

Evaluation of the Special Education Programs

Department of Special Education

Swansea Public School District

Swansea, Massachusetts

Conducted:
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I. Introduction:

The Superintendent of Schools, John Robidoux, requested that James A. Shillinglaw conduct an evaluation of the special education programs for the Swansea Public School District. The overall focus of this review is to gain a greater understanding of the current status of special education programs and services within the district; identify the strengths of the existing programming; and determine what issues need to be addressed to enhance current programming. The administration wants to procure recommendations that will assist them with addressing future program needs, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes and activities, and the instructional supports that may be required to ensure greater access to the general curriculum for students with special needs.

A. Purpose:

The purpose of an independent evaluation of a specific program and service is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strengths, needs, and recommendations. An independent evaluation allows for the district to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well in the district, but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened. This evaluation is focused on the specific domain of programming and services that serve students with special needs.

The review 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:

- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students on Individualized Education Programs within the Swansea Public School District;
- Determining if the district provides a continuum of services to meet the diverse needs of the special education population;
- Evaluating the current special education transportation to determine cost effectiveness;
- Determining the efficacy of the current models (inclusion classes, co-teaching) to maximize access to the general education curriculum;
- Determining what strategies and professional development resources are needed to enhance the current special education model;
- Identifying staffing and resources that reflect 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;
- Determining the need to develop capacity to provide support to students who require more intensive services in order to make effective progress.

This review process brings forth information that will enable the district administration and the 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 Swansea Public Schools.

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 recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the school-based special education and general education personnel can develop short and long-range action plan(s) that will address the agreed upon issues.

B. Reviewer:

Mr. James A. Shillinglaw, CAS, an independent special education consultant, 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. Most recently he was the Southeast Region Associate Manager for the Walker Partnerships. He has conducted over fifty-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 of the following:
 - Data and statistics provided by the Swansea Special Education Department
 - Data and statistics provided by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
 - Special education procedure manual
 - Program descriptions
2. Small group and individual interviews and discussions were conducted with individuals occupying the following positions:
 - Director of Special Education
 - Superintendent of Schools
 - School adjustment counselors, 4
 - General education teachers, 7
 - Special education teachers, 8
 - Instructional assistants, 6
 - Speech/language therapist, 1
 - Occupational therapist, 1
 - Parents, 24
3. Observations of programs and classrooms were conducted of the following:
 - Fifteen special education programs
 - Six general education/co-teaching classrooms

The interviews/discussions that were conducted with individuals were 45 minutes in length. Emphasis was placed on the focus of the service and program under review. Questions and discussion focused on the following:

- What are their roles and responsibilities to the program being reviewed?
- What are their main concerns?
- What is working well?
- What program strengths can they identify?
- What trends are they experiencing in the program?
- What changes do they believe need to occur?
- What topics of professional development need to be addressed?
- What practices need to be in place to enhance the program?

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 his/her respective role, his/her experience in the field of education, the length of time that he/she has been in his/her current position, and any other factors that emerged from the interview process.

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. Swansea Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of the students.

Specific Commendations:

- The Superintendent of Schools for commissioning this review in order to gain insight into program/service enhancements and improvements for the district's special education programs;
- The commitment and support of the district's principals for the special education programs in each building;
- The very high level of dedication and commitment of school-based personnel to fulfill the requirements of special education students' IEPs;
- Comprehensive program descriptions have been developed for the continuum of special education services throughout the district. The descriptions include: a philosophy, mission statement, placement criteria, counseling components, discipline code, and parent involvement;
- Staff in the high school ARCH program (Alternate Roadways through Case High School) initiated a district-wide autism awareness program. Staff visited every elementary school classroom to present different aspects of autism spectrum disorder. They also had tee shirts made that were sold to commemorate Autism Awareness Month;
- Staff from the ARCH program also established a Best Buddies Program during the current school year (2016-2017). Initial participation with the high school population has been very positive. Students in the ARCH program greatly enjoy the interaction when students come into the program;
- Administration at the high school has supported the development of a unified track team for the ARCH program. Students from the ARCH program compete with students from surrounding communities;
- Throughout the interview process, there were many comments from staff related to the positive school climate throughout the Swansea Public Schools;
- Many of the staff in the in the substantially separate programs came to the district with experience having worked in collaborative, day and residential programs with students who required intensive instruction, behavior management and social skill development;
- The commitment of the special education administration for attending a majority of the initial and reevaluation IEP meetings throughout the district;
- The development of the Case Manager Resource procedure manual that is given to all staff members at the beginning of the school year. The manual outlines all teacher responsibilities, timelines, and pertinent information to ensure compliance;

- The district’s percentage of students receiving special education services is significantly lower than the state average. The district’s average is 11.3% while the state average is 17.2%;

Table I. Percentage of students receiving special education services by school as compared to the district and state average 2015-2015

Data is from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

School	% By School	% By District	State %
Elizabeth S. Brown	11.4%	11.3%	17.4%
Gardner	3.7%	11.3%	17.4%
Jos. G. Luther*	13.6%	11.3%	17.4%
Mark G. Hoyle*	16.3%	11.3%	17.4%
Jos. Case Jr. HS*	11.3%	11.3%	17.4%
Jos. Case HS*	10.3%	11.3%	17.4%

Source DESE FY 16 October Census Report

*Includes substantially separate program(s) enrollment

IV. Factors Affecting the Implementation of Programming and Services:

There are numerous factors that impact the district's ability to deliver instructional and related services to students within the Swansea Public Schools. The most pressing factors are the number of students (census) with special needs, balancing the level of need, and the impact of providing required services.

