

Dedham Public Schools

Special Education Program Evaluation

January 2013

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INTRODUCTION

At the request of June Doe, Superintendent of Schools, and Kathy Gaudreau, Director of Special Education, a Special Education Program Evaluation of the Dedham Public School's early childhood, elementary, middle school and high school special education programs and practices was completed during December 2012 and January 2013. A primary reason for planning a comprehensive special education review was to examine current practices and procedures to help determine why the district continues to find students eligible for special education at a much higher rate than the overall state average.

The consultant who completed the current evaluation has been the director of special education for five Massachusetts school districts, a consultant and trainer for the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Educations (DESE), and a member of state and national task forces considering special education issues. She has completed numerous special education program evaluations and provides consultation and training for several school districts. She has also been an adjunct faculty member at Framingham State University and Greenfield Community College.

The consultant met with the superintendent and director of special education to discuss the concerns that prompted the current program evaluation and to gather pertinent background information prior to designing an appropriate protocol for completing the evaluation. The evaluator developed a number of questions with which to frame the evaluation process.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

Questions that were addressed as part of the evaluation included, but were not limited to, the following:

- What factors have led to Dedham's finding 22% of its students eligible for special education, which is a significantly higher rate than the state average of 17%?
- Does the district employ clearly articulated practices, including a Student Assistance Team process, a District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) and data-based Response to Intervention (RtI) screening and tiered instruction to address the needs of struggling learners instead of and before making a referral for special education evaluation?
- Does the district have established entry and exit criteria and IEP Team procedures that guide decision-making by IEP Team members to determine disability categories,

eligibility for special education, service delivery models and types and amounts of service for identified students?

- Does the district provide a full continuum of programs and services at all grade levels to meet the needs of students with a wide range of disabilities?
- How does the district identify and respond to emerging program or service needs?
- Do current district practices support a successful transition of students from one level to the next, i.e., preschool to elementary school, elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school and high school to post –secondary life?
- Is there a clear and consistent decision-making process regarding the allocation of resources? Are district programs and services provided in a cost-effective manner, with maximum utilization of resources? Are additional or different resources required to maximize productivity and student outcomes?
- Does the current special education enrollment, and the presenting needs of the students, warrant the present staffing level and assignments of special education teachers, related service providers and instructional aides?

DATA SOURCES

As noted, the above questions provided a framework within which to consider the multiple sources of information and data that were collected and analyzed during the program evaluation process. The comprehensive process included, but was not limited to, completion of the following activities:

- Three days onsite to complete school visits and interviews
- Meeting with superintendent, director of special education, curriculum director, business manager and high school principal
- Interviews and phone conferences with director of special education
- Individual interviews with the seven district principals
- Interview with elementary and secondary special education directors
- Focus group meetings with special education teachers and related service providers (school psychologists, speech-language pathologists, social workers, school adjustment counselors) at the seven district schools

- Brief observations of all special education programs/classrooms in the early childhood center and the four elementary schools
- Review of special education staff rosters and schedules
- Review of instructional assistant rosters and assignments
- Review of October 2012 and June 2012 Student Information Management System (SIMS) Reports
- Review of out-of-district student and placement roster
- Review of cost comparison of in-district vs potential out-of-district program costs completed by director of special education
- Review of initial referral data for SY's 2010-2011, 2011-2012 and 2012-2013
- Review of "Selected Populations" multi-year analysis completed by director of special education regarding school demographics and special education enrollment
- Review of DESE Coordinated Program Review Mid-Cycle Report dated May 31, 2011
- Review of Student Assistance Team Guide
- Review of District-Wide Program Descriptions
- Review of RtI (Response to Intervention) protocols for tiered interventions
- Review of professional development training provided for special educators

ENROLLMENT DATA

The Dedham Public Schools total enrollment, as reported in the October 2012 Student Information Management System (SIMS) Report, was 2,829 students. The special education enrollment, of students ages 3-21, was 634 students, or 22.5% of all students. The state average of students found eligible for special education is 17%. Please note that the special education enrollment number may increase during the school year as preschool students with disabilities enter the district throughout the year and referrals for special education evaluation of currently enrolled students are completed, often with a finding of eligibility for special education services. In June 2012, 22.3% of district students were eligible for special education.

The district's SPED enrollment by levels, and the percentage (rounded) of all district SPED students at each level, is as follows:

- Early Childhood Education Center -> 70 students = 11% of all SPED
- Elementary Schools (4) -> 221 students = 34.6% of all SPED
- Middle School -> 143 students = 22.4% of all SPED
- High School -> 134 students = 21% of all SPED
- Out-of-District (OOD) -> 66 students = 10.3% of all SPED

The most recent information provided by DESE regarding the number of students educated in out-of-district placements showed that the state average of students in out-of-district placements for SY 2007 through SY 2010 was 6.7%. Dedham’s percentage of students currently in out-of-district placements is 10.3%. Similar to the percentage of Dedham students found eligible for special education, its out-of-district population is higher than the state average.

To further understand the needs of the students who receive special education services in the district, the October 2012 SIMS Report was analyzed to determine if Dedham’s identification of students by disability categories aligns with state averages. The first requirement to find a student eligible for special education is for the Team to determine if a student “has a disability”. If so, they must identify the category that best describes the student’s disability and then ask the question of whether the student is “making effective progress.” To understand why Dedham finds so many students to be “disabled” and eligible for special education, it is important to examine what types of disabilities are being identified by IEP Teams. The following provides a comparison of Dedham’s current percentages with the most recent state data (2010).

Percentage of Special Education Students Ages 3-21 by Disability Category

Disability	# of Students	Dedham %	State %
Communication	212	33.2%	17.6%
Specific Learning Disability (SLD)	118	18.5%	33.5%
Health	68	10.7%	7.7%
Autism	58	9%	6.5%
Emotional	51	8%	8.4%
Developmental Delay	47	7.4%	10.5%
Neurological	32	5%	4.3%
Multiple Disability	26	4%	2.8%
Intellectual	15	2.3%	6.5%
Sensory/Hearing	4	.6%	.7%

Sensory/Vision	4	.6%	.4%
Physical	3	.5%	.9%
Sensory/Deaf Blind	0	-	-

The information provided about Dedham’s disability category determinations will be considered later in this report. The discrepancy between the school district’s percentage, and the state’s average percentage of students found eligible under Communication vs Specific Learning Disability (SLD), is an interesting and significant finding. In both cases, these two disability categories account for at least half of all identified students. The requirements to find a student eligible under SLD include more steps and may be considered to be more rigorous. It is possible that some younger students who have developmental speech differences are being found eligible as having an articulation “disability” and provided with an IEP when periodic screening or a short-term regular education intervention provided by a speech-language pathologist might be more appropriate. This is only one example of what might be driving the significant differences in findings of Communication Disability vs Specific Learning Disability.

The MA Special Education Regulations definitions of these two disability categories are provided below:

Communication Impairment

The capacity to use expressive and/or receptive language is significantly limited, impaired, or delayed and is exhibited by difficulties in one or more of the following areas: speech, such as articulation and/or voice; conveying, understanding, or using spoken, written, or symbolic language. The term may include a student with impaired articulation, stuttering, language impairment, or voice impairment if such impairment adversely affects the student's educational performance.

Specific Learning Disability

The term shall have the meaning given in federal law at 34 C.F.R. §§300.7 and 300.541.

Federal Definition:

Specific learning disability is defined as follows:

(i) General. The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

(ii) Disorders not included. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

As noted earlier, after determining that a student has a disability, the Team has to answer the question of whether the student is “making effective progress”. In order to address this question, the Team members should be familiar with the objective criteria of what the district considers to be effective academic and/or functional progress at various grade levels.

Initial Referrals for Special Education

Initial referral data for school years 2010-2011, 2011-2012 and the current school year (through 11/21/12), were examined to help understand the origins of the current special education enrollment. During that time, a total of 315 students were referred for an initial special education evaluation. More than one third of the referrals (total of 110) were made by parents. During SY 2010-2011, a total of 134 referrals were received. During SY 2011-2012, 144 referrals were received. For SY 2012-2013, a total of 37 referrals had been received by 11/21/12. Data regarding how many of the 315 initial evaluations resulted in a finding of no eligibility was not available to the evaluator.

The PreK data for SY 2010-2012 does not provide a comparison of parent referrals with those received from early intervention agencies. However, there were thirteen PreK parent referrals, out of a total of thirty-six PreK referrals, for SY 2011-2012. For the current school year, seven of the fourteen PreK referrals received by 11/21/12 were made by parents.

Initial referrals by levels, for SY 2010-2011, SY 2011-2012 and year to date, are as follows:

- PreK = 85 referrals
- Kindergarten = 24 referrals
- Elementary – 90 referrals
- Middle School = 36 referrals
- High School = 50 referrals
- Private schools (grades not specified) = 30 referrals

SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFF

Staff rosters for each school were reviewed to determine the number of special education staff assigned to each school, as well as the total number for the district. Varying numbers of special education staff at the elementary schools reflect differences among the distribution of special education students and district-wide programs as well as the relative needs of the students enrolled in each program.

