

SPECIAL SERVICES PROGRAM REVIEW

CONSULTANT REPORT

August 2011

Submitted By:
Michele Wilson Kamens, Ed. D.

West Windsor Plainsboro Regional School District
Special Education Program Review and Evaluation

December 2010 – August 2011

Introduction

The education of students with disabilities is guided by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004, and the New Jersey Administrative Code (NJAC) Chapter 14 Title 6A. These laws mandate district policies and procedures related to the identification and placement of individuals with disabilities, as well as implementation of educational programs. One of the key tenets of IDEA is the concept that students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent possible. Over the last three decades, IDEA has been amended several times, with movement toward revisions that encourage inclusive practice and clarify the implementation of district programs for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

The West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District, with the goal of ongoing improvement of programs for students with disabilities, requested this program review as a collaborative endeavor between an external consultant and an internal review committee of district stakeholders. The goal of the review was to evaluate current programs and determine short and long-term goals for program improvement. For the external review, we have examined and collected data related to stakeholder perceptions of programs and services, statistical information related to programming for students with disabilities, and research related to current practice in special education. We would like to thank everyone who participated in this project, giving their time and energy to support this review.

Context of the Current Special Education Program

District Overview

The West-Windsor-Plainsboro School District consists of two high schools serving grades 9-12 (WW-P High School North, and WW-P High School South), two middle schools for grades 7-9 (Grover Middle School and Community Middle School), two intermediate elementary schools serving grades 4-5 (Village School and Millstone River) and four primary elementary schools service grades K-3 (Dutch Neck Elementary, Maurice Hawk Elementary, Wicoff Elementary, and Town Center Elementary). Preschool programs are offered at various schools in the district. Integrated preschool programs (half-day) for 3 and 4 year olds are offered to children 3 and 4 years old, with and without disabilities at Wicoff, Dutch Neck, and Hawk schools.

The district has experienced considerable growth in the last several decades, with 2518 total students enrolled in 1975, 3400 students in 1985, 6400 students in 1995, and 9400 students in 2005. In addition to numbers, there has been considerable change in demographics as well, creating more diversity throughout the district.

District Personnel

Data from October 2010 indicated that currently there are 1317 students who qualify for special education services in the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School district, with 1210 placed in district programs, and 107 participating in out-of-district programs. Of these 1210 students, 158 are in need of speech services only, while 1052 have been identified as having various other categories of disability, as designated by federal and state regulations related to special education identification and placement. West Windsor-Plainsboro School District has the lowest percentage of classified students in Mercer County , at 11.84 (see Table 1).

There are a total of 304 personnel in the Department of Special Education. Child Study Teams, consisting of school psychologists (11.5), learning disabilities teacher consultants (12.6), and social workers (10.3), service students in district and out-of-district placements. Each child study team member functions as a case worker, assigned to individual students as the coordinator of their services. In addition, there are various related service providers, including speech and language specialists (15.9), occupational therapists (4.2), physical therapists (1.8), and a part-time (.4) teacher of the deaf. There are 112.334 special education teachers, and 125.87 instructional assistants. There are 6 secretaries that service the Department of Special Education. All of these personnel are directly supervised by the Director of Pupil Services (see Table 2).

Continuum of Services

In accordance with federal and state law, the district provides a continuum of services to allow for placement in the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities at various levels. In-class resource (ICR) programs, which provide the services of both general education and special education teachers in the general education classroom, are available in a variety of subjects and provide the least restrictive option after full-time general education. Resource Rooms, where students are pulled out of the general education classroom for part of the school day, are provided as replacement or support options for various subject areas. In addition, there are a variety of special class placement options that are primarily self-contained and available to students who need more support. Various out-of-district placements have been made for students whose level of need cannot be addressed by in-district programs.

The following is a summary of current programs by level (2010-2011 school year):

Program for Preschool Students with Disabilities:

A half-day program for 3 and 4 year old children with diagnosed disabilities, offered at Millstone River School

Integrated Preschool Program:

Half- day programs integrating preschool aged children with and without disabilities are offered at Wicoff Elementary School, Dutch Neck Elementary School, and Hawk Elementary School. Each building offers a morning session for 3 year-olds and an afternoon session for 4 year-olds.

