District-Wide Inclusionary Practices

Arlington Public Schools

Department of Special Education

Arlington, Massachusetts

Conducted:
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Submitted by:
LABBB Collaborative
Bedford, Massachusetts

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

The Director of Special Education for the Arlington Public Schools requested that the LABBB Collaborative conduct a district-wide evaluation of the special education inclusionary practices. The administration is seeking recommendations that will assist the district in understanding the status of inclusionary practices across the three levels. The district wants recommendations on how these practices can be enhanced/improved, and how special education personnel can be more effectively utilized within general education classrooms. This evaluation pays particular attention to the co-teaching model of instruction, the in-classroom support model currently being implemented, and the current strengths and areas of need in both programs.

A. Purpose

The purpose of an independent evaluation of a specific program and service is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strengths, needs, and recommendations. An evaluation allows for the district to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well in the district with respect to the focus of the evaluation *(inclusionary practices)*, but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened. This evaluation is focused on the specific area of inclusionary practices for students who are determined to be eligible for special education.

The evaluation process is designed, through a multi-step approach, to assist the school district's leadership team and the school-based special education personnel in having a guided and focused discussion that will enable effective short and long-range planning to occur while recognizing and addressing issues such as:

- o Identifying trends and patterns in referrals to special education

- o Identifying the main characteristics in the students who are referred

- o Identifying similar profile characteristics in the non-referred and referred students

- o Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students in Individualized Education Programs

- o Identifying trends in the program placements of students

- o Determining the effectiveness of current program and service interventions

- o Staffing and resource needs that reflect student needs

- o Creating a long-range *(3 to 5 years)* plan that addresses the agreed upon needs of the student population

o   Establishing a comprehensive approach to the development of more standardized practices that are linked to the budget planning process

This evaluation process brings forth information that will enable the district administration and school-based special and regular education personnel to develop an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective approaches for serving the special needs students in general education classes.

It is important to recognize that, for the information contained in this report to be beneficial to the district and special education services, the stakeholders must come together to discuss the findings and the recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the school-based special education and regular education personnel can develop short and long-range action plan(s) that will address the agreed upon issues.

B. Evaluators

Robert J. McArdle, M. Ed., Special Education Consultant for the LABBB Collaborative, has forty-three years in public education as a Mediator and Educational Specialist for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Administrator of Special Education for Woburn Public Schools, Pupil Personnel Administrator for the Greater Lawrence Technical High School, Stoneham Public Schools and Executive Director of the Greater Lawrence Education Collaborative, Northeast Associate Manger of Walker Partnerships and Interim Executive Director of the Gifford School. Mr. McArdle has been a Visiting Faculty member at Salem State College, Fitchburg State College, the University of Massachusetts/Boston, and Endicott College, in addition to consulting for several public and private schools. Mr. McArdle has conducted over sixty-five public school special education program evaluations. He has served on numerous advisory boards, task forces and special committees. He has presented at numerous conferences and conducted professional training sessions for school personnel for over twenty-five years. He served in several Executive Board positions, including President of the Massachusetts Association of Administrators of Special Education and was named Massachusetts Special Education Administrator in 2001.

James B. Earley, Ed. D. is an independent Special Education Consultant who provides contracted services for the LABBB Collaborative, SEEM Education Collaborative, Northshore Education Consortium, and Seaside Education Consultants. He has forty-seven years of public education experience as a teacher, teaching assistant principal, Massachusetts Department of Education Supervisor and Acting Regional Special Education Administrator, thirty years as Administrator of Special Education for the Watertown Public Schools and Superintendent of Schools for the Watertown Public Schools, and twelve years as Managing Director of Walker Partnerships prior to assuming his current consulting activities. Dr. Earley has been a Senior Lecturer at Lesley University and Wheelock College, an Adjunct Professor at the University of Massachusetts/Boston, and a Student Teacher Supervisor for Salem State University. Dr. Earley has consulted for numerous educational organizations, participated in a variety of

special education task forces and committees, and was a member of the Executive Board of the Massachusetts Administrators for Special Education for 24 years. He has conducted over 125 independent program reviews and evaluations for public schools, private special education schools, and charter schools. He has conducted numerous professional development trainings for school districts within Massachusetts and several other states. Dr. Earley has been recognized for his contributions to special education and received several awards, culminating with being named the recipient of the National Outstanding Special Education Administrator of 2003 by The Council of Administrators of Special Education.

II. Methodology

This program evaluation was conducted based on a four-step process.

1. Written documentation pertaining to the district's inclusionary practices for students with special needs in general education classes was reviewed. The documents that were reviewed as part of the process included 26 Individual Education Programs (IEPs), the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP), program descriptions of the various special education programs offered by the district, special education student census data, special education staffing, census for out-of-district placements, the district's Response to Intervention (RtI), Tiered System of Intervention for math and literacy, department goals for FY 18, and Student Support Team (SST) procedures. The document review activity required three hours by the two LABBB consultants.

2. Forty-seven observations of inclusion settings and co-teaching settings across all schools occurred. Observation time varied from 15 to 25 minutes for each setting. This activity required four days by the LABBB consultants.

3. One-on-one and focus group discussions were conducted with a broad range of school-based personnel representing the administration and general and special education personnel from all levels. One-on-one interviews were 30 minutes in length and focus group interviews were 45 minutes in length. Some interviews were shortened in the length of time due to staff schedules and their various assignments. This activity required two full days by the two LABBB consultant. Fifty-one individuals participated in the interview process. Interviews and discussions were conducted of the following positions:

   o Director of Special Education
   o Principals, 5
   o Special Education Coordinators, 5
   o Evaluation Team Chairpersons, 4
   o Special Education Teachers, 7
   o General Education Teachers, 6
   o Special Education Co-Teachers, 4
   o General Education Co-Teachers, 4
   o School Psychologists, 5
   o Related Services Providers, 6
   o Social Workers, 1
   o Paraprofessionals, 3

Questions and discussion focused on the following:

- o What trends do you see in the special education and general education student population?

- o Do you have tenure in Arlington?

- o What is your role and what are your responsibilities to the program you are serving?

- o Do your colleagues have a full understanding of your role?

- o What is working well for the special needs population that you are serving?

- o What are your main concerns regarding special education?

- o What strengths of the inclusion program can you identify?

- o What trends are you experiencing in the program?

- o Are there clearly stated and understood entrance/exit guidelines for your program?

- o How is student progress measured?

- o What type of data collection system is utilized?

- o What do you see as a major influence(s) on referrals to special education?

- o Do you see any obstacles to student progress?

- o Are special education procedures and practices clear to you?

- o What changes do you believe need to occur regarding inclusion practices and the co-teaching model of instruction?

- o Do you find that the co-teaching model of instruction is a benefit to special needs students?

- o If so, how would you define that benefit?

- o Do you see a distinction between the co-teaching model and in-classroom support model?

- o If there is a distinction, what is it?

- o Is there a structured re-entry program for students who have been hospitalized?

- o What topics of professional development need to be addressed?

- o What practices need to be in place to enhance your services?

- o What are some parents' concerns?

- o Do you have any other thoughts or ideas regarding the structure or operation of special education services that you think should be included in this report?

These questions varied, somewhat, depending on the specific role of the individual who was interviewed. Discussion expanded beyond these specific questions based on the individual's experience within their respective role, their experience in the field of education, the length of time that they have been in their current position, and any other factors that emerged from the interview process.

4. An exit interview was conducted with the Director of Special Education for reviewing the initial findings and recommendations.

III. Commendations

This section of the report is for the purpose of recognizing the efforts put forth by the district and the administration in their plan to meet the needs of special needs students through inclusionary practices across the district. Special Education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. There are competing interests that continue to place significant pressure and financial burden on the school district. Arlington Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of the students with a variety of approaches, programs, and services.

Specific Commendations:

- o The Director of Special Education is commended for commissioning this program specific special education evaluation.

- o The special and general education school-based personnel are recognized for their dedication to the students and their supportive attitude towards inclusion.

- o The school-based staff who participated in the interviews were forthright, expressed an understanding of the complex nature of inclusion, and provided thoughtful input for this evaluation report.

- o The district has numerous special education programs in place that provide a continuum of programming and services to those eligible special needs students.

