

LEWISVILLE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

An Evaluation of Services for Students
with Disabilities

Spring, 2013



STETSON
& ASSOCIATES, INC.

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Introduction

Like no other time in our national history, schools are being judged on the success of every single student, including students with disabilities, who historically have been exempt from stringent standards of accountability. Educating students with disabilities has shifted from a concentrated focus on deficits to achieving outcomes that result in academic success at each student's enrolled grade level. The requirements of No Child Left Behind, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and participation in statewide assessments has caused schools to critically examine the delivery of instruction and supports for students with disabilities.

"The...students, staff and community design and implement a learning organization that provides engaging, innovative experiences every day...so that ALL students enjoy thriving, productive lives in a future they create."

Lewisville ISD
Mission and Vision

The future of educational funding is uncertain, making high performance and efficient practices essential. In keeping with their stated mission and vision, the Lewisville Independent School District (Lewisville ISD) has engaged two different studies to ensure district fiscal effectiveness while preserving their record of a quality educational experience.

History and Purpose

In an effort to anticipate further reduction to educational funding, the Lewisville ISD commissioned Moak, Casey & Associates to conduct an efficiency analysis. The final report, *Staff and Budget Efficiency Analysis Study, January 2012*, contained a number of recommendations including the following: "Engage an outside consultant to conduct a program review of the Special Education Department including an examination of staffing levels and students service levels."

In Fall 2012, Stetson & Associates, Inc. was commissioned to address this specific recommendation. This special education program evaluation report was developed with the active participation and input of Lewisville ISD central office administrators, school administrators, teachers, support service providers, and parents of students with disabilities. Lewisville ISD is commended for taking positive steps to assure effective and equitable practices in its programs and schools. By evaluating the special education program, the district has taken an impressive step toward excellence and continuous improvement for all students.

Guiding Principles

Several principles guided our review of special education services. First, students with disabilities should be viewed as general education students who require some level of additional support in order to be successful. Decisions regarding special education supports required by a student today will likely change several times during his school career.

Second, it is no longer possible, either philosophically or practically, to separate an evaluation of services for students with disabilities from a review of the quality of instructional services provided to *all* students. Special education services are support services, so it is necessary to examine the general education instructional delivery system for all students and the problem solving process for any student who experiences difficulty in school.

Third, this report is not a compliance review. Rather, it is based on a review of services for students with disabilities within the context of highly effective, research-based practices. While compliance issues, when noted, may be discussed in this report, the evaluation process requested and provided did not include a folder review or other aspects of a traditional compliance review.

Finally, this report was guided by the conviction that equity in service delivery is a necessary precondition for excellence within a school district. It is not possible for schools to achieve recognition for excellence unless success is pursued and achieved for all students within the district.

Evaluation Methods

An evaluation of services provided to students with disabilities in Lewisville ISD required an examination of quantitative and qualitative data from a variety of sources. Stetson and Associates, Inc. selected six basic methodologies, including:

- Structured interviews and classroom observations on each campus;
- Structured interviews with key central office personnel,
- Focus group sessions for multiple stakeholders, including elementary and secondary principals, general education teachers, special education teachers, speech and language pathologists, appraisal staff, paraeducators and additional related services staff;
- A survey of faculty members' perceptions of the services provided to students with disabilities in Lewisville ISD;
- A survey of parent perceptions of Lewisville ISD services for students with disabilities; and,
- A review of comparable district statistics pertaining to the enrollment of students with disabilities, performance on assessments, staffing for students with disabilities, and budget and financial information.

The data collection instruments and surveys are provided in Appendix A. The following is a brief description of the methodologies of the Lewisville ISD evaluation of services for students with disabilities.

Structured Interviews and Classroom Observations. Visits were made to 23 campuses during the month of November 2012 for the purpose of conducting brief interviews with campus principals, key teaching personnel and for conducting structured observations of classrooms in which students with disabilities receive services. There are numerous variables that impact staffing needs and resource utilization that can only be observed in the classroom setting.

Both special education classrooms and inclusive general education classrooms were visited and a structured observation guide was used to document instructional practices and student and staffing numbers. These classroom visits provided the opportunity for evaluators to observe the range of students served and various aspects of instructional delivery from the teacher's perspective. The classroom observation tool developed by Stetson and Associates, Inc. for use in the Lewisville ISD and several other client districts has been recognized in presentations at the state and national levels. Refer to Appendix A for copies of the materials used to collect data from the campus visits.

Interviews with Key Central Office Personnel. The lead evaluator conducted structured interviews with numerous district-level staff, including the Superintendent of Lewisville ISD and leaders from the departments of Curriculum and Instruction, Human Resources, and Special Education. The following questions were asked of each interviewee:

1. What is your role in the district? How does this role interface with the responsibility to provide services to students with disabilities? In what ways do you directly collaborate with/support the department of special education?
2. As you consider services provided to Lewisville ISD's students with disabilities, what aspects of these services are successful?
3. What aspects of these services do you believe need to be improved?
4. Given the national focus on services for students with disabilities and the organization dynamics of Lewisville ISD, what will be necessary to enhance shared ownership of students with disabilities?

Focus Groups. The focus group process is used for a variety of purposes, including group brainstorming, planning, and as a mechanism for gathering participant responses to questions posed for program review and evaluation. This approach is widely used today in business and education applications and has a growing reputation as a method for gaining critical information for those most affected by the questions of the day (Greenbaum, 1998; Krueger, 1994). The focus group process was originally used to identify and quantify qualitative data within the realm of sociological research. The process requires the evaluator to pose the same questions to a variety of respondent groups. The information is then analyzed to determine common themes and identify areas requiring further study throughout the evaluation process. It is important to note that comments received from focus group participants reflect their personal perceptions and/or experiences. They must be analyzed and interpreted carefully and verified with observable and/or quantifiable data.

In November 2012, ten focus group sessions were conducted in Lewisville ISD. Each session was approximately 90 minutes in duration and followed the same sequence. After an introduction of the focus group as a critical aspect of the evaluation process, the participants were requested to respond to two questions:

1. What is working with regard to services for students with disabilities in Lewisville ISD?
2. What is not working with regard to services for students with disabilities in Lewisville ISD?

The participants in these meetings generated responses that were later analyzed and quantified. Refer to Appendix B for responses from each focus group session. The list of focus group sessions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus Groups by Category

Elementary Special Education Teachers	Elementary Principals
Secondary Principals	Speech Pathologists
Secondary General Education Teachers	Elementary General Education Teachers
Paraeducators	Secondary Special Education Teachers
Appraisal Staff (Diagnosticians and Licensed Specialists in School Psychology)	Itinerant Staff, OT/PT, APE, Counselors, Music Therapist, Interventionist, Deaf Education, Transition, Homebound and In-House Training

It is important to note that although invited by the Department of Human Resources, no parents attended the focus group session scheduled by Lewisville ISD.

Faculty Survey. Thirty-nine items were included in the survey disseminated to all campus administrators, teachers, paraeducators and support staff in the district. These participants also had the opportunity to add comments and/or suggestions for improving services for students with disabilities and name positive aspects of the program and services currently provided. See Table 2 for demographics of completed faculty surveys by position. The district received 1,444 responses (of approximately 4,400 faculty members offered the survey) for a 32.8% return rate – an excellent return rate! This return rate represents a statistically significant sample.

This faculty survey was disseminated to Lewisville ISD staff through a link that directed respondents to the survey hosted on the Stetson and Associates, Inc. website. The responses were downloaded and analyzed using robust statistical analysis software. The results of this survey are reported throughout this document as an expansion of the critical issues addressed per evaluation objective.

Table 2. Demographics of Returned Faculty Surveys

Respondent Group	# of Completed Surveys
Administrator	89
Counselor/LSSP	54
Diagnostician/LSSP	26
General Education Teacher	749
Paraeducator	200
Related Service	50
Special Education Facilitator	4
Special Education Teacher	245
Speech/Language Pathologist	27
Total	1,444

Refer to Appendix C for a summary of the results and disaggregated responses of the faculty survey, a summary by level of campus, a summary by position of respondent, and comments that were received in response to the open-ended questions posed in the faculty survey.

Parent Survey. A link to an online survey was distributed to parents of children receiving special education services. These surveys were disseminated to parents of students with disabilities. Stetson & Associates, Inc. received 270 survey responses.

Parents were asked to respond to statements related to their satisfaction with the quality of services provided, their opinions of the inclusion of their child in the Lewisville ISD, their participation in and perceptions of the IEP process, their opinions of their relationship with the school, and the extent to which they feel supported by the principal and central office personnel. Refer to Appendix D for a summary of the parent survey results. These results will be referred to throughout this report as they expand our understanding of each of the issues presented. Parents who responded to this survey also had the opportunity to provide additional written comments, which were categorized as they related to the goals of this evaluation.

A Review of Comparable District Statistics. This study highlights comparative data relative to services, staffing, student performance, budget and financial resources relative to the special education population. The districts utilized for comparison were selected by Lewisville ISD and included districts with similar student enrollment, demographics, and property wealth.

Program Evaluation Goals and Evaluation Questions

The overarching purpose of this evaluation was drawn from the specific recommendation cited in the Moak, Casey & Associates report referenced previously.

Following is a list of five goals that emerged from the initial district-level vision setting meeting and serve as the focus for the remainder of this report. These goals were reinforced by a thorough examination of issues specific to Lewisville ISD.

- GOAL 1. School leaders embrace shared ownership for all students, including students with disabilities, to ensure equitable access to instructional quality and full compliance with legal standards.
- GOAL 2. Teachers have the knowledge, skills, and commitment to provide highly effective instruction to all students, including students with disabilities.
- GOAL 3. Lewisville ISD provides a seamless system of supports and a delivery of services for students with disabilities that has eliminated separate, or parallel systems and reinforces the understanding that all students are general education students who are full members of the school community.
- GOAL 4. Human and capital resources are sufficient and utilized in ways that are effective, efficient and appropriate for achieving the goals of services for students with disabilities.
- Goal 5. Parents of students with disabilities are welcome partners and valued members of the school community.

