Special Education Program Evaluation of Elementary and Intermediate Learning Center Programs

Department of Special Education

Scituate Public Schools

Scituate, Massachusetts

Conducted:
Fall 2014

Submitted by:
Walker Partnerships
A Division of Walker
Needham, Massachusetts
02492
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VII. Summary
I. Introduction

The Director of Special Education requested that Walker Partnerships conduct an evaluation of the elementary (primary and intermediate learning centers) and the Gates learning center special education programs in the Scituate Public Schools. The administration wants to procure recommendations that will assist in addressing the current and future status of the learning center programs in the district, present and future program needs, the inclusion process of students with disabilities into general education classes, activities and instructional supports that are required to ensure greater access to the general curriculum for students with special needs, current and future staffing and space needs for special education, effective utilization of the existing programs, and services and staffing for special education. The administration is also looking for information related to: procedural practices, procedures, professional development offerings for program personnel, and identifying program enhancements that the district should be considering in future years. Specific attention has been paid to the utilization of paraprofessionals, rigor of classroom instruction, and vertical consistency related to theory and practice of all three programs.

A. Purpose

The purpose of an independent evaluation of designated special education programs and services is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strengths, needs and recommendations. An independent review allows for the district to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well to support positive outcomes for students receiving special education services, but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened.

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:

- Identifying trends and patterns in referrals to special education
- Identifying the main characteristics in the students who are referred
- Identifying similar profile characteristics in the non-referred and referred students (changing demographics)
- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students in Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs)
- Identifying trends in the program placements of students
- Determining the effectiveness of current program and service interventions
- Staffing and resource needs that reflect current and anticipated student needs
Creating a long-range plan that addresses the agreed upon needs of the student population

Establishing a comprehensive approach to program and service development that is linked to the budget planning process

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

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

B. Reviewers

Mr. James A. Shillinglaw, CAS, Southeast Region Associate Manager of Walker Partnerships, has thirty-nine years of public school experience. He has been a teacher and building coordinator. Mr. Shillinglaw was an Administrator of Special Education and Director of Pupil Personnel Services for thirty years for the Provincetown Public Schools, Provincetown/Truro Public Schools, the Barnstable Public Schools, the Hanover Public Schools, and the Duxbury Public Schools. Mr. Shillinglaw has been an Adjunct Professor for Lesley University and Framingham State College as well as a presenter at numerous conferences. He was also the president and a member of the executive board of the National Association of Pupil Service Administrators for six years. He has conducted over forty-five independent program evaluations and conducted numerous professional development sessions for school-based personnel.
II. Methodology

This program evaluation was conducted based on a three step approach.

1. A review of written documentation pertaining to this evaluation was conducted. It included program descriptions, review of student IEPs, role responsibilities, and caseloads. Program procedures, practices, expectations, program goals, entrance criteria, data collection system and stated intervention strategies.

2. Thirteen hours of specific program observations. Observations of the Primary and Intermediate Learning Center programs, observations of the Gates Intermediate School special education programming, and interviews with designated school-based staff.

3. One-on-one interviews, and discussions were conducted with personnel in the following positions:
   - Director of Special Education
   - Principals, 1
   - Special Education Teachers, 5
   - General Education Teachers, 6
   - ABA Tutors, 6
   - Board Certified Behavior Analysts, 2
   - Parents, 7
   - Occupational Therapist, 1
   - Adaptive Physical Education, 1
   - Physical Therapist, 1
   - Augmentative Communication Specialist, 1

The one-on-one interviews were thirty minutes in length. Questions and discussion focused on the following:

