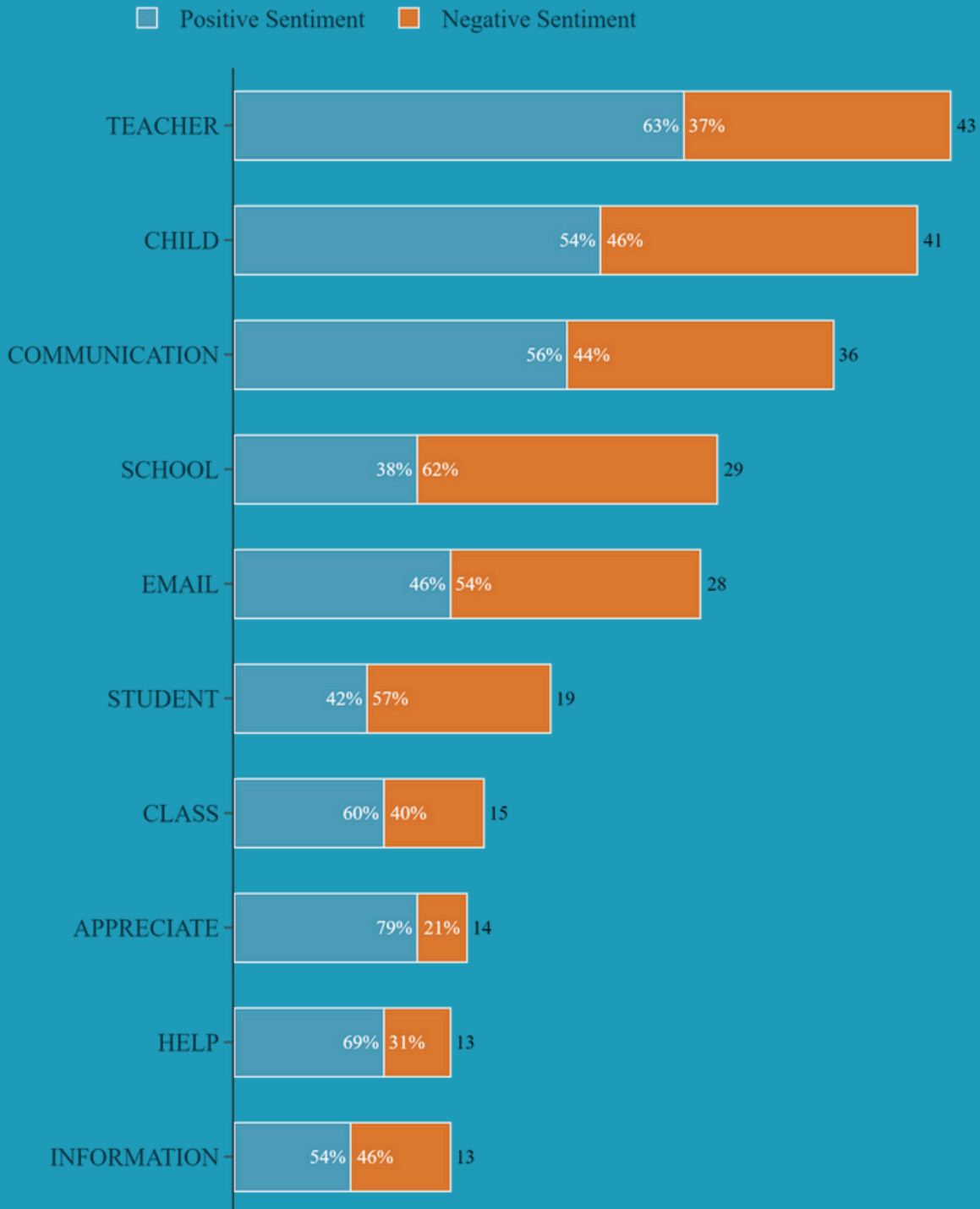
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Prompt: *The communication I value most regarding my child is...*

*Emotions Scale

Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



See appendix for methodology.



CONCERNS

PROMPT

My biggest concern regarding my child's educational experience with Amherst, Pelham, Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools is....

THEMES

- **Concerns about Academic Rigor and Individualization**
- **Insufficient Support for Neurodivergent Students**
- **Inconsistent Communication and Transparency**
- **Social and Emotional Well-being of Students**
- **Financial Constraints and Its Impact on Educational Quality**

Concerns about Academic Rigor and Individualization

Many parents expressed concern about the academic challenges faced by their children, especially those who are not receiving adequate support or engagement in their learning. There are fears that students, particularly those in programs like Caminantes, are not being held to high academic standards, leading to significant gaps in foundational skills such as reading and writing. Additionally, parents noted that there seems to be a lack of encouragement for students who fall in the "middle"—not receiving the necessary challenge or support to thrive academically. This concern extends to the quality of instruction in core subjects, with parents questioning the rigor and depth of the curriculum, particularly in high-demand areas such as math and language.

Insufficient Support for Neurodivergent Students

A considerable number of responses highlighted apprehensions regarding the treatment and support of neurodivergent students within the district. Parents articulated their dissatisfaction with the perceived lack of understanding from staff about learning disabilities, resulting in inadequate accommodations and individualized support, particularly for students with IEPs. There is a strong sentiment that behavior management approaches in the school are more punitive than supportive, failing to recognize behavior as a form of communication. Concerns were raised about staff qualifications and their ability to provide the necessary understanding and support for students with diverse learning needs. 17

Inconsistent Communication and Transparency

Parents expressed frustration about the lack of communication from the school regarding their child's academic progress and school happenings. Many highlighted incidents where they only learned about their child's struggles after making direct inquiries, creating feelings of disconnect and disappointment. This lack of transparency also extends to broader administrative actions, particularly with respect to the Caminantes program. Parents noted that there is little information available about how decisions are made regarding educational strategies and that they feel unheard and unengaged in discussions about their children's educational experiences.

Social and Emotional Well-being of Students

There are significant concerns about the social dynamics within the schools, particularly in relation to bullying and the overall climate. Parents highlighted how social issues, including cliques and bullying, adversely impact their children's emotional well-being and their ability to thrive academically. The pandemic's lingering effects on social interactions have compounded these issues, leading to a desire for schools to create better opportunities for positive interactions and friendships among students. There is a consensus that fostering a supportive and inclusive environment is critical for enhancing students' overall educational experience.

Financial Constraints and Its Impact on Educational Quality

Parents repeatedly voiced concerns regarding the financial health of the school district and the potential consequences of budget cuts on educational quality. There is worry that declining funding will lead to staff shortages, reduced programming, and fewer academic resources. Many noted that this not only compromises the educational experience for their children but also erodes trust in the district's ability to provide high-quality schooling. Comments about the disrepair of facilities and the need for better materials and resources reflect a broader anxiety about how financial decisions are impacting day-to-day educational experiences for students across the district.



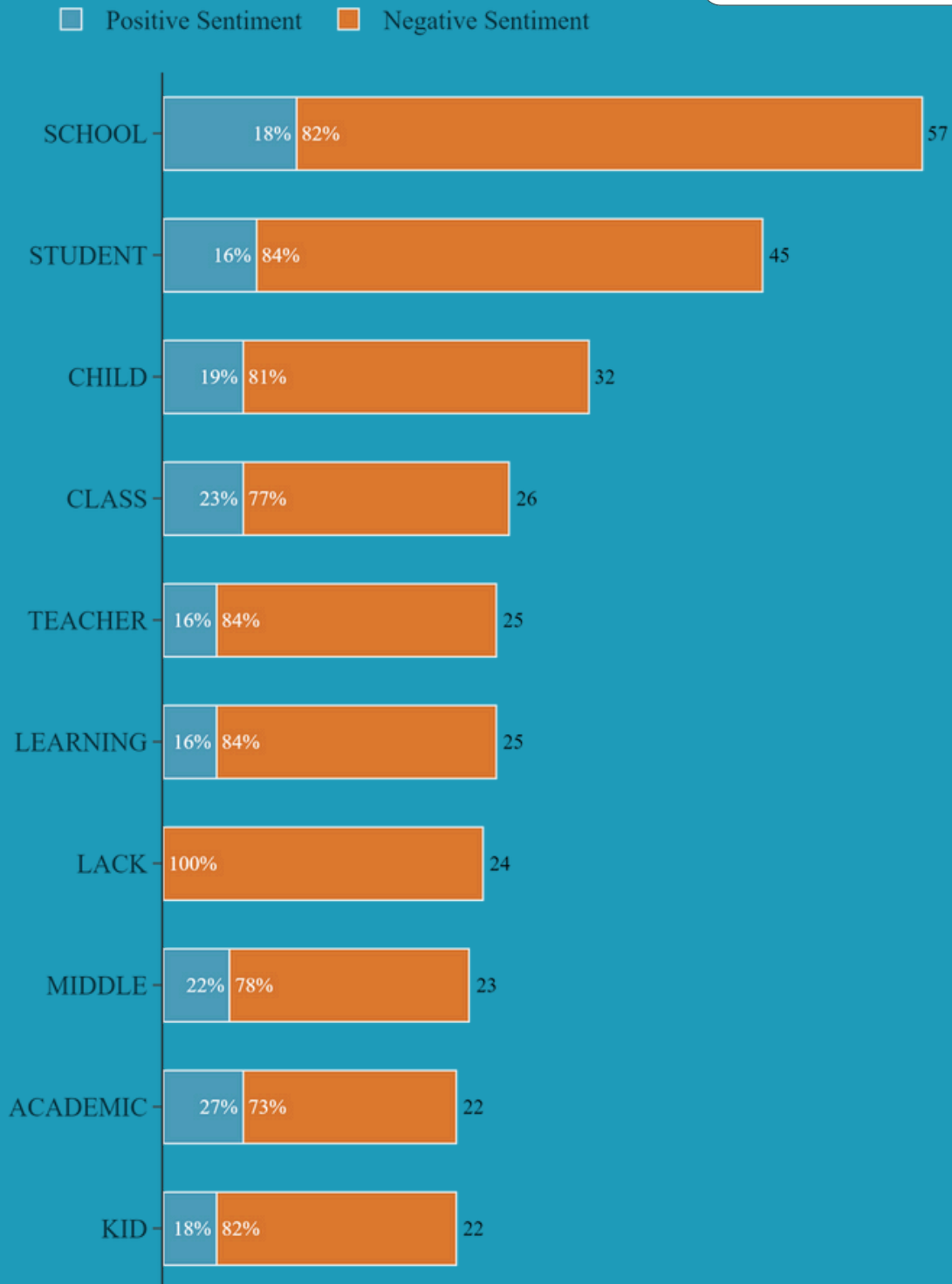
The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

Prompt: My biggest concern regarding my child's educational experience with Amherst, Pelham, Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools is....

*Emotions Scale

Positive: hopeful, optimistic, supportive, enthusiastic.

Negative: recommend, improve, input, unsure, uncertain, confused, pessimistic, critical.



See appendix for methodology.

PRAISE



INNOVATE | K12

PROMPT

My biggest praise regarding my child's educational experience with Amherst, Pelham, Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools is....

THEMES

- **Outstanding Teachers and Staff**
- **Strong Community and Inclusivity**
- **Rich Extracurricular and Program Variety**
- **Personalized Student Support**
- **Positive Academic Environment**

Outstanding Teachers and Staff

Survey respondents consistently praised the quality of teachers and staff within Amherst Pelham Regional Public Schools. Many comments highlighted individual educators, such as Diane Chamberlain and Ms. Cuffee-Gray, who were acknowledged for their dedication and ability to connect with students personally. Parents appreciated the effort teachers put into supporting their children's diverse needs, mentioning instances of teachers going above and beyond to create a nurturing learning environment, especially within special education programs. The warmth, kindness, and commitment these educators demonstrate not only in their teaching but also in their daily interactions with students have created a supportive atmosphere that many parents feel fortunate to be part of.

Strong Community and Inclusivity

Respondents frequently noted the sense of community fostered within the schools, particularly at the elementary level, such as Crocker Farm. Families felt welcomed and valued, which contributed to their children's positive educational experiences. Many parents celebrated the district's dedication to diversity and inclusion, specifically citing programs like Caminantes, which support bilingual students and promote cultural appreciation. Additionally, the staff's genuine care for students formed a close-knit environment that helped new families acclimate easily, creating a shared commitment among parents, educators, and the wider community to cultivate an enriching school experience.

Rich Extracurricular and Program Variety

The breadth of extracurricular offerings and specific programs drew considerable praise from respondents, who highlighted opportunities in music, art, and specialized clubs, such as the SeneGambian Program. Many parents expressed that these varied programs helped their children not only excel academically but also thrive socially and emotionally. The involvement in diverse activities provided students with the chance to explore interests outside the traditional classroom environment, enhancing their overall educational journey and peer interactions. Parents celebrated how these programs contributed to their children’s engagement, creativity, and teamwork skills.

Personalized Student Support

Many of the survey responses emphasized the individualized attention and support students receive, particularly those with unique learning needs. Parents appreciated the responsiveness and dedication of staff members who work tirelessly to help students succeed. The individualized support and tailored communication through mechanisms such as 504 plans and the AIMS program were recognized as vital to ensuring a positive educational experience. Additionally, parents valued the efforts made by counselors and special educators who took the time to understand their children’s challenges and worked collaboratively to meet those needs, demonstrating a commitment to inclusive education.

Positive Academic Environment

Respondents conveyed an overall satisfaction with the academic rigor and safety of the schools, particularly in the high school setting. Many parents noted that their children have thrived in a challenging, yet supportive environment which fosters critical thinking and active engagement with the curriculum. The feedback highlighted the balance of academic expectations with emotional support, allowing students to feel secure while tackling demanding coursework. Some parents pointed out the need for continued academic scrutiny and support for students who may feel lost or struggle within the system, yet they generally raised praises for the quality of education their children received, indicating a deep appreciation for the academic framework provided by the district.



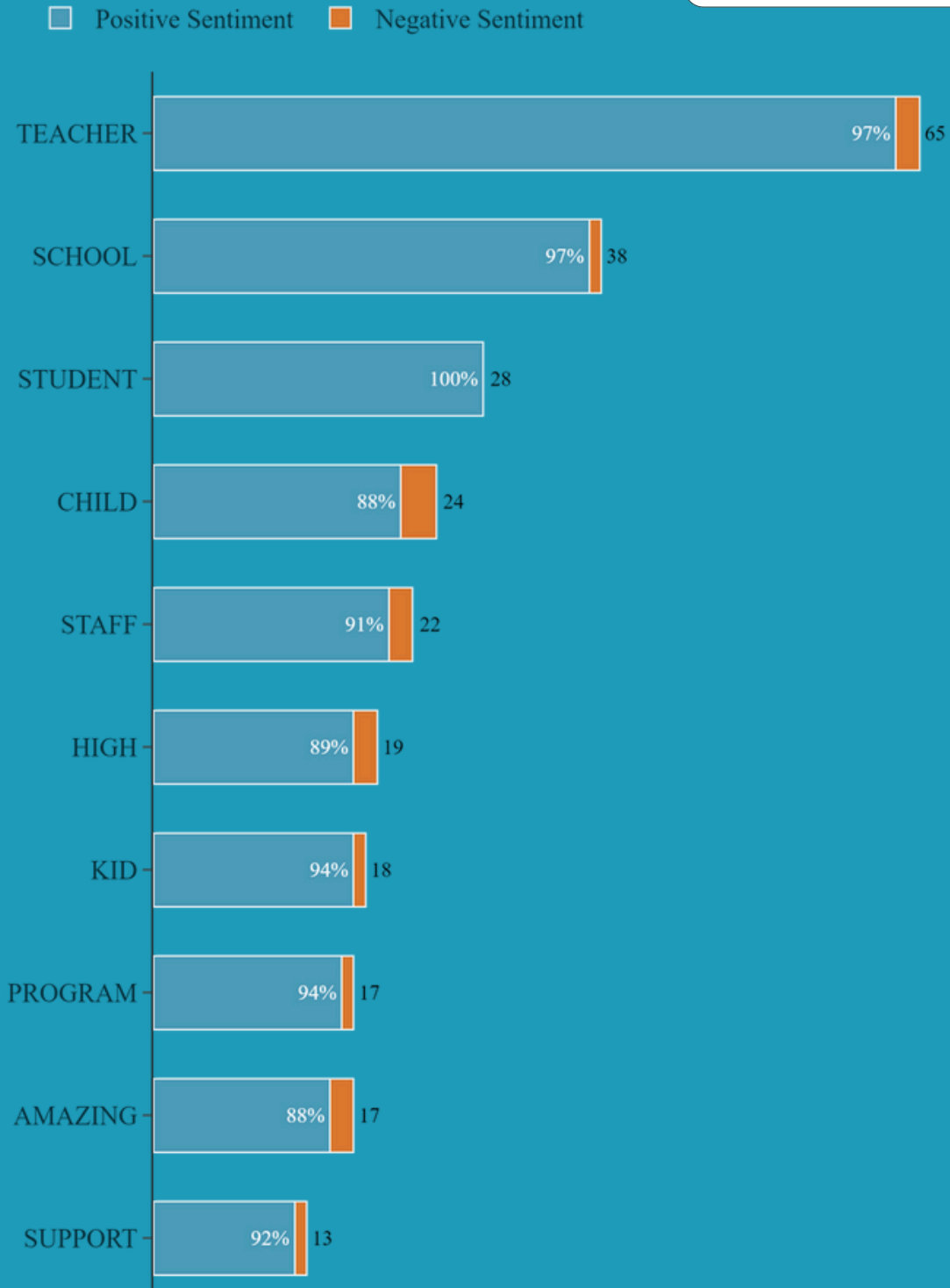
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See appendix for methodology.

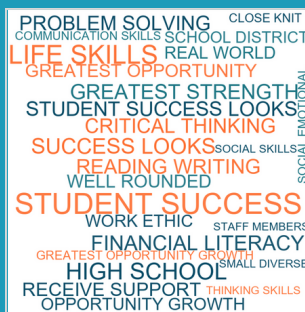
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METHODOLOGY



The Frequency of Words Expressed

This figure shows the top words used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The less frequently used words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.



The Frequency of Language Patterns

This figure shows the top word groups used by participants, after removing “stop words” and several other “filler words” (words that don’t provide context or meaning to a written sentence or thought). The groups of words were identified using bigram and trigram analysis (continuous sequences of 2 and 3 words, respectively). The less frequently used clusters of words were also omitted from this figure, to highlight the more popular ones.



The Emotions of Words Used in Ideas Shared

The ten most commonly used words were identified by determining whether the word appeared at least once per shared idea. Stop words were removed prior to the analysis. Once the words were identified, the sentiment breakdown was determined by utilizing a state-of-the-art, fine-tuned BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representation for Transformer) NLP (natural language processing) model.



ACADEMIC

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Special Education Program Review
Effectiveness and Efficiency of Special Education Supports
Amherst-Pelham Regional School District

Respectfully Submitted by: Dr. Nadine G. Ekstrom, President
Dr. Leah Ferullo, Consultant
April 2024

Special Education Program Review
Prepared for Amherst-Pelham Regional School District by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE:

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District contacted an independent educational consulting organization, Academic Discoveries, LLC, regarding their interest in pursuing a program review process for their special education department. Their inquiry focused on the efficacy and efficiencies of resources and programming within the special education department to ensure staff appropriately serviced students.

Academic Discoveries was the lead evaluator and partnered with the district's special education administration. Given the district's interests, Academic Discoveries developed four overarching research questions to guide this program review. The questions were as follows:

1. In reviewing the philosophy of requiring additional support for students with disabilities, is there potential for students' progress to be compromised rather than enhanced?
2. When a young student requires adult support beyond the general education teacher, how is the district considering reducing this need as the students transition through grades K through 12 to ensure independence rather than dependence?
3. What are the reasonable expectations for general education teachers when teaching in a diverse classroom without the request for additional staffing support?
4. When is it reasonable to request additional support for a general education teacher and/or student?

METHODS:

To understand the district's implementation of pedagogy, curriculum, instruction, and assessment in special education services, we conducted a sequential explanatory mixed methods design by collecting and analyzing quantitative record review data and qualitative interviews, focus groups, and survey data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). First, Academic Discoveries and Amherst-Pelham's special education leadership team discussed the methods and profile of this work completed.

This program review implemented a mixed-methods approach, using multiple resources to collect quantitative and qualitative data and analysis. A survey included 480 participants, including parents/caregivers, faculty, staff, and administration. The review interviewed eleven (11) individuals from special education and general education. Additionally, eleven (11) individuals, including parents/caregivers, staff, and the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC), participated in focus group sessions. Academic Discoveries conducted elementary and secondary observations throughout the district. Finally, Academic Discoveries researched district-wide data and results



from the Department of Elementary and Secondary's website, the Census Bureau, and document review provided by the district.

As a result of this data collection and review, the following portion of this executive summary provides overarching findings from the report, including areas of promise and potential growth. The executive summary concludes with recommendations from Academic Discoveries based on the findings of the data collection process results.

KEY FINDINGS:

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District has invested in implementing high-quality special education instruction from preschool to age 22, as evident in the survey, interviews, focus groups, and observation data.

When referencing the first program review question, *“In reviewing the philosophy of requiring additional support for students with disabilities, is there potential for students’ progress to be compromised rather than enhanced?”* the responses include classroom observations, interviews, focus group participants, and survey responses. By and large, the educators and parents/guardians value the importance of the paraeducators in the classroom. The need for additional support is primarily determined through team meeting discussions, testing results, and classroom data. Additionally, 85% of educators reported that they often or always recommend the need for a paraeducator because the previous IEP team members included this service in the student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). Parents view this additional support as effective in helping their children succeed in school. There were discrepancies between paraeducator and teacher perspectives when asked if a paraeducator was required for students with disabilities to be successful (Paraeducator = 81%, Educator = 34%). Another discrepancy between the two parties was their level of agreement as to whether the paraeducator’s role is to ensure the student remains on-task (Paraeducator = 52%, Educator = 25%). Paraeducators (65%) agree more than twice as often as educators (29%) that having a paraeducator is the best model for classroom support.

The second review question, *“When a young student requires adult support beyond the general education teacher, how is the district considering reducing this need as the students transition through grades K through 12 to ensure independence rather than dependence?”*, was researched through surveys, interview and focus group participants, and classroom observations. According to the survey results, the parents/caregivers equally considered versus not considered to be reducing support for their child. 42% of the parents somewhat or strongly agreed that reducing a paraeducator would be appropriate when their child is making effective progress, while 73% of educators somewhat or strongly agreed with this statement. Parents and educators strongly value having a paraeducator in the classroom to support their children with disabilities. Educators reported that transition times for students (grade to grade, one school to another) are a source of anxiety and concern for staff and parents. Yet, paraeducator input during these times is lacking. Educators would like to see



fading support for students as they grow into the older grades to promote their self-awareness of learning. Administrators confirmed that most requests come from the transition years when students go into kindergarten from preschool and enter elementary, middle, or high school. The administration would like to see more requests come from a data perspective and demonstration of student needs rather than due to anxiety and the unknown.

The third review question was, “What are the reasonable expectations for general education teachers when teaching in a diverse classroom without requesting additional staffing support?” The results of this question were reviewed, staff survey responses were analyzed, and interviews and focus group participants were analyzed. General educators reported they appreciated block scheduling as it allowed for more differentiated instruction opportunities. Some other strategies included a variety of options for reading such as, but not limited to, technology, audiobooks, peer reading, having reference materials, google search for adapted materials, and using visual aids. Many reported they value the support from their colleagues. They create classroom routines for small group instruction, prepare modified work, and implement peer teaching. When determining the general educators’ comfort level of teaching without a paraeducator or special education teacher, the educators were less confident teaching without a special education teacher over a paraeducator.

Additionally, they needed to be more confident in teaching multi-sensory approaches. They further required more knowledge in how to implement peer tutoring when special education supports utilized in their classrooms. When asked about the variety of supports they provide in their classroom without additional staff support, 52% modified classroom routines and social/emotional instruction at least half the time, and 85% reported they focus on respecting differences at least half the time. When asked how they could better support students, paraeducators responded that they currently must be more reactive than proactive and would like it the other way around. Paraeducators get asked to do many tasks beyond their current role and would like to be given Chromebooks similar to the other staff in the school system. They feel this would help them to do their jobs more efficiently. Paraeducators expressed concern over the need for more time to debrief with colleagues about individual students and the potential for enhanced intervention strategies, reporting that time constraints are a significant barrier to doing their work effectively.

The final review question, “*When is it reasonable to request additional support for a general education teacher and/or student?*” was reviewed through the survey, interview, and focus group participation. 78% of parents believed they should have a right to request additional adult support for their child(ren). However, 75% responded that they only asked for additional support after meeting with the teachers about their child(ren)’s progress, and they believed in partnering with the school to determine alternative strategies for supporting their student before requesting additional adult support. Although data is a primary form of evidence in determining the need for additional support, only 68% of all staff and 77% of teachers stated they collected more than three (3) data results from the students before asking for additional support.



Additionally, 74% of all staff and 76% of teachers stated that a paraeducator should be added when more than 30% of the class comprises students on an IEP. Educators shared their strategies for modifying classwork, developing differentiated instructional practices, and working with the behavioral concerns of students before requesting additional adult support. Paraeducators reported they don't always feel they have received adequate support and training in understanding all the concerns regarding student IEPs and how to service some students requiring specialized support. Although they have shared different opinions on approaches to supporting students with disabilities, they have not always felt supported or knowledgeable about making the best accommodations to support some students.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

As a result of this review, Academic Discoveries, LLC has included the following recommendations. The proposed recommendations resulted in two (2) categories: professional development and systemic approaches.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Data Support:

Through survey results and interviews, it became evident that educators would benefit from supportive professional development in analyzing data to inform instruction. Many respondents reported their need for more data use when determining the need for professional support.

Paraeducator Training:

It is important to note that through the years, paraeducators have received training with overarching themes such as, but not limited to, trauma and social/emotional support. However, paraeducators and teachers reported the need for intense training for paraeducators so they feel confident and highly qualified to provide special education support to students with disabilities. The specific training may include specialized training on particular disabilities, roles and responsibilities of

an inclusive classroom, and how to collect data. It would be beneficial for the special education administration to review the observation notes from the elementary versus middle and high schools to determine specific strategies needed for supporting students on an IEP in these settings.

Pedagogical Practices:

This section suggests pedagogical practices that could be included in the professional development training. It is based on observations conducted by the evaluator. Provide increased opportunities for accommodations and modifications in large and small group activities. A specialist with a deep understanding of special education should provide this training to general education teachers and paraeducators on how modifications and accommodations support students with disabilities in the general education classrooms. General education teachers must build a more robust foundational understanding of how students with moderate to severe

disabilities should be included, not integrated into their classrooms. Here is a video example of what the evaluator is referencing:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VMz06iVzqs>.

SYSTEMIC APPROACHES

Scheduling and Planning - Collaboration:

When observing classrooms, there was a clear identification of overstaffing in some classrooms. Planning must determine where and when paras could support students within the school. Students are not in a classroom with a teacher and three (3) paraeducators, for instance, when there may only be the need for one (1) paraeducator. This shift in practice will allow the paraeducators to support more classrooms over a given period.

Consideration of Individual Strengths:

The administration is encouraged to develop a system of reviewing each paraeducator and determining their areas of strength and knowledge to ensure appropriate assignments to students with disabilities that align with their strengths. It is essential to recognize that not all paraeducators may have strengths in all disability categories. If a need is present, it is vital that appropriate training ensures they are confident in the expectations of their role.

Administration Creating Scheduled Collaboration:

Given that paraeducators in Amherst-Pelham Regional School District appear to have limited collaboration time with educators, they feel that they are always

Additionally, in one classroom, two (2) paraeducators were supposed to be present, and the classroom teacher reported they never stayed. There is a need for more communication between the building-based administration and the special education coordinators regarding staffing needs in each classroom. The recommendation is to build a team in each building to review staffing needs to support students with disabilities and to create an overarching schedule to ensure students who need generalized paraeducator support are in the same classroom. Hence, the

Roles and Responsibilities of Educators:

Given that ALL educators receive a license through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Massachusetts educational system expects all licensed educators to teach students of various abilities. Various responses from the educator survey participants showed that not all educators know how to implement differentiated instruction. Therefore, the district administration should support this requirement for all educators and create a system to hold all licensed educators accountable. One example is the expectation that all educators have a differentiated instruction goal as part of their annual professional practice goal. Another recommendation may be to create a yearly building-based goal and ask individual educators how they will impact that goal.

“in the know” about issues and concerns that arise with the students they are supporting. However, they are concerned about their effectiveness in providing special education support to students as they are not always hearing

about the educational needs and updates firsthand.

Identifying Need and Purpose of a Paraprofessional:

As a result of this program review, the evaluators have questions about when there are actual needs for a paraprofessional in some classrooms, as outlined in the observation findings. Therefore, it is recommended that the district review DESE's guidance on hiring a paraprofessional and review the samples outlined on their website

(<https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2014-3ta.html>).

Technology Devices:

Paraeducators could be more effective if they had Chromebooks to respond to emails, collect in-time data, and report situations to their direct supervisors. It would benefit the district if the administration could consider an approach to support this request, if not Chromebooks, perhaps another device that can help with today's technological needs.

INTRODUCTION

AMHERST-PELHAM REGIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS - OVERVIEW

The Amherst-Pelham Regional Public School District is in Pioneer Valley of Western Massachusetts. The regional district comprises two municipalities and one regional district, Amherst, Pelham, and Amherst Regional, located in Hampshire County. The Regional district is comprised of Amherst and Pelham, and for the region, Leverett and Shutesbury also join for grades 7-12. Although Amherst is often recognized as the “town of,” it is a city home to three colleges/universities. Pelham is a town in Massachusetts named after the Pelham family.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pelham,_Massachusetts). Amherst’s neighboring towns consist of Hadley, Sunderland, Leverett, Shutesbury, Pelham, Belchertown, Granby, and South Hadley (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amherst,_Massachusetts). Pelham’s neighboring towns include Shutesbury, New Salem, Belchertown, and Amherst.

According to 2022 five-year estimates by the United States Census Bureau, Amherst consists of 33,389 people with an average median value of owner-occupied housing (with a mortgage) of \$452,200. Approximately 8.8% of the population includes people under 18 years of age. In addition, 69.5% of the community’s population is white, with about 9.2% associated with having two or more races. English is the most common first language in the home; however, about 20.8% of individuals aged five and above speak another language. Of residents aged 25 years and older, 61.1% have graduated with a bachelor’s degree or higher

(<https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2022.S2506?q=Amherst%20town,%20Massachusetts%20median%20value%20of%20housing%20with%20a%20mortgage>).

Additionally, the same resource reported that Pelham consists of 1,315 people with an average median value of owner-occupied housing (with a mortgage) of \$395,200. Approximately 18.5% of the population includes people under 18 years of age. In addition, 85.6% of the community’s population is white, with about 4% associated with having two or more races. English is the most common first language in the home;



however, about 9.7% of individuals aged five and above speak another language. Of residents aged 25 years and older, 2.5% have graduated with a bachelor's degree or higher

(<https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2022.S0701?q=Pelham%20town,%20Massachusetts>).

The Amherst, Pelham, and Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools consist of three districts, with an FY2023-FY2024 total enrollment of 2,193. Amherst includes three schools: Crocker Farm Elementary (326 students), Fort River Elementary (346 students), and Wildwood Elementary (311 students). The Amherst municipal school system provides education for preschool to grade six. The Pelham municipal system includes one school, Pelham Elementary (129 students), which educates students from kindergarten to grade six. The Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools consists of two schools to support both communities: Amherst Regional Middle School (369 students), including grades seven and eight, and Amherst Regional High School (841 students), including grades nine to age twenty-two.

(<https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/student.aspx?orgcode=06050000&orgtypecode=5&>).

The Amherst-Pelham Regional Public School District prides itself on its diverse student body and academic excellence. According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website, its schools are home to a rich mix of students, with 57.5% being white, 17.6% Hispanic, 9.6% Asian, 7.3% Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic, 7.8% African American, 0.2% Native American, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander. In 2022, the district achieved a commendable 94.2% graduation rate, with an overall drop-out rate of 1.2 and a mere 0.2% for students with disabilities in all grades.

(<https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/dropout/default.aspx?orgcode=06050000&orgtypecode=5&leftNavId=15627&>).



AMHERST-PELHAM STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

In all three school systems, Amherst, Pelham, and Amherst-Pelham Regional, the percentage of students with disabilities is higher than the state average of 20.2%. For instance, Amherst is 21.7%, Pelham is 24.8%, and Amherst-Pelham represents 26.3% of the student population. Notably, as students advance in their educational experiences, the percentage of students on Individual Education Plans (IEPs) tends to decrease; however, the opposite is true in this situation. In Table 1, you will also see how each school system compares to the state average in FY2020 regarding student placement for those with a disability.

Placement	Amherst	Pelham	Amherst-Pelham	State Rate
Full Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the day inside the general education classroom.)	79.1%	95.0%	52.9%	66.9%
Partial Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 40%-79% of the day.)	13.5%	5.0%	32.9%	13.3%
Substantially Separate (inside the general education classroom less than 40% of the day.)	5.6%	0.0%	5.0%	13.6%
Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital placements (does not include parentally-placed private school students with disabilities)	1.9%	0.0%	9.3%	6.2%

It's encouraging that Amherst and Pelham have made significant strides towards the least restrictive environment (LRE), the goal for all educational systems. It is also important to note that the percentage in separate schools for the Region may reflect that the district has its in-district publicly approved day school for students in grades 7-12. Amherst-Pelham has a noteworthy percentage in the partial inclusion setting, surpassing the state average. However, there is room for improvement as their full-inclusion placements are nearly 14% lower than the state average, and their separate

school's placement is more than 3% higher than the state average. Please note that this statistical data is from DESE's website and recognizes FY2020, not the most current school year.

(https://profiles.doe.mass.edu/gis/sped_map.aspx?orgcode=06050000&).

AMHERST-PELHAM REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT – SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM REVIEW REQUEST

Dr. Faye Brady, Director of Student Services, expressed the importance of attaining an objective perspective of the district's efficacy of resources related to special education and servicing students. Her request, driven by concerns about the efficacy and efficiency of requesting paraprofessional support throughout the three school systems, was a crucial step in our collective effort to ensure students receive special education services properly without potentially over-identifying the need for additional staffing support. The administration's request for a program review is a testament to our commitment to continuous improvement and our dedication to providing the best possible education for our students. The district sought to receive an objective exploration that included a review of current best practices and potential recommendations for additional best practices. Furthermore, the district's interest was ensuring student support matched the IEP goals and disability. This report aims to understand better the strengths and needs within the special education department pertaining to using paraprofessionals in the classroom. This comprehensive review aims to provide the least restrictive environment for students and ensure that the three school systems provide appropriate interventions and/or modifications to support students in their home school.

As a result, the review process, a collaborative effort between the special education department and the administration, was undertaken to ensure a continuum of efficacy and efficiencies of resource allocation to support students with disabilities, including identifying the need for paraprofessional support, appropriation of special education



staff, and ensuring students are appropriately serviced. In addition, the following overarching research questions were used as a framework for the review process:

1. In reviewing the philosophy of requiring additional support for students with disabilities, is there potential for students' progress to be compromised rather than enhanced?
2. When a young student requires adult support beyond the general education teacher, how is the district considering reducing this need as the students transition through grades K through 12 to ensure independence rather than dependence?
3. What are the reasonable expectations for general education teachers when teaching in a diverse classroom without the request for additional staffing support?
4. When is it reasonable to request additional support for a general education teacher and/or student?

Therefore, this program review consisted of exploring the special education department to ensure a continuum of best practices was implemented regarding staffing support and alignment with student needs.



METHODS

To understand the district's implementation of special education services within each school system, we conducted a sequential explanatory mixed methods design by collecting and analyzing quantitative record review data and qualitative interviews, focus groups, and survey data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Academic Discoveries and Amherst-Pelham's special education administration met three times to discuss the overall program review process and refine, revise, and finalize the interview, focus group, and survey questions. In addition, Academic Discoveries reviewed district- provided documentation and observed classrooms at various schools and grade levels.

QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Quantitative data collected through survey responses and district and state documentation review was part of the program review process. This section outlines the quantitative data collected and its analysis.

AMHERST-PELHAM REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT AND COMPARABLE DISTRICTS

DESE's District Analysis Review Tool (DART) was pivotal in our research. This tool enables districts to review data and valuable information with other districts that share a similar profile. It provides a benchmark for evaluating Amherst-Pelham's performance over a three-year period, allowing us to consider their district's performance against districts with similar profiles.

The data we collected for student performance (Figure 1 and Figure 2) and student growth percentiles (Figure 3 and Figure 4) are two distinct measures. Student performance assesses how well students performed in specific content areas on the MCAS annual statewide assessment for Massachusetts. On the other hand, student growth percentiles review the level of student learning from their previous performance, measuring the learning that has occurred for students from one grade to the next. This distinction is important as it is one of the measurements used in districts to determine the effectiveness of their instruction and interventions over one school year.



Figures 1, 2, and 3 illustrate the percentage of students recognized as students with disabilities, low-income, and ELL categories, according to DESE. Figure 1 illustrates Amherst in comparison to other districts. Figure 2 presents Pelham in contrast to other districts. Figure 3 outlines Amherst-Pelham compared to other districts identified using DESE’s DART tool (<https://www.doe.mass.edu/dart/>).

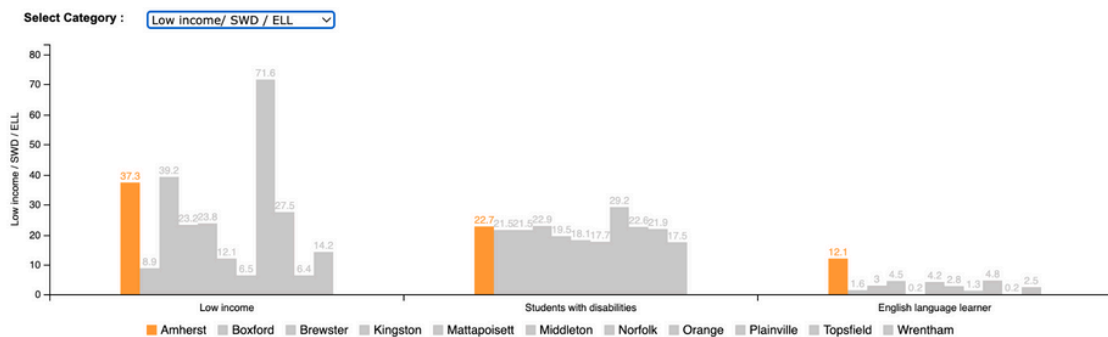


Figure 1: Amherst - Low Income, SWD, and ELLs in Comparison with Other Like Districts.

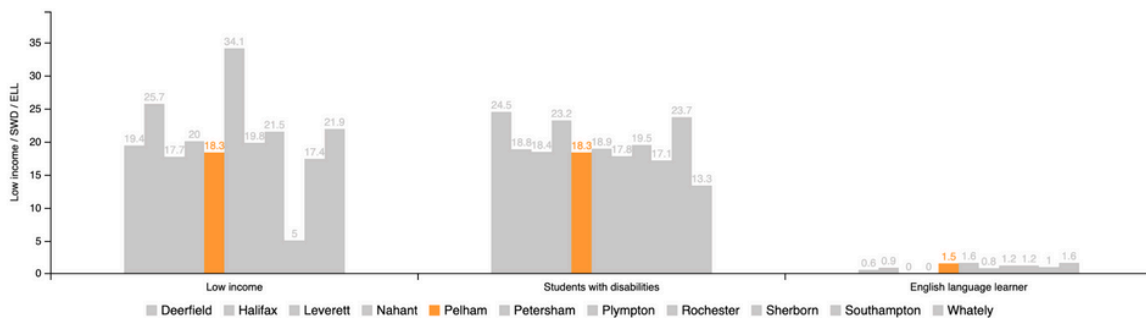


Figure 2: Pelham - Low Income, SWD, and ELLs in Comparison with Other Like Districts.

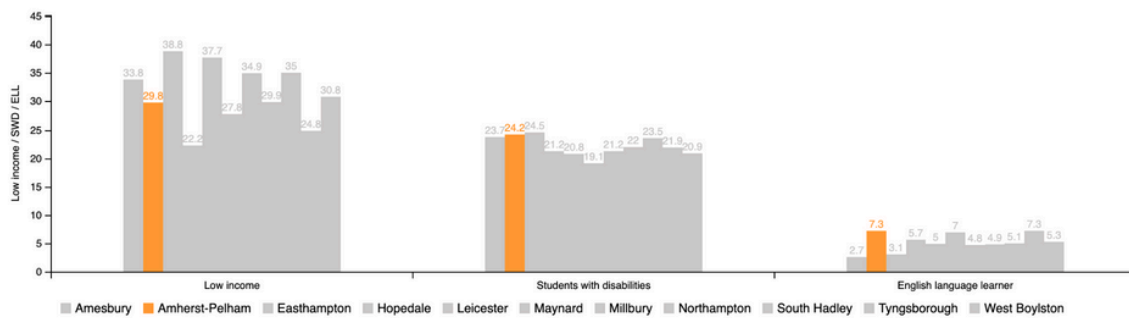


Figure 3: Amherst-Pelham - Low Income, SWD, and ELLs in Comparison with Other Like Districts.