Organization of this Report

Following this introduction, each of the major goals described above are addressed in sections of this report. Each section will begin with a brief overview of best practices related to that goal. Specific commendations and recommendations will be described and discussed. The final section offers conclusions and suggests organizational processes to transform the recommendations listed throughout this report into changed practice at the district and school levels.

- Theme 1. A Common Vision and Shared Responsibility for All Learners
- Theme 2. Clear and Consistent Messages
- Theme 3. Highly Effective Instruction
- Theme 4. Staffing and Scheduling that Supports Student Success
- Theme 5. Parent Satisfaction with Services for Students with Disabilities

The support for a careful examination of the current status of services for students with disabilities and for a long-range plan for continuous improvement exists in Lewisville ISD. This support is evidenced by: the request for this review of current practice; the active involvement of education staff members who participated in meetings, interviews, or observations; and, the involvement of parents of students with disabilities across the district. Lewisville ISD intends for this report to provide a launching point for future efforts to improve services for students with disabilities, their families and the community.

Theme 1: A Common Vision and Shared Responsibility for All Learners

A common vision and vocabulary regarding services for students with disabilities is an essential pre-condition for achieving strong student outcomes and for effective coordination and use of resources to achieve this result. Without a clear and consistent vision for students with disabilities, the philosophies and practices guiding service delivery will vary widely from year-to-year and school-to-school. The lack of a common vision and vocabulary results in a loss of momentum for individual students and in decreased focus across the faculty. Conversely, a shared vision can serve as a catalyst to dramatically move the organization from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Throughout Texas and the nation, students with disabilities are increasingly viewed as “our students – not your students or my students.” This sense of shared responsibility for all students is an important component of a common vision. A positive, clear, and consistent message regarding services for students with disabilities, including equal membership in the school community, must be articulated by the superintendent, administrators over general education and special education, and by each principal. The practices of inclusive education and equitable access to quality instruction have resounding support in the literature and in practice. The role of leadership is critical to creating these necessary conditions for success.

Findings

There are seven findings related to this theme.

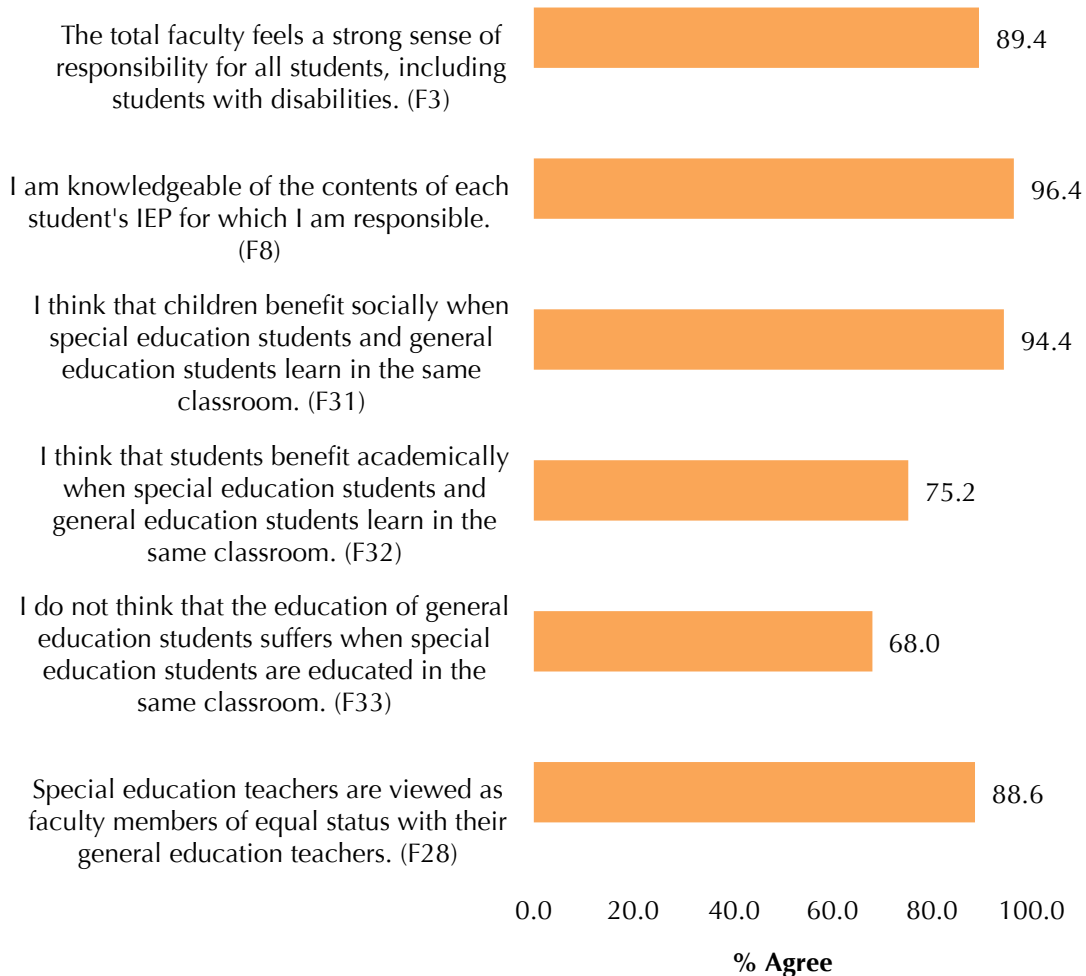
1. There is a strong commitment to provide quality services to Lewisville ISD students with disabilities on the basis of their individual needs.
2. Lewisville ISD has many quality practices that can be characterized as outstanding and worthy to serve as models within the district and for other districts as well.
3. There is a strong sense of shared responsibility across the majority (89.4%) of Lewisville ISD educators. General educators express higher agreement with this statement than special educators.
4. There is a long-standing commitment to inclusion of students with disabilities in Lewisville ISD. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) statistics reveal that Lewisville ISD exceeds the state target rate of students with disabilities spending 80% or more of their day in the general education setting. Attitudes toward the practice vary between parents and educators and from level to level.
5. While the practice of inclusion is widespread in the district and attitudes toward it are generally quite positive, there is a need for a common vision of inclusive education and quality indicators that every school should strive to achieve. This common vision will serve to achieve an appropriate level of consistency across Lewisville ISD campuses to facilitate smooth student transitions from level to level and enhance school and parent communication and goal setting.
6. With regard to compliance with state and federal rules and regulations governing services provided to students with disabilities, Lewisville ISD is in substantial

compliance as reflected by the PBMAS standards with the exception of TAKS-M (now STAAR) participation, and special education representation.

7. Of all of the districts Stetson and Associates, Inc. has visited over 25 years, Lewisville ISD has achieved the most success in creating opportunities for equal membership for students with disabilities among their typical peers. Some form of *Circle of Friends* was found on a number of the campuses visited.

The following is an expansion of these findings, including supporting data and observations.

Figure 1. Summary of Faculty Survey Responses Related to “A Common Vision and Shared Responsibility for All Learners”



Quality Services. There is a strong belief across Lewisville ISD faculty that their school provides quality services to students with disabilities. In fact, 95.2% of all faculty respondents indicated agreement with this statement. Almost ninety-five percent (94.7%)

of parents of children with a disability report they believe he or she receives quality services in Lewisville ISD. Approximately 98% of the following respondent categories indicated that students with disabilities receive quality services: administrators, diagnosticians, paraeducators, related service personnel, special education facilitators and special education teachers. This is an extraordinarily high rating. Of interest is that 11.1% of speech/language pathologists indicated they do not believe that Lewisville ISD students receive quality services. This was the only group that approached this level of disagreement.

There were a number of very positive remarks made in the focus group sessions that reinforced the notion that quality services for students with disabilities is a priority for the district. Comments such as “we are attempting to be a best practice district” and Lewisville ISD is “building a national reputation” underscore the pride associated with special education services.

Shared Responsibility for Students with Disabilities. One crucial characteristic of schools that are successful with a broad range of diverse students is shared responsibility for all learners. In the past decade this characteristic is one that is studied in every credible evaluation of quality services for students with disabilities. This is particularly important because our history in education is one of separation and segregation for students with disabilities.

In “exhaustive longitudinal studies of school success,” Newman and Wehlage (1995) concluded that successful schools share three characteristics:

1. A clear, shared purpose for all students' learning;
2. Teachers engage in collaboration to achieve this purpose; and,
3. Teachers take *collective* responsibility for student learning.

Across all positions, 89.4% of faculty survey respondents indicated “the total faculty feels a strong sense of responsibility for all students, including students with disabilities. A review of faculty survey results by position reveals a disparity between responses of general and special education staff. Administrators and general education faculty report strong agreement with this statement: administrators (97.7%), counselors/LSSPs (88.8%), and general education teachers (92.8%). Special education personnel were less positive: diagnosticians/LSSPs (69.3%), special education facilitators (75.0%) and special education teachers (79.1%). This disparity is common across other evaluations of special education services and may be explained by considering that special education staff are often in the position of integrating students with disabilities into the general education classroom and may experience some reluctance from their general education colleagues. In addition, improvements in scheduling, collaborative planning time and increased sharing of instructional roles in the general education classroom typically improve these ratings.

Commitment to Inclusive Practices. The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) statistics reveal that Lewisville ISD has a higher than state target rate of students with disabilities spending 80% or more of their day in the general education setting. Attitudes toward this practice vary between parents and educators and from level to level. While 94.6% of parents responding to the survey indicated “we think that children benefit when special education

students and general education students are educated in the same classroom,” only 75.2% of faculty members agreed with this statement. This question examined perceptions of academic benefit. In a related question about the social benefit when both general and special education students are educated together, 94.4% of faculty respondents agreed. The perception of social benefit was equally strong across all levels.