Over identification of Students Requiring Special Education and Related Services:

Massachusetts has the second highest rate of special education identification in the United States. Currently, the state average is 17%. Rhode Island has the highest rate at 19%. In a study requested by the Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), conducted by Thomas Hehir and Associates, there were several key findings that related to the over-identification of students eligible for special education.

Nearly two out of three Massachusetts students with a disability are identified as belonging in one of three categories: specific learning disability, communication, or other health impairments. Due to the potentially subjective nature of their diagnosis, rates of identification for these categories may be more sensitive to policy decisions than rates for the more strictly defined categories.

Rates of special education vary substantially across Massachusetts districts, ranging from a low of approximately 9% to a high of 29% of a district's students identified as eligible for special education and related services. Local school districts are given substantial flexibility in their interpretation of these specific categories.

Table II.

Comparison of Disability Compared to the State by Percentage:

State vs. Swansea

Disability	State (% Students by Disability)	Swansea FY 16
Autism	8.1%	15.8%
Communication	18.0%	9.3%
Developmental Delay	10.7%	12.6%
Emotional	8.5%	8.5%
Health	9.4%	17.0%
Intellectual	6.2%	5.7%
Multiple Disabilities	2.9%	0.0%
Neurological	4.9%	2.4%
Physical	.8%	0.0%
Sensory/Deaf/Blind	.1%	0.0%
Sensory/Hard of Hearing	.7%	0.08%
Sensory/Vision impairment	.4%	0.0%
Specific Learning Disability	29.4%	27.9%

Source DESE FY 2016 October Census Report

Benefits of Full Inclusion:

In 2011, Dr. Mitchell D. Chester, Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, commissioned Thomas Hehir and Associates to conduct a review of special education in the Commonwealth. The purpose of this review was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the identification, placement, and academic performance of students with disabilities in Massachusetts, and to recommend strategies that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education might use to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The following are several of the findings and recommendations that have come from the culmination of the three reports that Dr. Hehir conducted.

Overarching Finding #2: *Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements appeared to outperform similar students who were not included to the same extent in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers.*

Across each of our studies, we found evidence suggesting that students with disabilities benefitted from being included in the general education classroom with their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements (spending 80 percent or more of the school day in general education classrooms), on average, earned higher MCAS scores, graduated high school at higher rates, and were more likely to remain in their local school districts than students who were educated in substantially separate placements (spending less than 40 percent of the day in the general education classroom).

Like students across the country, the proportion of time Massachusetts students spent being educated in classrooms with their non-disabled peers varied for students with different disability designations. For example, students with disabilities in the high incidence categories had full inclusion placements with their non-disabled peers at higher rates than students with other disability classifications. Students with intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, and emotional disturbance had higher rates of substantially separate placements than students with other disability classifications.

Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: A Synthesis Report

Table III. Percentage of students in educational environments:**Indicator 5 - Educational Environments for Students Aged 6 - 21 with IEPs**

*For 2014-15, the state target for % of Students with IEPs served in **Full Inclusion** is 60.5%, 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%.*

	Enrollment	District Rate	State Rate	State Target
Enrolled students with IEPs	238	--	--	NA
Full Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the day)	132	55.5%	61.9%	60.5%
Partial Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 40%-79% of the day)	25	10.5%	16.7%	NA
Substantially Separate (inside the general education classroom less than 40% of the day)	72	30.3%	14.4%	14.5%
Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital placements (does not include parentally-placed private school students with disabilities)	9	3.8%	6.9%	5.5%

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 placed appropriately in an environment that is specifically suited to meet his/her needs. The law intends that the degree of inclusion be driven by the student's needs as determined by the IEP team.

Transition Services:

In 2004, Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA). One of the important issues was the focus that was placed on transition. Prior to 2004, transition services focused on students with significant cognitive and mental health issues. The transition process would start when a student was sixteen. The intention was to begin linking the student and family with the appropriate human service agency to ensure that a plan was in place once a student turned twenty-two and was no longer entitled to special education services. The reauthorization of this act in 2004 broadened the scope of transition to all students once they were fourteen years old.

Transition services --- The definition emphasizes that transition services are a coordinated set of activities ". . .designed to be within a results-oriented process that is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities."