DISTRICT SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District provides a comprehensive range of in-district programming options. These include special education services integrated within the general education classroom, partial inclusion in the general education setting, and full-day specialized instruction in special education classrooms. This ensures that every student's unique needs are met, fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

The Academic Individualized Mainstream Support (AIMS) program is a standout offering. It provides students with autism and other neurological disabilities with comprehensive, specialized support throughout their school day. This program, detailed in Appendix A, is a testament to our commitment to meeting the unique needs of every student.

The second, third, and fourth identified programs are similar in profile. These programs are vertically aligned to support elementary through high school students. Therefore, each program is in a school at each of the three levels: elementary, middle, and high schools. The elementary program is called the Building Blocks Program, while the other two programs are the Student Support Program (SSP) at the Middle School and the Student Support Program (SSP) at the High School. These two programs focus on the social and emotional well-being of students challenged in regulating their behaviors, emotions, and social and academic demands during the school day. Each social/emotional/behavioral program has manuals describing the program's philosophy, supports, and staffing to ensure students are educated in a psychologically safe and comforting learning environment to succeed in the school day. Appendix B is the manual for the Building Blocks elementary program. Appendix C is the manual for the Middle School program, and Appendix D is the manual for the High School program.

The fifth substantially separate program offered by Amherst-Pelham is the separate day school program, provided to students from grades seven through twelve who require a more restrictive setting beyond the SSP programs. However, they can still attend an



educational program called the Summit Academy in their home school district. Further details and information are outlined in Appendix E.

Amherst-Pelham offers substantially separate programs to students with significant disabilities who require intensive specialized programming and oversight throughout the school day. The names of these programs are the Intensive Learning Center (ILC), Essential Skills Program (ESP), and Pathways to Independence Programs (PIP). These programs support students from kindergarten through grade 12. Students served in these programs may have one or more disabilities in areas such as autism, cerebral palsy, cognitive impairment, and/or health impairments.

The Intensive Needs programs provide coordinated related services and specialized instruction to students in grades K through 12 in both school-based and community settings in adaptive and independent living skills, social skills, functional academics, school behavior, and vocational awareness. The program supports inclusion in the general education environment when appropriate and opportunities for exploration and skill development in modified, universally designed arts, physical education, and music classes. Routine communication and collaboration with families is a priority in the Intensive Needs programs and efforts are made to adapt communication methods to the needs and preferences of each family.

The Connections program is a functional life skills program for students with IDD and other neurological disorders who have typically completed four years of high school but have not yet achieved a high school diploma. These students continue their programming until they turn 22 or until they achieve a high school diploma, whichever comes first.

The Connections Program provides individualized plans, which allow students in special education to transition successfully from their role as high school students to their new role as adults in the community. The program supports developing and strengthening their functional life skills, including money and time management, travel training,



community safety, post-secondary education or training, vocational training, social skills, self-determination and self-advocacy skills, and recreation and leisure skills.

At the core of the program is Person-Centered Planning, which assesses students individually and helps them create their post-secondary vision. Each student's individual strengths, interests, preferences, skills, and abilities are considered when planning their programming.

Students can participate in a variety of classroom activities and community experiences to prepare them for their transition to adult life. The goal is to integrate the students into their community as much as possible while receiving natural-environment teaching at vocational sites and in the community where they live.

According to the special education administration, the paraeducators have received the following training over the past two years:

- 10-hour ABA training
- District-wide DEI and LGBTQIA+
- Roles & Responsibilities
- One training dedicated to reading Accommodations and IEP At a Glance
- Hovering/Fostering independence
- De-escalation Training
- Van Monitoring
- Elementary Paraeducators:
 - Behavior Management
 - How to provide the correct amount of support
 - Restorative circles
- Grief (provided to a school where a student passed away)

These trainings align with inclusive practices, expectations of the roles and responsibilities of paraeducators, and how to support students of various levels of need.

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Our program review, a rigorous and comprehensive process, was supported by a wealth of qualitative data. This included survey results, focus group discussions, interviews, and classroom observations. The review, which commenced in the fall of 2023, saw data collection conclude in March 2024. The questions used for collecting data were meticulously drafted and created by Academic Discoveries, and they were reviewed and approved by the Amherst-Pelham central office administration, ensuring the highest standards of quality and relevance.

SURVEY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

The survey consisted of 43 questions covering various aspects of the program. However, the questions were presented to individuals based on their roles, and not all questions were received by all participants. The survey was distributed to parents/caregivers, educators, support personnel, and administrators. Four hundred eighty (480) participants responded to the survey. Given that some individuals participated in more than one role (parent/educator, etc.), the total number of roles was equivalent to five hundred thirty (530) responses.

The breakdown of the roles is listed in Table 1 as follows:

Role	Percentage	Number of Participants(N)
General Education Elementary Teacher	13%	67 53
General Education Secondary Teacher (including elective teachers)	10%	
Special Education Teacher	14%	75
Related Service Provider	7%	39
Elementary (Art/Music/PE/World Language)	2%	8 4
Reading Specialist	1%	6
Nurse	1%	

School Adjustment Counselor	2%	10
School Psychologist	2%	8
Paraeducator	15%	81
Parent/Guardian	27%	145
Building Administrator	2%	13
Central Office Administrator	2%	13
School Guidance Counselor	1%	6
Education Team Leader	1%	2
Total	100%	530

Table 1: Roles of Survey Participants

Those who identified as secondary teachers were then asked which discipline they taught. Of those individuals, the percentage of disciplines was relatively evenly distributed, with Specials (Art, Music, PE, Library, etc.), English, and Math being of the highest percentile, as outlined in Table 2 below:

Discipline	Percentage
Science	16%
Social Studies	11%
English	18%
Math	18%
Specials (Art, Music, PE, Library, etc.)	20%
Language (Spanish, French, Latin, etc.)	9%
Other	8%
Total	100%

Table 2: Discipline of Secondary Teachers - Survey Participants



Those who stated they were related service providers identified which services they provided. Figure 4 illustrates the participants' responses. Speech/Language pathologists had the most participants, with Board Certified Behavior Analysts being the second highest population.

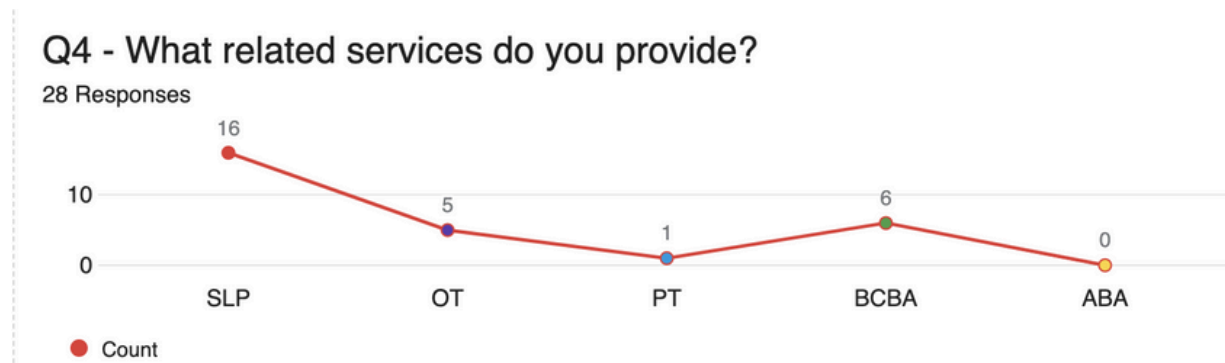


Figure 4 Relate Service Providers - Survey Participants

The survey delved into the tenure of our educators at Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools, revealing a rich tapestry of experience. Table 3 showcases this diversity, with 40% of the educators who participated in this survey having served 0-5 years. At the same time, a significant 29% of the participating educators have dedicated more than 15 years to Amherst-Pelham, a testament to their commitment and loyalty.

Length of Employment by Amherst-Pelham Regional School District	Percentage
0-5 years	40%
6-9 years	18%
10-14 years	13%
15 + years	29%

Table 3: Time Employed by Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools

The educators' dedication to their students was evident in their responses to the question about the grade levels they support. Some educators even supported multiple grade levels. The elementary and middle school grades were equally represented, with

preschool having the smallest percentage at 2%. The high school grades were also equally represented, except for the beyond grade 12 age group, which comprised 3% of the responses. Educators could recognize more than one grade they currently support, reflecting their commitment to meeting the diverse needs of our students.

Grade Level Educators Support	Percentage	Count
Preschool Kindergarten	2%	22
Grade 1 Grade 2 Grade 3	7%	85
Grade 4 Grade 5 Grade 6	7%	84
Grade 7 Grade 8 Grade 9	7%	85
Grade 10 Grade 11 Grade	8%	93
12 Beyond Grade 12	8%	90
	8%	88
	8%	92
	5%	61
	5%	62
	8%	87
	8%	86
	8%	88
	7%	84
	3%	29

Table 4: Grades Participating Educators Support

The educator participants in this survey were represented by all schools, with Amherst Regional High School consisting of 25%, Fort River Elementary representing 22%, Amherst Regional Middle School staff composed of 18%, Wildwood Elementary, and Crocker Farm Elementary representing 16%, respectively, Pelham Elementary



consisted of 10%, Summit Academy staff composed of 7%, Amherst Early Childhood Center resulted in 3% of all participants. The Central Office represented 2% of the participants. When asked if the employees worked in a specific specialized program, 34% responded yes. Table 5 illustrates the number of individuals who participated in the survey that worked in a specified program.

Name of Program	Number of Participants
Student Support Program - ARHS	133345
Student Support Program - ARMS	5
AIMS – ARHS	6
Pathways to Independence Program (PIP)/Connections	6
AIMS – ARMS	8
Amherst Early Education Center	9
Essential Skills Program - ESP	
Intensive Learning Center (ILC)	
Summit Academy	
Building Blocks	
AIMS - Elementary	

Table 5 Special Programs Survey Participants Support

The survey asked staff if they could define the program profile in which they worked. All responses provided specific information that aligned with the program they supported. The survey asked how often the students enrolled in the special education program attended inclusion classrooms. Review the outlined responses in Figure 5.

Q19 - How often are students enrolled in this special education program attending inclusion classrooms?

44 Responses

Field	Choice Count
Never	4
Once a week	1
2-3 times a week	2
0- 20% of their school day	3
21% - 40% of their school day	13
41% - 60% of their school day	5
61% - 80% of their school day	9
Greater than 80% of their school day	7

Figure 5 Frequency Students Attend Inclusion Classrooms from Specialized Programs

When asked if the amount of time they attended an inclusion classroom aligned with the service delivery, specifically the provisions outlined in the student’s Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), 93% responded, “Yes,” and 7% reported, “No.”

Additionally, paraeducators were asked in which areas they support students on IEPs. The responses revealed a diverse range of roles, with 32% stating they worked 1:1 with students, 26% supporting the inclusion-whole class setting, 23% working within the special education programs, 12% supporting in the special education classrooms, and 8% answering “other.” This diversity of support should instill confidence in parents/caregivers about the comprehensive assistance their children receive.

Parents/caregivers who participated in the survey weighed more heavily in the eighth grade than any other grade level. However, it is essential to note that parents/caregivers of school-aged children of all grade levels participated in this process. Parents/caregivers were able to acknowledge all grades that their children attend in Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools. Therefore, in some instances,



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parents/caregivers may have checked off more than one grade in this survey question. Table 6 illustrates the distribution of parent participation in this survey:

Grade Your Child(ren) Are Educated in Amherst-Pelham Regional School District	Percentage	Count
Preschool Kindergarten Grade 1 Grade 2	4%	10
Grade 3 Grade 4 Grade 5 Grade 6 Grade 7	5%	13
Grade 8 Grade 9 Grade 10 Grade 11 Grade 12	3%	8
Beyond Grade 12	8%	19
	9%	21
	7%	16
	6%	14
	7%	18
	6%	15
	11%	26
	7%	18
	9%	22
	7%	16
	8%	20
	2%	5

Table 6: Parent Survey Participants - Grade, Their Child, Attends ARPS

In addition, parents/caregivers responded to whether their child was on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), identifying whether their child receives specialized educational services. Of those who responded, 77% of the parents/caregivers reported that their child received special education services. Some parents/caregivers had more than one student who received special education services. As a result of the survey, parents/guardians presented all children's grade levels on an IEP.



Finally, parents reported how long their child(ren) attended the Amherst Regional Public Schools (ARPS). 26% responded that their child(ren) attended school for 0-1 years and 2-4 years, respectively. Additionally, 31% reported that their child(ren) has been in the school system for 5-9 years, and 15% responded their child(ren) has been in the school system for more than ten (10) years.

FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURES

The focus group discussions occurred over one day, starting at 8:15 am and completed at noon. A total of 11 individuals were scheduled to participate in these sessions, with two (2) individuals not in attendance. Their roles included paraeducators who supported general and special education classrooms, and substantially separate programs and provided one-to-one support. Each focus group session lasted between 30 and 45 minutes in length and in groups of three to four individuals at one given time. The questions were like all parties, focusing on the four overarching research questions. Further information regarding the focus group responses will be defined in the report section, which outlines each overarching program review section.

INTERVIEW PROCEDURES

The interviews comprised 11 questions, with additional follow-up questions supporting the four overarching review research questions. These questions were designed to provide a qualitative measure and more clarity into the findings portion of the program review. The evaluator interviewed twelve people in this process. These individuals included parents, general educators, special educators, elementary and secondary teachers, and administrators. The interviews took place via virtual platforms. They were conducted individually, and each session lasted 30 to 45 minutes.

OBSERVATION PROCEDURES

Academic Discoveries, a research firm specializing in educational evaluations, conducted the classroom observations over two days. The first day, January 23, 2024, was completed at the middle and high schools. Academic Discoveries observed



classrooms for an average of 20 minutes in each class. The evaluator observed Eight (8) classrooms on this day.

The second observation occurred on February 2, 2024, at Crocker Farm, Fort River, and Wildwood Elementary Schools. Each of these classroom observations lasted 20 minutes in each classroom. The observer, a trained researcher from Academic Discoveries, entered twelve (12) classrooms on this day. The observations focused on pedagogical interventions that supported students with disabilities.



FINDINGS

This report section elucidates the special education program review findings, a collaborative effort between the evaluators and the Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools. The evaluators meticulously gathered the quantitative and qualitative data findings, ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive research process.

AMHERST-PELHAM REGIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS OVERVIEW-

The Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools, in its commitment to providing quality education for students with disabilities, has implemented special education program manuals to support its specialized programming. The school system previously endorsed a philosophy of implementing co-teaching models, which reduced the number of paraprofessionals to support general education programs. However, in recent years, the district has invested in increasing the number of paraeducators in the system while maintaining the co-teaching model. Each of the four program review research questions outlined in this section explains evidence of special education approaches the school systems take to educate students with disabilities. The report will further clarify the findings from all data collection sources to support the four program review research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: IN REVIEWING THE PHILOSOPHY OF REQUIRING ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, IS THERE POTENTIAL FOR STUDENTS' PROGRESS TO BE COMPROMISED RATHER THAN ENHANCED?

The data collection included survey responses, interview questions, and focus group questions to answer this research question. This section of the report provides an overview of findings to support the summary, areas of promise, growth, and recommendations later explained in this document.



SURVEY RESPONSES:

The survey, a crucial part of our research, provided thirteen (13) questions to support the first program review research question. It was answered by parents/caregivers and Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools personnel, whose valuable insights form the basis of our findings. The information below provides the raw data results for each question.

PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

In their responses to the survey, parents and caregivers reported whether their child(ren) on an IEP receives special education support in the general or special education classroom. These responses, which form a significant part of our findings, revealed that 52% of the participants reported their child(ren) receives special education services in the general education classrooms, 30% in pull-out special education classrooms, 16% in a special education K-12+ program, and 2% in a special education preschool program.

Parents were then asked how they determined that their child(ren) received the level of services identified in the IEP. Table 7 provides their overall responses.

How was it determined your child(ren) received the level of services identified in the IEP?
Team meetings, but I generally feel the major decisions have already been made ahead of time by the school team/administration
Through academic testing, observations, and conversations
In their IEP meeting with their team, or doctor’s recommendation
Medical evaluations and school evaluations
IEP conferences, teacher and special education recommendations, and, at times, parents overriding or rejecting portions of the IEP in favor of more positive opportunity outcomes
Evaluations, diagnosis, as meetings are relatively ineffective
We (parents) aggressively advocated for their needs for several years. Because we knew

the system, we eventually got what we requested.
Through the IEP meeting process, IEP team discussion.
Early intervention helped us get a diagnosis of ASD and transition into preschool and then into kindergarten
Came into the district with an existing IEP
Therapist and psychiatrist recommendations
Since both parents are educators, we pushed our son to be tested and advocated for his inclusion.
The level of support is determined through meetings, progress reports, and discussions with my child about what is working or not.

Table 7: How the Level of Services Identified in the IEP are Determined - Parent Survey Responses

When asked if their child(ren) participated in a specialized program offered in the district, 52% responded no. Parents reported considering the need for a paraeducator in the classroom to assist their child's learning experience long-term. Table 8 provides most of their responses.

When considering the need for a paraeducator in the classroom, how do you think this support will assist your child's learning experience in the long term?
Increased support in the classroom
I think the para is effective in helping my child stay on task, especially when the child is easily distracted. Eventually, the child will stick to the schedule better.
My child wouldn't be able to access the curriculum without para support. He does not read at grade level and needs support in this area. Without it, he will fall behind, give up, and lose self-confidence.
Please keep our paras. They make it possible for the school to run smoothly.
Para educators are critical to my child's long-term learning.
Having paraeducators in the classroom has meant the difference between my child languishing in a pull-out situation or special education class rather than succeeding in a general education classroom.

I think that it is abundantly clear that the staff in the school are all overstretched beyond capacity and, therefore, cannot be effective. More support is needed for all teachers. The students suffer from not having teachers and staff who are emotionally regulated.
My child does not need paraeducator support.
Through a scaffolded approach, my children are gaining skills to work independently and learning to advocate for themselves to seek clarity. There is no way this could be done without the assistance of a paraeducator.
It grants him accessibility both academically and socially
She will have an easier time keeping pace and understanding the material.
There are such glaring special education administrative issues in the district that, unfortunately, having a paraeducator in the classroom won't make much difference.
With help from paras, he is currently learning skills to participate in a classroom.
Eventually, we hope he'll be able to do that independently. He is succeeding in school and building confidence and enjoyment of learning because he has para support right now. He's also learning social/emotional skills to help him regulate so that he can learn. The para reinforces good behaviors and skills. My child already feels like he doesn't
belong and is different, but having a para helps him feel safe and that he always has support.
My child will be able to effectively access the curriculum. My child will be able to succeed and feel-good being with peers.

Table 8: How Paraeducators Assist a Child's Learning Long-Term - Parent/Caregiver Survey Responses

Finally, parents described how having a paraeducator in the classroom may impact their child's learning experience in the long term. Parents reported that the paraeducators had supported their children's success in work completion, built self-confidence, provided a beneficial learning experience in feeling successful, and created an enjoyment of learning. Others reported their concerns about the district eliminating paraeducators and stated that often, parents reach out to SEPAC to ask for support in requesting a paraeducator for their child in the classroom. The responses to this question resulted in parents' fear of losing their child's paraeducator in the classroom. They reported their child had demonstrated a decrease in anxiety and an increased fostering of independence and confidence in "self" due to the additional adult support.

STAFF:

Educators responded, “To what extent does the educational team determine the need for a paraeducator to support students?” To better understand the differences in responses between the educators, Table 9 responds to their opinion on where a paraeducator is needed to support students as determined by the educational team.

In your opinion, to what extent does the educational team determine the need for a paraeducator to support students? (N=126 - excludes paraeducators, parents/guardians, and nurses)				
Field	Never	Rarely	Often	Always
Using data to support the decision	1%	12%	49%	38%
Because the student received this support in the previous IEP	3%	12%	67%	18%
Staffing needs	17%	27%	40%	17%
Student performance during independence tasks	2%	13%	55%	30%
Student behavioral concerns	1%	8%	63%	28%
Review of student’s aptitude abilities versus the student’s performance	4%	30%	50%	16%
Student’s overall programming (whether in an inclusion or substantially separate classroom)	2%	9%	62%	27%
Observation of a student in the classroom	6%	17%	42%	35%
Due to the parent's request	13%	42%	37%	9%

Building Schedule	15%	40%	35%	10%
Classroom Schedule	17%	40%	37%	7%

Table 9: The Extent to Which the Educational Team Determines the Need for A Paraeducator to Support Students

Next, teachers reported to what extent they believed statements about the role of paraeducators and their impact on student learning. Table 10 reflects their responses. The results illustrate the responses of paraeducators and classroom teachers.

To What Extent Do You Believe the Following: Classroom Teacher (N=102) and Paraeducator (N=31)						
Field	Role	Unknown	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
A paraeducator in the classroom is required for students with disabilities to be successful	Classroom Teacher	4%	11%	19%	32%	34%
	Paraeducator	0%	0%	0%	19%	81%
A paraeducator in the classroom effectively supports student growth and learning.	Classroom Teacher	2%	0%	6%	40%	52%
	Paraeducator	0%	0%	0%	10%	90%
The role of the paraeducator is to ensure the student remains on-task.	Classroom Teacher	2%	8%	18%	47%	25%
	Paraeducator	0%	0%	13%	35%	52%
The student's progress is improved when a paraeducator supports the students in the classroom.	Classroom Teacher	3%	0%	5%	39%	53%
	Paraeducator	0%	0%	0%	26%	74%

The student gains independence when a paraeducator is provided in the classroom.	Classroom Teacher	6%	8%	24%	40%	23%
	Paraeducator	0%	0%	10%	58%	32%
The best model for classroom support is having a paraeducator.	Classroom Teacher	9%	7%	26%	28%	29%
	Paraeducator	0%	0%	0%	35%	65%
Having a paraeducator in the classroom allows the teacher to provide more direct instruction to all students.	Classroom Teacher	3%	4%	6%	34%	53%
	Paraeducator	0%	3%	3%	16%	78%
Having a paraeducator in the classroom assists in fostering student independence.	Classroom Teacher	6%	7%	20%	33%	34%
	Paraeducator	0%	0%	0%	55%	45%

Table 10: The Roles and Impact of Paraeducators - Classroom Teachers and Paraeducator Survey Responses.

In five areas outlined in Table 10, there are disparities between the classroom teacher and paraeducator reflection on the roles, responsibilities, and impact of a paraeducator in supporting students with disabilities.

Next, educators were asked to provide strategies they implemented in their classrooms to support student independence for students with disabilities. Table 11 summarizes their responses.

Please provide strategies you implement to support student independence for those students with disabilities.
Build in high-leverage accommodations and teach students how to use them
Use a writer's workshop model for significant projects to support explicit teaching and guided

support to foster skill growth in writing, graphic organizers
Teach new concepts using the “gradual release” model to monitor student learning before expecting independence
Visual supports (e.g., visual schedules, first-then board, icon sequences), posting lists
Video modeling
AAC (e.g., topic boards, speech generating devices), adaptive technology - large, screened computer
I offered to assist after a student had tried. I also provide positive feedback on student successes.
Teaching students to rely on a buddy instead of a teacher
Breaking steps down and having students combine steps on their own, providing reasonable deadlines
Celebrating when students demonstrate independence, strategic praise, positive feedback
Use of manipulatives, multimodal content delivery, use of token economy
Differentiated instruction, scribing, note taking, offer choices, gesture prompts rather than verbal cues
Movement breaks, using body regulation movement, redirecting
Regular check-ins
Adapted curriculum, enlarging print, adjusting visual contrast
Self-regulation strategies to return to a calmer state and be ready to learn
Timing: allow additional time
During recess, allowing space to gain social independence
Setting goals with each student and monitoring the success together
Scaffolding prior knowledge to promote confidence before teaching new concepts
Giving students space to ask questions to check for understanding
Establishing relationships to create a sense of belonging

Table 11: Strategies to Support Students with Disabilities



Educators responded to how the support of a paraeducator effectively improved student outcomes. Their responses offered insight into how they view the need for paraeducators in their classrooms to support students with disabilities. Below are examples of their responses:

- When the paraeducator is familiar with the content, they can support implementing different methodologies. For example, they can support students who need to work through a checklist to be able to complete a multi-step assignment.
- Suppose a paraeducator can monitor students and help answer fundamental questions that allow them to stay on task. In that case, it frees me up to give small group instruction when a select group of students needs targeted support in a skill area.
- If a student has adaptive behavior needs, a paraeducator can effectively ensure those needs are met so content access can be facilitated.
- If a student has significant sensory issues, a paraeducator can support them during the instructional portion of the class and help them learn in a different location.
- A para also provides a much-needed adult who can support a child without redirecting them. For students with behavior challenges, I have found that having an adult to talk things through and be on the student's side as they are figuring things out allows them to discuss their decisions and helps them return from periods of dysregulation.
- Paraeducators also connect with students, which builds the classroom culture. They can often be a person that students look forward to at school, which is crucial to school success.
- Meeting students' needs that teachers, for varied reasons, cannot meet.
- With students that have physical impairments and needs related to those disabilities, individual reminders for students with significant attentional or neurological issues.
- Having another voice in the class builds relationships with students so they have an adult with whom they feel comfortable asking for help.
- Paraeducators modify the material on the spot, for example, by simplifying complex concepts or providing additional resources. They work with kids in a quieter setting when needed, such as in a separate study area or during individual work time. They also redirect students to tasks, for instance, by reminding them of their assignments or guiding them back to their work when they get distracted.
- I see our paraeducators assisting students in self-monitoring their emotions and reactions and teaching them to problem-solve challenging social and academic problems.
- It is immensely helpful for supporting work completion, connections with peers, whole group and small group projects, safety with classroom materials, support

- during classroom field trips and breaks, and outdoor time flexibility for student pacing and turning in student work.
- Not all paraeducators assigned understand how to work with 5-year-olds. Some make it harder for me to do my job because I must keep stepping in to solve the problem and support the student's needs. Not all paraeducators have therapeutic training skills.

As a follow-up to the previous question, educators reflected on student outcomes when a paraeducator supported the classroom. They provided very similar responses, as outlined below:

- It depends on the paraeducator's training. A paraeducator can help facilitate access to learning by, for example, providing additional explanations, adapting materials to the student's learning style, or assisting with technology use. However, they cannot ultimately teach the student the content.
- Skilled, trained paraeducators can positively affect student outcomes.
- Students do better but need more tools for independent development.
- As an educator, I firmly believe that students who have the support of a paraeducator are more likely to succeed in the classroom. This includes not just academic success but also social and emotional success. I have former students who I believe are far better off today because of the para support they had in elementary school. Your role as a paraeducator is crucial in shaping these success stories, and your efforts are deeply appreciated.
- The paraeducator's support is only valuable to students who have significant needs.
- Having a paraeducator to provide support in the least intrusive way can help students gain confidence and understanding of the material and become more successful.
- Some of my most behaviorally challenging students avoided being placed in BB or AIMS because of their paraeducators. They have also realized academic and social/emotional success.
- Success looks different for different kids; this is a general question for specific situations.
- Paras are essential to the success of students with special needs. Paras help to make the classroom accommodating enough for students to succeed at their own pace.
- Paraeducators help students stay on task during a lesson by providing reminders, setting timers, or breaking down tasks into smaller, manageable steps. They also help keep students organized by organizing materials, such as notebooks and folders, and guiding students in maintaining a structured work environment.
- This may sound paradoxical, but it is true: The purpose of having interpreter-paraeducators who assist students with language barriers is to eliminate the need for their services as the students become more proficient in the language.
- Our students can access the work better.

- Teachers are allowed to work without being distracted.
- They would surprise me each day with their improved questions.
- Improved yet take the modifications from the role of the teacher where it should be.
- With the support of paraeducators, I have witnessed these students grow socially, emotionally, and academically. This progress is a testament to the positive impact of paraeducator support.

INTERVIEWS:

General and special educators were each asked four (4) questions, while administrators answered five (5) questions to support this research question for the program review. This section discusses key themes extracted from the responses. The general educators, special educators, and administrators provided results.

General and special educators were asked the same four questions with a slight variation on questions 2 and 3. Question 1 was, “What data do you use when considering reducing paraeducator support in your classrooms?” The emergent themes suggested an individualized approach to paraeducator support, focusing on maximizing student success and independence through tailored interventions and ongoing assessment. Participants' responses included examining academic progress by assessing independent performance in tasks aligned with student IEPs, reviewing behavioral data to gauge student engagement and safety within the classroom environment, and considering supervisor feedback and observations of the paraeducator's interactions with students.

The second question was, “What are the benefits of having a paraeducator in the classroom?” These emergent themes focused on dynamics, benefits, and challenges associated with paraeducators in the classroom. Interviewees discussed the benefits of having paraeducators in the classroom for modeling teacher language, supplying instructional strategies, and providing valuable student support. Responses also highlighted challenges regarding communication, alignment of instructional goals, and differences in philosophies and approaches between the teacher and paraeducator in the classroom.



General educators' third question was, "Rather than having a paraeducator in your classroom, what practices can be implemented to promote student independence, learning, and performance?" The special educators' variant was "Rather than having a paraeducator supporting students with disabilities, what effective practices can be implemented in your classroom to promote student independence, learning, and performance?" Emergent themes emphasized the importance of a multifaceted approach to promoting student independence, learning, and performance. Participant suggestions included considering individual needs, implementing inclusive practices, and strategically deploying support resources. Responses included that while differentiated instruction is provided alongside the breaking down of assignments, it is challenging to offer comprehensive individualized support without paraeducators when students require significant prompts and individualization. There was mention of being unable to be in all the places where there is a need for one-on-one support because of the substantial presence of students needing individualized support.

The fourth and final question asked to the general and special educators was, "What are the benefits and drawbacks of additional adult support on student progress (including social interactions, learning, and performance)?" The emergent themes highlighted the complex dynamics of additional adult support in classrooms. Responses suggested that effective collaboration between educators and paraeducators can lead to positive student outcomes, but misalignment and overreliance can challenge student progress and teacher workload. There was mention of balance regarding hindering dependency and a perception that paraeducators may be underutilized in general education settings.

The administrators responded to five questions. Question one was, "What has been your experience regarding the requests from staff or parents for paraeducators? and how has this impacted your building/district?" The emergent themes suggested complexities surrounding requests for paraeducators, their impact on schools and districts, and the importance of balancing support needs with considerations of student inclusion, staff workload, and resource allocation. Interviewees noted a significant



demand for additional paraeducators from staff and parents and an awareness of maintaining the least restrictive environment for students. There was mention of paraeducators' attendance and absenteeism as a significant issue due to the disruption in the continuity of student support. Administrator data also suggested that while schools mostly had autonomy in assessing support needs, sometimes requests are driven by teacher exhaustion and/or a population of challenging students rather than the specific needs of individual students.

The second question posed to the administrators was, “What data is used to identify the level of student need requiring paraeducator support?” Emergent themes suggest that while data is implemented to some extent in determining the level of student need requiring paraeducator support, there are opportunities for improvement. A focus on academic and behavioral indicators and a need for more systematic data practices, consistency, and alignment with academic and safety considerations would be beneficial. Interviewees considered data use to be an area of growth. While some schools use checklists and track interventions, no focus is currently on normalizing or tuning data. Participants also agreed that the district prioritizes student well-being and safety in decision-making.

Administrators were then asked, “Does the paraeducator perform other responsibilities outside of the classroom (lunch/recess/bus duty; clerical work)?” and, “How is it determined how much time the paraeducator may spend on these tasks?” Themes arose from participant answers that surmised a paraeducator's diverse roles and responsibilities, including the importance of supporting teachers and students, effective time management, and adherence to contractual agreements. Common responses focused on extra duties for the paraeducator, such as recess, lunch, and bus support. Administrators mentioned efforts to provide equitable distribution of responsibilities, and there was a discussion of paraeducators fulfilling instructional duties and administrative duties such as grading, paperwork, and photocopying.

The fourth question to investigate the first research question was, “How has using paraeducators in your building/district been a positive student experience? For staff? And for the administration?” The data illustrates that paraeducators are crucial in enhancing students' educational experience and supporting staff, contributing to a positive and inclusive learning environment. The most common responses included the mention of the positive relationships and connections that paraeducators build with students and suggested that paraeducators are critical figures in meeting the diverse and sometimes complex needs of students. While the presence of paraeducators is reported as providing an opportunity to enhance the inclusivity of the learning environment, administrators also mention these interactions are sometimes seen as Tier 1 or Tier 2 interventions.

The final question asked the administrators under this research question was, “How has using paraeducators in your building/district negatively impacted student experience? For staff? And for the administration?” The interview data revealed recurring themes regarding the negative impact of paraeducators in educational settings. These include issues such as attendance and consistency problems, paraeducators overstepping boundaries, and a lack of adequate training leading to ineffective support for students. There was also mention of how personality conflicts and inadequate pay contribute to challenges in managing paraeducators. Respondents articulated that overreliance on paraeducators can lead to learned helplessness among students. They also expressed the need for more adequate training to better support students in phonics and math. Respondents mentioned that Inconsistent attendance was negatively affecting student learning, impacting the staff, and causing the need to adjust plans. Inadequate pay was identified as a contributor to absenteeism and was believed to affect the level of professionalism among paraeducators.

FOCUS GROUPS:

Paraeducators met with the evaluator in a focus group format. To support the research question, “In reviewing the philosophy of requiring additional support for students with disabilities, is there potential for students’ progress to be compromised rather than enhanced?” Paraeducators responded to five questions to learn about their perspectives regarding their roles, responsibilities, and perceptions of their roles.

The first question asked paraeducators how other staff members viewed their role. The results included themes ranging from needing clarification on what others thought to be asked to take on teacher roles when substitutes were unavailable. Some other themes included:

- Their role is to model and support students in all classroom settings
- View changes depending on staff acceptance and student needs.
- Catch a student before behaviors exist, otherwise perceived as ineffective by other staff.
- Paraeducators feel valued in the preschool, and educators can only do their jobs with them.
 - For educators who are not teaching in the preschool, they are viewed as having a “cute” job. However, over 50% of the preschool students are on Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), which are personalized plans designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities.
- I am sometimes asked to co-teach with educators, which feels valued.
- They were asked to substitute teach when a teacher was absent, disregarding the significance of their role. (Otherwise, he mostly feels supported.)
- The role of the paraeducators is viewed differently, depending on the school.
- If they have a college degree, they feel more highly regarded by teachers. Otherwise, they are looked down upon and not appreciated.
 - With a college degree, paraeducators feel they are treated more like equals.
- Paraeducators reported often struggling with “should I, or shouldn’t I?” which can be challenging depending on the building's administration.
- When in special education classrooms, they are viewed as equal. However, in a general education classroom, they feel valued 50% of the time as a team member.
- They are viewed as a “helper” in the classroom.

The next question asked paraeducators if they knew how their assignment was determined. Some responded that it depended on student needs within the district and

where staffing gaps existed. In some cases, upon being hired, paraeducators were asked which role they preferred to work in the district - in an inclusive setting, in substantially separate classrooms, as one-to-one support, or in a specialized program. Otherwise, the paraeducators reported needing clarification on their assignment's determination. However, they noted that those more experienced paraeducators usually were assigned to students with more significant and challenging needs. Some felt their level of expertise and skills should have been valued by others. Some examples they provided included the need to review students' IEPs collectively and the lack of professional training on how to work in the classroom to support students, provide safety care, and promote social/emotional learning. They followed up by stating that the paraeducators used to have training for a whole week before school started, and now this is nonexistent.

When asked what the paraeducators do on an average day at work, including the activities they participate in, the nature of their interactions with students, or any daily routines that were essential aspects of their day, they provided concrete examples supporting individual student needs as well as activities needed to ensure the school building is running smoothly. For example, some reported they have toileting and diaper changing duties, ride the morning van as a monitor, navigate play during free choice, run morning meetings, and get students dressed for outdoor activities. One paraeducator said they start their day by preparing to teach reading directly to students learning English as a second language and providing one-to-one support for others. Sometimes, this paraeducator scribes and helps students with their written assignments.

Some support students at breakfast or during lunch by cutting food, preparing their drinks, and helping with social play during recess. Some reported they are one-to-one and walk with the student when they need a break, provide verbal and visual cues, provide de-escalation strategies based on the Safety Care training (which is a program that teaches strategies for de-escalating challenging behaviors) they received, offer



coping strategies to students, and assist older students in the PIP program to deliver coffee to the classrooms.

Some duties include being a substitute teacher, covering teachers during break times, cleaning and preparing the classrooms at the end of the day or before classroom instruction, running small group instruction, and cleaning up the playground outside after recess. Additionally, some directly oversee student schedules to ensure they complete their daily work and tasks by providing materials students may need and provide emotional support.

One paraeducator reported being a floater and having been asked to work as a hall monitor and to support students in math, literature, and ESL classes. They all responded that they are often pulled during MCAS testing to become proctors, which means they supervise students during the test for the statewide assessment.

Paraeducators were then asked how their role positively impacts student growth and their role in that outcome. They reported their role directly impacts student growth in many aspects of student learning. They are not just 'helpers' in the classroom but crucial contributors to student development. For example, they help scaffold student tasks and support them with every step when using communication devices, improving their self-help and self-regulation skills, ensuring students are focused on the task at hand, and ensuring they are engaged and motivated in their learning. Furthermore, they view themselves as another set of hands to support student learning, another adult that students can trust, and, in some cases, as the student's safe place.

The last support question in this section asked paraeducators in what ways their role could potentially hurt student growth and how the district could support them in turning this into a positive outcome. Immediately, someone reported that students sometimes rely too heavily on one person and recognizing this early in switching staffing before the student becomes too dependent on the adult would benefit student learning. In one incident, a parent chose to request the same paraeducator for their child for six years,

and this was not a positive outcome, according to the paraeducators, as this became challenging for the student to generalize skills learned. Additionally, paraeducators reported they were placed in certain roles to support students with specific disabilities, and they never received the training they needed to ensure appropriate interventions were occurring. The district would need to further train staff on their roles, which is not currently happening. This highlights the need for ongoing professional development and support for paraeducators to ensure they can effectively carry out their roles and responsibilities.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2: WHEN A YOUNG STUDENT REQUIRES ADULT SUPPORT BEYOND THE GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHER, HOW IS THE DISTRICT CONSIDERING REDUCING THIS NEED AS THE STUDENTS TRANSITION THROUGH GRADES K THROUGH 12 TO ENSURE INDEPENDENCE RATHER THAN DEPENDENCE?

The data collection included survey responses, interview questions, focus group questions, and classroom observations at the elementary and secondary levels. This section of the report provides an overview of findings to support the summary, areas of promise, growth, and recommendations later explained in this document. The goal of every educational system is to foster an academic learning environment that builds upon student independence, regardless of their capabilities. Therefore, the Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools sought to see how well they promoted this educational outcome for their students with disabilities.

SURVEY RESPONSES:

The survey provided questions for parents/caregivers and staff to assist in responding to the second program review research question, “When a young student requires adult support beyond the general education teacher, how is the district considering reducing this need as the students transition through grades kindergarten through twelve (12) to ensure independence rather than dependence?”

PARENTS/CAREGIVERS:

Parents/caregivers reported their child(ren)'s experience in school with additional adult support beyond the general education teacher. They reported how their child might be successful in considering less support than they currently receive in school; 50% of the participants reported they had considered less support, and 50% responded this option was not applicable. Those who did consider how their child may require less support to be successful explained this consideration. They openly responded with the following feedback for district review:

- Often, it's in a different order; the child has had less support and has not been successful; therefore, the support needs to be increased. We have heard arguments that our child might need less support to grow, but that is entirely dependent upon the paraprofessional and child's relationship. An excellent para (and our school has many!) knows when to step back and let the child do their work/make their own decisions/etc. It doesn't mean the child may need support in other situations.
- I could pay private tutors if I have the means.
- I have considered this, but I am focused on meeting his still-needed needs.
- We would like our child to build independence and learn generalized skills. They do not have para support.
- The teacher prompted them to recite the information, check for understanding, etc. However, these accommodations, which the school agreed upon, were never implemented both years.
- I hope that with more support, my child will develop more skills for independence in the future.
- Right now, he 100% requires para support to be successful, but he could move to a 2:1 situation and fade para support as he progresses through elementary school. We are building skills that will allow us to fade para support over time.
- We are still determining the outcome once we see how he does for a time without support. We wouldn't want to give that up.
- My child has ADHD and dyslexia, but he reads at grade level and is fully capable of understanding concepts in all areas. He is also very verbal, but that is the only way he demonstrates understanding.
- I've carefully compared her success with a para to her loss of success before having a para. I've also kept a careful eye on her success in the classroom and listened to my child's concerns daily. If my child is successful at certain times of the day without a para, I confirm with the classroom teacher and then, as a team, decide on the next steps.
- I frequently wonder how my child can manage learning more independently. He has progressed over the years, but his complex interlocking challenges mean that the work paraeducators have done with him to help him access the school curriculum has been nothing short of miraculous.
- Yes - the child is failing without additional support

- My child only gets in-class support in math but goes to her support person outside of class for help with other courses. That seems adequate. I would not ask for more support.
- He would be more successful if he could handle task initiation and stay on course independently.

