

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A report of the Classical Program Review of Special Education Programs and Services Montgomery County Public Schools

The Study

In the fall of 1997 then superintendent Paul L. Vance proposed a review of Montgomery County Public Schools' (MCPS) special education programs and services. Its purpose was to do an "analysis of present situations, past trends, and future projections involving relevant laws, regulations, and policies; and characteristics of the program including services offered, budgeted dollars, personnel involved, and students." The Montgomery County Board of Education passed a resolution, and a team of consultants from the University of Maryland was engaged to design and conduct the review with assistance from selected MCPS personnel and other individuals, including parents.

The study was conducted in three phases during the 1998-99 school year, beginning in the fall to frame critical areas to be examined and questions to be addressed. Information was obtained through:

- Three focus group meetings with parents of special education students and a meeting with the Special Education Advisory Committee
- A meeting with the Education Committee of the Montgomery County Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)
- A meeting with the MCAASP Special Education Committee
- Visitations to 11 schools, including Mark Twain and the Regional Institute for Children and Adolescents (RICA)
- Interviews with 33 individual teachers
- A meeting with the Montgomery County Education Association Special Education Committee
- Interviews with 8 principals, 4 speech and language specialists, 4 guidance counselors, 9 psychologists, and 15 central office individuals or program directors
- Review and analyses of existing MCPS reports/documents/data regarding programs, services, staff, and budgeting

In addition to these activities, the MCPS Department of Educational Accountability (DEA) conducted two surveys. One survey was conducted regarding the perceptions of parents who had children in special education programs during the 1998-99 school year. The sample consisted of 2,929 parents of children representing all of the 11 disability categories.

A second sampling consisted of a telephone survey of 266 households of parents who had filed for any one of four special education proceedings—administrative review, mediation only, mediation and due-process hearing, and only due- process hearing. Survey results were based on 83 percent of those that completed the survey.

Focus Areas

Eight overall areas emerged as the most salient to study. It was determined that compliance issues would not be addressed since monitoring was the responsibility of the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE). Additionally, it was determined that only programs and services for special education students from kindergarten to age 21 would be examined (omitting toddler and preschool programs).

The specific areas that were investigated are: characteristics of students and procedures for identifying; placement; performance; staffing; transition services; parent satisfaction; budget allocations; and organization. In summary form, here are synopses of the areas that were scrutinized, along with observations and conclusions.

Student Characteristics

At the time of this study, MCPS was serving 15,891 students, ages 3-21, in its special education program. This was broken down as follows: 0.3 percent American Indian, 5.2 percent Asian, 26.8 percent African American, 52.9 percent white, and 14.8 percent Hispanic. About two-thirds were male.

A dominant issue among student characteristics was the apparent disproportionate representation of African Americans coded with Mild Mental Retardation (MMR), Specific Learning Disability, or Emotional Disabilities (ED). African American students accounted for 20.9 of the total school population. They accounted for larger percentages in these three special education categories, however. It was an observation among some teachers and administrators that in some instances special education was the only supplemental resource available to students who experience academic or behavioral difficulties and may be a factor in the overrepresentation of African American students in those three categories.

There also were indications that the percentage of Hispanic students, who represent 14.2 percent of the MCPS population, would be disproportionately identified as SLD, gaining two percentage points in just two years. There were further reports that at secondary school levels Hispanic students were being re-coded and placed in Fundamental Life Skills (FLS) classes at increasing rates.

MCPS has several initiatives underway to respond to the above situations but needs to commit additional resources. This is especially true in the general education setting where it was perceived that some principals and teachers do not have the training or resources to deal appropriately with students who are either racially or culturally diverse.

Programs and Placements

The latest amendments to the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) make it very clear that placement decisions regarding students “must be individually determined on the basis of each child’s abilities and needs, and not solely on factors such as category of disability, significance of disability, availability of special education and related services....”