There are fifty-two (52) special education teachers distributed among the seven district schools. There are also eighty-six (86) instructional aides (IA's). In addition, there are related service providers assigned full or part-time to each school. Related service providers include: speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, school adjustment counselors, behavior specialist/BCBA, occupational therapist(s), physical therapist and vision specialist.

In analyzing whether the number of staff is sufficient to meet student needs, it is often helpful to calculate the ratio of special education teachers to students and the ratio of special education teachers plus instructional aides to students. These are all “direct service” staff. The following provides this information by levels.

Staff to Student Ratios by Grade Levels

- **Early Childhood Education Center → 9 teachers and 19 instructional aides**
(teacher to student ratio = 1:8) - (teacher and IA to student ratio = 1:2.5)
- **Elementary Schools → 22 teachers and 41 instructional aides**
(teacher to student ratio = 1:10) - (teacher and IA to student ratio = 1:3.5)
- **Middle School → 9 teachers and 19 instructional aides**
(teacher to student ratio = 1:16) - (teacher and IA to student ratio = 1:5)
- **High School → 12 teachers and 7 instructional aides**
(teacher to student ratio = 1:11) - (teacher and IA to student ratio = 1:7)

The above information indicates that, overall, the district has very robust ratios of special education staff to students. Please note that the ratios would be even more favorable if the direct services provided by related service providers, especially speech-language pathologists, were included in the calculations.

In considering this data, it is important to note that, as part of the district’s leveled reading program, many of the elementary special education liaisons are the primary teachers of reading for a small group of students. In addition to this one hour per day, five days a week direct service time for teaching reading to a small group of students during the grade level reading block, the liaisons might also serve as the primary instructor of math for some special education students. In many other school districts, a special education teacher might provide supplemental reading services to students who have “full inclusion” IEP’s (at least 80% of time in regular education), with the regular education teacher being the lead teacher for instruction in the district’s literacy program. In Dedham, students may also receive supplemental special education instruction for specific reading decoding and fluency skill deficits. The role of the elementary reading specialists in completing assessments and providing direct instruction to struggling learners and students with IEP’s is not clear to this evaluator.

Currently, there are sixty-six (66) high needs students placed in out-of-district schools that are not included in these figures since their instruction is provided by staff of the out-of-district schools. There are certainly many students with very complex needs being educated in district-wide programs. They require significant individual or small group instruction, behavior management and/or physical care. However, the majority of students with intensive needs are

being educated in out-of-district placements. Two-thirds of OOD students are in grades 9 – 12, and many of them will continue to be eligible for special education until their 22nd birthdays.

The staffing ratios change at each succeeding level, in the way one might expect. As students gain skills they are able to apply them with increased independence and may require less direct instruction and support services. Also, students with complex needs are placed at an increasing rate in OOD placements as they move to higher grades, reducing the need for a high level of district staff support. It is not clear to this evaluator why there are so many IA's at the middle school level. It is important to examine the combined teacher and instructional aide ratios at the middle school instead of only relying on the teacher to student ration as an accurate reflection of special education staffing and services at the middle school.

SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Each district school provides special education services and supports in both inclusive classroom settings and in small group pull-out settings which include only students with IEP's. In inclusive settings, a special education teacher, or related service provider, or instructional aide provides direct or supportive services to students in the general education environment for all of or some part of the school day. In pull-out services, a special education teacher or therapist or instructional aide provides direct teaching and reinforcement of target skills in a separate, less distracting setting to a small group of students, or to an individual student, in accordance with their IEP's.

In addition, a number of district-wide special education programs are located at specific elementary schools, the middle school and the high school, and provide supports and services to students with moderate to severe needs. At the elementary level, a student who requires the services and instructional model of a district-wide program has to transfer to another school if the program is not located at his/her home school.

The district's special education programs include the following:

Early Childhood Education Center

- Half-Day Integrated Preschool - (Maximum of 15 students, more than half of whom are typically developing. Staff includes special education teacher and one IA.)
- Full-Day Integrated Preschool - (Integrated AM with 13-15 students, and substantially separate PM with 6-8 students. Staff includes special education teacher and 2-3 IA's.)
- Full-Day Integrated Kindergarten - (Maximum of 14-16 students, at least 50% of whom do not have IEP's. Staff includes special education teacher and 2-3 IA's.)
- Full-Day Specialized Kindergarten - (Substantially separate with 6-10 students; integration into full-day or half-day kindergarten based on student's ability. Staff includes special education teacher and 2-4 IA's.)

The early childhood programs offer a full continuum of least restrictive to more restrictive options that allow the IEP Teams to match the amount and the level of services to students' presenting and sometimes changing needs. The staffing levels reported above are very

favorable and do not include the related services that the majority of students with IEP's might receive. Since substitutes are not typically provided when an IA or related service provider is absent, the ratio of staff to students may vary on any given day. It might be helpful to analyze the number of staff present, including substitutes, for a period of three to six months in order to gain a more accurate picture of average staff to student ratios. Anecdotally, many staff reported that not having substitutes for IA's presents a significant dilemma.

Concerns were expressed by some ECEC staff that the schedule does not include a half-day a week planning, collaboration and administrative paperwork time block, as do many preschool special education programs.

Elementary District-Wide Programs

Co-Taught at Oakdale

- Co-Taught Integrated First Grade – There is a maximum of 14-16 students in the class, at least 50% of whom do not have IEP's. Staff includes a full-time special education teacher, full-time general education teacher and one IA. At the present time, there are eight students with IEP's.
- Co-Taught Integrated Second Grade – There is a maximum of 14-16 students in the class, at least 50% of whom do not have IEP's. Staff includes a half-time special education teacher, full-time general education teacher and one IA. At the present time, there are six students with IEP's.

The model for Dedham's co-taught classes, which provides a full-time special education teacher for first grade and a half-time special educator for second grade, is an excellent, widely used instructional model that allows for intensive direct instruction and reinforcement of critical literacy and numeracy skills in the first grade. It is also appropriate to have a half-time special educator for the second grade co-taught class as students begin to apply some of the skills taught in first grade with increasing independence. If some of the students who comprise the regular education cohorts in these classes are "at risk" learners, they also derive great benefit from the co-teaching model provided in this program. As with the early childhood programs, the staffing levels are very favorable.

Written guidelines that include specific criteria for an IEP Team to consider in recommending that a student be assigned to the Co-Taught classes, along with descriptions of the continuum of curriculum modifications and instructional strategies provided in these district-wide programs, have not been fully developed.

Looping at Avery

- Looping Grade 1-2 → The same group of students remains intact for grades 1 and 2, with the same dual certified (regular and special education licensure) teacher. There is a maximum of 14-16 students, at least 50% of whom do not have IEP's. Staff includes one special education teacher and one or two IA's. There are three students with IEP's in the current grade one looping class. One IA is assigned to the class.

- Looping Grade 3-4 -> The same group of students remains intact for grades 3 and 4, with the same dual certified (regular and special education licensure) teacher. There is a maximum of 14-16 students, at least 50% of whom do not have IEP's. Staff includes one special education teacher and one or two IA's. There are six students with IEP's in the current grade three looping class. One IA is assigned to the class.

While "looping", with the same group of students staying together with the same teacher for two years, is a very good instructional model for both regular and special education, the implementation of this model in Dedham is uneven. Students who could benefit from this type of instructional model can only access it if they are in the "right" grade. For example, during the current school year, there is a first grade and a third grade looping class at Avery. For SY 2013-2014, these same teachers will maintain the same groups of students they teach this year and become a grade two and a grade four class. If a current kindergarten or current second grade student's IEP Teams determine that, for SY 2013-2014, these students would gain the most educational benefit from being assigned to a Looping Program, they will not be able to access the program since they will not be in "the right grade".

It is not clear how this "every other year" looping model impacts the assignment of students with IEP's to the co-taught first and second grades. It would be helpful to review how many students with IEP's are assigned to the first grade co-taught class during a school year which also has a first grade looping class. Likewise, it is important to compare the number of students in the second grade co-taught class for a school year in which there is a second grade looping class. For the current school year, there are eight students with IEP's in the Oakdale co-taught grade one and there are three students with IEP's in the Avery grade one looping class. The evaluator does not know the "home" schools of either group of students. There are six students with IEP's in the co-taught second grade class.

As with the co-taught programs for grades one and two located at Oakdale School, written guidelines that include specific criteria for an IEP Team to consider in making a recommendation for a student to be assigned to the looping classes, along with detailed descriptions of the curriculum modifications and instructional strategies each program provides, would support appropriate decision-making by IEP Teams. Are the profiles of the students in each of these program models, i.e., co-taught classes and looping classes, significantly different?

