

Cherry Hill Public Schools

Special Education Program Review and Evaluation

September 2013-January 2014

Introduction

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

The Cherry Hill Public Schools, with the goal of ongoing improvement of educational programming for students with disabilities, requested this external program review as an initial overview of data collection related to program quality. The goal of the review was to evaluate current programs and determine goals for program improvement. To accomplish this goal, we examined and collected data related to stakeholder perceptions of programs and services, and analyzed these data for emergent themes related to current best practice in special education. We would like to thank everyone who participated in this project, giving their time and energy to support this review.

Context of the Current Special Education Program

District Overview

The Cherry Hill Public Schools consists of three high schools serving grades 9-12 (Cherry Hill High School East, Cherry Hill High School West, and the Alternative High School Program), three middle schools for grades 6-8 (Beck Middle School, Carusi Middle School, and Rosa

International Middle School), and twelve elementary schools serving students in grades K-5 (Barton, Cooper, Harte, Johnson, Kilmer, Kingston, Knight, Mann, Paine, Sharp, Stockton, and Woodcrest). Preschool programs are offered at the Barclay Early Childhood Center.

Cherry Hill is the twelfth-largest school district in the state of New Jersey and one of the largest suburban districts. The district employs approximately 1,007 teachers and other certified staff, 48 administrators, and 333 educational assistants. Data as of August, 2013 indicated that the district serves 11,473 students), including 5,047 in Grades Pre-K through 5, 2,690 in Grades 6-8, and 3,609 in Grades 9-12. The school population includes students who speak 64 native languages, with 2,054 bilingual students and 177 English Language Learners. The ethnic distribution includes 65.5% Caucasian, 16% Asian, 8.7% Hispanic, 7.5% African American, and 2.8% with two or more races. Approximately 18.2% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cherry_Hill,_New_Jersey).

District Mission and Goals

The district website (<https://www.cherryhill.k12.nj.us/about/about.cfm>) states the following:

The mission of the Cherry Hill Public Schools is to provide a quality education program that ensures that all students are proficient in the Common Core State Standards and New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards. This program will be delivered in a positive environment, preparing our students to be knowledgeable, responsible, caring, and confident citizens in an ever-changing world.

- Continue to improve student achievement at all grade levels for all students and close achievement gaps where they exist.
- Create a cost-effective budget that provides for educational resources as well as preventive maintenance and ongoing facilities improvement in all schools.
- Enhance communication with and outreach to internal and external stakeholders
- Enhance relationships with internal stakeholders through effective hiring and retention practices and staff training programs.

Currently there are 2304 students who qualify for special education services in the Cherry Hill Public Schools, with 2169 placed in district programs, and 135 participating in out-of-district programs. Of these 2169 students, 223 are in need of speech services only, while 1946

have been identified as having various other categories of disability, as designated by federal and state regulations related to special education identification and placement.

There are a total of 518 personnel that work in the area of special education, which includes one Director and three Special Education Supervisors. Child Study Teams, consisting of eleven school psychologists, eleven learning disabilities teacher consultants, and nine social workers, service students in district and out-of-district placements. Each child study team member functions as a case manager, assigned to individual students as the coordinator of their services. In addition, there are various related service providers, including twenty-one speech and language specialists, six occupational therapists, two physical therapists and one Colleague Teacher. There are 189 special education teachers, and 264 instructional assistants. There are five secretaries that service the Department of Special Education.

Continuum of Services

In accordance with federal and state law, the district provides a continuum of services to allow for placement in the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities at various levels. There are five elementary schools that are designated as "co-teaching" schools, providing one class at every grade level that is taught by both a general education and special education teacher. Students with disabilities are placed in these classrooms for the entire school day. There are also in-class resource (ICR) programs, which provide the services of both general education and special education teachers in the general education classroom; these placements are available in a variety of subjects, particularly at the middle and high school levels, and provide the least restrictive option after full-time general education. Resource Rooms, where students are pulled out of the general education classroom for part of the school day, are provided as replacement or support options for various subject areas. In addition, there are a variety of special class placement options that are primarily self-contained and available to students who need more support. Various out-of-district placements have been made for students whose level of need cannot be addressed by in-district programs.

There is an in-district Alternative High School for students who are determined to be at-risk and need a small, more structured and supportive setting to be successful. This is a

comprehensive program with numerous mental health services available, including counseling, therapy, and psychiatric services. In this setting, there are varied opportunities for academic achievement (such as on-line courses for electives) as well as service learning experiences and internships to mirror the high school experience, and provide transitions to post-secondary work. There is a structured behavior program in place, with clear rules and expectations. It was indicated that students who may not have been able to function in high school have been able to succeed in this program.

The following is a summary of current programs by level (2013-2014 school year):

Program for Preschool Students with Disabilities:

Barclay Early Childhood Center is a designated center for preschool students with a wide range of disabilities. There are also students without disabilities attending programs here, allowing for several inclusive integrated preschool classrooms.

Program for Students with Multiple Disabilities

Paine Elementary School

Carusi Middle School

High School West

Program for Students with Mild Cognitive Disabilities

High School West

Programs for Students with Autism

Barclay Early Childhood Center

Kingston Elementary*

Mann Elementary

Rosa International Middle School

Programs for Students with Behavioral Disabilities:

Harte Elementary

Beck Middle School

Alternative High School

Programs for Students with Learning Language Disabilities (LLD) Self-Contained :

Barton Elementary

Cooper Elementary*

Johnson Elementary

Knight Elementary*

Sharp Elementary

Stockton Elementary*

Woodcrest Elementary *

Beck Middle School (self-contained LLD)

*(designated co-teaching elementary schools with one classroom at each grade level with full time in-class support)

Resource Program:

In-Class Resource and Pull-Out Resource Programs at all schools, dependent upon student IEPs.