The emphasis on transition has placed an added demand on special education staff to develop a comprehensive plan that clearly articulates goals and objectives that will lead students to post-secondary activities.

There are potential legal ramifications for the school districts that do not understand the importance of the transition process and have not developed transition plans that clearly articulate a post-secondary vision. A disturbing trend has emerged in recent years with parents unilaterally placing their child in residential programs that provide a comprehensive "college like" environment. In many cases, the school district is not in a position to take legal action because they have not met the standard in developing an adequate transition plan.

Why did Congress feel that transition needed to be such an important part of the reauthorization in 2004? They were very concerned about the high drop-out rate and low employment rate of students with disabilities. They didn't pass the original law with the intent that students would receive special education services throughout their school years and not be able to transition into meaningful life activities. Swansea Public Schools has recognized the responsibility to develop a program to support students transitioning to post-secondary life.

Co-Teaching:

There have been several significant changes in both state and federal legislation that have greatly impacted special education. In the 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Congress was very disappointed in the number of special needs students who were not only excluded from general education classrooms, but also had limited involvement in state and local assessments. The reauthorization ensured that special needs students would not be excluded from state and local assessments as well as encouraged school districts to provide services in the Least Restrictive Environment, the general education classroom.

In 1993, Massachusetts passed the school reform act that led to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, better known as MCAS, that established high standards for all students to meet in order to receive a high school diploma.

In 2001, Congress passed the landmark legislation, “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). The stated goal of NCLB was “...to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice so that no child is left behind.” All of these acts have focused attention on assisting students with increasingly diverse learning needs to achieve high academic performance in general education.

These changes have greatly impacted how special education services are delivered to students. Prior to these changes, the service delivery for special needs students relied on pulling students out of the general education classroom to provide instruction that often did not relate to accessing the curriculum. Students lost important instruction in the classroom, and in many cases this left the students at a significant disadvantage to be successful in participating in state and local assessments.

The development of effective co-teaching models has allowed special education students to have more access to the general education curriculum. Co-teaching is effective for students with a variety of instructional needs. The collaboration of the general and special education teachers creates a classroom environment that differentiates instruction, makes essential accommodations, and allows all students to maximize their potential. Without the benefits of on-going professional development, collaboration, and common planning times, the co-teaching model will not be an effective utilization of staff, and consequently will not maximize student access to the general education curriculum.

Parent and School District Relationships:

“Special education laws and regulations are meant to protect a student with disabilities and ensure that he or she gets the service and assistance that may be necessary to make effective progress. The laws and regulations are also very complex.” It is important to gain the trust and confidence of parents as they begin to navigate the challenging Individual Education Program (IEP) process. To many parents that initial experience can often determine the long term relationship they will have with the school district.

**Statement from “A Parent’s Guide to Special Education,” a joint publication of The Federation for Children with Special Needs and the Massachusetts Department of Education.*

V. Findings:

Specific Findings:

Through the review process, it was apparent that the school administration is very aware of the needs of the district as a whole and the needs of its individual buildings. Although considerable effort has been put forth to develop and implement quality programming for students with disabilities, there are a number of issues that have been identified and will need to be addressed over a reasonable period of time. 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.

Table IV. Special Education Expenditures for Swansea Public Schools from FY 06-FY 07:

SWANSEA

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	-- In-District Instruction--		- Out-of-District Tuition -		Combined	Total	Special	
Fiscal	Other		Mass. Public	Mass Private	Special Ed	School	Education	state
Year	Teaching	Instructional	Schools and	and Out-of-	Expenditures	Operating	Percentage	average
			Collaboratives	State	(A+B+C+D)	Budget	of Budget	percentage
				Schools			(E as % of	
							F)	
2006	1,039,782	558,545	524,373	182,494	2,305,194	19,120,840	12.1	19.1
2007	1,503,404	657,582	404,477	179,332	2,744,795	19,702,159	13.9	19.4
2008	1,515,979	579,755	316,322	135,170	2,547,226	18,776,609	13.6	19.8
2009	1,543,773	572,955	593,388	200,517	2,910,633	18,574,466	15.7	20.1
2010	1,626,051	590,487	461,691	158,659	2,836,888	18,904,559	15.0	19.8
2011	1,741,698	535,983	362,416	167,351	2,807,448	19,554,924	14.4	19.9
2012	2,001,528	553,120	235,621	357,344	3,147,613	20,587,692	15.3	20.5
2013	1,939,752	512,575	302,023	343,545	3,097,895	21,308,452	14.5	20.9
2014	1,973,419	545,934	263,021	370,017	3,152,391	21,328,260	14.8	20.9
2015	2,074,035	557,400	247,388	464,103	3,342,926	22,310,188	15.0	21.0

- Swansea is consistently below the state average for expenditure of the special education budget versus the overall school operating budget. It is not unusual to see districts where that percentage can run as high as 25%.
- Tuition cost to collaboratives has declined since FY 2009. This would coincide with the district's initiative to develop a continuum of programs for low incidence students.

