

Hopewell Valley Regional School District
Special Education Program Review and Evaluation

December - April, 2010

Introduction

The education of students with disabilities is guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, and the New Jersey Administrative Code (NJAC) Chapter 14 Title 6A. These laws mandate district policies and procedures related to the identification and placement of individuals with disabilities, as well as implementation of educational programs. One of the key tenets of IDEA is the concept that students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent possible. Over the last three decades, IDEA has been amended several times, with movement toward revisions that encourage inclusive practice and clarify the implementation of district programs for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

The Hopewell Valley Regional School District, with the goal of ongoing improvement of programs for students with disabilities, has requested this program review as a collaborative endeavor between an outside consultant and district stakeholders. The goal of the review was to evaluate current programs and determine short and long-term goals for program improvement. Over the course of four months, we have examined and collected data related to stakeholder perceptions of programs and services. We would like to thank everyone who participated in this project, giving their time and energy to support this review.

Context of the Current Special Education Program

There are currently 610 students who qualify for special education services in the Hopewell Valley Regional School District, with 533 placed in district programs, and 67 participating in out-of-district programs. Of these 610 students, 95 are in need of

speech services only, while 515 have been identified in one of 13 categories of disability (i.e. Specific learning disability, Autistic, Emotionally disturbed), as designated by federal and state regulations related to special education identification and placement.

These numbers have remained fairly consistent over the past several years ranging from 601 in 2005 to 610 in 2009.

District Personnel

There are a total of 185 personnel in the Department of Special Education This includes Child Study Team Members, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers (speech, OT, PT). Child Study Teams, consisting of school psychologists (5.5), learning disabilities teacher consultants (6.5), and social workers (3.9) service students in district and out-of-district placements. Each child study team member functions as a case worker, assigned to individual students as the coordinator of their services. In addition, there are various related service providers, including speech and language specialists (9.8), occupational therapists (2.1), assistive technology specialist (.5), a physical therapist (1), and behavior therapists (2). All of these personnel are directly supervised by the Director of Pupil Services, in addition to 4 (3 CST and 1 department) secretaries, 6 school nurses, and 1 registered nurse.

Staffing has also remained relatively consistent over the past several years with 84.2 primary staff members (cst, special education teachers, and related service providers) to 85.8 in 2010. This number does not include paraprofessional staff which has a tendency to fluctuate over the course of a school year.

Administrative Structure

The Pupil Services Department is supervised by the Director of Pupil Services. All Child Study Team members report to the Director of Pupil Services, as well as school nurses and related service providers. In addition to the personnel who are directly supervised by the Director of Pupil Services, she also supervises two special education supervisors; the Supervisor of Elementary Special Education, and the Supervisor of Secondary Special Education.

The supervisors each work with and directly supervise all special education teachers in the district, as well as all paraprofessionals. The Supervisor of Elementary Special Education is housed at Stonybrook Elementary School, and supervises, evaluates, and oversees all elementary special education teachers (27) and elementary paraprofessionals (50). The Supervisor of Secondary Special Education is housed at Hopewell Valley Central High School, and supervises, evaluates, and oversees all secondary teachers (31) and paraprofessionals (23) at both Timberlane Middle School and Hopewell Valley Central High School. In addition to their supervisory duties, the supervisors provide professional development for their assigned personnel, and oversee curriculum and instruction in special education at their respective levels.

A principal is assigned to each elementary school in the district. Both Timberlane Middle School and Hopewell Valley Central High School have a principal and two vice principals. These administrators meet with the Director of Pupil Services on a regular basis. The principals and the director report to the Superintendent of Schools.

Special Education Finances

Although not necessarily germane to this program review, the cost of providing services to students with special needs has garnered a significant amount of media attention in the wake of State reductions in education funding. Further, much of special education services are intertwined with general education services, making it difficult to arrive at a true cost (i.e. many staff members work with all students but are charged to the special education account).

A review of the information available from the district budget office indicates that district spending on special education has decreased between the 2009/10 and 2010/11 budgets by approximately \$400,000. This number includes contracted staff salary increases of 4.8% and state approved tuition increases of between 6-10% by out of district placements. The district has been proactive in working to contain costs by developing in-district programs, reducing legal costs, reviewing services (i.e. paraprofessionals) for their effectiveness.

A side by side comparison with general education would not provide any meaningful results, due in part to the specific mandates by the State regarding class sizes and staffing, particularly in the area of Child Study Team members. For example, state mandates limit the size of some special education classes to 6 or 9 students versus general education class sizes which have no state guidelines but typically average 20 or above.

Continuum of Services

In accordance with federal and state law, the district provides a continuum of services to allow for placement in the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities at various levels. Programming ranges from students who are placed in private residential facilities to students who are fully mainstreamed in general education classroom. “Collaboratives”, which provide the services of both general education and special education teachers in the general education classroom, are available in a variety of subjects and provide the least restrictive option after full-time general education. Resource Rooms, where students are pulled out of the general education classroom for part of the school day, are provided as replacement or support options for various subject areas. In addition, there are a variety of special class placements that are primarily available to students who need more support.

Various out-of-district placements are made for students whose level of need cannot be addressed by in-district programs. This includes a variety of placements, including day schools and residential placements. During the 2009-2010 school year, 67 students are in out-of-district placements (approximately 11%). This number has steadily been decreasing due to the district’s concerted effort to increase the in-district programs available to their students. Currently there are 14 in-district programs available to HVRSD students.

The following is a summary of current programs by level (2009-2010 school year):

Preschool

A continuum of services is offered on the preschool level. Housed in portable classrooms behind Bear Tavern Elementary School, there are three different levels of programs available. The Preschool and Early Education for Children of Hopewell (PEECH), SKIP, and SKIP PLUS.