   - What is your role and what are your responsibilities?
   - There are multiple staff involved with both programs. How do you develop a common language to ensure consistency?
   - How the programs were initially developed? What is the theory of practice?
   - There appears to be an evidence based process for data collection. How was it developed, how were staff trained, and how is it used to develop IEPs?
   - How is program curriculum developed to ensure access to MCAS?
   - Do programs change based on the needs of students from year to year?
   - How is it determined if a child requires 1:1 services? Is there a process/criteria to fade supports?
- How is technology utilized within the programs?
- Describe the role of the BCBA, and the inclusion specialist. Is there an overlap or redundancy?
- How are community outings determined and how are they aligned with goals of the program?
- What is working well for students with disabilities?
- What needs are being met with the current program?
- What needs are not being met with the current program?
- What strengths of the special education program can you identify?
- What trends are you experiencing in special education?
- What changes do you believe need to occur?
- Do you have a copy of your job description?
- Are procedures, practices, and requirements for your position clear to other school-based staff?
- What interventions do you see occurring for students who may be struggling?
- Are there entrance/exit criteria in place for your service/program?
- What topics of professional development need to be addressed?
- What practices need to be in place to enhance programming?
- How is student progress measured?
- What suggestions do you have for changes you think need to occur to enhance the effectiveness of student support and success?
- Are your professional development needs being addressed?
- Does the general education staff understand your role?
- What are some parents’ concerns?

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.

The parent interviews were conducted either one to one or on the phone. Questions for parents:

- What are the services that your child is receiving?
- Do you feel that you are kept informed regarding your child’s progress?
- Do you feel that the staff members working with your child have a good working knowledge of your child’s needs?
- Do you feel that you receive answers to your questions from special education personnel within a reasonable time frame?
- Do you feel that school personnel are receptive to your suggestions?
- Do the staff members working with your child indicate that they see effective progress? Do you see progress?
- Do you feel that you have access to the personnel working with your child?
- Are there any issues that you feel the department or school should be aware of, in relation to you, as the parent of a child with special needs?
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 the students. Special Education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. There are competing interests that continue to place a significant pressure and financial burden on the school district. Scituate Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to address the needs of the students with disabilities.

Specific Commendations:

- The expressed enthusiasm and dedication of the interviewed staff and the staff met during program observations.
- The thoughtful input and suggestions offered by parents that demonstrated a clear desire to see programming, procedures, and practices improved upon.
- The established document, “Home Services/Parent Training Guidelines,” that clearly states the purpose, requirements and intended outcome of this service.
- The district’s efforts to pursue the development of two Board Certified Behavior Analysts positions that were previously contracted with outside vendors.
- The efforts of the Learning Center staff and administration for developing a power point describing the programs. This presentation is utilized to educate parents and the community about the programs and the range of services that are provided.
- The commitment of staff associated with the PLC and ILC programs to provide a monthly newsletter to parents that describes the monthly themes, suggestions from the related therapies for activities that parents can reinforce at home, and informing parents of upcoming events.
- The efforts of staff and the building administrator to conduct a self-assessment to discuss the PLC and ILC program strengths and needs.
- The speech language therapist dedicated to the PLC and ILC programs for her level of expertise and training in the area of augmentative communication and assistive technology.
- The district’s initiative to establish a higher pay scale for ABA tutors in recognition of their training and skill level. The district also provides training for paraprofessionals four times a year.
Both schools, Hatherly and Gates are very supportive of the programs and make every attempt to include learning center students in all school activities.

The Director of Special Education for her initiative to develop criteria for determining paraprofessional services. The process will be field tested during the 2014-2015 school year.
IV. Factors Affecting the Implementation of Programming and Services

There are numerous factors that impact on a school district’s ability to deliver instructional and related services to special needs students. None of these factors are more impacting than the census and the specific needs of the students. These two factors drive program development, service initiatives, and expenditures. There are, also, several other factors unique to a particular district that may not be impacting factors in other districts. This section of the report will address several of the factors that affect the implementation of special education programming and services in Scituate.

Census and Needs

Table IV illustrates that the district has a higher percentage of students in four of the disability categories than the statewide average.