- o The efforts by the district to provide an inclusionary approach of instruction and support for special needs students is recognized.

Table I. Percentage of Special Need Students Included

	Fully Included	Partially Included	Total	Substantially Separate
Arlington	70.5%	8.6%	79.1%	6.1%
State-Wide Average	63.3%	15.7%	79.0%	13.9%

Source: Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) FY 17 October Census

Table I illustrates that the district has a higher percentage of special needs students fully included than the state-wide average. The state-wide average for partially included is higher than the district. This is a common representation when the fully included percentage is lower than the district's percentage for full inclusion. 79.1% of the district's special needs population is participating in full and partial inclusion. The district has a significantly lower percentage of students in substantially separate settings than the state-wide average.

- o The high school has constructed a co-teaching model that represents evidence-based practice.

o   A common planning block exists at the high school for the collaborating teachers of the co-teaching model.

o   The middle school's model for co-teaching is an effectively designed model with a special education teacher and a full-time teaching assistant for a cluster of 7 to 8 students at each grade level. Each cluster of students travels throughout the day with the same special education teacher and assistant for each content subject. Also, each cluster of students has a daily academic support period with their special education teacher and teaching assistant.

o   The district is commended for its efforts to keep the co-teaching class ratio of students with disabilities to typical students below the 50/50 ratio.

o   The Millbrook Program, a general education program option at the high school, provides an off-campus alternative setting for high school students.

o   The Harbor Program, a general education program option, provides a reentry setting for students returning to school from a hospitalization, illness, or extended absence due to school avoidance.

o   At all levels, an effective use of technology for instructional purposes by special and general education staff was observed.

o   Middle school special education staff who were observed during academic support periods were starting the sessions with "how to" organizational skill development strategies for the completion of assignments.

o   Google School format is employed by some elementary special education staff for collecting data on student performance.

IV. Factors Affecting the Implementation of Programming and Services

There are numerous factors that impact on the district's ability to deliver instructional and related services to students. Currently, the district is placing significant effort and resources on enhancing district-wide inclusionary practices. Through the in-class model of support and the co-teaching model, the district has 79.1% of the special education population either fully included or partially included in general education classes.

None of the factors that impact the implementation of special education programming and services are more pressing than census and the needs of the students. These two factors drive program development and service initiatives.

Census
For FY 17, the district had 825 students identified as students eligible for special education services. *(FY 18 state data was not available at the time of this report development.)* This number represents 14.6% of the school age population, which is below the state-wide average of 17.4%. The district has varying representation by disability category compared to the state-wide averages.

Table II. FY 17 Percentage of Students by Disability Category Compared to the State

Disability Category	Arlington	State-Wide
Intellectual	1.9%	5.0%
Hard of Hearing	1.0%	0.7%
Communication	12.4%	15.4%
Visual Impairment	0.7%	0.4%
Emotional	10.6%	9.1%
Physical	0.1%	0.6%
Health	12.2%	13.0%
Specific Learning Disability	**12.2%**	**24.7%**
Deaf/Blind	0.1%	0.1%
Multiple	1.0%	2.0%
Autism	12.4%	11.9%
Neurological	**25.0%**	**5.6%**
Developmental	11.0%	11.1%

Source: DESE FY 17 October Census Report

Table II illustrates that the district is fairly consistent with the state-wide averages in its identification of students in the various disability categories, except for *Specific Learning* and *Neurological* disabilities. The district has a significantly different percentage of students identified in these two categories. *Specific Learning Disability* is half the state-wide average while *Neurological Disability* is five times higher the statewide average. It is the evaluators' experience that interpretations of the disability definitions by evaluation teams influences the determination of disability. A review of the definitions of the

disability categories should lead to greater consistency with statewide averages for these two disability categories.

The district is not over-identifying students with special needs; in fact, based on available census reports, the district has been below the statewide average based on DESE reporting for the past fourteen years.

Needs

The needs of the individual students are a major influence on programming. There is a varying and diverse group of disability categories that make up the census of students in pre-school through grade 12 and the 18 to 22 age population participating in special education programming. Many of the students in these programs have more than one disability. There are students with two or more disabilities that impact significantly on their ability to learn and make effective progress. A program's focus of learning shifts from student-to-student and from year-to-year. The staff is confronted with having to differentiate the instruction in many forms on a daily basis. Accommodations and modifications to the various core curriculums need to occur on an ongoing basis from small group instruction, to whole class instruction, to one-on-one instruction. The staff demonstrated flexibility both in their ability to meet the various instructional, emotional, and social needs of the students in all observed classes, but equally important was their effort to continuously refine the curriculum for content instruction.

The needs of the students, based on assessment data, are driving the instruction. The use of diversified and supplemental materials is essential to meeting the diverse needs of the students given their multiple and individual needs. The current group of students participating in the special education programming at the various levels demonstrates not only varied needs, but the intensity of their needs is significant and requires ongoing support from a variety of support personnel.

Table II illustrates that the district is in line with the state-wide averages for *Emotional*, *Autism* and *Developmental Disabilities*. For these three disability groups of students to make effective progress, a high ratio of personnel-to-students is required. The needs of the students in these disability groups are more intensive and require more programmatic support. As a result, program expenditures are costlier.

Utilization of Instructional Assistants

The utilization of instructional assistants has become a major factor in the implementation of special education programming and services. In a Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-3 advisory issued on March 20, 2014, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education found that according to data from the DESE Educator Personnel Information Management System (EPIMS), in *FY 16, Massachusetts had 17,570 paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities in the Commonwealth schools. (*Data only available up to FY 16.)*

As students with disabilities are increasingly placed in general education classroom settings, the use of paraprofessionals (instructional assistants) has greatly expanded.

Recent national figures estimate that well over 500,000 paraprofessionals are employed in public schools, and increases are anticipated in the coming years. The proliferation of paraprofessionals in public schools often has outpaced conceptualization of team roles and responsibilities as well as the training and supervisory needs of paraprofessionals. Nowhere is this more evident than in schools where students with severe or multiple disabilities are included in general education classrooms.

Paraprofessionals are playing an increasingly prominent role in the education of students with disabilities. With pressure from parents who want to ensure that their children are adequately supported, and general educators who want to make sure that they and their students are adequately supported, the use of special education paraprofessionals has become a primary mechanism to implement more inclusive school practices.

Common Issues to be Aware of for Special Education Paraprofessionals
Interference with Ownership and Responsibility by General Educators
- o There are general education teachers who do not think it is their responsibility to educate special needs students.
- o The availability of paraprofessionals or instructional assistants can create an opportunity to avoid assuming responsibility and ownership for special needs students in the general education classroom.
- o In many cases, the paraprofessionals do not receive the supervision needed to make these decisions. They may find themselves having to "wing it."
- o Often, the paraprofessional may not be doing the same activity that the class is.
- o In many cases, the education of the most challenging students is given to paraprofessionals who do not have the level of training and classroom experience that is required to serve this population.
- o If the role of the paraprofessional becomes ill-defined, the paraprofessionals can be relegated to performing clerical duties.

Separation from Classmates
- o Often, special needs students are removed from the main setting of the general education class and receive their instruction either in another part of the classroom or outside the classroom.
- o With appropriate modifications and/or accommodations, many of these students can participate in the same classroom activity.

Dependence on Adults
- o The student becomes dependent on the paraprofessional for all behaviors in the classroom, e.g., picking up the pencil, using materials, or following along in the book.
- o There is little evidence of fading prompts to decrease dependence on the assistant and encourage the student to respond to other people.
- o The paraprofessional stays involved with the student much longer than is necessary.
- o The long-term relationship of the paraprofessional with the student can become counterproductive.
- o The relationship of the paraprofessional can create boundary issues with parents. The paraprofessional becomes "part of the family."

Impact on Peer Interactions
- o When the paraprofessionals are not in proximity to the special needs students, peers are more likely to become involved with the students.
- o Having a paraprofessional assigned to the special needs student can become an additional stigma attached to the student, especially as the student gets older.
- o It is a more effective utilization of staff to assign paraprofessionals to the classroom or the program. They can work with specific students on activities that require 1:1 assistance.

Limitations on Receiving Competent Instruction
- o Many classroom teachers expect capabilities from paraprofessionals that are unrealistic.
- o Inappropriate help can be given by the paraprofessional such as doing the student's work, providing answers on a test, or giving inappropriate instruction.