Administrative Structure

There is a superintendent, two assistant superintendents, and four Directors (Director of Curriculum, Director of Pupil Services, Director of Human Resources, and Director of Support Operations). The Director of Pupil Services reports directly to the Superintendent of Schools. In addition to the responsibilities of Director of Pupil Services, she is also responsible for Health Services, SACC (School Age Child Care), implementation of NCLB/IDEA, HIB (anti-bullying), Affirmative Action, Home Instruction, and Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS).

There are three Supervisors of Special Education/Pupil Services, who report to the Director of Pupil Services. Each of the supervisors is assigned to different schools, and the distribution was revised for this school year. In the past, the supervisors did not evaluate teachers, but with the implementation of the new evaluation system, they have been assigned to evaluate teachers as part of a cluster. The Supervisors of Special Education/Pupil Services each have additional duties. One is the 504 Officer and manages Extended School Year Programs , another oversees the Special Education Medicaid Initiative, and the third oversees

the Tienet IEP program data system, as well as out-of-district placements. There is also a Special Education Colleague Teacher, who is responsible for working with teachers, and doing a variety of tasks related to special education programs.

There are three Supervisors of Curriculum that report to the Director of Curriculum. They are responsible for math, English/Language Arts, and science/social studies, bilingual education, professional development, and Title 1 Programs.

Each elementary school has a principal. The three middle schools and high schools are assigned a principal and various assistant principals in each building. These administrators participate in the supervision and evaluation of special education teachers and educational assistants. At the time of this review, all elementary and middle school building administrators report to the Director of Curriculum; the high school administrators report to the Superintendent of Schools.

There has been a recent restructuring of assignment of administrators related to the supervision of teachers, where each administrator is assigned a list of specific teachers. Based on this initiative, special education teachers and educational assistants will be supervised by administrators in various roles, depending upon their tenure status.

Program Review: Methodology

Research Questions

This program review was conducted as a research project, using qualitative methodology to yield data related to special education programs in the Cherry Hill Public Schools. The review was conducted to seek answers to the following initial research questions:

- 1) What are stakeholder perspectives (administrators, teachers, parents, and related service providers) related to special education practices in the school district?
- 2) In what ways might Cherry Hill 's special education processes and programs be improved to align with current research-based practices as well as current federal and state requirements?

Data Collection

Data for this program review were collected in several stages. First, the reviewer visited all schools in the district to collect contextual data related to programs, processes, and facilities. This involved visiting and observing in almost all special education classrooms. During site visits, meetings/interviews were conducted with building administrators, child study team members, general and special education teachers, special education supervisors, and various other staff and service providers, depending upon their availability. During each visit, the Director of Pupil Services or a Supervisor of Special Education accompanied the reviewer. Observation and meeting notes were collected during visits as a data source.

In the second stage, the reviewer conducted focus groups with various district stakeholders. A schedule was created by the Director of Pupil Services, , and meetings were advertised via district e-mail, as appropriate. All focus group meetings were open to any interested participants in their related group. Focus group meetings were conducted with various stakeholder groups; 28 child study team members, 11 administrators, 29 parents, 23 teachers, 9 educational assistants (including their president to represent others who could not attend), and 34 related service providers. Meetings were also conducted with the Curriculum & Instruction Team and the Pupil Services Team (Director and Supervisors). All focus group and interview participants were invited to send additional comments and information individually via e-mail. Meeting notes were taken via computer as an additional data source. Special education administrators did not attend focus group meetings to preserve confidentiality of participant responses.

Focus group questions were open-ended, targeting the strengths, challenges, opportunities, and wishes of the participants. These initial protocol questions were consistent for each group. Additional questions were generated as appropriate, based on the evolution of the discussions.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data were analyzed by the program reviewer using qualitative methodology, on both a formative and summative basis. At the conclusion of the first stage (observations) , data were

reviewed to determine and refine questions to be asked in the subsequent focus group sessions. Data were reviewed and coded to determine emerging themes and patterns across data sources (focus groups, meetings/interviews and observations, etc.) as well as across participant groups (parents, administrators, teachers, child study team members, related service providers, etc.). Trustworthiness of the data was maintained through triangulation of data within and across these various data sources and stakeholder groups. Recurrent patterns and themes emerged from this analysis of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). One of the recommendations of this review is to create internal review teams to review and address the various findings. It is anticipated that further validation will occur when external review data are compared with the internal review findings.

Findings

Throughout data collection, participants acknowledged the strengths of the programs in the district, but were considerably reflective about areas of need. In the spirit of program improvement inherent in this review, there was a strong focus on recommendations for program improvement. Several primary themes and patterns, related to the research questions, consistently emerged from the data. These were issues relevant to: 1) the need for planning and consistency; 2) placement and the continuum of services and 3) personnel and staffing. Various subthemes were consistently evident. The following is a discussion of these themes and subthemes.

Planning and Consistency

Compared to many other suburban school districts in New Jersey, Cherry Hill is a large district, with a total of 19 schools. The data indicated a perceived population change over the past several years, but public statistics indicate that the population has been somewhat stable. Most of the schools in Cherry Hill are neighborhood schools, and have their own distinct culture that reflects the population of the surrounding neighborhood and the population attending school there. Although it is important for each school to have its own identity and culture, this also creates inconsistency, which provides a challenge for efficiency, particularly related to special education programs, which span across all schools.

A primary recurring theme of this review was the need for consistency in processes, procedures, and expectations for special education practice (and related general education practice) across the district. There is a perception that expectations fluctuate across the district, and often change on an ongoing basis; one comment indicated that there are "shifting expectations". Many of the participants indicated a need for a "plan", and consistent message related to special education for all involved. For example, procedures for placement decisions, expectations for co-teachers, and processes for recordkeeping, progress monitoring, assessment, etc. all vary amongst buildings.

