

Special Education Program Review Report of Focus Groups, February 2010

Introduction

Periodically the Needham Public Schools has reviewed facets of its special education program in order to identify areas of strength and need. Next year our district will participate in a full Coordinated Program Review (CPR) when the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education will audit and review our special education, civil rights, English Language Learner, Title I, NCLB and Section 504 program compliance. The CPR is an important process, completed every 6 years, that evaluates our compliance with regulatory requirements.

In anticipation of this audit, we are conducting a review process to gather both subjective and objective information from data sources and district stakeholders. This process will allow us to review our special education program beyond regulatory compliance. The goal of the special education program review is to identify areas where we could be more effective or efficient, and to establish a course of improvement for those identified areas.

Focus Group Process

The review process began with a series of 18 Focus Groups conducted during a 7-week period, December 23 to February 9. Randomized invitations were sent to stakeholder groups with more than 20 members, capturing building, grade level and specialty representation in the invited groups. If a stakeholder group had less than 20 members, all members were invited. Our goal was to maintain the groups at 8-12 participants to facilitate optimal participation. The following chart tallies the number of participants in each group.

The Focus Groups followed an established protocol. We provided the protocol and the following questions in writing, to all of the groups, except the HS student group.

1. Name one thing that you think is going well in special education and definitely should continue.
2. Think about student progress. What factors do you think contribute most to that progress?
3. What do you think that we could do better or differently to enhance student progress?
4. Are there areas where you think our resources could be used better, creating more efficiency?

The HS student Focus Group was asked the following questions:

1. Name one thing you like about coming to school at Needham High.
2. When it comes to your Skills Center or STRIVE class, how does this work to support your progress in school? What are the good things about Skills or STRIVE?

3. Are there things you wish you could do at the HS that you can't do because of how your classes are scheduled?
4. When you think back over your years in school, is there one person who was really helpful to you? Can you tell us what it was like to receive special education in elementary or middle school?

During the Focus Groups, Ms Bonaiuto facilitated the meetings, and I took verbatim notes. The exceptions to this role assignment were during the SEPAC Focus group, when Tom Campbell, Director of Human Resources, took notes, and I was not present, during the HS Student Group, when I facilitated and Ms. Bonaiuto took notes and during the Nurse's Focus Group when Mr. Campbell again took notes and I facilitated. Following each Group (except HS students), participants were asked to complete a written "Ticket to Leave" that asked three questions:

1. Describe the philosophy and/or vision of special education in the Needham Schools as you understand it.
2. How is that philosophy/vision consistent or different from your own beliefs about special education?
3. Other comments are welcome.

DATE	GROUP	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
12/23	Preschool Staff	9
1/7	HS Special Ed. Staff	8
1/11	HS Gen. Ed. Staff	6
1/12	Nurses	10
1/19	SEPAC Board Liaisons	14
1/21	HS students	4
1/21	Preschool Parents	5
1/21	Pollard/HR Gen. Ed. Staff	9
1/26	Pollard/HR Special Ed. Staff	14
1/28	Elem. Gen. Ed Staff	5
1/28	ES/MS/HS Parents	9
2/2	Elem. Special Ed. Staff	10
2/3	MS/HS Teacher Assistants	8
2/4	Principals/Central Admin.	11
2/5	Special Ed. Directors/Preschool Coordinator	4
2/8	Preschool/Elem. Teacher Assistants	8
2/9	Special Ed. Team Chairs	4
2/9	District Leadership Team	15
	TOTAL	153

In every group, the discussion was rich and thoughtful. Almost every participant in every group expressed appreciation for the special education review process and the opportunity to provide their input.

The Focus Group responses are organized into the following categories:

1. Identified Strengths of Special Education
2. Critical Factors That Contribute to Student Progress
3. Philosophy/Vision/Leadership
4. Areas Identified for Improvement

Identified Strengths of Special Education

Many strengths of the special education programming surfaced through the Focus Groups. The following were most often cited:

Needham has a high quality staff.

Every group mentioned overall quality of special education staff as a major strength. The quality of the general education teachers and teacher assistants was also frequently mentioned.