Table 12 illustrates parents' and caregivers' responses to the extent to which they believed their child benefited from paraeducator support. To support the overarching research question, they were asked four questions about this topic.

To what extent do you agree with the following:					
Field	Unknown	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Your child is building independence through the support of a paraeducator.	9%	9%	7%	26%	49%
Reducing paraeducator support would be appropriate when your child is making effective progress.	9%	28%	21%	30%	12%
A child requiring a paraeducator may have lower expectations than their peers.	5%	56%	21%	18%	0%
Having a paraeducator may lead to unintended consequences for my child's learning development.	12%	49%	21%	15%	3%

Table 12 Parent/Caregivers Survey Response - To What Extent They Agree with Statements

As outlined in Table 12 above, parents strongly value the importance of paraeducators in their child's education to support continued learning expectations and build student independence. 75% somewhat or strongly agreed that their child is building independence through the support of a paraeducator. Additionally, 42% of the parent

respondents reported that reducing a paraeducator's support would be appropriate when their child progresses effectively.

STAFF:

The survey asked the staff two Likert scale questions to support this overarching program review question. The first question asked about the extent to which they believed the levels of paraeducator support are appropriate in developing student independence, the level of support needed for student progress, unintended consequences, and the needs for paraeducators in the classroom versus individual students. Table 13 outlines their responses:

To what extent do you believe in the following statements:					
Field	Unknown disagree	Strongly	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
A student is building independence through the support of a paraeducator.	4% 6%		20%	38%	32%
Reducing paraeducator support would be appropriate when a student is making effective progress.	6%	4%	17%	45%	28%
A child requiring a paraeducator may have lower expectations than their peers.	9%	35%	24%	28%	4%
Having a paraeducator may lead to unintended consequences for the student's learning development.	11%	24%	22%	35%	8%
A staff member often needs a paraeducator in their classroom rather than an individual student.	13%	16%	19%	36%	16%

Table 13 Educator Survey Participants - To What Extent You Believe in the Following Statements

As outlined in Table 13, there were three categories in which educators somewhat or strongly agreed with the statements in more than 52% of all opportunities:

- A student is building independence through the support of a paraeducator (70%),
- Reducing paraeducator support would be appropriate when a student is making effective progress (73%) and
- A staff member often needs a paraeducator in their classroom rather than an individual student (52%).

The next question asked educators to what extent various components were considered when determining a student's least restrictive environment (LRE). Table 14 outlines the responses from educators, using a Likert scale ranging from unknown to always.

To what extent are the following components considered when determining a student's least restrictive environment (LRE)? (N=218)						
Field	Unknown	Never	Sometimes	About half the time 8%	Most of the time	Always
A paraeducator is a restrictive service.	26%	14%	28%		11%	13%
The potentially harmful effects of using paraeducators may have on student needs.	30%	21%	24%	5%	10%	11%
The potential growth of student development should a paraeducator be requested.	25%	7%	21%	3%	22%	21%
The number of special education students in the classroom versus the number of staff recommended.	32%	15%	23%	7%	16%	6%

Parent requests versus student need for paraeducators.	33%	15%	39%	8%	11%	5%
Supports already in place versus additional resources.	29%	5%	26%	8%	18%	14%
Alternative interventions to paraeducator support.	28%	5%	28%	10%	14%	15%

Table 14: Components Considered when Recommending an Additional Paraeducator - Educators Survey Response

Table 14 identifies two significant areas for future discussion. The first is the area in which 46% of the educator responses consider the potential growth of student development should a paraeducator be requested at least half of the time. When considering the need for paraeducator support, the areas where students will benefit and grow in their development abilities should be a high priority for all educators. Additionally, 25% of the educators were still determining whether this would be a consideration. The second area noted in this report is considering the number of special education students in the classroom versus the number of recommended staff, which resulted in 29% for at least half the time. The concern with this statistic is that classes may end up with an overabundance of adults to support students in the same classroom. The result means that although a paraeducator may be required to help a student, they can support more than one student with a disability in the same classroom (unless the student requires 1:1, 2:1 support).

INTERVIEWS:

Three (3) interview questions and two (2) follow-up questions were considered to support informational gathering for the second program review research question. Overarching themes are outlined below. This section of the report will focus on the results provided by the special educators and administrators.

The question asked to all interviewees was, “When students with disabilities transition from one grade to another, it can be a point of anxiety for staff and parents, whether they transition from one grade level to another school. How do these transitions impact

the request for paraeducators?” The following two questions were asked as a follow-up: (a) “How are conversations between these professionals organized?” (b) “How often are additional supports recommended during these transitions?”

Responses yielded themes from the three special educators interviewed. The respondents stated that transitions are a source of anxiety and concern for staff and parents. Although there is discussion on the need for consistent paraeducator support to avoid disruptions, it was communicated that there needs to be more paraeducator involvement in IEP meetings. Communication between paraeducators, teachers, and other professionals is perceived as limited, and it was suggested these created challenges in coordinating discussions about student needs, progress, and support during transitions. There was an acknowledgment that scheduling differences in elementary, middle, and high school may necessitate increased paraeducator support. Respondents believed that although the team may adjust support during transitions, there should remain potential or gradually fading support over time.

The six administrators interviewed provided insight regarding an uptick in requests for paraeducator support to facilitate smoother transition due to increased anxiety by parents and staff for students experiencing a change in grade level or schools. Responses clarified that transitions from preschool to kindergarten and elementary to middle school yielded the most requests. The evaluator noted that parents are more open to exploring alternative support options when their child is transitioning between buildings rather than a reduction of support in the same building. Interviewees suggested monitoring and evaluating support levels when fading paraeducator support. They also offered that it would be beneficial to have more regular conversations and data analysis on student performance rather than relying on anxiety during transitions to signal an evaluation of support. The last trend that emerged from this question was the need for more tailored interventions and services due to the perception of a gap in support between students with specialized programming needs and those requiring minimal support.

FOCUS GROUPS:

The focus group sessions asked paraeducators one (1) question that supported this overall research question. The response to this question resulted in overarching themes, areas of promise, and areas of opportunity.

Paraeducators expressed how they viewed their role in supporting students transitioning from one grade to another or a different school and how paraeducators could help students and decision-makers during this transition time. They reported that teachers informally observe or ask their opinions before the occurrence of transition meetings. The paraeducators will often provide student work, present manipulatives that assist student learning, and assist in making connections with students after they transition into another class to keep the lines of communication open. The paraeducators focus the entire school year on preparing their students for the upcoming year. By and large, paraeducators reported that the significance of building and maintaining relationships with the students and acknowledging them in their new learning environment has been a strategy for supporting students when they transition.

RESEARCH QUESTION 3: WHAT ARE THE REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS FOR GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHEN TEACHING IN A DIVERSE CLASSROOM WITHOUT THE REQUEST FOR ADDITIONAL STAFFING SUPPORT?

The data collection included survey responses, interview questions, and focus group questions to answer this research question. This section of the report provides an overview of findings to support the summary, areas of promise, growth, and recommendations later explained in this document.

SURVEY RESPONSES:

The survey asked Amherst Regional Public School paraeducators, general education, special education, and administrative staff four (4) questions from the survey to help collect information that supports the third research question. This section will provide an overview of the survey results.



STAFF:

The program review evaluator wanted to learn from educators which strategies, supports, and/or resources they are providing in their classrooms to support students with disabilities. The first question in this section asked educators what resources they utilize or complement without additional staff support when facilitating a lesson that requires differentiated instruction. Their responses included overall themes, such as:

- Block scheduling allows for more differentiation because there is time for a small instructional session and a monitored semi-independent work session, where targeted instruction can more easily happen.
- Sometimes, I use technology to support independent work, such as audiobooks, posting reference materials, sending individualized support to specific students, and other similar activities.
- Pre-taught graphic organizers are reading guides.
- We use the technology that differentiates work for us and create multiple student entry points.
- If I have a curriculum for a topic, I often use internet searches to see what others have done. I belong to FB groups (e.g., the Science of Reading, Teaching Morphemes). I belong to CHADD and read ADDitude, to name a few.
- Unique Learning Systems Google everything and add it for kids to get a simpler version. Google search to get adapted material at different levels—lots of information. The problem is that the information is only sometimes available for free.
- We provide visual aids (pictures, videos, graphic organizers), 3D objects, and manipulatives - Flipgrid or Screencastify.
- I teach a fully differentiated heterogeneous classroom with 25 students and no paraeducator. I give students manageable reading and writing tasks daily, go at a reasonable, supported pace, and offer independent challenge work for students to move more quickly.
- I rely on support from my colleagues to brainstorm strategies specific to the students in my classroom, do research online, or reference resources I've used in my educational journey.
- Small group instruction with one group being an independent activity (an activity kids already know and can do without support, a station that reinforces a skill/concept using familiar materials). At least two of our curricula have online/digital components, and many kids can work independently on iPads. However, I still need to be able to check in with and support students who need help accessing these.
- I work with the most challenging students, whether in a large or smaller group. Students capable of working independently are asked to do so and possibly help others when they complete work. I create schedules to give time to all students (although students with more significant needs may get more teacher time).
- Whiteboard, Chromebook, and printed copies are implemented.

● Different levels of text or math practice work, graphic organizers and checklists so students can work independently and move at their own pace, having rubrics or answer keys for students to check their work when done, having directions spoken and written, having students work in pairs, triples, or small groups, having a student be a "coach" when their work is completed, having different ways for students to show their understanding (written or spoken words, pictures, etc.).

Knowing that paraeducators are in high demand and educators may only sometimes receive this support, it was essential to understand further how they are currently implementing strategies when these individuals are unavailable to ensure student learning. The educators responded as follows:

- Building routines allows for flexibility when small group learning happens. Try to build the whole lesson around a task that most students can complete with a higher level of independence so that when my focus shifts to 1-2 students, everyone else can engage with something meaningfully.
- I give sentence starters, modified work, graphic organizers, and the model "I do, we do, you do" as some examples of teaching methods.
- I draw pictures quickly if needed. If necessary, I become a one-on-one with the student and teach and support the student.
- I repeat and rephrase directions -visual aids, project-based learning -and peer teaching among students.
- Direct modification. I generated more notes, provided preferential seating, and increased program solicitation.
- Multiple types of group instruction (whole, small, individual) Peer support
Differentiation Modified lesson plans/modified assignments Whole group breaks, individual breaks.
- I am using computer programs and online instruction.
- Whole group instruction followed by individual or paired activities that reinforce the instruction and differentiate the materials and problem sets rather than the instruction. While kids work independently, I can check in more 1:1 with kids who need that support. However, depending on the needs of the students, this can be more than "occasionally challenging," and time is tight. So many of these questions directly depend on the kids I currently have and are potentially misleading. For example, I am highly confident in teaching the whole group and meeting each student's needs. However, suppose I have a child with disruptive behaviors due to emotional trauma, a kid with severe motor needs, one who has trouble getting started, or one who is inflexible and cannot follow directions unless presented in a particular way. In that case, my teaching ability is very dependent on paraeducator support.
- Independent, with some support and others, I work with them to complete the activity together. Sometimes, a lesson must be stretched across days/weeks to get the idea across. I use a lot of visual supports and model what I expect to be done.
- Demonstrations and examples of work are strategies used in my classroom.

- Different levels of text or math practice work, graphic organizers and checklists so students can work independently and move at their own pace, having rubrics or answer keys for students to check their work when done, having directions spoken and written, having students work in pairs, triples, or small groups, having a student be a "coach" when their work is completed, having different ways for students to show their understanding (written or spoken words, pictures, etc.).
- Shift expectations, provide incentives for tasks, and scaffolding.

The following two questions are illustrated in Table 15. These questions reviewed the educators' confidence level in teaching their students without an additional paraeducator or special education teaching support. The options were not applicable, extremely unconfident, somewhat unconfident, somewhat confident, and extremely confident.

General Educators, to what extent do you feel confident in teaching without additional: A. Paraeducators B. Special Education Teaching Staff						
Field	Role	Not/App.	Extremely unconfident	Somewhat unconfident	Somewhat confident	Extremely confident
Whole group instruction	Para	10%	15%	14%	31%	30%
	Special Education Teaching Staff	25%	10%	14%	25%	25%
Small group instruction	Para	8%	11%	15%	23%	44%
	Special Education Teaching Staff	23%	14%	15%	21%	28%
Providing individual support to students, as	Para	5%	19%	16%	27%	33%
	Special Education	22%	19%	20%	18%	23%

needed	Teaching Staff					
Differentiated instruction	Para	6%	13%	20%	37%	25%
	Special Education Teaching Staff	21%	15%	19%	25%	22%
Multisensory learning	Para	12%	12%	29%	33%	14%
	Special Education Teaching Staff	26%	15%	26%	23%	10%
Peer tutoring	Para	27%	10%	14%	31%	18%
	Special Education Teaching Staff	36%	9%	16%	26%	13%
Collaboration with parents	Para	14%	8%	8%	29%	41%
	Special Education Teaching Staff	28%	9%	11%	25%	26%

Table 15: Confidence Level w/o Paraeducator or Special Education Teaching Supports - Educator Survey Responses

In all categories outlined in Table 15, educators, despite their dedication and efforts, reported less confidence without special education teaching staff than with paraeducators. Table 15 highlights their challenges in providing comprehensive education without additional support. Less than 40% reported they were somewhat or extremely confident in teaching peer tutoring without special education staff.

Additionally, less than 34% responded they were somewhat or extremely confident in teaching multi-sensory learning without special education teaching staff.

Educators responded that they provided various supports in their classrooms to meet all learners' needs when an additional staff member was unavailable to support their classroom instruction. The options were not applicable, never, sometimes, about half the time, most of the time, always. Table 16 illustrates the percentage of responses that included about half the time, most of the time, and always.

To what extent do you provide the following supports in your classroom to meet all learners' needs without additional staff to support your instruction: (N=102; classroom educators)				
Field	About half the time	Most of the time	Always	Total
Alternate curriculum	12%	15%	9%	36%
Specific modified reading materials	12%	15%	13%	40%
Modified testing	4%	22%	10%	36%
Modified classroom routines and social/emotional instruction	7%	30%	15%	52%
Peer collaboration	13%	22%	14%	
Incorporating music	10%	13%	12%	
Respecting differences	4%	22%	59%	

49% 35% 85%

Table 16: Supports Provided in Classrooms w/o Additional Adult Support - Classroom Educator Survey Responses

In Table 16, two areas yielded more significance than 50% in providing support in their classrooms at least half the time: modified classroom routings - social /emotional instruction and respecting differences.

INTERVIEWS:

The general educator was asked, "In an ideal world, what types of support and resources would you need to teach in your diverse classroom?" The themes of this



response revolved around communication structures, resources, paraeducators' roles, and support mechanisms. One interviewee offered that a special education liaison was needed to help with communication between all stakeholders. There was a discussion of finding a balance between the needs and numbers of students within classrooms and the need for smaller classes. More prep time and more time to communicate with parents and liaisons warranted attention.

The special educators responded to two questions. Two out of three interviewed were asked, “What are the most challenging requests you receive from general education providers that you struggle to support?” Both answers indicated that students in special education programs are primarily the responsibility of those programs rather than a shared responsibility with general education teachers. Respondents also emphasized the urgent need for a more precise delineation of roles to help identify who is responsible for student support and instruction. Another emergent theme was the disparity between special educator and paraeducator training and the problem with teachers training paraeducators rather than someone with specialized knowledge. The interviewees also spoke about the importance of guidance and support from special education teachers to facilitate effective collaboration within the team and provide mentorship for new or inexperienced general education teachers.

The second question asked the special educators, “How do you determine whether another individual is needed in a general education classroom?” with a follow-up question, “How do you determine whether that additional person should be a paraeducator or a special education teacher?” The two responses explained that educators collected data such as checklists, academic task performance, and social needs to determine if another individual needed support. Their goal is for “meaningful inclusion” so that students are included, but their needs are still being met. The special educators felt that the general educators needed to have more trust in the decisions made by the special education team. Consideration for paraeducators over special educators is given to provide support when a student is unsafe in a classroom. Lastly,

they strongly emphasized the necessity of collaboration and communication between general and special education staff to address behavioral concerns effectively.

All six administrators responded, "When you request an additional adult for a classroom, what actions do you take to ensure this request is valid?" The emergent themes focused on complying with safety and regulations while committing to collaboration with teachers, using data to drive decisions, and ensuring that support aligns with student needs and goals. Some administrators reported using observations and professional judgment to evaluate when paraeducator support is needed. In contrast, others reported the use of data on behaviors and reasons for behaviors to determine the validity of requests. Two administrators explained that they try to exhaust interventions before moving to higher levels of support and offer tips and tricks after observations. They reported that they try to be honest with teachers about what requirements are to support IEPs through academic support.

The second question to support the third program review question was, "How can special education administration support you when additional adults are requested for your building?" Five administrators' responses elicited emergent themes regarding a desire for structured processes, greater fairness and collaboration throughout the evaluation process, and the goal of more respectful utilization of paraeducators. Respondents discussed needing a specific process as the perception is that currently, paraeducators are not utilized effectively, and the justification for this type of support varies by building. Another area where administrators expressed concern was the lack of training for hired paraeducators directly sent into classrooms.

The last question asked administrators to gather information for research question three: "If an additional adult is not an option, what other supports or resources could support you and your building?" Five administrators' interview data yielded themes regarding the importance of comprehensive support services, enhancing training and collaboration, addressing staffing needs, and leveraging technology for student support. The need for additional therapeutic support was mentioned frequently, with suggestions

for additional personnel such as BCBA's, intervention teachers, mental health counselors, and further behavioral counselors to help with the increased emotional and behavioral needs perceived in the classrooms. The respondents noted paraeducators' valuable role but acknowledged room for improvement, such as training and incentives to improve attendance and effectiveness in supporting their students. One administrator offered the importance of increasing the use of assistive technologies to support student independence and to facilitate learning and individualized needs.

FOCUS GROUPS:

Paraeducators reported on three (3) supporting questions that aligned with the third essential research question, "What are strategies, supports, and/or resources a general education teacher utilizes/implements without additional paraeducator support? (Tiered Systems of Support)". The first question asked paraeducators how they viewed themselves as a support in the classroom. Their perspective resulted in some overarching themes:

- Better with supporting students than adults,
- Hands-on approaches,
- Sometimes, they must review the rules of the classroom before they can support the students, as it may depend on the demands of the classroom teacher as to how they intervene,
- Team player and have a lot to give for student support,
- Vital role as an extra set of hands, and by being there, takes the stress off the teacher's plate,
- A paraeducator is not the lead teacher but is a support for the teacher to remind them why they do what they do,
- Teach students daily social skills and how to rely on one another rather than only the teacher.

Paraeducators were then asked how their services could be better utilized during school. Many responded they were "tapped out" and needed more support from one another and more highly qualified paraeducators with training and/or experience. They are becoming more reactive than proactive due to the lack of staff trained and skilled in helping with behavioral concerns. There tends to be a lack of substitutes to support their students if they call out sick, and they feel guilty when they must take a sick day.

On the other hand, they feel overworked and call out more than they would like, but they feel rundown.

Some stressed that the district and the students would benefit from more robust support at the earlier grades to build their independence, resulting in a lower need for support as the students age. They stated they would like to be included during lesson planning to feel better prepared for the upcoming lessons and could assist in the teaching. They would like to focus on their job tasks primarily and are asked less often to make photocopies or become last-minute substitute teachers. They would like a Chromebook to be more efficient in their roles, read their emails, and be more readily prepared for their tasks. They would like opportunities to discuss IEP updates throughout the school year and a scheduled time to collaborate with their advisors.

The last question in this section asked the paraeducators what they found the most challenging in their roles. Some reported their inability to have time to use the restroom. They stated that their mental health sometimes becomes compromised as they don't have a break throughout the day, and working with students who have physical needs can be exhausting. They expressed concern over the lack of time to debrief with colleagues about individual students and the potential for enhanced intervention strategies, reporting that time constraints are a significant barrier to effectively doing their work. In previous years, the paraeducators had time to collaborate with specialists, teachers, and outside consultants. The teachers are now informing the paraeducators of what was discussed regarding student needs and progress. This lack of collaboration results in not making intervention adjustments in a timely fashion, prolonging the effectiveness of student plans.

Furthermore, paraeducators reported that there was an increase in students coming to school with experiences of trauma, and the paraeducators needed more support, time, and training to be effective in assisting these students. Another list of challenges included the increased need to do many tasks simultaneously, data collection, being

present in the classroom, supporting students and teachers, scheduling changes, and being pulled from one task to another.

RESEARCH QUESTION 4: WHEN IS IT REASONABLE TO REQUEST ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR A GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHER AND/OR STUDENT?

The data collection included survey responses, interview questions, and focus group questions to answer this research question. This section of the report provides an overview of findings to support the summary, areas of promise, growth, and recommendations later explained in this document.

SURVEY RESPONSES:

Three (3) survey questions supported data collection for the fourth research question. These questions include responses from parents/caregivers, paraeducators, general and special educators, and administration. This section provides the results of these questions.

PARENT:

The program review evaluators found value in understanding the families' perspective and knowledge of their rights to request additional support on the supports to assist their children's learning experiences. Furthermore, as part of this study, it was essential to understand their perspective on how they are partners in this process. Table 17 outlines their level of agreement with statements to support this research.

To what extent do you agree with the following: (N=60)					
Field	Unknown	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
A parent should have a right	2%	0%	20%	28%	50%

to request additional adult support for their child(ren).					
I only ask for additional support after meeting with the teachers about my child(ren)'s progress.	10%	5%	10%	33%	42%
I believe in partnering with the school to determine alternative strategies for supporting my student before requesting additional adult support.	7%	2%	17%	42%	33%
I would rather my child try to work independently rather than require an additional adult in the classroom to support their success.	7%	35%	27%	25%	7%

Table 17 Parent/Caregiver Survey Participants - Level of Support for Their Child(ren)

As evidenced in the Table above, parents are valuable advocates for their children and the support needed for them to be successful in a learning environment. Additionally, they understand their rights to request additional support and the importance of partnering with their schools in making these decisions.

STAFF:

To determine the staff's perspective on the rights of general educators, special educators, and parents, they were asked similar questions as the families. Table 18 illustrates their responses.

To what extent do you agree with the following: (N=158 - ALL district staff; N=86 - Teachers only)						
Field	Role	Unknown	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
General education	ALL Staff	1%	0%	4%	27%	69%

teachers should have the right to request additional support.	Teachers	1%	0%	2%	23%	73%
Special education teachers should have the right to request additional support.	ALL Staff	1%	0%	1%	24%	74%
	Teachers	2%	0%	0%	23%	74%
A parent should have a right to request additional adult support for their child(ren). I only ask for additional	ALL Staff	4%	3%	12%	39%	42%
	Teachers	1%	3%	14%	40%	42%
support after trying alternative strategies in the classroom. I collect more than 3	ALL Staff	9%	1%	6%	25%	59%
	Teachers	5%	1%	1%	27%	66%
data results from the students before asking for additional support for students. If a student received	ALL Staff	22%	2%	8%	26%	42%
	Teachers	15%	2%	6%	28%	49%
paraeducator support in the previous school year, I agree with continuing that support in the current/next school year. A paraeducator should be added when more	ALL Staff	12%	7%	18%	41%	23%
	Teachers	12%	5%	20%	41%	23%
than 30% of the class comprises students on an IEP. Students require 1:1 support when they have	ALL Staff	15%	4%	7%	23%	51%
	Teachers	15%	2%	7%	20%	56%
a behavioral disability and demonstrate distracting behaviors.	ALL Staff	10%	12%	16%	31%	31%
	Teachers	10%	6%	19%	33%	33%

Table 18 - Comparison of ALL Staff Versus Teachers to What Extent They Agree with Statements

In reviewing the data outlined above, there is value in having the responses separated from ALL district staff to teachers. Although there are some similarities, the results outline areas for improvement in understanding the roles and responsibilities of requesting additional support. There are two areas, however, that outline specific concerns. More than 15% of educators and 22% of all staff responded “unknown” when asked about collecting at least three (3) data points before requesting an additional adult for support. Additionally, 15% of educators and all staff responded “unknown” when asked about the paraeducator ratio when a classroom comprises more than 30% of the class with students on an IEP.

Educators were then asked, “What steps have you taken before considering the request for additional paraeducator support?” The responses yielded the following themes:

- I have only requested additional paraeducator support if the paraeducator is written into the IEP and has yet to be assigned or when a student must learn in another physical location.
- Modifying work, discussions with students, collecting data, having students do self-reflection, teaching student strategies, and creating separate plans with students.
- Discussed at a team IEP meeting and made decisions as a team.
- Positive behavior strategies with the student and the whole class, getting to know the student better by enjoying some game time together, discussion with the student’s caregivers, conversation with a colleague who also works with the student (finding out what works for that colleague - if anything, taking away privileges, referred the student to building administration
- Teachers must document every aggressive, dangerous, or eloping behavior before help is given.
- Safety of students, connecting with the students, ability to deliver instruction to all students, contact liaisons, guidance counselors, and parents, implementing a variety of assessments, and differentiated instruction.
- I will ask if I can’t do my job effectively without one.
- Observation, data collection, anecdotal evidence, classroom arrangement, individual schedules, response plans to unexpected behaviors, multiple places in the classroom for students to take a break with materials that support a “reset,” emotional check-in collaboration with their teachers, specialists, and parents are strategies used.
- I don’t think I ever felt I could ask for paraeducator support as a classroom teacher. I may desire or even beg for additional support. Still, I believe that a student must fail in the curriculum and/or hurt other children before administrators consider giving such support. It’s pretty frustrating and

overwhelming, leading to teacher burnout. We are all doing more than just teaching.

- I generally document everything I am doing, how I am accommodating, reporting data on the Educators Handbook (behavior issues), and meeting with administrators.
- I have tried a variety of methods.
- I don't ask for extra support. We have limited resources, and I am willing to work myself to the bone. Occasionally, I have an administrator who initiates extra support because they see the toll on EVERYONE in the class: teachers and students.

INTERVIEWS:

General educators and special educators were asked four (4) questions with one (1) follow-up question, while administrators reported on two (2) questions with three (3) follow-up questions. All questions supported informational gathering for the fourth program review research question.

The general and special educators were asked, “When do you ask for additional adult support in your classroom?” The four interviewees all responded to this question. They highlighted the importance of requesting additional support when there are safety concerns, or a student is not progressing adequately. Educators expressed that paraeducators are requested when there is a high level of need, like in a co-taught classroom where much of the population is on IEPs or when assistance is needed due to absenteeism in staff. Other insights included not asking for extra support to build student independence and how planning and coordinating to meet the mandates of the student's IEP ahead of time has lessened the need for additional support.

The second question asked to the general and special educators was, “What examples of alternative strategies have you implemented before asking for a paraeducator?” Two responses uncovered insight into strategies used in the classroom before paraeducator support. The most common was how to be creative and resourceful and share professionals to support student needs. Small groupings and differentiated instruction were identified as ways to promote student progress without adding additional adults.

Emergent themes from the general and special educator question “What data do you use to determine the need for additional paraeducator support?” focus on data-driven decision-making from two respondents. The two responses included progress monitoring, writing rubrics, exit tickets, unit tests, and diagnostic testing to track individual data and monitor student growth. Both participant groups noted an emphasis on using a variety of assessments.

General and special educators were asked to explain the paraeducator's role in the general education classroom and then asked, “How might this role differ if the additional support was a special education teacher?” To support informational gathering from the fourth program review research. Emergent themes from all four respondents' answers underscored the importance of collaboration, differentiation, promoting student independence, and maximizing support staff's effectiveness in educational settings. Responses included the benefits of having a paraeducator in the classroom, such as helping students access the curriculum, prompting students to be on task, providing safety when students escalate, and taking data. There was, however, agreement in the perception that special education teachers are more effective and efficient in the classroom due to expertise, planning together, communication, higher level of instruction, and understanding of learning strategies. Educators noted that the tradeoff seems to be that there are fewer special educators available for enough support to provide meaningful inclusion, and the instruction and support for the child is more intense and effective.

The first question posed to administrators under this research question was, “What has been your response when an educator asks you for additional adult support in their classroom?” Five out of six administrators provided responses that yielded emergent themes discussing individualized intervention, professional collaboration, proactive problem-solving, and student-centered support to ensure effective service delivery. Responses included offering strategies and methods to help the student be independent while making progress. Strategies mentioned included changing the environment, instructional shifts, access to small groups, additional practice, and utilizing

accommodations. Administrator responses agreed that unless the IEP mandates a one-to-one paraeducator immediately, the team should collaborate about moving forward and frame tiers of support before adding another adult to the classroom.

The second question to administrators that supported the fourth research question was, “How often have you observed a classroom that has previously asked for additional support, and you have assisted with alternative strategies rather than an additional person?” The follow-up questions included: (a) “How has their response been?” (b) “What has been your follow-up experience?” and (c) “How has this changed in pedagogical practices?” Administrators spoke to the frequency of being asked for additional support in the classroom. A common theme emerged: the need to be methodical and discuss interventions, schedule check-ins, and collect data to make a well-informed decision rather than just deciding on additional personnel in the classroom. Administrators' responses provided mixed feelings regarding how educators respond to alternative strategies. There was an acknowledgment of frustration felt by teachers due to not getting a quick fix, but a feeling that the interventions and colleague collaboration help the educators feel heard. One consideration was that educators may need to be reminded that additional support personnel in the classroom is not standard and that interventions must be exhausted first.

The administrator's responses regarding the follow-up experiences regarding offering alternative strategies tended to have a negative trend. Administrators highlighted that the relationships between them and educators can be compromised because educators feel insufficient support is added or the administration does not understand. Although there were reports of weekly meetings and daily check-ins, administrators felt educators were frustrated with the education system, and a feeling of losing hope could present itself. The final follow-up question about the change in pedagogical practices displayed overarching themes regarding strategies for improvement, the importance of ongoing support, and the highlighting of challenges to enhance student achievement.

Participants discussed navigating complex situations and the difficulty of maintaining



consistency and following through with interventions and pedagogical approaches. Administrators offered the importance of establishing exit criteria when new adult support is added to ensure clarity regarding the purpose and duration of the support. Responses also included the importance of clarity and communication between educators, administrators, and families when considering additional and reduced support personnel. Lastly, administrators highlighted universal practices that promote access and inclusivity for all students. Still, they noted that there are time constraints and limited resources to support professional development, proper supervision, and reflective practices among educators.

FOCUS GROUPS:

The focus groups responded to three questions to support the fourth essential review question, “When is it reasonable to request additional support for a general education teacher and/or student?” The first question provided to the paraeducators asked if they had experienced a situation in the general education classroom when they were unclear about which students they were supposed to support. One paraeducator reported a situation of helping a student with a seizure disorder. It felt they were not adequately trained to notice the symptoms of a seizure (staring), resulting in high anxiety and an increased sense of being incapable of supporting this student.

Another paraeducator spoke about their situation in the AIMS special education program and said they don’t feel qualified to support this student emotionally. In some situations, paraeducators reported being assigned to different content-specific classes they don’t feel qualified to help, such as math or AP classes at the high school.

One paraeducator told the evaluator that they were getting injured consistently by a student with an Autism diagnosis and felt unqualified to work with this student. On one occasion, when the paraeducator proceeded to intervene, the administration told this individual that the intervention was inappropriate. This individual asked to be switched to another paraeducator role, where they felt they could be more beneficial for students. In addition, paraeducators reported that when they are quickly pulled from working with

a specific classroom or set of students to work with other students, they do not know the child(ren)'s disability, interventions, or needs for accommodations. Therefore, they are fearful of doing something they should not or vice versa.

The second question asked paraeducators if they had been in classrooms where they felt they were the teacher rather than the support person and to provide examples of these experiences. When no substitute teacher is available, they become that role for the day and take over the classroom. In other situations, when classroom teachers are absent, and a substitute teacher is provided, paraeducators take on the classroom teacher role, and the substitute teacher watches the lessons unfold. In some instances, paraeducators reported teachers leaving the room for fifteen (15) to twenty (20) minutes and not returning to their classrooms, requiring paraeducators to take over as the teacher. The expectation of becoming a substitute teacher mainly occurred last school year and was noticed less frequently this year. There were instances where paraeducators felt they needed to be cautious about overstepping their roles but were asked to modify assignments for teachers, even when they were unsure of the content, or the fact that EL students were given assignments without translation and modifications resulted in challenges. Other paraeducators reported they work in partnership with their teachers and have never felt they needed to be responsible for the classroom or that the teacher required them to take over the class.

The last question in these sections asked paraeducators to define their role in the general education classroom. Some reported they needed to do whatever the student needed for support and assistance and be the extra hands. In some instances, paraeducators responded that the teacher would provide whole-class instruction and break the classroom into small groups. When this occurs, the teacher will work directly with those on an IEP while the paraeducator works with the general education students.

When paraeducators receive IEPs in advance, such as in the AIMS classroom, they review the documentation. They will review how to support these students in the general education classroom. Others reported that working in the general education classrooms



is an exciting role where they may be smoothing the waters. They noted that every day is a new challenge, which they appreciate. They feel their role is essential to ensure everyone understands that students learn differently and to demonstrate a relationship of trust and respect with the students and teachers. They felt their role in the general education classroom requires flexibility, empathy, independence, and the ability to advocate for student needs.

CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS:

On January 23, 2024, the observer began the classroom observations at the Middle School. On this day, the observer visited eight (8) observations: four (4) middle school classrooms and four (4) high school classrooms. Each observation lasted approximately twenty (20) minutes. These classroom observations aimed to determine the effectiveness of special education adult support.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

The first class had eighteen (18) students, a science teacher, and a special education teacher. Upon arrival, the students were working independently in small groups. The special education teacher worked with a small group of three (3) students on content and skills. The students worked on a self-evaluation sheet while the science teacher walked around the classroom, ensuring that all students were on task. After ten minutes of observation, the teacher told the students to clean up their work area. The special education teacher kept all students on task to clean up their spaces. The students switched classes during this time, and the special education teacher left. As the new classroom period began, a paraeducator entered the classroom with the new group of students. There were now eighteen (18) students in the classroom with a science teacher and paraeducator.

The teacher asked the students to find their seats while the paraeducator shut off the lights to help settle the students. The teacher then set a two (2) minute timer to encourage the students to quiet down. Despite multiple and respectful reminders from



the paraeducator, two students sitting in the back of the room continued to disrupt the class. The paraeducator repeatedly said, “Thank you to those who were respectful during the silence.” Throughout the observation, some students were moving around, speaking loudly, and not remaining seated despite being asked to do so. There appeared to be classroom management challenges, as students repeatedly talked over the teacher's instructions.

In the next classroom, there were twenty-two (22) students, and the class was reading “Long Way Down” with a focus on “how figurative language enhances symbols.” The teacher and paraeducator had a group of students working on the lesson. The students appeared confused about the classroom expectations. The paraeducator then sat with a group and listened to their conversations but offered minimal interventions or probing. At the same time, the classroom teacher circulated the room, providing support to each group through content probing and academic help. The teacher then turned to the paraeducator to offer prompts as to what needed to happen and which students the paraeducator required to support. One student in a group of five (5) said, “I’m out,” and left the classroom, and that group quickly became a group of four (4). After a few minutes, the paraeducator left the room to find the student. The classroom teacher kept the students focused on the task and kept them progressing on the assignment. When the paraeducator returned to the classroom, this individual had minimal interactions with students and stood by the walls in the classroom. A student asked the paraeducator to sign for the bathroom pass as the teacher worked directly with a small group of students. The paraeducator then walked to the side of the classroom and took a drink from their water bottle. In moments when the teacher did not directly engage with the group, the paraeducator appeared off-task and disengaged. One group of students began talking about their favorite country and who was famous. At the end of this observation, the students were leaving the classroom to take a seven (7) minute break to transition from one activity in class to the other. In general, the classroom exhibited several strengths in classroom behavior despite some off-task behavior. However, the paraeducator predominantly remained at the back of the classroom and provided limited support, guidance, and student interaction.

The third classroom observed at the middle school had twenty-one (21) students, a classroom teacher, and a paraeducator. The paraeducator was working one-on-one with a student. The class was preparing for an upcoming assessment and reviewing science questions. The teacher called on individual students by pulling names labeled on popsicle sticks. Some of the questions included, "What is the name of all the tubes through which blood passes to and from the heart?", "What are the two waste products made by the mitochondria as they burn food and release energy?" After eight (8) minutes of observing the classroom, the paraeducator left the class with the student. The teacher then approached the observer and explained that the student with the one-to-one paraeducator cannot tolerate these games and requires breaks. Therefore, the student was leaving the room to take a break. Although most of the class appeared engaged in the activity, the teacher made no modifications to support the students who struggled to remain in the room due to their inability to tolerate the game. This lack of modification raised concerns with the observer about why the game continued to be implemented despite the awareness that a student had a low tolerance for such activities. Additionally, there was a question regarding the decision to have the student leave the classroom rather than adapting the activity to accommodate all learners.

The last observation at the middle school was a small special education classroom that included a teacher, the former one-to-one paraprofessional, two (2) seventh-grade students, and one (1) eighth-grade student. While the teacher was working directly with the eighth-grade student on the music assignment, the paraprofessional talked to a seventh-grade student about their computer game. After ten minutes of observing the classroom, the para reported they would "leave the class early for lunch because I want to beat the line at lunch" and told the students they could do the same. Within three (3) minutes, the paraeducator returned to the classroom, told the observer, "I'm on lunch," and proceeded to walk with their lunch tray into the adjoining classroom. Three (3) other paraeducators then entered the classroom and began talking, interrupting the eighth-grade student's lesson. The teacher continued to work with the students on music assignments (verse, etc.). During this observation, the evaluator noted that the

paraeducators caused some distractions during the lesson, which may have disrupted the students' learning environment.

HIGH SCHOOL

The first observation at the High School was a small classroom of twelve (12) students and three (3) adults. In this classroom, students were reviewing for their test, which would occur the following day. One paraeducator supported a student as a one-to-one adult intervention. The second paraeducator was reading her book, unrelated to the content or skills in supporting students. After the observer walked around the room, the paraeducator proceeded to prompt the student with a question for the review. However, the classroom teacher walked around the room, guided, and supported the students with disabilities and general education students, and kept the students on task. Three (3) students in the center of the room were working independently and reviewing their books to find evidence to support their review responses. The paraeducator, originally reading her book in the classroom, began providing the students with answers to the review document by looking through the student's notebooks. Rather than prompting the student to find the answer independently, the paraeducator provided the correct answers. When the student was working independently, this would have been a reasonable time for the paraeducator to walk about the room to support other students, such as stopping the girls from watching videos on their phones and redirecting them to the assignment. Instead, the teacher had to come around and tell the students that they should shut the video off unless it were a chemistry video. Working one-on-one with the student, the paraeducator assisted the student in staying on task throughout the observation and provided prompts that engaged the student's learning. This paraeducator assisted two (2) other students and then asked the teacher for guidance on better supporting a student. This observation highlighted a contrast in the effectiveness of two paraeducators in their support of students. While one appeared very effective, it will be beneficial for the other paraeducator to receive further training and clarification on their role and responsibilities.

The second observation had twenty-four (24) students, a classroom teacher, and a paraeducator. Additionally, there was a “teacher helper” in the class, a student from one of the upper grades in high school. This class was in a pre-algebra inclusion classroom setting. Upon arrival of the observation, while students were working independently in reviewing for the test for the next day, the paraeducator sat in the back of the classroom. In this situation, the paraeducator provides one-to-one support for the individual student. However, according to the classroom teacher, this student does not require this support except on rare occasions. This student is the classroom’s top performer, according to the teacher. The supported student began sharing his frustration with the computer and inability to check his work. The classroom teacher reassured the student that this happens to most students and was able to redirect the student back on task. The paraeducator remained seated, provided no intervention initially, and gradually offered coping strategies to redirect the student. Within sixty (60) seconds, the student was back to completing his work independently. During this observation, it would have been appropriate for the paraeducator to walk around the room to support other students and ensure they were confident with their preparation work. Additionally, the student supported by the one-to-one paraeducator would benefit from having a student-teacher “helper” or a “friend” to assist when overwhelmed. According to the teacher, the teacher helper has been a positive influence and role model for the students.

The third classroom observation was an English class composed of ten (10) students, a classroom teacher, and three (3) paraeducators. Upon arrival, the classroom teacher was seated at her desk and reviewing items on her computer as students reviewed their written work. One (1) paraeducator worked with the student on the computer as the one-to-one support. This adult was speaking Spanish to the student. Another paraeducator was working one-on-one with another student to review the overall objectives of the lesson. After three (3) minutes into the observation, the third paraeducator arrived to support another individual student. The class assignment involved them reading an independent book and reviewing it based on prompts on the board. The teacher walked around the room to support students between reading

responses from her computer. Through this observation, there were opportunities for paraeducators to be utilized differently. For example, there may be situations where the classroom teacher could provide hands-on support, increased prompting, and peer editing.