Programs for Students with Multiple Disabilities: (Cognitive Disabilities, Autism, and other programs)

High School North LARKS, with 3 teachers and 1 job coach (Grades 9 through age 21)
Community Middle School STARS (Grade 6-8)
Millstone River School (3 classes: (Autism grades 1-3, and 4-5, MD grade 4-5)
Town Center Elementary School (Grades K-1 and 2-3)
Dutch Neck Elementary School (Grades Pre-K and K).

Program for Students with Behavioral Disabilities:

High School North Academy (Grades 9-12, departmentalized).

Programs for Students with Learning and/or Language Disabilities (LLD):

High School North (Grades 9-12) Magnet Program, Departmentalized by Subject
Community Middle School (Grades 6-8) Magnet Program, Departmentalized by Subject
Millstone River School (Grades 4 and 5, 2 classes)
Village School (Grades 4 and 5, 2 classes)
Maurice Hawk Elementary School (Grades 1-3, 2 classes)
Town Center Elementary School (Grades 1-3)
Wicoff Elementary School (Kindergarten and Grades 1-3).

Resource Program:

In-Class and Pull-Out Replacement Programs at all schools, dependent upon student IEPs. Not at all grades levels or in all subjects.

Study skills/pull out support is provided in middle and high schools.

High School South provides an Inclusion Consultant to support junior and senior students in inclusive classrooms.

Administrative Structure

There is one deputy superintendent, and two assistant superintendents. The Deputy Superintendent is responsible for pupil services and planning, and is the direct supervisor of the Department of Special Services. One assistant superintendent is in charge of finance and serves as the Board secretary. Another is responsible for curriculum and instruction. Over the past several years, there have been various changes in administrators. Recently, the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction resigned, the District Supervisor of Special Services, and the Supervisor of Special Services (secondary programs) retired. The former elementary supervisor was hired as the District Supervisor of Special Services. A new Supervisor of Special Services was hired to oversee secondary programs, but resigned shortly thereafter. A new Supervisor of Special Services was hired to oversee elementary programs. Recently, searches were conducted and personnel were hired to replace the remaining vacancies. There have also been several changes in building administrators throughout the district.

The Deputy Superintendent for Pupil Services and Planning is responsible for special education in the district. This office oversees the Office of Special Services, which is run by the District Supervisor of Special Services. Within this office, there are two Supervisors of Special Services, one responsible for elementary programs (P-5), and the other responsible for secondary programs (grade 6 through age 21). Child Study Team members report to the Supervisor of Special Services appropriate to their grade level assignments. The special education supervisors participate in evaluation of special education teachers and paraprofessionals at their respective levels. The supervisors each work with and directly supervise all special education teachers in the district, as well as all paraprofessionals. All special education administrators and secretaries are housed in a separate building next to Wicoff Elementary School in Plainsboro, NJ, along with the Director of Guidance and the guidance secretaries.

A principal and one assistant principal are assigned to each elementary school in the district, with the exception of Wicoff, which does not have an assistant principal. The two middle schools and two high schools are assigned a principal and two assistant

principals in each building. These administrators also participate in the supervision of special education teachers and paraprofessionals. All administrators report to the Superintendent of Schools.

There has been a recent restructuring of assignment of administrators related to the supervision of teachers, where each administrator is assigned a list of specific teachers. Based on this initiative, special education teachers and paraprofessionals will be supervised by administrators in various roles, depending upon their tenure status.

Program Review: Methodology

Research Questions:

This program review was conducted as a research project, using both qualitative and quantitative methodology to yield data related to special education programs in the West Windsor Plainsboro School District. The review was conducted to seek answers to the following initial research questions:

- 1) What are stakeholder perspectives (administrators, teachers, parents, students, and related service providers) related to special education practices in the school district?
- 2) In what ways do West Windsor's special education programs and processes align with current research about effective practices in special education?
- 3) In what ways do West Windsor's special education processes and programs align with current federal and state requirements related to special education practice?
- 4) Do special education programs and practices align with district values, vision and mission?

Data Collection

Data for this program review were collected in several phases. In Phase One, the reviewer visited all schools in the district to collect contextual data related to programs, processes, and facilities. This involved visiting and observing in classrooms, and interviewing teachers, teacher assistants, child study team members, building administrators, students, and various other staff.