- Preschool and Early Education for Children of Hopewell (PEECH) – integrated with general education
- SKIP (Special Kids in Preschool)
- SKIP PLUS (Special Kids in Preschool in need of more intensive support)

Elementary

- Collaborative Kindergarten
- Collaborative Programming Reading/Language Arts, Science, Social Studies and/or Math (Grades 3-5)
- Resource Center Programs Grades 1-5 (math, reading. Language arts)
- Special ClassK-2
- Special Class3 -5
- Language Learning Class (I and II)
- Class for Children with Autism (CCA)

Middle School

- Applied Academics
- Learning Skills
- Resource / Replacement Classes

High School

- Collaborative Programming Reading/Language Arts, Science, Social Studies and/or Math
- Life skills
- Resources / Replacement Classes
- Academic Essentials (Includes Community Based Instruction)

Program Review : Methodology

It is essential for any program review to include input from all key stakeholders, parents, teachers, students and administrators at the very least. Additionally, although strictly regulated by the New Jersey Office of Special Education Programs, each district develops programs that reflect the needs and values of their community. The goal of this program review was to objectively review the Special Education program in the Hopewell Valley Regional School District by combining input from the key stakeholders, the researcher's knowledge of current "best practices", and the district's adherence to the State code.

Phase One: Data Collection

Data for this program review were collected in two phases. In Phase One, the reviewer conducted various focus groups that were advertised via the district web site and e-mail. During Phase One, all focus group meetings were open to any interested stakeholders throughout the school district. Parent meetings were organized by level (preschool, elementary, middle, and high school), and advertised in the newspaper, via e-mail, and on the district web site. Additional focus groups were conducted with teachers, child study team members, and related service providers (therapists, paraprofessionals, etc.). In addition, the consultant visited all schools in the district, observing in various classrooms, and conducted interviews with various administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Phone conversations and e-mail exchanges were held with members of the Board of Education, teachers, and parents. Data sources are as follows:

District Overview Visit:

One day was spent visiting all schools in the district, meeting various personnel and receiving an overview of district special education programs and data from the Director of Pupil Services.

Organizational Meetings:

Several organizational meetings were held with the Superintendent of Schools to monitor the program review process, plan for subsequent review activities, and review current feedback from participants.

Parent Focus Groups:

Preschool: Two focus groups were held for parents at Bear Tavern Elementary School, both morning and afternoon.

Elementary: A focus group was held for elementary parents at the Board Office.

Timberlane Middle School: A focus group was held for Timberlane parents at the Board Office.

Central High School: A focus group was held for high school parents at the Board Office.

An additional open focus group was held for any parents who may not have been able to attend earlier focus group meetings.

District Personnel Focus Groups:

Teachers and paraprofessionals

Child Study Team

Related service providers (OT, PT, speech, etc.)

Interviews:

Personal interviews were held with each building principal and both special education supervisors. A full day was spent with the Director of Pupil Services, visiting all schools and providing an overview of the District's special education programs. In addition, various individual interviews and conversations were held with teachers, child study team members, and support staff.

An informal focus group was held with high school students placed in special education programs. This group was chosen by the principal.

Observations:

Classroom observations were held in each building, on a variety of grade levels and in varying classroom structures. During these observations, the Program Reviewer had the opportunity to observe lessons, and speak with teachers, paraprofessionals, and students.

All participants were invited to provide additional perspectives and information on an individual basis by communicating with the Program Reviewer via telephone and e-mail. The consultant spoke with a member of the Board of Education and several parents by telephone.

Phase Two: Data Analysis (by reviewer, then Program Review Committees)

In Phase Two, individuals were asked to volunteer for Special Education Program Review Committees, and a representative from each stakeholder group was asked to serve on a committee (parent(s), teachers, child study team member, and supervisor). A meeting was conducted with each group to review data displays containing the data collected in Phase One and discuss themes that emerged, strengths, challenges, opportunities/resources, and recommendations.

All Committee members were again invited to provide additional perspectives and information on an individual basis by communicating with the Program Reviewer via telephone and e-mail. During Phase Two, committee members were contacted via e-mail after their respective meetings as a follow-up to solicit additional information.

During Phase Two, an electronic survey was distributed electronically for input from any stakeholders interested in contributing to the data. In addition, an update session presenting the Phase Two data was held on April 15, 2010 and open to all interested stakeholders. During this meeting, participants were invited to add to the data and recommendations.

In addition to qualitative data, a quantitative survey was distributed to parents by the Superintendent's Office. There were over 150 responses received. The data received in the survey was consistent with the information received in the focus groups.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data for this project were analyzed using qualitative methodology, on both a formative and summative basis. At the conclusion of Phase One, data were reviewed and coded to determine emerging themes and patterns across data sources (focus groups, interviews, observations, and district documentation) as well as across participant groups (parents, administrators, teachers, child study team members, related service providers, and students). Trustworthiness of the data was maintained by having Phase Two committees review the initial data and discussing the patterns and themes that emerged. In addition, the update presentation provided an opportunity for participants and stakeholders to provide clarification about the findings.

Findings

Several consistent themes and patterns emerged from the data. These were:

1) communication, 2) preschool issues, 3) professional development, 4) space, 5) continuum of placements and consistency of services, 6) program and curricular concerns, and 7) paraprofessionals. Within these general themes, various subthemes, including strengths and concerns related to each theme, were consistently evident. The following is a discussion of these themes and subthemes.

Theme One: Communication

A primary theme that was consistently evident throughout this program review was communication amongst stakeholders in the school district. Many comments referred to communication issues due to the current administrative structures, where individuals seeking or attempting to share information were unsure about the appropriate person to approach. Data suggested that a recurring concern was communication between the Office of Pupil Services, the child study team, and parents.

In addition, communication between the child study team members and teachers was a subtheme of the data.

Strengths:

There are various vehicles and structures currently in place to facilitate communication throughout the district. First, information is disseminated to the entire district and the community through the district website, with regular newsletters, event information, calendars, and general district information posted. Information about events is also sent out to families and district personnel via regular e-mails. At the beginning of each school year, the Director of Pupil Services gives a presentation about special education programs for parents, with current updates and information about available services and programs. In addition, written communication through flyers, handbooks, etc. are distributed as appropriate (i.e. Preschool Handbook).