Joseph Case High School

- In 2010 the district established an initiative to develop substantially separate programs that would create a continuum of services for low incidence students with cognitive, developmental, and social skill deficits, as well as students with social/emotional issues. This initiative was necessitated by the number of students who were placed in out of district programs. At that point there were fifty students educated outside of the district in predominantly collaborative and private day school programs. The initiative has been very successful. Currently there are eleven students out of district. It is important to note that three of these students are in group homes operated by the Steven's School. The district is programmatically responsible for these students. Their LEA is financially responsible. Six of the students in the ARCH programs had previously been in collaborative programs.

- There are two ARCH programs. One program services students from ages of fourteen to eighteen. The curriculum is highly modified to meet the specific needs of the students. The focus is obtaining skills in functional academics, pre-vocational and vocational skills, social skills, daily living skills and adaptive physical education. Students participate in the MCAS or MCAS Alt based on their ability. The transitional phase of ARCH is for students who will remain in the program upon reaching the age of twenty-two. The focus in this program is to prepare students for post-secondary life. Students will continue to receive instruction in ELA and math, but will have more exposure to community experiences, supported job employment and job shadowing. This is the first year for the ARCH transitional program.
- Both programs are next to each other, allowing the ability to share staff. There is also a small kitchen to conduct culinary activities. Having access to a larger kitchen area would provide more opportunities to enhance culinary skills.
- The district has been fortunate to hire special education teachers and paraprofessionals who have had extensive experience working in intensive day and residential programs. This experience has enhanced the quality of programs by incorporating many of the methods and philosophies of their prior programs.
- Transitioning many of the students from more restrictive placements has impacted the structure, entrance criteria and design of the substantially separate programs throughout the district. Students who had previously been eligible for a more restrictive program are in many cases no longer appropriate because of the severity of need many of the current students exhibit. This often creates a challenge for the home school to develop a program that allows the student to make effective progress.
- The district provides a continuum of partial substantially separate programs in the areas of ELA and math for students with specific learning disabilities. These programs begin at E.S. Brown Elementary School (grade 3-5) and continue through the junior and senior high schools. A majority of the special education teachers assigned to these programs are dual certified. In many cases students first identified at the elementary level will continue in this substantially separate track through high school. An ELA (substantially separate) and history class were observed. The ELA special education teacher had selected literature that aligned with grade level curriculum but was adapted to student ability level. Although the teacher provided an extensive overview and context for the story, it was challenging to keep students fully engaged. The history class had only two students who were finishing independent projects. An academic support class provided instruction in the area of geometry, engaging students through the use of an overhead projector.
- Case High School Alternative Center for Education (CACE) operates as an alternative “school within a school,” servicing students with social/emotional as well as academic difficulties. The program is staffed with two special education teachers, two paraprofessionals, and a full time school adjustment counselor (SAC). The physical space for the program provides opportunities for individual instruction, areas for student who are experiencing issues with regulation, and an office for the SAC. Each teacher is responsible for two core academic subjects. The program is designed to have three phases that students work towards. Each phase provides more privileges as the students strive for a lesser restrictive environment.
- The staff exhibit a great deal of collegiality and empathy for the students. They have established a level of trust that students respect and respond to. The students are engaged and appear comfortable in the program. In fact some students prefer staying in the program where they have met with success even though they have earned the opportunity to transition into the school community.

- There is a weekly staff meeting to discuss students that involves program staff, the special education director, general education representatives and school administration.
- Both teachers actively seek out subject department heads and other core academic teachers to stay current with curriculum. General education teachers are invited to the program as well as students from CACE having opportunities to attend mainstream academics.

Joseph Case Junior High School

- The ARCH program at Case Junior High School is similar to the high school ARCH program. The focus is to develop prevocational skills and provide academic support utilizing a modified curriculum. Students are integrated into many of the school community activities, field trips, as well as participating in special subject areas such as art, drama club and physical education. Support from an occupational therapist is provided in the area of technology. One of the paraprofessionals is also certified in applied behavior analysis (ABA).
- There are currently nine students in the program with a special education teacher and three paraprofessionals. The census is expected to be eleven for the next school year (2017-2018). There are questions of whether the size of the classroom can accommodate that many students.
- During the observation students were researching Star War characters (it was Star Wars Day throughout the school) on iPads utilizing graphic organizers. Students converted information from the organizers to develop a paragraph.
- A color coded behavior chart was posted in the room to reinforce appropriate behaviors. There is also a break room that students can use for self-regulation.
- The substantially separate ELA and math classroom services students in grades six through eight who have significant specific learning disabilities. On the day of the observation, the special education teacher assigned to the program was not available. The paraprofessional was very capable of managing the class. Instruction was rigorous and students were engaged. The lesson was multi-sensory, requiring students to write about an event in their lives and design a life map while incorporating figurative language.
- The co-taught seventh grade ELA class services four students. Two students were on IEPs and the other two students were classified as at risk. Several times during the interview process with both district staff and parents the term “at risk” was mentioned. It was not clear whether there was criteria to determine how ‘at risk’ is defined. The special education teacher was also not available that day. A substitute was in the class, but was not engaged with the lesson. The general education teacher conducted a history lesson utilizing the SMART board involving students correcting grammar.
- The sixth grade academic support teacher spends half of the day co-teaching math, English, and science. Common planning time is available only for math. She is the liaison for nine students. They have been successful developing what appears to be a parallel co-teaching model, when co-teachers instruct different groups of students at the same time in the classroom.
- The Joseph Case Junior High School Alternative Center for Education (JACE) is in its second year of existence. Prior to that it was a South Coast Educational Collaborative program. There are seven