A challenge related to consistency was the lack of knowledge about program availability for students with disabilities across the district. A need for this to be documented and communicated to all stakeholders in order to select the appropriate programming for each student. It was suggested that there is an "oral culture" surrounding special education programs, again indicating a need for clear, written information related to programs, processes and procedures.

A recurring theme was the challenge of communication throughout the district, particularly across administration, faculty, and staff. A considerable amount of communication is done through e-mail, but often this information goes through various channels and does not always get to everyone involved. For example, it was stated that special education supervisors send information to building administrators, but these administrators do not always send the messages to teachers. Often, teachers communicate with their supervisors directly, but responses and response time varies. A clear pattern for communication is needed, particularly with so many stakeholders.

Overall data indicated that there is a great deal of autonomy for building administrators, which fosters the individual culture of each school, but can be an obstacle to consistency. Throughout the program review, it was clear that building administrators were supportive of special education initiatives, but there was inconsistency in their involvement, practice, and impact on special education programs in their schools.

A recurring concern was the lack of long-term planning, particularly for program and placement options across the district. Data indicated the need for planning ahead, so that options for students would be made available when needed, and adjustments to programs and schedules could be planned to accommodate student needs. It was indicated that, except for transfer situations, information about future needs is available as students move through the system. There was a perception of reactive vs. proactive planning, where classroom space and student needs were negotiated based on availability.

The Cherry Hill Public Schools website link to Special Education/Pupil Services begins with the following:

Board Goal: Achieve an increased level of consistency across all schools by applying an individualized data-driven approach to child study evaluations, IEP development and implementation of special education programs. {Retrieved from: <https://www.cherryhill.k12.nj.us/departments/student/>}

Clearly, this goal of consistency is a challenge in a large school district with so many programs. This should be a focus of ongoing program evaluation and improvement. The following recommendations are indicated by the data:

Recommendations: Planning and Consistency

- 1) Using strategic planning processes, bring together a team or teams of stakeholders to develop a five-year plan, based on some of the data and recommendations from this review (Phase 2). A timeline should be developed for implementation of the recommendations and then for follow-up evaluation of actions implemented. All related stakeholders should be represented in creating this plan. A mission statement should be developed to reflect and communicate the philosophical framework for special education programs in the district.
- 2) Development of clear procedures for implementation of special education processes and paperwork. Consistent formats and processes for disseminating information (i.e. from supervisors to teachers, information about initiatives, letters to parents, arranging transportation, writing IEPs, referral, etc.) should be used throughout the district. It is critical

that these procedures be communicated clearly to all related stakeholders throughout the district, particularly building administrators who oversee these processes in their own buildings.

3) District and building administrators should meet regularly, with dedicated time to specifically discuss special education expectations, policies and procedure updates so that they all have a common understanding of special education practice in the district.

Placement /Continuum of Services

The Referral/Placement Process

N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7 mandates that before a student is determined to be eligible for special education services, the process for Intervention and Referral Services (I & R S) be implemented. A team is created at the school level, and when a child who is at-risk or having difficulties is referred for evaluation, the team is required to convene to collect relevant data, develop and implement action plans to provide appropriate interventions, provide support to school staff to implement these interventions, and regularly review the effectiveness of interventions to determine subsequent interventions (NJDOE, 2006). It is required that parents be part of the I & RS team, and other team members are to be determined by the district. I & RS is intended to be a general education process and typically involves guidance staff, administrators, teachers (general education and sometimes special education), and other participants. In New Jersey, this process replaces the former function of Pupil Assistance Committees (PAC). Although this is considered a general education initiative, it is closely tied to the referral process for special education and impacts special education staff and programs.

The purpose of I & RS teams is to provide support to students who have challenges, or are at-risk, to be successful in the general education setting, with the goal of providing student support before the student is referred for special education evaluation. If interventions are determined not to be successful, the student may then be referred for evaluation and eligibility for special education services. In the Cherry Hill Public Schools, I & RS teams have been implemented at the building level, and a recurring theme in the data indicated that the process has been inconsistent across the district. The structure of teams in each school was different

from other schools, and each school team used varying procedures to facilitate the process. It was suggested that a considerable number of students who are part of the I & RS process are eventually referred for special education evaluations. In order for I&RS to be effective, criteria and processes should align to apply consistent criteria for students.

Shortly before this review began, a revision of the I& RS process was developed by the district. The revision was aligned with I & RS process criteria in NJAC: 6A:16-8 (NJDOE, 2006). The new process and procedures were also developed to align more closely with the principles and process of Response to Intervention (RTI), which is now common practice for identification of students needing support, and is being implemented in many districts throughout New Jersey and across the nation. In the Cherry Hill revision, all referrals to the child study team must be submitted to the Office of Pupil Services. At the time of this review, the new process had not yet been implemented. However, there are some relevant recommendations based on the data.

Recommendations: The Referral/Placement Process

1) Although the documents are very specific, priority should be the communication of the new procedures and clear expectations for this process to everyone doing relevant work throughout the district. NJAC states that boards of education must "identify the roles and responsibilities of the building staff who participate in each building's coordinated system for planning and providing intervention and referral services" (NJAC 6A:16-8.3). Professional development and means of support for staff, particularly general education teachers who are asked to implement the interventions, is also addressed in the Code and critical to the I & RS process. Teams should have a common goal and a clear purpose, which is understood by all team members.

Participant data from this review indicated concern about the new process and whether it would work. This skepticism is a concern that may be alleviated by making stakeholders aware of the process and asking them for feedback about the new process as it unfolds.