Another vehicle for communication with families of students in special education is the existence of various parent groups. A Special Education Parent Committee is held by the Director of Pupil Services. In addition some of the PTOs, parent sub committees exist specifically for families of students with classified disabilities at each building. Various other groups have been formed by parents, such as Families 411. Overall, the data indicated that district personnel were aware of the importance of ongoing communication with families, and used a variety of venues to do so.

Within the district, communication takes place through face-to-face conversation, e-mail, and regular meetings. Meetings are held to facilitate communication. Weekly meetings are held for district administrators, including the Director of Pupil Personnel Services. The Director of Pupil Personnel Services meets twice per month with the entire child study team. In addition, child study team members assigned to specific schools meet monthly with the building principal. Additional strengths noted in the data were the strong support from the elementary supervisor, as well as overall strong participation and engagement of families.

Challenges:

A major challenge of communication was inconsistency. Some participants, particularly parents, found it easy to access information, while others found it very challenging. Many participants expressed frustration about messages, as well as the tone of these messages, being different depending on the individual delivering the message. Some participants reported inappropriate, unprofessional interactions with district personnel. In several instances, participants perceived that information was intentionally being withheld. According to the perceptions of some participants, this inconsistency often results in a lack of trust and perceived secrecy, leading to adversarial relationships. It was evident that this has been an underlying part of the culture of the district, most frequently related to interactions with parents and families, particularly with the Office of Pupil Services and child study team members. Although these data were inconsistent, it was clear that this often leads to emotion, litigation, and a situation where parents perceive that they need to “fight” for information and services. Others did not perceive this as a challenge. District personnel are aware of these issues, however, and expressed concerns about ways to improve these relationships.

Although there are a variety of vehicles for communication with parents, the data indicated that these were not consistently accessed (Virtual Backpack, Family 411). District personnel expressed frustration at the minimal amount of participation in the available parent groups, which have been held at various times of the day and days of the week to accommodate family needs. When questioned about the availability of written venues for accessing information (handbooks, website, e-mail, etc.) several parents expressed that they had not seen or used these sources.

The data indicated confusion as to roles, responsibilities, and the chain of command. Many respondents indicated a lack of knowledge as to who to report to with questions, issues and concerns due to the current administrative structures. Overall, parents expressed the need for more and better communication overall, related to their child’s progress, processes, and structures.

Another recurring challenge was the need for better and consistent communication between the teachers and the child study team members who serve their students. Under the current meeting structures, these two stakeholder groups do not have an opportunity to discuss district-wide issues as a group with an exception on the pre-school level where a coloration day is scheduled every other Friday. In addition, communication between child study team members and teachers about individual students often occurs informally and in brief encounters.

The district has experienced a considerable number of changes in administration in the last several years. This turnover has created ongoing changes in communication styles and structures, as well as policies. The data indicated optimism that with a new superintendent starting in 2009, communication throughout the district will be improving.

Opportunities and Recommendations:

It was clear that the issue of communication was the primary theme of this program review. Although many of the district programs appear to be serving the needs of students with disabilities, communication challenges have impact in each area and theme that emerged. Many programs and services are available, but not utilized due to a lack of awareness of these opportunities. Interpersonal relationships are impacted by a breakdown in communication. If these issues are resolved, it would benefit all stakeholders and the function of special education programs and services in Hopewell.

Overall, the data indicated that, although there were many challenges related to communication, the district recognizes and is making an ongoing attempt to improve upon and address these challenges. A key example is the current program review, which has created a venue for all stakeholder groups to express their perspectives about district interactions. The following are various recommendations related to this theme, made by the Program Review Steering Committees based on a review of the data.

First, it is recommended that the district craft a vision statement for special education, communicating a clear vision about goals, roles, and responsibilities for all stakeholders. As part of this vision, there should be a clear set of structural procedures

for special education processes and programs, including an organizational chart with clearly defined roles for all personnel. Within this structure, it should be clearly delineated who parents, teachers, and other personnel should call with questions, concerns, etc. A “common language” should be defined, where all stakeholders are clear on what is being discussed or addressed. A special education glossary might facilitate the use of this common language. These structures should be clearly communicated and disseminated through a special education handbook, for parents as well as district personnel, so everyone is “on the same page”. The handbook should be readily available in various forms, such as hard copy and on the district web site, and used as a consistent place to obtain information. It should be updated regularly to maintain current information. A special education tab/link should be clearly available on the district web site so there is one central way for everyone to access information, and viewers do not have to wade through a lot of information. The handbook should be accessible through this website link.

Parents expressed a need to know about long-term opportunities for their children and transition. This presents a challenge, as programs change on an ongoing basis according to student needs. However, there were some suggestions to accomplish this. One was to provide a meeting for parents of students with disabilities during eighth grade, with a written packet of information, to help parents and students prepare for the transition to high school. A questionnaire might be completed by students, parents, teachers, and case managers to start a dialogue about their needs for high school and beyond. It was suggested that college students with disabilities be invited to talk with students and parents. These meetings might be open to all parents, so even preschool parents might be exposed to what might lie ahead for their children.

Parents and families of individuals with disabilities experience many challenges and have varied experiences as their children grow and develop. Although most district personnel indicated that they understand this, the data indicated that there is a great need to improve district/family interactions. Professionals must recognize the needs and perspective of parents and families. At the same time, parents must recognize that the district has limitations as to what they can provide for individual students. It was suggested that district professionals have ongoing professional development as to how

to interact with parents, and crisis intervention. One suggestion was to have a panel presentation with parents informing the professionals about their needs and perspectives. It was also recommended that programs be offered for parents, including a possible mentoring program, so that parents are able to understand the limitations of the district, and recognize when their expectations might be unrealistic. It would be helpful for district personnel to communicate and explain the reasons why certain programs may not be offered, giving as much explanation and information as possible. Creation of a parent resource network across grade levels would be a way to provide mentoring, support, and programming for parents. If parents provide these opportunities for other parents, perhaps they can find a way to increase participation in the events offered by the district.