In a more direct question, faculty members were asked if they believe the education of general education students suffers when special education students are educated in the same classroom. Thirty-two percent (32%) of Lewisville ISD faculty respondents agree. This is a high percentage with the highest level of concern expressed by counselors (37.1%), general education teachers (37.1%) and paraeducators (36.6%). The group indicating the lowest level of concern was principals (10.3%).

To conclude this point, Lewisville ISD exceeds the current state standard for including students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The concerns regarding student benefit or harm may be impacted by the need to continue to improve inclusive education practices and to adjust support systems and instructional strategies for a student who experiences difficulty in the general education setting. The burden is not on the student but on the system to make appropriate adjustments. Lewisville ISD will improve these statistics by making needed adjustments to instructional delivery in some classrooms and in implementing a more systematic staffing and scheduling process. These specific points will be discussed in later chapters.

Compliance Status. The compliance status of a district is a direct reflection of the extent to which students with disabilities and their families are valued and accepted as important participants in the educational process. According to the Texas Education Agency Performance Based Monitoring System, Lewisville ISD is only slightly above the state target of 20.0 for participation of students with disabilities in the TAKS-M assessment. This rate, although not at the state targeted level, is better than the Region 11 rate and is better than six of the nine comparison districts. The district is in compliance with TAKS participation and TAKS-Alt participation and exceeds the compliance standards in these two areas.

The district exceeds the state percentage standard for enrollment of students with disabilities and identification of students with disabilities who are African American or Hispanic. However, eight of the nine comparison districts are also overrepresented in these two subgroups.

The district’s compliance with the LRE standard is impressive. For children ages three through five, Lewisville ISD is twice the state standard and is 12 points higher than the state for students ages 6-11. The district LRE rate for students ages 12-21 is very near the state standard.

Model Approaches to Social Inclusion and Belonging. One excellent measure of the extent to which a district values its commitment to students with disabilities is the attention paid to students’ social/emotional needs and their full membership in the school community. Where observed, the formalized programs designed to create authentic friendships between students with disabilities and their typical peers were outstanding. Of the schools visited, the Circle of Friends program at Briarhill Middle School was noted by one reviewer

as “the best example of inclusive services benefitting all students.” In the words of one parent, “The Circle of Friends program is amazing! It has made a very positive impact on my child. The relationships that have formed there are true friendships.”

In analyzing comments from the parent survey, it appears that while many positive examples of social inclusion and belonging exist in the district, this practice is not district-wide. Two comments illustrate parent interest in these programs and frustration when they are not available: “My child received needed support academically, but I feel there could be more support for his social development;” and, “I have requested Circle of Friends multiple times. Schools won’t discuss it.” Due to the very positive models that some Lewisville ISD schools have already developed, it would be helpful for the district to showcase these examples and encourage some version of Circle of Friends or School Buddies on every campus.

An amazing 97.7% of parents responding to the parent survey indicated students with disabilities are considered full members of the student body in his or her school. Aligned with this response, 96.7% of faculty members responded positively to the same question. These results are noteworthy and reflect positively on the climate of Lewisville ISD schools and the caring approach of Lewisville ISD educators.

Recommendations

1. Reinforce the Lewisville ISD commitment to quality services for students with disabilities. Identify those practices noted in this report, showcase each practice, and publish and publically acknowledge the quality of services.
2. Review and address the possible reasons for the disparity regarding faculty perception of shared responsibility for students with disabilities identified (general education teacher reluctance, scheduling, time for collaboration, etc.). Provide professional development and other activities to promote shared responsibility.
3. Foster current Lewisville ISD inclusive practices and improve the approach to inclusion by adopting a system-wide model that addresses a common vision, understanding and benefits, the expected instructional practices that promote inclusion, a continuum of supports, and a model for staffing and scheduling to ensure implementation.
4. Adopt a needs-based model for staffing and scheduling where each student’s curriculum and support needs are first determined by grade and content level, then assign staff to address those needs.
5. Continue to monitor and address the compliance issues of overrepresentation of students with disabilities who are African American, Hispanic and LEP. Consider training and support in the areas of cultural proficiency and culturally responsive instructional practices.

Lewisville ISD has many positive indicators of a commitment to quality services for students with disabilities. The issues cited as areas of concern are important but the positive aspects of the current services have established a strong foundation upon which these concerns may be addressed.

Theme 2: Clear and Consistent Messages

One of the most difficult challenges for school districts is the ability to disseminate clear and consistent information to multiple stakeholders. The complexity of the “business of school” has increased along with numbers of students and faculty, legal and regulatory guidelines, and accountability requirements. The need for more consistent communication from the special education department emerged from discussions with Lewisville ISD principals, teachers and ancillary staff.

Findings

Two major findings emerged as an important theme across survey comments, focus group sessions and individual interviews.

1. Messages and directions related to the provision of special education services are not consistent across the district, leading to confusion and inconsistent levels of implementation.
2. The organizational structure does not facilitate the opportunity for the special education director to communicate directly to principals as needed.

Need for Consistency in Message and Direction. The current organizational structure divides the district into three zones encompassing five feeder patterns. This decision provided more immediate responses to schools and a more personalized approach to the specific issues of each campus. In addition, the special education directors are now more familiar with individual students and their needs and can provide effective support when decisions must be reached. Six director positions were designated to provide the same level of assistance across the five feeder patterns in Lewisville ISD. This decision, which solves a number of problems, also exacerbates the challenge of ensuring clear and consistent information across the zones.

The following is a representative comment from the faculty survey regarding the need for consistency. “The main suggestion I have for improving services is to improve communication from the department when disseminating new guidelines, mandates, or just general information. Each group has a separate meeting. I see a lack of consistency in what we do because we all, for some reason, are not aware of the same information.”

Focus groups comments from appraisal staff and secondary principals revealed the following: “There are different opinions and information across zone leaders,” and, “Smaller zone meetings are good but it is difficult to get consistent information.”

One concern about the risk of inconsistent communication related to the high risk of violating a legal requirement. This is an excellent observation and yet another reason to increase efforts to enhance the level of clarity and consistency of critical information from the department of special education.

There were several positive statements regarding improved communication. One respondent commented: “There is good communication between lead teachers and supervisors. In tough situations, the directors really listened to my opinion.” A member of the appraisal staff commented, “the zone arrangement made it easier to set up meetings,

easier to collaborate and to share expertise.” Another commented, “Our issues are more focused and issue-driven within the zone arrangement.” It is well worth the effort to control for inconsistent information while employing the benefits of a more responsive organizational structure. This is not solely a special education issue but one that equally impacts all departments. The legal ramifications of inconsistent or unclear information may be more serious for special education but it can be controlled.

Need to Ensure Necessary Access to Principals for Information Dissemination. Special education is a multi-faceted, complex and ever-changing practice for students with identified needs. This complexity is largely due to a continual process of integrating federal laws, state regulations, and local policies and practices. Special education is also impacted by on-going legal decisions. These factors, in concert with the emphasis on maximizing access to general education, make it critical to connect special education administration at the central office level with curriculum and instruction and campus-based leadership/accountability.

The current district leadership structure separates curriculum and instruction from principal leadership. This may be impacting the effectiveness, management and delivery of information involving campus leadership.

While special education is integrally connected to curriculum and instruction (or teaching and learning), the special education department also needs greater involvement with principal leadership since accountability for instructional supports and services ultimately rests with the principal.

Recommendations

1. Develop a clear purpose statement for the department of special education with a brief list of expected research-based practices that should be in place across programs and services for students with disabilities.
2. Survey principals, special education team leaders, central office staff and other key groups for a list of issues/directions/policies for which confusing or conflicting information is currently provided. The process for gathering this information should be informal and require very little time or effort. Consider repeating this annually to proactively identify areas of confusion or inconsistency.
3. Involve department staff at the central office in creating a similar list and in identifying areas in which different practices are observed that negatively impact the quality of services or the degree to which the district is in compliance with rules or regulations.
4. Create a list of topics that account for requests for clarification and numerous calls to the department. Address this list in department meetings to engage in detailed discussions regarding appropriate responses to questions and the instances in which questions should be directed to the department director.
5. Work collaboratively with key department staff to create a set of clear, consistent responses in written or bulleted form for dissemination as appropriate. Date all original communications and updates.

6. Increase role clarity for members of the special education leadership team by providing a simple reference document outlining the roles and responsibilities of each supervisor.
7. Utilize the department's website to provide clear information that is easy to access about staff leadership assignments and the written clarification of key procedures related to services for students with disabilities.
8. Consider responding to the current district organizational structure for special education by eliminating the separate location for housing the leadership staff and/or increasing the level of involvement and participation of special education leaders in planning, training and information-sharing with other departments.
9. Improve the special education departmental organizational structure by addressing role clarity and systems for communication of key information.

This theme of the need for improved clarity and consistency of message or information is not atypical for departments that oversee highly complex content and regulations. In addition, it should be emphasized that assignment of a director to each of the zones actually enhances responsiveness, if not consistency, in many ways. The recommendations cited above specifically address these concerns.

Theme 3: Highly Effective Instruction

Quality instructional practice is the cornerstone of educational success. The educational systems in this country have been held to ever-increasing levels of accountability for student performance. Federal and state guidelines require some form of a consistent, objective process for determining student progress and methods for clearly identifying procedures to redirect learning for struggling students to ensure future success. One of the primary components for both initial success and targeted remediation is the identification, implementation and evaluation of effective instructional practices designed to meet the needs of learners at all levels.

This section of the report addresses school climate, instructional planning, participation of students in the general curriculum, grouping practices, appropriate use of accommodations and modifications, and the range and quality of instructional materials. Other factors include the quality of instruction in special education classrooms, the use of instructional technology and the degree to which academic learning time is used effectively. This section primarily reflects the results of an analysis of structured observations of practices in selected Lewisville ISD classrooms and contains information from focus groups and faculty survey comments.

Findings

There are numerous findings in the section on Instructional Quality.