2) A critical need in the I& RS process is to collect data to determine effectiveness and monitor consistency across schools and teams. An overall structure should be in place to monitor team membership, team training, paperwork, and most importantly, the impact of the process on

students. Ongoing analysis of interventions used, the effectiveness of these interventions, numbers of students who are ultimately referred for further evaluation. These data should be used to regularly review the process for possible adjustment or revision.

3) It should be considered that I&RS is meant to be a general education initiative and is typically overseen and implemented by general education administration and staff, with some involvement of child study team members or special education teachers at a building level. In many districts, the process is facilitated by guidance staff. In Cherry Hill, it appears this has been the responsibility of the special education administrators, and this reflected a conflict of interest, as well as increased responsibility for special education staff.

4) RTI requires that general education classroom teachers be familiar with the process as well as evidence-based interventions and how to implement them. In order to make the RTI process effective, relevant professional development should be provided for all stakeholders involved in the RTI process, with a focus on general education teachers.

Placement/Classification

A significant strength of the Cherry Hill Public Schools is the array of special education options that reflect the practice of least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004). Available placements are on a continuum of services from very restrictive (out of district placements) to least restrictive environment (general education, in-class resource, or ICR/in-class support, or ICS, or co-teaching). The data suggested that in Cherry Hill, a consistent goal is to encourage inclusion of students in general education classrooms whenever possible. It was also suggested that students be de-classified when appropriate.

Concerns about placement and classification emerged from the data. Federal law (U.S. Department of Education, 2010) lists thirteen classification categories of disability, and NJAC: 6A includes 14 discrete categories. In the Cherry Hill Public Schools, a variety of terms are used to describe classroom programs, but there were no clear or consistent definitions of what criteria were used to place students into these settings or determine their level of support. Participants communicated a lack of clear or consistent understanding of criteria for

classification labels or discrete differences between labels. For example, there were a considerable number of classrooms designated as "CI" or "Communication Impaired". According to NJAC 6A:14-3.5, there were very specific criteria for students to qualify for this classification, particularly challenges specific to language development. However, it was not clear that students in these classrooms had disabilities that were primarily related to language, or how the needs of these students differed from those who are placed in CAPSS (Communication and Pragmatic Social Skills), classes for students with autism, or classes for students with Learning Language Disabilities (LLD). Similarly, there were various terms used to indicate the placement of students with disabilities in general education classrooms, co-teaching, ICS (in-class support), or ICR (in-class resource) . It was not clear as to whether there was any difference between criteria used to determine these services for individual students, or how these contexts are different.

A significant concern was the perception of some faculty and staff that placements are decided based on availability rather than appropriateness to student needs, and that IEPs are adjusted to fit students into classes where there is space for them. In some cases, particularly at the middle school and high school levels, it was suggested that this is sometimes driven by scheduling, even though the needs outlined in the IEP should be driving each child's schedule. It was reported that, with budget constraints and increasing numbers of referrals or students transferring into the district, many classes are at their legal limit of numbers of students with disabilities. In this context, the data indicated that placements are not always aligned with student needs. Without clear criteria for placement in different categories, it is possible that unsuitable placements may occur. Although this may only be a perception of some faculty and staff stakeholders, it is a critical concern. In many cases, it was inconsistent and unclear as to how the level of support is determined for each child. However, in contrast, it was also communicated that students with disabilities are seen as individuals who have unique needs, and that considerable effort is made to place students appropriately based on their needs rather than a label. These conflicting perceptions should be explored and addressed.

Recommendations: Placement/Classification

1) Classification labels used across the district should be reviewed, defined, and adjusted to align with current practice, as outlined in federal (IDEA Regulations Part 300.8:c) and state definitions for eligibility (NJAC 6A:14-3.5).

2) Placement procedures and classification criteria must be clearly and consistently communicated to all relevant personnel.

Co-Teaching

Five elementary schools (Cooper, Kingston, Knight, Stockton and Woodcrest) are designated as co-teaching schools, with one co-taught classroom at each grade level. Most of these classrooms had a minimum of 8 students with disabilities in each class, creating an appropriate class size. However, data from observations and interviews with participants indicate inconsistency in practice and vague expectations for co-teachers. The situation reflected an attempt to implement effective practice; however, in many cases, the general education teacher was the lead instructor, and the special education teacher functioned in a secondary role, and few accommodations or modifications were observed. This is a common challenge in co-teaching practice, but minimizes the impact of having two certified teachers in the classroom. The benefit of having co-teaching as a focus in particular schools can be strengthened if these classrooms serve as models of effective and current practice of co-teaching. There is considerable literature that provides structures and recommendations for effective practice in co-teaching, particularly ways to maximize impact for students (Friend & Cook, 2010).

In some situations, the structure of having two teachers in the classroom was called ICS (in-class support), some ICR (in-class resource), and others co-teaching. The differences were not evident. Criteria were not clear as to how it is determined which students are placed in these settings. The label for these structures should be consistent with clear communication of expected practice and roles in these settings.

At the secondary level, there were many class sections where in-class support/in-class resource is provided. We visited many of these classrooms during the review, and again, found that, in most situations, the general education teacher was leading the lesson, with the special education teacher having a secondary role in the instruction. This is particularly common at the secondary level, where content knowledge impacts teacher roles. Again, the literature provides ways to structure this to maximize impact on student learning.