Loss of Personal Control
- o Dependence on paraprofessionals can be a detriment to students wanting to advocate for themselves.
- o Often, decisions and choices are made without the input of the student, the parent, or the team.

A very important factor is the budgetary impact of maintaining a large number of paraprofessionals versus the competing needs of other important services and interventions. Currently, there is a beginning trend by school districts to "trade in"

paraprofessional positions for special education teachers and create clusters of special education students for co-teaching sections across grades and content subjects.

Developing and Maintaining a Continuum of Services
Prior to 2000, Massachusetts Special Education Regulations, under Chapter 766, mandated districts to develop IEPs that would "maximize a student's potential." At that time, the Massachusetts standard was the most demanding and comprehensive in the country. Other states adopted the federal standard under IDEA (Individuals with Disability Education Act) that ensured students make "…effective progress through a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)."

In 2000, Massachusetts adopted the federal standard of "effective progress." There has been ongoing debate as to whether districts need to provide the comprehensive level of services to special education students or a minimum level of services. This question of which level to provide, versus the spiraling cost of special education, is often a continuous and heated controversy in many school districts. The issue becomes even more of a concern in a challenging economic environment.

In 2001, Congress again passed the landmark act, No Child Left behind (NCLB). The stated goal of NCLB is "to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind." In 2013, Congress passed The Student Success Act. Although this act relinquishes some responsibilities back to the states, it still emphasizes the closing of the achievement gap and educating all students. These acts have focused attention on students with increasingly diverse learning needs achieving high academic performance in general education.

These changes have greatly impacted how special education services are delivered to students. Prior to these changes, the service delivery relied on "pulling" students out of the general education classroom to provide instruction that often did not relate to accessing the curriculum. Students lost important instruction in the classroom which, in many cases, left them at a significant disadvantage to be successful in participating in state and local assessments. The co-teaching model of instruction has become an increasingly popular inclusive school practice. For many school districts, the development of effective co-teaching models has allowed special education students to have more access to the general education curriculum. Co-teaching is effective for students with a variety of instructional needs. The collaboration of the general and special education teacher can create a classroom environment that differentiates instruction and makes essential accommodations that allow all students to maximize their potential. General education accommodations to serve students with disabilities in inclusive settings has required all professionals to work more collaboratively.

To effectively implement this model of instruction, districts need to hire additional staff or reallocate staff from other special education programs. Currently, Arlington does not have the co-teaching model of instruction in place at all grade levels across all content areas.

15

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as amended in 2004, does not require inclusion. Instead, the law requires that children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) appropriate to meet their unique needs. IDEA contemplates that the least restrictive environment analysis begins with placement in the general education classroom.

However, IDEA recognizes that it is not appropriate to place all children in the general education classroom. Therefore, the law requires school districts to have a continuum of placements available, extending from general education classrooms to residential settings, to accommodate the needs of all children with disabilities. Using the continuum concept makes it more likely that each child is appropriately placed in an environment that is specifically suited to meet his/her needs. The law intends that the degree of inclusion be driven by the individual student's needs as determined by the evaluation team.

In developing the Individual Education Program (IEP) for a student with disabilities, IDEA requires the IEP team to consider placement in the general education classroom as the starting point in determining the appropriate placement for the child. Should the IEP team determine that the least restrictive environment is not the general education classroom, consideration must be given to determine what other services outside of the general education classroom are necessary for the student to make effective progress.

Advocacy and Legal Perspective
Prior to Chapter 766 being enacted, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, through various DESE administered legislative acts, funded the placement of special needs students into privately operated day and residential school programs. This practice created a network of private schools within the state to service various disability populations. Because these programs were established for serving the specific disabilities of students, over time they became very specialized prior to the enactment of Chapter 766. Most of these programs continue to operate today, even though public schools have created a continuum of services and programs at the district level and through their educational collaborative affiliations.

Massachusetts has a long history of advocacy by special interest groups on how special education operates at the state and local level. The influence by advocates, their associations, and the interests of other parties, can greatly influence what actions a district may have to undertake to maintain and develop quality programs and services. These influences can also create an environment at the local level where cost benefit decisions are not necessarily made in the best interest of a student, but rather they are determined by what the parents believe is in the best interest of their student. A conflict may arise which can only be resolved through mediation, a hearing, or in some cases, a settlement.

The public may have little or no knowledge of what a district must do to serve a student with special needs. When a dispute occurs between the parents and the school district with regards to the services recommended for a student, the parents have the right to

resolution of the dispute through a third party. Although this action is sanctioned in special education law and regulations, it does place the burden of evidence on a school district to prove that their recommendations meet the standard of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the federal statute for meeting the needs of the student. This action can lead to an expensive out-of-district placement if parents prevail through the Bureau of Special Education Appeals hearing. The expense for the school district can be considerable, not only for the placement, but should the parents prevail in a hearing, they are entitled to recoup their legal costs from the school district. Therefore, school districts are continually confronted with the issue of cost avoidance when a dispute arises over a placement within the district or a placement in an out-of-district tuition-based program. This aspect of special education is an area of which few are aware or fully understand. Like Arlington, these evaluators have found that school districts are often confronted with the fact that parents have the means to retain legal counsel and move into "dispute resolutions." This can be an expensive line item in the special education budget. The expense is not only a direct cost, but also an indirect one because it requires the staff to spend its time meeting and preparing the work that will assist the district in deciding what course of action it will pursue if a dispute arises

This history of educational advocacy greatly impacts the evaluation and placement process for students determined to be eligible for specialized instruction through special education, and this can lead to a great deal of uncertainty during the school year. This advocacy role plays an important part in the issue of expenditures for special education, not only in staff time within the schools, but also in respect to independent evaluations, mediations, and due process hearings. The results of a due process hearing, or the settlement of a case prior to this hearing before the Bureau of Special Education Appeals, can lead to unanticipated expenditures during a school year. These expenditures can significantly add to a special education budget at any given time. There is no guaranteed approach that will ensure an avoidance of these legal encounters, but quality and defensible internal programs and services certainly will reduce the potential for greater unanticipated legal and placement expenditures. The district's exposure can only be measured by the recent history of legal involvement for the district. This factor cannot be ignored when formulating a special education budget and when developing long-range programming and service initiatives.

Educational Experience
It is essential that this factor become part of the mission of the department in addressing the needs of students with disabilities. To what extent can the district provide an appropriate comprehensive educational experience for students? There is little question or doubt that Arlington is willing to meet the academic needs of its students with special needs. Arlington, like many school districts, is facing new expectations as to what the district should provide for students with significant disabilities. These new expectations need to be continually assessed for each student with respect to program and service options, especially as the population of students with more severe needs moves from one level to the next. As more students spend a greater portion of their school day in general education classes, the model of support for these students will need to evolve so that these students can experience success. All evaluation team members must seriously

consider the educational experience factor when developing and designing placement recommendations. The overall culture of the school community will need to continue to gain a greater understanding of these new expectations, and, over time, the issue of expectations will need to be continuously reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

V. Findings

Through the evaluation process, it was apparent that the district's administration is very aware of the needs of the district, individual buildings, and students. The following findings are provided to assist the district with the work that needs to be completed. These findings are in not in an order of priority.

Specific Findings:

1. Most interviewed staff were not aware if a job description exists for their position.

2. There remains a degree of uncertainty by the general education staff with respect to how to utilize the teaching assistants within their classes.

3. Lists of accommodations in the reviewed IEPs were excessively long. Many of the accommodations listed in the IEPs are good teaching practices that all staff members incorporate in their instruction. Some districts have taken steps to develop a list of good teaching practices employed by staff and post them in the classrooms. Using this approach makes the team responsible for developing accommodations for the IEP that are written specifically for the individual student.

4. Some progress reports are lacking specificity in terms of a student's measurable progress. What does the phrase "adequate progress" mean? This does not indicate measurable progress.

5. There is a lack of a data collection procedure occurring for special needs students across the district.

6. Special education "specialized instruction" is not fully understood across the district. There were limited examples of specialized instruction observed in the various special education settings.

7. Interviewees expressed frustration with the lack of follow-through by some parents with respect to acquiring out-of-school support for their child and the family. It was expressed, numerous times, that there needs to be a greater emphasis placed on developing school/family partnerships.