In Phase Two, focus groups with various stakeholders were conducted throughout the district. A schedule was created by the Supervisors of Special

Education, and meetings were advertised via the district web site and e-mail, as appropriate. All focus group meetings were open to any interested stakeholders in their related group. Meetings for parents of students in special education program were organized by level (preschool, elementary, and secondary), and then additional meetings were scheduled for any parents who were unable to attend previous meetings. Focus groups were conducted with special education teachers (elementary and secondary), child study team members, related service providers, special education supervisors, building administrators, general education in-class resource partners, instructional assistants, and guidance personnel (Director and school counselors). In addition, the reviewer conducted interviews with the Superintendent and various members of the Board of Education. Phone conversations and e-mail exchanges were held in addition to group meetings. All focus group and interview participants were invited to send additional comments and information individually via e-mail.

During Phase Two, an electronic survey was distributed to parents of special education students to solicit additional input from parents who might not have had the opportunity to come to meetings. Over 150 responses were received.

The following is a summary of data sources:

Observations:

Approximately 15 days were spent visiting all schools in the district, meeting various personnel and receiving an overview of district special education programs and facilities. Classroom observations were held on a variety of grade levels and in varying classroom structures. During these observations, the Program Reviewer had the opportunity to observe lessons, and speak with faculty, staff, students and administrators. Observation notes were kept during these visits.

Organizational Meetings: Several organizational meetings were held with administrators to monitor the program review process, plan for subsequent review activities, and review current feedback from participants. These meetings were supplemented by phone conversations and e-mails.

Parent Focus Groups: Parent focus group meetings were held in both evening and daytime sessions. Meetings were held with parents of students in elementary special education programs, secondary education programs, and out-of-district placements. Two additional open focus groups were held for any parents who may not have been able to attend earlier focus group meetings.

District Personnel Focus Groups: Focus groups were conducted with the following district personnel stakeholder groups: Elementary special education teachers, secondary special education teachers, preschool special education teachers,

elementary child study team members, secondary child study team members, instructional assistants, general education co-teaching partners, building administrators, special services administrators, guidance director, guidance counselors, and related service providers (OT, PT, speech, etc.) ,

Interviews: Personal interviews were held with various teachers, parents, or administrators who might have requested an individual meeting. All participants were invited to provide additional perspectives and information on an individual basis by communicating with the Program Reviewer via telephone and e-mail.

Data Analysis Procedures

In Phase Three, data were analyzed by the program reviewer with support from the Project Coordinator Consultant for Special Education Data Management. Most of the data for this project were analyzed using qualitative methodology, on both a formative and summative basis. At the conclusion of Phase One, data were reviewed to determine and refine questions to be asked in the subsequent focus group sessions. In Phase Two, data displays were created to facilitate analysis. Data were reviewed and coded to determine emerging themes and patterns across data sources (focus groups, interviews, observations, etc.) as well as across participant groups (parents, administrators, teachers, child study team members, related service providers, students, etc.). Trustworthiness of the data was maintained through triangulation of data within and across these various data sources and stakeholder groups. Recurrent patterns and themes emerged from this analysis of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It is anticipated that further validation will occur when the external review data are compared with the internal review data.

Quantitative data supplied by the school district, the Project Coordinator Consultant for Special Education Data Management, and the New Jersey Department of Education were also used to compare with quantitative data collected as part of the review process.

Findings

Several primary themes and patterns, related to the research questions, consistently emerged from the data. These were: 1) the referral and placement process, 2) program offerings, continuum of services, and curriculum; 3) staff roles and relationships, and 4) articulation and consistency across the district and 5) parent relations. Within these general themes, various subthemes were consistently evident. The following is a discussion of these themes and subthemes.

The Referral/Placement Process

N.J.A.C. 6A:16-7 mandates that before a student is determined to be eligible for special education services, the process for Intervention and Referral Services (I & R S) be implemented. A team is created at the school level, and when a child who is at-risk or having difficulties is referred for evaluation, the team is required to convene to collect relevant data, develop and implement action plans to provide appropriate interventions, provide support to school staff to implement these interventions, and regularly review the effectiveness of interventions to determine subsequent interventions (NJDOE, 2006). It is required that parents be part of the I & RS team, and other team members are to be determined by the district. I & RS is intended to be a general education process and typically involves guidance staff, administrators, teachers (general education and sometimes special education), and other participants. In New Jersey, this process replaces the former function of Pupil Assistance Committees (PAC). Although this is considered a general education initiative, it is closely tied to the referral process for special education and impacts special education staff and programs.