1. The overall impression of the climate and quality of instructional services in Lewisville ISD is extremely favorable.
2. Lewisville ISD faculty members clearly understand (98.8%) it is their responsibility to use instructional accommodations for any student who will be more successful with their use. This is a positive finding as many educators continue to be confused about this requirement.
3. Lewisville ISD faculty members report an extraordinarily high use of instructional accommodations and curricular modifications for students with disabilities. Responses to every question about the use of accommodations, modifications to content, and modified grading procedures when specified in the IEP ranged from 90.9% to 98.7% agreement with each statement.
4. Actual observations of instructional practices suggest the use of instructional accommodations and curricular modifications is not as widespread as reported. One observer reported that instructional accommodations were in use in only 33 out of 64 classrooms observed. This is a missed opportunity for students with disabilities and students who are struggling to learn the content, be more successful, and learn more efficiently.
5. The general education curriculum is consistently used as the curricular framework for students with disabilities. This is also true in most settings serving students with moderate to severe disabilities. This practice is consistent with the expectation that all students with disabilities shall have access and opportunity to progress in the general education curriculum (IDEA 1997). This is a positive finding as off-grade level instructional materials are still observed in many other district programs for students with disabilities. The use of the general education curriculum for

- Lewisville ISD's students with disabilities is probably a major contributing factor in the rate of student success in the state accountability system.
6. Although co-teaching and other models of in-class support are employed in Lewisville ISD classroom, these partnerships frequently did not exhibit the full range of instructional delivery options that can be implemented when two certified teachers share the same classroom. Rather than both teachers assuming an active role in instruction as intended, the majority of instances of co-teaching observed could be characterized as "one teach - one observe" or "one-teach - one assist." This may be improved through professional development, modeling and accountable implementation monitored by school principals. It should be noted that in those classrooms where collaborative teaching was effectively used, both teachers shared instruction, used all six options for shared instructional responsibilities, worked with all students effectively and interchangeably, and served classrooms with no more than one-third of the enrollment composed of students with disabilities.
 7. Flexible grouping strategies were generally more evident at the elementary level and much less frequently observed at the secondary level. The exclusive use of whole group instruction limits student engagement, peer support models, and opportunities to more fully realize the advantages of two teachers in a general education classroom.
 8. Educational technology was used in many classrooms to support student success. The successful use, however, of educational technology varied from campus to campus. Some educators reported frustration with the time lag in receiving technical support and training. Other Lewisville ISD educators reported a high degree of satisfaction with the rich technological resources and training available to them. Efforts should be made to identify the reasons for this uneven degree of successful use of educational technology and remedy them. This represents a possible inequity of access to important resources for student success.
 9. The use of positive behavioral supports varied across classrooms in Lewisville ISD, with most teachers posting rules for behavior and maintaining appropriate classroom discipline. The observers noted several excellent examples of the use of positive behavioral supports in the Behavior Intervention Classes (BIC) visited. Behavioral point systems were in place and posted. Several positive comments regarding the quality of the district's BIC classrooms were reported in survey responses and focus group sessions.
 10. Observations of specialized support settings found consistent use of structured, targeted, fast-paced and individualized instruction.
 11. Several Lewisville ISD educators described the Focus on the Future classes for secondary level LIFE Skills students as a successful program resulting in post-school success for students.

Campus Climate. Campus leaders seem to possess a high degree of expertise, care and concern that was clearly evident. Reviewers were made to feel welcome at each campus and were treated with kindness and respect by all staff encountered. The facilities were well maintained and orderly, and offered an environment that celebrated education in a positive manner. Banners and signs celebrating students and student work were proudly displayed. Student success is perceived as a high priority in Lewisville ISD.

Collaborative Instructional Planning. A well-defined instructional planning process is essential to effective delivery of academic information. This includes quality written lesson plans that show evidence of the lesson cycle, evidence the lesson plans are aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) curriculum and, in the case of students with disabilities, match the individual students' IEPs. There must be indicators the written lesson plans are actually followed when implementing instruction within the classroom. Teachers in Lewisville ISD have access to a well-developed curriculum tied directly to the TEKS. Curricular objectives and lessons are accessible to teachers through the district website.

Because of the increased focus on access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities, the lesson planning process takes on another dimension. In planning the delivery of instruction, care should be taken to coordinate between general and special education with respect to following the general curriculum framework and ensuring access and progress for students with disabilities.

At some schools, teachers have scheduled planning time with their special education peers rather than with their general education colleagues. The time is most often reportedly utilized for "maintaining ARD paperwork – making sure it's tight." Common planning time (between general and special education) for instructional purposes is inconsistent, creating situations in which special education staff providing support to general education classrooms must do so "on the fly." This is a critical concern because it may limit the effectiveness of instructional support (teacher effectiveness) and the potential for accelerated student progress.

Teaching Methodologies by Level. In the Lewisville ISD, differences were observed in teaching strategies used in elementary schools and those applied in middle and high schools. Many more differentiated strategies were observed in elementary school classrooms including: flexible grouping, rich-activity based instruction, use of graphic organizers and manipulatives, and high interest centers. Some of the classes observed provided students with multiple ways to demonstrate their learning.

In contrast, middle school and high school classes frequently emphasized whole group instruction and lecture-driven practices. Several teachers posted assignments stating the students were to read a chapter from the textbook and then complete the questions prepared at the end of the chapter or complete a worksheet. When students work primarily from packets, worksheets or on individualized assignments without the benefit of opportunities for critical thinking and application of new skills, teachers risk loss of student engagement, academic rigor and student progress.

Limited Use of Special Education Teacher Expertise in the General Education Classroom. The most frequently observed model for in-class support at the secondary level was either one teach-one assist or one teach-one sit, in which the special education staff sat at the back of the classroom or with "their student." Additionally, the vast majority of "in-class-support" is provided by a paraeducator versus a teacher, although when a teacher was providing in-class support, there were no observable differences in their role versus a paraeducator in the general education classroom. This is a missed opportunity to lower the student-teacher ratio and increase student support by actively engaging both teachers in instructional roles. The overuse of the one teach-one assist model of co-teaching signifies

that lecture is the primary instructional technique. This clearly indicates a need for common planning time, training in collaboration, the use of strategies that differentiate instruction for students, and creating active instructional roles for two teachers in the classroom. All students were typically working on the same task, in the same manner, and within the same time frame in most classrooms observed. Instructional accommodations, curricular modifications and differentiated ways in which students could evidence their learning was generally not observed.

When collaborative teaching models are utilized, both teachers must be engaged. If they are not, an important and expensive resource is underutilized and the needs of struggling students may not be met.

In order to improve this situation, training must be provided to teaching partners, both adults must know the options for sharing instruction, principals must monitor the classrooms for effective practices, and both teachers must be held accountable for student learning.

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a general education initiative or process ensuring differentiated strategies are utilized, data is collected and used to know when and how to support instruction, and intervention strategies are provided. All of this is a part of Tier I core instruction. There is a significant misunderstanding about RTI organization, responsibility and intervention. According to one special education central office staff, Lewisville ISD has been inconsistent in the implementation of RTI and continues to have high referrals for special education eligibility per year. Schools who have a referral rate larger than 25% are asked to review their referral rates in the context of RTI.

Instructional Strategies Observed in Special Education Settings. Instruction observed in the Lewisville ISD special education settings (for students with severe needs) was consistently found to be structured, targeted, fast paced, individualized and coordinated. These traits were also consistently observed at all three levels in addition to the 18-22 year old program housed on a separate campus. The use of paraeducators in these specialized settings was flexible and non-categorical. It appears paraeducators have been provided necessary training and schedules to maximize their time and talents.

Special education settings considered “academic” support (resource, ALS) were generally consistent with general education in that instruction was lecture-based and whole-group. These classrooms were observed utilizing grade level materials with instruction closely aligned to general education. However, some specialized support classrooms contained students from multiple grade levels in a single classroom working on very similar materials. Several of these teachers reported that it is very difficult to individualize instruction and assignments when the kids are all from different grade levels and with very different IEP goals. Reportedly, there is also a strong belief (among special educators) that they are not serving students appropriately unless students were pulled out of general education and instructed in a special education setting.

Accommodations and Modifications. Schools and districts must understand the importance of and effectively implement instructional accommodations and curricular modifications as needed for special education students in both general and special education classrooms.

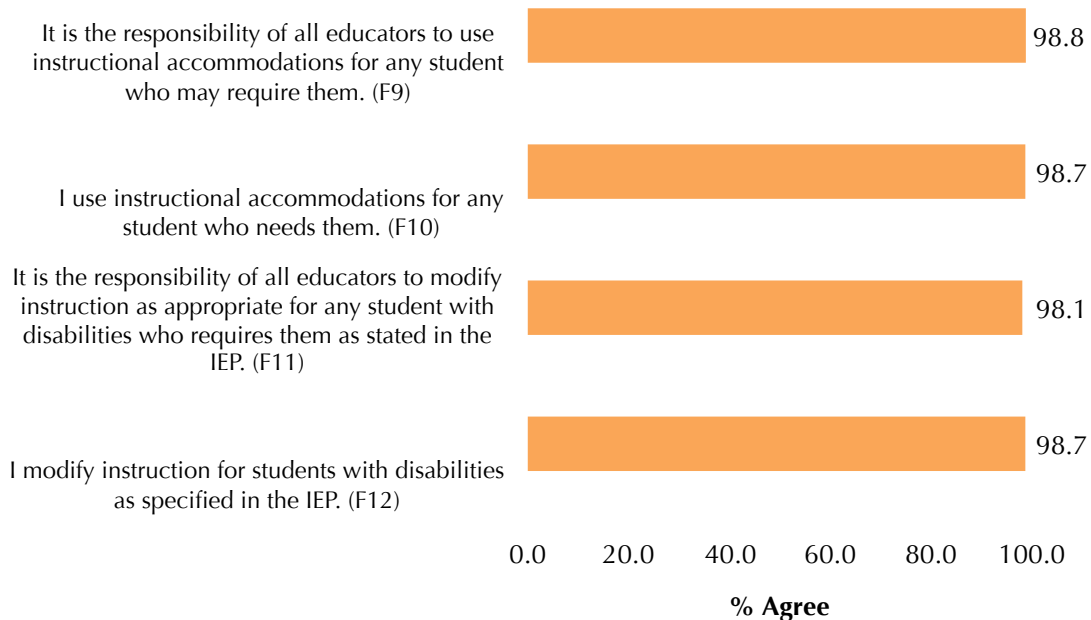
These are the paths through which instruction in the general curriculum is made accessible to students with disabilities. Instructional accommodations provide support for many learners with and without a disability. Yet many teachers are either reluctant or do not fully understand how to use them. This dilemma represents one of the great losses in forward progress for struggling students.