8. There lacks a stated set of guidelines for the various services offered to students through special education. In order for the evaluation team members to decide eligibility for specialized instruction, there should be a set of guidelines outlining how students enter and exit a program.

9. Interviewees identified the following trends that are appearing in students: ADD, impulse control issues, dysregulation of self, executive functioning issues, poor literacy skills, school phobia/refusal, anxiety/stress, oppositional defiant behaviors, and trauma related issues.

10. Co-teaching opportunities are limited at the elementary level. The co-teaching model of instruction at the middle school is not following evidence-based practice. At both levels, it appears to be primarily in-class support. Best practice requires the special education teacher and the general education teacher to be equally involved in the delivery of instruction.

11. District-wide and consistent definitions for the practices of inclusion, in-classroom support, and co-teaching are lacking.

12. Guidelines for the co-teaching model that address the make-up of the class are lacking. Research indicates that the typical student population should make up 2/3 of the class with special education and other categories making up the remaining 1/3.
    • The percent of special needs students to general education students
    • The percent of ELL students (if any)
    • The percent of students on Section 504 plans

    Although it is not a requirement in Massachusetts, some states have state laws that limit the enrollment of special education students in general education classes. Illinois has a 70/30% law that requires that no more than 30% of the students in a classroom be special education students.

13. Guidelines are lacking that assist the collaborating teachers in the co-teaching model regarding their role and responsibilities for the co-teaching model and in-classroom support.

14. At the secondary level, the practice of keeping special and general education teachers together as a team, not changing teams each year, is not in place.

15. There is a need to clarify when "pull out" services are required. Is it a general education class scheduling issue, a lack of availability of special education personnel and/or a lack of grade level clustering of special needs students?

16. There is a need to enhance and encourage dialogue and professional development about what should occur in general education classrooms to assist teachers and instructional assistants working with special education students.

17. Written procedures are in place for students transitioning from the elementary level to the middle school level. There is also a procedure in place for transition from preschool to kindergarten and middle school to the high school. However, these procedures are not written down. The addition of the new sixth grade school will also need to be factored in.

18. The SST process *(Student Support Team)* is not embedded throughout the district, and it is not practiced with consistency.

19. The tiered system of instructional support (Response to Intervention, RtI) is not embedded throughout the district.

20. There appears to be a lack of understanding of all the special education programs and services available to eligible students.

21. Clear lines of communication need to be defined so that all special education staff and building administrators know the communication chain of command and the decision-making process within the department.

22. Greater understanding of the referral question by team chairs is required in-order to ensure that assessments that may not be needed are not requested.

23. There is a lack of understanding of what constitutes a language-based/learning disabled program. Some interviewed staff members indicated that there may be a need for this type of program; however, based on a review of the data collected by the district, there does not appear to be a need, at this time, to construct a specific program at the elementary level.

24. The district needs a comprehensive approach to professional development for general education teachers and teaching assistants on the "how to" for working with students with disabilities.

25. Teaching assistants require professional development in the various curriculum frameworks, instructional strategies, and behavioral strategies. An orientation program for newly hired assistants needs to be in place that is comprehensive and enables the assistants to fully understand the role and responsibilities of their specific assignment.

26. Special education teachers do not conduct standardized educational assessments at the time of the initial evaluation and re-evaluation.

27. The district has attempted to implement a time for special education staff to meet by building, by program, by itinerant groups, and by department. These efforts should continue and should be supported.

28. Guidelines are not in place for determining when a teaching assistant is required, or no longer required, for assignment to a student, a general education classroom, or a program.

29. There was an expressed concern, with respect to special education caseloads, that there is not a system in place featuring a weighted approach that factors in numbers, needs of the caseload, variables of the demographics of each school, and an equity of resources across the district.

30. From a review of data and comments by interviewees, referrals for special education evaluations have risen from last year.

31. School psychologists are a valuable resource; however, their primary responsibility is to conduct evaluations. This leaves very little time for them to consult with school-based staff or provide support to students. The district should require special education teachers to conduct the educational testing and work in harmony with school psychologists to assess students and make recommendations. Having special education teachers test would allow school psychologists more time to consult with school-based staff.

32. District class size is having an impact on inclusionary practices in the planning of placements of students from certain disability categories into general education classes. Students with more moderate to severe needs may have limited access due to class size.

33. There appears to be an over-reliance on the teaching assistants to provide direct instruction to students at the elementary and middle school levels. This may be due to a lack of adequate staffing of special education teachers at the two levels.

VI. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the evaluation process that was recently completed. The findings listed in the previous section are the foundation for the following recommendations. Each recommendation is followed by an explanation that is intended to further expand on the rationale for the recommendation. These recommendations are intended to provide insight and direction for the administration and school personnel in making decisions regarding the direction that they determine to follow with respect to the existing programs and services. These recommendations should be viewed as a point of departure for involved personnel to engage in discussions that will lead to the development of programs and services that truly address the inclusionary practices of the district.

It will be necessary for the stakeholders to come together and develop an action plan(s) that is comprised of short and long-term steps. Budget implications, as well as structural and organizational issues, need to be well-understood so that appropriate program development can be instituted. Through an inclusive process of discussion, a plan will emerge that is comprehensive, meaningful, and purposeful. These recommendations are not presented in an order of priority.

Student Support Team Process

1) The Student Support Team (SST) needs to be more uniformly practiced throughout the district and aligned with the RtI (Response to Intervention) and MTSS (Massachusetts Tiered System of Supports).

Explanation:

o There are varying degrees of implementation of the SST process throughout the district. For the process to be more effective at each school, a more deliberate structure is required. Once the process is more uniformed and consistently practiced, referrals for special education may be reduced.

o If utilized properly, the SST process is an effective tool. When a student has been referred to special education for an evaluation after going through the SST process, the referral is considered to be a more legitimate referral. There is currently a sense that the SST process can be an obstacle to making a referral, suggesting that it is "just another step to go through." There are reported examples where parents will circumvent the process by writing a letter to the school administration and requesting an evaluation under special education. While this cannot be completely prevented, further education for parents, and a more effective usage of the SST process, can lead to fewer parental and staff referrals.

o There needs to be a data review of those students who were processed through the SST team so that it can be determined which ones were found ineligible for special education. This type of analysis can provide the district with information that will indicate the kind of training that the SST team members should receive so only legitimate referrals are processed.

o The SST process is a general education process and members should be general educators. Based on their given expertise, special educators should be brought in to provide insight on students.

o On a consistent basis, building administrators need to participate as members of the SST process. Research clearly demonstrates that more effective change occurs in teaching practices when building administrators engage in the SST process.

o On a scheduled basis, SST team members need to rotate through team memberships so that all building staff members eventually participate in the process. This participation by all staff increases staff ownership to the process.

o In order to gain a greater awareness and insight into effective strategies of intervention, professional development needs to be made available to the SST teams. Coaching of team members should also be part of the training experience so that their strategies of intervention can be assessed, revised, and expanded.

o An updated manual that specifically outlines the purpose and function of the SST team should be developed. The roles and responsibilities of team members, uniformed applications that are consistently used, and a suggested list of intervention strategies based on the presenting student's central issue(s) should be included.

2) The district needs to continue the efforts that have been put forth in the implementation of the RtI (Response to Intervention) and MTSS (Massachusetts Tiered System of Supports).