Special education teachers (liaisons) and teacher assistants develop positive, trusting relationships with students.

The importance of the relationship between teachers and students was mentioned in particular by the student group. Other groups mentioned looping, teachers getting to know students over multiple years and other structures that allow students to progress once a relationship and expectations are established.

Collaboration among special education and general education staff is improving and seems to be a focus of current improvement efforts.

Collaboration was mentioned in all groups as important and a promising practice. Some participants described team meetings, some group problem-solving, others talked about collaborative planning, instruction and assessment. While it was sometimes mentioned as a strength, it was also mentioned as an area needing further attention.

The inclusion model is effective, especially when the support and efforts of general education, special education, and teaching assistants is seamless.

The inclusion model is seen as both desirable and working effectively in Needham for most students. Questions surfaced about the definition of inclusion (e.g. time in general ed classroom seat versus quality of interaction in general ed classroom), and other details of implementation such as student placement.

The availability of specialized programs, preschool through Grade 12, help students stay in the district as close to their home school as possible, while also providing the individualized services they need for progress.

The specialized programs, PreK-12, were seen as a plus, making it possible for students to both learn and stay in Needham. Teachers and students spoke positively about the increased vocational and community programming that is available to students at the High School.

The schools demonstrate flexibility to meet students' needs or to change course when things are not working.

Some participants mentioned that they have noticed more early identification and intervention that seems to be working well for students; others mentioned a data-driven review process that helps students get the services they need and then exit special education. Others talked about flexibility they see within individual programs, classrooms or pullout groups that respond to the ever-evolving needs of individual students.

Critical Factors that Contribute to Student Progress

Participants were then asked to think about what factors or practices seem to most contribute to student progress. The answers differed at the various grade levels, paralleling appropriate developmental needs of students at various ages.

Preschool focus on home/school connection and targeted services

At the preschool level participants talked about the home/school connection including consistent, reliable, and honest communication teacher to parent to add consistency to the student's home and school life, and the therapies and services provided to students. They also talked about the expertise of and collaboration among the various teachers and service providers, the value of individual therapies, and flexibly modifying therapies according to how students are progressing.

Elementary school focus on early intervention, use of data to target services, well-coordinated team of professionals

According to focus group participants, students at the elementary school do well when student needs are identified early and addressed proactively. Participants described a well-organized team of liaison, guidance, classroom teachers, specialists, teacher assistants who collaborate and share responsibility for a students' progress. Groups talked about the importance of targeted services that help students gain basic skills in the early years. They also talked about frequent and reliable assessments to target instruction, and ongoing data-driven decision-making that supports a focus on the goals of the IEP.

By middle school students who begin to take responsibility for their learning make the most progress.

By later elementary school and into middle school, teachers, parents and students all described continued student progress as coming from a process where students begin to have a self-awareness of their disability, and begin to take responsibility for their learning. While the student/teacher connection continues to be very important, most participants said, "students who are active in their own learning" and can "demystify" their disability do well. "If you can instill a passion in a student... this contributes to their wanting to learn." This is a stage where students need to be challenged with high expectations while providing high supports. The planning among the various professionals is critical in previewing, reviewing, planning modifications and providing a differentiated program that helps students take responsibility for their own learning.

At high school, students need a program/coursework and accommodations that meet their needs, combined with appropriate and consistent supports that allow them to be self-advocates and independent learners.

General education teachers talked about students who ask questions, stay after school, and advocate for their own learning as being most successful. The special educators talked about their need to develop trusting and supportive relationships with students to help them navigate and self-advocate getting skill support when they need it, getting proper administration of modifications when they need it, and helping students to gain access to classes that are appropriate for their learning capacity at any point in time.

Home School connection

All groups talked about a strong and appropriate home school connection. Parents and teachers who establish productive communication routines and who can support the student both at home and in school results in an ideal scenario. Some teachers of older students talked about parents who “helicopter” and actually get in the way of student progress; on the other end of the spectrum are parents who are absent from their student’s learning and teachers related that this absence can compromise a student’s pace of success.