Orton-Gillingham at Greenlodge

- Students in grades 1-5 are fully integrated in age/grade appropriate classrooms and receive pull-out individual and/or small group instruction in "Orton-Gillingham" which is a multi-sensory, rule-based supplemental reading program. A special education teacher who has earned a certificate to teach this program is located at Greenlodge School. Students who are identified as requiring this supplemental reading instruction to improve their decoding and fluency skills transfer to Greenlodge in order to access the service. There are eleven students on the caseload at this time.

It is the intention of the director of special education, Kathy Gaudreau, to have a special education teacher at each elementary school certified to teach either the Orton-Gillingham or the

Wilson Reading program(s). Currently, identified district teachers are participating in the required training and, by next school year, the need to have students transfer to Greenlodge School to access these supplemental reading services should be significantly reduced.

Primary Learning Center (PLC) at Riverdale

- This is a substantially-separate program for grades 1-3 with a capacity of 4 to 10 students with moderate to severe disabilities. There are currently eight students in the program. All academic instruction is modified to meet student needs. Students are included in age/grade appropriate general education classrooms for all non-academic areas, while inclusion for academics is based on individual student performance. The staff includes a special education teacher and four IA's, two of whom are 1:1 aides.

Adaptive Learning Center (ALC) at Riverdale

- This is a substantially-separate program for grades 3-5 with a capacity of 4 to 10 students with moderate to severe disabilities. There are currently eight students in the program. All academic instruction is modified to meet individual student needs. Students are included in age/grade appropriate general education classrooms for all non-academic areas, while inclusion for academics is based on individual student performance. The staff includes a special education teacher and two IA's. The program is an extension of the PLC at Riverdale.

Team-Based Learning (TBL) Centers at Avery

- The primary grades TBL class is a small therapeutic program for students in grades 1-2, with a capacity of 4 to 8 students. There are currently four students in the program with two initial referrals in process. Staff includes a special education teacher, a school adjustment counselor (SAC) who also serves the intermediate grades TBL class, and two IA's, one of whom is a 1:1 aide. The program provides behavioral support, interventions and behavior plans based on a leveled system, social skills training and accommodations and modifications to curriculum as indicated. When appropriate, students are integrated, with support, in age and grade level classrooms.
- The intermediate grades TBL class, for students in grades 3 -5, follows the same model as the primary class. Staff includes a special education teacher and two IA's, one of whom is a 1:1 aide. As noted above, the SAC supports both classes. Seven students are enrolled in the intermediate TBL program at this time.

The therapeutic program model followed by Dedham's two elementary TBL classes is one that has been successfully implemented by many school districts, in Massachusetts and nationally. The evaluator learned that the TBL program that was previously in place at the Dedham Middle School was discontinued for the current school year and the resources reallocated to open the primary TBL classroom at Avery. Many district staff members, with a variety of roles, expressed regret at the loss of such a critical program for the middle school.

A detailed description of the Team Based Learning Program has been developed and includes specific information regarding: the population served, philosophy, staffing pattern, academics, therapeutic milieu and therapy services, parent/family support, behavior management and mainstream opportunities.

Language-Based Learning Center (LBLC) at Greenlodge

- The LBLC is a partial inclusion program that serves students in grades 3-5 and currently has 12 students. The staff includes a special education teacher and four 1:2 IA's are assigned to the program. Instructions are modified to meet student needs and they are fully integrated in age/grade appropriate classrooms for all areas other than those which require individualized specially designed instruction. A social skills group is provided as part of the curriculum.

The written program description for the elementary language-based learning centers describes the diverse student needs that are met in this program model, which provides both small group direct instruction in a pull-out setting, and modified instruction in inclusion classrooms and support, as needed, in other general education settings. The students share many common characteristics, including instructional levels that are below grade level, and functional skills, especially in the social/emotional and language domains, which are below developmental norms for age and grade.

MIDDLE SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Language –Based Learning Center at DMS

- The middle school LBLC parallels the grades 3-5 program at Greenlodge and is a partial inclusion program that serves students in grades 6-8. The staff includes a special education teacher and three IA's, including a program aide, one 1:1 IA and two 1:2 IA's. There are 12 students assigned to the program at this time. Instruction is modified to meet students' needs and they are fully integrated in age/grade appropriate classrooms for all areas other than those which require individualized specially designed instruction.

Please refer to comments regarding the elementary school program regarding specific program criteria and guidelines. As with the elementary program, the middle school LBLC program serves students found eligible under a variety of disability categories who present with common academic and functional skill deficits. The standard district curriculum, with significant modifications, and selected supplemental and parallel curricula provide the instructional framework for these programs.

Adaptive Learning Center (ALC) at DMS

- The Adaptive Learning Center is a substantially separate program for students in grades 6-8, with a capacity of 6 to 12 students. At present, there are twelve students, one special education teacher, one program IA and one 1:2 IA. The modified curriculum includes a focus on daily living and self-help skills. Students participate, with support, in grade

appropriate general education classrooms for all non-academic activities. Integration for academics is determined by student performance. The middle school ALC program provides a continuum, with the elementary ALC, of a program “strand” for students with significant needs whose special education eligibility will likely continue until age 22.

HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Vocational Team at DHS

The Vocational program is a substantially separate program with two classrooms for students in grades 9-12, with a capacity of 6 to 20 students. Staff includes two full-time special education teachers, a part-time vocational specialist and three IA’s, including one program aide and two 1:1 IA’s. At this time, there are 28 students in the program. The curriculum is modified to meet students’ needs and focuses on daily living, self-help skills and vocational education. The students integrate, with staff support, into grade appropriate general education classrooms for non-academic areas. Individual students may be integrated for academics based on performance in a particular curriculum area.

Ms. Gaudreau has put practices in place to assure that the Dedham Public Schools is in compliance with the state and federal special education regulations that relate to “post-secondary transition” for students with disabilities. The MA DESE’s Office of Special Education Planning and Policy closely monitors school districts’ compliance with the Transition requirements, including the completion of “Transition Planning Forms” (TPF).

It is commendable that Dedham High School has an established “vocational” program to help assure that the assigned students can achieve the best possible educational, vocational and social outcomes. Access to, and participation in the community is stressed as part of the curriculum. Ms. Gaudreau and program staff explained that many of the students who have participated in the program passed MCAS and received regular diplomas.

Most of the district’s 18 to 22 year old students who have very complex needs are educated in out-of-district placements. This is very appropriate since Dedham is not a large enough district to provide comprehensive services and programming to such a small cohort of students, each of whom has a unique profile and requires a high level of individualized services. Large school districts typically have a sufficient number of students with similar needs in their 18-22 year old population to develop their own in-district programs, although they still rely on out-of-district placements for some students. It is definitely most cost effective for Dedham to use Collaborative or private approved special education schools to meet the educational and related needs of this relatively small, but diverse group of district students.

Strategies for Success Class

- This is a class that is offered five days in a seven day cycle and is a special education service that provides students with direct instruction in test-taking strategies, study skills, note taking, organization, and support across all academic domains.

Grade Nine Team Model

- A special education teacher on each grade nine team provides both “strategies for success” (see above) and inclusion co-teaching. For grades 10, 11 and 12, inclusion support is provided by two instructional special education aides in general education courses where needed by specific students.

Alternative Team at DHS

- The Alternative program is designed for students in grades 9-12 whose “needs are not met in the traditional school setting”. Currently, there are 21 students in the program; at the beginning of the school year 26 students were in the program. Staff includes one primary special education teacher, one dual certified SPED/English teacher, a .8 FTE Math teacher and a .6 FTE Science teacher. There are two IA’s.

There was a general consensus among staff, including administrators, that the Alternative Program should be reviewed to consider if the current program model and staffing provides the most appropriate program services to meet the needs of the students. The program does not have a full-time clinician, which is unusual given the number of assigned students. The two school psychologists and the part-time school adjustment counselor (22.5 hours at DHS and 10 hours at DMS) share the program caseload. The program does not appear to be a classic “therapeutic” program which includes, as part of its design, a focus on students’ receiving instruction in the mainstream, with varying degrees of support, and as their emotional status allows.

For students who may be returning from a psychiatric hospitalization, according to the high school administrators, there isn’t a “short-stay” program or an identified, specific “intake process”. High school staff visited programs at some other school districts to gather information about a variety of program models and features that might be beneficial for the district’s students. Dedham has “issues of scale” considering the relatively small size of the district and the need for a critical mass of students to implement a broad continuum of services and programs. However, some additional services and interventions could, and should, be implemented to strengthen the services for students with emotional, social, behavioral and psychiatric concerns.

Written guidelines for the Alternative High School Program, including entrance criteria, have been completed under Ms. Gaudreau’s direction. They are currently in draft form.

A Special Education Program Evaluation of Dedham High School was completed by a district committee, including Ms. Gaudreau, in April 2012. The evaluation process included surveys of staff, parents and students, interviews and focus groups. An analysis of the information gathered from these multiple sources, and a review of the current high school programs and services generated findings reflecting the input of all stakeholders and a

comprehensive list of recommendations. The reader is referred to the document, “Dedham High School, Special Education Program Evaluation” dated April 13, 2012, to review the complete report. This document is a valuable resource for moving the discussion and planning of potential changes to high school special education programs and services to the next level.