In order to facilitate more consistency of communication with parents, it was recommended that initiatives be taken to improve communication between special education personnel (i.e. between case managers in different schools, and case managers and teachers). Teachers would like more opportunities to communicate with case managers, and increase their observations in classrooms. It would be helpful to create an observation schedule for case managers that is shared with teachers. If everyone is “on the same page” and has the same understandings about programs, it should help to increase consistency. It was suggested that all special education personnel have department meetings several times a year, so everyone has similar understandings and is informed about district policy and practice.

Theme Two: The Preschool

There are approximately 68 students participating in preschool programs in the Hopewell Valley Regional School District; this comprises approximately 10% of the total number of students identified as having disabilities. Preschool programs have experienced rapid, consistent growth over the past several years, from one class of approximately 6 classified students in 1999 to a current enrollment of **68 students half of which are classified in 2009-10**. Classes are housed in portable classrooms in the back of Bear Tavern Elementary School, along with offices for child study team

members serving the preschool. Subthemes that emerged related to the preschool indicated this rapid growth, along with many parental concerns and the need for dedicated supervision.

Strengths:

A consistent theme related to the preschool was the caring, hard-working staff who were dedicated to the growth and needs of the children. There is a clear focus on the need for early intervention services for students with varying levels of disabilities. Structures are in place for optimizing interactions, as every other Friday students do not attend to allocate time for collaboration, parent/school interaction, home visits, etc.

Within the preschool, a continuum of services is offered. The PEECH program (Preschool and Early Education for Children in Hopewell) is a half-day program for children from 3-5 years of age, where children with and without disabilities are taught in a single, collaborative classroom setting. These classes are taught by an individual special education teacher with paraprofessionals assigned based on student needs and abilities. There are currently two PEECH classrooms, serving four groups of students.

The SKIP program (Special Kids in Preschool) provides more intensive services for students with various disabilities, and currently is a full-day program for one class of children. The SKIP PLUS program is a full-day program designed for children with significant, multiple disabilities who are in need of even more intensive services. These programs provide students with teachers, paraprofessionals, and various therapies as needed. The programs are also served by a shared child study team with the Bear Tavern Elementary school that also provides evaluations for all students who turn three or who enter the pre-school program. A board certified behavior consultant (BCBA), who also services students with autism throughout the district, consults routinely at the preschool. The data indicated the high quality of student experiences and progress in the preschool, with many comments about the dedication of teachers.

Challenges:

The preschool has experienced various challenges, most likely due to this rapid growth. Space has become an ongoing concern, as well as the impact of adding children in the preschool to the number of children at Bear Tavern Elementary School. This has had an impact on school resources, and placing additional responsibilities /demands on administrators, nurses, and other staff.

The preschool schedule is designed to provide flexible time on alternate Fridays, where students do not come to school. This time is used for a variety of purposes, such as collaborative time for teachers and staff, parent meetings, home visits, etc. Although this was stated, it was not clear as to how activities are determine for these days, creating questions as to the way they are structured. Parents who attended the focus sessions were not aware of what takes place on these days, and did not know of any home visits occurring; although the district has sent a letter explaining the purpose of these collaborative days.

A primary challenge expressed throughout the district, but particularly the preschool, was the inconsistency of communication and dissemination of information to parents, and inconsistency of communication between families, teachers, the child study team, and administrators. Parents appear to have inconsistent experiences at this level, some being satisfied with the services provided, and others very dissatisfied. The data indicated frustration about a lack of information or inconsistent information, frustration about available services for their children, and an unclear chain of communication when they have concerns or questions. For example, a brochure is available that explains the various programs. However, some parents reported receiving this brochure; others had never seen it.

Concerns were expressed about the transition from preschool to elementary programs and services, particularly a lack of teacher and parent input into elementary placements for students. Data indicated that the child study team members were not in classrooms often enough to have a clear picture of the child's needs and abilities.

However, it was indicated that the child study team members made decisions about future placement, and parents and teachers had little impact on these decisions.

Recommendations:

Ongoing growth of the preschool indicates the need for a supervisor dedicated to providing clear organization, structure, and processes at this level. Clarity is needed for all preschool participants about roles, responsibilities for all involved in the programs. Parents, teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals need a clear chain of command to know where to go for information, resources, or problems. This individual would be on site at the preschool to address all issues, especially those that might come up unexpectedly throughout the school day. Consistent, dedicated supervision would provide consistency and clarity for communication, professional collaboration, and programming.

A priority at this level is communication with parents and families. This is often their first experience with school or special education programs. Many parents are dealing with the emotional impact of discovering that their child has a disability, and this is a sensitive time. It was recommended that a “family day” orientation be held on the first day of school, and perhaps also the first day after the winter break in January. This program should be structured where parents can bring their children to their first day of school, meet all related faculty, staff, and administrators, and see the facility. The day might be structured to provide an additional, separate information session for parents after the children begin their day, with the opportunity to ask questions and receive critical information about structures, processes for communication, where to go with questions, etc. A written handbook containing all of this information would be distributed to parents at this time. Parents would be given the opportunity to interact with one another and learn about parent group and information opportunities.

It is recommended that the district investigate the possibility of a Preschool Parent Advisory Council to provide a vehicle for parents to have a representative voice in activities and structures at the preschool. This would foster a collaborative relationship

between home and school that sets the foundation for these relationships throughout the child's school career.

Currently, one district-wide parent conference is scheduled on the calendar. The possibility of providing additional parent conference sessions should be considered as a vehicle for parents to solicit information about their child's progress. It is recommended that the Advisory Council and the district explore additional ways to foster ongoing communication with parents, as there is a clear need for parents to be consistently informed about their child's progress and functioning in school. This might be facilitated by more frequent progress reports or various means of communication via technology (postings, blogs, etc.)

Theme Three: Professional Development

Currently, much of the professional development related to special education in the district is provided internally by administrators and specialists, particularly the elementary and secondary supervisors. Subthemes indicate that although many challenges might be met by increased professional development, a lack of time and resources are available.