Table I. % Comparison of High Disability Categories vs. State 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Scituate</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Disability</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DESE October 2011 Census Report

Table II. % Comparison of High Disability Categories vs. State 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disability Category</th>
<th>Scituate</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental Disability</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>10.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>15.3%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurological</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DESE October 2011 Census Report

Table I illustrates that the four categories are higher than the statewide average, but more importantly, there are at least two, if not three categories that require “staffing to student ratios” that places a significant burden on the special education budget. Serving students with autism and developmental disabilities requires higher staffing ratios with specialized skills. To service students with autism and developmental disabilities requires in-district specially trained personnel or students will require out-of-district placements. These four categories are examples of “the needs of students in relation to the number” as factors that impact the implementation of programs and services. There may be a need to review the designation of the disability category of Health. Walker Partnerships has found, when conducting these program evaluations, that staff will inadvertently place students in a disability category that is not appropriate. A review of disability definitions may be one strategy to address this issue. The data on Table I was provided in the program evaluation conducted by Walker Partnership in 2012. The data in Table II updates the percentages. The district percentage for students in the four designated disability categories is still higher than the state average. The Health disability category percentage has actually increased during
the past two years. The recommendation to review the designation of the disability category for Health should continue to be a priority.

Technology/Assistive Technology

Children with multiple disabilities have unique needs and challenges. Many of these young children struggle to communicate their wants and needs, engage in their world, and learn abstract concepts and ideas. Professionals and families working together must identify the individual supports that each child needs so that they can ensure that the child with multiple disabilities is an active participant in all aspects of his or her life and can make meaningful progress toward valued life outcomes. The tremendous advancements in technology have greatly impacted the educators’ abilities to provide students with multiple disabilities a better access to their environment. Through comprehensive assessment, appropriate technology can be provided to students that will enhance their education and daily lives. This factor will be further addressed in the Recommendations section.

Developing a Continuum of Services

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 appropriate to meet their unique needs. The 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, in order 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 IEP team.

In developing the Individual Education Program (IEP) for a child 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 in order for the student to make effective progress.

Utilization of Instructional Assistants

The Walker Partnership has conducted over 125 program evaluations during the past five years. Consistently in many of the school districts that we evaluate if there is an over-dependence on the utilization of paraprofessionals. In many cases paraprofessionals are the primary staff responsible for the implementation of student IEPs. This creates a dynamic where you have the least qualified staff responsible for a majority of service delivery. Scituate Schools has been an exception to this. The reviewer has been impressed with the district’s efforts to ensure that students receive services from highly qualified Applied Behavior Analyst tutors. The district has made a substantial effort to ensure that the ABA
tutors are trained, and supervised. The district has established a separate pay scale in recognition of their skill level. This has ensured a consistent level of service to students in the Learning Center programs. During the course of conducting the recent review several staff stated during interviews that there should be more ABA tutor assistance in the district. I do not support this recommendation.

**Community Based Instruction (CBI) versus Field Trips**

Regular and systematic instruction in functional, age-appropriate skills in integrated community settings, using naturally occurring material and situations designed to help the student(s) to acquire and generalize life skills that enhance his/her opportunities for meaningful experiences and relationships within the community. CBI differs from the traditional field trip in that instruction is cumulative, and usually the same skills are instructed and assessed from week to week. The emphasis is on acquisition and application of functional and age appropriate skills in naturalistic settings.

**Parent and community support to enhance special education**

The **C.O.R.S.E. Foundation (Community of Resources for Special Education)** is a 501(c)(3) which was established by a group of dedicated parents and educators to raise funds to provide the highest quality educational, social and recreational community experiences so children with special needs can reach their full potential. This foundation has been able to supplement many meaningful activities that would be difficult to support within the special education department budget. In recent years they have supported yoga and music therapy through the South Shore Conservatory for all three of the Learning Center programs. Yoga for the Special Child is a program developed by the parent of a special needs child that modifies the essential components of yoga to adapt to special needs students.
V. Findings

Through the review process, it was apparent that the school district’s administrators are very aware of the needs of the district as a whole, the individual schools, and the student population. The following findings are provided to assist the district with the work that needs to be completed. These findings are presented in no particular order of priority.

Specific Findings:

- The Scituate special education department currently provides programs at the elementary and intermediate levels for students with significant delays in the areas of language, communication, cognition, social interaction, but demonstrate pre-academic readiness and the ability to actively participate in life skills.