Accommodations are generally defined as a change made to the teaching or testing procedures in order to provide a student access to the information, and/or the opportunity to demonstrate her/his knowledge or skills. In other words, this is a change in HOW the student will learn or demonstrate learning. A modification is defined as a change in WHAT the student is expected to learn or demonstrate mastery. In contrast to accommodations, only the ARD/IEP team can determine the need for and specific descriptors of curricular modifications.

In Lewisville ISD however, accommodations were consistently described as sending a student to “special education for small group” in order to complete a test or assignment, and modifications were consistently described as “what the special educators do for students.” This limited use of a full range of instructional accommodations should become a change priority for Lewisville ISD.

Yet the perception is the extent to which instructional accommodations and curricular modifications are used appropriately varied from actual observed practice. The following survey results illustrate that teachers report a high degree of implementation.

Figure 2. Faculty Perceptions re: Use of Accommodations/Modifications



At times, teachers discussed modification of curriculum, with no mention of how the instruction was being accommodated. Several comments were made in focus groups regarding the need for additional training in the distinction between and the use of accommodations and modifications.

Modifications of the content or curriculum in general education were rarely observed. The practice most frequently observed is to provide the same work to all students at the same level or to create a classroom composed of struggling students and students requiring special education support. A typical “instructional strategy” in middle and high school was to read a selection and answer questions on a worksheet.

According to focus group comments, while generally teachers are doing a “better job” of modifying for students, accommodations and modifications are still viewed by some general education teachers as the responsibility of special education. Special education teachers report that some general education teachers are reluctant to accommodate and/or modify.

Educational Technology. There are many forms of technology that may support students with disabilities as successful learners in the general education classroom. A number of excellent technology applications were observed in specialized support settings, but not for students served in general education. In focus groups, participants mentioned the need for technology to be available to students with disabilities. There was a level of excitement during these exchanges indicating an awareness of the level of assistance technology can provide.

Flexible Grouping Strategies. Effective use of grouping techniques in a classroom is a valuable strategy for teachers to increase the level of involvement of students in the subject matter and provide opportunities for developing appropriate socialization skills. Flexible grouping is a way of grouping students that will maximize their instructional time based on their performance level. Students can be grouped to meet their instructional, emotional, and personal needs.

Flexible grouping practices offer students options designed to tap into different readiness levels, interests, talents, and learning modalities. It allows for the quick mastery of information and ideas. It also accommodates the need for additional exploration for students requiring more time for mastery and allows for collaborative and independent work.

In the majority of Lewisville ISD’s secondary general education classrooms, whole-group instruction was the predominant instructional delivery practice observed. Even when a teacher and/or paraprofessional was present with a relatively small number of students, the instruction was delivered to the whole group. There is a much wider use of flexible grouping at the elementary level. Although much of the student work was individual in nature, students were grouped for discussion and to complete individual assignments.

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. Evidence of positive behavioral support systems was observed across the majority of Lewisville ISD classrooms visited. Rules and norms were posted; most teachers had well-established procedures and routines. Some

teachers were observed positively acknowledging desired student behaviors as they occurred throughout instruction. Student behavior was appropriate.

Support Provided in Specialized Settings. As stated in the findings, instruction observed in specialized (special education) settings was consistently found to be structured, targeted, fast-paced, individualized, and coordinated.

Secondary Specialized Support Settings. These traits were also consistently observed at middle, high schools and in the 18-22 year old program housed on a separate campus. The use of paraeducators in these specialized settings was flexible and non-categorical, some working with a number of individual students in different specialized support settings. Paraeducator support is carefully coordinated and orchestrated among specialized support settings.

Social Inclusion. The Circle of Friends program currently implemented in a number of elementary, middle and high schools was observed during physical education classes at each level and was a high point not only for the campus visits, but the staff seemed to enjoy showcasing this very successful “social” program. Most impressive was the number of general education students involved and the genuine care and friendship observed. The success of this program also indicates social inclusion in Lewisville ISD is a positive and naturally occurring connection for students.

Recommendations

1. Connect best practices for students with disabilities with best practices for all students such as multilevel instruction, flexible grouping, use of instructional technology, activity based learning, peer tutoring models and positive behavioral supports. Include special educators and general educators in training regarding these models of instructional delivery.
2. Bridge the knowing-doing gap regarding effective and appropriate implementation of instructional accommodations for any student requiring them to achieve success. Connect instructional accommodations, typically a special education term, with the concept of instructional scaffolding, generally a general education term. Increase awareness of all Lewisville ISD educators regarding the role in accommodations/scaffolding in facilitating and accelerating learning.
3. Consider these best practices as a necessary core, or foundation to the Response to Intervention (RTI) process.
4. Provide a clear description of quality instructional standards for services for students with disabilities that must be met on each Lewisville ISD campus. This will ensure basic consistency across all schools, provide a floor of equitable services and facilitate student transition from school to school and level to level. Through site-based decision-making, principals and faculties will still have latitude to adopt campus-specific approaches, but all under an umbrella of guaranteed quality and legality.
5. Provide targeted training for principals and key central office personnel regarding these quality standards. Provide these standards in a simple format to enable each campus to conduct its own review of current status.

6. Clearly establish and publish the Response to Intervention (RTI) process as a general education initiative with specific data elements and criteria for on-going progress monitoring and selection of skill-based interventions as determined by student need.
7. Provide general education content training for special education staff members to increase knowledge levels of the general curriculum, thereby increasing their value to general education teachers.
8. Provide training for both general and special education teachers in the effective use of the district's general education curriculum. Provide opportunities for general and special education teachers to practice and implement scaffolding, accommodations, and methods for modifying the general education curriculum to meet individual student needs as identified by his/her IEP.
9. Provide training for paraprofessionals that include content overviews of academic areas in which they are involved, as well as the use of effective differentiated strategies in dealing with diverse learners.
10. Increase the effectiveness of in-class support models to improve services to students with disabilities, and academic and behavioral outcomes. This is a critical recommendation and will also be tied to recommendations for Theme 4 regarding effective use of personnel and scheduling processes.
11. Build an on-going planning cycle to promote collaboration with other instructional departments that also serve students with disabilities, and develop an annual district-wide professional development calendar that includes all groups within the district.

The relationship between the quality of instruction in both general and special education classrooms and the perceived need for staffing to support learning is direct and foundational. In the next chapter, we will address staffing and scheduling practices and concerns in Lewisville ISD.

Theme 4: Staffing and Scheduling that Supports Student Success

One of the most complex challenges facing special education is the determination of staffing needs at campus and district levels. Unlike general education, special education staffing is not formula-driven. Students with disabilities receive a variety of services in a variety of ways from a variety of staff – all determined by IEP committees on a student-by-student basis. Special education is a service rather than a place, and decision-making regarding the type and number of staff requires a process based on each student’s unique needs and the needs of the educators who teach them.

The type and level of support needed for each student requiring special education and related services must be determined on an individual student basis. The level of staffing necessary to meet these needs is often impacted by numerous variables. These variables include, but are not limited to:

- The commitment of teachers and administrators to shared ownership for all students;
- The presence of a consistent, objective process for determining staffing needs, from Early Childhood through high school, that results in appropriate and equitable staffing decisions across the system;
- The degree to which teachers use research-based instructional strategies that increase participation and access to the general education classroom;
- The degree to which teachers have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to teach students with diverse learning needs, including students with disabilities;
- The degree to which general education and special education teachers have the skills and the will to work in cooperative arrangements such as co-teaching, support facilitation and collaborative planning; and,
- The ability and willingness of administrators to organize the delivery of services through innovative scheduling and staffing practices.

Sufficiency, efficiency, and appropriateness of special education staffing also requires special considerations. For example, what may be considered an efficient use of staff may not be appropriate or even legal. This includes practices such as clustering students at one location for services or assigning students to a class or location that does not offer opportunities to interact with their non-disabled or age-appropriate peers.

Findings

These findings relate to staffing and scheduling for student success.

1. Lewisville ISD is sufficiently staffed to deliver quality services to students with disabilities. While there is likely a need to adjust staffing numbers from campus to campus, the total number of staff appears to be sufficient.
2. There is a strong perception among Lewisville ISD educators that additional staff is needed. Only 62.9% of faculty survey respondents agree that their school receives adequate personnel to support the needs of students with disabilities.

3. The district should implement an objective; student-centered, district-wide process for determining staffing needs for students with disabilities. This process should be the single mechanism for determining the need for and assignment of special education staff.
4. Most Lewisville ISD schools use a categorical approach (with label names such as ALS, AVLS, BIC, or COMM) to determine special education teacher and paraeducator assignments. This practice results in an inefficient use of staff, reinforcing the perception that the district is understaffed.
5. Common planning time for collaborative teaching partners is not provided on a district-wide basis. This results in poor, limited use of the skills of the second certified teacher.
6. Paraeducators are not always appropriately trained for their assigned roles and were found to be fulfilling the role of a certified teacher in some of the classrooms observed. Note that there were also positive examples of their work with students and many positive comments from faculty and parents regarding their contributions.
7. Many Lewisville ISD schools provide peer support programs that promote social inclusion and provide the least intrusive support when appropriate. This practice is not implemented district-wide.
8. In-class support for students within the general education classroom is provided, however students with disabilities in in-class support and co-teaching arrangements are distributed in a manner that prevents efficient use of staff. In some co-taught classes, the percentage of students with disabilities exceeds one-third of the total which creates a quasi-special education setting and difficulty for teachers in meeting the needs of the class.