Strengths:

Administrators and various participants throughout the district agreed on the need for ongoing professional development at all levels. Various opportunities are available for teachers in the form of professional learning communities (PLCs) and workshops. As the PLC model for professional development was recently adopted by the New Jersey Department of Education and the Mercer County Professional Development Board, the district's current professional development programs are working toward compliance with these current expectations for practice related to professional development. Recently, all PLCs for teachers in Hopewell special education programs have been focused on learning new technology for evaluation and assessment (AIMSWEB).

The data indicated an overall positive perspective of inclusion and collaborative, co-taught classrooms for students with disabilities. Both general education and special education faculty appear willing to engage in collaborative classroom instruction, and administrators recognize the need for this to happen. For collaborative classes, attempts are made to structure common planning and development time for co-teachers. However, this is often constrained by schedules and structures, particularly at the secondary levels. Often, special education teachers work with a variety of partners throughout the school day, and are unable to collaborate with their co-teachers. Many teachers interact with their partners during their own time beyond the school day, leading to inconsistency across teams. Although the data indicated positive experiences, some indicated that this creates a lack of communication and often inconsistent structures for delivery of instruction.

Challenges:

Participant data reported that professional development opportunities were inconsistent, and not everyone gets the same information or experiences. A primary theme was the need for more professional development for general education faculty and staff related to special education and differentiated instruction. This was also indicated for special area teachers, such as math, art, physical education. Professional development for collaborative teams related to co-teaching, teamwork, and structures for collaborative inclusive classrooms would benefit those who work in collaborative placements. Although child study team members and special education teachers indicated a willingness to provide professional support to general educators, it was indicated that general education teachers do not consistently access this support, or do not know it is available to them.

It was indicated that the primary responsibility for professional development for faculty and paraprofessionals was through the Curriculum and Instruction Office. On allocated professional development days, the special education supervisors find it a challenge to provide meaningful opportunities for both groups, as their time is limited. On occasion, consultants are hired by the district to provide program guidance and

information, but it was not completely clear as to whether or how this information was communicated to faculty and staff.

Professional development is also offered to parents and families in the form of guest speaker events. The Office of Pupil Services schedules various speakers to share information about topics related to parent concerns, such as SSI, social skills, etc. However, as mentioned earlier, participation is minimal.

A considerable area of need is professional development for paraprofessionals who work with children in special education. It was indicated that a recent session was held to discuss a book as a professional learning community. This opportunity was facilitated by the elementary supervisor and was perceived to be very informative. The need for paraprofessional development is discussed in more depth later in this report.

Recommendations:

Throughout this review, there were numerous recommendations related to professional development for district personnel and parents. The district's Professional Development Committee should review the district plan to consider issues related to special education, many of which will benefit all stakeholders in the district.

First, professional development related to effective communication and interpersonal relations with parents and families should be addressed and revisited on a regular basis. This might be in the form of a panel discussion with parents, teachers, case managers, and administrators, or a presentation by parents about their frame of reference related to having a child with a disability. District special education personnel would benefit from professional development for sensitivity training, crisis management, and professional interactions and communication. If all stakeholders are sharing a common language and set of values, this would facilitate a collaborative environment. Although there are currently various informational opportunities offered to parents, there should be steps taken to engage their interest and encourage participation. A parent advisory council for parents of students with disabilities would provide a vehicle for parents to become involved in these initiatives, choose topics relevant for parents, and disseminate information in order to maximize attendance.

Another focus for professional development is to provide knowledge and skills to general education teachers and staff related to special education. Topics suggested were an overview of various categories of disability, legal issues, and particularly ways to differentiate, adapt, and modify instruction. Professional development for collaborative partner teams should be offered to maximize their interactions and effectiveness in classrooms.

Theme Four: Space

A consistent theme from all participant data was facility space. Participants consistently indicated the impact of facility space on programs and placement decisions for students and classes in the continuum.

Strengths:

Many families move to the Hopewell Valley Regional School District because of the quality of the programs offered there. The perception expressed in the data is that this is particularly true of special education programs. Another strength expressed was the sense of community in various parts of Hopewell; although schools are spread out throughout the district, each section has a sense of community.

Challenges:

These factors, although strengths, lead to various challenges. The increasing numbers of students in need of special education services has created a need for different spaces. District administration recognizes the strong sense of community, and makes an attempt to place children in their neighborhood school whenever possible. However, with limited space and financial resources, it is an ongoing challenge to balance this, while still offering the continuum of available services and meeting individual student needs. Reports were made about students who had been placed in three different elementary schools in the district, having to move from year to year. This creates additional social barriers and challenges for students, many of whom already have social challenges related to their disability. One student reported that he does not

interact with other children in his current school beyond the school day because he lives in another area of the district, so he “hangs out with his mom”.

Several classrooms for students with disabilities throughout the district are held in temporary, portable classrooms outside of the school building. In the past, this has been a common stigma for students with disabilities, often leading to social isolation and teasing. Although this was recognized as many of the participants as unacceptable, they recognized the reality of smaller numbers of students being placed in these smaller spaces. In some cases, concern was expressed that students in these portable classrooms did not have equal access to building facilities and technology, even though administration has made an attempt to rectify this situation with alternative opportunities.

Recommendations:

Ideally, it would be beneficial to add facilities to house students and support programs throughout the district. However, in the current economic climate, this is not realistic. However, it would be helpful to set up a district-wide structure (committee, workgroup, etc.) to examine alternative space allocation related to special education. This group should review placements on an ongoing basis with a focus on best practices in placing students with disabilities. Whenever possible, students with disabilities should be physically placed in spaces that maximize integration with students without disabilities, in the least restrictive environment and in places that facilitate learning and minimize stigma. It might be necessary to reallocate space to accomplish these goals. The district already tries to place students in their neighborhood school, and this practice should continue, also to be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

If the preschool is going to continue to grow, it is critical to explore possible reallocation or new space for these programs. It might be beneficial to explore the possibility of an early childhood center, where the preschool might be integrated with Kindergarten and first grades to facilitate interaction for all students and provide services and facilities that are developmentally appropriate.