The purpose of I & RS teams is to provide support to students who have challenges, or are at-risk, to be successful in the general education setting, with the goal of providing student support before the student is referred for special education evaluation. If interventions are determined not to be successful, the student may then be referred for evaluation and eligibility for special education services.

In the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District, I & RS teams are administered by the guidance staff. As part of this program review, the Director of Guidance was interviewed, and a focus group conducted with guidance staff. In addition, a document review of all I & RS forms and procedures was completed. I & RS data and documentation forms were requested from each school.

The recurring theme related to the I & RS referral process was considerable inconsistency in I & RS procedures throughout the district. The makeup of teams in each school was different and varied from year to year. Each school team used different procedures and forms to facilitate the process.

Although complete data were not available related to student movement through the I & RS process, the data received suggests that a large number of students who are part of the I & RS process are eventually referred for special education evaluations, and many are then found not to qualify for special education services. This indicates that the intervention system is not effective (see Table 4). This uses a great deal of time and resources, with little impact. In addition, the data indicated that various stakeholders, particularly parents, perceived this process as a way to “put off” services for children, and that children are losing valuable time in this process before they

receive actual services. Shortly before this review began, a new Director of Guidance was hired by the district. In conversations with the Director, it was clear that revision of the I & RS process was a priority, and a review of procedures, forms, and team composition was being conducted at the time of this program review. Professional development for team members was being planned in order to initiate change and provide some common understandings of the process.

Related Research

The challenges of this I & RS process are not unique to West Windsor-Plainsboro School District. The process is required by federal and state law, but there are not always clear or structured guidelines for process and procedures (Truscott, Cohen, Sams, Sanborn, & Frank, 2005; New Jersey Department of Education, 2004). Team membership is important and should be appropriate to the purpose of the team (Truscott, et al, 2005). Teams should have a common goal and a clear purpose, which is understood by all team members. Intervention and solutions should go beyond the student-based treatment focus, including solutions that might be classroom-wide strategies, parent and peer interventions, or community interventions. Research indicates the importance of regular professional development for teams to learn new and current interventions (Truscott, et al., 2005; Slawski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).

The function of these teams is very important, and there are a considerable number of resources, particularly staff time, involved. It is important for teams to function efficiently, and be structured using appropriate team models based on best practice (Truscott, et. al, 2005; Rafoth and Foriska, 2006). The role of the administrator has considerable impact on team functioning (Rafoth and Foriska,2006). In addition to professional development, it is recommended that team members and administrative leaders learn about structures for problem solving teams.

The role of the referring general education classroom teacher is also critical to the effectiveness of the pre-referral process. If the goal is for students to be successful in the general education classroom, the current teacher must be a part of the team and understand their role in the process. They must believe that their input is valued by the team, feel that interventions are appropriate and able to be implemented, and should have accountability for the outcomes of implementation (Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004; Young & Gaughan, 2010). Research indicates that many team- recommended interventions are those that have already been tried by the classroom teacher, and were not successful (Truscott, et al, 2005; Slonski-Fowler & Truscott, 2004).

Recommendations

It is recommended that the revision of the I & RS process be continued to meet the criteria in the NJAC: 6A code (NJDOE, 2006). A priority should be the creation of district policy related to a common vision and communication of clear expectations for

this process. Professional development and means of support for staff, particularly general education teachers who are asked to implement the interventions, is critical to the process.

An investigation of the forms used for the process provided a checklist of possible interventions, which, in the reviewer's professional opinion, were not all necessarily interventions. Rather than have a checklist, it is recommended that the strong experiential knowledge and professional expertise of the team members be used to determine creative strategies for intervention. For example, rather than "seating the child near the front of the classroom", interventions such as strategies for student participation, alternate teaching strategies, alternative materials, and hands-on participation be considered. It is recommended that each team have the resource *Pre-Referral Intervention Manual* (Mc Carney & Wunderlich, 2006) to use in creating such strategies.

A critical need in the I& RS process is to collect data to determine effectiveness and monitor consistency across schools and teams. An overall structure should be in place to monitor team membership, team training, paperwork, and most importantly, the impact of the process on students. Ongoing analysis of interventions used, the effectiveness of these interventions, numbers of students who are ultimately referred for further evaluation. An additional recommendation is for administrators in guidance, special education, and school administrators to meet regularly to analyze these data, review cases and progress, and to review the process for possible adjustment or revision.