Many alternative programs in other school districts are open to both special education and general education students. A typical high school setting may be challenging to a variety of students who have different learning styles, family or medical stressors or emotional needs but who do not have “disabilities” that would qualify them for special education eligibility. It might be helpful to review the records and IEP’s of current program students to consider whether all the students truly meet the eligibility standards or whether some of the students might have been found eligible because they would be best served by the educational environment and the supports that the alternative program provides.

FINDINGS

INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS

Interviews with key stakeholders in the district provided detailed information about practices related to the identification of at-risk students, determination of eligibility, IEP Team process and the special education programs and services provided to students with disabilities. The commitment of all interviewees to supporting the progress, and dignity, of students with disabilities was notable. Their regard for other members of the Dedham Public Schools staff and for the families of the students whom they support was apparent in all conversations. They were generous with their time, candid in their remarks and knowledgeable about special education staffing, procedures and services as they related to their particular roles and responsibilities.

Individual interviews, using a consistent set of questions and topics, were conducted with the seven principals. The two assistant principals joined the high school principal. The elementary and secondary special education directors participated in a joint interview. Focus groups, again using a standard set of questions/topics, were conducted with special education teachers and related service providers at each school. A total of sixty-two (62) special education professionals participated in the focus groups.

Director of Special Education

Kathy Gaudreau is completing her fourth year as the director of special education in Dedham. She joined the district in 2005 as the early childhood coordinator, then served as an elementary special education director for one year, and was the interim special education director for one year prior to being appointed as the director.

When asked to describe the special education programs and services in the district, Ms. Gaudreau explained that, when she first came to the district, Dedham was a “full inclusion” district with very few disability specific programs. A number of district programs are now in place, as noted in an earlier section of this report. Currently, there is a lack of detailed written guidelines and specific criteria for each program. She noted that four years ago, in response to budget constraints, one special education teacher was cut at each school.

Regarding what she considers to be strengths and successes of the special education program, Ms. Gaudreau feels that, in general, the staffing is excellent and that she has been able to bring them “to a higher level”, with administrative support. She referenced a variety of programs at the middle school level, including the addition of co-taught English and math classes and a “strategies” class, as well as the addition of staff to the high school’s Vocational Program. The Team-Based Learning Centers at Avery Elementary School have been a notable success.

When asked what she considers the challenges or areas of growth for special education, Ms. Gaudreau noted that the therapeutic program at the middle school was cut this year and is a “significant loss”, especially since it also served as a resource for struggling general education students. She feels that not having the program has had a serious impact on middle school counseling for vulnerable students. She sees a need to “grow a variety of programs and to separate programming for students with autism spectrum disorder from those with low cognitive skills”.

When asked to comment on why she thinks that Dedham finds so many students eligible for special education, Ms. Gaudreau reported that, in her view, there are fewer general education accommodations and differentiation than might be appropriate, at all levels, including the high school. While math and literacy coaches have been added to the schools as additional supports, Ms. Gaudreau has not yet seen a decrease in referrals. Some additional reading specialists have been appointed this year. The evaluator’s understanding is that the reading specialists work only with regular education students. The special education director thinks that the curricular demands may be overwhelming for some students and that, in general, the culture among general educators is one that suggests “a struggling student is someone else’s responsibility”. Ms. Gaudreau stated that “within both general education and special education, the evolution of tiered interventions has made slow progress” and “there is not a clear RtI process” in the district.

There are structural aspects of the special education team process that concern Ms. Gaudreau. PreK- 5 special education teachers write the IEP’s and perform all of the clerical responsibilities related to the IEP process, e.g., sending Team Meeting invitations and securing parent signatures, making copies, etc. While the middle school and high school special educators write the IEP’s, all of the clerical tasks related to the IEP process are completed by secretaries. The support of a procedural assistant at the ECEC and at each elementary school for a designated period of time each week would provide essential help.

The elementary and secondary special education directors, who are administrators that were added this year, chair the initial evaluation and reevaluation team meetings. The school principals chair the annual review meetings. Ms. Gaudreau feels that the reality is that the new special education directors primarily function as team chairpersons with little time for focused

program development. There is some clerical assistance for the elementary director, who is responsible for the early childhood center and the four elementary schools. The secondary director has full-time clerical support at the high school and shares a secretary at the middle school. It would be appropriate to resolve the current imbalance of secretarial support for the special education directors by assigning an equivalent amount of time, per week, and on a schedule to be determined, to each of the directors.

Regarding emerging trends or presenting student needs, Ms. Gaudreau noted that she sees an increase in mental health issues, particularly anxiety, dysregulation and depression among all age groups.

The district has made a strong commitment to varied and high quality professional development. Ms. Gaudreau provided a summary of the trainings that have been provided for special educators for the past two years and the current school year. The topics are timely and address multiple aspects of strengthening special educators' knowledge, skills and practical application of best practices.

Ms. Gaudreau has organized a critically important professional development opportunity for the early childhood center, elementary and middle school principals, special education directors, counselors, and school psychologists. They will attend a three day training during January 2013 on Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS). This well-researched, data-based, school-wide intervention system has been implemented over the past several years in multiple school districts across the country with excellent results.

Interview with Elementary and Secondary Special Education Directors

For the current school year, an elementary and a secondary special education director were appointed. Marjorie Fraden-Goldstein is the director for the Early Childhood Education Center and the four elementary schools while Amy Muldoon is the director for the middle school and high school.

In discussing why Dedham finds such a high percentage of students eligible for special education, the directors, both of whom are new to the district this year, find that there appears to be a long-standing over reliance on special education. They feel that having principals facilitate annual review meetings makes it hard for the special education directors to begin to develop ongoing relationships with families, that are continued at the annual review meetings, and to move toward dismissal from special education services, when appropriate. One noted that she sees "a district wide culture of, when a student has a problem, SPED owns it". The other director commented that, when a student has a review or a reevaluation "it is almost expected that we keep them on. I hear from some staff that parents may be upset if we don't."

The directors raised concerns about helping Teams find a student not eligible for special education, at both initial evaluation and reevaluation meetings. There is sometimes insufficient assessment data presented at Team meetings. There is a lack of clarity regarding what supports

would be available in regular education for a student who has been found not eligible for special education. A higher number than may be warranted of preschool students who have “just articulation issues” have been found eligible at the preschool level. While short-term interventions provided by a speech-language pathologist might be appropriate for some of these students, they may not all meet the standard of “disability” and “lack of effective progress” that would require an IEP.

The directors reported that, in their view, there are a number of situations where SPED is filling a regular education responsibility. They feel that there is a lack of understanding, knowledge and training among regular education staff which leads to a lack of shared ownership for student progress. They question the level of understanding among staff of tiered interventions (RtI) and think that the majority of staff is unclear about it.

While both directors are beginning to see “some positive changes and increasing flexibility among staff”, they identified some needs. Training for Team members in analyzing and considering a variety of data to determine eligibility and in how to manage the difficult conversations that may ensue with parents is necessary. The need to develop program criteria and guidelines is apparent to them. Currently, some rigidity is evident in considering if a particular program is appropriate for a student. At the high school, while there are some students who have a “blend” of program services, it is not typical.

School Principals

Of the seven principals in the Dedham Public Schools, one is completing her first year in the district and the longest serving is completing her eighth year. The locations of district-wide programs were identified earlier in this report. Interviews with the principals provided information about the special education process and practices at each school, and across the district, regarding topics that were the focus of the current program evaluation. As the persons who are responsible for the day to day operation of the special education programs and services at the districts’ schools, the input of the principals is critical to this evaluation process.

Examples of principals’ responses to a question that asked “What do you consider to be the strengths and successes of the special education program in your school and in the district?” include the following:

- “The work is collaborative and there is a sense of family among the staff. It is a warm, welcoming environment.”
- “We offer a wide range of services as a district, which is a positive but also draws additional families to the district. My building is different than others regarding (lower SES), and some other factors and is very accepting of differences.”
- “I have a cohesive staff that look out for one another and help each other meet the standards. They consult one another and read each other’s IEP’s.”
- “The (special education) programs are strong and keep students in district who may be challenging elsewhere.”
- “The SPED staff is excellent. I am impressed by their communication of test results and student progress and their desire to do the best they can.”

- “The hiring of two new special education directors brings a new set of eyes to the district.”