- Two of the programs are housed at the Hatherly Elementary School. The primary learning center (PLC) services students from kindergarten through third grade. The intermediate learning center services students from grades four through six. There is a program at Gates Intermediate School (GLC).

- Staff and administration associated with the program have developed a comprehensive power point/handout describing the learning center programs. The presentation provides an overview of the history of the programs, theory and practice, the multiple components of the program, tools for measuring progress, curriculum instruction as well as the role of support staff.

- During December of the current school year (2014-2015) administration and staff conducted a self-assessment articulating the strengths and the needs of the PLC/ILC programs. The following includes their findings.

  **Strengths**
  - Staff stays with the programs, there is not a high turnover
  - Dedicated SLP to the programs
  - Current ABA tutors are well trained, flexible and hardworking

  **Curriculum**
  - Strong individualized programming based on students ability
  - Focus on ADL skills and functional academics for students
  - Ability to maximize inclusion opportunities for students to be exposed to general education curriculum and time in class to work on social and play skills with appropriate models
  - General education teachers willing and happy to keep staff up to date with the happenings in the classroom
- Individualized ILC/PLC programs (yoga, music therapy, APE, adaptive art, modified field day)

**Instruction**
- ABA model and methodology
- Opportunities for co-treatments
- Multisensory instruction
- Opportunities to explore thematic units at the student’s ability level
- Reverse inclusion opportunities

**Assessment**
- Group approach to administering the ABLLS so that reporting and IEP is done cohesively and effectively
- Descriptive data driven assessment

**Physical Space**
- Having the handicap bathroom close to PLC
- Air Conditioning
- OT/PT next to ILC
- Adaptive swings on both playgrounds

**PLC/ILC Needs**
- Time for ABA tutors to meet with teachers and therapists to update programming
- Align staffing ratio to meet required student IEP needs for success and reassess every year or when new students enroll in the program
- Enough staff to appropriately include students in inclusion opportunities at their grade level and with their class
- ABA tutors need to have trainings that are appropriate and applicable (PMT, Adaptive technology
- Physical restraint training for ALL staff annually
- Adjusting to two BCBA’s between the programs to ensure continuity
- Entrance/exit criteria
- Cap to enrollment in Learning Center
- Inclusion specialist (currently .5) role clarified

**Primary and Intermediate Learning Centers**

**Curriculum**
- Extra materials for ILC/PLC students from grade level curriculum materials and access to curriculum
- Summer programming move location? Service provider changes?
• More technology based programming that can be utilized by diverse learners

Instruction
• More training and training on technology that can be implemented in the PLC and ILC classrooms such as Smart boards
• Time to oversee staff and model instruction
• Clear roll of the BCBA in the classroom, as well as inclusion specialist

Assessment
• Training in standardized testing so it can be used when it is applicable
• More assessments that are appropriate for the learners in our classroom besides the ABLLS

Physical Space/Materials
• Access to appropriate furniture and storage: Need new dividers
• Having the therapists as close to the classroom as possible
• Budget for materials that are appropriate for students
• Access to busses for community based trips
• Opportunities to go on community trips weekly (Need nursing staffing for this)

The Learning Center programs are staffed with experienced instructors, related service providers, and ABA tutors.
• One special education teacher for each program
• A part time (.5) inclusion specialist who assists with developing accommodations and modifications for students in the PLC who are integrated into kindergarten through second grade general education classrooms
• ABA tutors. The district has developed a higher pay scale for this classification of para-professionals to reflect the level of their training and skills
• A speech language therapist who is dedicated to both programs (.9 FTE). She provides extensive support in the area of augmentative communication
• The district has made a commitment to hire two (2.0 FTE) BCBA. One services the PLC program, the other services the ILC and GLC programs
• APE services that are co-taught with the physical education teacher and the physical therapist. They have utilized UBD (Understanding by Design) to plan lessons on a monthly basis. The APE class provides students with an opportunity to develop skills and preview what activities they will experience in the regular PE class. The same concept is used for Art class.
• Yoga and music therapy that is supported by the CORSE foundation. See Commendations
An objective of both programs at Hatherly is to provide meaningful opportunities for inclusion. There have been concerns in the past related to the level of inclusion versus the individualized skill development that is important for students to maximize their potential. Currently staff feel that the level of inclusion is appropriate. Several students from both programs spend a significant part of the day in general education classrooms with support staff from the programs.