students in the program. A majority of the students access general education classrooms for portions of the day. The teacher is invited to all transition meetings for students entering from the elementary program and students going to the high school CACE program.

- Extensive efforts are made by the building administration to ensure that classroom accommodations are exhausted prior to considering eligibility for students to enter the program.

J.G. Luther School

- The Luther Elementary School Alternative Center for Education program (LACE) is housed at Luther Elementary School (grades 3-5). The lead teacher of the program was co-teaching in a fifth grade social studies class. It appeared that the two were utilizing a supportive co-teaching model in which one teacher takes the lead instructional role and the special education teacher taking the supportive role provides assistance and may elaborate on a point in the lecture. There were two students from the LACE program in the class.
- There are two Developmental Support Programs (DSP) at the elementary level. The K-2 program is housed at the Hoyle School. The grades 3-5 program are at Luther. The programs are part of a continuum of services for students with developmental and cognitive disabilities. They are vertically aligned with the junior and senior high school ARCH programs. The curriculum is aligned with the frameworks. Instruction in the Luther DSP was multi-sensory.
- There is one other special education teacher in the building who services students in the general classroom setting as well as pull-out in the areas of ELA and math. She is co-teaching ELA utilizing a Readers Workshop model.
- The school adjustment counselor (SAC) services Hoyle and Luther schools, primarily working with students in the substantially separate programs. There are currently twenty-three students on IEPs who receive support in social skills, issues related to anxiety and coping skills. General education teachers work hard to accommodate students who exhibit emotional difficulties. Several teachers have incorporated a “Take a Break” desk where a student can benefit from sensory manipulatives to help with their regulation.
- Luther has implemented an intervention block to support students who are experiencing academic difficulty based on classroom observations, and informal assessments.

Gardner Elementary School

- There is one special education teacher at GES who services students primarily within the classroom setting. During the observation the special education teacher was working with three students at a table in the back of the classroom on a modified math lesson.
- Last school year two retired teachers were utilized to provide interventions supporting students who were at risk. This year a Title I instructor provides intervention. There are also two reading specialists who also service students on IEPs.
- A concern that was expressed several times throughout the interview process related to students who were not eligible for substantially separate programs but required more services than the school resources could provide. Bringing students back from out of district programs created different

eligibility criteria. This has left a gap in the continuum of services for students who were previously eligible for substantially separate programs. This has particularly impacted smaller schools in the district such as Gardner who only has one special education teacher.

M.G. Hoyle Elementary School

- There are five early childhood programs housed at HES. There is one full-day Pre-K integrated classroom. Two half-day Pre-K classrooms (AM & PM sessions). One self-contained Pre-K classroom for students with significant developmental disabilities. There is also one self-contained K-2 DSP classroom that also provides services for students with developmental disabilities.
- The preschool programs offer a diverse continuum of services to accommodate a range of disabilities. There is fluidity between programs that offers the ability to transition students between programs based on their ability to make effective progress. A majority of the students in the five early childhood programs are autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In fact the district has a significantly higher percentage of student diagnosed as ASD compared to the state average. The state average is 8.1% while the average for Swansea is 15.8%.
- A majority of the student census in the early childhood programs transition from early intervention.
- Early childhood programs have access to a board certified behavior analyst (BCBA) through the South Coast Educational Collaborative.
- The K-2 DSP program currently has six students with one special education teacher and three paraprofessionals. Instruction was small group and individual in separate areas in the room to limit distractions. Curriculum was significantly modified to align with the frameworks.
- There was one other special education teacher who services students within the classroom setting as well as pull-out services in the areas of ELA and math. During the observation she co-taught a math class with twelve general and special education students in the resource room. The lesson was interactive and also involved students working in teams.
- The district employs one speech/language therapist and two speech assistants; (another assistant will be added in 2017-2018). There is one occupational therapist and one .8 FTE certified occupational therapy assistant (COTA). Physical therapy is contracted through the collaborative. Speech and OT assistants work under the supervision of the speech/language and occupational therapists. The two therapists also conduct all of the initial evaluations and reevaluations.
- The speech and occupational therapists both conduct short term 10-12 week sessions at the kindergarten level for students experiencing difficulty in communication and fine motor. These sessions, with parent permission, assist in determining whether students have a disability or if the issue is developmental in nature.
- Concern was raised by the speech language therapist as well as several parents about the use of only one diagnostic tool, Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF), to determine eligibility for speech/language services.
- Although the district has transitioned students with significant needs from out of district programs, there has not been an increase in speech and occupational therapy services.