Explanation:

o There is confusion, on the part of school-based personnel, as to whether or not the district is going to use the problem-solving strategy of RtI/MTSS. Staff members need to be informed that the district is moving forward with it and receive an explanation on how it will be implemented.

o The RtI/MTSS problem-solving model is a systematic approach that reviews student strengths and needs, identifies scientifically based interventions, frequently collects data to monitor student progress, and evaluates the effectiveness of the interventions implemented with the student. Problem-solving

is a model that is used, as the first means, to solve student difficulties within the general education classrooms. If problem-solving interventions are not successful in general education classrooms, the cycle of selecting interventions and collecting data is repeated with the assistance of the Problem-Solving Team.

o The purpose of the problem-solving process is to assist the classroom teacher and parent(s)/guardian(s) in designing and selecting strategies for improving student academic and/or behavioral performance. The intent is to develop academic and behavioral intervention strategies that have a high probability of success. A structure is provided for addressing the academic and/or behavioral concerns identified by teachers or parents. A problem-solving process requires full collaboration among a team of professionals, along with parents, to identify a specific measurable outcome, and to design research-based interventions that address the concerns. The district must integrate the use of data, both to guide the development of effective interventions, and to provide frequent monitoring of a student's progress. The process includes an assurance that interventions are implemented with fidelity. Family engagement in the process is vital to guarantee that all information which might impact success is considered.

o The RtI/MTSS process is similar to the SST process. Many consider the RtI/MTSS process to be more comprehensive in scope and more grounded in evidence-based "best practice." These two approaches could be wedded so that school-based personnel have the "best of the two" to assist them in formulating instructional and behavioral interventions for assisting students who exhibit difficulties in learning and self-regulation.

o The RtI/MTSS process has proven to be an effective, preventive intervention for students experiencing learning, social, and behavioral difficulties when special education and general education are merged.

Co-Teaching Model of Instruction

3) The district needs to review the current co-teaching and in-classroom support practices and establish a clear and consistent approach to these models across the district.

Explanation:

o To properly operate the co-teaching and in-classroom instructional support models, there needs to be clear, concise, and agreed upon statements that stress the purpose and intent of these two separate models of instruction. There is confusion among school staff as to exactly what the co-teaching and in-classroom models are and how they are to function. Additionally, throughout the district, there are varying perceptions of the role and function of a special education teacher assigned to a general education classroom.

o Based on the requirements of the district's Department of Special Education, the district's belief system, its culture, and its mission, co-teaching and inclusion descriptors need to be framed.

o The descriptors need to incorporate evidence-based "best practice" and reflect the positive components of current practices at the individual schools.

o The descriptors need to indicate which model or models of instruction will be utilized and when they will be utilized. The four models commonly referred to are Supportive Teaching, Parallel Teaching, Complementary Teaching, and Team Teaching. A resource reference is A Guide to Co-Teaching: Practical Tips for Facilitating Student Learning. R. Villa, J. Townsand & A. Nevin. Crown Press, California. Another resource is Co-Teaching, a handbook for creating and sustaining effective classroom partnerships in inclusive schools. Marilyn Friend, Greensboro, NC 27455-2590, www.coteach.com

o The descriptors need to be developed in collaboration with all current participants of the co-teaching and in-class models, and these descriptors should be subject to periodic reviews and updates. The descriptors need to include a clear outline of the role each involved person plays in providing instruction within the classroom.

o Many districts are gradually eliminating the in-class model of support and are moving toward the co-teaching model of instruction, as Arlington is doing at the secondary level. This is a step that the district may want to explore at the elementary level to help reduce confusion over the two models. This change has enabled other districts to expand the roles of the two collaborating teachers and their impact on instruction. The distinction between the two models is that in-class support is provided by paraprofessionals and sometimes special education teachers, while special and general education teachers conduct the co-teaching model.

4) Should the district move toward developing more co-teaching models across the grade levels, there will be a need to maintain a balanced enrollment in co-teaching classes.

Explanation:

o The evaluators have observed, in previous program evaluations, that co-teaching classes have a tendency to either become special education self-contained classes, or class enrollment becomes a higher percentage of students on IEPs than typical students.

o Current research indicates that student ratios in co-teaching classes should be approximately two-thirds general education students to one-third special

education students. However, the ratio certainly can vary, slightly, based on the type of needs *(intensity)* of the clustered group of students within a section.

o Should the number of co-teaching classes be expanded throughout the district, greater consideration must be given to matching students with" like needs" as they are clustered together into co-teaching sections. These groupings should have similar needs so that the instructional methodology presented by the collaborating teachers is relevant to the students' needs. One structural model that has been observed is the designation of one class at each grade level at the elementary level, and at least one content class at each grade level at the secondary level. Expansion of this example can occur as more staff members become interested in participating in the model. As more special education instructors decide to participate in the co-teaching model, the practice of "pull out" time for special needs students will be reduced.

o Consideration has to be given to the learning styles of the students and the teaching styles of the co-teachers. Along with clustering students by needs, pairing teachers to the students is essential to make the model more effective with regards to student progress.

o The district also needs to be cognizant of the number of English Language Learners and students on 504 plans that are placed in co-taught classes.

5) Should the administration make a firm commitment to the co-teaching model, several practices will need to be in place.

Explanation:

o A continuation of the structured common planning blocks is imperative. The collaborating teachers need to have common planning time on a weekly, if not bi-weekly basis. Currently, all but three co-teaching teams have weekly common planning time.

o Scheduling students for these co-teaching classes prior to the development of the master schedule is necessary.

o There needs to be a clustering of students with special needs, emphasizing the need of balanced classes.

o Co-teaching teams need to be committed to the model and remain together for several years in order to develop the cohesiveness that is required for this model to be effective.

o Professional development needs to be an ongoing activity for those staff engaged in the co-teaching model.

- Co-teaching coaching support should be another aspect of professional development that is incorporated for support of the model and the staff.

- Periodic meetings should occur throughout the school year for the collaborating teachers, building administrators, and curriculum department heads. These meeting should allow for the participants to explore and discuss their concerns, issues, success, and what changes need to be considered.

- Current participating staff members articulated that guidelines are lacking that address the issue of the roles and responsibilities of the two collaborating teachers within the co-teaching model.

- An operating manual/handbook needs to be developed that provides guidelines with respect to grading, homework assignments, examples of curriculum and instructional accommodation, sample behavioral intervention strategies, types of shared teaching activities that can be conducted, effective use of common planning time, suggested strategies for problem solving, sample test forms, progress reporting forms, suggested systems of communication, and the "how," "when," "what," "where" and "who" statements, etc. This type of organizational product will reduce, if not eliminate, confusion between and among teachers.

- The teachers, with administrative assistance and oversight, should develop this operating manual. This can be conducted as a study group or as a summer workshop activity.

Professional Development

6) For all school personnel, the district needs to develop a more comprehensive approach to professional development experiences that focus on regular and special education topics.

Explanation:

- The district has done commendable work in providing professional development experiences on numerous topics of curriculum and instruction to school-based personnel over recent years. Professional development for all school personnel regarding a number of issues related to special education, however, has not been in place. Some examples of such development experiences include: best practices for instructing students with disabilities, legal issues, SST practices, the RtI/MTSS model, eligibility determination for services, dealing with challenging behaviors in the classroom, students with mental health needs, working with different disabilities categories in the classroom, etc.

o Arlington has many very highly qualified special education personnel with significant experiences that could be utilized to plan, develop, and provide trainings to faculty on a number of the topics.

o Professional development needs to be consistent across the district, and themes established for each school year should be maintained throughout.

o Interviewed staff members expressed an interest in having more frequent and in-depth training opportunities that focus on the following:

  1. Techniques/strategies for teaching students from social/emotional classes
      ✓ How to work as a team
      ✓ Establishing rules (for ourselves and for students)
      ✓ How to plan
      ✓ How to best provide instruction
  2. Limited English students that may have a disability
  3. What is a learning disability?
  4. RtI levels
  5. Co-teaching
  6. Universal design
  7. Strategies for general education teachers
  8. How to assist the struggling student
  9. Who is the average student?
  10. Using the IEP as a learning tool
  11. Modifying and accommodating
  12. Classroom management of challenging behaviors
  13. "More social emotional training and less curriculum"
  14. Avoiding the pitfalls in special education
  15. How to avoid litigation
  16. How to work with various disabilities
  17. IEPs and IEP writing
  18. Working with students on the autism spectrum
  19. How to fill out forms
  20. Overview of special education laws and regulations

o Interest was expressed for training in the area of eligibility determination. Staff members want a greater understanding of the difference between a typical student who is struggling and a student who is eligible for specialized instruction. They also want clarification on exactly what specialized instruction is.

o There needs to be a discussion of the issues of "What is right?" or "What is fair?" There was some expressed concern, frustration, and a lack of understanding regarding appropriate grading, student workload, and assignments for students with disabilities. Interviewed staff expressed interest in these issues and suggested that a study group format would be useful.

o Training needs to be designed by groups of professionals and support staff so that it is meaningful to them. The training experience should be designed with respect to the professional experience of the audience. Not all staff should be presented with the same information. Training needs to be designed with respect to the current knowledge and experience of the various groups and audiences. Specialists such as school social workers, speech and language therapists, psychologists, guidance counselors, etc., should have the opportunity to attend training that is specific to their field of expertise. In some cases, this may require off-site attendance at conferences and/or workshops. Another option would be to approach neighboring districts, through a collaborative, to see if they are interested in participating in the development of training for "low incidence" professionals. On-line training for school-based staff on these the above stated topics is another approach that should be considered.

o When training is structured so that topics are dealt with in-depth and are combined with follow-up opportunities to review implemented practices, they have a more significant impact.

o Coaching and follow-up sessions should be ongoing experiences for all participating staff.

o Team chairpersons are often the initial contact for parents through the referral process, and they play a role with parents throughout the student's educational experience. Training needs to continue to assist chairpersons with techniques for working with parents in a collaborative manner, encouraging them to be significant members of their child's team.