Staff Sufficiency for Special Education. Sufficiency of staff refers to the adequate numbers of individuals required to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. To ensure all students with disabilities are provided FAPE in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), districts employ administrative staff, appraisal staff, related services and instructional professionals, and paraeducators for students requiring the following services: identification, evaluation/re-evaluation, IEP development, instructional services and related services.

A review of state and regional data regarding the student-to-teacher ratio for students with disabilities is noted in the following tables. Lewisville ISD's student-to-teacher ratio for special education is 12.3, which is significantly below the state ratio of 14.9.

The 2011-12 Texas Education Agency AEIS District Detail review of the nine comparison districts selected by Lewisville ISD reveals the following information regarding special education staff and special education student-to-special education teacher ratio (see Table 3).

Table 3. State and District Staffing Ratios for Special Education

	Total Enrollment	SWD	Special Education Teachers	Students with a Disability per teacher
Lewisville ISD	51,779	4,975	404.4	12.3
Allen ISD	19,364	2,065	103.1	20.2
Arlington ISD	64,592	5,056	379.0	13.3
Denton ISD	27,738	2,274	172.2	13.2
Fort Worth ISD	82,853	4,560	250.4	18.2
Frisco ISD	39,903	3,417	329.1	10.4
Katy ISD	62,153	4,966	267.1	18.6
North East ISD	67,208	6,054	452.0	13.4
Northwest ISD	16,556	1,315	78.5	16.8
Plano ISD	55,386	5,594	697.7	8.0
Texas		430,350	28,977.2	14.9
Average of 9 districts			14.7	

Lewisville ISD's special education student-to-special education teacher ratio is lower than seven comparable district ratios, as well as the state ratio. The student-to-staff ratio is below seven of the nine districts.

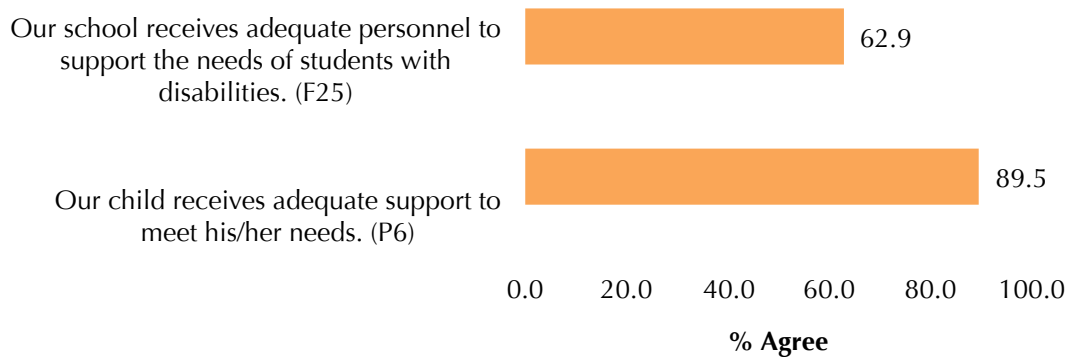
Table 4. Comparable District Staffing Ratios for Special Education Appraisal Staff and Speech and Language Pathologists (SLPs)

	Students with Disabilities	Appraisal Staff	SWD per Appraisal Staff	SLPs	SWD per SLP
Lewisville ISD	4,975	70.79	70.3	60	82.9
Allen ISD	2,065	27.00	76.5	16.24	127.2
Arlington ISD	5,056	66.62	75.9	57.53	87.9
Denton ISD	2,274	48.40	47.0	31.98	47.0
Fort Worth ISD	4,560	94.52	48.2	41.79	109.1
Frisco ISD	3,417	42.29	80.8	47.42	72.1
Katy ISD	4,966	76.66	64.8	69.09	71.9
North East ISD	6,054	43.76	138.3	61.67	98.1
Northwest ISD	1,315	20.00	65.75	13.0	101.2
Plano ISD	5,594	43.93	127.3	109.98	127.33
Average of 9 districts			80.5		93.5

Table 4 reveals a wide range of students with a disability-to-appraisal staff ratio for the nine comparison districts. Lewisville ISD's ratio of students with a disability-to-appraisal staff is lower than seven of the nine districts and similar to two of the districts. Additionally, the student with a disability-to-SLP staff ratio for the nine comparison districts ranges widely and Lewisville ISD's ratio is lower than six of the districts and above three. While there are many other factors that impact the need for appraisal and SLP staff, including caseload and workload, it appears there is sufficient staff for these two categories.

Strong Perception of the Need for Additional Staff. The faculty survey asked Lewisville ISD staff to indicate their level of agreement with the following statement, "Our school receives adequate personnel to support the needs of students with disabilities." Of concern is that 27% of administrators, 38% of special education teachers, 39% of general education teachers, 50% of SLPs and 49% of appraisal staff perceive the district does not have adequate personnel (see Figure 3). This disparity between comparison data, staff perception and observed practice warrants further review of the efficiency in the use of existing staff.

Figure 3.
Perceptions of the Need for Additional Staff



Human resource quantity, quality and efficiency were frequently mentioned by a number of focus groups and faculty survey respondents. Comments were mixed with suggestions of being sufficiently staffed, while others stated a need for more personnel to improve services for students with disabilities. One special education administrator stated, "We are actually richly staffed in some instances," while others said, "We need more hands-on help for special needs students." Many statements included "we need more staff" or "there is not enough staff." There were also references to the impact of budget cuts on having more staff and the need to "fully staff" the services for students with disabilities.

Evaluators observed small class sizes in specialized settings during school visits. Additionally, the ratios for collaborative teaching and other models of in-class support were viewed as inconsistent with best practice. This appears to be the result of three key factors; each is addressed in this report:

- The need to increase shared ownership between general and special education and improve systems-level communication and coordination with campus-based leadership;
- A categorical approach to staffing; and,
- The need for a district-wide approach for determining staffing needs.

Implement an Objective, Student-Centered Staffing and Scheduling Process. At present, most districts in the country use a variety of methods for determining the number and type of staff required to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Some of the most typical approaches are:

- A **principal request process** involves every principal in the district determining the number and type of support needed. Each principal engages in individual negotiations with central office for approval of personnel requests. This approach results in inequities across the system and relies heavily on the effectiveness of each principal to argue his or her case for staff.

- A **ratio or formula-driven approach** determines the number of staff required to meet the needs of students with disabilities on each campus. While adequate for making projections of numbers and cost, this method does not regard individual student needs and violates the spirit and letter of the law with regard to individualized programming. As a result, some classrooms are staffed very richly while another classroom with the same number of students may find staffing insufficient. Overall, funds are not spent wisely and the system must deal with a poor match between support needed and support provided.
- A **severity-index system** determines the level of severity for students, typically by disability category or other mechanism, and assigns a staffing level per severity index. This approach has the same pitfalls as the ratio or formula-drive approach, and again results in a less than precise staffing determination. Resources are unwisely allocated on the basis of inadequate assumptions, many student needs are unmet, and parents and teachers are frustrated.

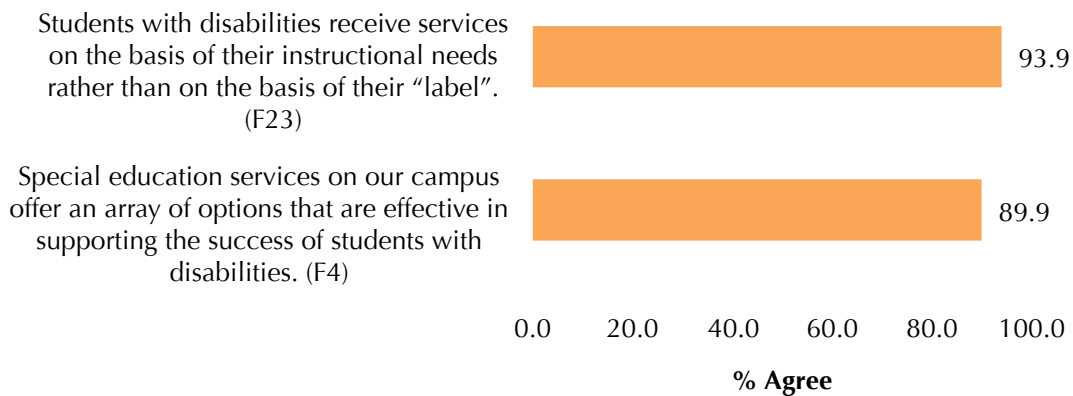
Stetson and Associates, Inc. recommends that Lewisville ISD adopt an objective, student-centered approach to determine staffing for special education. In such an approach, the support needs of each student are individually considered; effective instructional and behavioral supports are considered before personal supports; and, staff are assigned for specific reasons and to provide specific services. This process also precludes inequitable assignments of staff and other resources across the district that can occur in the absence of such a systematic approach.

Over a period of 25 years, we have found many benefits of a student-centered staffing process, including:

- Staffing decisions are precise, and students are neither over-supported or under-supported.
- Instructional quality is critical as staffing is often increased as a means to compensate for poor instruction.
- Common planning periods are more likely to occur when teachers are grouped by grade level or content area rather than assigned to address a large range of grade levels or all content areas for a specific disability category. This increases collaborative planning opportunities for teaching teams.
- This approach meets the spirit and the letter of the law requiring individualized decision-making.
- Equity concerns are eliminated as each student receives the supports needed, thus staffing is not based on persuasion or other subjective means.
- Parents are supportive of such an approach and are able to serve as more engaged partners in the decision-making process with educators.
- Concerns over due process hearings and litigation are decreased as all parties recognize the objective, student-centered manner in which staffing is determined.
- Teachers, related service personnel and paraeducators are flexible on the basis of student needs versus adult needs or available services or locations.
- Students make more progress as their support needs are targeted and focused.