E.B. Brown Elementary School

- There are two special education teachers at BES. One teacher services students primarily in the classroom setting. The other special education teacher provides support for ELA and math in a substantially separate classroom.
- The co-taught third grade classroom was conducting morning meeting. The general education teacher led the meeting. The special education teacher introduced an ELA lesson that included a graphic organizer. The complementary co-teaching approach is when a co-teacher does an activity to enhance the instruction provided by the other co-teacher.
- The observation of the substantially separate program included five fourth grade students working on geometry. Instruction was multi-sensory, employing white boards, an overhead projector and had students cutting out different triangles.
- The substantially separate teacher is dual certified. The teacher spoke of the challenges having to differentiate curriculum for ELA and math for three different grade levels. There are limited opportunities to meet with general education teachers to discuss subject areas and how it is presented in the classroom.

Parent Concerns

As part of the process for developing a format for the program evaluation, great effort went into ensuring that there were multiple opportunities for parent input. There were three focus groups scheduled during the onsite component of the program evaluation. The following concerns were selected to represent common issues expressed by parents. Twenty-four parents participated in three focus groups. Representatives from the SPAC attended all three of the focus groups.

- There were multiple issues expressed related to communication between parents and the school district which has led to mistrust and adversity.
- Parents felt there was not adequate notification informing parents of the opportunity to meet as part of the program evaluations. Parents also felt excluded because of the time of day the groups were held as well as not having enough lead time to make arrangements to attend.
- Several parents felt that communication between school and home was insufficient. Because many of the students have difficulty with communication, parents lacked consistent knowledge of what their child's day encompassed. In one case a student came off the bus with an injury the parent was not made aware of.
- There was frustration receiving information through the school. Parents were not made aware that a service provider had been absent for an extended time.
- Compliance with timelines related to receiving IEPs and the reevaluation process in a timely manner was expressed. In some cases months expired before parents received a proposed IEP.
- Several of the parents were relatively new to the community and had children placed in early childhood programs. There was concern that students were not more involved with general education classrooms,

which limited their contact with peer models. Programs in general lacked consistent access to technology that could support students with significant communication deficits. It was felt that in general staff needed more training with applied behavior analysis (ABA).

- Parents lack an understanding of extended year services (ESY). Several felt that the burden of proof for eligibility appeared to be their responsibility.
- Related service providers were not invited to IEP meetings. For parents who have children with significant disabilities in the area(s) of communication and motor activities, this was very concerning.
- There are limited supports for students with issues related to anxiety. General education teachers lack an understanding of how to accommodate students within the classroom who experience anxiety.
- There is a poor understanding of learning disabilities and dyslexia. There are limited resources and training for phonetic based instruction.
- There was a consistent theme related to the lack of ongoing professional development for special education staff.
- For some parents, assessment information was not available prior to the Team meeting, leaving them unprepared to fully participate in the meeting.
- The transition process from early intervention to preschool is not proactive and not always a positive experience as parents enter the school district.
- Concern was expressed that there are low expectations for students on IEPs and that quantitative data is lacking to document progress. In some cases, IEP goals remained the same even though bench marks were obtained.

VI. Recommendations:

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

There will be a need for the stakeholders to come together and develop an action plan 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.

1) The district should consider phasing out the substantially separate services on the English and Mathematics continuum of programs and developing a co-teaching model of instruction.

Explanation:

- Once students are placed in substantially separate programs it often becomes a track they stay in throughout their education experience, which, in many cases, will limit their ability to successfully reintegrate into the mainstream.
- The district's initiative to hire only dual certified special educators will enhance the opportunity to develop an effective co-teaching model. In fact, through interviews and observations, it was apparent that special education staff exhibited content knowledge in the areas of ELA and math.
- Roles and responsibilities of staff members involved with the co-teaching model should be clearly delineated.
- The district does not meet the state target for providing more inclusive opportunities. DESE data indicates that only 55.5% of the special education students in the district spend more than 80% of their time in general education classrooms. The state is 61.9% of special education students.
- Creating an effective co-teaching model increases the schools' capacity to service the students that are currently serviced in the substantially separate programs in a less restrictive environment.
- Transitioning to a co-teaching model may provide more support for students who have been identified as requiring more services than school staff can provide.
- To properly operate the co-teaching and in-classroom instructional support models, there needs to be a clear, concise, and agreed upon statement that stresses the purpose and intent of these two separate models of instruction.