Both programs are data driven. ABA tutors are trained and supervised by the lead teachers and the BCBA's in data collection. Both classrooms are organized to provide individual carrels to conduct discrete trial training. The PLC has created individualize academic programs that are focused towards the MCAS/State standards in ELA and Math. The PLC currently has two third grade students who participated in the MCAS alternative assessment. Students in the PLC use specialized technology such as Lexia to support their instruction in reading. Progress monitoring assessments; DIBELS and STAR are utilized for students who can participate. The ABLLS-R is the primary mode of assessment and is also utilized to assist in creating programs for students. The ILC appears to be more academically rigorous than the PLC. Instruction is modified to access MCAS entry standards based on the students ability. Each student in the ILC has a program book that is divided into different skill sets; academic, ADL (activities of daily living), and prevocational. The ILC utilizes the ALL (Accessible Literacy Learning). The curriculum includes data collection forms to determine mastery. Several other assessment tools such as the ABBLs are also used to monitor student progress. Several of the students exhibit emerging academic skills that supported their general education classroom placement. ABA tutors are rotated between the students. Mayer Johnson symbols provide a common language between programs, staff, and therapists.

The special education administrator and the two BCBA’s have developed a job description. Their current responsibilities include the following:

- Conducting Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs)
- Developing home programs
- Developing behavior support plans
- Supervise data collection
- Graphing and analyzing data
- Training ABA tutors

A motor room is provided for physical and occupational therapy as well as yoga classes.

Learning Center students model appropriate social skills when they interact with peer models in settings such as the library. This reviewer believes there could have been more interaction opportunities initiated during small group activities.
• Currently the district contracts with an outside agency to conduct assistive technology (AT) assessments. There has been an increase in the number of parent referrals for AT assessments. The SLP associated with the Learning Center programs is currently enrolled in a Master’s program in the area of assistive technology. This will increase the district’s capacity to provide these assessments in-se.

• Much of the development of the theory of practice for the Learning Center programs was initiated by the current instructor for the ILC programs. She came to the district from a program that relied heavily on applied behavior analysis and discrete trials.

• There is concern that the role of the BCBA is not fully understood in the PLC program. This has created a poor utilization of her skills and potentially a lack of consistency with the development and implementation of individual student behavior plans.

• It is reported that there is insufficient time to meet with the teacher, that student programs lack continuity and specificity in their development. It is important that teachers provide the opportunity to model programs and ensure that time is available to collaborate on the management of the program.

• The program management appears to be different in the ILC program. The teacher creates and models programs for the ABA tutors. Common planning time is scheduled to ensure that there is communication related to the analysis of data with the lead teacher and the BCBA.

• Students in the general education classrooms are very accepting of students in both programs. They interact with the students and ignore maladaptive behaviors.

• Parents in all three of the Learning Center programs are generally very happy with the continuum of services that their child and family receive. Several parents have had bad experiences in the past, with other programs in the district, but feel that communication has greatly improved. They feel they are listened to and respected. All of the parents that were interviewed were nervous about the transition from the ILC to the GLC at Gates as well as the transition from Gates to the high school program. Parents are knowledgeable about their child’s disability as well as the community resources and services available.

• General education teachers are very supportive of the Learning Centers. They feel like they have learned a lot of vocabulary and common language associated with the program’s behavioral and therapeutic approach. They have also utilized strategies that they have learned from the inclusion of students that have been effective in their own instruction. They would like to see more opportunities to communicate with the program teachers.
Gates Learning Center

- When the Walker Partnership conducted a program evaluation in 2012 there were twelve students and five paraprofessionals in the program. Currently there are five students and two paraprofessionals assigned to the program.