7) Recognizing the limited time available to teaching assistants, the district needs to provide these assistants with substantial professional development and ongoing support.

Explanation:

o Teaching assistants spend considerable time working directly with individual students and small groups of students. These individuals have varying backgrounds and experiences. If the district is going to continue to rely on these positions to support special needs students in general education classes and in substantially separate programs, then the district must provide greater exposure to training opportunities so that assistants have a more extensive knowledge of the various disabilities, curriculum frameworks, strategies of instruction and intervention, management of behavioral issues, provision of in-classroom support, and the making of curriculum accommodations and modifications. These paraprofessionals need to have a greater understanding of how instruction is provided to students with special needs.

o Teaching assistants need to know how they are to be utilized in the various instructional settings. All too often, when paraprofessionals are assigned to general education classes they do not know how to function in that setting. Additionally, in many instances, the general education teachers do not know how to effectively use paraprofessionals. It is essential that training is provided to the paraprofessionals that will give them the strategies that they need to use in all settings.

o Teaching assistants who have mastered certain skills and strategies could be used to assist in conducting some of the training experiences.

8) The district needs to continue with the design of a district-wide training program to be shared with all staff that will increase their general awareness level regarding special education terminology, practices, procedures, regulations, and available services within the district.

Explanation:

o There is considerable misunderstanding of the various terms that are used in special education. School-based personnel do not have a clear understanding of the distinctions among in-class support, inclusion, the co-teaching model, accommodation, adaptation, and modification. Staff may interchange these terms, one for the other, despite the fact that there are clear distinctions among them.

o The distinction among the disabilities categories is another area of training that is needed. Staff members need to have a greater understanding of the various disabilities, what they mean in terms of an impact on learning, and what the "best practices" are that they should be utilizing as interventions.

o Some confusion remains as to what constitutes a student's eligibility for specialized instruction. There seems to be a pattern developing among general educators where one student becomes eligible, so if another student appears to have similar needs, then that student should become eligible as well. This misunderstanding creates confusion among staff and could lead to an increase of referrals for special education evaluations.

o During the interviews, when discussing the inclusion of students with disabilities and the reason for doing so, it was not mentioned, with any consistency, that access to the general education curriculum was the reason to include students with disabilities into general education classes. This is not a major error on the part of any one individual, but it is an indicator of the thinking of school-based personnel with respect to why students are being included, and that all school-based staff are responsible for the education of all students.

31

o There are some exceptional programs for students with disabilities that begin at the pre-school level and continue to the high school level. However, general education personnel, and some special education personnel, are not aware of the various programs and services that are available. There is a need to ensure that all staff members have an understanding of the varied programs and services that are offered through special education. This may need to be addressed annually, during teacher orientation, or when other department or building meeting forums are held. Whenever it occurs, it is necessary to ensure that all staff members have a greater appreciation of the programs offered by the district.

o Given that these varied programs exist, the job descriptions, roles and responsibilities of the various special education personnel need to be periodically reviewed and updated when necessary. There is confusion and a lack of understanding of the various special education positions within the district. Over time, positions become defined by the individuals who fill them. In one school a special education instructor may function in a particular capacity; yet, in another school, an individual in the same position may function differently.

o There are different interpretations of the team chairperson's role and responsibilities, depending on the individual who fills this position. A clearer definition of responsibilities needs to be put in place and shared with building staff and administration.

Team Meetings

9) The director should consider the following strategies to maximize administrative efficiencies and communication within the department.

Explanation:

o *Establishment of Special Education "Chain of Communication Command"*
A clear line of communication needs to be established to ensure that all involved teachers, chairpersons, principals and coordinators are aware of the decision-making process within the department. Information indicating how decisions are made, how communication is shared, and what timelines are involved needs to be established and shared with all appropriate personnel

o *Establishment of an Assessment Handbook*
There needs to be an assessment handbook developed that outlines the roles and responsibilities of the special education staff, the related services providers, and the special education service providers with respect to the evaluation process. This handbook should outline the assessment/testing requirements, determine who is responsible for what type of assessment, and describe how the assessment reports should be developed. In addition, the handbook should outline the various

assessment tools that each specialist utilizes for the various evaluations that are conducted.

o *Procedural Manual*
A manual should be developed that defines the process necessary for staff to follow, ensuring that staff know where to find all special education policies and procedures, and they are aware of how to access them. This can be done by having each staff member complete a review at the beginning of the year to include how/where to access information when needed.

o *Team Decision Making*
To alleviate the lack of input at team meetings, consideration should be given to having special education teachers conduct the initial standardized educational assessment. This would also ensure that the person most likely to service an eligible student has a formal understanding of the student's needs and how much service time is required. Team chairs should also review the assessments that they are seeking as part of the initial team process.

Assigning Teaching Assistants

10) The district needs to establish guidelines by which teaching assistants are assigned to a student, a group of students, a program, or a classroom.

Explanation:

o The teaching assistants provide a beneficial service to students with disabilities, but it is not clear to all staff members how the final recommendation is made to assign a paraprofessional to a special needs student, a group of students, a program, or a classroom.

o Given the number of teaching assistants within special education, and the growing requests for additional positions, it is imperative that the district maintain clear guidelines for why an assistant is being assigned to a student. The assignment of a teaching assistant to a student because of health and safety, a foremost reason from an administrator's point of view, and the usage of teaching assistants in a substantially separate program are both fairly clear reasons. Beyond these reasons, however, it becomes less certain as to "how" or "when" a paraprofessional should be utilized.

o The decision-making process needs to be clear and understood by all those who have input in the process. The research on the decision-making process is scant (Freshi, 1999; Giangreco, Broer & Edleman, 1999). The idea that a paraprofessional is utilized to implement the goals of an IEP should be due to the district's current inability to implement these goals without the use of this

additional support. A recommended starting point is the DESE Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-13 – Identifying the Need for Paraprofessional Support.

o The district should study the following various strategies that are commonly practiced: trading teaching assistant positions for special education positions, increasing ownership by the general education staff, providing time-limited assignments, and using assistants to free up special education personnel from burdensome paperwork so that special educators are able to spend more time with students. ("Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools." Giangreco, M., Halvorsen, A., Doyle, M., Broer, S. Journal of Special Education Leadership, October 2004.)

o Roles and responsibilities of the teaching assistants should be reviewed and updated. Specific functions for which they are responsible need to be documented so that cooperating staff members have a full understanding. Practices and procedures should also be spelled out on how the assistant is to function in various instructional settings such as working with groups, working one-on-one, monitoring test taking, etc.

o The district also needs to establish a process/protocol for the scheduling of teaching assistants. Building principals, along with the Director of Special Education and Special Education Coordinators, should develop a process to determine when teaching assistants are scheduled, who makes the assignment, and who monitors the ongoing need for the assignment.

Administrative

11) Administrative oversight of special education programming, services, and special education personnel needs to be redefined as to the structure within the Department of Special Education.