Theme Five: Continuum of Placements/Consistency of Services

Options for placement of students with disabilities vary at different grade levels, and sometimes fluctuate depending on the individual needs of students.

Strengths:

The data consistently indicated that district professionals work hard to put programs together that meet individual student needs. There is an emphasis on following individual students' IEPs, as all teachers are required to read the IEPs for students placed in their classroom. This is accessed and monitored electronically to facilitate this process. In general, it was indicated that related services, such as occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech, and behavior specialist were readily available for students needing these services. Collaboratives, where both a general education and special education teacher work together to deliver instruction in an inclusive setting, are available throughout the district. These structures align with current practice and support student placements in the least restrictive environment, as mandated by law. It was indicated that students are placed in the least restrictive environment whenever possible; this was particularly indicated by the number of students placed in general education classrooms at the secondary levels.

An important indication from the data is strong administrative support for special education programs. Administrators create schedules around the needs and services for students with disabilities. They are aware of the need for common planning time and administrative support for collaborating teachers, and make an attempt to do so when scheduling.

The placement process appears to be aligned with federal law and current practice. Schools have had Pupil Assistance Committees (PAC) to recommend and enable pre-referral interventions for students identified as being at risk, although it was reported the pre-referral process was different in all schools.

The district is currently developing a Response to Intervention initiative (RTI) at Stonybrook Elementary School and there is awareness about this initiative across the

district. There is a plan for RTI to be implemented carefully and gradually across the district. This initiative will enhance the current PAC process to create a systematic structure for assessment, support and interventions to students in general education classrooms, with the goal of minimizing the need for classification. Although the RTI process is a general education initiative and part of No Child Left Behind, it is important for special education personnel to be a part of this process.

Challenges:

Participants, particularly parents, indicated that the availability of placements is inconsistent, depending upon individual child study team members and case managers. The data indicated a history of frequent litigation and the need for out of district placements. It was indicated that the changes in administration have contributed to inconsistent numbers of out-of-district placements.

In the process of meeting individual student needs, a challenge that emerges is the inconsistency of placement options from year to year. Several participants emphasized the need for collaborative classrooms to be an option articulated through the grade levels, so students who are successfully placed in these classrooms can experience consistent placement from one grade level to the next.

It is a perception that placement decisions are most often made by child study members, and that teachers feel they have minimal input into placement decisions, even though they work more closely with the child and participate in the IEP meeting. It was indicated that child study team members should be visiting and observing children in classrooms more often. Some participants reported inconsistent availability and information about placement options.

There was consistent data indicating parent focus on meeting the needs of their individual child, with unrealistic expectations about what can be done with the resources available to the district. For example, requests for programs outside of school, summer programs, etc. are made on a regular basis. It was indicated that, for the most part, the district makes a sincere attempt to balance the individual needs of students and the

resources that are available. However, within the scope of this review process, it was difficult to determine if these requests were appropriate.

An additional concern expressed in follow-up meetings was the length of time needed to make changes to a child's IEP. Although the timelines are indicated by law, parents perceived that it took almost a full school year to implement any changes when these are warranted – There seems to be some confusion by parents between General Education interventions, i.e. Basic Skills Instruction, and Special Education services.

Although it was not stated as a challenge in participant discussion groups, both district personnel and parents indicated that the transition program warrants improvement and attention. Parents indicated their concern for their child's future starts early, even at the preschool level. The high school program is in the process of being improved, as indicated by new programs and the hiring of a transition coordinator. However, transition options offered by the district fluctuate according to student needs, so it is a challenge to project these future options when children are in the lower grades.

A consistent concern mentioned is the challenge of having students pulled out of needed classroom time to provide related services; this a perennial challenge to provide additional services to students within a regular scheduled school day.

Recommendations:

Programs are revised on a regular basis based on the needs of the children, as stipulated in their IEPs. As this changes on a regular basis based on need, it is important to communicate the services available and placement options to all stakeholders on an ongoing basis. Establishing a clear process for communication would provide a vehicle for regularly communicating the various programs available in the district to all stakeholders. In this way, parents, teachers, and child study team members would all know these options during IEP reviews, and able to make the best placement decision possible for the child.

It is recommended that a flow chart be established to examine placement options for individual children as they progress through the grades.

In order to address the concerns about transition, it is recommended that parents be informed about possible transition options and professional development be offered about this topic. This should be emphasized at the middle school level. One suggestion was to have an informational meeting specifically for 8th grade parents of students in special education programs, in addition to a packet of information. It was also suggested that college students with disabilities be brought in to speak with students and parents who might be considering college as a post-secondary option.

The research about transition supports the need to start thinking about transition early in the student's schooling. It would be valuable to discuss this at every level, varying the depth of the conversation to be appropriate for that level. On a regular basis (perhaps at specified intervals), this should be addressed at an IEP meeting. Early in the placement process, a questionnaire could be completed by parents (and the student, if appropriate), teachers, and case manager about future goals, relevant strengths and challenges, etc. This would start the dialogue and could be revisited as the student progresses through the grades.

It was surprising that the high number of out-of-district placements(11%) did not emerge as a recurring theme in the data. This seems to be a complex issue for the school district, with some historical implications that litigation and conflicts with parents often resulted in an out-of-district placement. Some data indicated that many of these placements might be the result of legal or political issues rather than what is warranted by the students' needs. It should be noted that federal law requires that students be placed in the least restrictive environment, and an out-of-district placement, particularly a residential placement, is on the most restrictive end of the continuum of services. It is recommended by the reviewer that a committee be formed to explore these placement patterns and determine any alternative options that might be appropriate for students.

Theme Six: Program and Curriculum

In most cases, it appears that students with disabilities in Hopewell are instructed in the general curriculum, based on the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. Everyday Math is a commercial mathematics curriculum that is mandated

throughout the elementary and middle school levels. At this time, there is not a consistent reading program used throughout the district. Handwriting without Tears is another commercial program that is consistently used in the elementary levels.