- Historically there have been students who were not involved in the PLC and ILC who have been recommended to the GLC from their home schools when they transition to the intermediate school.

- Students from the Gates Learning Center (GLC) are integrated into several different applied sciences classrooms. Based on class size, that varies from semester to semester, the Art teacher modifies assignments based on student ability. In one example the class assignment was to draw a portrait from a magazine picture. For students in the GLC students drew the portrait connecting dots. GLC students also have access to the after school art club that meets once a week. They are supported by paraprofessionals from the program. More training in the area of motor skills and access to differentiated materials would provide more opportunities for students to access applies science programs such as Art.

- Gates incorporates several programs that promote the inclusion of learning center students to participate in the school community. Where Everybody Belongs (WEB) is a positive behavior initiative that trains seventh grade students to be peer leaders. There is a WEB dance that GLC students participate in. There is also a Best Buddies program that approximately thirty students have joined. It is unusual to hear of such a well-organized Best Buddies program at the intermediate level.

- The Family/Consumer Science teacher has been very involved with the GLC program for five years. Her class has been an excellent opportunity for GLC students to experience meaningful inclusion. Activities are differentiated, and demonstrated to allow students to fully participate in the classroom activity. She also has organized the MCAS Café. The café is offered to the Gates teaching staff during MCAS. Jobs such as; host, server, cash register are developed to simulate a café setting.

- APE is also provided to students in the GLC program if they require it as a service on their IEP. The model is similar in its focus to provide students a modified preview of the skills they will be learning in the general education PE class.

- GLC students are integrated into Geography. Instruction is fast paced with little opportunity to differentiate. Students are usually removed from the class and receive instruction in another area of the room. Each student has a Geography Grade Sheet where they receive points for; homework, table of contents, keeping their binder, focus on teacher, having all materials needed. The classroom teacher in the past had more involvement with the students and could modify assignments. It is more difficult since the district has adopted the demanding common core.
The district

Indicator 5 - Educational Environments for Students Aged 6 - 21 with IEPs 2013-2014

For 2012-13, the state target for the % of Students with IEPs served in Full Inclusion is 59.7%, the target for % of Students with IEPs served in Substantially Separate placements is 14.5%, and the target for % of Students with IEPs served in Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital placements is 5.5%.

Comparison of % of Students Included vs. State Average 2013

Table III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>District Rate</th>
<th>State Rate</th>
<th>State Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled students with IEPs</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the day)</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>77.6 %</td>
<td>59.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 40%-79% of the day)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>6.7 %</td>
<td>18.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantially Separate (inside the general education classroom less than 40% of the day)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>9.0 %</td>
<td>15.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital placements (does not include parentally-placed private school students with disabilities)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6.5 %</td>
<td>6.9 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Special Education data are suppressed for enrollment counts fewer than 6.

Comparison of % of Students Included vs. State Average 2011

Table IV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Scituate</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Inclusion</td>
<td>79.2%</td>
<td>58.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Inclusion</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-separate</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE), October 2011 Census Report

Comparing data from 2011 and 2013 illustrates that Scituate has consistently had more students fully included than the state average. Both tables illustrate that the district has substantially fewer students in sub-separate programs than the statewide average, although the average has increased during the past two years. (2011-7.5%, 2013-9.0%)
VI. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the district-wide special education program evaluation process that was completed in January 2015. 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 to make decisions regarding the direction 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 meet the needs of the student population.

There will be a need 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 presented in no particular order of priority. The recommendations are broken up into sections.

1. The current model for the Primary Learning Center should be reviewed to determine the utilization of staff, curriculum content, and coordination of data used to develop student programs.

Explanation:

- There was concern throughout the interview process regarding the minimal amount of time available for communication between the lead teacher and support staff. It is vitally important that common planning time be established on a consistent basis to discuss daily instruction, utilization of data, student progress (or lack of progress). Communication should involve all staff that are involved with the program including; ABA tutors, BCBA, speech language therapist, Occupational and Physical therapists, and the inclusion specialist.