In the fourth observation at the high school, a math class, there were seventeen (17) students, a teacher, and a paraeducator. Upon entering the classroom, the observer noted one student taking a quiz they had missed in the back of the room, and the rest of the students were taking the opportunity to complete make-up or missed work from the semester as the grades were closing at the end of the week. The paraeducator was sitting in a small group with two students in the front of the classroom. The adult offered minimal intervention with the instruction, although the students appeared off task. The paraeducator played with her pencil and completed the review document the students had to complete. While the two students previously referenced were talking over the teacher's voice, the paraeducator continued to draw on her paper, ignoring the classroom disruption. The teacher then went over to these students and prompted them by saying, "If you complete three (3) 'do-nows,' I will give you a fidget." During this observation, the paraeducator proceeded to work independently rather than walking around the room to support. Instead, the paraeducator completed her own "do-nows." While the classroom teacher continued to prompt the students to remain on-task, the paraeducator continued to work on her papers. Throughout the 20-minute observation, the paraeducator prompted the students once. Otherwise, the paraeducator has no other communication with the students. The teacher taught, encouraged, managed the classroom, and reinforced behavior expectations. The overall observation concluded that a paraeducator was unnecessary in this classroom, as this individual offered minimal to no assistance within twenty (20) minutes.

ELEMENTARY

On February 2, 2024, the evaluator observed 13 classrooms. Each classroom observation lasted approximately 20 minutes, and the observations began at 8:30 AM.



The observations span three elementary schools: Crocker Farm, Fort River, and Wildwood Elementary. The last observation ended at 2:05 PM. For confidentiality, this report will not expressly state the locations of these observations. These observations aim to determine overall themes and consistencies across buildings as they relate to the effectiveness of implementing paraeducator support in the classrooms.

In the first classroom observed at the elementary school, the evaluator observed sixteen (16) students; a classroom teacher, a paraeducator, and a translator were present. Upon entering the classroom, the students were engaged in a mindful moment body exercise, resting their hands on their laps, and closing their eyes if they felt comfortable. The paraeducator and translator reiterated the classroom expectations to the student on an IEP. After the mindful body activity, the teacher explained the day's lesson. The one-to-one paraeducator guided the student to bring out their folder and prepare for class expectations. The paraeducator was a second set of eyes and hands for the classroom teacher in this observation. This individual worked directly with students nearby to support on-task expectations. When the individual student left the room to work with a therapist, the paraeducator immediately transitioned to work with another student in the classroom. Students were completing a math lesson, and the paraeducator immediately pulled visual cues to support student learning for those struggling with the lesson concept.

In the second classroom, there was a one-to-one paraeducator working directly with the students through morning play and using building blocks. During the switch from play to classroom teacher-directed activities, the paraeducator supported three students through this transition. Once the paraeducator provided the individual student with a fidget and was appropriately seated, the one-to-one paraeducator moved about the classroom to assist other students. Another paraeducator in the classroom was collecting data on student behavior and transitioning from play to academic work. When the classroom transitioned to singing "backward C, backward C, that's how we make a 3!" the one-to-one paraeducator modeled the kinesthetic movement, and the student they were supporting followed along with the class. It was evident the student would not

have been on task learning the content or skills without the one-to-one support. The interventions in this classroom were a model observation of the effective use of paraeducators.

The third classroom consisted of fourteen (14) students and three (3) adults. Upon arrival, a one-to-one paraeducator played a math game, “dot bingo,” with a student on the floor. Two students were taking personal space in the back of the room, and the special education teacher was teaching the class as the classroom teacher was out sick. The special education teacher was working with two (2) students on math computations using manipulatives. The observation of this class identified student-centered practices by asking questions, probing challenging situations, and ensuring student understanding. One paraeducator approached a student and asked, “Do you feel distracted? Would you like headphones or no headphones?” The student responded, “No headphones.” The paraeducator replied, “Okay, I just wanted to check in.” The teacher gave students an independent task to check the status of the others working on their computers. “When you complete this lesson, you can start a math game.” When the teacher left the desk, the student removed his headphones, distracting other students in the group. Others could now hear what he was working on, and the others turned to watch him. The teacher came back to see what he was working on. The paraeducator remained focused on the student in the back of the room. Using his hands to help the student count; “I have six fingers up now; if I want to go to 7, how many more fingers do I need? How do I get to 7? Do I need one more finger or two more?” The student said, “2 more.” “Okay, let’s try that... How much did we get to?” “8”, and he had the student count. Then the paraeducator returned to the question again, and the student said, “1”. The paraeducator provided positive feedback by stating, “Thank you for taking that challenge with me.” The paraeducator was persistent in asking questions in various ways to try to get the student to remain focused. This class demonstrated effective use of educator and paraeducator support and inclusive practices to ensure continued learning.

The following classroom observation began with a meditation break for the students. This class was a sixth-grade classroom with one classroom teacher, and where one student had a one-to-one paraeducator due to their disability. The lesson focused on mathematical computation. The one-to-one paraeducator used the laptop to pull up a document aligned with the classroom activity to support the student. The room was prepared for students in small groups. However, the student with the visual disability was facing the back of the room and had to physically turn their body and head to see the direct instruction. When small group peer collaboration was in place, the paraeducator supported facilitating the discussion among the students. When the teacher directed the students to write notes, the paraeducator cued them to type notes. The student got tired of doing the work and handed the laptop to the paraeducator, who began typing the definition for the student. The student stated, "I don't care. You just do it." The paraeducator is a positive influence and support in this individual case. However, it would benefit the paraeducator to receive guidance on reducing support or responding to a student's refusal.

The evaluator then observed a substantially separate special education program with ten (10) students, a classroom teacher, paraeducators, and a one-to-one paraeducator. In this classroom, students were educated within their cubicles, and the paraeducators were reinforcing skills. The classroom teacher was sitting at her desk preparing for upcoming lessons. During the observation, strategies such as using timers for breaks, behavioral charts, token systems, movement breaks, calm space, cues for reading, manipulative-based activities, and music were noticeable. Each student had individual lessons and was directed with hand-over-hand or explicit step-by-step instructions. There was evidence of parallel play between a student and a paraeducator and the use of technology devices for communication. This observation resulted in identifying high-quality instruction and needed student support.

As the observer transitioned into another room, the mode shifted from a substantially separate program to an inclusion classroom. In this room were fourteen (14) students, a classroom teacher, a special education teacher, and a student teacher. The



classroom teacher and student teacher worked together to review lesson plans, etc. The special education teacher was working with four (4) students and keeping them focused on a game. As students finished their iReady work, they transitioned to playing the game with the other students. The observer noted the special education teacher's prompting and probing when asking questions to engage the students. The paraeducator walked around the classroom, ensuring all students remained on task.

In the next observation, the special education teacher was in an IEP meeting, so the paraeducator covered one of the shared classrooms in the building. Partition walls separated the two classrooms. The paraeducator reviewed Wilson's strategies via an interactive whiteboard game. There were four (4) students on this side of the classroom. This individual was assigned to a one-to-one student. The observer noted that while the paraeducator was instructing the students on Wilson, the assigned student was sitting in the back of the room watching a video with headphones on. The observer proceeded to the other side of the partitioned wall and observed the general education inclusion classroom. There were eleven (11) students, a classroom teacher, and a paraeducator. The paraeducator led a game, "word wall," on the cloud platform. The students were learning about deletion, "take away the 'm' sound." After twelve (12) minutes of this observation, the paraeducator returned to the literacy general education classroom and ensured all students worked on their assignments. The student with a one-to-one paraeducator transitioned with this adult back into the inclusion classroom as the special education teacher returned from her IEP meeting. The teacher then asked the paraeducator to make copies, which required the IEP support to leave the classroom.

In the meantime, the teacher challenged the students with a classroom assignment, and they were waiting for the paraeducator to return to ask their questions rather than asking the teacher in the classroom. In addition, the teacher went around the classroom to assist students but never acknowledged those in the small group who had been working with the paraeducator. After three (3) minutes, the paraeducator returned to the classroom and immediately probed and prompted the struggling students by

providing scaffolding and reflecting on previous lessons. The overall takeaway from this observation includes the recognized value of this paraeducator. This individual was pulled to teach a lesson, work one-to-one, and be the copying assistant for the teacher. There are some highlighted concerns from this observation as well. For instance, if this is an inclusion classroom, there is no evidence of inclusive practices that would make students with disabilities feel they are part of the same learning environment as their peers. This inclusion model illustrated an inclusive approach through geographical location, not through instruction or expectations. Additionally, the student supported through a one-to-one paraeducator was required to take a break and watch a video while the adult support was teaching, rather than having the student included in the classroom and having another adult temporarily work with this student or take over the other classroom.

The last observation in this building was a cluster of substantially separate classrooms with two programs in three different classrooms. Despite the challenges of overpopulation and limited space, the educators showed remarkable dedication. In one classroom, there were usually six (6) students, but two (2) were absent, and three (3) were participating in an inclusion classroom. The educators reported that these programs were becoming overpopulated and may need additional space. A game between a paraeducator and a student was on one side of the room. Another student received direct instruction from an educator, reviewed words, and sounds, and grasped where the letter “e” should be placed in a word. Each paraeducator was actively involved with the students. The observer, however, is left wondering about the rigor and consistency of curriculum alignment and pedagogy to support a continuum of learning for the attending students.

In the last building observed, the evaluator entered five (5) classrooms, and the observations were approximately twenty (20) minutes long. One classroom observation is not described in this report, as the observation lasted only nine (9) minutes, and the students mainly were transitioning from one classroom to another. The first classroom observed in this building was a substantially separate special education classroom.



However, most students were entering an inclusion music class, and the special education teacher guided the evaluator into this setting to observe the one-to-one support and students with disabilities. One paraeducator had to assist a student with medical support. The paraeducators were also using AAC devices. A guest singer was in the class who actively engaged the students. One student from the substantially separate classroom was fixated on the singer's voice and began smiling and getting excited. All students marched into a line as they sang a song. The students who were seated in the wheelchair were able to move around with the paraeducator's support and guidance. The student was then placed back into his wheelchair after everyone finished singing the song. The students from the substantially separate classroom were actively engaged and participated in this classroom, with the support of their one-to-one paraeducator.

The following classroom was an inclusion setting with twenty-one (21) students; two (2) were from a substantially separate classroom. During this class observation, there was evidence of differentiation. The teacher recognized the students from the substantially separate classroom and began working directly with the students. It was evident that another student was on a behavior plan as the classroom teacher gave the student a tally for coming into the classroom quietly and immediately working on-task upon entering. This class demonstrated areas of strength in inclusive practices, showing the potential for positive outcomes that can be achieved with the right support and strategies.

Next, the classroom consisted of ten (10) students, a classroom teacher, a student teacher, and a paraeducator. In this classroom, students learn about the beginning and middle of a story. After reviewing the story, students worked in their writing journals to complete the story. The paraeducator observed from the sidelines and occasionally checked in with the students. The one-to-one paraeducator observed the student as frustrated and challenged with the task. This observation was evidenced by twirling the pencil and staring at the paper. An adult walked over to this student, said, "Cooking," and then kept walking. The student continued to demonstrate his intimidation by

looking around the classroom and second-guessing what he was writing. The paraeducator talked with the other adults in the classroom and watched the student from the sidelines. The student teacher independently read a story to one student. The classroom teacher worked individually with the students who required one-on-one support. During this twenty (20) minute observation, the paraeducator spent less than three (3) minutes supporting this student and neglected to provide guided instruction to reduce the student's frustration or anxiety.

The last observation was reduced in time as the observer and building administration entered this room together. The purpose of this observation was to observe the effectiveness of the paraeducators in the classroom. However, they were not in the classroom as they were directed to. Rather, the administration and classroom teacher did not know where they were. The students were working independently, which allowed the observer and administrator to speak with the teacher. The educator reported that the two (2) students who required support never received the support in their classroom, as the paraeducators often leave during the lesson. The classroom teacher was clearly frustrated and reported the lack of support she received in providing the educational learning environment that was planned by the administration. This lack of support for students with disabilities is not just a concern but a pressing issue that demands immediate attention.



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LITERATURE REVIEW - RESEARCH TO SUPPORT FINDINGS

As of 2019, sixty percent of students with disabilities spent more than eighty percent of their day in the general education setting (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022).

Over the past decade, this trend has influenced the steady increase in the number of paraprofessionals (also referred to as para-educators or aides) employed in our nation's public schools. Paraeducators now outnumber special education teachers as service providers (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). While the defined role of these individuals is ambiguous due to the wide range of duties the position encompasses (Max & McCoy-Daley, 2024; McDermott et al., 2024), the purpose of these positions is to support teachers and students to ensure student learning and success.

The literature review presented here provides evidence-based research on the effective utilization of paraprofessionals in schools. Aligned with the research questions, this review discusses how paraprofessionals can compromise or enhance student progress, strategies to reduce adult support beyond the general education teacher, and ways to promote growth toward independence. Additionally, it addresses the need for appropriate and reasonable support for general education teachers in diverse classrooms.

Given the large number of paraprofessionals in the field and their critical role in educating students with intellectual and emotional disabilities, it is necessary to provide proper training, coaching, and implementation for these individuals (Brock & Anderson, 2019). Building on their previous work, Brock, Seaman, and Downing (2017) explore the effect of paraprofessional training on promoting learning for students with severe disabilities and challenging behaviors. After partnering with special education teachers to implement evidence-based instructional practices, one teacher requested further training for her staff to better support a child who frequently engaged in challenging



behaviors. After gaining permission from the parents and the Ohio State Institutional Review Board, the authors partnered with the paraprofessional to implement a functional behavior assessment to determine the function of the challenging behaviors and a multiple stimulus without replacement preference assessment to select effective reinforcers. The assessments helped design effective instructional plans. Brock, Seaman, and Downing (2017) note that the paraprofessional had no formal training in instructional, support, or behavior management strategies before this study.

The observer noted that the paraprofessional implemented the designed instructional programs and modeled instructional video practice during the study. They were also given performance feedback to inform their work during this time. Student data related to individualized goals was collected. The treatment took place in a classroom for students with severe disabilities for 50 consecutive school days. After the intervention, the paraprofessional completed a survey about the training and the strategies she had implemented.

Brock, Seaman, and Downing (2017) found that although video modeling alone was sufficient to promote implementation fidelity and student progress in the communication category, the addition of performance feedback and coaching increased student progress in two other categories (independent transitions and letter identification). The authors suggest that while student outcomes were improving, the coaching aided the paraprofessional in altering her practice to ensure success for the student. Findings from this study provide implications for practice for special education teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators. First, the authors advise that paraprofessionals should only take on responsibilities for which they have been sufficiently trained. Second, results suggested that special educators and administrators must communicate that positive function-based approaches are essential to promote student engagement. Finally, the authors report that teachers must be prepared to supervise paraprofessionals and be given time to effectively train and support these individuals to work successfully with students.

While the previous study had several limitations, such as sample size and lack of maintenance data, Sharma and Salend (2016) reviewed data over ten (10) years on the roles and impacts of paraprofessionals and the factors that influence the performance of these assistants. The authors conducted a systematic and rigorous search and selection methodology to identify studies that explored the following research questions: (a) what roles are teacher's assistants (TAs) assuming to support educators and students in inclusive classrooms? (b) how do the roles performed and supports provided by TAs in inclusive classrooms impact students, educators, and inclusive education; and (c) what factors influence the performance of TAs in inclusive classrooms?

This comprehensive analysis of 61 studies conducted across 11 countries offers valuable insights into the multifaceted roles, impacts, and influencing factors of TAs within inclusive educational settings. Much like Brock, Seaman, and Downing (2017), the findings suggest that while TAs play a crucial role in instructing and supporting students with disabilities, there may be limited training and oversight. Sharma & Salend (2016) present the potential for disparity in the quality of instruction by TAs compared to that delivered by certified teachers through an investigation of audio recordings taken from instructional activities in inclusion classrooms (as found in Radford et al. (2011) and Rubie-Davis et al. (2010)).

The researchers present observational findings that while a positive correlation is observed between the presence of TAs and heightened student participation, engagement levels, and reduced disruptive behaviors among students with disabilities, there were also studies that cautioned against potential drawbacks. These drawbacks include reduced inclusion, socialization, and independence due to the common practice of TAs working separately with students, thereby reducing interactions with educators and peers even in varied group sizes.

Qualitative interviews with students highlighted various experiences with TAs, from supportive inclusion to excessive intervention limiting autonomy and social integration. Forty-nine percent of the studies analyzed by Sharma and Salend (2016) addressed

factors influencing TA performance, such as unclear guidelines, inadequate professional development opportunities, lack of communication with educators regarding student needs and lesson plans, and limited supervision and feedback.

Studies revealed that TAs felt their roles varied based on unclear responsibilities, limited collaboration, and differing views on their position by classroom teachers. The authors suggest a need for school districts to examine the efficacy of their practices and policies for using TAs in inclusive classrooms. To align expectations and responsibilities, districts can triangulate data through observations, surveys, and interviews to inform evidence-based decision-making processes regarding using TAs or pursuing alternatives (co-teaching, allocation of resources, peer support, etc.). Sharma & Salend (2016) proposed implementing policies to ensure delineations for teacher and TA roles, promote communication and collaboration, and provide targeted training to prepare TAs for diverse classroom roles.

In his 2017 study, Goldstein investigated the dynamics of student-teacher interactions involving paraprofessionals (PP) and students with disabilities (SWD). Considering the substantial time these professionals spend with their designated students, this research aimed to explore the balance between independence and dependence of such students on their assigned paraprofessionals. The study focused on a ninth-grade English class of 23 students, one of whom had a full-time paraprofessional. Data collection methods included observations, interviews, video recordings, and document photography.

Goldstein's (2017) findings revealed that the interaction between the PP and the SWD surpassed that of the interactions between the SWD and the lead teachers. The PP's tasks included offering detailed explanations of learning activities, providing motivation and prompts to initiate and sustain tasks, and offering additional time and encouragement to students in need. Moreover, data indicated that the PP played a pivotal role in assessing the student's understanding of the presented content. Analysis of frequency, percentage, interaction initiation, and patterns highlighted the significant role of the PP compared to the classroom teacher. Interviews indicated that when the

lead teacher began to direct more attention towards the SWD, the paraprofessional would step in, and the teacher would re-focus their attention on the larger group.

The presence of the paraprofessional positively impacted student motivation, focus, academic understanding, and peer interactions. However, there needed to be more reliance on the paraprofessional to hinder critical social interactions with peers despite efforts to foster social development. Goldstein (2017) stressed the importance of achieving a balanced environment where both teachers' roles are optimized to reduce SWD's dependence on the paraprofessional. Enhancing positive interactions between the PP and the lead teachers may reduce the SWD's reliance on the paraprofessional. Goldstein (2017) advocated for collaborative lesson planning, shared responsibilities, and task accessibility for all students to nurture self-reliance among students with disabilities while ensuring inclusivity for all learners.

Schools are faced with the ongoing challenge of effectively utilizing paraprofessionals. The study by Haines et al. (2022) in a rural elementary school focused on improving special education service delivery and enhancing collaboration among professionals. The research spanned two years and utilized a mixed methods approach, including demographic surveys, visual service delivery mapping, interviews, and focus groups. The school had 325 students from kindergarten to grade 6, with over 24% eligible for special education services. The authors note that zero students with disabilities were enrolled in external placements.

In year one, the school served all special education students internally, with 91% spending at least 80% of their time in general education classrooms. However, special educators had high caseloads and spent less than 37% of their time on instruction.

During year two, resources were reallocated to hire more certified teachers and support service teachers. For example, full-time paraprofessional positions were reallocated to part-time special education teachers and master-level support service teachers with literacy and numeracy expertise. The goal was to increase access to academic support

specialists for all students. Paraprofessionals and special education teachers were more evenly distributed across the school. This distribution caused reduced caseloads, increased instructional time for special educators, and increased peer collaboration, which improved instruction and flexibility in the classrooms. Haines et al. (2022) reported increased staff participation in deeper student data analysis, leading to more efficient planning and instruction.

This reallocation reduced caseloads, increased instructional time for special educators, enhanced peer collaboration, improved instruction flexibility, and deeper analysis of student data for more efficient planning and instruction. While staff reported benefits such as increased trust in support staff presence and improved efficiency, they also noted challenges like reduced staffing flexibility, impacts on nurturing relationships between paraprofessionals and students, and decreased opportunity for non-curricular outdoor activities that required more adults.

The study's limitations include the inability to generalize results to all schools and the need for more academic data collection on paraprofessional and teacher training. However, implications for practice include implementing distributed and collaborative leadership, identifying service delivery problems, being open to reallocating resources, and increasing the availability of highly skilled staff for more inclusive instruction and collaboration.

While paraprofessionals play a vital role in special education services, it is imperative to shift focus towards reducing the reliance of students with disabilities on these individuals to promote greater independence that extends beyond their academic years. Scheef et al. (2023) propose strategies to reduce student over-reliance on paraprofessional support and foster autonomy.

The authors advocate for prioritizing student independence, prompting paraeducators to transition from direct to more indirect support roles. Their recommendations emphasize proactive approaches over-reactive measures and stress the importance of



collaboration among all staff members in educating students with disabilities. Scheef et al. (2023) recommend assessing paraeducators' proficiency in independence-focused support, peer interaction facilitation, and fading procedures. Paraeducator engagement is crucial, necessitating professional development on evidence-based practices and ongoing supervision for guidance throughout the academic year.

Scheef et al. (2023) highlight the benefits of conducting an ecological assessment of the classroom environment and daily expectations to identify areas requiring additional support and guidance, such as instructional delivery, curriculum level, transitions, and physical space. Understanding student preferences through self-determination assessments can enhance independence and self-regulation and offer valuable insights into a student's readiness for autonomy, self-regulation abilities, psychological empowerment, and self-realization. This understanding can facilitate success in both academic and post-secondary settings.

Utilizing visual and written supports is recommended to foster independence. Tools such as schedules, graphic organizers, and task analyses aim to reduce reliance on paraeducators' prompts. Peer supports are highlighted for improving social interactions, communication skills, and inclusivity. Collaborating with peer support and gradually reducing paraeducator involvement so the paraeducator's role changes to monitoring the student interactions is encouraged. Helping students practice making choices and creating visual representations of steps promotes independence rather than continued dependence on memory or external assistance.

The authors promote utilizing peer support as a valuable strategy for enhancing social interactions and inclusivity. Pairing students with similarly aged peers can improve social skills, communication, and a broader social network. Monitoring support peers, modeling language for engagement, identifying common interests, and redirecting students when necessary are critical aspects of this process. The authors stress the importance of collecting baseline data to guide the successful fading of paraeducator

support. Scheef et al. (2023) encourage gradual fading prompts as a beneficial strategy for skill retention with increased independence.

The work done by Pucket, Mathur, and Zamora (2017) provides insight into the effects of strategies to improve classroom behaviors and support the social skills of students exhibiting behavioral concerns to increase independence. The authors conducted a study focused on implementing a comprehensive intervention that targeted social skills for two 4th graders. The intervention provided by a special educator used interactive social narratives, video modeling, and peer mentoring. The study took place over eight (8) weeks, and data was collected using observations, interviews, and student journals.

Following identifying target behaviors in collaboration with classroom teachers, the two participants engaged in 30-minute interventions. Interactive social narratives consisted of an application that displayed scenes and graphics illustrating good choices and positive reinforcement for such choices. Video modeling was also utilized, including the participants watching their performances regarding target behaviors. A peer mentor was chosen and worked with the participants to aid them in academic and social interactions. Teachers facilitated discussions based on interactive social narratives, videos, and peer support, providing reinforcement and further guidance for the target students.

Results indicated improvements in the three target areas. First, the authors describe positive behavioral changes in the classroom, including attention to task, appropriate actions such as hand-raising, and appropriate academic responses. The researchers describe the two students involved in the study who successfully generalized the skill of attending to a task and were able to reduce reliance on in-class support by the end of the intervention. Data also suggested an increase in academic behaviors and responses. Pucket, Mathur, and Zamora (2017) highlight the positive effect narratives, modeling, and mentoring had in maintaining actions such as being an active listener, raising hands, staying seated, following directions, etc.



The changes in classroom behavior positively changed, but more notably, the students' perceptions about their behaviors also changed. The authors noted that a growing awareness regarding the benefits of positive behaviors increased the participants' motivation to continue to act appropriately and, therefore, seek more positive responses from teachers and peers.

While limitations included one of the researchers also serving as the special educator who administered the intervention and the need for more observation sessions, the results imply replicability. Pucket, Mathur, and Zamora (2017) concluded that employing evidence-based interventions in special education settings to encourage marginalized students to cultivate friendships and social competence can enhance these students' ability to generalize essential skills. This approach will help foster independence alongside academic progress and positive social interactions.

The final research questions explored in this review include: What are the reasonable expectations for general education teachers when teaching in an inclusive classroom without additional staffing support, and when is it reasonable to request additional support for a general education teacher and/or student? These questions come from the growing body of literature regarding the overuse and misuse of paraprofessionals in public education. In exploring supplementary aids and services for students with disabilities, Toews et al. (2021) analyze strategies and resources used in inclusive classrooms before deciding to utilize a paraprofessional.

The authors examine trends in supplementary aids and services (SAS) as outlined in IEPs and analyze SAS across various educational placements to compare students with and without behavior support plans (BSP) or with and without complex communication needs (CCN). Toews et al. (2021) aimed to address gaps in understanding how and when to provide SAS for students with extensive support needs.

Toews et al. (2021) contacted teachers of students with educational support needs (ESN) and examined 92 de-identified IEPs from students in grades K-12. Eighty-eight

were deemed eligible for analysis. Initial findings revealed significant differences in collaborative SAS for students with BSP compared to those without, as well as variations in social communication SAS between students with CCN and those without.

The authors implied that the types of SAS provided to students across different placement settings were the same, suggesting that placement type alone may not determine the level or type of support provided to students with ESN. While Toews et al. (2021) report an expected higher level of collaboration and behavioral support for students on IEPs for BSPs and a strong likelihood for students with CCN to have SAS supports such as assistive technology and specialized communication supports, they highlight a discrepancy of the social communication supports for students with CCN.

Results also suggest that students in inclusive placements had no significant difference in SAS provision across placement categories. The authors note that the decision-making process behind placement and proper SAS provision should be analyzed.

Toews et al. (2021) point to the absence of variability across placement settings to question whether SAS listed for students in separate placements could be provided in inclusive settings. To counter this, the authors recommend thoroughly considering supports in the least restrictive environment decision-making process.

One of the significant observations was that more educational support needed to be used within the natural environment. Instead, there was a reliance on paraprofessionals throughout the school day. Toews et al. (2021) propose developing behavioral SAS and empowering students with self-monitoring tools and support to access daily routines, tasks, and schedules. A lack of access to communication support was noted, and there was a need to improve access to augmentative and alternative communication systems and comprehensive support services.

Toews et al. (2021) acknowledge limitations such as small sample size and generalizability. Recommendations included embedding support by existing staff, peers



or through self-monitoring. This would avoid the reliance on adult support, which can hinder student growth and independence. It underscores the significance of training team members to enhance communication support and evaluation practices, advocating for less invasive supports before considering more restrictive measures or placements. The authors stress the importance of documenting efforts to support students with SAS before resorting to more restrictive interventions.



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District contacted Academic Discoveries, LLC, to facilitate a program review in the special education department. The program review focused on four main questions outlined in the findings section of the report. Using a multi-dimensional program review model, these questions were researched using data collected by the district and evaluator, peer-reviewed research, observations, surveys, focus groups, and interviews. This section of the report explains some of the findings from the review.

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District employs highly qualified professional educators, reading specialists, and special education staff to support all specialized learning opportunities. Their staff has proven longevity and commitment to the district, community, and students. In addition, the administration and staff expressed their appreciation for the dedication and commitment Amherst-Pelham demonstrates in supporting their students with disabilities. Amherst-Pelham Regional School District has dedicated funding and resources to hire special education paraeducators to help students who require additional support in general and special education settings.

Academic Discoveries' evaluators completed this special education program review. The district's special education administration assisted in preparing for the focus groups, interviews, and specialized classroom observations, which positively influenced the findings of this program review.

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District has offered professional development to paraeducators on their roles and responsibilities, how to provide various levels of support dependent upon student needs, and a focus on restorative practices. However, given these trainings, it was only sometimes observed that they have generalized into the classroom settings. In middle and high schools, there remains concern about some of the levels of support and the practices implemented in inclusive classrooms.



When referencing the first program review question, *“In reviewing the philosophy of requiring additional support for students with disabilities, is there potential for students’ progress to be compromised rather than enhanced?”* the responses resulted from classroom observations, interviews, focus group participants, and survey responses. By and large, the educators and parents/guardians value the importance of the paraeducators in the classroom. The need for additional support is primarily determined through team meeting discussions, testing results, and classroom data. Additionally, 85% of educators reported that they often or always recommend the need for a paraeducator because the team requested this service in the previous IEP. Parents view this additional support as effective in helping their children succeed in school.

There were discrepancies between paraeducator and teacher perspectives when asked if a paraeducator was required for students with disabilities to be successful (Paraeducator = 81%, Educator = 34%). Another discrepancy between the two parties was their level of agreement as to whether the paraeducator's role is to ensure the student remains on-task (Paraeducator = 52%, Educator = 25%). Paraeducators (65%) agree more than twice as often as educators (29%) that having a paraeducator is the best model for classroom support. Educators offered numerous strategies they implemented in their classrooms to support students with disabilities beyond requesting a paraeducator. When asked how a paraeducator supports student outcomes, the educators overwhelmingly reported that their presence was valued and supported if the paraeducator was adequately trained and familiar with the content. The level of training the paraeducator had received impacted the results of student outcomes.

Many educators responded that they use data to determine the need for additional paraeducator support; overwhelmingly, the responses focused on maximizing student success, independence, and engagement during independent tasks. Educators shared the values of having a paraeducator in the classroom and challenges regarding different philosophies and pedagogical approaches. Rather than having a paraeducator in the

classroom, educators reported the importance of a multifaceted approach to promoting student independence, learning, and performance. Participant suggestions included considering individual needs, implementing inclusive practices, and strategically deploying support resources. According to educators, the benefits and drawbacks of having paraeducators in the classroom suggest that effective collaboration between educators and paraeducators can lead to positive outcomes for students. The drawback, however, is the potential for misalignment and overreliance that negatively impacts student progress.

The administration reported their concern about the overwhelming increase in requests for paraeducators and the impact on schools. They also tried to balance needing support, staff workload, and resource allocation. Given the increased demands for additional adult support, they need help to support the least restrictive environment. Not all requests are necessarily due to student needs but are potentially caused by teacher exhaustion. Additionally, a focus on academic and behavioral indicators and a need for more systematic data practices, consistency, and alignment with academic and safety considerations would be beneficial. Administrators rely on paraeducators to assist with lunch, recess, bus, and administrative duties such as paperwork and photocopying. As for other benefits of having a paraeducator in the building, the administration reported the positive relationships and connections that paraeducators build with students and suggested that paraeducators are critical in meeting students' diverse and sometimes complex needs. The administration also shared concerns about the paraeducators' attendance rate and the overreliance of paraeducators on students, which can lead to learned helplessness.

Paraeducators reported that they are sometimes asked to do other duties outside of what the administration hired them to do. Some noted that some educators viewed their role as a support in the classroom but did not constantly feel valued by others. Many wanted to learn how the administration chose their specific assignments. Sometimes, they felt insecure about their role due to a lack of background knowledge or specialized

training. They view themselves as another set of hands to support student learning, another adult that students can trust, and, in some cases, as the student's safe place.

Throughout the classroom observations, most classes offered direct support for students through a paraeducator. However, it appeared in some classrooms that the paraeducator was not viewed as a valuable addition to the classroom or to support the students with disabilities.

The second review question, “*When a young student requires adult support beyond the general education teacher, how is the district considering reducing this need as the students transition through grades K through 12 to ensure independence rather than dependence?*” was researched through surveys, interview and focus group participants, and classroom observations. In the survey, 50% of the parents/caregivers responded that they did consider it, and 50% of the parents/caregivers did not consider less support for their child. 42% of the parents somewhat or strongly agreed that reducing a paraeducator would be appropriate when their child is making effective progress, while 73% of educators somewhat or strongly agreed with this statement. Parents strongly value having a paraeducator in the classroom to support their children with disabilities.

When educators were asked how frequently the number of students and adults in the classroom were considered when recommending paraeducators for support, only 29% reported about half the time or more often. They noted that transition times for students (grade to grade, one school to another) are a source of anxiety and concern for staff and parents, yet paraeducator input is lacking. Educators would like to see fading support for students as they grow into the older grades to promote their self-awareness of learning. Administrators confirmed that most requests come from the transition years when students enter kindergarten from preschool, elementary, middle, or high school. The administration would like to see more requests come from a data perspective and demonstration of student needs rather than due to anxiety and the unknown.

The classroom observations demonstrated appropriate and effective practices for the needs of paraprofessionals in most classes. However, there were instances where the classrooms had one-to-one paraprofessionals who could have been more attentive to students. In some cases, there were classroom general paraeducators who were observed not attending to students. In other instances, however, the observer noted that paraeducators assisted in the classroom above and beyond the expectations of their role and responsibilities. This observation illustrates an inequitable practice in the district.

The third review question, “What are the reasonable expectations for general education teachers when teaching in a diverse classroom without the request for additional staffing support?” The results of this question were considered through staff survey responses and interview and focus group participants. General educators reported they appreciated block scheduling as it allowed for more differentiated instruction opportunities. Some other strategies included a variety of options for reading such as, but not limited to, technology, audiobooks, peer reading, having reference materials, google search for adapted materials, and using visual aids. Many reported they value the support from their colleagues. They create classroom routines for small group instruction, prepare modified work, and implement peer teaching. When determining the general educators’ comfort level of teaching without a paraeducator or special education teacher, the educators were less confident teaching without a special education teacher over a paraeducator. Additionally, they were the least confident in teaching multi-sensory and peer tutoring without special education support. When asked about the variety of supports they provide in their classroom without additional staff support, 52% modified classroom routines and social/emotional instruction at least half the time, and 85% reported they focus on respecting differences at least half the time. The interviews resulted in emerging themes demonstrating a need for training paraeducators in the district and whose responsibility it was to ensure paraeducators understood their roles and responsibilities.

The interviewees highly valued the special education teachers; however, they also expressed the additional need for collaboration between special education teachers and general education teachers to address behavioral concerns. There appeared to be a “trust” concern between the special education and general education teachers. In contrast, the special education teachers would like to see more trust in decisions made by the special education professionals. Administrators often use their professional judgment, data, and observations when supporting the requests for additional adult staff. Administration supported the need for increased collaboration throughout the evaluation process, more respectful use of paraeducators, and a desire to have paraeducators more highly trained to support student needs. Additional therapeutic support was an overwhelming response from the administration regarding how the special education department could better support their schools.

Paraeducators believed they provided support through hands-on approaches, being a second set of hands, working as team players, and an additional educator to support social skills and academic review. When asked how they could better support students, paraeducators responded that they must be more reactive than proactive and would like it the other way around. They get asked to do many tasks beyond their current role and would like to be given Chromebooks like all the other staff in the school system. This additional device would help them to do their jobs more efficiently. They expressed concern over the need for more time to debrief with colleagues about individual students and the potential for enhanced intervention strategies, reporting that time constraints are a significant barrier to effectively doing their work. In previous years, the paraeducators had time to collaborate with specialists, teachers, and outside consultants. The teachers are now informing the paraeducators of what was discussed regarding student needs and progress. This lack of collaboration results in not making intervention adjustments in a timely fashion, prolonging the effectiveness of student plans.

The final review question, *“When is it reasonable to request additional support for a general education teacher and/or student?”* The evaluator answered this question



through surveys, interviews, and focus group participation. 78% of parents believed they should have a right to request additional adult support for their child(ren). However, 75% responded they only ask for additional support after meeting with the teachers about their child(ren)'s progress, and they believed in partnering with the school to determine alternative strategies for supporting their student before requesting additional adult support.

Although data is a primary form of evidence in determining the need for additional support, only 68% of all staff and 77% of teachers stated they collected more than three (3) data results from the students before asking for additional support. Additionally, 74% of all staff and 76% of teachers stated that a paraeducator should be added when more than 30% of the class comprises students on an IEP. Educators shared their strategies for modifying classwork, developing differentiated instructional practices, and working with the behavioral concerns of students before requesting additional adult support. Many reported they ask for paraeducator support when they have exhausted their known strategies, most with examples of small group instruction. Many stated they would instead learn independent skills before asking for an additional adult to support the classroom. While many educators believed a paraeducator could be an extra support in the classroom, they also shared this was only beneficial when paraeducators were trained and had a deep understanding of the content, curriculum, and how to work with students with specific disabilities. Rather than adding another adult in the classroom, administrators reported that they try to work with their staff to identify strategies to revise the environment and instructional practices and observe how accommodations are implemented. They stated this is often helpful, and the requests are only sometimes necessary once the support has been provided.

Paraeducators reported they don't always feel they have received adequate support and training in understanding all the concerns around student IEPs and how to service some students requiring specialized support. They have shared different opinions on approaches to support students with disabilities, and they have not always felt supported or knowledgeable about how to make the best accommodations to help some

students. In some instances, paraeducators reported they thought they were expected to be the teacher in the classroom when a substitute teacher was present or if the teacher was sick. The district didn't have a substitute for the day.

The data collected in this study identified areas of promise and growth for Amherst-Pelham Regional School District.

AREAS OF PROMISE

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District implements specialized special education support throughout its schools through co-teaching, inclusion supports, separate special education classrooms, and substantially separate programming. Its highly qualified special education professionals support students with disabilities.

Out of 314 special education staff, 48% have a professional license, 32% have an initial license, 11% have a temporary license, 6% have an emergency license, 2% have a temporary license, and 1% have a waiver. Given the challenges in hiring special education professionals in districts, Amherst-Pelham should be commended that 99% of all special education professionals have a license with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in Massachusetts.

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District has a highly dedicated staff interested in providing their students with the best support. Parents support the paraeducators who help their students in all grade levels. Additionally, the school system has outlined descriptions of its special education programs that outline the profile of students who may require specialized instruction and programming.



AREAS FOR GROWTH

It is valuable to note that the Amherst-Pelham Regional School District teaching staff and administration have been concerned about providing the appropriate services for students with disabilities. Although their concerns are valid, the findings show that not all district employees may have a clear and comprehensive understanding of best practices and approaches to supporting students with disabilities. There are misinterpretations of the expectations of how to support all students in a classroom and who is responsible for providing that support.

Additionally, it appears from paraeducators, teachers, and administration that the paraeducators are asked to provide support in the building by giving duties, working as substitute teachers, and making photocopies rather than always directly supporting students. There are also concerns about the meaning and vision of an inclusion classroom and how students with moderate to severe disabilities may be included in the general education classroom, according to classrooms observed. The evaluator assumes that this lack of inclusiveness is due to a misinterpretation and understanding of how this pedagogy should be implemented, not due to a lack of wanting or willingness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The program review for the Amherst-Pelham Regional School District consisted of interviewing administration, teaching staff, and parents. The evaluator also reviewed statewide and districtwide data. The evaluator completed classroom observations at the elementary, middle, and high schools. The evaluation team completed this program review over approximately four months. As a result of this supported program review, it is essential to recognize the number of highly qualified staff throughout the district and their dedication and commitment to implementing high-quality special education instruction to support student learning. The study included a focused review supporting many practices the district provides.

It is invaluable to note that Amherst-Pelham Regional School District has made significant strides in developing manuals for substantially separate programs and in reflecting on the needs and requests of having special education supports in place for students with disabilities. The below recommendations should be identified as revisions to support the work the district has already put into its school system.

As a result of this review, Academic Discoveries includes the following recommendations. The proposed recommendations resulted in two categories: professional development and systemic approaches.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Data Support:

Through survey results and interviews, it became evident that educators would benefit from supportive professional development in analyzing data to inform instruction. Many respondents reported their need for more data use when determining the need for professional support.

Paraeducator Training:

It is important to note that through the years, paraeducators have received training with overarching themes such as, but not limited to, trauma and social/emotional support. However, paraeducators and teachers reported the need for intense training for paraeducators, so they feel confident and highly qualified to provide special education support to students with disabilities. The specific training may include specialized



training on disabilities, the roles and responsibilities of an inclusive classroom, and how to collect data. It would be beneficial for the special education administration to review the observation notes from the elementary versus middle and high schools to determine specific strategies needed for supporting students on an IEP in these settings.

Pedagogical Practices:

This section suggests pedagogical practices that could be included in the professional development training. It is based on observations conducted by the evaluator. Provide increased opportunities for accommodations and modifications in large and small group activities. A specialist with a deep understanding of special education should provide this training to general education teachers and paraeducators on how modifications and accommodations support students with disabilities in the general education classrooms. General education teachers must build a more robust foundational understanding of how students with moderate to severe disabilities should be included, not integrated into their classrooms. Here is a video example of what the evaluator is referencing:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VMz06iVzqs>.