Recommendations: Co-Teaching

- 1) Create a district-wide vision with expectations for co-taught inclusive classrooms. Building administrators should receive professional development, with an emphasis on appropriate models for co-teaching, strategies for choosing co-teaching partners, and development of co-teaching teams. The expectations should be communicated clearly to all relevant teachers and participants.
- 2) It is suggested that a co-teaching walk-through form, based on these district-wide expectations, be created to be used as part of the evaluation system. This will communicate and reinforce expectations for both general education and special education teachers.
- 3) Consistent and ongoing professional development about co-teaching should be provided for all teachers who co-teach, particularly those who are newly assigned. It is recommended that this be done for co-teaching partners on an ongoing basis, to start pairs at the beginning, and later to revisit and track the progress of their evolving partnership.
- 4) Co-teachers should volunteer and be willing to participate in this structure.
- 5) Wherever possible, strive to incorporate common planning time for co-teachers. The new Professional Learning Community time could be used for this purpose at the elementary levels. Scheduling at the secondary levels should be reviewed to find creative ways to find time for co-teachers to work together.

Personnel/Staffing

A consistent theme of this review was the quality and dedication of the faculty and staff in the Cherry Hill Public Schools. There was a clear focus on what is best for the students and determination to meet their needs. Special education administration, faculty, and staff have a great deal of expertise and appear to strive for ongoing growth of their own professional knowledge. Given this dedication, several subthemes emerged related to program revision and improvement.

Child Study Teams

In the Cherry Hill Public Schools, child study teams have considerable impact on special education programming for students with disabilities. These 31 individuals are primarily responsible for the entire process of evaluation, placement, and writing Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for all students who are referred or classified as having special educational needs. This requires being a liaison between the school and the child's parents, and responding to parent questions and concerns. They are expected to collaborate with the child's teachers, observing and monitoring student progress based on IEP goals. Child study team members are often asked to provide support and suggestions to teachers, in both general and special education, to provide appropriate interventions for students. They coordinate and write annual reports, and schedule annual IEP meetings. When students move from one school to another, child study team members often facilitate the transition and participate in placement decisions. In addition, many child study team members are on I & RS teams for their assigned schools. These duties are outlined in New Jersey Administrative Code (NJAC:6A:14-3.1-3.2).

There is a child study team member placed at each elementary school, and that individual serves as the case manager for all of the classified students in their assigned school. The assignment of one case manager per building ensures that there is always a team member on site to create consistent relationships with the building administrator, teachers, students, and parents. Three elementary schools are grouped together to create a complete team (learning disabilities teacher consultant, school psychologist, and social worker), which provides some consistency across schools. The Barclay Early Childhood Center and each of the middle

and high schools have a complete team assigned to the building, with the exception of the Alternative High School. In these settings, a child study team member is assigned to various students as a case manager, and is responsible for coordinating services for each of these students.

Clearly, this is a daunting job in a large district with an extensive continuum of services, very involved parents, highly motivated teachers, and ongoing numbers of students who are referred for evaluation. The roles of child study team members and case managers are outlined in NJAC 6A (NJDOE, 2006), and the district is in compliance with these guidelines and roles. However, the code does specify that case managers have “an apportioned amount of time for case management responsibilities” (NJAC 6A:14-3.2c).

Caseloads for child study team members across the district are inconsistent and high, ranging from approximately 50 to 85 students. These numbers make it an ongoing struggle for child study team members to do their jobs effectively. It was clear that child study team members were hard-working, dedicated professionals who had a desire to do their job and were frustrated with conflicting demands on their time. There seemed to be a consistent perception that they are not respected or supported.

Observation data indicated that most child study team members had ongoing communication and a good working relationship with their assigned building administrator. The nature of their work varied, depending needs of the students in their schools and the nature of the students' disabilities. For example, students in need of behavioral/emotional support and classes with students with severe disabilities require intensive services that often warrants ongoing support from the case manager. Although there is a full team at Barclay, this team processes all new referrals, which requires full evaluations for all students, and often a great deal of interactions with parents.

The paperwork that is mandated by law seems to take precedence over their work with children and teachers. Data indicated that many case managers rarely observe or interact with the students. Case managers reported many non-professional tasks that take up a significant amount of their time (copying, sending letters to parents, scheduling meetings, arranging

student transportation) could be alleviated by dedicated secretarial support in each building. Currently, the district is using Tienet as software for special education reports, and the data from various stakeholders indicated that this program is challenging and not user-friendly. It was mentioned that the district is currently seeking an alternative program; this would help to reduce the stress of paperwork for all involved. There was ongoing mention of need for each case manager to have a dedicated printer that is not shared in order to protect confidentiality of the student.

Another challenge for child study team members was the goal of articulation between schools and across the district. Several team members expressed that they try to attend IEP meetings for students who are transitioning to a school at the next level (i. e. elementary to middle, middle to high school), but this is difficult due to time constraints. Articulation is critical for students who are experiencing a change in level and/or program, particularly when making decisions about the best placement for a student. It appears that, although they strive to be consistent in writing reports and IEPs, there are differences across the district, which can be problematic when students are moving between schools. There was some confusion about how files should be handled and stored.

Child study team members reported that they had few opportunities to participate in appropriate and relevant professional development, often attending district initiatives that are not related to their work. It is critical that these professionals be part of rigorous and ongoing professional development, both with teachers and supervisors, on topics such as effective skills for collaboration with parents and families, district expectations for I & RS (as mentioned earlier) , and other topics relevant to their specific specialty.

Recommendations: Child Study Teams

1) There should be in-depth data collection and review of the nature of the work of child study teams. This might be accomplished by having each team member keep track of the number of hours they spend on aspects of their work. Case loads should be reviewed to determine what is reasonable in each school, related to the context and needs of the students in the building.

2) With the new initiative of morning Professional Learning Communities at the elementary schools, there is an opportunity to create a schedule for child study team members to work with teachers. It is recommended that the PLC schedule be reviewed to seek such opportunities.