- It is important to consistently monitor the program to ensure that the current instructional methods include the following:
  
  - Instructional methods have documented effectiveness and reflect current evidence based practice.
  - The methodology promotes maximum engagement in appropriate activities and targeted skill areas.
  - Instructional methods promote high rates of successful performance based on continual data collection.
  - Instructional methods encourage communication and social interaction and;
• Encourage the spontaneous use of learned skills in different settings.

o The building administrator should meet with program staff on a monthly basis to facilitate open dialogue related to; student progress, utilization of staff, and concerns related to program goals and philosophy.

o The role of the BCBA assigned to the program needs to be clarified. Discrete trials and student behavioral support plans are an integral part of the learning center practice. Having access to a BCBA is a valuable service that can greatly impact the efficacy of the program. There should be consistency in how BCBA’s are utilized to fully benefit from their expertise.

o The lead teacher should be available to model student programs for the ABA tutors. The learning center programs are fortunate to have paraprofessionals that are experienced and trained, but there will be times that they will require support to ensure consistency.

o The demands of ensuring that the curriculum provides access to MCAS are challenging. Rigorous instruction at the early childhood level is critical to future academic progress and the opportunity for students to enter a less restrictive environment. Development of a professional learning community for the learning center programs would be beneficial in developing more vertical consistency related to curriculum.

o Stake holders should consider reviewing the current job description of the inclusion specialist. It appears that part of her role is to make accommodations and modifications for students in the PLC program when they are included in the general education classroom. Although she is well qualified it should be determined if this is the best use of her time and abilities.

2. The current model for the Gates Learning Center should be reviewed to determine if there is consistency with the elementary learning centers and if it meets the needs of students entering from the elementary programs.

Explanation:

o One of the concerns that was expressed was the appropriateness of the current GLC model to meet the complex needs of students transitioning from the Intermediate Learning Center.

o The models at the elementary and intermediate schools differ significantly in several areas.

  • There is not the level of related services provided at the GLC that is evident at the elementary level. There is a .9 speech language therapist that is dedicated to both programs at the elementary level. The speech language therapist at Gates services
the GLC, other students that need speech/language services at the school as well as a caseload at the high school. She provides a small group session one time a week for forty minutes and a classroom session one time a week. In reviewing IEPs in the elementary programs many of the students receive speech/language three to four times a week as well as a consultation. The speech/language therapist at Gates does not have the level of expertise in augmentative communication that many of the students will require. There is limited technology available to the Gates program

- The theory and practice of the elementary programs is strongly based in applied behavior analysis and discrete trials. Both programs are data driven. Although BCBA consultation is available to the Gates program the current structure is not conducive to an intense ABA model. The Gates program is more oriented towards life skills and pre-vocational. Based on current IEPs students would have decreased services entering the GLC.

- The model at Gates is more focused on including students in the mainstream. Most students in the program only receive about two periods (periods are 56 minutes) of small group instruction for ELA and Math. There are multiple schedules that need to be coordinated to ensure classroom coverage.

  - Historically there are students from other elementary schools that are recommended to the more restrictive Gates program when they transition to the intermediate school. This raises the question of whether they were receiving the level of service they needed to make effective progress at their respective schools. Apparently they were not eligible for the level of service provided in the Hatherly programs. Part of the review process for the GLC should clearly involve developing entrance criteria. The current level of service at the elementary level should also be evaluated to determine a profile of the students who eventually are recommended to a GLC type program.

  - There appears to be another program at Gates that is similar to the GLC. It would be important to develop entrance criteria for this program also. Is there redundancy in what each program provides? Should one program continue to be more life skills oriented and a new program developed that would model the elementary programs?

  - Clearly there needs to be consideration to either significantly modify the current program or develop a new program that is more aligned with the elementary model. The profile of students with significant needs is changing in the district. Extending the continuum of programs to meet their need is necessary. Otherwise the district will be forced to send students out of district. There will be four students who enter GLC from the ILC next year. This will also need to be considered in the future for students who are not appropriate for a school to work post-secondary experience once students transition to high school. The intermediate school is a critical juncture for students and families. It is also a relative brief time (two years) that students attend the intermediate school.
There are many positive benefits that the students in the GLC receive being included in the school community. At this level there are still parental expectations having their child included as much as possible. Making those decisions are difficult. Consideration should be given to the level of inclusion students currently receive versus the critical skills they will need in the future. The program needs a more consistent approach to instruction. Two periods a day may not be enough time to provide the instruction and strategies students require.