SYSTEMIC APPROACHES

Scheduling and Planning - Collaboration:

When observing classrooms, there was a clear identification of overstaffing in some classrooms. Planning must determine where and when paras could support students within the school. Additionally, in one classroom, two (2) paraeducators were supposed to be present, and the classroom teacher reported they never stayed. There is a need for more communication between the building-based administration and the special education coordinators regarding staffing needs in each classroom. The recommendation is to build a team in each building to review staffing needs to support students with disabilities and to create an overarching schedule to ensure students who need generalized paraeducator support are in the same classroom. Hence, the students are not in a classroom with a teacher and three (3) paraeducators, for instance, when there may only be the need for one (1) paraeducator. The shift in practice will allow the paraeducators to support more classrooms over a given period.

Consideration of Individual Strengths:

The administration is encouraged to develop a system of reviewing each paraeducator and determining their areas of strength and knowledge to ensure appropriate assignments to students with disabilities that align with their strengths. It is essential to recognize that not all paraeducators may have strengths in all disability categories. If a need is present, it is vital that appropriate training ensures they are confident in the expectations of their role.

Roles and Responsibilities of Educators:

Given that ALL educators receive a license through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the Massachusetts educational system expects all licensed educators to teach students of various abilities. Various responses from the educator survey participants showed that not all educators know how to implement differentiated

instruction. Therefore, the district administration should support this requirement for all educators and create a system to hold all licensed educators accountable. One example is the expectation that all educators have a differentiated instruction goal as part of their annual professional practice goal. Another recommendation may be to create a yearly building-based goal and ask individual educators how they will impact that goal.

Administration Creating Scheduled Collaboration:

Given that paraeducators in Amherst-Pelham Regional School District appear to have limited collaboration time with educators, they feel that they are always “in the know” about issues and concerns that arise with the students they are supporting. However, they are concerned about their effectiveness in providing special education support to students as they are not always hearing about the educational needs and updates firsthand.

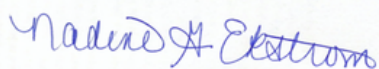
Identifying Need and Purpose of a Paraprofessional:

As a result of this program review, the evaluators have questions about when there are actual needs for a paraprofessional in some classrooms, as outlined in the observation findings. Therefore, it is recommended that the district review DESE’s guidance on hiring a paraprofessional and review the samples outlined on their website (<https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2014-3ta.html>).

Technology Devices:

Paraeducators could be more effective if they had Chromebooks to respond to emails, collect in-time data, and report situations to their direct supervisors. It would benefit the district if the administration could consider an approach to support this request, if not Chromebooks, perhaps another device that can help with today’s technological needs.

Respectfully Submitted,



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Dr. Leah Ferullo



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APPENDICES

- Appendix A: AIMS Program Description
- Appendix B: Building Blocks
- Appendix C: Student Support Program
- Appendix D: High School Student Support Program
- Appendix E: Summit Academy Description
- Appendix F: ILC, ESP, PIP, & Connections Programs



Appendix A:

AIMS

Academic Individualized Mainstream Support

Introduction

AIMS is a program of services for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other neurological conditions who require specialized interventions. Student needs and interventions vary greatly at an individual level. However, AIMS generally addresses needs in pragmatic/social skills, executive functioning, self-advocacy, and emotional, sensory, behavioral regulation to order to achieve increasing levels of success through school and beyond. Students in AIMS will also develop a post-secondary vision and engage in transition planning, instruction, and supports. Each student brings their own set of strengths, talents, and challenges. AIMS seeks to identify and foster these talents, as well as to create individualized programs to support the students as they continue to develop the skills needed for them to become as independent as possible.

Needs are addressed in the most appropriate, least restrictive learning environment, in general education to the fullest extent possible, so a student is able to continue learning naturally alongside their peers. Within the AIMS classroom, students can expect direct teaching and guidance to address their IEP goals, either individually and/or in small groups. The AIMS classroom also offers a quieter space to calm oneself, to connect with others with ASD, and a place to organize and re-energize within their school day. Outside the AIMS classroom, students can expect positive behavioral supports, visual prompts tailored to their individual needs, consistent verbal prompts, sensory breaks, and additional adult assistance, all as necessary to the individual student.

The AIMS teacher functions as a resource to general education teachers and other school personnel. They work closely with a team of paraprofessionals, a speech/language pathologist, ASD/behavior consultant, occupational therapist, vocational/transitional coordinator, and psychologist/adjustment counselor, when appropriate, to design, implement, and adjust a program of services for each student. Parents/Guardians, and the students themselves, are critical members of this team and frequent communication and collaboration is key to student progress and success.



Who qualifies?

Academic need (levels of inclusion)

Students in the AIMS program generally fall under the “partial to full inclusion” guideline, meaning that they receive a portion to all of their core academics within the typical large group, inclusion classroom. Students may also have a need for pull out, small group instruction for academic needs specified through the IEP process. These academics may or may not be addressed through the AIMS classroom, depending on the support configuration within each building. The AIMS teacher will then provide academic support, often centering around the organizational, reading comprehension and writing skills needed across all academic subjects. In general, students should have some ability to complete homework outside of the classroom and be on a track to take the standard MCAS, with or without accommodations, at the secondary level. If a student requires an MCAS-ALT or needs significant modification to all academics, another program may be more suitable to meet the student’s needs.

Social pragmatics need

Students in the AIMS program require direct instruction in social pragmatic language/social-behavioral functioning and will often have a direct goal in this area. They need supports to communicate and collaborate with peers and adults in a school setting. This includes learning strategies and the “hidden curriculum” of expected behaviors within group learning situations in the classroom, and less structured situations such as the playground, hallways, and cafeteria. Students receive explicit instruction in perspective-taking and understanding emotional, social and physical boundaries. AIMS staff also engage in facilitating and guiding students to develop their social connectedness and network. Students need support to develop effective self-advocacy in the classroom and beyond, requiring direct instruction and support in navigating through the neurotypical world into adulthood.

Independence

Often, students need higher levels of support at the early elementary level, and then move toward greater independence as they continue through the school years, learning and gaining skills. However student needs for support can shift back and forth over time as the learning demands and social environments change. As discussed at students’ IEP meetings, within academic classes, students may need individual or shared paraprofessional support for different reasons, with many requiring a level of academic and social/emotional/behavioral coaching throughout the school day. At the secondary level, the goal is to have students access the school community and curriculum with their instruction and support coming directly from general education teachers as often as is appropriate. Over time, the team should engage in a systematic, gradual process of fading support to increase each student’s’ career and college readiness in accordance with their post-secondary vision. Our goal is to help students in



the AIMS program become independent and fully participating partners in whichever community they join as adults.

What can students expect?

Instruction

Because student needs will often encompass a wide array of educational, social, behavioral, and life skill areas, a variety of approaches and curriculum is used. As is appropriate for the individual student, teachers and providers use aspects of Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports, Speech-Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy, Transition/Vocational Education and Support, among other fields, to directly teach and guide students in the following areas: social language pragmatics, emotional regulation, sensory regulation, executive functioning, technology, self-advocacy, and post-secondary transition skills including the development of self-determination and a post-secondary plan for post-secondary education, training, and independent community living skills.

An ASD-friendly home base classroom and community

The AIMS classroom and program is a community. Students may find peers who share special interests, talents, perspectives, and experiences. Because the programs are mixed grade levels, older students often act as mentors, sharing information about navigating classes, teachers, and the school at large. The classroom is a comfortable space with consideration given to sensory needs and run by adults who understand and embrace the uniqueness of each individual with ASD. The classroom is a room that can be accessed when needed, sometimes just to have a break from the academically, sensorially, and socially demanding environment of a typical public school. Other times, the space may be needed for students to decompress if and when they become dysregulated by events in the larger environment. Finally, students may also use this space as a separate, supported spot for individual work, small group work and tests as specified in their IEPs.

A support team including a lead teacher, specialists, and staff

Students receive support from numerous school personnel. This always includes the AIMS classroom teacher who functions as a liaison and case manager. Others often include paraprofessionals, behavioral specialists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, vocational coordinators, school psychologists, and counselors.

AIMS teacher: The AIMS teacher has numerous responsibilities. They coordinate all services for the student and manage the student's schedule (along with guidance at the secondary level). With the support of the rest of the team, the AIMS teacher implements and monitors the goals/objectives within a student's IEP. AIMS teachers engage in ongoing, high levels of communication and collaboration with families, service providers, paraprofessionals, and general education teachers. Through this collaboration, they proactively problem solve and help identify accommodations and modifications to



support their students. The AIMS teachers may also administer IEP assessments and report to the team.

Within the AIMS classroom, the teacher, along with other providers on the team, delivers direct instruction of social, academic, executive function, and transition skills. Outside the classroom, along with a team of paraprofessionals, they support the generalization of these skills into inclusion and less structured settings. The teachers, along with the behavior specialist or counselor, are also on call to provide social/emotional/behavioral support during the day or during less structured school-sponsored activities that AIMS students, like all students, may access.

Paraprofessionals: Students who participate in the AIMS program have differing needs for educational support. Some of our students may need a 1:1 paraprofessional to help support academic needs as well as social skill navigation. Others may be independent within the classroom or within other school environments. The paraprofessional may provide social coaching, academic assistance, or may implement behavioral plans and supports.

Behavior Specialist: The behavior consultant holds shared responsibility for functional behavior assessments and behavior plans. They observe in multiple settings to help the team understand how a student functions across the school environment. They consult on social skills, academic skills and daily living skills. Behavior consultants may meet with parents to provide consistency between home and school. Students with ASD are often at risk of either being perceived as a bully or falling victims to bullying because of their tendency to misunderstand social cues and agendas. Behavior specialists can be useful in observing actions that have been identified as potential bullying, to understand the interactions and identifying the supports needed to develop strategies to alleviate these situations. Behavior specialists may also help AIMS teachers monitor progress on behavior and also set up data collection systems across the student's program.

Speech-Language Pathologist: The speech-language pathologist plays a critical role in consulting on approaches and plans to address specific language pragmatic needs. They help facilitate social groups within the classroom and provide individual/small group pull out sessions to address specific language needs as specified through the IEP process. They also administer evaluations and report on progress.

Counselor/School Psychologist: Within different buildings, roles of counselors and school psychologists shift. Students within the AIMS program may require consultation or direct service with a counselor or school psychologist to address socio-emotional needs. They may do daily or weekly check in and check outs within the classroom, help facilitate weekly social groups, or provide individual/small group sessions to address needs specified through the IEP process. They also administer evaluations and report on progress.

Occupational Therapist: In addition to traditional occupational therapy needs, such as handwriting and typing needs that may be included in a student's IEP, the OT consults



on sensory integration supports and curriculum for the AIMS program. The OT may also work on self-regulation and help the student develop self-calming routines and rituals. Transition/Vocational Coordinator: At the secondary level, the transition/vocational coordinator may become an important part of the team, consulting on the development of a post-secondary vision, the skills and instruction the student needs to achieve that vision, and the community support options available. This may mean assisting with the exploration of post-secondary education and training programs, instruction in skills such as writing a resume and interviewing, training in independent community skills, such as accessing public transportation, and/or the development of work-based learning plans implemented at an internship experience.

Transition Support

Students with ASD often require thoughtful planning and support when transitioning into new environments. If invited, the AIMS teacher attends transition meetings of students moving from preK to K, from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school. Once placement in the AIMS program has been decided, the sending teacher, along with the behavior specialist, will create plans specifying the student-specific information about positive behavior supports, accommodations and modifications. The incoming AIMS teacher communicates and collaborates with the family and the communication key point person at the sending school to identify the expectations and supports needed at the next level. This may include the creation of social stories and visual supports, planning separate visits for the student, and communicating/teaming with the families to address any lingering questions/concerns the student and family have about how “things work” at the new level. When a student moves from one AIMS program into the AIMS program at a receiving school, any identified supports and materials should move with them. For instance, a record of prior behavior plans, including the most current plan, should be created to help the receiving team understand what supports have been used in the past. Ideally, the sending and receiving AIMS teachers should meet to discuss the student’s needs and to ensure a smooth transition.

As students enter the secondary level, they become increasingly involved in their own transition planning. By law, during the school year a student turns 14, students are invited to attend IEP meetings, and the IEP team must develop a transition plan using the Transition Planning Form attached to the IEP. Within that plan, students identify a postsecondary vision for education, work, and living. The team then identifies and monitors the skills and instruction needed to achieve the vision.

Positive Behavior Support Plans/Behavioral Intervention Plans (PBSP/BIP)

Students in the AIMS program often have positive behavior support plans attached to their IEP, particularly at the elementary level, and, in some cases, continuing throughout high school. These plans should reflect both teaching strategies and functional responses to unexpected student behavior, and should be updated as often as needed, at least yearly. Specifically, behavior plans should include antecedent interventions to prevent inappropriate behavior, teaching strategies develop missing skills, and reactive plans to be used as consequence/discipline methods if a student has an unexpected

behavior. Additionally, plans should specify student-specific social emotional supports, academic supports, and ineffective discipline methods. Often, data is collected by a paraprofessional to help monitor the appropriateness of the plan. This data should be summarized and analyzed with the support of the behavior specialist to progress monitor.

What can parents expect?

Communication/collaboration

Good communication and collaboration is essential for the team to function well and the student to make progress. While individual students and parents will require differing levels of support, communication should be proactive, positive, and ongoing. At any level, some cases will require daily, or near daily, communication, others will require weekly or monthly communication to maintain success. At the elementary level, students bring home daily communication sheets. This level of communication may need to continue to certain cases, but more often, as students move into the secondary level, communication moves to a weekly contact, either by phone or email, and may transition to monthly for some cases. Face-to-face meetings may be helpful when discussing a specific situation, on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to share progress, problem-solve, and coordinate support between the home and school. At all levels, there will be a point person for communication between families and school. That person may be the program coordinator or the AIMS teacher, depending on the building's support configuration.

Parent Support/training

Through events such as speaker talks, trainings, potlucks, etc, the AIMS teachers and coordinator may facilitate parent meetings to share strategies and form support networks. This may also include collaboration with SEPAC. Topics might address questions such as "What are ASD community supports available?" or "How can I use the language or techniques taught in school to address skills at home?"

What can paraprofessional staff expect?

Training

We provide both student specific and general trainings for the staff in our programs. Case conferences allow for individualized student support and consistency across all support personnel. Service providers will do specific trainings on interventions and supports, for instance sensory supports, S'cool moves, etc. Both the AIMS teacher and behavior consultant co-treat, train, and model behavioral strategies throughout the school year. Feedback is shared regularly with paraprofessionals and service providers. Paraprofessionals at the elementary level attend individual therapies



to allow for training by additional service providers to make sure they can take advantage of teachable moments as they arise throughout the day.

Team building, communication, and collaboration

Each AIMS classroom is a community that functions as a team. To maintain this team, positive communication and collaboration amongst all team members is essential. Paraprofessionals should feel comfortable approaching the AIMS teacher, the team of service provider consultants, and each other, for support in working with students. Through regularly-scheduled individual and group meetings (e.g. daily check in/check out, late starts, and early releases), staff have a chance to ask questions, process concerns, and share the strategies they have found to be successful with students. Newer staff bring fresh perspectives and questions to the team, while learning from the the more experienced staff within our programs.

Evaluation/Feedback

Paraprofessional evaluations should be written by the AIMS teacher who sets up a meeting to discuss the evaluation with the paraprofessional. The AIMS coordinator or school administration staff may also be included in the evaluation process. Evaluation will be based on observations and feedback that has occurred throughout the school year. An informal discussion/check will occur mid-year and is a chance for both teachers and paraprofessionals to share any global feedback or concerns and to problem solve solutions. A formal evaluation will then occur at the end of each school year.

Appendix B:

Building Blocks Program Manual





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PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY

The Building Blocks program believes that all students want to meet the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic demands of a general education classroom environment. A child's inability to exhibit expected behaviors in the classroom is not willful or chosen; it indicates an underlying skill deficit that must be remediated. The Building Blocks program vision is to create a safe and trusting environment where students can learn and practice social-emotional skills. With ongoing support and continuous reinforcement, Building Blocks staff believe that all students can learn these skills and participate meaningfully in an inclusion setting. Building Blocks is an in-district elementary therapeutic program that utilizes trauma-informed interventions to help students reach their full potential. Children participating in the Building Blocks program are Fort River students and members of the community.

Trauma Informed Practices

Trauma Informed Practice involves three different components: Building Safety and Trust, Understanding Behavior Through a Trauma Lens, and Building Social-Emotional Skills:

Building Safety and Trust

Students who are placed in the Building Block program as determined by their IEP Team have likely experienced the school and classroom settings as negative. Their difficulty regulating emotion has led to behaviors that may have impacted peer and adult social relationships. Many students do not believe that they can be successful in school and do not trust that adults in the building will be able to understand and care for them. The Building Blocks program recognizes that students will not be able to learn new skills unless they feel safe. The program model attempts to create this safety through the following actions:

Getting to know each student as an individual

Learning about each student's interests, values, and motivators

Facilitating connections with general education teachers

Developing consistent and predictable routines

Being consistent and predictable in adult behavior response

Clearly posting and following program expectations

Using techniques based on the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) model to better understand why a problem behavior occurred

Engaging parents, outside providers, and other important stakeholders to ensure the team is working together

Using verbal de-escalation strategies to manage emotional dysregulation





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Understanding Behavior Through a Trauma Lens

The Building Blocks program strongly believes in the motto, “children would do better if they could do better.” Problem behavior communicates that the student does not possess the skills necessary to meet our expected behaviors. To make progress, Building Blocks staff analyze student behavior data to determine what skill deficit is driving the target behavior. Identifying this skill deficit allows for an individually tailored skill building plan to be developed.

Building Social-Emotional and Studentship Skills

The Building Blocks program understands that social-emotional competency is necessary for academic learning to take place. Students require developmentally appropriate ability to self-regulate. Program staff understands that individuals with emotional disabilities require additional differentiated instruction and reinforcement for these skills to be internalized and implemented across environments.

The Building Blocks program recognizes that student’s social-emotional skill deficits likely impacted their availability to learn foundational studentship skills. This includes behaviors such as following routines, attending to small and large group instruction, and transitioning between activities. Program staff work with students to systematically teach and reinforce these skills.

Evidence Based Interventions

Building Blocks staff is committed to utilizing Evidence Based Interventions when helping students remediate skill deficits. This includes the following:

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) techniques are taught to help students utilize both thinking and behavior strategies for managing emotional distress.

Gradual Exposure techniques are utilized to help slowly increase student exposure to stressful environments so that they are better able to access newly learned skills

Task Analysis involves breaking down complex routines into smaller steps so that they can be taught more easily.

Reinforcement Principles are utilized to reward students for using their skills and exhibiting other prosocial behaviors in the school environment





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BUILDING BLOCKS CONSULTATION AND CONSIDERATIONS

Amherst Public Schools are committed to educating students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The Building Blocks program was developed to meet the social, emotional and behavioral needs of students whose IEP Team determined that the individual student's needs could not be met in their resident school. The program was developed for students who require an intensive level of skill-building and wrap-around support across the school day in order to access the curriculum and make meaningful progress. Without this level of support, the student would not be able to access the curriculum and make meaningful progress. The program is not for all students experiencing social, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges. Building Blocks is considered a more restrictive educational environment.

Consultation

The consultative process with Building Blocks starts by engaging in an internal review of what has been tried and what other interventions can be done to support the student in their resident school. This initial consultation process should begin with an administrator from the resident school and the Student Services Office. This is an internal process initially involving only school personnel; however, if or when applicable, it will expand to include the family and IEP Team. This consultation is not a decision making process; placement determination or change thereof, is made by the IEP Team.

Student Profile

A student may be considered for the Building Blocks program if they have a primary emotional impairment or similarly presenting disability, such as Health: ADHD, that substantially impacts their ability to access the curriculum and make meaningful progress even after the provision of intensive social, emotional and behavioral interventions and support at the resident school.

Students may exhibit a diverse array of behavioral challenges, including both internalizing (withdrawal, school refusal) and externalizing (aggression, non-compliance) behaviors throughout the school day. These students' emotional regulation challenges often impact their ability to develop and sustain healthy interpersonal relationships with both peers and adults.

Secondarily, some students may also have a specific learning disability or other impairment that further impacts their ability to find success in school. It is not atypical that some students perform below grade level academically secondary to their regulation difficulties.

Consultation Request



A resident school may seek consultation from Building Blocks program staff by the school administrator initiating the process with the Student Services Office. The following information and/or steps should be taken by the resident school when the student first experiences difficulties and periodically to monitor progress; not just prior to the consultation process. The information gathered through these actions / steps will be submitted to Student Services and reviewed by Building Blocks program staff during the consultation process; and when applicable, by the IEP Team.

The consultation process includes review of the documentation, a minimum of two observations by program staff, and a case conference including essential resident school staff (not the full IEP team, building administration, and a Student Services administrator. During this ~~non-decision~~ making meeting, the program staff will share their observations, seek clarification and/or ask for more information, and offer suggestions to the resident school to consider and implement.

Documentation Required:

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) that has been implemented with fidelity in school on a daily basis for a minimum of three (3) months; this documentation will include the data collected, the write up of the data analysis, and notation about the changes to the plan or interventions that were informed by the data analysis. Each stage in the process should be documented for review during the consultation.

Lagging Skills Inventory (Click [LINK](#) and make a copy or print)

Provide a copy of the completed inventory of student skills
Indicate what skill has been worked on, by whom and for how long

Formal Assessment: When was the student's last full evaluation? What assessment areas were included? What assessments are still needed and/or should be updated? What additional assessment should be conducted?

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

Psychological including social and emotional components
Other areas as needed

(Note: Formal assessment is necessary when a Team is considering a change in placement to ensure all reasonable efforts, accommodations and modifications were made by the resident school and to inform the IEP Team decision making process.)

Additional supports and outside agencies or resources accessed:

Complete the [case management assessment](#) form to identify outside providers and agencies involved;

If these resources have not yet been accessed, the resident school should pursue these early on when the presenting concerns indicate.





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BUILDING BLOCKS CLASSROOM DESCRIPTIONS

Students in the Building Blocks program present with a diverse array of skills. Some students will spend most, if not all, of their school day within the Building Blocks program. Other students will receive their education in the general education classroom with Building Blocks staff support and consultation. The Building Blocks program model has two separate classrooms that are designed to meet student needs based on their ability to access the general education setting.

Foundations Classroom

Students in the Foundations classroom spend most of their day in the Building Blocks program. They require more intensive instruction to support improved emotion regulation and mastery of studentship skills. The classroom is designed to provide students opportunities to practice situations that they will face in the general education setting (e.g. morning meeting) with fewer students and significant adult support.

Social-Emotional Learning

Foundations classroom students receive explicit instruction with a school psychologist to build the following competencies:

Affect Identification - the ability to utilize physiological cues to understand what emotion they are experiencing

Affect Communication - the ability to utilize an effective verbal script (e.g. I am frustrated) to elicit support from a trusted adult

Self-Regulation - the ability to voluntarily engage in adaptive behavior(s) that help the student return to an emotional baseline after an upset.

The Foundations classroom includes opportunities for explicit practice of these social-emotional skills, including classroom activities, role plays, and interactive modeling techniques. In addition, more individualized skill-building plans may be developed to provide additional scaffolding for students to learn these skills.

Studentship Skills

Foundations classroom students receive explicit instruction in studentship skills, the basic elements of how to function in a school setting. Skills are assessed using criterion-referenced behaviors based on the Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLLS). An initial baseline assessment is conducted when students begin the program. Skills are explicitly taught and practiced in the Foundations classroom. Progress data is collected through both explicit and in vivo learning opportunities. Collected data will inform explicit instruction.





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Academics

Foundations classroom students present with diverse learning styles. Academic instruction is structured so that students have the opportunity to access whole group instruction, direct instruction from a special educator, and centers-based learning approaches that allows the student more autonomy to engage with material and demonstrate knowledge.

Transitions Classroom

Students in the Transitions Classroom are able to access the general education setting with support. This support is focused on generalizing emotion regulation and studentship skills across settings. The following supports may be utilized by students in the Transitions classroom to help them be successful in the general education setting:

Gradual Integration: When a student moves to the transitions classroom, the student's educational team will be involved in developing a strategic plan to slowly increase inclusion opportunities. Program staff will work with the student and general education teacher to foster a safe and trusting relationship. Routines and expectations will be reviewed so that the student understands how to access support from the general education teacher.

Paraprofessional: If deemed appropriate by the IEP Team, a paraprofessional may accompany a student to the general education classroom to implement a behavior plan to promote independent skill use, support access to academics, and assist the student in getting their needs met by the general education teacher. Ongoing data collection and analysis is utilized to determine when paraprofessional support can be faded to foster student independence

Academic Consultation: The Transitions special education teacher will work closely with the student's general education teacher to better understand the student as a learner. This may include support with how to support the student to best access content, show what they know, and remain engaged.

Academic Instruction: continuum of supports provided by Transitions teacher or building-based special education teacher.

Behavioral Consultation: the program BCBA will be utilized for push-in and/or consultation support to the general education teacher and paraprofessional (if assigned) to guide support plans.

Social-Emotional Collaboration / Consultation: Building Blocks program psychologist / counselor will work closely with the general education teacher to understand support strategies that can be used in the moment to help a student effectively identify, communicate, and regulate challenging emotions



Self-Regulation Coaching: Students in the transition classroom will receive coaching support when experiencing emotional distress to choose self-regulation strategies that help them return to baseline and continue with their academic day.



BUILDING BLOCKS STUDENT ASSESSMENT

The Building Blocks team develops an individualized plan for each student to understand what is required to help them move towards greater inclusion opportunities and independence. This section will review the planning process in more detail:

Referring School

A student has a long educational history prior to Building Blocks being identified as the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). Assessments were conducted, interventions were implemented, data collected that has been analyzed and used to inform interventions, and teacher-student relationships were developed. The Building Blocks team works with referring school stakeholders to understand the student's experience. The goal is to identify how strong relationships were developed, what interventions worked well, when the student was most able to demonstrate success, and what intrinsic and extrinsic variables have increased student motivation.

Benchmark Assessment

Under the guidance of the Building Blocks Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA), students will be assessed on their ability to complete classroom routines. Analysis will include the level of independence that a student can demonstrate these studentship skills.

Thinking Skills Inventory

Under the guidance of the Building Blocks program psychologist / counselor , the student will be assessed in their ability to identify emotional states, communicate needs effectively, tolerate emotional distress, and navigate interpersonal relationships. A modified version of the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP), developed utilizing the Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) approach, is utilized to identify social-emotional skill strengths and needs.



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BUILDING BLOCKS STUDENT INCLUSION PLAN

Student Name: _____

Program Entry Date: _____

Plan Date: _____

The Building Blocks team meets within two months of program placement to review initial data and develop a comprehensive inclusion plan. This plan outlines the social-emotional and studentship target areas that will be addressed to prepare a student for success in the inclusion environment. The plan also outlines a gradual inclusion plan to order inclusive educational experiences based on the environments that the student experiences the most to least success.

What are the target behavior(s) that most impact the student's ability to access the general education environment?

Utilizing the Thinking Skills Inventory (TSI), the team has identified the following three lagging skills to target for remediation to best address the above target behaviors.

The school psychologist will utilize counseling and in vivo classroom opportunities to work towards the following objectives:

Utilizing the studentship skills assessment, the team has identified the following areas in need of remediation:



When the student is ready, the team will introduce inclusion opportunities in the following order based on student interest, success, and team feedback:

- 1.)
- 2.)
- 3.)
- 4.)
- 5.)
- 6.)
- 7.)
- 8.)



GRADUAL STUDENT INCLUSION SUPPORT PLANNING

Philosophy

The Building Blocks program believes that students will be most successful in an inclusive classroom where the student feels they are an active member of the general education classroom community at Fort River. Building Blocks staff must work collaboratively with the general education teacher to achieve this vision.

Transition Teacher Role

The Transition classroom teacher oversees student gradual inclusion experiences. This includes the following tasks:

- Support reverse inclusion opportunities for students to facilitate peer connections before the student begins a gradual inclusion plan. Reverse inclusion refers to bringing peers from the general education classroom into Building Blocks.
- Support individualized meeting with general education teacher to develop relationship, review routines, and learn more about the students interests
- Provide consultation on a weekly or bi-weekly basis to general education teachers to support relationship development, implementation of skill development plans, differentiation of academic content, and help with ongoing problem solving. The frequency of this consultation may fade over time as the student experiences increased comfort and success in the inclusion setting.
- When applicable, push into the classroom to model effective interaction strategies, allow for the general education teacher to have 1:1 social opportunities with students, and observe challenging behaviors in the classroom to provide strategies and support adjustments.
- Provide ongoing supervision and training of paraprofessionals working with students in the general education setting. This work would include fidelity monitoring around skill development plan implementation, ongoing data collection which will be analyzed and used to inform decision making / interventions, and supporting other students in the classroom under the guidance of the general education teacher

CLINICAL SERVICES

The Building Blocks Program psychologist / counselor provides a range of services to help students develop the social-emotional competencies necessary to be successful in the general education setting. These skills are developed through the following model:

Target skills are determined based on the team's identification of the lagging skills that underlie the problem behaviors impacting student's ability to effectively access the inclusion setting

The psychologist / counselor provides direct instruction to explicitly teach the target skill in a separate setting.

The psychologist / counselor collaborates with Building Blocks staff to develop a skill development plan (discussed elsewhere in this manual) to help the student generalize their target skill to the classroom environment.

The psychologist / counselor works with the Foundations teacher to implement the skill development plan in the program classroom. The school counselor works with the Transitions teacher to support paraprofessional and/or general education teacher implementation of the skill development plan.

The psychologist / counselor modifies target skill instruction based on data collected by teacher and paraprofessional staff. Data will be analyzed and used to inform interventions.

The Program psychologist / counselor also serves the following additional roles in the Building Blocks program:

Provide ongoing consultation and training to paraprofessionals to support therapeutic intervention and de-escalation skills

Provide in vivo coaching to support SafetyCare skill implementation

Provide mental health assessment services in response to safety concern

Provide as needed counseling services in a timely manner to students requesting emotional support

Collaborate with community-based mental health providers to ensure care coordination

Collaborate with families to support skill generalization, review progress, and assist with access to community resources

Case Management Assessment



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Student Name: _____

Assessment Date: _____

DSM-V Diagnosis:

Current Medication(s):

Outpatient Therapist: _____

Contact Information: _____

Treatment Frequency: _____

Release (Circle): Yes No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

Medication Provider: _____

Contact Information: _____

Release (Circle): Yes No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

Additional Providers / Supports



Intensive Care Coordinator (ICC): Yes No
 Provider Name and Contact Information

Therapeutic Mentor (TM) Yes No
 Provider Name and Contact Information

In-Home Family Therapist (IHFT) Yes No
 Provider Name and Contact Information

In-Home Behavior Therapist (IHBT) Yes No
 Provider Name and Contact Information

Other In-Home Provider Yes No
 Provider Name and Contact Information

DMH Case Manager Yes No
 Provider Name and Contact Information

DCF Case Manager / Social Worker Yes No
 Provider Name and Contact Information

If Yes to any service providers, has a release been signed?

Yes

No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

What additional service needs, if any, would the student/family benefit from?

What home/community barriers, if any, are impacting the students' school functioning?



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What steps will Building Blocks take to support the student/family in addressing these barriers?

Studentship Skills Assessment

Student: _____

Date Completed: _____



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All skills will be assigned a rating based on student ability. These ratings are based on data collected during the initial entry into the Building Blocks program assessment period, and at subsequent intervals for progress monitoring.

Needs Improvement (NI) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 0 - 25% of the time

Developing Skill (D) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 26 - 50% of the time

Approaching Mastery (A) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 51 - 75% of the time

Mastered (M) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 76 - 100% of the time

Routines and Expectations

Skill	Rating	Notes (Optional)
Transitions to classroom from the bus		
Hangs up coat/backpack		
Removes needed items from backpack		
Places appropriate items in backpack		
Sits in chair when told		
Sits in group without disruptive behaviors for 10 minutes		
Raises hand to answer a question or ask for help Speaks only when called on		
Uses scissors appropriately		
Returns materials to proper location when finished		
Lines up upon request		

Waits in line for up to 3 minutes		
Maintains walking pace when in line		
Works independently on academic tasks for 5 minutes		
Works independently on academic tasks for 10 minutes		
Works independently on academic tasks for 20 minutes		
Keeps hands to self		
Transitions from classroom to the bus for dismissal		

Skills Generalization: Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review

The individual environment is the ideal way to introduce a new skill. However, it is often a challenge for anyone to bring the skill learned in that session to the real world. The Building Blocks program develops individualized plans that help students generalize skills across settings. These plans include four essential elements: Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review. These elements are defined below:

Preview

When a student is first learning a new skill, they are likely to be unsure of when it is useful. What are the appropriate moments when this skill should be utilized? Students also need support to inhibit their old pattern of behavior and replace it with the new skill. It is important to recognize that these students have developed responses to emotional discomfort that have helped them feel better in the short term.

The PREVIEW helps the student predict when they might need to use their skill.

SAMPLE:

Kevin, we are about to start our math block. We are introducing a new lesson. Learning new things can cause us to think “I give up. I will never do this.” If that thought comes into mind, let us talk about what skills we will use to help us push through

Prompt

Even when a student is given a preview, they may still struggle to apply a given skill when it is needed. The student is likely to need adult assistance to coach them for how to apply the skill. However, there are many ways to coach a skill.

The PROMPT is the strategy used by an adult to help cue the student to use their skill.

An effective prompt is the least intrusive for the child. This ranges from most intrusive (physical hand over hand) to least intrusive (gesture).

Reinforcement

Previous behavioral patterns exhibited by the student to manage uncomfortable emotions were reinforced by the environment. This reinforcement led the behavior to turn into a habit; the student continued to exhibit the behavior in response to difficult feelings. Students will not use their newly learned skills unless the environment reinforces them.

The REINFORCEMENT is the specific way that the adult will respond to the student using their skill to increase that adaptive behavior in the future

Review

Self-reflection is an important part of learning. It is an opportunity to think back on your performance, celebrating strengths and determining how to resolve weaknesses. This

process also increases student awareness of situations that happened in class and how the student managed them.
The REVIEW is the specific process for how the adult will facilitate self-reflection after the class has ended.



PREVIEW, PROMPT, REINFORCE, REVIEW (PPRR) Plan

Student: _____
Date Developed: _____

Team Review Date: _____
Progress Review Date: _____

Priority Lagging Skills

Skill Target (Choose One):

Relationship Building
Psychoeducation

Affect Identification
Affect Communication

Cognitive Coping
Behavioral Coping

Behavioral Objective:

Preview

Prompt

Reinforce

Review (Optional)

Data Collection:





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Counselor Skill Building Behavioral Objectives

Skill Target Relationship Building - This skill target should be chosen when a student first enters the program. It can also be chosen when relational disruption or life stressors have impacted the student's ability to address other skills

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify at least 3 preferred activities they can do with the counselor at the end of skill building sessions

Student will verbalize understanding of how the counselor can support their social-emotional growth in the program

Student will develop a plan to repair relationship with an identified student/staff member

Student will identify formal and informal supports for managing life stressors

Psychoeducation - This skill target should be chosen when the student begins learning Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT) strategies in counseling. It can also be chosen when specific issues arise that require psychoeducation, including learning about diagnosis, sexual development, IEP processes etc.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will verbalize understanding of the sensory spectrum and how they experience their emotions

Student will learn that emotions are normal, natural, and harmless

Student will learn about healthy and unhealthy ways of dealing with strong emotions

Student will learn about how avoidance behaviors can make strong emotions worse over time

Affect Identification - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty knowing that something is bothering them. They may be showing behavioral signs of distress but are unable to link these behaviors to a distressing emotion. This impacts their ability to engage in behavioral or cognitive coping behaviors.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will learn to identify common triggers for different emotional experiences

Student will learn physiological cues associated with different emotional experiences

Student will learn what an emotion tells them to do and why (emotional behaviors and purpose)

Affect Communication - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty expressing their thoughts, needs, and concerns with words. The student may not know the correct verbal script to access help/coping strategies or they may not trust that an adult will meet their needs if they communicate.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify social supports in the building (peers, adults) and what information they feel comfortable sharing with them

Student will learn and role play specific verbal scripts to communicate an emotion and/or access adult support

Student will collaborate on a plan for how they will access general education teacher support in the classroom

Cognitive Coping - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty identifying accurate and helpful ways of thinking to promote emotion regulation. Distorted thinking, defined as thoughts that are both inaccurate and unhelpful, often impede the student's ability to engage in adaptive behavioral coping strategies.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify their distressing emotions as part of their bodies alarm system

Student will understand that they are vulnerable to false alarms where there body tells them they are in danger when they are actually safe

Student will learn how to track their automatic thoughts to life events

Student will learn about cognitive distortions and how to analyze their automatic thoughts to determine if they are using a cognitive distortion

Student will learn thinking strategies that help them persevere through distressing emotional experiences

Behavioral Coping - This skill target is chosen when the student struggles to utilize adaptive coping strategies to take an effective break and return to emotional baseline. This student may not know what behaviors help them achieve emotion regulation. This student may not believe that there are any adaptive behaviors that will help them

achieve emotion regulation. The student may struggle to identify the need for a behavioral coping strategy at a point where it is likely to be effective.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will practice 10 coping strategies when calm and identify which are most effective in reducing emotional distress

Student will develop a concrete coping plan that includes proactive times when skills will be utilized to maintain calm, early warning signs that indicate a coping skill is needed, and a step by step approach for where a break will occur and what strategies will be available.

Student will develop a behavioral coping diet that includes skills they will use at regular intervals throughout the day



Paraprofessional Staff Training

The program coordinator is responsible for overseeing ongoing paraprofessional training. All paraprofessionals in the district are eligible for up to 10 additional work hours per school year for training. This time can be used outside of the school day.

This time does need to be tracked by the program coordinator to ensure it stays within the 10 hours. If those hours are close to being used up, the building administrator should be made aware. The building administrator and/or special education administrators may be able to approve additional meeting time if necessary. The additional ten (10) hours will be documented by the use of sign-in sheets at each meeting, including training topic/agenda, and kept track of a spreadsheet by the teacher, psychologist/counselor and/or program coordinator.

Monthly Meetings

A great way to use this time is with a monthly staff meeting. The staff are not required to come to the meeting, but they should be invited and made aware that this time is paid in addition to their contracted time and a benefit to them.

There are multiple ways to use this time:

- Community Building Activity
- Case Review
- Group training
- Role Play

Debrief Meetings

It can be necessary to update the group about an acute situation that may impact staff and/or students

Topics may include:

Behavioral Episode: Support staff emotional processing of behavioral episode, review antecedents, policies/procedures, communication, review safety plans

Student changes: Discuss census changes, including student program movement, relocation, hospitalization etc.

Staff changes. Discuss staffing changes, including staff transfer

Paraprofessional Observations

Paraprofessional staff should be observed at least once a month by either the Building Blocks coordinator, teacher or psychologist / counselor. This is a way to provide in vivo informal training. The observing staff member should take informal observation notes. The observing staff member should review observations, including strengths and



growing edges. It is not contractually allowed to provide staff with written feedback except at the end of the school year. Building administration guidance should be sought if in-depth individualized training is needed.

Cross Training/Shadowing sessions

Student absences may provide more program paraprofessionals than needed on a given day. This provides a perfect opportunity for cross training. Paraprofessionals can be placed so that at least one person is able to observe a seasoned staff member working with a student they have not worked with. After the “shadow” session, the Building Blocks teacher or psychologist / counselor can meet with the paraprofessional to discuss the observation. Any questions can be reviewed and answered. Additional cross training sessions may be useful for staff to learn new roles. Ideally, by mid-year, each staff member could work in any position within the program and could work with all students in the program.

Shadowing Documentation

Shadowing Staff Name: _____

Date/Time

Shadowed Staff Name: _____

Initials of Student:

I Noticed: Please use this space to write observations of successes the staff you are shadowing has with the student, what is occurring and what was the response.

	Student Behavior	Staff Response
Preview		
Prompt		
Reinforce		
Review		
Tone:		
Directions:		
Physical Proximity:		



Other		
-------	--	--

I Wonder: Please use this space to record any questions or comments you have during the observation time

Questions I have:





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Individualized Student Program Development Checklist

Student: _____

Placement Date: _____

Two Week Tasks - The following tasks will be completed by _____

_____ Program psychologist / counselor and Program Coordinator will meet with stakeholders from referring school

_____ Initial parent meeting conducted

_____ Initial PPRR plan developed (Relationship Building)

One Month Tasks- The following tasks will be completed by _____

_____ Case Management Assessment completed

_____ Studentship Skills Assessment completed

Two Month Tasks - The following task will be completed by _____

_____ Building Blocks Inclusion Plan completed

_____ Updated PPRR plan completed

_____ Paraprofessional staff trained on updated PPRR plan



Self-Regulation Coaching Model

Philosophy: The Building Blocks program seeks to build student capacity to independently engage in behavioral and cognitive coping strategies to return to emotional baseline.