The principals’ responses to a question that asked what they “consider to be challenges or areas of growth for special education” include the following:

- “I see some tension between SPED and regular education and some inflexibility about sharing responsibilities, but it’s getting better.”
- “I don’t think the SPED students are doing that well; they are not meeting their narrowing the gap goals. Some of the kids in the mix are the neediest in the district.”
- “I am always concerned about potential disproportionality.”
- “The Strategies for Success Class seems to be used more as a homework center than for teaching skills.”
- “We are overdoing accommodations on MCAS.”
- “The Alternative Program needs an overhaul.”
- “We lack transition services for students who are returning from hospitalization, and a short-stay program.”
- “More common planning time is needed.”
- “Strengthen PLC (Professional Learning Communities) by providing guidelines for discussion.”
- “For ELL students, teasing out the causative factors of learning struggles is difficult.”
- “There are increasing mental health issues among students and parents.”
- “In some cases, we have a one size fits all approach, e.g., the language-based program includes students with learning disabilities, Asperger’s, PDD (pervasive developmental delay) and these are very distinct disabilities.”
- “There is a problem when a student who has been in the 2nd grade co-taught class at Oakdale needs a lot of support and has to leave to go to Greenlodge for 3rd grade to attend the language-based program.”
- “The therapeutic program was removed because of budget issues and it is a significant loss. I can identify nine students who need this program. Kids moving in from Boston from behavior programs are going into general education, have learning struggles and cannot succeed.”
- “I think that there are some ECEC students with IEP’s who have articulation problems and do not need special education.”

As noted earlier, one of the main reasons that the district’s leadership chose to complete a special education program evaluation is the fact that the Dedham Public Schools continues to find students eligible for special education at a much higher rate than the state average. When asked why they think that is happening, principals provided answers that include the following:

- “Teachers, in general, think “a concern” equals an IEP and this needs to change. I struggle with PreK teachers, who also have special education licensure, who refer a lot of students for special education. We need to do work with differentiating instruction and need to have a paradigm shift.”

- “Way too many students have been qualified based on parental pressure. I am hard-pressed to figure out what some kids’ disabilities are. Three-year reevaluations were not used to really review eligibility; the new secondary special education director has started to address non-eligibility.”
- “We have to work on the transition of elementary to middle school. Teachers sometimes say that the kid needs to have these supports when they are not really necessary. We need to really figure out why.”
- “A lot of physicians tell parents to write letters. Dedham is seen to have great SPED services.”
- “There are a lot of entitled parents and there is a lot of parent talk.”
- “Many teachers don’t understand or use differentiated instruction. Kids and parenting have changed, but some teachers don’t take responsibility for all kids.”
- “It is a piece of wanting to help every child and if what you strategized in S.A.T. (Student Assistance Team) doesn’t work, make a referral.”
- “I think some kids are on IEP’s who are almost at grade level and I wonder why they’re in SPED. Whose responsibility is it?”
- “There is a sophisticated parent base that is able to get documentation.”
- “Virtually every student who registered in my school this year had an IEP from another district.”
- “I don’t feel that my staff rushes to identify...we use Title I. Staff understands the eligibility process but struggle with the determination. They also struggle with finding students not eligible at the transitions.”
- “This indicates staff is hyper-vigilant about working with students who need additional assistance. There may be other ways to serve them.”
- “Students who are identified in high school typically have mental health issues.”

Principals were asked to describe the Student Assistance Team (S.A.T.) process in their schools and to rate its effectiveness. Responses included the following:

- “The principal manages the process. We have some issues. We have a lot of supports and staff typically utilizes most of them before it gets to the S.A.T.”
- “The school counselor chairs S.A.T. and coordinates with the parent.”
- “The principal chairs it and the teacher fills out the forms. There are a lot of attention referrals and we may do a rating scale and ask the parent to follow-up with their pediatrician. Three students have been considered so far this year.”
- “The assistant principal supervises this or the guidance counselor. There have been four meetings so far this year. The staff finally gets it that S.A.T. is not a first step to referral, but I’m not sure the staff understands the next step regarding interventions.”

When asked to discuss the tiered intervention (RtI) process in their schools, the principals provided the following information:

- “The school has been trained but a formal process has to be established and implemented. Teachers are well aware of it.”

- “I think we’re supporting struggling learners. We have 40 minute grade level meetings once a week. We use ACUITY in grades 3-5 and we have data review teams.”
- “We had a tutorial program for two years and students could get an “ok” to get support during a class period with permission of guidance. Some kids used this as a crutch and teachers were resentful.”
- “Staff has some conceptual knowledge of RtI but not the practical applications. It is not formalized. I would like to see that developed centrally.”
- “I would really like teachers to start with the S.A.T. process before they start implementing things so that the process is documented.”

Principals were asked whether they think there is an over-reliance on instructional aides. A sample of their responses includes the following:

- “Inclusion aides are helpful in allowing teachers to offer a broader curriculum.”
- “The culture is that if a student has a problem he/she needs an aide. The perception is that it’s extra help as opposed to a bridge to independence.”
- “Instructional aides are attached to liaisons. I don’t see that there are any to spare.”
- “There is some mentality of needing an aide if a student struggles.”
- “There is an adequate number but there is no time for planning and supervision with teachers.”
- “There are two students who have 1:1 instructional aides but they actually share them with other students. There are powerful parents whose children need support but perhaps not 1:1 support.”
- “My school is very well-supported. I’m trying to figure out why there are so many 1:1’s. We are working towards not having an aide matched to a specific student. There is something for all of them to do and I am still in the process of allocating resources better.”
- “We’re in really good shape except when someone is out. IA’s do not have subs.”
- “I have a good handle on overseeing IEP implementation but there is a problem since there are no substitutes for IAs’ on a regular basis.”

When asked to describe their role in the special education Team process, and whether they recommend any changes to current practices, principals’ responses included the following. As noted earlier in this report, principals are currently responsible for chairing Annual Review IEP Team meetings.

- “I think it is an inappropriate blending of roles, between being a facilitator and a participant, and it could be someone else’s responsibility.”
- “I don’t have a special education degree and am not qualified to make certain service recommendations, particularly if a parent advocate challenges the school.”
- “I think facilitating the annual reviews is an important role. I share the responsibility with the assistant principal.”
- “It is not an appropriate function for a principal and the time factor alone is problematic. I don’t have a special education background to deal with challenging decisions.”

- “It’s tricky. I read all students’ IEP’s. Kathy (Gaudreau) and Marjorie (elementary special education director) are very helpful. We need some training in IEP process and programs, including the counselor.”
- “I think it’s inappropriate for principals to chair the annual reviews. It muddies the waters in terms of principals’ roles and takes up one day a week on average. I understand that the district doesn’t want teachers to make financial decisions.”
- “I also have responsibility for Section 504 meetings and plans.”
- “I’m more comfortable because of my SPED background but it takes a lot of time. We need to have team chairpersons.”
- “How will this be managed when the time demands of our staff evaluation responsibilities increase?”

Recommendations and suggestions that principals offered that would strengthen the special education programs and process included the following:

- “We need an intermediate team-based learning class; there is none currently. This is concerning to me because I have students moving up to middle school. Where do they go without a program?”
- “We need a curriculum and materials budget when new programs are developed.”
- “The district needs to develop instructional models to help a student problem solve independently.”
- “Concrete suggestions and information from this evaluation that can inform next steps might aid a process of self-reflection.”
- “Review the locations of elementary programs to allow a continuum so students don’t need to move schools.”
- “The Alternative Program needs an overhaul.”

Finally, principals were asked what professional development they suggest that might reduce the apparent over-identification of special education students. Their suggestions included the following:

- “Differentiation of instruction...tiered interventions training...there needs to be a paradigm shift.”
- “Training for regular education staff in how to better manage and teach students with behavioral needs and trauma.”
- “Training for regular education and special education teachers in how to develop simple behavior plans. We see more and more emotional needs.”
- “Bridging the gap between general education and special education and clarifying the expectations for all.”
- “More social skills training for all staff.”
- “More training for instructional aides.”
- “Combined professional development for general education and special education staff in Math and Reading on content-focused strategies and co-teaching.”
- “We have six half days and one full day for professional development. I think the administration does a good job in providing a continuum of training.”

- “There is a rigid process in assigning staff and the relevance of professional development to a person’s role should be considered.”
- “The Math presenter was geared only to regular education and didn’t include differentiation in the training.”
- “Counselors used to have a once a month meeting with an advanced degree clinician that was discontinued last year. It was an important PD source.”

Focus Group Interviews with Special Educators

The evaluator had the opportunity to meet with groups of special educators at each district school. As noted elsewhere, sixty-two people participated in the process. As with the principals, they were candid and forthcoming in sharing their opinions and perspectives regarding special education in the Dedham Public Schools.