3) Create ongoing opportunities for Child Study Team members to participate in meaningful professional development. In addition to external professional development, there should be regular district-wide meetings for all CST members to discuss initiatives, processes, and procedures for their work. This would provide more consistency across the district.

4) Child Study Team members should have allocated time to meet with their teams and the teachers they serve. There should be opportunities for voicing their needs and concerns, making them feel as if their expertise is respected and valued.

5) Provide dedicated and consistent secretarial support, either in each building or central office, to do paperwork tasks, scheduling, and transportation. Secretaries should be familiar with the processes and procedures for efficient and effective support.

Contract Services

Throughout this review, there was consistent discussion about staff who worked as contracted services rather than being employees of the district. This applied to some speech/language specialists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, reading specialists, and other service providers. Although the question was asked, it was not clear or consistent as to why some positions were filled by employees while others were contracted. Those who are not district employees are not evaluated based on the same system as district employees. It was indicated that there are different expectations for contractors vs. employees. The contractors do not always participate in the same professional development as district employees, so there is not always consistency between their knowledge and that of district employees. In addition, there was a perception that contractors may have first priority for summer work, and that their summer pay was higher than that of district employees.

The data indicated the high quality work of most contractors, and their dedication to the students and their work. Many of the contracted employees have been in Cherry Hill for an extended period of time, others come and go. Overall, this system presents challenges to scheduling, as the contractors typically have fixed schedules and cannot always be flexible. This structure makes it difficult for collaboration amongst service providers.

Contract Services: Recommendations

- 1) A review of the process for determining the cost effectiveness of hiring contracted employees vs. district employees is recommended.
- 2) Review differences in expectations, quality of work, opportunities, and evaluation of employee vs. contracted work for therapists and other service providers.

Supervisor Relationships

There are three special education supervisors who oversee the functioning of programs in the district. These supervisors report to the Director of Pupil Services. Their offices are housed at the Malberg Administrative Building, with the three supervisors sharing an office. Their proximity facilitates ongoing communication amongst the supervisors and between the supervisors and the Director.

Notes and impressions from meetings and on-site observations indicated a comfortable relationship between the special education administrators and school personnel. It appears that there is ongoing communication between building administrators (elementary principals, and designated special education administrators at middle and high schools) and the supervisors assigned to the buildings. There were clear working relationships with the child study team member assigned to the building. Even though there had been some recent realignment of supervisors, they seemed to know most of the teachers in their assigned buildings, and they were familiar with many of the students and their cases. Supervisors also attend bi-weekly meetings with curriculum administrators, and it was indicated that there are positive formal and informal interactions between these administrative teams.

A challenge for the supervisors is the fact that, although they are often the special education professionals with ongoing contact with teachers, it has been a challenge for them to support and develop the effectiveness of teachers, since they have not been assigned to do evaluations. This has changed in the last year, but they are not specifically assigned to evaluate special education teachers, which does not facilitate their impact on the special education programs.

The Director and Supervisors are also responsible for some programs that are not related specifically to special education, such as 504 plans, HIB, the newly revised I&RS process, etc. These initiatives require a lot of time and attention, which takes away from the time and attention needed to effectively run such as wide range of special education programs and related personnel.

One challenge that emerged from the data was related to communication to and from supervisors. When supervisors send information to building administrators (typically via e-mail), it is assumed that this information is being shared with special education personnel in their buildings (teachers, service providers, case managers, etc.). However, this is not consistently the case, as building administrators may assume that special education supervisors are communicating directly with all personnel. This can cause breakdown in communication of initiatives, information, and procedures for consistency across all special education stakeholders.

Recommendations: Supervisor Relationships

- 1) Reassign special education supervisors so they evaluate only special education staff, or those related to special education (such as co-teaching pairs).
- 2) Create consistent and efficient procedures/processes for communication between supervisors, building administrators, and teachers.
- 3) Have regular meetings between supervisors and their respective teachers to facilitate communication and give teachers an opportunity to ask questions and give feedback about

programming, initiatives (such as progress monitoring, new computer programs used, etc.), and to provide ongoing, regular feedback to supervisors.

Educational Assistants

There are at least two educational assistants assigned to each elementary and middle school self-contained special education classroom, with additional one-to-one educational assistants for individual students if required by the student's IEP. This provides a considerable amount of support to teachers and students with disabilities. In classrooms with students who are included in general education for part of the day, educational assistants go to the general education classrooms with the students, which often leaves one educational assistant in the special education classroom.

Although this support seems to be beneficial, the data from observations and discussions with personnel indicate that the work and assignment of educational assistants could be more effective. The nature of their work is often different in different settings, with varying skills required. Programs with students having more severe disabilities (low-functioning autism, emotionally disturbed) might be supported by more educational assistants. A part of this challenge is the lack of time for teachers and educational assistants to communicate and plan. Typically, educational assistants are helping students during arrival and dismissal, when this would be time to plan with the teacher.

Given this context, a consistent theme was the professional development and training of educational assistants in the district. Professional development seems to be inconsistent, and when provided, is often provided to all educational assistants throughout the district. With specific skills required and the varied nature of their work, appropriate and ongoing professional development is warranted. For example, some assistants might benefit from training for managing extreme behavior, others need sensitivity training for work with students with autism, toileting, fostering independence, etc.

Recommendations: Educational Assistants

- 1) Plan and provide regular and targeted professional development for educational assistants, with topics relevant to the specific nature of their specific work.
- 2) Provide time for teachers and their assigned educational assistants to communicate, and plan together. This might be done as part of a professional development day, when students are not present.
- 3) Review the nature of educational assistant assignments to be appropriate to the needs of their specific students.