Self-Regulation Coaching Steps:

Functional Communication - Staff may support students in utilizing appropriate language to communicate emotional distress and ask for help

Stimulus Free Environment - Staff may provide a student a timed (3 - 5 minute) opportunity to be in a low stimulus environment to allow the student's body to slow down and increase likelihood of compliance with behavioral coping strategies

Skills Coaching - Staff may provide guidance and modeling for what behavioral or cognitive coping strategies to choose and how to do them effectively.

Independent Coping Skill Use - Staff may provide the student a timed (5 - 7 minute) opportunity to practice a behavioral or cognitive coping strategy of their choice. Staff will conduct a pre and post assessment of emotional distress to help identify whether the skill was successful

Alarm Log - Staff may provide assistance to the student in identifying the antecedent/trigger for the distressing emotion that necessitated self-regulation coaching supports

Future Planning - Staff may provide the student choices for what will help them be successful and safe for the remainder of the school day.



Appendix C:

Student Support Program (SSP) Manual



August 2021
PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY



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The Student Support Program (SSP) believes that all students want to meet the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic demands of a general education classroom environment. A child's inability to exhibit expected behaviors in the classroom is not willful or chosen; it indicates an underlying skill deficit that must be remediated. The SSP vision is to create a safe and trusting environment where students can learn and practice social-emotional skills. With ongoing support and continuous reinforcement, SSP staff believe that all students can learn these skills and participate meaningfully in an inclusion setting. SSP is an in-district middle school therapeutic program that utilizes trauma-informed interventions to help students reach their full potential. Students participating in SSP are ARMS students and important members of the larger school community.

Trauma Informed Practices

Trauma Informed Practice involves three different components: Building Safety and Trust, Understanding Behavior Through a Trauma Lens, and Building Social-Emotional Skills:

Building Safety and Trust

Students who are placed in SSP as determined by their IEP Team have likely experienced the school and classroom settings as negative. Their difficulty regulating emotion has led to behaviors that may have impacted peer and adult social relationships. Many students do not believe that they can be successful in school and do not trust that adults in the building will be able to understand and care for them. SSP recognizes that students will not be able to learn new skills unless they feel safe. The program model attempts to create this safety through the following actions:

Getting to know each student as an individual

Learning about each student's interests, values, and motivators

Facilitating connections with general education teachers

Developing consistent and predictable routines

Being consistent and predictable in adult behavior response

Clearly posting and following program expectations

Using collaborative student discussions to better understand why a problem behavior occurred

Engaging parents, outside providers, and other important stakeholders to ensure the team is working together

Using verbal de-escalation strategies to manage emotional dysregulation



Understanding Behavior Through a Trauma Lens

SSP strongly believes in the motto, “children would do better if they could do better.” Problem behavior communicates that the student does not possess the skills necessary to meet our expected behaviors. To make progress, SSP staff continuously analyze student behavior data to determine what skill deficit is driving the target behavior. Identifying this skill deficit allows for an individually tailored skill building plan to be developed.

Building Social-Emotional and Studentship Skills

SSP understands that social-emotional competency is necessary for academic learning to take place. Students are most available for learning when they have developmentally appropriate ability to sustain attention, manage frustration, problem-solve, and effectively self-advocate. SSP staff understands that individuals with emotional disabilities require additional differentiated instruction and reinforcement for these skills to be internalized and implemented across environments.

SSP recognizes that student’s social-emotional skill deficits likely impacted their availability to learn foundational studentship skills. This includes behaviors such as following routines, attending to small and large group instruction, and transitioning between activities. Program staff work with students to systematically teach and reinforce these skills.

Evidence Based Interventions

SSP is committed to utilizing Evidence Based Interventions when helping students remediate skill deficits. This includes the following:

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) techniques are taught to help students utilize both thinking and behavior strategies for managing emotional distress.

Gradual Exposure techniques are utilized to help slowly increase student exposure to stressful environments so that they are better able to access newly learned skills

Task Analysis involves breaking down complex routines into smaller steps so that they can be taught more easily.

Reinforcement Principles are utilized to reward students for using their skills and exhibiting other prosocial behaviors in the school environment

Self-Regulation Coaching

Students will likely encounter challenges within the general education classroom that necessitate leaving the environment to engage in behavioral and/or cognitive coping skills. SSP seeks to provide ongoing teaching, support, and reinforcement of independent coping skill use. The Self-Regulation Coaching classroom provides a clear structure to help students develop these independent self-regulation skills. This process is outlined below:

Step 1: Stimulus Free Environment

Students are provided a short timed opportunity (3 - 5 minutes) to be in a stimulus-free environment to begin the self-regulation process. This is helpful because all individuals struggle to process and produce language and effectively problem solve when in a heightened state of distress.

Step 2: Skill Practice

Students are provided coaching to select a coping strategy to reduce emotional distress. Paraprofessional staff will review options and may model how to use a strategy. The student will have 5 - 7 minutes to use the skill. They will rank their stress level before and after using the skill. This will be logged by paraprofessional staff on a Coping Skills Log (see appendix).

Step 3: Reflection and Future Planning

Students complete an Alarm Log (see appendix) to help them identify the antecedent to their emotional dysregulation. They will also be able to select a few support options to help them have a successful rest of their day. This may include:

- Planned break in Self-Regulation Coaching classroom
- Emotional space - student will do work but will not be called on
- Counselor Request Form - student will complete a formal request to be seen by the SSP counselor for a check-in

Guided Study



Students are assigned to the SSP classroom for their Guided Study block. There are many activities that take place during Guided Study:

Mentor Monday - Students utilize the beginning of the week to set personal behavioral and academic goals. They will also complete routines to identify their academic needs for the week and make plans to seek out additional support as needed

SEL Skill Building - Students will meet 1x week with SSP counselor for group lessons utilizing Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) concepts

Executive Function Skill Building - Students will receive explicit instruction to better plan and organize assignments and initiate and follow through on tasks

Fun Friday Lunch

Students will be eligible to earn a special lunch in SSP on Friday based on the number of points earned (see SSP Point Sheet)

Points may also be utilized towards incentive activities or other rewards based on student interest.

SSP staff recognize that students must have developmentally appropriate emotion regulation skills to be most available for learning. Students placed in SSP often require additional teaching, rehearsal, and reinforcement of emotion regulation strategies to help them generalize skills across environments. The SSP team all play an important role in this process and work collaboratively to help students realize these gains:

SSP Counselor Responsibilities

- Provide explicit instruction in social-emotional skills in both individual and group sessions
- Support the development of individual PPRR plans to help generalize skills taught during individual and group sessions
- Provide as-needed emotional support to students to help address acute stressors.
- Complete the Case Management Assessment and regularly communicate with outside community resources to help promote care coordination and overall student social-emotional wellbeing
- Provide risk/threat assessments as needed in response to concerns of safety to self or others

BCBA Responsibilities

- Complete the studentship skills assessment and support explicit instruction and rehearsal of non-mastered skills
- Support the development of individual PPRR plans by informing effective behavioral strategies for student prompts and reinforcement
- Develop and train staff in feasible data collection strategies to continuously monitor student progress towards skill mastery
- Analyze data collected by staff members to inform possible changes to intervention approach

Teacher Responsibilities



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- Provide explicit instruction in executive functioning skills during guided study
- Provide ongoing support and consultation to general and special education teachers working with students placed in SSP to help them understand how best to support student success in the classroom
- Provide ongoing support and training to paraprofessional staff to ensure fidelity to PPRR plans and use of self-regulation coaching space
- Monitor student academic progress and work collaboratively with student, teachers, and families to support student success
- Provide regular communication to families regarding student social, emotional, academic, and behavioral progress
Paraprofessional Staff
- Implement PPRR plans with fidelity
- Follow Self-Regulation Coaching space process to promote student emotion-regulation skill development
- Collect data as directed by the program BCBA to monitor student progress
- Work with students in the classroom to support their ability to access supports from the general education teacher
- Fade support as indicated by student success to promote independence
- Support all students in the assigned classroom to reduce stigma of paraprofessional presence, develop relationship with general education teacher, and allow opportunities for student independence
- Share essential qualitative insights and observations on student response to help inform intervention approaches

Students in SSP are moving towards greater independence in the school setting. SSP seeks to promote this independence by building increasing self and task-monitoring skills. Each student in the program will have a binder that will help them track their progress and reference their newly developing emotion regulation skills. As students increase their independence and success in the general education setting, they may apply to be *off binder*.

Each student binder will include at least the following elements:

- Individualized behavior goals established during Mentor Monday
- Visual references of social-emotional skills being addressed in individual and/or group counseling
- Academic organizational supports
- List of preferred coping strategies that can be accessed in the classroom
- Materials needed to implement the Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review (PPRR) plan

Student Name: _____

Assessment Date: _____

DSM-V Diagnosis:

Current Medication(s):

Outpatient Therapist: _____

Contact Information: _____

Treatment Frequency: _____

Release (Circle): Yes No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

Medication Provider: _____

Contact Information: _____

Release (Circle): Yes No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

Additional Providers / Supports

Intensive Care Coordinator (ICC): Yes No



Provider Name and Contact Information

Therapeutic Mentor (TM) Yes No
Provider Name and Contact Information

In-Home Family Therapist (IHFT) Yes No
Provider Name and Contact Information

In-Home Behavior Therapist (IHBT) Yes No
Provider Name and Contact Information

Other In-Home Provider Yes No
Provider Name and Contact Information

DMH Case Manager Yes No
Provider Name and Contact Information

DCF Case Manager / Social Worker Yes No
Provider Name and Contact Information

If Yes to any service providers, has a release been signed?

Yes No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

What additional service needs, if any, would the student/family benefit from?

What home/community barriers, if any, are impacting the students' school functioning?



What steps will SSP take to support the student/family in addressing these barriers?

Studentship Skills Assessment

Student: _____

Date Completed: _____



All skills will be assigned a rating based on student ability. These ratings are based on data collected during the initial entry into the SSP assessment period, and at subsequent intervals for progress monitoring.

Needs Improvement (NI) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 0 - 25% of the time

Developing Skill (D) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 26 - 50% of the time

Approaching Mastery (A) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 51 - 75% of the time

Mastered (M) - The student is able to complete the skill independently between 76 - 100% of the time

Routines and Expectations

Skill	Rating	Notes (Optional)
Keeps speaking volume at correct level		
Follows cafeteria rules		
Sits in chair when told		
Places appropriate items in backpack		
Sits in group without disruptive behaviors for 10 minutes		
Raises hand to answer a question or ask for help		
Speaks only when called on		
Returns materials to proper location when finished		
Transitions between classes		
Copies homework from board		
Turns to specific page when asked		

Completes and turns in homework assignments on time		
Works independently on academic tasks for 5 minutes		
Works independently on academic tasks for 10 minutes		
Works independently on academic tasks for 20 minutes		
Keeps hands to self		
Reports problems to teacher		
Requests support from teacher		
Requests from teacher to leave the class		

Skills Generalization: Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review

The individual environment is the ideal way to introduce a new skill. However, it is often a challenge for anyone to bring the skill learned in that session to the real world. SSP develops individualized plans that help students generalize skills across settings.

These plans include four essential elements: Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review.

These elements are defined below:

Preview

When a student is first learning a new skill, they are likely to be unsure of when it is useful. What are the appropriate moments when this skill should be utilized? Students also need support to inhibit their old pattern of behavior and replace it with the new skill.



It is important to recognize that these students have developed responses to emotional discomfort that have helped them feel better in the short term.

The PREVIEW helps the student predict when they might need to use their skill.

SAMPLE:

Kevin, we are about to start our math block. We are introducing a new lesson. Learning new things can cause us to think “I give up. I will never do this.” If that thought comes into mind, let us talk about what skills we will use to help us push through

Prompt

Even when a student is given a preview, they may still struggle to apply a given skill when it is needed. The student is likely to need adult assistance to coach them for how to apply the skill. However, there are many ways to coach a skill.

The PROMPT is the strategy used by an adult to help cue the student to use their skill.

An effective prompt is the least intrusive for the child. This ranges from most intrusive (physical hand over hand) to least intrusive (gesture).

Reinforcement

Previous behavioral patterns exhibited by the student to manage uncomfortable emotions were reinforced by the environment. This reinforcement led the behavior to turn into a habit; the student continued to exhibit the behavior in response to difficult feelings. Students will not use their newly learned skills unless the environment reinforces them.

The REINFORCEMENT is the specific way that the adult will respond to the student using their skill to increase that adaptive behavior in the future

Review

Self-reflection is an important part of learning. It is an opportunity to think back on your performance, celebrating strengths and determining how to resolve weaknesses. This process also increases student awareness of situations that happened in class and how the student managed them.

The REVIEW is the specific process for how the adult will facilitate self-reflection after the class has ended.

PREVIEW, PROMPT, REINFORCE, REVIEW (PPRR) Plan



Student: _____
Date Developed: _____

Team Review Date: _____
Progress Review Date: _____

Priority Lagging Skills

Skill Target (Choose One):

Relationship Building
Psychoeducation

Affect Identification
Affect Communication

Cognitive Coping
Behavioral Coping

Behavioral Objective:

Preview

Staff will remind Adrianna how she can communicate her needs effectively by:
-Raising hands

Prompt

Reinforce

Review (Optional)

Data Collection:



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Counselor Skill Building Behavioral Objectives

Skill Target Relationship Building - This skill target should be chosen when a student first enters the program. It can also be chosen when relational disruption or life stressors have impacted the student's ability to address other skills

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify at least 3 preferred activities they can do with the counselor at the end of skill building sessions

Student will verbalize understanding of how the counselor can support their social-emotional growth in the program

Student will develop a plan to repair relationship with an identified student/staff member

Student will identify formal and informal supports for managing life stressors

Psychoeducation - This skill target should be chosen when the student begins learning Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT) strategies in counseling. It can also be chosen when specific issues arise that require psychoeducation, including learning about diagnosis, sexual development, IEP processes etc.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will verbalize understanding of the sensory spectrum and how they experience their emotions

Student will learn that emotions are normal, natural, and harmless

Student will learn about healthy and unhealthy ways of dealing with strong emotions

Student will learn about how avoidance behaviors can make strong emotions worse over time

Affect Identification - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty knowing that something is bothering them. They may be showing behavioral signs of distress but are unable to link these behaviors to a distressing emotion. This impacts their ability to engage in behavioral or cognitive coping behaviors.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will learn to identify common triggers for different emotional experiences

Student will learn physiological cues associated with different emotional experiences

Student will learn what an emotion tells them to do and why (emotional behaviors and purpose)

Affect Communication - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty expressing their thoughts, needs, and concerns with words. The student may not know the correct verbal script to access help/coping strategies or they may not trust that an adult will meet their needs if they communicate.
Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify social supports in the building (peers, adults) and what information they feel comfortable sharing with them

Student will learn and role play specific verbal scripts to gain access to communicate an emotion and/or access adult support

Student will collaborate on a plan for how they will access general education teacher support in the classroom

Cognitive Coping - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty identifying accurate and helpful ways of thinking to promote emotion regulation. Distorted thinking, defined as thoughts that are both inaccurate and unhelpful, often impede the student's ability to engage in adaptive behavioral coping strategies.
Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify their distressing emotions as part of their bodies alarm system

Student will understand that they are vulnerable to false alarms where there body tells them they are in danger when they are actually safe

Student will learn how to track their automatic thoughts to life events

Student will learn about cognitive distortions and how to analyze their automatic thoughts to determine if they are using a cognitive distortion

Student will learn thinking strategies that help them persevere through distressing emotional experiences

Behavioral Coping - This skill target is chosen when the student struggles to utilize adaptive coping strategies to take an effective break and return to emotional baseline. This student may not know what behaviors help them achieve emotion regulation. This student may not believe that there are any adaptive behaviors that will help them

achieve emotion regulation. The student may struggle to identify the need for a behavioral coping strategy at a point where it is likely to be effective.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will practice 10 coping strategies when calm and identify which are most effective in reducing emotional distress

Student will develop a concrete coping plan that includes proactive times when skills will be utilized to maintain calm, early warning signs that indicate a coping skill is needed, and a step by step approach for where a break will occur and what strategies will be available.

Student will develop a behavioral coping diet that includes skills they will use at regular intervals throughout the day

SSP Points Sheet



Name: _____

Date: _____

Staff Signature: _____

Program Signature: _____

1 - Dependent

2 - Interested

3 - Involved

4 - Self Directed

SSP Goals

Goal	Per A 1	Per B 1	Per C 1	Per D 1	Per E 1	Per F 1	GS/AS	Advisory
	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1
	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	1 2 3 4	2 3 4 1 2
	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	1 2 3 4	3 4

SEL Goals

Goal	Per A 1	Per B 1	Per C 1	Per D 1	Per E 1	Per F 1	GS/AS	Advisory
	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1
	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	1 2 3 4	2 3 4 1 2
	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	1 2 3 4	3 4

Personal Goals

Goal	Per A 1	Per B 1	Per C 1	Per D 1	Per E 1	Per F 1	GS/AS	Advisory
PG 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	2 3 4 1	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4 1
PG 2	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	2 3 4	1 2 3 4	2 3 4

Person Goal 1:

Person Goal 2:



SSP Total Points: _____ SEL Total Points: _____ Personal Goal Points:

AS Revise Activity (Bonus Points = 4)

Staff SSP Point Sheet Guide

The following guidelines inform how points should be awarded for each period:

Description	Point Value	Definition
Dependent	1	Needed total adult support to accomplish goal
Interested	2	Needed two or more prompts to accomplish goal
Involved	3	Needed one prompt to accomplish goal
Self-Directed	4	Accomplished goal with total independence

Reinforcement Levels

Points earned will inform access to reinforcement during breaks/incentive periods and access to Fun Friday activities. Specific reinforcements will change based on student interests.

Purple

Points: 22 - 28

Orange

Points: 15 - 21

Pink

Points 8 - 14

Blue



Points 7 - 13

Important Note: Students receiving blue 3 days in a row indicates the need for a collaborative student conversation to understand obstacles to meeting goals



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Student Intake Form

Student: _____

Date: _____

Welcome to SSP! SSP is a program that teaches you the skills you need to be successful in school! This is just the beginning of this journey. To start, the adults in the program are responsible for learning about how to best help you feel safe and valued in this community. You are responsible for trying your best to communicate your needs safely. Completing this form will help us get started. You can fill out this form on your own or with help.

What are you interested in? What do you like to talk or learn about?

2.) Have you ever had a teacher that you really liked? If so, what did you like about them?

What made them special? If no, what kind of teacher do you think you would like? How would they act? How would they help you?

3.) What would you like to do for a job when you grow up? Why?

4.) What are some things that make school hard?



5.) How would the adults know that you were having a hard time with something?
What
would you be doing or saying?

6.) What do you like to do to feel better when you are experiencing a negative emotion?

7.) How can the adults in SSP help you feel better when you are experiencing a negative emotion?

8.) Are there any ways of responding that adults DEFINITELY should not do when you are experiencing a negative emotion?



Self-Regulation Coaching Model

Philosophy: SSP seeks to build student capacity to independently engage in behavioral and cognitive coping strategies to return to emotional baseline.

Self-Regulation Coaching Steps:

Functional Communication - Staff may support students in utilizing appropriate language to communicate emotional distress and ask for help

Stimulus Free Environment - Staff may provide a student a timed (3 - 5 minute) opportunity to be in a low stimulus environment to allow the student's body to slow down and increase likelihood of compliance with behavioral coping strategies

Skills Coaching - Staff may provide guidance and modeling for what behavioral or cognitive coping strategies to choose and how to do them effectively.

Independent Coping Skill Use - Staff may provide the student a timed (5 - 7 minute) opportunity to practice a behavioral or cognitive coping strategy of their choice. Staff will conduct a pre and post assessment of emotional distress to help identify whether the skill was successful

Alarm Log - Staff may provide assistance to the student in identifying the antecedent/trigger for the distressing emotion that necessitated self-regulation coaching supports

Future Planning - Staff may provide the student choices for what will help them be successful and safe for the remainder of the school day.

COPING SKILLS LOG



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Self-Regulation Reflection

Rationale: This form will help you understand what happened that caused you to experience emotional distress. The more we understand why we feel difficult emotions, the better we can prepare ourselves to manage it. This form will also help you identify how these difficult emotions felt in your body.

What do you think caused you to experience emotional distress?

Why do you think this event was so distressing?

Where did you feel the emotional distress in your body

Fast Heart Rate

Tense Shoulders

Stomach Ache

Headache

Irritable/On Edge

Restless Body

Tight Chest

Urge to Yell

Inattentive/Unfocused

Feeling Hot/Sweaty

Other _____

Self-Regulation Future Planning Checklist

Rationale: This form will assist you in understanding what you need for the rest of the period/day to be successful. Please review the following options and discuss with staff what supports may be helpful

Counselor Request - I am able to go back to class and complete my work. I would like to schedule a time to see my counselor to talk through an issue that is bothering me. Staff will email the counselor and they will check in with me by the end of the day

Planned Break - I can go back to class and complete my work but would like to return to the self-regulation coaching space in _____ minutes to use another skill

Emotional Space - I can go back to class and complete my work but would like the teacher to not call on me for the rest of the period



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Alternate Work Space - I am able to complete work but do not feel that I can be successful in the classroom for the period. I would like to complete my work in the SSP classroom

I am requesting the following supports to help me be successful for the rest of the period/day (Circle all that apply)
 Counselor Request
 Emotional Space

Planned Break
 Alternate Work Space

Individualized Student Program Development Checklist

Student: _____

Placement Date: _____

Two Week Tasks - The following tasks will be completed by _____

_____ Student intake form completed

_____ Student oriented to self-regulation coaching procedures

_____ Program counselor, BCBA, and/or teacher will meet with ARMS staff members familiar with student needs

_____ Initial parent meeting conducted

_____ Initial PPRR plan developed (Relationship Building)

One Month Tasks - The following tasks will be completed by _____

_____ Case Management Assessment completed

_____ Studentship Skills Assessment completed

Two Month Tasks - The following task will be completed by _____

_____ Updated PPRR plan completed



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_____ Paraprofessional staff trained on updated PRRR plan



Appendix D:

Amherst-Pelham Regional High School Student Support Program (SSP) Manual



October 2023



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PROGRAM PHILOSOPHY

The Student Support Program (SSP) believes that all students want to meet the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic demands of a general education classroom environment. A student's inability to exhibit expected behaviors in the classroom is not willful or chosen; it indicates an underlying skill deficit that must be remediated. The SSP vision is to create a safe and trusting environment where students can learn and practice social-emotional skills. With ongoing support and continuous reinforcement, SSP staff believe that all students can learn these skills and participate meaningfully in an inclusion setting. SSP is an in-district high school therapeutic program that utilizes trauma-informed interventions to help students reach their full potential. Students participating in SSP are ARHS students and important members of the larger school community.



SSP PROGRAMMING

SSP strongly believes in the motto, “children would do better if they could do better.” “Problem behavior” communicates that the student does not possess the skills necessary to meet our expectations. To make progress, SSP staff continuously analyze student behavior data to determine what skill deficit is driving the target behavior. Identifying this skill deficit allows for an individually tailored skill building plan to be developed.

The programming used in SSP to support students accessing their education and develop skills to foster lifelong emotional success, include utilizing **trauma informed practices, SEL frameworks, and CBT Strategies**

Trauma Informed Practices

Trauma Informed Practice involves three different components: Building Safety and Trust, Understanding Behavior Through a Trauma Lens, and Building Social-Emotional Skills:

Building Safety and Trust

SSP recognizes that students will not be able to learn new skills unless they feel understood and safe. The program model attempts to create this safety through the following actions:

- Getting to know each student as an individual
- Learning about each student’s interests, values, and motivators
- Facilitating connections with general education teachers
- Developing consistent and predictable routines
- Being consistent and predictable in adult behavior response
- Clearly posting and following program expectations
- Engaging parents, outside providers, and other important stakeholders to ensure the team is working together
- Using verbal de-escalation strategies to manage emotional dysregulation

Understanding Behavior Through a Trauma Lens

Staff in SSP recognize and understand the impact that trauma can have on students' ~~social emotional well-being as well as their academic~~ achievement. SSP understands that when students feel unsafe, their brain-body response interferes with decision-making and self-regulation. Helping students understand their own trauma responses,



learning and using self-regulation tools and strategies, and helping them how to know and advocate for their needs is paramount in SSP.

Building Social-Emotional and Studentship Skills

SSP understands that social-emotional competency is necessary for academic learning to take place. Students are most available for learning when they have developmentally appropriate ability to sustain attention, manage frustration, problem-solve, and effectively self-advocate. SSP staff understands that individuals with emotional disabilities require additional differentiated instruction and reinforcement for these skills to be internalized and implemented across environments.

SSP recognizes that student's social-emotional skill deficits likely impacted their availability to learn foundational studentship skills. This includes behaviors such as following routines, attending to small and large group instruction, and transitioning between activities. Program staff work with students to systematically teach and reinforce these skills.

SEL Framework

Social Emotional Learning includes the following five core competencies which are central to SSP:

Self-awareness – Students recognizing their emotions and how they impact their behavior; acknowledging strengths and weaknesses to better gain confidence in their abilities.

Self-management – Student's ability to take control and ownership of their thoughts, emotions, and actions in various situations, as well as setting and working toward goals.

Social awareness – Student's ability to put themselves in the shoes of another person and to act with empathy and in an ethical manner within their home, school, and community.

Relationship skills – The ability to build and maintain healthy relationships with people from a diverse range of backgrounds. This competency focuses on listening to and being able to communicate with others, peacefully resolving conflict, and knowing when to ask for or offer help.

Making responsible decisions – Choosing how to act or respond to a situation based on learned behaviors such as ethics, safety, weighing consequences and the well-being of others, as well as yourself.

Mental Health Supports



Students placed in the SSP program are likely to have received mental health diagnosis, including mood and anxiety disorders. These symptoms greatly impact the student's ability to consistently participate in all aspects of the school day, including attending class, completing work, and managing social interactions. The SSP program includes both counseling and classroom-based support to help students best manage their symptoms so that they can access their education and make effective academic progress.

Counseling supports aim to help students develop behavior and thinking strategies to manage distress in the school setting. Interventions are rooted in evidence-based Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) concepts. CBT helps students to understand the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Through this awareness students can then choose ways to change the way they respond to situations to decrease emotional distress and promote effective coping. Classroom based opportunities are available to students to help them practice these developing skills.

The SSP classroom is designed to provide *in vivo* support to students experiencing mental health symptoms that are impacting school performance. Students receive guidance and coaching to access self-regulation behaviors to reduce distress. Students also have the opportunity to complete assigned work in the SSP room when the general education setting is too overwhelming. Students may also receive scheduled or in-the-moment emotional check-ins to help students manage acute stressors.



STUDENTS IN SSP

Students who are determined to require the support of SSP by their IEP team, likely have a primary diagnosis of emotional disability. They are students who require therapeutic support in order to access the curriculum and make meaningful educational progress. Students requiring the support of SSP are determined to need additional and substantial skill development in the areas of social and emotional regulation. Students who are enrolled in SSP require the additional support of an adjustment counselor to support skill development and to make academic progress.



SSP CURRICULUM AREAS

The SSP classroom has several curriculum areas including teaching self regulations skills, future planning that meets student goals, self advocacy in and out of the classroom, and supporting study skills. Within these areas, students will participate in lessons and complete activities which will be included in the student portfolio.

Self-Regulation

Students will likely encounter challenges within the general education classroom that necessitate leaving the environment to engage in behavioral and/or cognitive coping skills. SSP provides ongoing teaching, support, and reinforcement of independent coping skill use.

Future Planning

In SSP, students will explore different post-secondary life paths. Students may come to SSP with a fully developed plan, and be ready to execute it, or they may be at the point of just beginning to explore their interests. Regardless of where they are when they enter the program, students will be supported to learn about and develop long term goals for their future and create a plan to help them achieve their goals.

Self-Advocacy

Students in high school are often in the process of learning how to self-advocate in a mature, respectful way. For students with social/emotional disabilities, this ability can be diminished by their lack of confidence and communication skills.

Students in SSP will not only be supported to identify what their individual needs are, but will learn skills to effectively communicate those needs.

Study Skills

Students who are assigned to SSP, are provided executive functioning skill building. Through direct instruction on study and academic skill development. Students will set personal weekly goals and are supported to identify academic and social/emotional support they may require over the course of the week. Students will be supported academically, as needed, to complete assignments and develop good study habits.



PROGRAM STAFF

All program staff are integral to the success of students enrolled in SSP. In addition to their individual roles, program staff will work together to support the social, emotions, and academic success of students.

SSP Counselor Responsibilities

Provide explicit instruction in social-emotional skills in either individual or group sessions.

Support the development of individual PPRR plans to help generalize skills taught during individual and group sessions.

Provide as-needed emotional support to students to help address acute stressors.

Provide risk/threat assessments as needed in response to concerns of safety to self or others

BCBA Responsibilities

Support the development of individual PPRR plans by informing effective behavioral strategies for student prompts and reinforcement

Provide ongoing coaching and support to SSP staff in implementing effective antecedent-based interventions and de-escalation techniques

Develop and train staff in feasible data collection strategies to continuously monitor student progress towards skill mastery

Analyze data collected by staff members to inform possible changes to intervention approach

SSP Educators will:

Provide explicit instruction in executive functioning skills

Provide ongoing support and consultation to general and special education teachers working with students in SSP to help them understand how best to support student success in the classroom

Provide ongoing support and training to paraprofessional staff to ensure fidelity to PPRR plans and use of self-regulation coaching space

Monitor student academic progress and work collaboratively with student, teachers, and families to support student success

Provide regular communication to families regarding student social, emotional, and academic progress

Paraprofessional Staff will:

Implement PPRR plans with fidelity

Collect data as directed by the program BCBA to monitor student progress

Work with students in the classroom to support their ability to access supports from the general education teacher

Fade support as indicated by student success to promote independence

Support all students in the assigned classroom to reduce stigma of paraprofessional presence, develop relationship with general education teacher, and allow opportunities for student independence

Share essential qualitative insights and observations on student response to help inform intervention approaches

STUDENT PORTFOLIO

Students in SSP are moving towards greater independence in the school setting. SSP seeks to promote this independence by building increasing self and task-monitoring skills. Each student in the program will have a portfolio that will help them track their progress and reference their newly developing skills.

Each student binder will be developed to include at least the following elements:

Vision board

Interest inventories

Research of future planning life areas

Concrete steps to meet vision

References of social-emotional skills being addressed

Student IEP

Academic organizational supports

List of preferred coping strategies that can be accessed in the classroom

Materials needed to implement the Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review (PPRR) plan

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS



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Case Management Assessment

Student Name: _____

Date: _____

DSM-V Diagnosis:

Current medication(s):

Outpatient therapist: _____

Contact information: _____

Treatment frequency: _____

Release on file(Circle): Yes No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

Additional Providers / Supports

Intensive Care Coordinator (ICC): Yes No

Provider Name and Contact Information _____

Therapeutic Mentor (TM) Yes No

Provider Name and Contact Information _____

In-Home Family Therapist (IHFT) Yes No

Provider Name and Contact Information _____



In-Home Behavior Therapist (IHBT) Yes No

Provider Name and Contact Information _____

Other In-Home Provider Yes No

Provider Name and Contact Information _____

DMH Case Manager Yes No

Provider Name and Contact Information _____

DCF Case Manager / Social Worker Yes No

Provider Name and Contact Information _____

If Yes to any service providers, has a release been signed? Yes No

If Yes, Expiration Date: _____

What additional service needs, if any, would the student/family benefit from?

What home/community barriers, if any, are impacting the students' school functioning?

What steps will SSP take to support the student/family in addressing these barriers?

Skills Generalization: Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review

The individual environment is the ideal way to introduce a new skill. However, it is often a challenge for anyone to bring the skill learned in that session to the real world. SSP develops individualized plans that help students generalize skills across settings.



These plans include four essential elements: Preview, Prompt, Reinforce, Review. These elements are defined below:

Preview

When a student is first learning a new skill, they are likely to be unsure of when it is useful. What are the appropriate moments when this skill should be utilized? Students also need support to inhibit their old pattern of behavior and replace it with the new skill. It is important to recognize that these students have developed responses to emotional discomfort that have helped them feel better in the short term.

The PREVIEW helps the student predict when they might need to use their skill.

SAMPLE:

Kevin, we are about to start our math block. We are introducing a new lesson. Learning new things can cause us to think “I give up. I will never do this.” If that thought comes into mind, let us talk about what skills we will use to help us push through

Prompt

Even when a student is given a preview, they may still struggle to apply a given skill when it is needed. The student is likely to need adult assistance to coach them for how to apply the skill. However, there are many ways to coach a skill.

The PROMPT is the strategy used by an adult to help cue the student to use their skill.

An effective prompt is the least intrusive for the child. This ranges from most intrusive (physical hand over hand) to least intrusive (gesture).

Reinforcement

Previous behavioral patterns exhibited by the student to manage uncomfortable emotions were reinforced by the environment. This reinforcement led the behavior to turn into a habit; the student continued to exhibit the behavior in response to difficult feelings. Students will not use their newly learned skills unless the environment reinforces them.

The REINFORCEMENT is the specific way that the adult will respond to the student using their skill to increase that adaptive behavior in the future

Review

Self-reflection is an important part of learning. It is an opportunity to think back on your performance, celebrating strengths and determining how to resolve weaknesses. This process also increases student awareness of situations that happened in class and how the student managed them.

The REVIEW is the specific process for how the adult will facilitate self-reflection after the class has ended.





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PREVIEW, PROMPT, REINFORCE, REVIEW (PPRR) Plan

Student: _____

Team Review Date: _____

Date Developed: _____

Progress Review Date: _____

Priority Lagging Skills

Skill Target (Choose One):

**Relationship Building
Psychoeducation**

**Affect Identification
Affect Communication**

**Cognitive Coping
Behavioral Coping**

Behavioral Objective:

Preview

Prompt

Reinforce

Review (Optional)



Data Collection:

Counselor Skill Building Behavioral Objectives

Skill Target _____

Relationship Building - This skill target should be chosen when a student first enters the program. It can also be chosen when relational disruption or life stressors have impacted the student's ability to address other skills

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify at least 3 preferred activities they can do with the counselor at the end of skill building sessions

Student will verbalize understanding of how the counselor can support their social-emotional growth in the program

Student will develop a plan to repair relationship with an identified student/staff member

Student will identify formal and informal supports for managing life stressors

Psychoeducation - This skill target should be chosen when the student begins learning Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT) strategies in counseling. It can also be chosen when specific issues arise that require psychoeducation, including learning about diagnosis, sexual development, IEP processes etc.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will verbalize understanding of the sensory spectrum and how they experience their emotions

Student will learn that emotions are normal, natural, and harmless

Student will learn about healthy and unhealthy ways of dealing with strong emotions



Student will learn about how avoidance behaviors can make strong emotions worse over time

Affect Identification - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty knowing that something is bothering them. They may be showing behavioral signs of distress but are unable to link these behaviors to a distressing emotion. This impacts their ability to engage in behavioral or cognitive coping behaviors.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will learn to identify common triggers for different emotional experiences

Student will learn physiological cues associated with different emotional experiences

Student will learn what an emotion tells them to do and why (emotional behaviors and purpose)

Affect Communication - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty expressing their thoughts, needs, and concerns with words. The student may not know the correct verbal script to access help/coping strategies or they may not trust that an adult will meet their needs if they communicate.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify social supports in the building (peers, adults) and what information they feel comfortable sharing with them

Student will learn and role play specific verbal scripts to gain access to communicate an emotion and/or access adult support

Student will collaborate on a plan for how they will access general education teacher support in the classroom

Cognitive Coping - This skill target should be chosen when the student has difficulty identifying accurate and helpful ways of thinking to promote emotion regulation. Distorted thinking, defined as thoughts that are both inaccurate and unhelpful, often impede the student's ability to engage in adaptive behavioral coping strategies.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will identify their distressing emotions as part of their bodies alarm system

Student will understand that they are vulnerable to false alarms where there body tells them they are in danger when they are actually safe

Student will learn how to track their automatic thoughts to life events

Student will learn about cognitive distortions and how to analyze their automatic thoughts to determine if they are using a cognitive distortion

Student will learn thinking strategies that help them persevere through distressing emotional experiences

Behavioral Coping - This skill target is chosen when the student struggles to utilize adaptive coping strategies to take an effective break and return to emotional baseline. This student may not know what behaviors help them achieve emotion regulation. This student may not believe that there are any adaptive behaviors that will help them achieve emotion regulation. The student may struggle to identify the need for a behavioral coping strategy at a point where it is likely to be effective.

Sample Behavioral Objectives

Student will practice 10 coping strategies when calm and identify which are most effective in reducing emotional distress

Student will develop a concrete coping plan that includes proactive times when skills will be utilized to maintain calm, early warning signs that indicate a coping skill is needed, and a step by step approach for where a break will occur and what strategies will be available.

Student will develop a behavioral coping diet that includes skills they will use at regular intervals throughout the day

COPING SKILLS LOG

Name: _____

Time/Class	Skill Chosen	Distress Before (1 - 100)	Distress After (1 - 100)

Self-Regulation Reflection

Rationale: This form will help you understand what happened that caused you to experience emotional distress. The more we understand why we feel difficult emotions, the better we can prepare ourselves to manage it. This form will also help you identify how these difficult emotions felt in your body.

What do you think caused you to experience emotional distress?

Why do you think this event was so distressing?

Where did you feel the emotional distress in your body

Fast Heart Rate

Tense Shoulders

Stomach Ache

Headache

Irritable/On Edge

Restless Body

Tight Chest

Urge to Yell

Inattentive/Unfocused

Feeling Hot/Sweaty

Other _____



Appendix E:

Summit Academy Description

Summit Academy is an approved Massachusetts (DESE) public special education day school of the Amherst/Pelham Regional School District.

Summit Academy provides students in grades 7 to 12 with comprehensive educational services in a therapeutic setting meeting all student needs as outlined in their IEPs. As a public special education day school, we are a separate school within the district. We are a self-sustaining school that provides separate academic classes, electives, and infrastructure for the students in the program. Students at Summit receive highly differentiated, small-group instruction within a supportive, structured environment. Summit Academy is a full-day, comprehensive school that provides all mandated components of a public education and adheres to Massachusetts curriculum frameworks.

Summit staff partner with families to provide ongoing support. Clinicians engage regularly with families, assessing and providing interventions and recommendations necessary for student growth.

Summit Academy Mission Statement

Summit Academy provides comprehensive educational services in a therapeutic setting. Summit Academy provides a public day school environment for students on IEPs in grades 7-12 who require a therapeutic setting to address social, emotional, behavioral and/or learning needs. Summit represents an opportunity for students to access their education in a highly supportive, least restrictive environment without having to leave the district.

We believe that all students want to be and can be successful. Our interactions with students are guided by the core assumption that students do well when they can. Building upon the work of Ross Greene, Marsha Linehan, and other experts in the field of behavioral support and intervention, we strive to recognize that students' struggles and challenges are indicators of lagging skills. We are committed to assessing, identifying, and teaching those skills so that students can achieve success in school and in the community.

Student Population: Who are the students at Summit Academy?



Summit Academy serves students who have IEPs and whose primary disability is most often social-emotional and requires intensive and longer-term interventions. Often, secondary and tertiary disabilities add to the complexity of our students' needs. These complex profiles require individualized interventions in a full day academic and therapeutic setting. The multifaceted needs of each student require that we maintain a thoughtful and thorough referral process to ensure that the needs of all students can continually be served in as safe and supportive a milieu as possible.

Students in Summit Academy MAY experience the following:

- Complex diagnostic pictures
- Complicated clinical problems
- Multiple diagnoses
- Pervasive and severe symptoms
- Severe emotional dysregulation
- Fixed mindsets
- Executive functioning challenges
- Rigidity in thinking that contributes to emotional reactivity/physical volatility
- Self-harm thoughts/behaviors
- Suicidal ideation and/or history of attempts
- Histories of trauma, attachment disorders, complex PTSD
- Experience of psychosocial stressors that overwhelm their capacity to cope effectively
- History of failure to progress academically

Students in Summit Academy MAY have mental health symptoms and/or challenging behaviors that impede learning and indicate lagging skills in:

- Attendance
- Classroom engagement
- Studentship
- Goal attainment
- Self-esteem
- Social & familial relationships
- Emotional regulation
- Distress tolerance
- Self-advocacy

Summit Academy Program Goals and Student Outcomes

At Summit Academy, we are committed to assessing and working with students' strengths, offering support and structure to give students the tools for success at school and in the community. Our responses to students are guided by a deep understanding of the connection between behavior and environmental reinforcement. We are committed to cultivating and maintaining a culturally responsive school environment.



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Our Goals at Summit Academy Are To:

Empower students to articulate their challenges and build the skills that address those challenges.

Give students the tools to proactively engage with mentors, teachers, and employers in a constructive manner.