Explanation:

o Arlington has experienced a number of changes in the position of Director of Special Education and in the coordinator's position over the past years. Given the turnover in these important leadership roles, it is important to allow the prevailing director the opportunity to review the current administrative staffing for the department and develop recommendations that will enable proper ongoing oversight to occur.

o The role of the team chairperson has a different interpretation depending on the individual filling the role. A clearer definition of chairperson responsibilities needs to be put in place and shared with the building staff and administration.

o   As new special education positions evolve over time and staff members change at the building level, administrators' requests, expectations, and building needs change. It appears that this has been one factor that has led to a significant turnover in this very important position.

o   A clear line of communication needs to be established to ensure that all involved teachers, chairpersons, principals and coordinators are aware of the communication process. Information indicating how decisions are made, how communication is shared, and what timelines are involved needs to be established and shared with all appropriate personnel.

o   The district provides a very comprehensive orientation for new staff each year. However, for staff members that start after the completion of the orientation, access to computers, email set up, training on IEP process, access to a key card, and knowledge of their caseload is difficult for these staff members to navigate. The district should consider a mini orientation for staff that begin after the formal orientation, particularly for individuals that are in a long-term substitute role.

Transition Practices

12) Transition practices need to be structured in a more sequential and consistent manner between the various school levels.

Explanation:

o   Transition activities are conducted each year for students moving from one level to the next. A written transition procedure exists for transition from the elementary school level to the middle school level. Procedures need to be written for other levels, as well, to ensure that requirements and timelines are consistently in place. Without a written procedure, timelines and expected activities can change every year.

o   Staff members are performing the steps for transition that need to occur, but the process varies throughout the district. It would be beneficial to review the steps with all involved staff members to ensure that practices and procedures are being consistently followed.

o   It is not only essential to have written procedures in place that designate timelines for various activities, but definitions of the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in the transition activities at each level should also be included. It is recommended that the district develop very specific steps for the transition process from one level to the next. Communication should be structured throughout the spring months based on a set timeline for the various activities to ensure that the actual transition of the student is completed in a manner that

defines success. The current start time of February will allow for the process to be successful.

Evidence-Based Practice

13) There needs to be a thorough review of evidence-based practice that is applicable to the various special education instruction, in-classroom support, and support programs currently operating within the district.

   Explanation:

o   The district offers an array of various programs and support services that are designed based on the designated disability category of the special education population. This is an effective approach for servicing the diverse special education population within the district. However, because the needs of the population are continuously changing, revisions in students' needs warrant a change in the approaches that special education instructors utilize to service students.

o   District leadership needs to begin a review process with special education staff to determine the following:

> ✓   What evidence-based practices are currently being utilized?
> ✓   How effective are these practices on student outcomes?
> ✓   Do they meet the identified needs of the students?

o   An example of a best practice that needs to occur is in the academic support periods. It appears that staff members are struggling with "getting the work done" on home assignments, term projects, and test preparation at the secondary level. Although special education staff were observed teaching study skills, a practice needs to be in place whereby the bulk of student time is spent on learning "how to" get the home assignments completed at home, "how to" prepare for a test, and "how to" complete a term project.

o   Students need to learn the skills that will assist them in becoming independent and successful learners. Certainly, they may require some assistance with various assignments, with reviewing new concepts, with having content re-taught, or with getting their work organized, but the ratio of this type of support to learning "how to do it independently" should be no more than two out of five periods. Some districts have established a practice where study skills are taught for three quarters of the period and school assignments are the vehicle by which the skills are taught. The remainder of the period is spent on teacher assistance with the various work assignments. Another approach that is utilized is using three days a week for skill development and two days a week for assistance with assignments.

o   Changes in strategies of instructional and behavioral intervention practices should be aligned with the true definition of the various programs, along with the intent, purpose, function, and outcome for the students within the programs. Many positive experiences of teaching and providing instruction were observed throughout the high school, but there needs to be a review of all programs and services. The work currently taking place with Wediko is to have various special education programs review their missions and values while also determining that they are current with evidence-based practices for the intervention and support that the programs are intended to provide.

o   Staff members need to design strategies which will allow students to be shared among programs and services. Students should have access to other special education program options and choices. They do not always fit nicely into one model or service. The sharing of a student among special education staff and programs may enable the student to benefit from the expertise of other special education staff and other program designs.

o   Recommendation 13 applies to all the models of instruction and programs, including the in-classroom support model *(inclusion)*.

14) The administration should have a unified data collection system for measuring student progress against student IEP goals.

Explanation:

o   The special education staff members are using various data sheets to measure progress. The effectiveness of the current approaches could not be determined based on the time available for this evaluation. It does appear, however, given the various computer models available, that it would be a worthwhile endeavor for the staff to begin reviewing various options and determine what data system is most appropriate for their needs.

o   It is important for the program staff to have the data that indicates treatment/behavior/academic goals are being addressed and progress is being recorded. The data needs to be reported in a format that is understood by both students and parents and can be used to drive instruction and supportive interventions by the school-based personnel.

o   The staff should form a study group to research what systems are available and begin to test out some systems. Google Form Spread Sheet, Microsoft Excel Pivot Table, and Developing Minds software are a few of the many models and systems that can be adapted for a specific use. There are some staff members attempting to use Google School, but this is an individual endeavor; it needs to be district-wide.

VIII. Summary

The Director of Special Education requested that the LABBB Collaborative conduct an evaluation of inclusionary practices of the Arlington Public Schools. This evaluation was focused on determining the status of special education co-teaching programs and services, the special education census, what is working well across the district with these two forms of inclusionary practices and concerns that staff members have over programming needs. The administration wanted to secure recommendations to assist them with short and long-range planning.

An introductory interview was conducted with the Director of Special Education and system coordinators. Written documents from the Department of Special Education were reviewed. They included the following: descriptions of programs and services, roles and responsibilities, census and budgetary data, curriculum materials, procedures and practices, and out-of-district placements. Observations were conducted of all co-teaching and various in-classroom support settings across the district of special education programs and general education classes. Thirty-minute one-on-one interviews and forty-five-minute focus group interviews were conducted with fifty-one individuals.

From this process, findings and recommendations were developed. Full explanations for each recommendation were included. This report provides the district with the necessary information to move forward with enhancing the existing programs and services and continuing the expansion of some of the work that is currently in place.

The administration has developed a number of special education programs and services that address the special education needs of the student population. There are many positive aspects and components to the services and programs available within the district. The *Recommendation*s section addresses issues and provides recommendations that can be carried out within a reasonable period of time to enhance what the district is attempting to accomplish for students with disabilities.

Appreciation is expressed to the support staff of the Department of Special Education and school personnel for their assistance with scheduling class observations and interviews.

Appendix

The evaluation process revealed additional information that the evaluators believe should be included in this report to assist the district in gaining a greater awareness of the various issues raised and suggested strategies to address these issues that were not directly related to the primary focus of this evaluation.

Program Development

1A) The district needs to further develop and expand program options for the special education population.

   Explanation:

   o As noted in the *Commendations* section of this report, the district has invested significant resources in program development at all levels. The increasing cost of special education, especially the out-of-district expenditures, is a difficult issue for all school districts. There are variations in each district's percentages and numbers as well as in the innate characteristics that will impact on the capacity and responsibility to meet the mandates of special education. Until appropriate state and federal resources are provided to assist in offsetting the financial demand of special education, the district will continue to be burdened with costs that may seem unreasonable.

   o The immediate reaction is to push back. Although the district has responded to the needs of the students by building capacity to serve students within the district, it is going to have to further that capacity should it want to reduce the expenditure for out-of-district placements and accompanying transportation costs.

   o Through the implementation of many of the recommendations, the number of students in special education can be reduced; therefore, some costs may be reduced over the next three to five years. The determination is to be proactive. The issue of costs for special education has been an issue since 1974 and will continue to be an issue for cities and towns. A proactive approach will go further in reducing the budgetary impact on the district.

   o A formal approach to clinical supervision needs to be in place for social workers and psychologists, on a consistent basis. Again, as with the specific program staff, this group of professionals needs to have access to clinical supervision. They need assistance with formulating treatment plans, setting student goals, providing guidance to administrators regarding the risk level a particular student may present, providing assistance with building capacity, and assisting staff with targeting improved understanding and management of complex students and families with mental health needs.

o As internal programs have been developed, the need to address utilization of staff becomes a more significant requirement. The district needs to develop a process to maintain continued access to staff schedules in order to assist with the decision making for staff assignments, show where overloads may be, and see available time for various staff members.

2A) The district needs to determine which disability categories it will select to develop further program capacity in order to assist with reducing the exiting of students to out-of-district placements.