When asked what they consider to be the strengths and successes of special education in the district, responses of the special educators included the following:

- “At the ECEC, there is integration with typical students, which benefits both populations and opportunities for the child to make progress in natural settings.”
- “There is a strong multi-disciplinary team that works well together and uses common language in their work and reports.”
- “There is good communication among the staff and we do thorough evaluations.”
- “The leveling for math and reading that is new this year is very good.”
- “In the inclusion model, many teachers are dual certified and are excellent collaborators.”
- “The EMPOWER writing program PD for upper elementary and middle school SPED staff and SLP’s was very good and should have included general educators.”
- “SLP’s have good training on social thinking and executive functioning.”
- “There are good program additions that have helped kids stay in the district.”
- “There is a lot of flexibility with staff to get students what they need...”all hands on deck”.
- “The principal values our judgment and is very approachable. The school climate and culture are excellent.”
- “I see huge successes for students in the first and second grade co-taught classes.”
- “The SPED department is collaborative, works hard and shares responsibility.”
- “We like the freshman teaming model with one special educator for each team.”
- “We have a wide variety of programs and the SPED department is very collaborative, communicates well and shares resources.”
- “We have excellent technology, including the LEXIA reading programs, SMART boards and ELMO’s. “

When asked what they considered to be the challenges or areas of growth for special education, responses of the special educators included the following:

- “The district implemented a therapeutic team-based learning program at the middle school which was lost, and now the students are sprinkled around.”

- “There is no full-time school adjustment counselor at the middle school.”
- “We don’t have defined criteria for programs...it’s a gray area and frustrating.”
- “Administration doesn’t have a clear understanding of who the students are and what the staff is doing. No one is evaluating the programs.”
- “We have a problem in getting textbooks and the reading level is not always appropriate. There is no adapted curriculum.”
- “At middle school, it would be good to have an “X” block for tiered interventions, including social thinking.”
- “We would like to have more PD time to develop and share learning materials.”
- “There will be a cohort of entering 3rd graders from the co-taught 2nd grade class and we suggest extending the co-taught model. We need something more intensive for “the gray area.”
- “The language based-program at Greenlodge should move to Oakdale or we should design an additional model for third grade.”
- “We have too much administrative paperwork to do for the IEP Team process.”
- “With a counseling caseload of 47 students (21 on IEP’s) and the difficulty in scheduling due to MCAS pressures, it is hard to find time to collaborate with other staff.”
- “We need criteria to know what student profile is appropriate in each program. Programs are not well-defined in the district. Are the principals well-informed about what the programs are?”
- “We need additional programming for students on the autism spectrum, including those in regular education, and the regular education teachers would need training.”
- “The instructional aides need training but there is no dedicated time in the schedule for teachers to plan with and supervise IAs.”
- “There are concerns with the language-based program for grades 3-5 this year. There are 12 students with varied profiles, including low cognitive. The SLP’s time in the program has been reduced.”
- “Some students, even with modifications, can’t manage the regular curriculum. There are no specific identified supplemental curricula in math and reading.”
- “Space is an issue. Grades 1-5 share one pull-out room with no dividers. It’s very distracting.”
- “The primary learning center could use more IA support for inclusion.”
- “There’s not a lot of differentiated instruction in general education...it varies.”
- “There are space issues at the ECEC and the building is not fully handicapped accessible. The playground may not be safe.”
- “Substitutes for teachers are not always available, even though principals have advocated for them.”
- “We could be more effective if we spent more time in regular education high school classes to provide and implement accommodations. If you aren’t in the regular education class at all, it makes the work difficult.”
- “The Alternative program doesn’t have a full-time clinician. It needs to have a full-time social worker.”
- “We have two RtI Math blocks per week and all staff participates. We don’t have enough staff to do Reading RtI.”

When asked why they think that Dedham finds more students eligible for special education than the state average, the special educators offered the following:

- “There are not a lot of general education interventions; there’s a lot of over-identification. There aren’t enough modifications and accommodations.”
- “Some students appear ready for dismissal but reevaluations don’t stress it.”
- “Many students have emotional needs and home issues.”
- “Kindergarten curriculum is more challenging and some students have not mastered the underlying skills. There is a mismatch between typical developmental skills and curriculum demands.”
- “Many referrals come from physician letters.”
- “We work hard to make a determination but it’s hard to have a crystal ball when a child isn’t yet three years old.”
- “Move-ins from Boston are increasing.”
- “Greenlodge doesn’t have Title I services.”
- “ELL students may not be getting sufficient support in general education.”
- “Anecdotally, parents move here with IEP’s.”
- “We look at weaknesses rather than disability and over-identify kids who fall below average. There’s a disconnect with regular education.”
- “Parents feel that there has to be a disability if the child isn’t doing well.”
- “There are some relentless parents, especially at middle school. When a reevaluation is due, parents still want the child to have extra help. We appease parents too much.”
- “Communication disability is identified often because we are willing to take on those students with lower percentiles (scores). This is a gray area.”
- “We have allowed regular education teachers to push kids to SPED. We should talk more about classroom accommodations and best practice.”
- “A lot of kids come up from elementary (to middle school) with IEP’s who have one or two weak areas.”
- “Not enough reduction in services takes place at annual review meetings and then it is difficult to find a student no longer eligible at reevaluation meeting.”
- “There needs to be work on developing RtI.”
- “We had an Academic Center run by a teacher who provided support for regular education students but now it’s more of a place than a service. A different model is needed.”
- “We need a clearer process for addressing all struggling learners. We need criteria.”

The special educators offered the following suggestions and recommendations for professional development:

- “What has currently been provided is great. More collaborative training with regular education would help. Consider how staff is assigned to particular trainings.”
- “Training on how RtI could work. There are no clear entry-exit criteria.”

- “Include instructional aides in training, e.g., understanding disabilities, data collection, prompting students.”
- “We train regular and special education staff in different things. We need more shared training.”

SUMMARY

A number of questions were developed that guided the current evaluation and that have been addressed in previous sections of this report. A statement of the findings related to each question follows:

What factors have led to Dedham’s finding 22% of its students eligible for special education, which is a significantly higher rate than the state average of 17%?

Information was not provided that supports a finding that Dedham has more truly disabled students than other communities in the state. There appears to be a long-standing belief and culture among the district’s schools, and at least some of the parent community, which suggests that struggling learners are the responsibility of special education. Staff at all levels, including principals and special educators, report that there is considerable parental pressure to find students eligible for special education, and to continue to find them eligible at reevaluation team meetings, so that they can get “extra help”. Students that are found to have “relative weaknesses” in one or more skills, and still fall within the average range on comprehensive assessments, are often found eligible for and receive special education services. The belief among some, but certainly not all staff and community members, is that, when a student has difficulty learning or mastering a skill, or conforming to a set of behavioral expectations, it becomes someone else’s responsibility. An understanding of typical development and the awareness that student performance that falls within the “normal range” comprises a broad spectrum that extends from low average to high average is critical to determining whether a student has a disability and requires special education. Similarly, a shared understanding among teachers of what constitutes “effective progress”, and the ability to explain it to parents is essential.

Fully a third of the district’s special education students have been found eligible under the Communication disability category, as compared to 18.5% of students in the state. Since the district does not have written guidelines with measurable entry and exit criteria, and the state’s definition of Communication disability (see page 6 of this report) is rather broad and vague, it is easy to see how this might be the default disability category identified for some struggling learners who don’t have significant delays in their academic and functional skill development but, instead, have “weaknesses” in one or two skills.

A Team must be very cautious in deciding a student has a “weakness” which requires special education if the student has a low average (still within normal range) or a below average score on a single sub-test or two subtests of a standardized test battery for which the student’s total, composite score is within the average range. Observation of the student in a classroom

setting and collection of data that relates to the area of “weakness” to determine if there is an educational impact is essential to the process. It would be inappropriate to find that a student has a disability without evidence of continued below average skill development after regular education tiered interventions have been implemented without meaningful progress.

None of the special educators, or principals, with whom the evaluator spoke, referenced “curriculum-based measurements” (CBM) as an essential element of standard ongoing assessment practices that are reviewed as part of a Team evaluation process. The evaluator is fairly certain that CBM’s are routinely considered, but wonders how much weight is afforded these findings in making an eligibility decision. While the district uses formative and summative assessments related to the district reading and math curricula, and administers the DRA (Diagnostic Reading Assessment) it was not clear to this evaluator if there are universal screenings for all students, especially at the elementary level, that provide quick probes to assess student performance at regular intervals for reading fluency, math calculation, writing, etc.. Examples include one or two minute oral reading probes or a two minute varied math calculation probe or five minute writing samples administered bi-weekly or monthly.

It is interesting to note that, at least anecdotally, many parents seek out special education services for their children when there is not strong evidence that they, in fact, have a disability. It is a major step for a school district and parent, via the IEP Team process, to conclude that a student has a “disability”. The impact on a student’s self-perception must be considered as well as the potential of lowered expectations for the student. In addition, there are budget impacts when more students than appropriate are found eligible for special education.

The principal of the early childhood education center, and the elementary special education director, hypothesized that one factor leading to a high percentage of preschool students being found eligible for special education may relate to an over-identification of students with “articulation” disorders. The program evaluator holds the Certificate of Clinical Competence in Speech/Language Pathology and is familiar with how well-intentioned IEP Teams may find a student with developmental sound errors to have a disability when parent training, rescreening, and short-term regular education interventions might be a better first response for some students. There are clearly students with sound errors who present with a profile that suggests a more complex speech disorder, or markers that indicate that early literacy skills acquisition may be compromised. It is not those students who are the focus of the possible over-identification of students with articulation concerns.