- Professional development needs to be provided and ongoing for those engaged in the co-teaching model. The professional development needs to be planned for an initial group of staff members, comprised of general and special education teachers who truly understand the benefits of the model.
- The training needs to be ongoing and have a follow-up component to the initial training that involves on-site coaching.
- The descriptors need to incorporate evidence-based best practices and reflect the positive components of current practices at the secondary level.
- The descriptors need to indicate which model or models of instruction will be utilized and when they will be utilized. The four models commonly referred to are Supportive Teaching, Parallel Teaching, Complementary Teaching and Team Teaching. A resource reference is [A Guide to Co-Teaching: Practical Tips for Facilitating Student Learning](#). R. Villa, J. Townsend & A. Nevin. Crown Press, California. Another resource is [Co-Teaching, a Handbook for Creating and Sustaining Effective Classroom Partnerships in Inclusive Schools](#). Marilyn Friend, Greensboro, NC 27455-2590, www.coteach.com.
- Many districts are gradually eliminating the inclusion model of support and are moving toward the co-teaching model of instruction. This is a step that the district may want to explore in order to reduce confusion over the two models. This change has enabled districts to expand the roles of the two collaborating teachers and their impact on instruction.

2) Should the district move to a more effective co-teaching model, an operating manual that addresses all aspects and elements of the co-teaching model will need to be developed.

Explanation:

- An operating manual provides guidelines with respect to grading; homework assignments; examples of curriculum and instructional accommodation; sample behavioral intervention strategies; types of shared teaching activities that can be conducted; effective usage of common planning time; suggested strategies for problem solving; professional development trainings, etc.
- So that confusion between and among teachers is minimized or eliminated, the following need to be developed: sample test forms, progress reporting forms, suggested systems of communication, and the “how,” “when,” “where,” and “who” statements.
- The teachers, with administrative assistance and oversight, should develop this operating manual. This can be accomplished through a study group or a summer workshop activity.
- The reference guides that were listed in the previous recommendation can be of assistance with the development of a co-teaching manual.

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

Explanation:

- Based on previous program evaluations, it has been observed that co-teaching classes have a tendency to become special education self-contained classes. It has not been unusual to see a 50/50 ratio.
- Current research indicates that student ratios in co-teaching classes should be approximately two-thirds general education students to one-third special education students. However, the ratio certainly can vary slightly based on the type of needs (intensity) of the clustered group of students within a section.
- Should the number of co-teaching classes be expanded throughout the district, greater consideration must be given to matching students with “like needs” as they are clustered together into co-teaching sections. These groupings should have similar needs so that the instructional methodology presented by the collaborating teachers is relevant to the students’ needs. One structural model that has been observed is the designation of at least one content class at each grade level at the secondary level. An expansion of this example can occur as more staff members become interested in participating in the model. As more special education instructors decide to participate in the co-teaching model, the practice of pull-out time for special needs students will be reduced.
- Consideration has to be given to the learning styles of the students and the teaching styles of the co-teachers. Along with clustering students by needs, pairing teachers to the students is essential to make the model more effective with regards to student progress.

4) In order to ensure that the co-teaching model is effective, close consideration should be given to the individual skills and effectiveness of the special education staff.

Explanation:

- Special education teachers should be selected to provide support based on their knowledge of the curriculum and content area. Special education teachers who have good knowledge of the curriculum should be utilized in these roles.
- Successful co-teaching models will take time to evolve and develop as teachers begin to feel more comfortable with the concept and have an opportunity to spend planning time together. In order to develop continuity, it would be beneficial for the general and special education teachers to be committed to work together for several years.
- Some classes will not require a co-teacher. This is based on the ability of the general education teacher to differentiate instruction, provide organizational strategies, and incorporate accommodations.
- Paraprofessionals can also be utilized in a co-teaching model. It was evident during an observation at the junior high school that a paraprofessional exhibited knowledge of the curriculum and was a capable instructor.

5) An effective co-teaching model will require clear and explicit understanding of each teacher's role and responsibilities.

Explanation:

- Special education teachers have many responsibilities to ensure compliance with regulations and procedures. Adequate time should be built into each teacher's schedule to ensure that there is not a conflict with his/her in-class responsibilities.
- It is important that support in the classroom is based on the academic needs of the students. In some cases, the general education teacher may not require additional support if this individual is capable of implementing required accommodations and ensuring access for all students.
- As the co-teaching model evolves, it will improve the utilization of special education staff.

6) The district should consider transitioning from the current Teacher Assistance Team (TAT) process to develop and implement a Response to Intervention (RtI) process. The final product should be consistent at all of the district's schools.