Explanation:

o At the time of this report, the district has 109 students in out-of-district placements. This represents 12% of the special education population. The FY 17 state-wide average for out-of-district placements is 6.9% of the special education population. The district's out-of-district percentage for FY 17 is 14.1% of the special education population. The district clearly has a significantly higher percentage of students in out-of-district placements than the state-wide average. A reduction can occur through internal program development, building capacity. Not all students can be served within the district, but when the out-of-district census is at these numbers, an analysis of the placements needs to occur to determine who can be served within the district should a program be in place.

o The district expended 7.3 million dollars in FY 17 for out-of-district tuitions to collaborative, public day, private day, and residential placements. It is projected that the district will expend 8 million dollars for FY 18.

o The district will need to respond to the cost-benefit of developing in-district programs for specific disability groups of students. With the increased pressure of the special education budget on the whole school budget, the district should formulate a strategy to expand and develop further in-district appropriate programming over the next three to five years. The cost of one out-of-district placement and the amount for the transportation for that placement can support, on the average, one experienced professional position. The statewide average cost of a day school placement is $61,000.00. To reduce the number of students in out-of-district placements and build program capacity to lower the number of students exiting the district, further internal program development will be required. Factoring in transportation costs, the district would be able to start a program that is fully staffed and appropriately equipped. For example, if one additional tuition student is returned to the district, the district would be able to provide the required support services to a program. The district is accessing its collaborative for placement, and it should continue to do so when it is determined that it cannot provide appropriate programming.

o The Germaine Lawrence School also impacts the district. This private, special needs school adds students to the middle and high school special education

census. Districts like Arlington that have private, special needs schools and/or group home residences within their district face additional challenges in that students attending the district schools create an increased demand for special education services. The Commonwealth and DESE have not effectively addressed this issue from a financial perspective for Arlington and other districts that have group homes and private special needs schools within their community.

o   In-order to effectively construct in-district programs that are appropriate, based on student population cohorts, resources need to be dedicated to this endeavor. Appropriate space, staffing, materials, and supplies must be built into the equation that leads to program development. Many times, a district needs to set the priority of program development to a specific disability population and begin the implementation on a small scale. These efforts will produce results because the district will have a program in place to accept students that transition from one level to the next, as well as unanticipated student move-ins. The effort to build capacity will reduce the reliance on out-of-district placements, reduce the exiting of students from the district, and may enable a student(s) to return to the district. These steps will assist in containing, and possibly reducing, the growth in tuition expenditures.

o   As the district has experienced growth at the Early Childhood level, it is also experiencing growth in students with emotional/social/behavioral health needs. These populations require intensive staffing with an array of related services to appropriately support these students. There are no easy answers, but the district must decide that they will continue, in the long term, to develop in-district programs when there are sufficient cohorts to sustain programming. This proactive approach will assist in reducing the number of students that are placed outside the district, and, over a period of time, the growth in special education expenditures for out-of-district tuitions and transportation costs will be contained.

o   The reality is that "good programming" is costly. It is labor intensive and requires a substantial commitment from the administration and the district's teaching staff. It can, however, also be cost-effective. When districts develop a full continuum of services, they can provide quality programs for special needs students. The benefits of having an appropriate continuum of programming across the district, for all disabilities, at all levels, will lead to the prevention of students exiting the district, the containment in the growth of the cost for special education, and the means to provide for students within the district by building capacity. Out-of-district placements, next to personnel expenditures, are the single largest impact on a special education budget. Arlington Public Schools needs to continue to monitor student needs and trends in placements to ensure that internal program options are available to meet student needs.

o   The administration needs to decide which disability category they will try to reduce from exiting the district. Once a decision is made, an action plan needs to be developed as to when the budgetary process will allow for the expansion and

implementation of new programming to address this concern. In reducing further exiting from the district, those funds earmarked for out-of-district placements would be used for program development.

o As more students remain in the district, they will have greater access to general education classes at all level. This, in turn, will provide students with LRE experiences. Another benefit is that students currently in sub-separate programs may have the opportunity to move into general education classes as other recommendations are implemented.

o Concern was raised through the interview process that a need exits at the middle school level for a Life Skills Program. This issue needs to be reviewed to determine the actual level of need.

Entrance/Exit Guidelines

3A) There needs to be clear and concise entrance and exit guidelines in place for all special education programs and services that are well-established and followed.

Explanation:

o The district has put forth a good deal of effort in developing programs and services to accommodate moderate to severe special needs programs. This investment has been beneficial to the district as quality programming and related services for students have been provided. Interviewed personnel were not able to articulate what they perceive as the entrance guidelines for their specific program, and they were less specific regarding exit guidelines.

o For all of the programs and related services, stated entrance and exit guidelines need to be in place that are based on evidence-based practice, current research, and reflect the mission and goals of each program. For the programs and services that provide a continuum of programming and services, it is essential that entrance guidelines, exit guidelines, and referral protocols are adhered to as stated, and they must be structured in a sequential manner for each district-wide program.

o If programs have entrance and exit guidelines, they are not clearly understood by some special and general education personnel. The establishment of these guidelines can be completed, in collaboration, when program descriptions and personnel roles and responsibilities are being updated.

o The same needs to be done for the related services of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling services. There are established professional standards for these services that outline the guidelines that need to be in place. Arlington is not unlike many school districts with regards

42

to related services. The evaluators have observed, in many other program evaluations, that discharge from these services is infrequent, even when stated goals have been mastered. It is essential that exit guidelines be formulated and followed so that when students succeed, they can either move to less service time or be discharged.

o If the related service providers of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy have written entrance and exit guidelines in place, this would ensure that caseloads are appropriate and that students are recommended for a change in services at the appropriate time, not just at annual reviews and re-evaluations. Too often, students continue to receive a related service for an undetermined time, such as a full year, or year after year. With established entrance and exit guidelines, students will be able to have a service reduced, when necessary, or be discharged from that service at the appropriate time.

o The establishment of entrance and exit guidelines, based on evidence-based practice, will assist the district in reducing the number of students on IEPs, the possible length of time a student is assigned to a specific program, and determine the duration of time that a student receives a specific service. Practices like these can also lead to the potential increase of time for students from these programs to have access to general education.

Program and Staffing Oversight

4A) The district has developed and invested in some very successful programs for disabled students within the district. Efforts need to be made to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of the students for whom they were developed, and that staff members receive the supervision required to remain effective.

Explanation:

o *Establishing a mechanism of program oversight*
Arlington has developed many in-district programs to meet the needs of the disabilities of *Autism, Intellectual, Emotional, and Developmental*. It is critical that the programs continue to service the needs of the students for which they were intended. The decision-making process for placing students into a program within the district, as indicated, is unclear. A formal procedure needs to be developed and made aware to all appropriate stakeholders. The evaluators have witnessed, through numerous program evaluations, many quality programs that have been compromised by having students that do meet the specific program guidelines placed into a specific program.

o The district has made a substantial investment in program development over the past ten years. It is not in the best interest of effective program sustainability for the personnel of these programs, and the programs themselves, not to receive the

ongoing oversight that they deserve. To accomplish this, Arlington needs to determine the "who" and "how" with respect to overseeing, evaluating, and monitoring of all programs. Consideration should be given to a written brochure for each program/service.

o *Establishment of an annual review of program populations*
An annual review of students placed in each program should be considered to ensure that the programs continue to meet the specific population for whom they were developed. Teachers and building administrators should be consulted to assess their input. Much effort has been committed to the programs, and efforts to assess that their continued effectiveness will be of benefit to all students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Conducting such a review will also allow the Special Education Department to remain proactive to such student needs as identifying reasons for increased reading instruction demands at the middle and high schools, and being proactive in addressing programs and services to address these factors.

o *Assistance to building administrators in supervising special education personnel*
Principals need to be prepared to supervise the special educators in their buildings. The district needs to provide training and assistance to allow them to perform this task.

o *Clarification of building and central office responsibilities*
The monthly meeting agenda with building principals should contain an item to ensure that a clear delineation of which office (school or special education) is responsible for reacting to staff needs be developed. This will allow staff at the school level to get answers to their concerns in the most-timely fashion. Issues as simple as "Who arranges interpreters?" and "How are the costs covered?" should be made clear.