Based on multiple sources of feedback in the program evaluation process, there may be less differentiated instruction in many classrooms in the district than should be expected. Class sizes in the district fall in a comfortable range when compared to many other districts. Resources, including instructional technology, are more than adequate. Excellent professional development has been provided to teachers. Absent some phenomenon in the community that would cause considerably more students who have actual disabilities to reside in Dedham, it is appropriate to examine the nature of the instructional models in regular education, particularly with regard to how instruction is differentiated, and the perceptions among regular education teachers of what is considered to be the normal range of development among students.

Several people mentioned that the SPED percentage may be impacted by the number of students who move into the district with IEP's, especially from Boston. Exact numbers of how many students with IEP's moved into the district so far this year, and for all of the last school year, and the number of students with IEP's who moved out of the district, would be helpful to know. While move-ins may have some degree of influence on the SPED percentage, it cannot explain the long-standing pattern of substantial over-identification that exists in the district. Regarding the references to students moving in from Boston with IEP's, it should be noted that Boston identifies students at a rate (approximately 18.6%) that is only slightly higher than the state average and much lower than Dedham's rate.

Does the district employ clearly articulated practices, including a Student Assistance Team process, a District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) and data-based Response to Intervention (RtI) screening and tiered instruction to address the needs of struggling learners instead of and before making a referral for special education evaluation?

The district does have a Student Assistance Team process in place at all schools but it appears to vary in how robust the process is from school to school. Interviews conducted in the first week of December revealed that some schools had just recently held their first meeting. It is a process that is fairly well understood by staff and it has the potential to be a very meaningful step in identifying and quantifying student needs and developing a series of data-based interventions. Some progress, according to a few principals, has been made in shifting the perception among regular educators that the S.A.T. process is the first step to making a special education referral. However, further training to emphasize that the primary intention of the S.A.T. process is to identify needs and provide specific, planned interventions in regular education to struggling learners may be helpful.

The district does not have a district-wide data based tiered interventions process in place. While training was reportedly conducted in the past, the implementation of a true Response to Intervention (RtI) tiered intervention system, based on universal screenings, specific short-term skill instruction, explicit benchmarks and data collection does not exist. It is important to note that the MA DESE has recently established an Office of Tiered Interventions which, from an organizational perspective, is on the same level as the Office of Special Education Planning and Policy.

Greenlodge Elementary School provides a twice a week forty minute "RtI Math Block" in which all students and staff participate. It is not clear to this evaluator how the student groups are organized but it can be assumed that it is by instructional levels. If all students are involved, then many must be performing in the average range and some in the above average range so perhaps the math blocks also provide enrichment. It is notable that the school has organized a way to provide dedicated time in the schedule to provide additional math instruction. However, how the groups and the specific instruction match a tiered interventions model for struggling learners is unclear to this evaluator.

A District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) must be submitted to the MA DESE by each district as part of their required annual reports and should articulate how each district school will accommodate students with diverse backgrounds and needs in the regular

education environment. There was general agreement among the interviewees that the DCAP is not a widely understood or implemented document in the district. Many interviewees had no familiarity with the term.

Does the district have established entry and exit criteria and IEP Team procedures that guide decision-making by IEP Team members to determine disability categories, eligibility for special education, service delivery models and types and amounts of service for identified students?

The district does not have comprehensive written entry and exit criteria that guide decision-making by IEP Team members. While the district has several excellent and effective district-wide programs, some with strands providing a continuum across school levels, specific written guidelines for describing and determining which special education programs and services are appropriate for meeting a particular type of disability or continuum of student needs are not yet available for all district programs and services, including related services. As noted in an earlier section of this report, there are written program descriptions for the team-based learning programs and the language-based learning centers.

Does the district provide a full continuum of programs and services at all grade levels to meet the needs of students with a wide range of disabilities?

The district, under the guidance of the director of special education, Kathy Gaudreau, has developed a number of high quality programs for students with a wide range of disabilities, including some that have “strands” extending from elementary through high school. For example, the Primary Learning Center and Adaptive Learning Center at the elementary level, followed by the Adaptive Learning Center at the middle school, and then the Vocational Program at the high school constitute a “strand” of individually designed services and instruction for students with moderate to severe needs with a variety of disabilities.

The Team-Based Learning Centers (TBLC) at Avery School provides an excellent therapeutic program for elementary school students with emotional/behavioral disabilities. It is unfortunate that the program had to be discontinued at the middle school this year since there is a definite need for this type of program at that level. The middle school does not have a full-time school adjustment counselor which presents a further disruption in the continuum of services, at a highly vulnerable stage of development, for students with emotional disabilities.

While the Alternative Program at the high school includes students with emotional disabilities, it is in need of review and reframing to determine who exactly the program is intended to serve and what service model(s) are appropriate. A document that establishes eligibility criteria for the alternative program is currently in draft form. A full-time clinician is essential if the program is truly going to be therapeutic in nature. Typical of many alternative programs, student attendance is a concern. It would be helpful to compute the average daily student attendance, including an analysis by days of the week. The program is highly staffed and it would be appropriate to calculate the average staff to student ratios, once the student attendance is analyzed. The program would benefit by having a full time social worker

There does not appear to be a “program” continuum at the high school for students who were assigned to the language-based learning centers at the elementary and/or middle schools. The assumption is that these are students who would continue to require specially designed instruction if their needs were so substantial that they required a program. Perhaps some of these students are part of the high school’s vocational program or alternative program. There is a reference to “language arts strategies” in the description of high school services. It is not clear to this evaluator what the profile is of students who receive these services.

A number of findings and recommendations regarding the “Strategies for Success” classes at the high school are included in the April 2012 report of the special education evaluation of the high school special education programs. It is important to clarify the process by which the strategies for success class teachers collaborate with the regular education staff to assure that the needs for curriculum and test modifications, preview and review of curriculum content, skill reinforcement and direct teaching of strategies and organizational skills are met. The goal of all special education is to have students apply learned skills with increasing independence across a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes. This is especially true for high school students. Except for grade nine, inclusion support is provided to students by instructional aides. It would be appropriate to consider how and when the special education liaisons for these students can spend time in those classes to monitor student progress and to observe the instructional aide. Supervision and planning with the instructional aides is essential to have this inclusion support model be effective.

Questions about which types of presenting student needs are best met in a co-taught or in a looping class at the elementary schools, given the “every other year” format of the looping classes, were discussed in an earlier part of this report.

There are multiple very good programs and services, a very robust number of special educators and there are an appropriate number of related service providers. The development of clear entry and exit criteria for special education eligibility with a defined continuum of presenting student needs and the corresponding interventions by each of the district services and district-wide programs are essential. Because Dedham is a small school district it is important to recognize that a particular program may “look different” from year to year with regard to the type and degree of severity of the disabilities of the students and the individual student profiles of each school year’s cohort of students.

It is important to include the out-of-district program(s), to which 10.3% of district students have been assigned, in any discussion of the “continuum” of district placements. Tuition for these 66 students accounts for a significant portion of the district’s special education budget. It is important to note that the “circuit breaker” provides reimbursement to the district for a portion of these tuition expenditures. As the district-wide programs are further defined and specific criteria established, it is appropriate to, once again, review the out-of-district student roster to determine which students may be ready to step down to a district program.

It is appropriate for smaller school districts to rely on out-of-district placements, especially education collaboratives, for students with low incidence or severe disabilities. Currently, twenty-six (39%) of the out-of-district students attend collaborative programs. Eleven

of the OOD high school students have an emotional disability. Depending on a potential review and refinement of the high school's alternative program, it may be possible that more students with significant emotional disabilities could be successfully served in the more natural environment of Dedham High School, rather than at an out-of-district school.

How does the district identify and respond to emerging program or service needs?

The special education director communicates regularly with the principals and is a frequent visitor to the schools and the special education programs. She knows all of the special educators and appears, based on multiple conversations and review of data sources, to make decisions and propose additions or changes to the district's special education organization, programs and services, or staffing within a framework of continuous improvement and collaboration. Ms. Gaudreau is a member of the district's leadership team.

Do current district practices support a successful transition of students from one level to the next, i.e., preschool to elementary school, elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school and high school to post-secondary life?

One measure of successful transition for Dedham students with IEP's is whether there is an effective Team process based on collection and analysis of objective data to determine if they are still eligible for special education. The percentage of students on IEP's, and anecdotal reports provided by a number of district personnel, indicate that there is an over-identification of students eligible for special education that, for some students, may begin as early as preschool and persists as they move through the grades. There is an apparent reluctance to recommend that a student be dismissed from special education, even though they have met their IEP goals, for fear that a parent will "push back". Given the wide-spread sense, expressed by special educators and principals, that many regular educators do not consider struggling learners their responsibility, perhaps some special educators are reluctant to recommend dismissal in case the student "might fail."