Philosophy, Vision and Leadership

The written and the oral responses received during the Focus Groups provided many contrasting understandings of our district’s philosophy and approach to meeting the educational needs of our students with disabilities. While most respondents reflected on the district’s philosophy by using words taken from the regulations and laws about special education (e.g., Least Restrictive Environment, Free and Appropriate Public Education, individualized program) and from the popular vernacular (e.g., inclusion, collaboration, promote independence, school-home partnership), many respondents also expressed concern that while the philosophy and message is an inclusive, positive one, in practice it oftentimes feels different. Teachers, parents and administrators expressed this concern.

Interestingly, few participants specifically mentioned leadership and the organizational structure of Needham’s special education program PreK-12 in their answers to any questions. However, comments about the divide between general education and special education were mentioned frequently. This divide was mentioned in many different contexts such as philosophy, professional development, implementing modifications, aligning course standards to IEP goals, taking responsibility for student progress, roles in communicating with parents and shared ownership of students.

Teachers, administrators and parents, whether classified in special or general education, touched upon this recurring theme of “shared ownership of all students”. One High School teacher reflected:

“Some teachers see special education as a ‘crutch’ and the difficulty we have finding the time to collaborate only serves to widen the gap in sharing our understanding about students and their needs.”

This comment is from a parent regarding the lack of “real” inclusion at her son’s school:

“Teachers at the Open House announced they have an “Inclusion” class...teachers should not have to announce this as though it is a description of a ‘special education-loaded’ classroom.”

One of the High School students shared this conversation reflecting frustration with having to explain her learning style and needs to others:

“I’m in Physics and there are these two girls that have the same teacher for honors and they said, ‘Oh, you probably just have that grade because you are in standard.’ They don’t know that it’s the same material but just at a different pace.”

Another parent shared this perspective on our district vision:

“There is a difference between the philosophy of special education in Needham and what is actually implemented. There are good intentions, but follow-through is lacking due to training deficits and probably budget and time constraints.”

A district administrator shared this thought:

Establishing a cohesive vision for the district requires: “a lot of communication between general and special education, as well as training and an expectation for collaboration. The current model doesn’t support this type of collaboration.”

While the feedback on the vision for special education in Needham was generally aligned, there were differences of opinion on whether the vision was being realized district-wide. Teachers, parents, teacher assistants, students and administrators provided rich responses to questions regarding district philosophy and this is an area that requires further exploration.

Areas Identified for Improvement

The various stakeholder participants mentioned a similar list of areas for improvement in almost every group. The consistency adds credibility to the results. The suggested areas are categorized below, with bullets reporting some of the specific comments.

Transitions and Preschool-12 Continuum of Services

- Some general and special education teachers and teacher assistants felt all of the “building to building” transitions should be evaluated and redesigned to insure more continuity for students and parents.

- Parents expressed confusion and lack of knowledge about long-term, in-district options for their children.
- Some Middle and High School general and special education teachers and teacher assistants expressed confusion about how to make sure skill-building is being addressed in Centers, since homework support sometimes gets priority over this.
- The High School students expressed concern about the embarrassment they suffered in late elementary grades when they had pullout services.
- Some administrators and teachers felt that entrance criteria for specialized programs was not clear.
- Some parents felt there should be more inclusion, in “home schools”, of high needs students, and that some students could benefit from this more than from the specialized program model. Some questioned the transition for ELC I students to Hillside School in grade 3, citing their child’s difficulty with transition.
- Some parents asked that the district prioritize and address the following topics: disability awareness, social skills, inclusion and anti-bullying, to benefit students with and without disabilities.
- Some participants, especially at Pollard and the High School, described the rotating block schedule as a barrier to successful programs for students who need significant support.

Communication and Collaboration

- Some teachers, at all levels, noted that students with disabilities are assigned to the same general education teachers year after year, due to their skill level. These teachers recognize the benefit for students, but also suggested this is not synchronous with what they thought the district vision is.
- Some parents noted that the level of communication and partnering changed as their student got older. In some cases the parents felt that they needed more communication, despite their student’s age.
- Some parents at the elementary level noted that good home-school communication is not a given across programs or buildings.
- Most teachers at elementary, middle and high school level desire more time and opportunities for collaboration between special and general education and teacher assistants.
- Teachers and parents expressed mixed responses to Team Meetings: some feel they have improved in their structure and in partnering between parents and teachers, while others feel that they need to be structured better for efficiency and communication. Some parents expressed concerns about the Team Chair’s role in committing district resources, citing the Chair as being least knowledgeable about their child.