3. The purpose and educational benefit of the current practice for field/community trips should be reviewed.

Explanation:

Throughout the interview process there was much discussion about the value and necessity of field trips. Many of the trips did seem worthwhile and of some educational value, but there did not appear to be a consistent purpose or process to determine the benefit and frequency of the field trips. Field trips in general tend to be a one-time activity. With the introduction to MCAS during school reform in the 1990’s one of the biggest changes in practice was the elimination of field trips because they were not accountable and did not support the rigor of the curriculum. There is limited time to provide the necessary skills special needs students require.

Community Based Instruction (CBI) may be a vehicle to link instruction with community settings. There should be a sequence of programs developed as a result of objectives that are pulled from students IEP to make the experience meaningful. As with other components of the learning center programs the goals of CBI should be measurable and data driven.

The emphasis is on acquisition and application of functional and age appropriate skills in a naturalistic setting.

Stakeholders should develop a process that will require an application process articulating the goals of the CBI and how it fits into the curriculum and monthly classroom themes.

4. Current technology and applicable software need to be incorporated into the Learning Center programs.

Explanation:

Combining technology with effective teaching promotes the child’s participation in learning and relating to others. Technology interventions can support access to, and participation in, everyday learning opportunities for children with significant disabilities.
The ultimate intervention goal should be for the child to be able to use the device or materials in a self-directed manner as part of the routine and activities of their daily life and natural environment.

Technology intervention, which includes the provision of individually appropriate devices and instruction on the use of the device, has the potential to assist students with multiple disabilities in successfully accessing their environment, then engaging in their environment, and therefore attaining critical developmental milestones more readily.

Technology should also be considered to enhance classroom instruction. There are so many opportunities through the internet that can be explored to create a more interactive experience with all classroom activities. At the very least, each classroom should have access to a Smartboard.

5. Utilization of paraprofessionals.

Explanation:

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), Massachusetts has over 25,000 paraprofessionals working in the Commonwealth schools with approximately two thirds of the paraprofessionals identified as special education paraprofessionals.

Instructional assistants 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 instructional assistants has become a primary mechanism to implement more inclusive school practices.

There was concern expressed that there were insufficient paraprofessionals available to support students within the general education classroom. In many districts paraprofessionals are added without a process or any quantitative data that supports adding staff. Many times it is parental pressure. Making the decision has far reaching considerations. Once this service is documented in the IEP it is very difficult to fade. The Director of Special Education developed a committee of special and general education teachers to develop Protocol and Criteria for the Determination of Paraprofessional Service. If a need for more paraprofessional support is necessary this protocol should be a helpful tool. It is comprehensive, data driven, and requires substantial documentation before a decision is made.
Teams should also thoroughly look at existing resources, staff schedules, overlap of staff in a program that are not necessarily utilized at all times, and small group instruction.

**VII. Summary**

The Director of Special Education requested that Walker Partnerships conduct an evaluation of the primary, intermediate and Gates Intermediate Learning Centers. This evaluation was focused on determining the current status of special education programming for the three programs. The administration wanted to secure recommendations that will assist in short and long-range planning.

The evaluation process consisted of reviewing written documents from the Office of Special Education, descriptions of programs and services, role and responsibilities, census and procedures and practices, and out-of-district placements. Observations of the Learning Centers were conducted. Thirty minute one-on-one interviews were conducted that involved twenty-nine (29) individuals.

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

The district 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 Scituate Public Schools. The Recommendation section discusses issues that can be addressed within a reasonable time from to enhance what the district is attempting to accomplish for students with disabilities.

Appreciation is expressed to the support staff of the Office of Special Education and the school-based staff for their assistance with scheduling school visits, class observations and interviews.