Explanation:

- One of the consistent themes throughout the interview process was the systematic lack of evidence-based data being used to make student oriented decisions. With the increasing demand for accountability and progress monitoring, the district will need to establish a process that is a research-based, logical, and a consistent model that can be used to make educational decisions for all students.
- The RtI problem-solving model is a systematic approach that reviews student strengths and needs, identifies scientifically based interventions, frequently collects data to monitor student progress, and evaluates the effectiveness of the interventions implemented with the student. Problem-solving is a model that is used, as the first means, to solve student difficulties within the general education classrooms. If problem-solving interventions are not successful in general education classrooms, the cycle of selecting interventions and collecting data is repeated with the assistance of the Problem Solving Team.
- The purpose of the problem-solving process is to assist the classroom teacher and parent(s)/guardian(s) in designing and selecting strategies for improving student academic and/or behavioral performance. The intent is to develop academic and behavioral intervention strategies that have a high probability of success. A structure is provided for addressing the academic and/or behavioral concerns identified by teachers or parents. A problem-solving process requires full collaboration among a team of professionals, along with parents, to identify a specific measurable outcome, and to design research-based interventions that address the concerns. The system must integrate the use of data, both to guide the development of effective interventions and to frequent the monitoring of a student's progress. The process includes an assurance that interventions are implemented with fidelity. Family engagement in the process is vital to guarantee that all information which might impact success is considered.
- The RtI process is similar to the pre-referral process. Many consider the RtI process to be more comprehensive in scope and more grounded in evidence-based best practices. These two approaches could be wedded so that school-based personnel have the "best of the two" to assist them in formulating

instructional and behavioral interventions for assisting students who exhibit difficulties in learning and self-regulation.

- Successful implementation of the RtI process should establish better criteria for eligibility, and may be helpful with decisions related to ESY services.
- One of the recommendations to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education from the **Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts** study was related to RtI.

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should promote adoption of a Response to Intervention (RtI) model in kindergarten through grade three to promote early literacy development.

Response to Intervention, when implemented with fidelity, has strong research support as a vehicle to improve early reading development for struggling readers and an improved means to identify students who may have a more intractable reading disability such as dyslexia. We believe that a more focused effort on early reading such as RtI might be helpful in promoting better literacy, overall, and reduce inappropriate referrals to special education.

7) Consistent effort should be established to create a forum to improve communication with parents of special needs students.

Explanation:

- There was a great deal of concern throughout the parent focus groups related to their lack of understanding of special education services, processes and procedures. This concern has led to, in many cases, a lack of trust with the school district. The Special Education Parents Advisory Council (SPAC) is in the process of being reestablished after several years of being inactive. This is an opportunity to begin open dialog between parents and the district.
- A consistent theme throughout the interview/focus group process is concerns related to communication, compliance issues and knowledge of what resources are available.
- Many of the parents that attended the focus groups had children in the early childhood programs (Pre K-grade 2). Not only were they new to the special education process, several were also new to the district. It can be an overwhelming task for parents to navigate a complex and challenging road to special education. It is important to develop a positive early relationship with a cohort of parents you will work with long term. In many cases that relationship will last until their child transitions to post-secondary life. In that regard, efforts should be made to meet at least monthly, specifically with parents in early childhood programs. It will be an opportunity to inform, promote open dialog, and have staff provide training in their specific disciplines.
- Because there were several concerns raised about the elementary developmentally supportive program (K-2) at Hoyle, it may be helpful to contract with an independent consultant with expertise in program development for autistic spectrum disordered students to observe and support the program.

8) There needs to be clear and concise entrance and exit criteria in place for determining eligibility for health impairments.

Explanation:

- A health impairment disability is one of the most commonly misidentified.

Nearly two out of three Massachusetts students with a disability are identified as belonging in one of three categories: specific learning disability, communication, or other health impairments. (Dr. Thomas Hehir report commissioned by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education)

- Based on data provided by district administration in 2016, Swansea's percentage of students identified with Health impairments was 17.0 % compared to the state average of 9.4%. This is a significant discrepancy which would indicate that there is a systemic lack of understanding on what constitutes a health impairment disability. The culprit is usually the over-identification of students in the ADD and ADHD disabilities.
- Entrance and exit criteria that are based on evidence-based practice, current research, and a determination that the student is not making effective educational progress for his/her age need to be in place.
- Professional development needs to be provided to review/reeducate staff on the components of the Health Impairment Eligibility Requirements that are required as part of the IEP eligibility process.

Health Impairment-A chronic or acute health problem such that physiological capacity to function is significantly limited or impaired and results in one or more of the following: limited strength, vitality or alertness including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli resulting in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment. The term shall include health impairments due to asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, and sickle cell anemia if such health impairments adversely affect a student's educational performance.

VII. Summary:

The Superintendent of Schools from Swansea Public Schools requested that James A. Shillinglaw conduct an extensive onsite review of the district's special education programs. The purpose of the review was to assist the administration and the school district in determining the effectiveness of current programs. The review process identified several needs to be considered and provided recommendations for strategies to improve programs.

Through the review of documentation, onsite visits, and one-on-one interviews, data was collected to formulate the Findings and Recommendations sections of this report.

The findings and recommendations have been presented and supported with explanations to assist the administration and school-based personnel in formulating an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective programming for special needs students.