Currently, MCPS has 37 program types for special education students that provide Intensity I-V services. Included are resource rooms, special classes, and special schools. Specific types of classes or programs have been developed for different categories of students.

The raw data showed that last December there were 15,891 students in special education. This represented 12.4 percent of the total MCPS student body. Of this total, 7,088 (45%) were receiving Intensity IV-V services (as compared to a state average of 35 percent). The remaining 8,803 students (55%), received Intensity I services (indirect services, consultation only), Intensity II (up to 5 hours of special education and related services per week), and Intensity III (between 6 and 15 hours of related special education and related services per week). In addition, African-American students received disproportionately fewer Intensity I-III services and tended to be placed in special classes.

In the last few years MCPS has made progress toward moving special education services closer to students, if not in their neighborhood schools. For instance, two special schools have been closed altogether. In addition, there has been a significant reduction in the number of children sent to non-public locations. This population has been reduced by some 200 students, representing a significant financial savings.

MCPS has a complex system of services, intensities, and programs to serve its special students. It appeared, however, that too often placement decisions were influenced by a student’s IQ and placement was guided by how to assign a student to the “right” place, not how to bring services and supports to the student. In order to comply with IDEA, however, special education students must have broad access to the general education curriculum. And while the Department of Academic Programs has several notable initiatives in progress to achieve this, not all general education school staff members have been given the requisite training and supports to accommodate these students to permit them to profit fully from such inclusion.

Student Performance

There is not sufficient creditable data to make broad observations and conclusions at the present time. (The reauthorization of IDEA, however, will require states to report on a number of performance indicators that will enable such definitive analyses in the future.) Available current data indicated that special education students are performing significantly below their peers. This is not unique, however, because a national report showed that 30-50 percent fewer students with disabilities are meeting their state’s standardized performance standards. (Within MCPS, however, MSPSP scores for special education are among the highest of the 24 local education agencies in the state.)

Significantly, MCPS has a lower dropout rate for students with disabilities than for the general population and a high percentage of these students are receiving either a diploma or certificate of attendance comparable to students without disabilities. (Data studied by the consultants in this area, however, sometimes conflicted based upon source—MCPS, MSDE, or Office for Civil Rights.)

This is contrasted by the fact that course failures and loss of credit (LC) rates for special education students are about double those who are not disabled. Unfortunately, there also is a lack of performance indicators in such important non-academic areas as communication, social and emotional development, employment outcomes, as well as in functional academics.

MCPS should use its current data as baseline indicators from which performance goals can be established for the future.

Transition Services

Nearly half a decade before it was mandated by federal legislation, MCPS provided transition services to special education students through Transition Support Teachers (TSTs). In addition, the MCPS IEP incorporates the identification of post-secondary types of services needed and transition linkages for students exiting high school. Each high school and all special schools have a TST assigned to serve students, even though the caseload per individual sometimes may be burdensome. Intensity IV and V students receive the most comprehensive services at this time.

According to the teachers interviewed, articulation of special education students from middle to high schools is an area that needs attention and presently little is being done to address this perceived need. Also, it was reported by school personnel that there was a lack of guidelines to determine what programs and services students earning a certificate will receive.

It is also noteworthy to report that MCPS has two Transition Training for Independence programs located on the Rockville and Germantown campuses of Montgomery College. While these programs serve a small number of students (13 total students ages 19-21) they are able to provide assistance in the areas of mobility in the community and employment. Most students have jobs before they leave school and about half reportedly will be able to keep working when they transition to an adult program.

Staffing

Despite the national shortage of special education teachers, MCPS has an extraordinarily high number of certified teachers and few staff vacancies. Last December, 715 special education teachers were employed to serve students ages 6-21. Only 20 were not fully certified. (There were 36 vacant positions.) Other staff members employed during this period included 76.5 psychologists, 36.7 occupational therapists, 30 physical therapists, 218.6 speech pathologists, 3 social workers, 1 brailist, and 29.17 interpreters. In addition, MCPS funded 733.5 hours of special education instructional assistants (SEIAs)—122.25 full-time equivalent positions.