Build skills that facilitate envisioning of a successful post-secondary transition, taking into account students' specific needs and resources.

Partner with families to bolster students' ability to navigate the transition from adolescence to early adulthood.

Provide a rigorous curriculum that is modified to meet learning needs while preparing students to meet graduation requirements.

Provide students with a foundation of life skills that will enable them to be prepared for the challenges of independent life.

Work with students and families to articulate and navigate pathways to success that are reflective of benchmarks students have achieved at Summit.

Partner with the district and the town to promote positive and constructive relationships and learning opportunities.

Summit Academy Program Components

The goal of Summit's overall program is to build social-emotional skills and increase classroom engagement by means of targeted, structured instruction and interactions. Communication among teachers, students, clinicians and paraprofessionals is essential to the work of teaching and reinforcing social-emotional skills, studentship skills, and academic content mastery.

Clinical & Behavioral Evidence-based Practices & Interventions at Summit

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

Trauma-informed Care

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Collaborative Problem Solving

Restorative Justice

Summit Academy's Clinical and Therapeutic Milieu

Academic classes differentiate and modify curriculum in light of student needs and lagging skills. Relationship building in the classroom is a key component of instruction. All classes adhere to the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks.

Elective courses reinforce social-emotional skill building and provide opportunities for students to connect and communicate with others.

While remaining respectful of students' need for space during lunch and transitional periods, staff seek out opportunities to connect with students, observe students' behavior patterns, and make themselves aware of student stressors and strengths.

Staff also use these times to teach and reinforce emotional and behavioral regulation.



Services on the student's Individual Educational Plan are met in group and individual counseling with the clinicians.

The clinicians consult with staff about specific interventions and techniques that address and reinforce students' emotional regulation skills amidst social and emotional challenges

Mindfulness practice is the cornerstone of DBT skills training and is reinforced weekly by beginning each all-school community meeting with a mindfulness exercise

Summit Academy's Academic Environment

All teachers at Summit Academy are certified in both their subject matter and in special education. As such, classrooms are taught with many accommodations built into the daily lesson plans. Teachers meet weekly to coordinate teaching approaches, discuss best practices and strategies, and collaborate on methodologies. Delivery of an academic curriculum commensurate with Amherst Regional High School graduation requirements is designed with student needs and perspectives in mind.

Teaching methodologies at Summit include:

Differentiation of assignments based on IEP accommodations and recommendations and integrated with daily lesson planning and delivery

Small-group instruction in every classroom.

Clearly stated routines and expectations, reinforced frequently.

Scaffolding and supports to break down complex tasks

Design of curriculum commensurate with and responsive to student interests.

Direct and transparent feedback concerning progress and growth.

Behavioral Strategies and Interventions at Summit Academy

All Summit staff follow evidence-based practices in interacting with, supporting, and responding to students' needs. These practices include interactional strategies for building rapport with students, interventions for maladaptive behaviors, and reinforcements of prosocial behaviors. To ensure fidelity in practice, staff meet weekly to review current practices and discuss their application in particular case studies.

Behavioral and intervention strategies include:

Validation as the primary interactional strategy

Reinforcement of desired behaviors

Reframing success to build student's capacity for change and allow more opportunities to celebrate growth

Scaffolding / Shaping of desired behaviors

Reinforcement of adaptive functional behavior



Negative maladaptive behavior often results in no discernable consequences that could reinforce the behavior (reinforcer is any consequence that increases the probability of a behavior happening again)

A restraint-free environment

Student Support Room at Summit

This space is designed with the goal of helping students learn to cope more effectively and to equip students with the skills that will enable them to tolerate social and academic challenges. Students are encouraged and supported in their efforts to learn and practice new skills aimed at helping them self regulate, tolerate distress, and more effectively communicate their needs. Students accessing this space are asked to complete self-reflections and are then given opportunities to practice skills. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) Skills are highlighted and emphasized. This approach helps to reinforce practice and skills acquisition outside of group time.

The Student Support Room provides:

- Interpersonal Effectiveness skills resources
- Distress Tolerance skills resources
- Toolkits for distress tolerance
- Visuals and reminders of skills
- Diary cards for self-assessment of skills practice

The Student Support Room also functions as:

- A less stimulating space for independent academic work
- A one-on-one space where students can work with staff

Extended-Year Services at Summit

Summit Academy provides extended-year Summer Services to students at risk of regression of their academic and social skills.

In support of the students, extended-year services include:

- Direct instruction in academic areas of need
- Access to clinical support
- Vocational opportunities

Administrative Support at Summit

Administrative support from the principal and staff includes:

- Support in guiding and developing Summit's mission and vision
- Oversight of budgeting, record-keeping, and personnel management.
- Supervision and support for staff training and skill development
- Behavioral consultation and support concerning challenging behaviors
- In-house management of IEP meetings and documentation



Staffing - Summit Academy Team Members' Roles and Responsibilities

The staff at Summit Academy believe that all students want to be, and can be successful. They are committed to cultivating and maintaining a culturally responsive school environment where students can learn and embrace education with a growth mindset, and where every student can “explore their path to success.”

Summit Academy employs two full-time clinicians who provide students with positive behavioral and therapeutic support. Clinicians support each student individually and as part of a group, addressing academic and personal resiliency, a strong vision and purpose for the future, and areas of personal strength.

Summit Clinicians are responsible for:

Individual and group counseling

Ongoing, strength-based, psychosocial assessment

Evidence-based therapeutic intervention focused on improved behavioral health that will allow increased access to school-based curriculum

Referrals for community-based services on behalf of student and/or parent/guardians

Family engagement to help parents understand how they can support their child's social-emotional and academic success at home

Regularly scheduled information sharing between student, parent/guardian, school personnel and collateral service providers to discuss progress related to goals

De-escalation intervention for students experiencing emotional or behavioral crises

Screening and referral to emergency services as needed

System-wide positive behavior support practices

DBT Skills Groups taught by clinicians, in small groups, to all students

Summit Academy employs a full-time licensed principal who also holds a special education administrator's license.

The Summit Academy Principal is responsible for:

Program development and evaluation in light of Summit's mission and vision.

Instructional leadership and teacher evaluation in light of the academic and therapeutic goals of the program.

Ensuring academics meet the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks

Coordinating professional development for staff in support of trauma-centered programming and social-emotional skills training.

Ensuring compliance with Special Education regulations and safety for all community members.

Partnering with clinicians and families to ensure appropriate processing of student intake and tuition-in referrals.

Serving as team chair for Summit Academy IEP meetings.

Coaching students to use support available to them at the Summit and to participate positively in school.

Ensuring that Summit's climate is nurturing, calm, student-focused, and caring.

Representing Summit's mission, vision, and practices to the district and community.

Promoting continuous improvement by instituting and reinforcing a school-wide growth mindset.

There are five academic high school teachers, all possessing dual certification in their subject area and in special education and a middle school teacher.

Summit Academy Teachers are responsible for:

Aligning core curriculum with the requirements for graduation from Amherst Regional High School while differentiating and modifying content in keeping with individual students' IEP goals and accommodations.

Ensuring 7th and 8th grade curriculum frameworks are followed and implemented and support students' IEP goals and accommodations.

Designing and implementing a series of electives that provide students with a range of experiences that address recreational, physical fitness, and vocational interests.

Working together as a team to support the school's therapeutic approach, its mission, and its self-sustaining model.

Employing innovative, interdisciplinary, and culturally responsive teaching approaches within a small class ratio of 6:1 or less.

Providing guidance and curriculum recommendations for extended school-year services.

Providing input for clinical and administrative work.

One particular teacher serving as IEP Liaison:

Works with Administrative staff to maintain IEP timelines

Collaborates with teachers and clinicians and gathers notes on student progress for Team Meetings

Sits in on all Team Meetings

Coordinates with teachers and clinicians to write IEPs and Progress Reports

Conducts Academic Evaluations

Coordinates MCAS testing

Assisting in classrooms are instructional aides who are skilled in delivering academic support and reinforcing social-emotional skill-building.

Summit Academy Instructional Aides provide the following:

One-on-one support in maintaining smooth and effective delivery of instruction.

One-on-one support for students in crisis

Positive relationships that reinforce skills and build on successes

Flexible and essential support in service of the overall program's mission and day-to-day needs.

Critical on-the-ground feedback and collaboration with other staff regarding observed behaviors.

In-house substitute teaching



Administrative support

Summit Academy also has a Special Education Secretary to oversee the day-to-day operations of the school office including:

Administrative Assistant to the Principal

Front office management

Ordering, purchasing, and IT support

Assisting with website, publications, and Summit Academy events

Special Education support services

Support in managing attendance, staff timesheets and absences

Scheduling and calendar management

Other Service Providers - (Speech, Vocational)

On an as-needed basis, other district-based service providers work with Summit staff to support students. Services include:

Consultations with professional staff on accommodations for the needs of students within the provider's field of expertise

Direct services for select students

Formal assessments

Participation in Team Meetings for select students

Summit Academy Entrance Criteria

General Entrance Criteria for Summit Academy:

Student is in 7th-12th grade

Formal intake interview has taken place with a parent/guardian

Student is on a signed IEP with a placement for a Separate Public Day School

Primary disability is social/emotional

Referral process is complete (see below) and it has been determined that a student's needs can be effectively met while maintaining the integrity and fidelity of Summit's programming

OR

Student is returning to district from private day school or other therapeutic program and requires a continuation of substantially separate programming or would benefit from therapeutic services during transition back to district

OR

Student requires a high degree of supervision, intervention, and high level of family engagement due to acute safety concerns

Note: Students are occasionally referred to Summit for an extended evaluation. Summit uses a separate process to conduct intake of students in need of extended evaluation.

Summit Academy Exit Criteria for transfer to a Less Restrictive Environment

(LRE)

General Exit Criteria for Summit Academy:



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Marked progress on IEP goals is evident (*which means that IEP goals should be reflective of placement/reasons for placement*)

Transfer from Summit is (preferably) student-initiated

Student is able to engage with the IEP team and members of receiving programs about progress they have made, areas of vulnerability that they will need to attend to, and needs for support.

Student can identify short term and long terms goals of next placement

Student attends school and individual classes 80% of the time

Student effectively utilizes therapeutic program supports and demonstrates increasingly less reliance on supports over time (this demonstrates skill acquisition and generalization of skills)

Student's classroom engagement and studentship skills are consistent (this will often translate to grades in the B/C range across classes)

Referral Process for Summit Academy

A referral packet shall be submitted for consideration of placement at Summit Academy. The referral packet is the first step in the process of considering a student for placement.

The complete referral process for consideration of placement at Summit Academy is included in this [document](#).

Information that is beneficial to include in a Summit Academy referral packet includes:

A current IEP A brief description of the reason the Team is considering a change of placement Data-driven documentation indicating level of need, e.g., an FBA, student assessments,

documentation of past intervening strategies that addressed the social-emotional and behavioral health needs

Recent evaluations (psychological, academic, speech/language, etc.) and other relevant documentation.

To ensure the integrity and fidelity of Summit Academy's instructional and therapeutic services, the Summit Academy referral process also takes into account:

The complexity of the student's individual needs and capacity of the program to manage and meet those needs effectively

How current staffing, census, and cohort could be influenced by the complexity of the student's individual needs

Other considerations in the Summit Academy referral process:



Summit clinician/staff is present for any team meetings where potential placement is discussed

Collaboration with referral source early in referral process to determine/explore remaining interventions in LRE

Summit Academy Community & Family Collaboration & Engagement

Summit Academy believes that its mission and goals are best met when staff works in collaboration with the community and family in a culturally responsive environment. As such, Summit Academy works with families and students on an individual and group level to support the students in learning to be a part of, and work within their communities. We aim to leverage student growth and studentship skills into successful transitions to post-secondary settings.

Summit Academy achieves this vision by:

Absenteeism framing with families

Partnership with local community mental health agencies and the Department of Mental Health (DMH) to facilitate trust in systems that deliver wrap-around services that support families.

Town-school partnership, where possible.

Vocational programming (MRC/Pre-ETS)

Field Trips

An experiential, project-based Environmental Education program

Collaboration with [Food Services](#) in matters of vocational training and event planning.

Special Events with family and friends

[Thanksgiving Meal](#)

[Graduation](#)

Presentation of Student Achievements

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Appendix F

ILC/ESP/PIP - Students grades K-12

The Intensive Learning Center (ILC), Essential Skills Program (ESP) and Pathways to Independence Programs (PIP) provide specialized programming and services to students with significant disabilities that require intensive programming and oversight throughout the school day. Students served in these programs may have one or more disabilities in areas such as autism, cerebral palsy, cognitive impairment, and/or health impairments.

The Intensive Needs programs provide coordinated related services as well as specialized instruction to students in grades K through 12 in both school-based and community settings in the areas of adaptive and independent living skills, social skills, functional academics, school behavior and vocational awareness. The program supports inclusion in the general education environment when appropriate as well as opportunities for exploration and skill development in modified, universally designed arts, physical education, and music classes. Routine communication and collaboration with families is a priority in the Intensive Needs programs and efforts are made to adapt communication methods to the needs and preferences of each family.

Connections - Transition age students (18-22)

The Connections program is a functional life skills program for students with IDD and other neurological disorders who have typically completed four years of high school and have not yet achieved a high school diploma. These students continue their programming until turning 22 or until achievement of a high school diploma, whichever comes first.

The Connections Program provides individualized plans, which allows students in special education to transition successfully from their role of high school students to their new role as adults in the community. The program provides support in developing and strengthening their functional life skills, which can include: money and time management, travel training, community safety, post-secondary education or training, vocational training, social skills, self-determination and self-advocacy skills and recreation and leisure skills.



At the core of the program is Person Centered Planning which assesses students individually and helps them create their post-secondary vision. Each student's individual strengths, interests, preferences, skills and abilities are taken into account when planning their programming.

Students can participate in a variety of classroom activities and community experiences in order to prepare them for their transition to adult life. The goal is to integrate the students into their community as much as possible, while receiving natural environment teaching at vocational sites and in the community where they live.





Paraeducator Program Action Plan

2024-2025

Respectfully Prepared and Submitted by:
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December 2024

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Introduction

This action plan outlines the steps needed to review and potentially sunset 1:1 paraeducator services for special education students in accordance with Massachusetts Department of Education laws and regulations, while maintaining alignment with best practices and ensuring student success. The action plan is organized into three phases: (1) Research and Preparation, (2) IEP Review Process, and (3) Implementation and Evaluation.

Paraeducator Program Action Plan					
<p>Goal: To ensure that the district follows best practices when making decisions regarding 1:1 paraeducator support services that meet legal requirements and maintain high-quality support for students with disabilities, by incorporating research-based strategies that address students' unique learning needs, promote students' independence and skill-building, and improve long-term outcomes for students with disabilities.</p>					
<p>Objectives:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To review and assess the effectiveness of 1:1 paraeducator services, ensuring that students receive appropriate support while fostering independence. 2. To ensure that all IEPs reflect best practices and align with current needs while maximizing student potential. 3. To promote models that support independence and skill-building for students with disabilities whom may no longer require 1:1 services. 4. To integrate research-based practices into the transition plan and ensure that the district maintains a high standard of support. 					
Plan Phase	Action Steps	Responsible	Start Date	Status Update	Due Date
Preparation & Research	Review related research and identify strategies for (1) effective paraeducator support and (2) reducing overreliance on 1:1 support to increase student independence.	SSO Director	December 2024	completed	December 2024
	Develop research-based rubric for evaluating efficiency of paraeducator use and obtain stakeholder input prior to utilization.	SSO Director	December 2024	completed	December 2024
IEP Review Process	Establish a Cross-Functional Team (CFT).	SSO Director SSO Administrator	December 2024		December 2024
	Review existing input and data provided from the special education para review and research; include collection and review of student experiences, and current utilization of paraeducators at the building level and identification of alternative support models (e.g., collaborative support model/shared paraeducators or other in-class supports).	SSO Director SSO Administrator CFT	January 2025		February 2025

	Develop a systematic approach and decision making tool with supporting documents (e.g. needs based assessment and rubric for determining the level of need and simultaneous development of a fading support plan) for IEP Teams to use when determining support needs.	SSO Director SSO Administrator CFT	February 2025		February 2025
	Conduct comprehensive review of current IEPs w/ 1:1 para support; review to include the identification of patterns and next steps.	SSO Director SSO Administrator CFT SE Staff GE Staff	March 2025		April 2025
Implementation & Evaluation	Collaborate with Human Resources to review para supervision and evaluation process (e.g. evaluation form) and provide recommendations.	HR SSO Director SSO Administrator Building Administrators	December 2024		January 2025
	Establish a training plan for staff for FY26 on key topics (e.g. how to determine para needs, fostering independence in students with disabilities, effective inclusion practices and principles of LRE).	HR Curriculum Director SSO Director SSO Administrator Building Administrators	March 2025		June 2025
	Develop and implement regular progress monitoring to assess student outcomes.	SSO Director SSO Administrator Building Administrators Case Managers	April 2025		December 2025
	Conduct a mid-year check-in to review the impact of the changes on student outcomes and adjust strategies as needed.	SSO Director SSO Administrator CFT Case Managers	December 2025		December 2025

Detailed Action Plan

Phase 1: *Preparation and Research*

Objective: To review and assess the effectiveness of 1:1 paraeducator services, ensuring that students receive appropriate support while fostering independence.

Action Steps:

- Gather and review current research and case studies on effective paraeducator use in special education and reducing overreliance on 1:1 support:
 - Resources: Identify evidence-based practices, especially from districts that have reduced reliance on 1:1 services.
 - Review Massachusetts Department of Education regulations (603CMR28.00) to ensure legal compliance regarding IEP development and 1:1 service provision.
 - Review DESE Technical Assistance Advisory on Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support (2015) for guidance regarding the appropriate utilization and support of paraprofessionals.
- Develop research-based rubric for evaluating efficiency of paraeducator use and obtain stakeholder input prior to utilization. The rubric will assess:
 - Opportunities to enhance student independence.
 - Opportunities to transition to less restrictive support models.
 - The effectiveness of resource allocation.

Phase 2: *IEP Review Process*

Objective: To ensure that all IEPs reflect best practices and align with current needs while maximizing student potential.

Action Steps:

- Establish a Cross-Functional Team (CFT) of special education staff, general education staff, ETLs and administrators.
- Review existing input and data provided from the special education parareview and research; include collection and review of student experiences, and current utilization of paraeducators at the building level and identification of alternative support models (e.g., collaborative support model/shared paraeducators or other in-class supports).
- Develop a systematic approach and decision-making tool with supporting documents (e.g. needs-based assessment and rubric for determining the level of need and simultaneous development of a fading support plan) for IEP Teams to use when determining support needs and for assessing and evaluating needs over time.
- Conduct comprehensive review of current IEPs w/1:1 para support; review to include the identification of patterns and next steps.

Phase 3: Implementation and Evaluation

Objectives: (1) To promote models that support independence and skill-building for students who may no longer require 1:1 services, (2) To integrate research-based practices into the transition plan and ensure that the district maintains a high standard of support.

Action Steps:

Implementation

- Collaborate with Human Resources to review para supervision and evaluation process (e.g. evaluation form) and provide recommendations.
- Establish a training plan for staff for FY26 on key topics to build capacity to effectively and appropriately support students with disabilities while addressing over reliance on 1:1 paraeducator support (e.g. how to determine para needs, fostering independence in students with disabilities, effective inclusion practices and principles of LRE) and share the plan with stakeholders including SEPAC. Training plan to include the following but not limited to:
 - Training for ETLs, case managers, general education teachers, special education teachers, paraeducators, and service providers on effective inclusion practices and principles of LRE to include: clarification of what inclusive education means in the district, district's underlying philosophy in providing educational supports services consistent with IDEA, and clarification of roles of team members.
 - Training for paraeducators and teachers on fostering independence in students with disabilities focusing on: best practices for encouraging student self-management and problem-solving, techniques to gradually reduce paraeducator intervention without disrupting student progress, and strategies for implementing skill-building activities that promote independence (e.g. gradual reduction of 1:1 support, transitioning students to group work, peer support, or shared paraeducators).
 - Paraeducator training using DESE's new, free Paraeducator E-Learning Modules to support the successful onboarding and ongoing professional learning of paraeducators.

Evaluation

- Develop and implement regular progress monitoring to assess student outcomes.
- Conduct a mid-year check-in to review the impact of the changes on student outcomes and adjust strategies as needed.

Research and Resources Summary

Key Research Findings:

- OverRelianceon1:1paraeducators canhinderstudentindependencebycreatingdependency.Researchsupports a shift towards models that promote self-reliance, socialization, and peer interaction (Giangreco, 2020).
- Casestudiesfromdistrictsthathavereduced1:1serviceshowimprovedstudentoutcomeswhensupportis shifted towards collaborative, in-class models.

Massachusetts Special Education Regulations:

- Under603CMR28.06,schooldistrictsarerequiredtoprovideservicesintheleastrestrictiveenvironment, ensuring that students are not unnecessarily isolated from their peers.
- IEPsmustbereviewedannually,andparaeducatorsupportshouldbeevaluatedtoconfirmthatitremains necessary and effective.

DESE Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-3 (revised): Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support

- StateandfederalspecialeducationlawrequireanIEPTeamtomakealldisionsregardingtheassignmentofa paraprofessional to a particular student.
- Stateandfederalspecialeducationlawsrecognizethatindependenceisakeyfactorofadulthoodandourpublic schools must always strive to build independence in our students, particularly as they begin to approach adult life.
- Decisionsregardingspecialeducationandrelatedservices(and,inparticular,decisionsregarding paraprofessional services) must be made in a way that allows the unique learning needs of each student to be met and that, at the same time, allows each student to become as independent as possible, particularly in preparation for the end of secondary education.
- Wheneveranassignmentofparaprofessionalservicesisinitiallymade,theTeamshoulldiscussanddevelopa plan for reviewing the continued need for these services, including a process to review and monitor the student's progress and determine whether the student's need can be met with other services or supports.

Conclusion

This plan will ensure that the district follows best practices while meeting legal requirements and maintaining high-quality support for students with disabilities. By transitioning students who no longer require 1:1 paraeducator services, we will promote independence and skill-building, ultimately improving long-term outcomes.

Appendix A

DESE Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-3 (revised): Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support

Reference: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (2015). *Technical assistance advisory sped 2014-3 (revised)*. Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support - Special Education. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/sped/advisories/2014-3ta.html>

The purposes of this advisory are to:

1. Advise school districts and parents about concerns regarding inappropriate utilization of paraprofessionals.
2. Clarify when it may be appropriate to use a paraprofessional, as well as ensuring adequate training and supervision.
4. Provide recommended actions and sample tools to increase school district capacity to support students with disabilities.
- Clarify the decision-making process for assigning paraprofessionals to individual students.

A. Introduction: Response to a Cry for Help

When school personnel or parents request a paraprofessional, they are asking for help. Something is amiss. Should a school district respond simply by assigning a paraprofessional to an individual student? Absolutely not.

"If schools respond exclusively to the request for a paraprofessional, without fully understanding the meaning behind the request, it increases the likelihood of masking the underlying issues and delaying attention to them."¹ Instead, "the task is to identify the underlying issues so that they can be addressed."²

The essential premise of this advisory is that the underlying learning needs of each particular student — that is, the root causes of the teacher's or parent's "cry for help" — must first be determined. Then there needs to be consideration of the full array of supports and services that may successfully address the student's unique needs. Districts must not restrict their consideration to use of a paraprofessional.

B. Concerns Regarding Inappropriate Use of Paraprofessionals

Data reflecting substantial increases in the number of special education paraprofessionals raises concerns about whether districts are effectively responding to the educational needs highlighted by requests for a paraprofessional.

The Department is particularly concerned by reports that, in some cases, paraprofessionals have been assigned simply on the basis of a student's educational profile or to provide a teacher with temporary relief from a demanding student. This may leave unaddressed key issues such as (a) improving teacher ability to educate a full range of students with disabilities; (b) building capacity in general education to design curriculum and instruction for mixed ability groups that include students with disabilities; and (c) changing or improving student behavior.

The Department is also concerned that paraprofessionals have been assigned responsibilities that require the skills of a licensed teacher - for example, making curriculum decisions, planning lessons or designing adaptations, as compared with implementing decisions made by the teacher. There have also been reports of inadequate training and supervision, making it impossible for a paraprofessional to be effective. And, paraprofessionals may continue to be assigned even though other services or supports could more appropriately address the student's learning needs. Inappropriate use of paraprofessionals may have detrimental consequences such as over-dependence, interference with peer interactions, insular relationships, stigmatization, provocation of behavior problems, or diminished student-teacher interactions.

This is not to say that paraprofessional services should never be used.³ As with any other special education service, paraprofessionals are inherently neither appropriate nor inappropriate for a particular student. Appropriate use of paraprofessionals depends, to a large extent, on whether the paraprofessional has the requisite skills to address effectively one or more aspects of a student's unique needs and whether the paraprofessional is adequately trained and supervised to be effective. Importantly, appropriate utilization of paraprofessionals also depends on consideration of whether there are other service or support options that would be a better choice because they would address effectively these same learning needs and offer additional advantages such as fostering greater independence. The process for

weighing these considerations and making a decision as to whether a paraprofessional should be assigned to a particular student, will be discussed in section E of this Advisory.

C. Overarching Goal of Promoting Students' Independence

It is the essential mission of elementary and secondary education to prepare all students for successful adult life, which may include independent living, competitive employment, further postsecondary education or training, and participation in the life of their community. State and federal special education laws recognize that independence is a key factor of adulthood and our public schools must always strive to build independence in our students, particularly as they begin to approach adult life.⁴

In order for these core educational principles to be realized, decisions regarding special education and related services (and, in particular, decisions regarding paraprofessional services) must be made in a way that allows the unique learning needs of each student to be met and that, at the same time, allows each student to become as independent as possible, particularly in preparation for the end of secondary education.

The following recommended actions are intended to respect and promote these essential principles.

D. Recommended Actions: School District Level

Whole school approach. School districts can develop greater regular education capacity to effectively serve diverse learners. School district leaders should review the use of paraprofessionals within the context of the whole school environment and consider adopting a tiered model of supports such as [Massachusetts' Tiered System of Supports \(MTSS\)](#). Data gathered in the analyses of students' needs can be compiled into a chart or matrix, and reviewed by school-based teams to make decisions regarding system-wide allocation of services and supports. Effective use of school-based student support teams (SSTs) may reduce the number of retentions, suspensions/expulsions, and referrals to special education. SSTs may also assist in reducing the inappropriate use of paraprofessionals.

District culture. Some may unconsciously believe that a one-to-one paraprofessional is always needed for a student with a particular kind of educational profile. It is important for the district community to examine its own assumptions and to challenge those that perpetuate a status quo that can result in unintended negative consequences. District leaders may find it fruitful to share data on the use of paraprofessionals and to discuss with students, their families and special educators together how to achieve the best instructional services, and aim for the best academic and non-academic outcomes for students. Involving families in this discussion will assist in fully considering how the community as a whole, not just the school, can help to achieve successful adult life outcomes for all students.

E. Recommended Actions: Individual Students

The IEP decision-making process. State and federal special education law require an IEP Team to make all decisions regarding the assignment of a paraprofessional to a particular student. The Team makes this decision solely on the basis of whether paraprofessional services are appropriate to meet the unique learning needs of the particular student so that he or she will have the opportunity to receive FAPE in the least restrictive environment and at the same time prepare for "further education, employment, and independent living."⁵

Breaking down the IEP Team decision-making into a three-step process, that considers use of paraprofessionals within a broader context, may substantially increase the likelihood of using paraprofessionals appropriately and effectively. First, at least one member of the Team should be fully informed about the general education environment and the expectations that typical students are expected to meet in the coming year. In that context, the Team examines information available from evaluations and other information which may include concerns of the parent, and previous progress with earlier IEPs. The Team then identifies all of a student's *special education needs* arising from the disability and presenting barriers to the student's learning. The Team must differentiate among needs that can and should be met in the general education environment with accommodations or minor modifications and needs that must be met through the delivery of specially designed instruction⁶ so that the student receives FAPE.

Second, the IEP Team considers the goals that are most important for the student to accomplish during the upcoming year and considers these goals in the context of the general curriculum, it's available support services as well as the *entire range of specially designed instruction, related services and accommodations* that can meet the student's particular needs.

Finally, the Team then determines the extent to which needed services can be delivered in the general education classroom and which services may require removal from the classroom. Research supports that most students with disabilities have better outcomes when they are fully included in the general education classroom, and the Team is tasked with carefully considering the risks and benefits to the student when removal appears to be necessary. It is at the intersection of these two important priorities -- the least restrictive environment (the general education classroom) and the promotion of independence, that the Team may consider the use of a one to one paraprofessional. If a one to one paraprofessional can increase the student's access to the general education environment or assist in moving toward more independence, then generally the Team should identify use of the paraprofessional.

This decision-making process offers the following advantages: (1) it assists the Team to assign paraprofessionals when necessary to meet the individual student's unique special education needs, (2) precludes assignment of a paraprofessional based on limited information - for example, solely on the basis of a student's diagnosis or the needs of a teacher, and (3) seeks to ensure that service or support options (other than a paraprofessional) are also considered and utilized if they would address effectively a student's learning needs and offer additional advantages such as fostering greater independence.⁷

Training and supervision. School districts have an affirmative obligation to ensure that all paraprofessionals are trained and supervised so that they will be able to provide the services for which they are responsible, as reflected in federal Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) policy guidance. Therefore, once an IEP Team decides that a paraprofessional is needed for a student, the Team has a responsibility to determine the means by which a paraprofessional will have sufficient training and supervision. This may occasionally require additional services or consultation in the IEP.

Develop a plan for fading paraprofessional support. It is important that paraprofessional services continue in amount and duration only as needed. For many students, other services or supports can be substituted for some or all of a student's paraprofessional services. Therefore, whenever an assignment of paraprofessional services is initially made, the Team should discuss and develop a plan for reviewing the continued need for these services, including a process to review and monitor the student's progress and determine whether the student's need can be met with other services or supports. The Team may establish criteria which, if met by the student, will trigger initiation of the IEP amendment process to consider a change in services. The family is a critical partner in the planning process, with the family made well aware of any potential changes in the student's program and engaged throughout the process. There is no "standard" plan for fading paraprofessional services—each will be individually tailored for the particular student.

Anchor district policies and procedures with best-practices for student leadership. Depending on the age of the student involved, the student may be a "driver" but at all times will be a participant in whatever actions are taken. Keep the student's needs and desires at the center of discussions and to the extent possible, involve the student in the planning and actions taken. If, after all, the purpose is to promote independence, then the student should be able to take pride in actively working toward his/her increased independence and full participation in the life of the school. With the student central to the process, educators and families alike must remember that each student is different and may need different approaches, and different amounts of time to respond to different actions. Anticipate that some students may need paraprofessional support in one or more areas for years, while others may move forward in leaps and bounds toward independence.

F. Conclusion

Paraprofessionals may be an essential service for some disabled students. Yet, their inappropriate use can waste resources, limit a student's potential for independence, and leave key issues unaddressed. To respond to these potential challenges, system-wide changes can substantially increase the capacity of a school district to respond appropriately to a

wide range of learners, and consideration of paraprofessional services for an individual student must be integrated into the IEP decision-making process for determining all of the student's unique special education needs and how they should be met.

The cause is important. The goal is the right one: successful adult life!

Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support

Examples – Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support

The following examples are intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

Student W is identified as presenting learning needs that are substantially different than those typically met by the general education teacher. The IEP Team might conclude that a paraprofessional, even with appropriate training and instruction, would not have the expertise or skills to meet these needs and that co-teaching with a special education teacher or collaboration between the special education and regular education teachers would appropriately address Student's underlying learning challenges.

Student X is identified as needing supplemental instruction. She also needs facilitation with peer interactions. After identifying her underlying educational needs, the IEP Team would consider the range of options that would meet those needs. The Team might determine that a paraprofessional is appropriate or that additional special education services (such as consultation to the regular education teacher and a social skills group) would better address Student's underlying learning difficulties. If a paraprofessional is to be assigned, the Team would discuss how to ensure the paraprofessional will be adequately trained and supervised.

Student Y has severe behavior problems. The needs might be identified as two-fold - both to safely contain and over time to reduce and eliminate Student's aggressive behaviors. The IEP Team might conclude that a paraprofessional is needed to help safely manage Student Y's aggressive behaviors while developing and implementing a plan to reduce, replace and/or eliminate the behaviors; but that paraprofessional services would not be able to address the underlining causes of Student's aberrant behaviors (and potentially could aggravate them); and that a behavior consultant and functional behavioral assessment are needed to develop a plan for more effectively addressing the Student's behaviors. The Team would also consider whether additional consultation services (perhaps from the behaviorist) may be needed to ensure appropriate training and supervision of the paraprofessional. Finally, the Team determines behavior criteria which, if met, would trigger a process for re-consideration of the need for paraprofessional services.

Student Z has significant mental health disabilities and is not making effective progress in the regular education classroom. The regular education teacher has little understanding or experience with the needs of students with this severity of mental health needs. The IEP Team would need to determine whether it may be sufficient to provide more or different consultation services to the regular education teacher; whether consultation services combined with a paraprofessional (who is appropriately trained and supervised) are needed to allow the student to access the curriculum and make effective progress; or whether Student's mental health needs are so significant that a different educational model is required for Student to receive an appropriate education.

Appendix B

Research on the Overreliance on 1:1 Paraeducator Support

The use of 1:1 paraeducators in special education has become widespread in school districts across the United States. These paraeducators provide individualized support to students with disabilities, helping them meet academic, social, and behavioral goals as outlined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). While 1:1 paraeducator support is often essential for some students, concerns have been raised about the potential for overreliance on such services. Overuse of 1:1 paraeducators can create unintended consequences, such as limiting student independence and social development. This research explores the evidence on the impacts of overreliance on 1:1 services, examining the academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students, as well as recommendations for alternative support models that foster greater autonomy.

Impact of Overreliance on 1:1 Paraeducator Support

a. Limiting Independence

Studies suggest that while paraeducators can provide critical support, over-reliance may inhibit the development of self-sufficiency in students. Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter (2012) highlight that excessive 1:1 support can create dependency, where students come to rely on their paraeducator for tasks they are capable of performing independently. This dynamic can prevent students from learning how to self-manage, problem-solve, or interact with peers in a way that promotes long-term independence. According to research by Fisher and Meyer (2002), students who received less direct support from 1:1 paraeducators demonstrated higher levels of engagement and task completion independently compared to those with constant adult assistance.

b. Social Isolation

In addition to limiting independence, overreliance on 1:1 paraeducators can inadvertently isolate students from their peers. Giangreco and Broer (2005) found that the close proximity of paraeducators can prevent students from engaging in natural social interactions with classmates, as they often serve as a "barrier" between the student and their peer group. When a paraeducator becomes the student's primary social partner, it can undermine efforts to foster social skills and peer relationships, which are essential for the student's emotional and social development. Long-term studies have shown that students who lack peer interaction opportunities may face challenges in post-school environments, including difficulties in work settings and social relationships (Carter et al., 2011).

c. Academic Progress

The academic impact of 1:1 paraeducator support is mixed. Some studies suggest that 1:1 paraeducators can help students stay on task and improve short-term academic outcomes, particularly for students with significant disabilities (Webster et al., 2010). However, over time, constant adult intervention may inhibit students from developing independent problem-solving skills and the ability to complete assignments without direct supervision. Researchers Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010) found that students who received more generalized support (such as from a classroom teacher or shared paraeducator) made similar, if not better, academic progress than those who had a dedicated 1:1 aide. This suggests that fostering student autonomy through less restrictive support models may lead to comparable or improved academic outcomes.

Alternative Models to 1:1 Support

Given the potential drawbacks of overreliance on 1:1 paraeducators, several alternative models have been proposed to better balance the need for support with the goal of fostering independence and social inclusion.

a. Collaborative Support Models

One of the most effective alternatives is the collaborative support model, which involves a shared paraeducator working with a group of students rather than providing exclusive support to one child. This model allows students to interact more freely with peers while still receiving necessary assistance. A study by Malmgren and Causton-Theoharis (2006) found that students in a shared paraeducator model were more likely to engage in cooperative learning activities and exhibited increased social interactions compared to students with 1:1 support.

b. Peer-Mediated Support

Peer-mediated strategies are another promising approach for reducing reliance on 1:1 paraeducators. This model involves training peers to provide academic and social support to students with disabilities. Research has shown that peer-mediated interventions can lead to significant improvements in both academic achievement and social skills for students with disabilities. Carter and Hughes (2005) found that students who participated in peer-mediated interventions demonstrated greater academic engagement and developed stronger relationships with classmates, which can lead to improved long-term outcomes.

c. Technology-Assisted Independence

The use of assistive technology can also help reduce the need for 1:1 paraeducator support by empowering students to complete tasks independently. For example, speech-to-text software, visual schedules, and task-prompting apps can help students with disabilities manage their work without requiring constant adult intervention. A study by Chiang and Jacobs (2010) demonstrated that students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who used visual supports and technology were able to complete more tasks independently, reducing the need for 1:1 assistance in the classroom.

Recommendations for Transitioning Away from 1:1 Support

a. Gradual Reduction and Monitoring

The transition away from 1:1 support should be gradual and carefully monitored. Teachers, special educators, and paraeducators should work together to develop transition plans that decrease the intensity of support as students build independence. Data-driven decision-making is key to ensuring that students continue to progress academically and socially during this transition. Regular progress monitoring and adjustments to the IEP will help ensure that the reduction in support does not negatively impact the student's development.

b. Professional Development for Paraeducators

To facilitate this transition, districts should invest in professional development for paraeducators. Training should focus on promoting student independence, using prompting hierarchies, and implementing fading strategies to gradually reduce support. Giangreco and Broer (2007) emphasize the importance of preparing paraeducators to understand the fine balance between providing necessary assistance and fostering student autonomy.

4. Conclusion

While 1:1 paraeducator support is necessary for some students, the research highlights the risks of overreliance, including limiting student independence, creating social isolation, and inhibiting academic growth. By shifting towards more flexible support models, such as shared paraeducators, peer-mediated interventions, and assistive technology, schools can promote a greater degree of autonomy and improve long-term outcomes for students with disabilities. A thoughtful, data-driven approach to reducing 1:1 support will help ensure that students develop the skills they need to succeed both academically and socially, while remaining in compliance with state and federal special education laws.

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Appendix C

Contemporary Educational Research on the Benefits and Deficits of 1:1 Paraeducator Support

The use of 1:1 paraeducators in special education remains a common practice in schools, designed to provide direct support to students with disabilities. While the model is effective for some students, contemporary educational research highlights both the benefits and potential drawbacks of relying on 1:1 support. Understanding the balance between when 1:1 paraeducator services are necessary and when they might hinder development is crucial for educators aiming to provide the most appropriate interventions.

Benefits of 1:1 Paraeducator Support

1. **Individualized Attention and Academic Support** One of the primary benefits of 1:1 paraeducators is the ability to provide individualized attention tailored to the specific needs of the student. Paraeducators can help implement personalized learning strategies, assist with task completion, and provide behavior management support as needed. According to Webster et al. (2013), students with complex learning needs benefit from direct instructional assistance that helps them engage with academic content and remain focused during class. This individualized support can also enhance access to the curriculum by adapting teaching strategies to the student's learning style.
2. **Behavioral and Emotional Support** Students with disabilities often require behavioral interventions to help them manage emotional and social challenges in the classroom. Research by Radford et al. (2015) emphasizes the positive impact of 1:1 paraeducators in supporting students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, helping them to navigate situations that might otherwise result in disciplinary actions or social isolation. Paraeducators can intervene in real-time, assisting students in managing anxiety, impulsivity, or frustration, which enables them to remain in the classroom rather than being removed to a more restrictive setting.
3. **Increased Access to Inclusive Education** The inclusion movement aims to integrate students with disabilities into general education classrooms. For students who need significant support, 1:1 paraeducators can be crucial in enabling access to inclusive environments. According to research by Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010), 1:1 paraeducator support often allows students with severe disabilities to participate in general education settings when they might otherwise be placed in more segregated environments. The presence of a paraeducator ensures that students have the help they need to navigate the academic and social demands of a mainstream classroom.
4. **Consistent Support Across School Settings** For students who have difficulty with transitions or unstructured settings, 1:1 paraeducators provide consistency throughout the school day. This continuity of support is particularly beneficial for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or those with severe developmental disabilities who struggle with changes in routine. When paraeducators accompany students across different educational settings (e.g., lunchroom, physical education, field trips), they can help ensure that students' behavioral and academic goals are supported in various contexts (Brock & Carter, 2013).