The process is described in Appendix F with example decision guides. Should Lewisville ISD decide to adopt such a process, the district may develop its own steps and materials or may use examples provided.

Figure 4. Faculty Survey Responses Related to an “Objective Student-Centered Approach”



A Categorical Approach to Staffing. One factor impacting staffing in Lewisville ISD, as verified through classroom observations and interviews, is a reliance on an array of categorical options for serving students with disabilities. Currently, Lewisville ISD staff are often assigned to support students in a particular program rather than assigned to support students by grade level or subject area. To illustrate this point, there are a number of “named” programs such as Academic Life Skills (ALS), Academic and Vocational Life Skills (AVLS), Behavior Intervention Classroom (BIC), Resource or Inclusion. Once these programs are identified, students are assigned to these services/programs.

Often observers found little instructional difference between some programming options. On a number of campuses, the instructional activities offered in resource settings were very similar to those observed in the ALS setting. Similarly, the distinction between ALS and AVLS was unclear when observed in practice.

When a non-categorical model is used, the special education teacher typically must divide his or her time across multiple grade levels or subjects, resulting in services that do not offer sustained support for students or teachers. As one secondary special education teacher commented, included students “are spread across too many general education classes, thus I have to get to four to five classrooms during first period. In inclusion, we must deal with seven different teachers and multiple content areas.”

In a non-categorical model, the needs of individual students are determined first and then the adults are deployed to meet their needs, beginning with the least restrictive setting first. Categorical models often require more staffing yet result in less individualization for students. The ideal is fewer “boxes” for students to fit into, quality student-focused services, and improved in-school and post-school outcomes for students.

Effective In-Class Support. As districts move to more inclusive settings for students with disabilities, one of the cardinal rules relates to the need for adults (special education teachers) to follow the students into the general education classroom. In other words, the support needs that were formerly met in a resource or self-contained classrooms are now provided, whenever appropriate, inside the general education classroom. Many districts have discovered the value of increasing the amount and quality of support inside the general education classroom, yet there are some predictable issues that often arise. These same issues were noted in varying degrees across the classrooms visited in Lewisville ISD.

- The dilemma of two teachers assigned to a classroom yet **only one teacher is actively engaged** in providing instruction to the group while the second teacher plays a fairly minor role. This suggests the need for specific professional development opportunities designed to acquaint the general education and special education teacher with the various ways in which instruction can be collaboratively delivered. It is important to avoid the general education teacher bearing full instructional responsibility while the special education teacher is without a clear role or responsibility determined in advance of instruction. The result of this problem is a significantly under-utilized certified teacher, stigmatizing assistance from the special education teacher, frustration on the part of the general education teacher and less impact on student achievement.
- The tendency is to often **overload co-taught classrooms** with high numbers of students with special needs. The assignment of no more than one-third of the students in a co-taught classroom from among the ranks of students receiving special education and/or students who are struggling is best practice. In this case, two certified teachers are expected in the classroom for the entire duration of the class period. In several Lewisville ISD classrooms visited, the numbers of students with disabilities exceeded this standard. In fact, this concern was raised by all four of the observers. As a general education teacher commented, “In some of the co-taught classes over 50% of the students are special education students.” One appraisal staff member was concerned that “when we overload regular education classes, students do not meet their goals – then we have failure ARDs.” This concern also surfaced in the faculty survey and focus group comments as well. This offers the district an excellent focal point for rapid program improvement.
- **The failure to provide a shared planning period** in which both teachers may prepare for instruction, determine specific roles and responsibilities, and discuss any students who are experiencing difficulty in the class inhibits full collaboration. This concern will be discussed later in this section.

Assignment of One Paraeducator for One Student. There is a growing pressure placed on districts across the United States by parents for a one-on-one assignment of a paraeducator to assist a single student throughout the entire day. There was a concern expressed in surveys and focus groups regarding the pressures to adopt this practice for some Lewisville ISD students with disabilities. Generally, a request is made by the parents of a student with a disability, yet teachers may also make this request. As several Lewisville ISD educators commented in focus groups and the faculty survey, “Lots of students need 1:1 help but we lack staff and time to train new staff.” Often this is not the best plan of action.

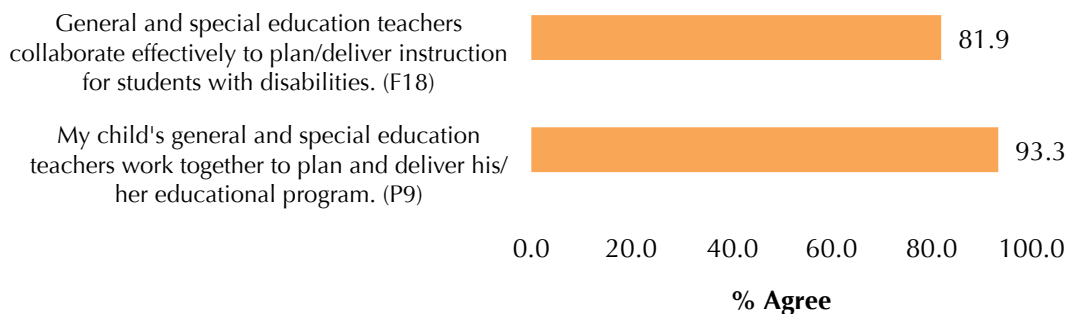
In this report, it is important to state that this practice is justified only on an individual student need basis and is actually detrimental to many students for a number of reasons. We recommend, instead, that Lewisville ISD use the objective process described above in collaboration with the child's parents to review each timeframe of the instructional day and determine if personal support is needed for each time period and who (or what type of personal support) would meet the student's need per class period. If, in rare instances, the student actually does require personal support for the entire school day, this should be made available per the requirements of IDEA. If however, the use of instructional strategies, technology, instructional accommodations or curricular modifications meets the student's needs, this 1:1 level of personal support is not the most beneficial.

An excellent resource is an article written by Dr. Michael Giangreco, University of Vermont, titled, "Be Careful What You Wish For: Five Reasons to be Concerned About the Assignment of Individual Paraprofessionals" (2005). Dr. Giangreco's article should be shared with teachers, parents and paraeducators.

Utilize Peer Supports as Appropriate for Personal Support. The practice of promoting positive peer relationships in Lewisville ISD through programs such as Circle of Friends (see Theme 3) is most impressive. This program and others like it are not in place on all Lewisville ISD campuses but seems to be a frequently requested option by parents of students with disabilities in the district. This approach provides peer-to-peer supports which are the most natural and least intrusive. With the excellent foundation already created by the district, this is a natural extension of the focus on social inclusion.

Need for Common Planning Time. With the use of categorical staffing models, shared planning times for special education teachers with grade level or subject area general education teachers are significantly limited or non-existent. The need for some degree of collaborative planning time cannot be overstated. It is virtually impossible for two teachers to be effective in jointly providing in-class supports (co-teaching or any other collaborative model) without some quality planning time available on a regular basis. This was a concern often noted during classroom observations when discussing challenges with the teachers or in faculty survey responses (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Survey Responses Related to Collaborative Planning



The provision of either a common planning period, which is not always possible, or at least a protected planning time on a periodic basis is the responsibility of each principal and is best accomplished during the master scheduling process. Almost every educational journal has featured entire issues or articles on finding and increasing the amount and value of planning time for teachers who share instruction and responsibility for students. This need emerged in Lewisville ISD as it does in most districts and should be addressed through professional development and resources for principals and central office personnel.

Recommendations

1. Implement an objective, student-centered staffing model across the district that will provide equitable services and supports for students with disabilities, provide appropriate levels of staffing based on student needs, and ensure that resource allocations result in the most efficient use of personnel. This will require a shift from ratios and multiple processes for requesting additional staff.
2. This shift will also address the current reliance on categorical staffing models and will result in more efficient assignment of personnel by grade level and/or subject area. It may require that some staff be shifted from one campus to another if some schools are found to be overstaffed.
3. Provide training and technical support for Lewisville ISD principals and selected faculty members to provide a consistent understanding of the process and offer technical support each year for schools to assess student needs for personal assistance and create an initial schedule for special needs in advance of the master scheduling process. This will facilitate more opportunities for common and protected planning times as needed.
4. Build capacity across special education leadership to support this change across Lewisville ISD campuses so the new staffing approach is not dependent on external consultants. The current zone arrangement with assigned special education directors is compatible with this recommendation.
5. Build campus skills so that when the new process is followed, the special education director will be able to step away from specific campus staffing decisions and serve as a resource to the process and as a means of accountability to ensure that the process is followed correctly.
6. Establish clear standards for quality with regard to in-class support, including the limit of only one-third of any co-taught class to be composed of special education students. If the class is staffed using a support facilitation approach on the basis of student needs (i.e., special education personnel provide more informal and flexible support two to three times each week), the standard will then be set at no more than the natural proportion of students with disabilities. This standard, in keeping with Lewisville ISD's statistics, would limit the number of students with disabilities to no more than 10% of the total classroom population when support facilitation is the delivery model of choice.
7. Improve the quality of in-class support by providing training and/or coaching regarding the multiple ways in which two teachers can share instructional delivery in the same classroom and the ways in which they can significantly increase the rigor of the content taught for all students.

8. When requests are received for 1:1 paraeducator assignments, use the objective staffing process to determine the specific support needs for each student. Engage parents as partners in this process and reinforce the goal to diminish personal support over time as student skills and independence increase.
9. Extend the district's current opportunities for formal peer friendships and social inclusion. It is highly desirable as a practice and the strides the district has already made should be extended to other campuses. In addition, expand the purpose of these efforts to include some level of peer tutoring to provide the least intrusive and most natural kind of support for any student – peer supports.
10. Provide information and resources to principals regarding creative ways to increase planning time for teachers and use that time more efficiently. This will enhance the quality and impact of all special education services, as preparation and structured collaboration are essential to the delivery of quality services for all students.
11. Monitor the success of the new approach to staffing and scheduling by periodically assessing staff and parent satisfaction with the level and effectiveness of services for students with disabilities. Particularly focus on the perception of Lewisville ISD educators regarding the need for additional staff. The current perception that additional staff are required to meet the needs of students with disabilities should decrease over time as the objective, student-centered process is incorporated into everyday practice.