Even though staffing allocations vary across programs/class types, they are well within state guidelines. Some of the variations across programs are justified by the nature of the services provided and/or needs of particular types of students. However, there appears to be too few teachers providing Intensity I-III services, particularly at the secondary levels.

The issue of caseload appears to be the overriding problem cited by teachers, principals, and parents. For instance, some schools and some service providers have large case loads to manage and paperwork and record-keeping burdens limit the amount of direct service time. Case loads also impact heavily on the time that these personnel have to work with general education teachers who need assistance and reportedly result in less effective prevention strategies.

In this same vein, school-based resource teachers have little or no clerical support even though they are responsible for providing direct services, managing all aspects of IEPs, and implementing new IDEA requirements. Principals report that they must provide additional support to their special education teachers to enable them to manage the administrative aspects of their job. These individuals also conduct educational assessments. All of this dilutes the time spent on instruction, collaboration, and support of general education teachers.

School psychological services are almost totally restricted to conducting evaluations required for eligibility. The lack of the availability of such professionals also is perceived by some principals and teachers to hamper the EMT process and other pre-referral interventions.

Lastly, there appeared to be limited professional development resources within the special education budget. Even though the department offers a rich variety of “modules” and programs for teachers, the amount of training and support for teachers, particularly those new to the system, is of some concern to teachers and principals and to special education administration. In particular, concern voiced by many teachers and special education administrators was the need for more professional development related to making accommodations to the general education curriculum.

Parent Satisfaction

According to data obtained through the DEA survey of 2,929 parents of children in special education programs there appeared to be general satisfaction among parents with the current process, procedures, and programs in special education. Parents of special education students were more satisfied than parents of general education students about being kept informed about student progress. And, parents of elementary special education students indicated a high degree of satisfaction (90.6%) with decisions made in their child’s IEP.

Nearly 85 percent or more of the parents were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with nearly all aspects of the special education service climate. The two areas that rated lower than others were staff members informing parents on ways to help in school (81.7%), and supervision of students on buses (78.2%).

The survey also showed a high degree of commitment on the part of special education families. Nearly all respondents indicated they helped their children with homework (96.9%), and attended back-to-school nights (90.1%). Less than 70 percent of the parents, however, volunteered to help with school activities (69.4%), or attend PTA meetings (64.1%). But even these two statistics showed a higher commitment than similar data for the parents of general education students.

Parents of high school special education students were the least pleased among all parents. Nearly 67 percent were less satisfied with their child's emotional and social progress, and with special education overall (61.8%). Parents of elementary special education students were the most satisfied, with the children of middle school students falling between these two benchmarks.

A second DEA survey of 189 parent households who filed for one of the four special education proceedings showed that about 60 percent were satisfied with the outcome of their proceedings. Most parents indicated that timely decision making regarding requests for program changes and sufficient dialog between parents and school staff might have avoided the request for formal proceedings. There has been a slight reduction in the number of formal filings for proceedings and administrative reviews, suggesting that MCPS has improved its adherence to procedural guidelines and timelines.

Resource Allocation

During the study year, it appeared that MCPS allocated about 11.8 percent of its operating budget to serve 12.4 percent of the ages 3-21 population. While it is difficult to obtain a "total" cost of special education in MCPS, the percentage identified does not appear to be excessive. However, there was little consensus among those interviewed (including teachers, parents, administrators, specialists, etc.) about how much was enough.

The difficulty in determining the "special education budget" was due in part to the lack of specific inclusion of transportation costs (that were estimated to be about \$6 million a year). The staffing allocation process also did not correspond to actual program staff assignments. Parents, principals, and special education administrators reported numerous incidents of inflexible resource allocation that hampered abilities to individualize services.