Relationship between General Education and Special Education

The majority of students with disabilities in Cherry Hill Public Schools are placed in an inclusive environment for some part of the school day, which reflects the practice of least restrictive environment. In this context, a significant number of general education teachers are working with students with disabilities on a regular basis. However, in many cases, general education teachers do not feel comfortable or do not have knowledge and skills related to effective practice in special education. The data suggested that, particularly in the secondary settings, some general education teachers were resistant to having students with disabilities placed in their classes, and did not want to plan or work with the special education teachers who are there to support the students. Several comments were made that some general education teachers assigned to inclusive settings perceived this as a punishment. All teachers were invited to the focus group for this review; however, none of the attendees were general education teachers. This lack of participation/interest indicates that general education teachers may be disconnected and do not recognize their own role in the special education process.

It was indicated that the general education administrators (Director of Curriculum and Content Area Supervisors) have a good working relationship with the administrators in special education, both formal and informal. They have bi-weekly meetings together, have

collaborated on projects (crafting the new I&RS Guidelines), and communicate regularly as their offices are all housed in the Malberg Administration Building.

Special education teachers serve on subject area curriculum committees, with the intention of giving them a legitimate voice in curricular decisions and opportunity to share potential adaptations and modifications. The data indicated frustration and confusion about how to use Common Core Standards and deliver curriculum to students with disabilities who are functioning below grade level. As the Common Core is implemented and new related assessments are implemented, these conversations will be critical in driving practice.

There were not any clear data about the relationship between special education and guidance personnel, particularly at the secondary level. There were minor indications of some conflicts in specific settings, as guidance is responsible for scheduling and there are considerable challenges in scheduling for students with disabilities in the middle and high schools. It is important to explore the interactions between guidance and special education in these settings to foster shared knowledge and collaboration.

A strong connection between general and special education is essential to modeling and creating an inclusive culture. In order to practice effective inclusive practice and instruction, school administrators should communicate clear expectations for communication and interaction between general and special education, modeling this through their own interaction with special education administration. District and building administrators should create and communicate a clear vision of what they expect from inclusive classrooms, particularly those that have co-teachers or instructional assistants present. General education teachers should receive training and support related to inclusive practice, differentiated instruction, and structures for co-teaching when appropriate.

Recommendations: Relationship between General Education and Special Education

1) Creation of a clear vision and expectations for interaction between general educators and special educators, and communication of the vision and expectations to all relevant stakeholders.

2) In order to improve the delivery of effective instruction, create opportunities for district-wide, consistent professional development related to current issues and practice in special education, where everyone receives the same messages.

3) Provide opportunities for open conversations and clear communication of expectations related to the implementation of the curriculum and Common Core Standards, with clear procedures for instruction and assessment. In order to accomplish this it is recommended that the district create a professional learning community related to inclusive practice. Members of this community should be teachers, parents, staff, and administrators in both general and special education. This group should craft a vision and related expectations, with action plans for implementing this vision.

Professional Development and Opportunities for Collaboration and Communication

Ongoing professional development is the key to effective practice, and was a consistent theme throughout this review. Special education faculty and staff typically participate in district-wide professional development when this is provided on designated days. Many reported that this is often irrelevant for them, and they are sometimes left out of sessions. Clearly, this time could be used more efficiently, when so many areas of professional development are needed to provide knowledge and consistency. For example, special education faculty would benefit from opportunities to discuss processes for progress monitoring, co-teaching expectations, and time to meet and discuss current issues with their special education colleagues. If there is relevant professional development for special education staff and service providers, this will increase consistency when implementing services for students.

Some of the staff, such as child study team members and service providers, are required to have specific professional development to maintain licensure, and these opportunities are not provided by the district. They expressed frustration that they have to go out of the district and pay for this on their own, yet they participate in district professional development that is often not relevant to their work.

In focus groups, it was suggested that professional development be relevant and take advantage of the expertise within the district as well as outside of the district. Special education administrators often provide turnkey professional development to their faculty and staff, but it was not clear as to the consistency of these opportunities. It was suggested that this type of professional development may be valuable, but it would also be beneficial to expand knowledge and skills beyond the district to get outside perspectives about current practice. It was reported that there are opportunities for educators to volunteer to provide after-school professional development sessions in their area of expertise. However, the perception is that topics are repetitive or not relevant, and participants expressed a lack of enthusiasm or support of this initiative.

Participants expressed the positive impact of the program review focus group meetings, in that they had opportunities to reflect, share ideas, and discuss practices with colleagues across the district who do similar work. They indicated the desire for more interaction and communication with one another as well as special education supervisors. In such a large district, they appreciated the opportunity to communicate with their colleagues. The data indicated that there are scheduled meetings for some participant groups, but these have a fixed agenda determined by administrators. It was recommended that meetings be held more regularly with a more open agenda to communicate district initiatives, share ideas and concerns, and explore current issues.

This need for collaboration was particularly emphasized by therapists. They are spread amongst buildings across the district and expressed a need for opportunities to communicate. One of their concerns was the cost of purchasing equipment when it is needed for a child, as others across the district might have this equipment or materials that are not in use. There are also many service providers who are contracted, as discussed earlier, which complicates the ability to communicate and collaborate.

Recommendations: Professional Development and Opportunities for Collaboration and Communication

- 1) Review the continuum of professional development options and offerings in the district to explore quality and relevance to professionals' role and practice.
- 2) Conduct regular meetings for stakeholder groups, such as teachers, therapists, and child study team members where they can share ideas, engage in relevant professional development, and have input into decision-making for their specific work.
- 3) Create specific procedures for service providers to communicate their input in decision-making for students with whom they work.
- 4) Create a central storage space for therapy equipment and materials. Make an inventory list that is updated regularly, and this should be circulated to special education personnel on an ongoing basis. This is more cost effective than each therapist buying specific equipment for children as it is needed.