The district has an MCAS pass rate for students with disabilities higher than the state average and a lower percentage of drop-outs among students with IEP's than the state average. These are good indicators of successful transition to post-secondary life for district students. As noted elsewhere in this report, the district's vocational program at Dedham high school and the placement of students age 18-22 in a variety of appropriate OOD programs that provide considerable community experience, and functional skills training, sets the stage for those young adults to have the most positive outcomes possible.

Is there a clear and consistent decision-making process regarding the allocation of resources? Are district programs and services provided in a cost-effective manner, with maximum utilization of resources? Are additional or different resources required to maximize productivity and student outcomes?

The decision-making process with regards to the allocation of resources was unclear to this evaluator. For example, the elimination of the team-based learning center at the middle school, as well as the lack of a full-time school adjustment counselor there, creates a situation

where troubled and troubling students lack sufficient and/or appropriate supports. In addition, students who may be vulnerable to emotional disorders that can emerge during the middle school years may not have preventative services available to them in a timely manner. The evaluator is aware that the positions were reallocated to add a primary team-based learning class at Avery. The restoration of a team-based learning program at the middle school for the 2013-2014 school year would be very helpful in meeting the emotional/behavioral needs of identified students.

The ratio of special education staff to students, especially when the IA's are included in the ratios, is very favorable in the district. Numbers of students in district-wide program classes may vary from year to year, given the needs of students, and the small size of the district. It is still appropriate to maintain these district-wide programs, assuming that the criteria for each program is broad enough to accommodate a critical mass of students each year, as these programs provide the best educational setting and services for students.

It would be helpful to review the daily schedules of the SPED liaisons with respect to the number of students seen in each time block, in what setting (in-class or pull-out) and for what instructional activity. It may be possible, or not, to identify potential cost-savings or reallocations that would help to address pressing district needs.

One additional resource that would assist the district to make more effective utilization of resources would be the addition of two or three team chairpersons as part of the teacher contract. The current management of the IEP Team process is fragmented, does not support the building of ongoing relationships with parents, and does not effectively address the collection of and review of data that would indicate that a student has met his or her goals and is no longer eligible for special education. Funding for the team chairpersons would probably need to be identified by reallocations from current special education staff positions, including instructional aides.

Facilitating the IEP annual review meetings was considered, by most principals, to be an inappropriate role for them and they are rightly concerned about how this time-consuming process can be managed along with the new teacher evaluation responsibilities that they have.

Do the current special education enrollment, and the presenting needs of the students, warrant the present staffing level and assignments of special education teachers, related service providers and instructional aides?

The current special education enrollment and presenting needs of the students suggests that there could be some reductions in special education staffing, especially if the percentage of students found eligible for special education is reduced. To make specific recommendations for reductions or reallocations would require an analysis of each staff member's current daily duties, by time block, duties and specific assignment in collaboration with the principals and special education director.

It is unclear to the evaluator why, e.g., nineteen instructional aides are necessary at the middle school. If the middle school reallocated three IA positions to add one teacher position, that might allow for the return of the middle school team-based learning center.

It is important that the district renew and strengthen its focus on the implementation of differentiated instruction and tiered interventions in order to reduce the long-standing over-identification of students found eligible for special education. Training in differentiated instruction and the understanding of typical development is needed for regular and special educators. Resources are necessary to effectively begin and institutionalize a tiered interventions initiative. It should be possible to blend resources from special education with regular education resources, including reading specialists, to plan and introduce a tiered interventions protocol.

While the findings of this report indicate that the special education programs and services of the district are effective in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, it is difficult to comment on the financial costs associated with the special education programs and services without pointing out the substantial degree to which the long-standing district and community culture, and the practice of defaulting to special education to address the needs of “struggling learners” impacts the budget. As noted in the beginning of this report, 634 district students (22.5%) were eligible for special education in October 2012. If the district’s current percentage of identified special education students aligned with the state average of 17%, 481 students would be eligible for special education services. The special education budget in Dedham is driven, to a considerable degree, by the practices and decisions of regular education.

As the district-wide programs build further capacity to meet the needs of students with moderate-severe needs, particularly students with emotional disabilities, there should be a corresponding reduction in the number of out-of-district placements and the associated costs. The district will need to continue to rely on OOD placements for 18-22 year old students.

If the number of special education students declines, there should be a reduction in the special education budget with some increases in the regular education budget related to the implementation or strengthening of regular education programs and services. For example, the implementation of tiered interventions may have some staff, technology and/or curriculum costs associated with it. The expectation that regular education teachers provide more differentiated instruction has few costs associated with it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide training to all administrators, regular and special education teachers and related service providers regarding the appropriate determination of special education eligibility.
- Develop guiding questions to help facilitate IEP Team determination of eligibility or non-eligibility for special education.
- Develop a three to five year plan, including annual benchmarks, for the district to meet the state average of students found eligible for special education.

- Provide training to all teachers, beginning with preschool and elementary staff, regarding “differentiated instruction” and develop follow-up protocols with principals to assure implementation at all grade levels.
- Establish a committee to review and revise descriptions and entry and exit criteria for district-wide programs and services and make recommendations, if appropriate, for additional or different programs and services.
- Convene an ad hoc committee, including special education directors, speech-language pathologists, school psychologists, special education and regular education teachers to consider how students are found eligible under the Communication Disability or Specific Learning Disability category and consider changes to current practices.
- Review the criteria for assignment as a special education student to the Alternative High School program and consider whether the program should also include regular education students. Assign a full-time social worker for the program.
- Review the report dated April 13, 2012 and titled “*Dedham High School Special Education Program Evaluation*” with administration and relevant stakeholders to consider the findings and recommendations. Implement the recommendations that are approved in accordance with agreed timelines.
- Review the current co-taught grade 1 and 2 model and the looping program for grades 1/2 – 3/4 to determine if they serve similar student needs and develop guidelines for assignment to each of these programs along with program descriptions. Consider whether two program models are necessary.
- Review the number and needs of current and entering middle school student with identified significant social-emotional disabilities to determine whether it is appropriate and cost-effective to allocate resources to restore a middle school Team-Based Learning Center for SY 2013-2014.
- Consider assignment of a full-time school psychologist or school adjustment counselor to the middle school for SY 2013-2014.
- Complete a case study review of students who have IEP services for articulation to determine if their needs could be met by short-term regular education interventions.
- Discontinue the practice of having principals serve as chairpersons for annual review team meetings.
- Add two full-time team chairpersons to support an IEP Team process that is consistent, supports the development of positive and trusting relationships with parents over time and maintains a focus on documenting student progress in meeting special education goals. Recommendations for a reduction or cessation of special education services, as appropriate and based on objective data, are best facilitated when there is consistency in the assignment of a team leader.

- Consider how best to provide clerical support to the elementary and secondary special education directors and special educators.
- Review all special education liaisons', related service providers' and instructional aides' student caseloads, daily schedules by time blocks, including student names and grades, setting (pull-out or inclusion), and specific instructional focus or activity to determine efficiencies of practice and potential for reallocation of resources.
- Consider ways in which opportunities might be identified for special education teachers to provide a total of one hour of weekly planning with and supervision of IA's.
- Develop and implement a data based tiered interventions model at all schools that includes universal screening and is consistent with recommendations of the MA DESE, and provide training to support the robust implementation of this process.
- Continue the excellent professional development training offered by the district and include more co-training with both regular and special education staff.
- Provide training regarding classroom management strategies and positive behavior interventions for all regular education and special education teachers and service providers.
- Review the OOD student roster to determine what refinements or additions to the district-wide programs would be necessary to return some students to the district and to decrease the need for additional students to be placed out-of-district.
- Continue to monitor initial referral counts monthly and compute the number and percentage of students found eligible or not eligible by school. Analyze teacher and parent referrals to determine any patterns of reported concerns that led to the referrals.
- Inform parents, through PTO meetings, SPED PAC meetings, student handbooks, and other communications, about "what special education is and is not", and describe the supports that are available to struggling learners through regular education.

CONCLUSION

It has been a privilege to have the opportunity to meet the administrators and special educators of the Dedham Public Schools. The commitment of all to assuring the most positive outcomes for students with disabilities was evident in every conversation. The director of special education, Kathy Gaudreau, was generous beyond measure in providing abundant time and data to help the evaluator obtain a comprehensive understanding of the district's practices and its students. Her dedication to the continuous improvement of the district's services and programs is evident in every conversation.

While many suggestions have been made in this report for changes or refinements to district practices, particularly as they relate to the over-identification of students found eligible for special education, it is important to point out that there are many strengths and excellent practices evident in the special education services and programs of the district. I am very grateful for the warm welcome that I received in every school and appreciate the generosity of everyone I met for sharing so much of their time and wisdom with me.

Respectfully submitted,

Ellen G. Honeyman, CAGS, CCC/SPL

January 6, 2013