Strengths:

A consistent theme in the data was the outstanding quality of teaching in the district. All stakeholders reported that teachers were hard-working and dedicated professionals focused on the children. Collaborative structures are strong, and the data indicated that these are benefiting students with and without disabilities. The data indicated a strong working relationship between general education and special education teachers in the district.

Transition programs at the high school have been enhanced by new staff, who are working on approvals for specific transition courses across the high school, as well as job placements for students at this level. There is a plan in place to open new classes that are focused on functional skills at the secondary level, first at the middle school and then at the high school.

In-class support programs are available throughout the secondary level, with most special education teachers highly qualified in the content area they teach.

Challenges:

Learning skills classrooms are available to middle school students who need this support. There is a district curriculum designed for these settings, where lessons are taught related to study skills, test taking strategies, etc. While the availability of this option is a strength, the challenge of these programs came up frequently in the data, where teachers find the need to provide support related to individual student needs rather than follow the curriculum. In many cases, teachers reported that students needed support for content area class work, help with homework and assignments, and that the curriculum was a barrier to accomplishing this. Teachers and students seemed somewhat frustrated by this situation.

Overall, the data indicated inconsistent quality and delivery of instruction in some areas, depending upon the individual who is delivering the instruction. Inconsistent data were reported related to the mandate for Everyday Math to be used as the standard curriculum for students with disabilities. Although some teachers found it beneficial for students, many reported that the spiral structure of this program was too challenging for their students with disabilities. Many reported that they have to supplement with additional materials to meet student needs.

The data indicated a desire for consistent reading and writing programs to be offered for students with disabilities. Students seem to be instructed in the program most familiar to their assigned teacher rather than appropriate programs to meet their needs. Every content area is reading-based, with an expectation of students being able to read content at all grade levels. General education content teachers need opportunities to adapt and modify instruction to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms. This may be provided through professional development for general education teachers about differentiation of instruction.

Another consistent theme was the challenge of the science curriculum at the middle school. It was reported by various participants that this curriculum was very difficult for students, particularly those with disabilities, and many students were struggling and in need of support.

Participants reported that there is inconsistent quality in the social skills programs throughout the district. Social skills programs are currently delivered by speech therapists and on the high school level, co-taught by a speech therapist and special education teacher, all of whom were trained by an outside consultant to deliver these programs.

Recommendations:

Students with disabilities should be instructed in a way that meets their individual needs and gives them access to the general education curriculum. The use of Everyday Math across the district provides a consistency and a common language across the district and across grade levels. However, teachers must be able to adapt

this program and use additional materials and resources when students are challenged. It was suggested that a summer project be set up to rewrite the Everyday Math curriculum at each grade level to be more special education friendly, with the same language and goals to provide a consistent choice of related materials.

A similar process could be used to address the concerns related to reading and writing programs. Having a hierarchy of available programs and materials relevant for students who struggle with traditional programs, would provide more consistency in approaches, across grade levels and throughout the district. The effectiveness of these programs, in compliance with the law, should be evidence based, and progress should be monitored through ongoing data collection. If a program requires teacher training or certification, teachers should be assigned to facilitate delivery of these programs to student who need them, with a focus on consistency and the ability to provide these programs as students progress through the grades. One consideration is to assign some of these teachers as reading consultants with flexible schedules who work with students as needed in various schools and on various grade levels.

A committee should be established to review and revise the science curriculum at the middle school, including special education teachers and general education science teachers. In this venue, these professionals should explore ways to differentiate instruction and determine strategies for delivering appropriate content in ways that would benefit all students and provide successful experiences for students with disabilities.

Speech therapists reported that they feel they do not have adequate training and are not comfortable with running social skills programs. However, the district feels they are trained and capable. Either way, effective social skills curriculum should be available to students throughout the grades. The delivery of this curriculum should be explored, with professionals knowledgeable in various social skills curricula and strategies working with the students.

Transition services, as required by NJAC must begin at 14 years old. Seeing this need, the district is in the process of expanding its life skills program on the secondary level to include Structured Learning Experiences and Community Based placements.

These programs have become extremely important in the future success of an individual with special needs.

The research emphasizes the need for co-planning time for general education and special education teachers to teach in an inclusive, collaborative setting (Friend & Cook, 2010). Administrators indicated that they try to schedule common preparation time for collaborative teachers, but this is a challenge given the complexity of the schedule. At the secondary level, special education teachers have an extra assigned period. This time might be used for collaborative planning time with general education faculty. It would also be helpful to explore alternative structures for scheduling, particularly at the middle school, to find ways to attach special education teachers to teams, as special education teachers are currently floating. It is recommended that a PLC or committee be established (consisting of various stakeholders) to look at other middle school structures to see what might work best for integrating general education and special education students and teachers

Theme Seven: Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals hold various roles throughout the district. As in many districts, paraprofessionals are frequently hired to support individual students with disabilities placed in general education and special education classrooms. In many cases, there may be several paraprofessionals in one classroom, as is the case in the Preschool.

Strengths:

It was consistently reported that the paraprofessionals in Hopewell are strong, caring individuals who give to the students beyond the responsibilities of their jobs. Many have a great deal of interactions with children. The district has recognized the need for ongoing professional development for paraprofessionals, and they recently worked with the elementary supervisor to read and discuss a book related to the characteristics of individuals with autism. Although they were not required to do so, a few paraprofessionals attended focus groups and provided data for this project.

Challenges:

Although the district has started to provide professional development for paraprofessionals, there were consistent data emphasizing the need to strengthen this process, with more ongoing pd related to dealing with behavior, individuals with autism, how to support students while promoting independence, etc. Professional development is a challenge because during staff development days, the elementary supervisor is providing professional development to the faculty, and cannot simultaneously provide programs for paraprofessionals.