Parent Relations

There is a Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) in Cherry Hill with approximately 49 members. The group meets monthly, and the Director of Pupil Services attends these meetings. The Director of Pupil Services and the Supervisors of Special Education/Pupil Services also meet with the executive board. Activities of the SEPTA vary, including events for students with disabilities in the district, informational sessions for parents, etc.

Overall, the data indicated that the relationship between parents of students with disabilities and the school district is a positive one. Administrators, staff, and faculty expressed a general positive attitude toward parents and respect for their role in the lives of the children. Administrators expressed desire to keep parents informed with open communication, willingness to compromise and work with parents to solve problems, supporting parents through the process.

Parents emphasized the overall quality of teachers and educational assistants in the district, and a generally positive view of special education. However, data from parents reinforced the lack of consistency across schools, levels, and people in the district, with comments indicating that the quality of services is related to what school your child is in, and is often "person dependent". Concerns were expressed about the availability and timing of IEPs and reports, supporting concerns about case management.

Data from parents suggested challenges and inconsistencies when their children were in middle school. They reinforced concerns about lack of support for science and social studies, and lack of differentiation in inclusive settings. There were also concerns expressed about class sizes getting larger over the past several years, particularly at the secondary level.

Recommendations: Parent Relations

- 1) Continue to maintain positive parent relationships through ongoing and open communication.
- 2) Increased consistency of policies and procedures, as well as review of child study team practice (indicated earlier in this report) , should help to improve parent relations and alleviate concerns about case management.

Implications for Practice and Program Improvement

The Cherry Hill Public Schools provide a continuum of high quality programs and a wide range of options for placement of students with disabilities. A considerable amount of resources, time, and hard work is dedicated to providing strong programs to all students with varying disabilities, at all grade levels. As a result, most students with disabilities are served in the district, with a relatively small percentage (approximately 6%) of students in out-of-district placements.

A recurring theme of this review was the quality of the teachers, administrators, and staff , who are focused on student learning, showed pride in students' accomplishments, and focused on what is best for the students. The district is clearly dedicated to providing the best

possible programming within the context of resources available. Many program additions and revisions have been implemented on an ongoing basis.

An overwhelming implication that runs throughout all of the findings in this review is the need for comprehensive, consistent, and focused professional development related to special education programs. With the number of students determined to be at-risk or receiving some kind of special education services, almost everyone employed by the district will interact with parents and students with educational needs. District-wide professional development should address some of the key issues highlighted in this report, in order to provide consistent understandings and expectations for staff and administration.

The findings indicated a need for consistent, accurate data collection across the district related to program and procedural effectiveness. Ongoing data collection is warranted to determine the effectiveness of new and ongoing initiatives before they are expanded or duplicated at various grade levels. In addition, procedures and structures should be clear, available in writing, and communicated to stakeholders involved.

Another focused area for data collection should be to monitor the work of child study teams. With their key role in identification, placement, and service delivery to children with disabilities, data is critical to determine effectiveness and make sure there are enough staff to provide substantive services to students, teachers, and families.

Relationships with parents of students with disabilities appear to be mostly positive, which is unique compared to many other school districts. Although some parents who attended focus groups were dissatisfied with their individual child's experiences, this does not appear to be a primary concern across the district. The fact that there was minimal data related to these challenges indicated that these relationships may be a strength of the special education program at Cherry Hill.

There are a considerable number of recommendations implied in this review; these have been listed by theme in the attached table. This template may be adapted to create a planning guide. It is highly recommended that the district conduct a second phase of this

program review by creating teams with representative stakeholders to generate solutions to address the various findings. This will provide validation of the data, as well as contribute to the development of a strategic plan for focused change and program improvement.

Reviewer's Professional Impressions

The Cherry Hill Public Schools is an outstanding school district that serves a large number of students in a diverse community with dedication and a range of opportunities for learning and growth. Throughout my interactions with district employees, it was evident that the district consists of highly knowledgeable, hard working professionals. During data collection, it was clear that there is ongoing reflection and program improvement taking place, as several of the findings of this review were already being considered. I was impressed by the dedication of time and effort to the review process, and the willingness of review participants to be transparent with information. Most importantly, the fact that the district requested this review demonstrates this ongoing reflection and desire to refine and improve programs for children with disabilities.

The process of conducting this review, particularly the focus groups, provided opportunities for participants to reflect on the nature of their work and share common ideas and perceptions about policies, procedures, and the impact on students. At the conclusion of focus groups, several attendees thanked me for the opportunity. This indicated a strong need for stakeholders, particularly teachers, child study team members, and other service providers to have regular, ongoing meeting time with opportunities to share and collaborate. It was my impression that they were appreciative of having someone to listen and welcome their input, and excited to have an impact on facilitating change.

It was clear from my interactions with teachers, administrators, child study teams, and other professionals in the district that their common goal is to provide the best programs and opportunities for every student. A recurring theme in all of my interactions and observations with Cherry Hill professionals and staff was a focus on the students and their needs. In a school district of this size, consisting of such a diverse range of students, this is an indication of high quality education. Programs are important, but the attitudes of those who implement these programs is critical to effectiveness.

It was a pleasure to be a part of this program review. All of the participants were supportive, enthusiastic, and focused on improving programs for children. I was made welcome in all of my encounters, and was given a great deal of support, particularly by the

Department of Pupil Services, who had someone escort me to every school visit. This indicated a culture of caring, student-focused professionals who embrace the possibilities of improvement and growth. Thank you to everyone who participated in this review.

Respectfully submitted,

Michele Wilson Kamens, Ed. D.

March, 2014

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