Deficits of 1:1 Paraeducator Support

1. **Overdependence and Lack of Independence** While 1:1 paraeducators can provide critical support, over-reliance on this assistance can inadvertently limit the development of self-sufficiency. Giangreco, Doyle, and Suter (2012) caution that continuous, one-on-one adult assistance can foster dependence, preventing students from learning how to complete tasks independently. This can become particularly problematic when paraeducators perform tasks for students that they are capable of completing on their own, such as organizing materials, initiating tasks, or answering questions. The lack of opportunities to build independence can hinder long-term success, as students may struggle when transitioning to less supported environments in adulthood.
2. **Social Isolation and Reduced Peer Interaction** Another concern is the potential for 1:1 paraeducators to isolate students from their peers. Giangreco and Broer (2005) describe how the close physical presence of a paraeducator can unintentionally act as a barrier between the student and their classmates, reducing opportunities for social interaction. When paraeducators assume a prominent role in the classroom, students may rely on the adult for communication and miss out on important peer-to-peer interactions. Over time, this can limit

the student's ability to build friendships and social skills, which are critical for overall development and future social functioning.

3. **Inconsistent Paraeducator Training** The quality of 1:1 paraeducator support often depends on the level of training and experience the paraeducator has received. Research indicates that paraeducators typically have limited professional training, especially in specialized instructional strategies or behavior management techniques (Brock & Anderson, 2020). This inconsistency can result in paraeducators not being equipped to implement evidence-based interventions effectively. For instance, a paraeducator may unintentionally reinforce negative behaviors or fail to properly support academic interventions due to a lack of knowledge. Therefore, while 1:1 support can be beneficial, its effectiveness largely hinges on the professional development and oversight provided to paraeducators.
4. **Resource Allocation and Cost Effectiveness** Providing 1:1 paraeducator support is resource-intensive and can strain school budgets. According to research by Blatchford et al. (2011), while 1:1 support can improve student engagement and classroom behavior in the short term, there is limited evidence that it leads to long-term academic improvements. This raises concerns about the cost-effectiveness of maintaining 1:1 paraeducator models, particularly when alternative support strategies (such as peer support models or assistive technology) may offer similar or better outcomes at a lower cost. Administrators must balance the need for individualized support with the broader goal of efficiently allocating resources to meet the needs of all students.

Contemporary Findings on Balanced Support Approaches

Contemporary research suggests that schools can achieve better outcomes by using flexible, balanced support approaches that reduce reliance on 1:1 paraeducators while promoting student independence and social engagement.

1. **Fading Support Strategies:** Gradually reducing 1:1 support over time, often referred to as "fading," is a strategy that can help students develop independence. Research by Brock and Carter (2015) emphasizes that systematic fading—where the intensity of support is reduced as students demonstrate increased competence—can help students take on more responsibility for their own learning and behavior. This approach allows students to build skills in a scaffolded manner while still providing support when necessary.
2. **Peer-Mediated Support:** Incorporating peer-mediated support models, where peers are retrained to assist students with disabilities, can reduce the need for 1:1 paraeducators while enhancing social integration. Carter and Kennedy (2006) found that peer-mediated interventions not only improved academic engagement for students with disabilities but also fostered stronger peer relationships. This model can promote inclusion and reduce dependency on adults by allowing students to interact and learn from their classmates.
3. **Shared Paraeducator Models:** In some schools, shared paraeducator models have been introduced as an alternative to 1:1 support. In these models, paraeducators are assigned to multiple students or provide support across different classrooms. Research by Webster et al. (2010) indicates that shared paraeducator models can maintain the benefits of individualized attention while encouraging more student-to-student interaction and greater independence.

Conclusion

While 1:1 paraeducator support offers significant benefits for students with disabilities, particularly in terms of individualized academic and behavioral assistance, contemporary research underscores the risks of overreliance. Potential deficits include limiting independence, isolating students from their peers, and placing strain on school resources. To address these issues, schools should explore flexible support models, including fading strategies, peer-mediated interventions, and shared paraeducator arrangements, which maintain necessary support while fostering student autonomy and inclusion. These balanced approaches, combined with appropriate training and oversight for paraeducators, can lead to more sustainable and effective outcomes for students in special education.

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Appendix D

Rubric for Evaluating Paraeducator Utilization and Ensuring Effective Goal Achievement

This rubric is designed to assess how paraeducators are being utilized in special education settings and whether their support aligns with student goals, ensuring efficient and effective strategies for promoting independence, academic achievement, and social development. The rubric evaluates multiple domains, including paraeducator-student interactions, collaboration with teachers, and alignment with IEP goals.

Criteria	Exemplary (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Ineffective (1)
1. Alignment with IEP Goals	Paraeducator consistently implements strategies directly aligned with IEP goals, demonstrating a deep understanding of student needs.	Paraeducator implements most strategies aligned with IEP goals and demonstrates an understanding of student needs.	Some IEP-aligned strategies are implemented, but support is inconsistent or not fully tailored to student needs.	Limited or no alignment with IEP goals, paraeducator demonstrates a lack of understanding of student needs.
2. Fostering Student Independence	Paraeducator promotes independence by encouraging students to complete tasks on their own whenever possible and using fading support strategies effectively.	Paraeducator encourages some independent work but may intervene more frequently than necessary. Uses basic fading strategies.	Limited encouragement of independence. Paraeducator performs many tasks for the student that could be self-directed.	Paraeducator creates student dependency by consistently performing tasks for them, with no fading strategies.
3. Collaboration with Teachers	Paraeducator works closely with the teacher, engaging in daily planning and sharing insights to improve student outcomes.	Paraeducator collaborates with the teacher on a regular basis but could be more proactive in sharing insights and strategies.	Paraeducator has minimal collaboration with the teacher, primarily following directives without engaging in planning.	Paraeducator rarely collaborates with the teacher, leading to disjointed or inconsistent support.

4. Communication with Students	Communicates effectively, using positive reinforcement, clear instructions, and responsive interactions that support learning and social goals.	Communicates clearly most of the time but may not consistently use positive reinforcement or varied strategies.	Communication is adequate but lacks depth or consistency. Limited use of instructional or behavioral strategies.	Communication is ineffective, unclear, or overly directive, with little focus on promoting student understanding.
5. Use of Time and Resources	Paraeducator uses time efficiently, balancing support across academic, behavioral, and social needs, without over-reliance on direct intervention.	Paraeducator generally uses time well but may need better balance between academic and behavioral support.	Some inefficiencies in time management, with either over- or under-utilization of direct intervention.	Significant inefficiencies in time management, with inappropriate use of direct support or resource allocation.
6. Supporting Peer Interactions	Paraeducator facilitates positive peer interactions, ensuring the student has opportunities to engage with classmates and develop social skills.	Paraeducator occasionally facilitates peer interactions but may not consistently prioritize these opportunities.	Paraeducator provides limited opportunities for peer interaction, focusing primarily on 1:1 support with the student.	Paraeducator isolates the student, limiting or preventing opportunities for peer interaction.
7. Professional Development	Paraeducator actively engages in ongoing professional development, applying new strategies to improve student outcomes.	Paraeducator participates in professional development but may not consistently apply new strategies in the classroom.	Minimal engagement in professional development, with limited application of new strategies to student support.	Paraeducator does not engage in professional development or shows no improvement in strategy application.

8. Adapting to Student Needs	Paraeducator shows flexibility, adapting support strategies in response to student progress, needs, or changes in the classroom environment.	Paraeducator adapts some strategies in response to student needs but may rely heavily on established routines.	Paraeducator struggles to adapt strategies, often following routines that do not fully address student needs.	Paraeducator shows little to no adaptability, maintaining rigid support routines even when student needs change.
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Strategies to Ensure Goals Are Met Efficiently and Effectively

1. Ongoing Training and Professional Development

Provide regular, targeted training sessions for paraeducators focusing on:

- Understanding and implementing IEP goals.
- Promoting student independence through fading and prompting hierarchies.
- Encouraging peer-mediated strategies and communication skills.

2. Collaborative Planning

Establish regular meeting times between paraeducators and teachers to discuss:

- Student progress towards IEP goals.
- Adjustments to support strategies as student progress.
- Insights on student behavior, independence, and peer interaction.

3. Data-Driven Decision Making

Incorporate:

- Regular progress monitoring using academic, behavioral, and social data.
- Adjustments to paraeducator involvement based on data to ensure that support is reduced as appropriate to promote independence.

4. Focus on Fading Support

Encourage paraeducators to:

- Gradually reduce the intensity of support as students demonstrate progress.
- Use prompting hierarchies to allow students more opportunities for independent work.

5. Promote Peer Interaction

Train paraeducators to:

- Facilitate peer interactions by integrating the student into group work or social settings.
- Reduce instances where the paraeducator becomes the primary social partner for the student, encouraging natural peer relationships.

Appendix E Stages of the Fading Plan

Stage 1: Full Support (Baseline)

- **Description:** At the beginning of the fading process, the paraeducator provides full 1:1 support in academic, behavioral, and social tasks as outlined in the IEP.
 - **Paraeducator Role:** Direct, continuous support with proximity to the student, assisting with academic tasks, behavior management, and facilitating social interactions.
 - **Duration:** 2-4 weeks (or longer if necessary) while the student builds readiness for increased independence.
 - **Evaluation:** Assess the student's current level of dependence on the paraeducator and identify areas where fading might be most successful (e.g., independent work, peer interactions).

Stage 2: Task-Specific Support

- **Description:** The paraeducator begins to reduce direct involvement in specific tasks where the student demonstrates competence or emerging independence.
 - **Academic:** Paraeducator assists only with difficult tasks; for routine activities, the student works independently with occasional check-ins.
 - **Behavioral:** Paraeducator provides prompts or reminders for behavior management but encourages the student to self-regulate as much as possible.
 - **Social:** The paraeducator encourages more peer interactions, stepping back from facilitating conversations unless necessary.
 - **Paraeducator Role:** Reduced proximity; the paraeducator monitors from a distance and steps in only when required.
 - **Duration:** 4-6 weeks, with bi-weekly progress monitoring.
 - **Evaluation:** Collect data on the student's ability to complete tasks independently. Track behavioral progress and peer interaction levels.

Stage 3: Intermittent Support

- **Description:** The paraeducator provides support only when the student shows signs of needing help during specific academic or behavioral challenges.
 - **Academic:** The student works independently most of the time; the paraeducator provides help only during more complex activities or at the student's request.
 - **Behavioral:** The paraeducator steps in only when necessary to prevent or address behavioral incidents; otherwise, the student self-manages.
 - **Social:** The student engages with peers more naturally; the paraeducator does not intervene unless peer interactions require mediation.
 - **Paraeducator Role:** Paraeducator steps in on an as-needed basis, focusing on moments of challenge or complexity.
 - **Duration:** 6-8 weeks with continuous assessment and team feedback.
 - **Evaluation:** Monitor the student's response to reduced support. Adjust fading pace if setbacks are observed.

Stage 4: As-Needed Support

- **Description:** Paraeducator support is minimized, with assistance provided only when the student explicitly requests help or when the situation requires immediate intervention (e.g., a behavioral crisis or complex academic task).

- **Academic:** The student works independently in most academic areas, with paraeducator help available only for new or advanced tasks.
- **Behavioral:** The student manages their behavior independently; the paraeducator provides occasional feedback or reinforcement as needed.
- **Social:** The student participates in social activities with minimal or no paraeducator involvement.
- **Paraeducator Role:** On-call support, but the paraeducator is not assigned to the student for continuous monitoring.
- **Duration:** 8-10 weeks with regular team review meetings.
- **Evaluation:** Data collection on student performance with little to no paraeducator intervention. Determine if the student can maintain progress without significant support.

Stage 5: Full Independence (Sunset of 1:1 Support)

- **Description:** The student functions independently in academic, behavioral, and social settings. The paraeducator is no longer assigned to the student on a 1:1 basis but may provide occasional check-ins or support during critical moments.
 - **Academic:** The student independently completes tasks, seeks help from the teacher or peers when necessary, and engages in self-directed learning.
 - **Behavioral:** The student consistently self-regulates and meets behavioral goals without paraeducator intervention.
 - **Social:** The student engages with peers and participates in group activities without needing adult facilitation.
 - **Paraeducator Role:** No longer assigned for 1:1 support; may be reassigned to other students or general classroom duties.
 - **Duration:** Ongoing, with periodic reviews to ensure continued independence.
 - **Evaluation:** Final assessment to ensure that the student's IEP goals are being met independently. Continued progress monitoring to prevent regression.

Monitoring and Evaluation

- **Weekly Data Collection:** Track student performance in academic tasks, behavior management, and social interactions. Use this data to guide decisions about further reductions in paraeducator support.
- **Progress Meetings:** Regular team meetings (e.g., every 4-6 weeks) to review student progress, update the IEP as needed, and adjust the fading plan.
- **Parent Communication:** Involve parents in the process by providing regular updates on the student's progress and discussing the benefits of increasing independence.

Support Strategies for Successful Fading

1. **Use of Assistive Technology:** Introduce tools such as visual schedules, timers, or apps to support the student's transition to independence.
2. **Peer-Mediated Support:** Encourage peer support strategies, where classmates assist the student in areas of need, reducing reliance on adults.
3. **Fading Prompts:** Use a hierarchy of prompts (from verbal to visual to gesture) to reduce the level of direct intervention gradually.
4. **Positive Reinforcement:** Reward independence and self-advocacy by providing positive feedback when the student completes tasks without adult assistance.

Conclusion

This fading plan ensures a thoughtful, research-based approach to reducing 1:1 paraeducator support while promoting student independence and skill development. It is flexible enough to accommodate the individual needs of students and can be adjusted as progress is made, with the ultimate goal of achieving full independence. Regular data monitoring and collaboration between the IEP team and family are essential for the plan's success.

Appendix F
Student feedback on 1:1 Paraeducator Support-Sample

Dear student,

Prior to your Team meeting please share some of your thoughts regarding your para educator support.

1:1 Para Support Feedback Checklist

Tell us about your experience with 1:1 para support. Your feedback will help us figure out the best ways to help you. Please be honest—we want to make sure we are meeting your needs!

1. How often do you currently use 1:1 para support?

- Daily
- A few times a week
- Occasionally (less than once a week)
- Rarely
- Never

2. How helpful is the 1:1 para support in the following areas?

(Please check all that apply)

- Academic support (e.g., help with assignments, understanding lessons)
- Organization and time management
- Emotional or social support
- Physical support (e.g., mobility, classroom assistance)
- Behavior management
- None of the above

3. Do you feel you need 1:1 para support during certain times of the day?

- Yes
- If yes, when? (Please specify: morning classes, lunch, specific subjects, etc.)
- No

4. Do you think the 1:1 para support helps you achieve your goals in school?

- Yes, definitely
- Somewhat
- Not really
- No, not at all

5. If you are not currently using 1:1 para support, do you think it would be helpful to you?

- Yes, I think it would be helpful
- Maybe, I'm not sure
- No, I don't think I need it

6. What areas do you feel you need more support in (whether from a para or another type of support)?

- Academics
- Social interactions
- Managing emotions or stress
- Staying focused or organized
- Physical mobility or tasks
- Other (Please specify):

7. How would you rate the overall experience of working with a 1:1 para?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

8. Do you have any suggestions for improving the 1:1 para support you receive?

9. Would you prefer more independence and fewer 1:1 supports?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

How do you imagine what that would look like? Please describe. (older students)

10. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience or needs regarding 1:1 para support?



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Initial Payroll Process Overview

Payroll Department
Amherst-Pelham Regional School District
November 8, 2024

DRAFT – for discussion purposes
only

Findings & Recommendations

Manual Processes (High Risk)

Observation:

The Payroll department doesn't currently leverage automated systems to full capacity, which leads to a range of significant challenges impacting efficiency and accuracy, while also introducing notable risks to the organization.

Risks noted during on site visit 10/31 :

1. Manual Processing Issues:

- The department relies on labor-intensive manual procedures, increasing the likelihood of errors in payroll calculations and resulting in discrepancies that can undermine employee trust and satisfaction.

2. Tight Turnaround Time:

- With a limited processing window of only three days—further compressed during holiday weeks—the department struggles to ensure thorough checks and balances, heightening the risk of inaccuracies and delayed payments.

3. Complex Reconciliation Tasks:

- Reconciling timecards from AESOP requires meticulous attention to detail, as staff must manually adjust for sick time, PTO, and AWOP. The necessity to sift through over 100 printed pages of reports from AESOP to account for extra shifts, translator services, etc. and make the respective adjustments manually in Munis adds further complexity and time consumption.

4. Inconsistent Rounding Practices:

- While Veritime is designed to round to the nearest quarter, discrepancies often occur, necessitating manual recalculations by HR. This not only adds to the workload but also introduces additional potential for errors.

5. Manual Pay Cards:

- They keep manual salary pay cards for each employee to track compensation data. If they lose the card there is no backup of this information.

Recommendations:

(1) – (3): These compounding challenges emphasize the urgent need for an effective automated payroll solution. The time keeping system and payroll system should be integrated to make the payroll process less time-consuming. Implementing such a system would streamline processes, ensure timely completion of payroll reconciliation, and enhance accuracy decreasing room for error.

(4): Establish a process for conducting routine system configuration check-ups to ensure all system settings and coding are properly aligned with operational standards.

(5): Ensure that all manual pay cards are stored electronically to eliminate the risk of loss or misplacement, safeguarding accuracy and ensuring seamless record-keeping.

Findings & Recommendations

Payroll Processes Including Policies and Procedures (**High Risk**)

Observation:

The payroll department doesn't have proper formal processes and policies in place for employee workflow, leading to significant issues in managing employee transitions and payroll accuracy.

Risks noted during on site visit 10/31:

1. Lack of Notification for Returning Employees:

- Two employees returned from leave of absence but were not processed back into payroll runs due to lack of communication from HR

2. Absence of Contract Signing:

- Payroll department didn't have the new contracts for employees upon their return, as there was no notification or formal process in place.

3. Automatic Opt-In to Previous Elections:

- Employees were automatically opted into the same elections as the prior year without their consent, which may not reflect their current preferences or needs.

4. Lack of Review:

- Payroll employees can enter new contract compensation information into system without any formal process of review.

Continued on next slide

Recommendations:

(1) – (3): Implement a policy requiring HR to promptly notify the payroll department of any employee status changes, including terminations/separations, leaves of absence, and other significant updates, to ensure timely and accurate payroll processing. Additionally, establish a checklist for employees, HR, and payroll to complete, ensuring all necessary steps are followed and documented for each changes.

(4): Develop a structured process for the delegated prepared and reviewed to ensure the accurate entry and review of all compensation information in the system.

Findings & Recommendations

Payroll Processes Including Policies and Procedures (**High Risk**)

1. Issues with Payroll Adjustments:

- A payroll specialist received an email after payroll was locked from an employee's supervisor requesting to unlock payroll because an employee forgot to clock in leading to extended payroll processing times.
- The payroll team will receive emails requesting changes for employees they witnessed forgetting to punch out, leading to ad-hoc adjustments without proper documentation, adds to their workload, and increases risk of error

2. Incomplete Time Cards:

- Payroll received a manual time card for somebody who worked an open house but the time card lacked a pay rate as well as the account code so they had to follow-up.

3. Reliance on Institutional Knowledge

- The interim head custodian was not receiving the correct pay. Pay should have been increased for his interim role and he was also not eligible for the shift differential. Payroll was referencing an internal spreadsheet with pay amounts that hadn't been updated.

4. Complex Contracts

- Multiple collective bargaining agreements that grant employees eligibility for various stipends, differentials, etc.

5. Password Safety

- Munis requires employees to utilize a long pre-populated password but we observed the password written on a note on the desk unsecured.

Recommendations:

(5) – (6): Leverage stand-up meetings with staff to ensure that all school-wide employees are fully informed of payroll cutoff times for time submissions and the importance of submitting complete time cards. Emphasize that there will be no exceptions to these deadlines and restrictions.

(7) – (8) Ensure that electronic documentation is available outlining employee compensation eligibility under collective bargaining agreements, enabling newly trained staff to easily track and verify eligibility criteria.

(9) Provide the payroll department with comprehensive password security and data protection training to ensure that passwords are securely managed and not left unprotected, minimizing the risk of data breaches.

Findings & Recommendations

System Inaccuracies (Moderate Risk)

Observation:

The payroll department has system inconsistencies that can lead to inaccuracies and the risk of incorrect pay for employees. These issues not only threaten employee confidence and trust but also create potential compliance risks for the organization.

Risks noted during on site visit 10/31:

1. Inconsistent Rounding Practices:

- The school district's policy is to round time to the nearest quarter, but occasionally it recalculates punched-out time to the exact decimal, resulting in potential pay inconsistencies.

2. Creation of Vacancy Positions:

- Substitute time is tied to teacher absences, but there are instances where substitute time is not tied to a teacher absence because employees can create vacancy positions in the overtime app for substitutes to pick up, which may lead to unauthorized or unverified shifts being filled.

3. Duplicated Entries in Munis:

- Employees have multiple profiles in the Munis system for if they perform work for different districts, which could potentially lead to confusion and payroll errors. Employees who work in all 3 will have 3 employee numbers and we received 3 W2s.

4. Wage Calculation:

- Pay rates displayed by the Munis system cannot be easily reconciled to the employee's contract which leads to confusion among employees. The Munis system recalculates salary and hourly wages using its own metrics for calculations

Recommendations:

(1) - (2): Establish a process for conducting routine system configuration check-ups to ensure all system settings and coding are properly aligned with operational standards.

(3): Explore the capabilities of the Munis system and reach out to determine if there is a way to consolidate profiles into a single, unified record, simplifying the tracking of compensation.

(4): Revise and optimize Munis system inputs to ensure that employees can easily compare their contracted compensation with the amounts displayed on their pay stubs.

Findings & Recommendations

Payroll Staffing (Moderate Risk)

Observation:

The payroll department performs tasks outside their scope of duties, which lowers their bandwidth to complete essential duties. This over-reliance on payroll for changes and ad hoc tasks can lead to inefficiencies and errors.

Risks noted during on site visit 10/31:

1. Infrequent Communication with HR:

- Lack of clear, consistent, timely communications between HR and payroll, resulting in situations where employees are reinstated at the HR level without payroll being informed.

2. Performing Town of Pelham Payroll:

- Payroll submissions from the town are often accompanied by only a printout from the treasurer, with numbers for each employee, leading to follow-up adjustments that may not be timely or accurate.

3. Lack of Backup Support:

- There is no backup payroll specialist ; when the payroll specialist is out, they have had to process payroll from home, which can compromise efficiency and accuracy.
- If the payroll specialist physically can not work, there isn't a designated employee that can process payroll. 2 part time employees have been hired for assistance, one of which retired from the department

Recommendations:

(1): Set up a defined communication process between HR and Payroll, such as regularly scheduled meetings (ex. Weekly or bi-weekly) to discuss updates about employee status changes or any payroll related organizational changes.

(2): Develop a standardized payroll submission template that includes comprehensive details for each employee, such as hours worked, pay rates, adjustments, etc.

(3): Provide comprehensive training to other payroll department employees ensuring they are fully equipped to execute payroll tasks in the absence of the primary payroll specialist.



APPENDICES
APPENDICES

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Appendix A – Risk Rating Chart

High	<p>Issue represents a control weakness which could have, or is having, a significant adverse effect on the ability to achieve process objectives.</p> <p>Requires prompt management action.</p>
Moderate	<p>Issue represents a control weakness which could have, or is having, an adverse effect on the ability to achieve process objectives.</p> <p>Requires short-term management action.</p>
Low	<p>Issue represents a minor control weakness, with minimal but reportable impact on the ability to achieve process objectives.</p> <p>Requires management action within a reasonable and defined time-period.</p>

Appendix B – Department Interviews

Interviewees:

Name	Title
Monica Torres	Payroll Specialist Lead (on leave)
Jill Berry	Treasurer
Jennifer Ortiz	HR Director
Yahdira Torres	HR Admin
Kate Holcomb	Budget Administrator
Shannon Bernacchia	Assistant Finance Director
Edgardo Luciano	Accounts Payable
Pedro Rios	Accounts Payable
Lesley Howard	Payroll Specialist Lead (acting)
Kathy Vassallo	Payroll Specialist
Jennifer Eichorn	Payroll Specialist

Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools

Supporting and Retaining School Leaders

Prepared by: Rick Rogers

January 2022

INTRODUCTION

Superintendent Michael Morris requested this qualitative study of principals' experiences as school leaders in the Amherst-Pelham Regional schools due to concerns about principal turnover in the district.

Purpose of the Study

- Identify common stressors and barriers contributing to school leaders not remaining in the district long-term.
- Understand the attributes and dispositions of school leaders necessary for success in the district in order to recruit and better support future leaders.
- Report findings and make recommendations related to hiring, onboarding, supporting school leaders new to the district, as well as supporting and retaining current leaders.

BACKGROUND

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District

The district has had more than typical turnover in school leadership in several schools.

- Three schools have had long-term stable leadership of ten or more years. (Crocker Farm, Wildwood, and Summit Academy).
- Two schools have new principals in their second year after having four leaders in ten years (Amherst Regional High School) and five principals in ten years (Amherst Regional Middle School).
- Two schools (Pelham and Fort River) currently have interim principals after having three leaders in ten years (Pelham) and five principals in ten years (Fort River).
- The Early Education Administrator is in her second year.

The Principal Matters

Principals play a crucial role in cultivating a school culture in which staff, students, and families feel safe, cared for, and valued. A recent research report commissioned by the Wallace Foundation (Grissom et al. 2021) reinforces earlier research, finding strong evidence of the impact that effective school leaders have on student achievement, school climate, and equity work.

The nature of relationships among the adults in schools has the greatest potential to shape school culture – and thus student learning. Relational trust is critical to a healthy school culture and social and academic outcomes for students (Bryk & Schneider, 2004). Zaretta Hammond's work on culturally responsive teaching challenges educators to "create an environment that the brain

perceives as safe and nurturing so it can relax, let go of any stress, and turn its attention to learning” (Hammond, 2015). This idea can be applied to adults as well.

Principal turnover can “jeopardize school improvement efforts, fracture school community relationships and erase institutional memory. Inclusive and culturally responsive reforms require time, coordination, and sustained leadership efforts to be successful, so historically marginalized student groups are disproportionately harmed by turnover.” (DeMatthews 2021)

Principals Under Pressure

At the same time, we know that principals experience substantial job-related stress that can compromise their personal well-being as well as their leadership (Mahfouz, 2020; Mahfouz et al., 2019). School leaders often end up “holding” the feelings of stress or anxiety for those in their communities, contributing to their own overload.

Principals were facing increasingly complex expectations and challenges even before the pandemic when nearly 20% of principals were leaving their schools each year (DeMatthews 2021). The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) updated their professional standards for educational leaders in 2015 and noted: “The world in which schools operate today is very different from the one of just a few years ago—and all signs point to more change ahead...Without question, such changes are creating myriad challenges for educational leaders.”

In a special report *Principals Under Pressure* (2018), Education Week writers conducted months of interviews with principals across the country. Principals reported their biggest challenges included: “Safety, student mental health, dealing with toxic employees, handling the complex needs of special education students and their families, holding on to the best teachers, and time management and work-life balance.”

This situation has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. In December 2021, the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) conducted a survey of over 500 Pre-K-12 principals. They found that nearly 40% of principals are expecting to leave the profession in the next three years. They noted that the pandemic has had a great deal of impact on their role with 79% reporting they are working harder, 73% working long hours and 62% having a harder time than ever doing their jobs.

They also noted that a tense political environment was accelerating some leaders’ decision to leave the profession. 34% report receiving online threats and 29% report receiving in-person threats from parents or guardians with similar but slightly lower percentages reporting threats from members of the community (NASSP 2021).

To survive and thrive, school leaders must be given support to develop their own capacity to handle stress, build trust, and cultivate caring and culturally responsive schools.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews or focus groups were conducted with a total of 16 past and present administrators. Two different focus groups were held, one consisting of current principals with longevity in the district and a second consisting of current principals who were newer to their roles. Individual interviews were conducted with six former principals, some current assistant principals, as well as the Assistant Superintendent for Diversity, Equity & Human Resources and the Superintendent.

It should be noted that each situation related to an individual principal's decision to leave is unique with its own narrative. The focus of the study is on identifying common underlying themes and possible patterns.

The author of this report has no past affiliation with or prior knowledge of the Amherst-Pelham schools. Statements describing the schools and community were made by the respondents themselves. The author's lens was one of a long-time principal in multiple districts and as someone who works to support current schools leaders and to train those aspiring to a leadership role.

INTERVIEW THEMES

Positives of Working in the Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools

All those interviewed were asked what they loved or valued about working in Amherst.

Common responses included:

- Diversity of the student body and community
- Commitment to social justice and anti-racism
- Support from the Superintendent: including regular individual meetings with principals, accessibility and willingness to listen
- Faculty: Words used to describe teachers included brilliant and passionate.
- Family support and involvement
- Intellectual Stimulation: In the words of one respondent: "This is a smart community where people want to do the work."
- Administrative Team: The current group of leaders was viewed as supportive and collaborative.

Those who came from outside the district were asked what drew them to apply to the Amherst schools. Some mentioned being encouraged to apply. Others talked about their desire to live in a place that had a diverse population but was not a large city. BIPOC leaders noted the importance of living in a place where they did not have to be the "only voice" for diversity and where their own children could see themselves. Some leaders cited a need to relocate to the area for family reasons.

Challenges of Working in Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools

- A Culture that Questions Decisions: Respondents all described the unique culture of Amherst as a challenge – even more so for those coming to Amherst from outside the district. Amherst was described as a community that values discourse and consensus, but

that also questions or challenges most decisions. In the words of one respondent, “I fully expect that any decision I make will be questioned.”

Most of the respondents described a cynicism about or lack of respect for school leaders that included, in some cases, challenging qualifications or, in other cases, questioning positive intent.

Several respondents described Amherst as a place that is quick to judge, “draw a line in the sand,” or is unforgiving when mistakes are made. A few described Amherst as a place where some staff, families and community members have a belief that “We know better.” Some also noted the intense following of local politics (School Committee meetings, town finance discussions, etc.) by members of the community may be contributing to the challenge.

- **Public Criticism Turns Personal:** Respondents acknowledged that discourse and dissent are expected and welcome. What was stressful, however, was when public criticism turned to personal attacks - “behind my back,” in public meetings, and in online postings. Respondents cited examples where they felt a negative “narrative” quickly developed around them or a colleague. These narratives involved being referred to as a (gender-based pejorative), a misogynist, or a white supremacist.
- **Outspoken Families and Community Members:** While Amherst was described as a community that values discourse and dissent, most respondents described an impression that only loud voices were being heard – and getting their way. When a small, but vocal, group is opposed to a decision, it becomes challenging to move forward. In some cases, parents or community members feel “I know better” and believe, in the words of one respondent: “I have a right to say what I want, how I want.” Leaders find it most challenging when this “how” becomes negative and personal.
- **Variations in Staff Relational Trust:** Issues involving trust vary widely among and within schools. In any school with frequent turnover in leadership, a lack of trust tends to be more prevalent. Respondents described factions or “power pods” within some schools. Several respondents cited an “us vs. them” feeling between some administrators and staff. Others cited a lack of openness to change or a lack of accountability for “bad behavior.” Several people noted that many staff reside in the community and that this can contribute to boundaries being crossed when staff who are unhappy with a decision try to enlist parents and community members to oppose it.
- **Social Justice - Mixed Message on Meaningful Change:** Some respondents raised a concern that while Amherst has a clearly stated value of promoting social and racial justice, there needed to be less talk and more openness to meaningful change.

Reasons for Turnover

Those interviewed were asked what they felt contributed to turnover among principals in Amherst. Those who left the district were asked their reasons for leaving. Among the themes that emerged:

- “Culture shock” was mentioned across most respondents, particularly when coming in as an outsider. Many respondents commented on the need for outsiders to recognize and learn to maneuver within a culture where everything is up for debate and it can be difficult to make final decisions. A few quoted the phrase: “Amherst - where only the ‘h’ is silent.” In some cases, respondents identified a lack of respect (from both staff and families) as a surprising part of this culture. Interestingly, veteran principals cited “coming up through the ranks” as contributing to their longevity.
- Pressure and Attacks: Several respondents noted instances where loud voices from the community led opposition to certain principals and, in some cases, contributed to a feeling of the principal being targeted by a certain individual or group. Several people who left noted feeling that a negative narrative had developed about them that they could not overcome. In the words of one administrator, “When people get a notion about you, it’s hard to change that perception.” Another described their time in Amherst as “the most difficult time of my career.” In the words of one leader: “I could not put my family through that type of public embarrassment.”
- Resistance to change was cited across all respondents. Those who have worked in the district for a length of time noted that some new people came in and tried to make changes too quickly.

Role of Identity

Administrators were asked to comment on how identity (notably gender, race and LGBTQ+ identification) may be contributing to challenges faced by principals. It is worth noting that the longest serving administrators (Superintendent and three principals) are all white men. It is also noteworthy that most of the principals who have left the district have been women.

BIPOC leaders may feel additional pressure to prove themselves both to the dominant culture AND to the expectations of members of the group with which they identify. They were more likely to report having their qualifications questioned.

Some women leaders reported feeling that their gender contributed to a lack of respect and they were more likely to be the subject of comments about their age, appearance or eating habits. Some felt gender contributed to a negative narrative (e.g. “She never smiles.”) developing around them.

Some principals stated they felt these issues were no different than other places they had worked. Others felt that the issues (particularly for women) were more pronounced in Amherst.

No one reported LGBTQ+ identification as an issue with several people underscoring a feeling of strong support in the community.

Supports In Place for Principals

Those interviewed were asked to identify the supports that were available and helpful for principals currently. Among those listed:

- **Superintendent:** Every person interviewed cited Superintendent Mike Morris as a key support they experience or experienced as a principal in Amherst. In particular, his regular individual meetings with principals, as well as his accessibility at other times were noted. (*Author's Note: The unanimity of agreement about his support is a rare and remarkable testament to a Superintendent.*)
- **Other Central Office Support:** Some principals, particularly newer principals cited Assistant Superintendent for Diversity, Equity & Human Resources Doreen Cunningham for her support with difficult personnel issues and her work to support BIPOC staff. Two people noted receiving support from Director of Student Services Faye Brady.
- **School-Based Administrative Team:** Several people noted having the support of a strong administrative team in their school. Working with an Assistant Principal who knew and understood the district was particularly helpful for leaders coming from outside the district.
- **Some Mentoring:** More recently, new principals have been provided with a formal mentor from outside the district – a support that participants valued and appreciated. Mentoring from within the district was mentioned as somewhat helpful but has been more informal or was not well-matched in terms of experience and level.

Additional Supports Needed

Participants were asked to identify new or additional supports they felt would be helpful for principals. Among the ideas suggested:

- Formalize and enhance mentor support, including better matching with internal mentors, expectations around frequency of meetings, a list of topics for mentors to address over the course of the school year.
- Provide more formal and ongoing introduction to the Amherst culture, including language, expectations, a blueprint for entry, and guidance around procedures (e.g. contracts, educator evaluation).
- Work with schools who are searching for a new principal to identify what the community wants and needs from a new leader at this moment in time. Develop a school plan for welcoming and supporting the entry of a new principal.
- Provide central office support in responding to and setting limits with outspoken voices in the community who oppose a school-based decision.
- Bring back and increase the frequency of district leadership meetings devoted to consulting with peers around problems of practice.
- Consider providing affinity group opportunities for women leaders and BIPOC leaders.

Attributes & Dispositions

Participants were asked what attributes or dispositions were most critical for a principal to have in order to be successful in Amherst. Among the themes identified were:

- Strong communication and interpersonal skills
- Ability to listen – “even when you don’t want to”
- Remain composed without getting defensive

- High degree of comfort with shared leadership
- Decision making: Includes others in decision-making. Openness to having the conversation and listening to dissent. Ability to make a final decision in the face of different voices
- Clear core beliefs and vision in order to stay focused on students
- Willingness and ability to build trust and make change over time
- Thick skin

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Two-Way Entry Planning:** The district should define and formalize an expected process to support the entry of new school leaders. In many districts, new principals are expected to create an entry plan for how they will learn about, build relationships, and begin to work with their new school community. This plan is often communicated to the school community and typically a principal would report out on findings at midyear. However, entry should be a two-way process. The district should create a blueprint of areas that should be part of supporting the successful entry of a new principal – along with a designated person responsible for each area. The plan should include technology & systems support (e.g. orienting new administrators to student management systems, supervision and evaluation tools, etc.) and key processes and procedures (e.g. union contracts, supervision & evaluation process, student discipline procedures, etc.). New principals should be provided with a “Who to Call” list of people in the district responsible for key areas.
2. **Enhance Current Mentor Supports:** The district should strengthen its recent efforts to provide mentoring to new leaders and leaders new to the district.
 - The district should develop a description of suggested areas to be addressed with a mentor over the course of the year, as well as a suggested schedule that includes starting work during the summer prior to the start of school, meeting more frequently (ideally twice a month) during the first half of the year, and continuing to meet at least monthly.
 - All principals new to the role (whether promoted from within or hired from elsewhere) should be assigned an external mentor. An external mentor serves as a confidential and neutral sounding board to discuss issues and concerns. A mentor should also address goals identified by the principal and district. Finally, an effective mentor can build leadership capacity by helping the principal step back from daily work in order to reflect on implications for their leadership.
 - Any principal new to Amherst-Pelham, regardless of prior experience should be assigned a district mentor or “docent,” who can guide and advise the principal on navigating Amherst culture, expectations and processes. Docents should be carefully selected and matched in terms of level and areas within which the new principal may need extra support.
 - Some districts also provide periodic group meetings with new administrators (4-6 per year) in order to ensure that key areas are addressed. The group sessions have the added benefit of enabling new principals to gain support and insights from others new to the district.

- 3. Enhance Central Office and Peer Support:** A key strong point in the current system of support for new school leaders is clearly the regular meetings and access to the Superintendent. This should continue. At the same time, however, there may be issues that arise that a principal feels do not warrant the attention of the Superintendent. And no matter how supportive the current Superintendent is, there may be issues principals don't feel comfortable raising with their direct supervisor or that may benefit from a different perspective.

The Assistant Superintendent currently meets regularly with some of the newer principals. This support should be more clearly defined and expanded as a way to provide another layer of central office support so that responsibility can be shared with the Superintendent. In some cases (Early Childhood, Assistant Principals), the Director of Student Services could be considered as an additional support person.

Finally, several principals (both current and former) mentioned past opportunities to discuss problems of practice with colleagues (using a structured protocol) during district leadership team meetings. The district should consider providing these opportunities again on a more regular basis. Several people described the current leadership group as collaborative and supportive. This type of work could strengthen the level of peer support.

- 4. Hiring Process:** Central office staff expressed satisfaction with the current hiring process for new principals. Principals who came from elsewhere described the process as thorough with opportunities to meet with staff and families. For unavoidable reasons, some principals were appointed without the benefit of the full process, but this was the exception, not the rule. This thorough vetting process should be continued as it increases the opportunity of finding a good match - both ways. That said, the district should define and make more explicit the attributes and dispositions that are most needed to be successful in Amherst. Particular emphasis should be placed on a willingness and ability to share leadership and to engage in discourse around most decisions.
- 5. A Community Conversation:** The district should consider engaging the larger community in a public conversation about supporting and retaining school leaders. Among the areas to be explored:
 - How to maintain open and respectful dialogue in the face of disagreements and ensure that all voices in the community are heard. In a recent column on leadership, Joshua Starr, Chief Executive Officer of PDK International and a former district superintendent put it this way: "Every member of the public has a right to approach the board and make their case. However, angry outbursts only contribute to the sound and fury, adding nothing of use to what is already a fraught decision-making process."
 - An honest self-assessment of how gender and race may be impacting how school leaders are welcomed and treated.

- How to slow down the rush to judgement and to be more forgiving of mistakes before a “narrative” develops around an individual school leader.
- How to respond when dissent turns to personal attacks in public meetings or online. Create a public “circuit breaker” - the equivalent of the “ouch” rule used by teams to enable individuals to signal that a line has been crossed that is offensive or is making them feel targeted.

Closing Thoughts

The principal matters. Retaining effective school leaders benefits students and promotes stable growth and change - particularly for inclusive and culturally responsive reforms that require time and sustained leadership to be successful.

The Amherst-Pelham Regional School District should be a desirable place to serve as a school leader. Among the things that would appeal to many caring and dynamic educators are the diversity of the student body and community, the ability to serve a socio-economic range within a well-resourced district, a strong commitment to social justice and anti-racism, talented and passionate teachers, active involvement from families, and a supportive and accessible superintendent. However, in order to continue to attract and then retain new leaders, the district needs to consider the issues and recommendations identified in this report.

About the Author

Rick Rogers is passionate about the principalship and supporting school leaders with a particular interest in promoting inclusive and culturally responsive school communities and a professional culture of reflective practice. Rick brings over 35 years of experience in public education, including 29 years as a principal in both suburban and urban settings. He currently serves as the coordinator and a lead facilitator for “The Soul of Leadership,” a personal and leadership renewal program for school leaders. He also serves as an adjunct instructor in the Salem State Educational Leadership graduate program and as a leadership mentor/coach supporting school leaders. He previously worked as the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Elementary School Principals’ Association (MESPA), overseeing its transition to a new unified PK-12 association (MSAA). He has prior experience as a facilitator for the National Institute of School Leadership (NISL) program. Rick holds a B.A. from Swarthmore College, an M.Ed. from Lesley University and a C.A.S. in School Leadership from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

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