A consistent theme related to paraprofessionals is a lack of time allocated for them to meet and talk with their assigned teachers. On the secondary level, paraprofessionals are often assigned to various teachers and classrooms, and are assigned during all class periods, so they have not designated time to communicate with teachers. Consistent with current research related to the work of paraprofessionals, they want to be listened to and need time to communicate with teachers.

Another theme that emerged was parents' desire to communicate with the paraprofessionals who work with their children. Professionals in the district see this as a concern, as paraprofessionals are not necessarily qualified to share information about students with parents and families.

Recommendations:

Professional development is critical for paraprofessionals, as they fill a variety of roles and work closely with children. In addition, this is mandated by NJAC and supported by current research (French, 2001). As recommended earlier, professional development should be provided by a variety of professionals and consultants, including district personnel and outside consultants, providing a variety of perspectives about current practice. Topics suggested in the data were appropriate interactions with parents, applied behavior analysis, how to support students while fostering independence, how to encourage and facilitate inclusion, and how to deal with

challenging behaviors. It is also suggested that paraprofessionals be part of the district-wide initiative about effective communication.

The data suggested a strong need for paraprofessionals to have time to communicate with the teachers in their assignments. It is recommended that schedules be designed to provide a designated time for this. It might also be valuable to provide professional development to teacher/paraprofessional teams to improve their interactions and maximize effective communication in the classroom.

Overarching Theme

In addition to the major themes that emerged during the review, it was observed that as a result of the lack of supports for at-risk students in general education, more students than necessary are referred for special education services. A byproduct of this is an increased number of classified students.

Recommendation:

It is not an uncommon phenomenon for “high achieving” school districts to see classification rates around the State average; however, the district should continue to focus on decreasing their classification rate, currently at 15%. In an effort to address this issue, the HVRSD has begun to pilot a Response To Intervention (RTI) program on the elementary level. The goal of this program is to identify and provide support to At-Risk students in the general education program, thereby reducing the need for special education services.

Discussion

The HVRSD has developed a strong special education program that has been consistently found “In Compliance” by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) through their monitoring process. In addition, anecdotal records indicate the success of students of graduates of the district who were classified – with many students transitioning to a two or four year college after graduation.

Although the classification rates and out of district placements are equal to the State average, efforts are being made to provide more support to at-risk students in general education as well as develop more in-district programs. Over time, this should result in a reduction in the number of classified students and students who are placed out of district.

The theme that emerged most consistently in the data was issue of communication, particularly between parents of children with disabilities and district personnel. This challenge permeates all other areas, and should be made a priority. Parents of individuals with disabilities face different challenges as their child develops through the life cycle (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). This is particularly evident at the preschool level, when parents are often receiving a diagnosis for the first time. The data in this review mirrored these challenges, as parents at varying levels had different concerns.

District professionals who work directly with parents should be made aware of these challenges, and learn skills to work collaboratively with parents to address their concerns (Friend & Cook, 2010). It is critical to provide knowledge and skills for all stakeholders related to interpersonal communications specific to educational settings. All involved with district interactions, including parents, should receive some training so that all stakeholders are aware of one another's frame of reference and able to disagree with a minimum of conflict. Although parents already have a voice, it is important to let them be involved in appropriate ways and encouraged to offer their feedback constructively. It is important for district personnel at all levels to listen to their needs and have structures in place to minimize roadblocks.

Although it is beneficial and cost effective to use in-district resources for professional development, this should be varied. It would be beneficial to balance this with outside perspectives, providing information about effective practice in other contexts and ways to facilitate change. Professional learning communities with participants within and outside the district might be developed to include a variety of stakeholders to enhance communication and continuity. For example, a PLC with teachers, parents, caseworkers, and administrators and an outside consultant might

work together to explore district structures and alternative options for communication and collaboration. New teachers should be oriented to the district's culture and perspectives. Ongoing updates regarding current research and practice should be provided consistently to all who work with students with disabilities.

Connection with the guidance department was not expressed in any of the data. This was surprising, as many students with disabilities experience social and emotional challenges. It is recommended that these connections be examined to see if they might be facilitated by different administrative structures. Counselors with knowledge about special education might be a valuable resource in facilitating programs, supporting students and professionals in the district, and possibly delivering social skills curricula.

Current practice in creating the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities is an inclusive model where general education and special education teachers work together in one classroom. The district calls these "collaboratives". Although there are some at the elementary level, this model has potential to grow, as it has been found to be effective for inclusive practice, and should be examined for consistency across grade levels. Professional development related to collaboration and co-teaching would help to enhance teachers' skills related to current effective practice (Friend & Cook, 2010). The data indicated that general education and special education personnel worked well together, but I was only able to observe this in collaborative classrooms, and the positive attitude of principals. Do these personnel meet on a regular basis? Do they have frequent opportunities to communicate and share knowledge and ideas? This might be an idea for future exploration.

Paraprofessionals have become an integral part of service delivery in special education settings (French, 2001). However, paraprofessional roles and responsibilities are not always clear, and many paraprofessionals do not have adequate preparation to do their jobs (Chopra & French, 1999). The research suggests various ways to support the work of paraprofessionals. The need for role clarification and professional development for paraprofessionals was supported in this review. Roles should be clearly spelled out for the paraprofessionals and who work with them, such as teachers, parents, and administrators. It would be beneficial to provide professional development

for all related to interactions and collaboration with paraprofessionals. This might be another opportunity to create a professional learning community. With structures in place and clarification of roles, paraprofessionals would be able to do their jobs more effectively.

The Hopewell Valley Regional School District provides an array of programs and a continuum of services that meet the needs of students with disabilities across the district. It was evident that it is a district priority to meet the needs of all students, given the resources available to them. District personnel are hard-working, caring professionals who are student-centered and want to do what is best for all concerned. The challenges found through this program review provide opportunities for change and improvement. Communication and training appear to be the primary challenges that permeate district programming and interactions. These concerns are recognized by most district personnel in the special education department and there is a willingness to improve in these areas. The Director of Pupil Services along with the superintendent are aware of these challenges and are working to provide programs and structure to meet these challenges over the next five years.

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