Theme 5: Parent Satisfaction with Services for Students with Disabilities

One hallmark of a successful district is high stakeholder satisfaction. It is particularly important for districts to provide services parents value. Another indicator is the extent to which parents are involved in the educational process. In Lewisville ISD, parents of students with disabilities are valued, active partners in the education of their children. There are several metrics that confirm this statement.

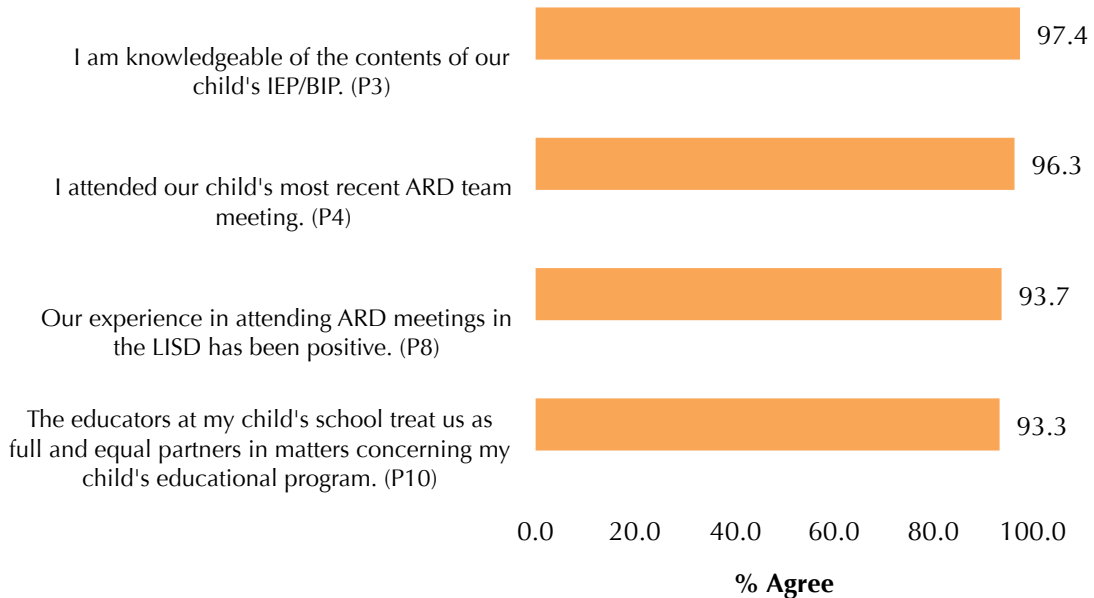
Findings

There are two broad findings for Theme 5.

1. Parents of students with disabilities in Lewisville ISD are extremely satisfied with the services their children are receiving and the support they are receiving from principals and the central office staff.
2. Parents of students with disabilities are involved in their children's education and planning for their future. In Lewisville ISD, 96.3% of these parents attended their child's most recent IEP meeting.

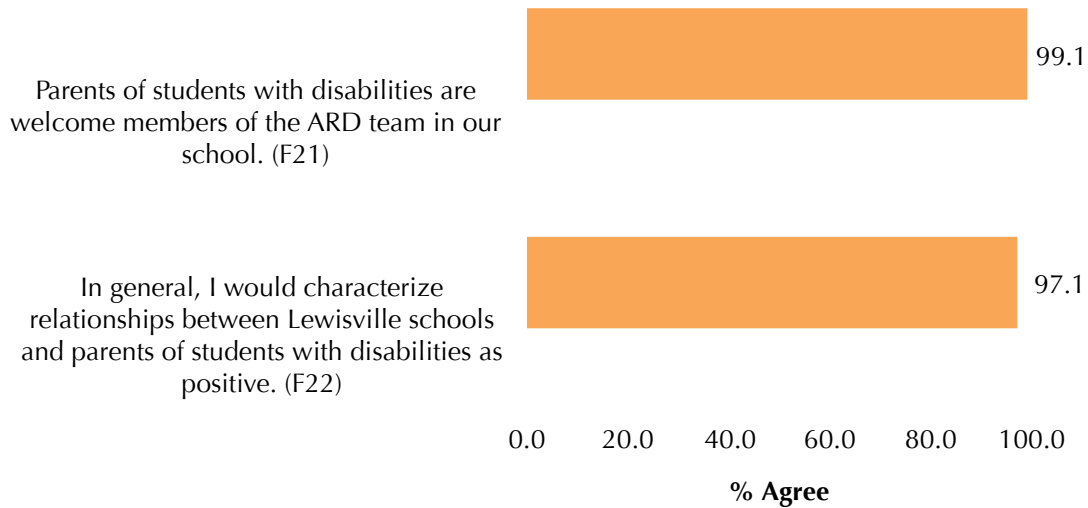
The perceptions of parents of students with disabilities were captured in an online survey that was distributed to this key respondent group. The following bar graph shows the percentage of parents who positively responded to four questions relative to their satisfaction with the quality of services and support received from campus and central office leadership.

Figure 6. Parent Satisfaction with Quality of Services and Support in LISD



Similar questions in the faculty survey provide evidence that Lewisville ISD educators view parents of students with disabilities as equal partners (96.7%); as welcome members of the ARD team (99.1%); and, characterize relationships between Lewisville schools and parents of students with disabilities as positive (97.1%).

Figure 7. LISD Faculty Perceptions of Parent Involvement



As a measure of parent involvement in educational decision making for their children with disabilities, 96.3% of Lewisville ISD’s parent survey respondents indicated they attended their child’s most recent Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. This contrasts sharply with a separate parent survey conducted by Stetson & Associates, Inc. in which only 77.8% of parents indicated they had attended their child’s IEP meeting. The IEP meeting is legally mandated, creates a blueprint for services to be provided and goals to be accomplished, and offers an opportunity for parents and school personnel to work collaboratively for the success of each student. This extraordinarily high parent participation rate in Lewisville ISD schools is noteworthy and suggests a positive climate for collaboration and positive school outcomes.

A deeper analysis of parent comments from the survey provides additional detail regarding the characteristics of their relationship with Lewisville ISD schools they particularly appreciate. A selection of the most representative comments from parents was analyzed and the following categories emerged:

- Parents are generally satisfied with the level and methods of communication, specifically communication with the central office, school principal and teachers, noting, “The special education department has been great, they really look at the needs of the student and have open contact with parents.”
- Parents commented on peer support programs and opportunities for social inclusion. Parents specifically expressed great satisfaction with the Circle of Friends

- program, stating, "The Circle of Friends program is amazing! It has made a very positive impact on my child. The relationships that have formed there are true friendships."
- Parent comments related to school climate and an environment of care and respect were overwhelmingly positive. Sample comments include, "Special education teachers go above and beyond and really care about each child," and "My son has had a lot of help and I am very thankful. I feel I have full support from the teacher, ARD team and principal."
 - Several parent comments expressed appreciation for the level of collaboration between Lewisville ISD schools. One comment states, "The fact that so many educators collaborate and hand-off seamlessly year to year has been extremely beneficial for our family."

In looking at areas for possible improvement, the following comment categories were noted in the parent survey results:

- While many parents positively commented about communication efforts, there were an equal number of suggestions for improvement, including: "More communication is needed between teachers and parents;" "More open/direct communication about how the student is doing and what they need to be doing;" and, "Would like to receive more feedback from teachers on what items our child is struggling with as well as homework to help us reinforce these things from home."
- Several parent comments suggest that peer support programs are not available at all LISD schools. One parent stated, "Circle of Friends has been requested multiple times. Schools won't discuss it." Many parents also suggested providing more opportunities for social inclusion between general and special education students, e.g., "My child receives needed support academically, but I feel there could be more support for his social development;" "The academic support is very strong but the social support is non-existent;" and, "Incorporate after-school opportunities for unstructured socialization with peers."
- Some parents expressed concerns about zoning and transitions between schools. Two comments specifically related to this concern include, "Not much attention during transition from elementary to middle school," and "My biggest problem with the special education situation in LISD has to do with the zoning. It should be set up so that students in an elementary school then go to the same middle school as the general education students at their current school."

Recommendations

With these results and comments as a backdrop, the following recommendations are intended to increase parent satisfaction and participation.

1. Involve parents in a review of this program evaluation and in the development of action steps to implement recommendations.
2. Consider a parent communication process at the district and campus level that emphasizes two-way communication.
3. Provide training for parents and educators in:
 - a. Serving as collaborative and effective IEP committee members,

- b. Teaming and cross-cultural communication skills; and,
- c. Trends and issues as they emerge.
- 4. Distribute information to parents regarding peer support programs and opportunities for social inclusion available through the district or school.
- 5. Provide training and information to school principals and teachers designed to increase opportunities for social inclusion on each campus.
- 6. Encourage parents to participate in district discussions of zoning and alignment of services for students with disabilities within school feeder patterns.

Conclusion

The evaluation of services for students with disabilities in Lewisville ISD represents an inquiry into the status of present services and the perceptions of multiple stakeholder groups. This report was developed with the active participation of the Lewisville ISD central office staff, the twenty-three schools visited, and the numerous survey respondents and focus group participants. Stetson & Associates, Inc. greatly appreciates the assistance and candor of all involved in the process.

Lewisville ISD is to be commended for taking positive steps to ensure effective and equitable practices are in place in its schools and across its programs for students with disabilities. Throughout this report, we have named the many positive practices that currently exist and have recommended changes we believe will build upon the foundation already created. One of our associates, after conducting structured observations in Lewisville ISD schools, commented to her colleagues: “This is a case of the possibility of a district moving from *good* to *great*.” We look forward to viewing your accomplishments and successes in the future!

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