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

- Most teachers, teacher assistants and administrators mentioned the teacher assistant and the critical role he/she plays in delivering special education services, but also the following problems:

Training for teacher assistants
Supervision and evaluation
Criteria for assigning a teacher assistant to deliver IEP services
Role definition

- Many special education teachers, at all levels, believe that the repertoire of assessment and instructional strategies and tools available to them should be made consistent across buildings at the elementary level, and consistent K-12.
- Some administrators and teachers expressed a concern that the IEPs are generally not written to incorporate the curriculum standards that are established in the district. This can be problematic for assessment of the student with disabilities in the general education curriculum.
- Some special education teachers and administrators would like to have more collaboration between the reading/literacy specialist and the special educators at the elementary level in order to better meet the reading needs of students with IEPs.
- Some elementary general and special educators would like to have more resources in mathematics, assessment and instruction.
- Many administrators and teachers believe that the Student Support Team is effective in their buildings, but that the general education capacity could be enhanced if training and model development (RTI) was provided.
- Many teachers expressed the need for more collaboration around instructional techniques with their general or special education partners. Co-teaching and collaborative consultation were mentioned frequently as models teachers and administrators would like to explore.
- Many teachers commented on the acquisition of assistive technology materials and expertise this year from ARRA IDEA funding. The teachers expressed a need for further training in the effective use of these tools.

Professional Development

- Most special educators, at all levels, identified their need for professional development in the following areas:
 - Assessment
 - Instructional programs for reading, math and writing
 - Content areas (for secondary special educators)
 - Co-teaching and other collaborative models of service delivery
- Most general educators, at all levels, identified their need for professional development in the following areas:
 - Collaboration and co-teaching techniques and models
 - Training in working with teacher assistants
 - Different disabilities
 - Accommodations/modifications to meet the needs of different students
 - How to report at an IEP meeting
- Parents suggested the following topics be presented in professional development to all teachers, administrators and teacher assistants, as appropriate:
 - Autism spectrum disorders
 - Applied Behavior Analysis and how to apply this to teaching
 - Writing Curriculum program for the district

- Executive Function Skills program for the district
- Several other topics for professional development were suggested by some teachers and administrators:
 - Curriculum frameworks and standards-based reporting for special education teachers
 - Response To Intervention as a response to struggling general education students
 - Social pragmatic skill building – having our expert Speech Pathologists train classroom teachers to help generalize the pragmatic skills to their classrooms

Summary

Given the expanse of the special education program in Needham, it is no surprise that these Focus Groups yielded such a far-ranging set of responses. There are a number of areas that require further study and action:

- Establishment of a unified philosophy, vision, staffing model and implementation strategy for Special Education.
- Determine best practices in curriculum, instruction and assessment for students with disabilities.
- Articulate the Preschool-grade 12 continuum of services to improve parent understanding, to make the transitions more seamless and to establish a school-home partnership through better communication.
- Identify best practices to establish an effective continuum of services for our growing population of students with autism spectrum disorder.
- Evaluate and improve teaming structures at elementary, middle and high school in order to enhance collaboration among all staff members.
- Create a professional development plan that targets critical skills for staff in various roles that contributes to a unified educational approach in the district.

Next Steps

1. Share Focus Group results with all stakeholder groups.
2. Administer a Parent Survey, coordinating with SEPAC, to solicit additional parent feedback. Completion date: April 2.
3. Share Focus Group results with Special Education leadership and District Leadership Team; discuss implications and identify priorities.
4. Develop a proposal for continuing the special education review process. Such a proposal may include data analysis, summer work, task forces, expert consultative service and/or a coordinator for the upcoming coordinated program review. Provide proposal to Superintendent by May 1.

Submitted by:

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