The financial process appeared to be "micro-managed" by the budget office. This adherence to detailed staffing allocations fosters accountability for ensuring that funds are used precisely as budgeted, but may not be responsive to program needs and flexibility in service options. However, this issue is under study by the Special Education Personnel Process Action Team (SEPPAT). This group was given the charge to review practices related to personnel allocations as they relate to special education.

Additionally, it appears that special education has achieved some degree of cost savings through reduced litigation and a reduction in non-public placements. However, only a marginal amount of resources have been returned to special education to improve programs and services in general classrooms.

Organization

Among the issues identified was the perception among some parents, central office, school-based special education teachers, and principals that there was an ambiguous relationship between special and general education. The frequency with which this issue surfaced suggested that there may be a general climate issue regarding beliefs and perceptions about special education that cut across many aspects of the program. It appeared that special education, in essence, operates as a separate administrative and instructional program within MCPS.

In the “traditional” special education model, programs tend to be viewed as qualitatively different from mainstream general education and that students “go to” or are “placed in” such settings. In newer models, reinforced by changes in IDEA, special education is more a system of supports and services that are linked to the general education curriculum, assessments, and accountability system. This requires a school system to have a larger set of cohesive goals and a broader understanding and integration of how explicit special education goals fit into the overall MCPS administrative goals and directives for all children. This vision also requires flexible use of resources. The draft vision for *Unification of General and Special Education* addresses some of these important goals. However, there appeared to be very limited implementation of the goals at the time of the study.

The Department of Special Education is one of three within the Office of Instruction and Program Development (OIPD). There are 126.5 staff members within the department, including 5 principals, 1 assistant principal, and 15.5 clerical personnel in special schools, who support programs for 15,891 students. While the department’s placement within the overall office for curriculum and instruction is salutary, it appears that there are little or no systemwide measures or goals for special education students outside of the global goals and key results enumerated in the Success for Every Student plan. (Specific program measures, for instance, do not address students with disabilities with the exception of the reduction of the number of African American males identified for special education.)

It appears to a number of the parents interviewed, as well as several principals, that the system’s focus on “all” students meeting the same academic standards is indicative that the MCPS leadership is not willing to set additional goals or expectations for students with disabilities or to include them fully into the system.

Another perceived problem reported by those principals interviewed was the lack of a comprehensive vision for special education in MCPS that defined a general approach and expectation for how students with disabilities would be the responsibility of all schools. All principals interviewed perceived the situations to be that schools considered “friendly” to special education got more classes while others had fewer burdens.

Lastly, the issues surrounding special education in schools with higher numbers of students receiving free and reduced priced meals, ESOL, and Title I services appeared to be even more pronounced. Teachers, principals, and psychologists interviewed indicated that the need for additional academic and behavioral supports creates waiting lists for EMT interventions and

places burdens on special education teachers who bear the responsibility for conducting educational assessments. There was a reported need for more general school-based learning supports that would coordinate resources and staffing to meet the needs of these populations of students.

Recommendations

- 1.** Develop an indicator system and key performance benchmarks or goals to track special education program performance.
- 2.** Eliminate the separation of special education within the overall administration and within schools.
- 3.** Increase the capacity of general education classrooms to better support students receiving special education, as well as other students with significant learning and/or behavioral needs.
- 4.** Review the current array of special education programs and classes to reduce the sorting and placing of students and create a seamless and flexible continuum of settings and services.
- 5.** Increase age-appropriate options for all students with disabilities ages 19-21.
- 6.** Develop a curricular framework, as well as systemwide professional development, for ensuring that all students with disabilities, regardless of where they receive their education, have the opportunity to access general education curriculum and extracurricular activities.
- 7.** Address the discrepancies in staffing across classes and programs that serve students with high incidence disabilities, particularly those receiving Intensity I-III services.
- 8.** Engage in initiatives and exploration of how to reduce special education paperwork.
- 9.** Revise the process for determining staff allocations and other resources with the goal of increasing flexibility at the school level with appropriate accountability for specific program and student indicators. These include both student performance data and other processes to be identified as part of the recommended indicator system.