Section 504

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities, particularly in programs that receive federal funding. Students who qualify are entitled to a "504 plan" that determines any modifications and accommodations that support students in school so they can participate and perform at the same level as their peers. It is meant to provide these accommodations in the context of general education. For example, some accommodations might be the use of technology to take notes, additional textbooks at home, wheelchair access, etc. A 504 plan is appropriate for students who have a disability, but might not need more intense services, or do not qualify for special education services under IDEA. These accommodations and modifications can provide support to students in the general education setting. If students received support in this context, it might eliminate the need for a full evaluation and involvement of special education services, with fewer resources and cost involved. It is recommended that a professional learning community/team of general and special educators, guidance staff, parents, and administrators be formed to review the 504 process in the district

Special Education Referral and Identification

Once a child is referred for child study team evaluation, responsibility shifts to special education staff and administration. The data indicated that there is a need for more communication and interaction between guidance staff and special education, both on the administrative levels and between guidance staff, child study team members, and teachers in both general education and special education. This might be in the form of meetings or professional development to provide consistency.

A concern related to identification is inconsistency in the criteria used to identify students with specific learning disabilities. It was suggested that some child study teams used the discrepancy model, quantifying the difference between ability and performance. However, it seems that this is not used in every case. Although the discrepancy model is still acceptable in New Jersey, current practice nationally is based on the Response to Intervention (RTI) model for identification, placement, and interventions for students at risk. This model is an initiative that begins with general education, and was part of No Child Left Behind legislation. As this model is rapidly replacing the discrepancy model, it is highly recommended that the district begin initiatives to provide training and structures for implementing RTI in the near future.

As required, a self-assessment/state monitoring report was submitted to the New Jersey Department of Education in January, 2008. The findings from this report included several areas of non-compliance, which have since been addressed according to a letter recently received from the NJDOE. One of the areas of non-compliance was an ongoing pattern of disproportionate representation of African-American students determined eligible for special education services. The plan of action described in the report was to analyze information from I & RS, and to “investigate models of response to intervention to reduce the district referral rate”. Data from this review indicated that the Response to Intervention model has not yet been implemented, but is one of the initiatives being explored by the new Director of Guidance.

Program Offerings/Continuum of Services/Curriculum

The district offers an array of special education placements and programs, on a continuum of services from very restrictive (out of district placements) to least restrictive environment (general education in-class resource, or ICR). These programs are listed earlier in this report. Federal law lists thirteen classification categories of disability, and NJAC 6A includes 14 discrete categories. Students with various classifications in West Windsor-Plainsboro School District are placed in classroom programs based on the following categories:

MD (Multiple Disabilities)

MD/Autism

LLD (Learning and Language Disabilities)

Behavioral Disabilities

Resource Room

Preschool Disabilities

Integrated Preschool

The cost of out-of-district placements for students with disabilities in 2010 was \$6,525,031. Although this represents a more restrictive environment than an in-district placement, many parents felt that their out-of-district placements were necessary for their students to receive an appropriate education. It was evident that the school district has made an attempt to bring students back to the district by creating new programs. However, this created a great deal of angst for many parents. When asked to bring their children back for a newly formed program, parents were skeptical about what that program would be like, and were reluctant to agree until the program was up and running, creating a Catch-22 for the district.

Some of the parent reluctance stems from a perception that programs are not always created with a long-term plan for how the child will progress through the grades. If the parent agrees to bring the child back to the district for a year or two, they do not want to have to send them back out-of-district after they complete those programs.

A strength of the district's continuum of services is that it adjusts regularly based on the needs of the students enrolled. Services needed are implemented based on IEPs. The district has managed to create a balance by providing an array of services with some consistency, yet adjusting annually based on the contextual needs of the children served. This sometimes creates a challenge in planning ahead, as children often move in and out of the district, and their needs may change as they grow.

Academy Program

The data was consistent in emphasizing the outstanding quality of the Academy Program, housed at High School North. This program, for students with behavioral disabilities in grades 9-12, provides a team approach to support students as needed, providing academic instructional in a small setting. An observation of this program supported the data; the reviewer had the opportunity to interview the students, who indicated that they feel part of a community within the school. They feel supported, and

also sustain one another with their “issues”. Many of the students stated that if they were included in general education classrooms, they would be more “excluded” socially.

A concern expressed from the participants is that no offerings are available for students with behavioral disabilities before they are in ninth grade. Various stakeholders questioned what was happening to students with behavioral disabilities before they reach this point. It is recommended that a long-term, articulated program be established to expand the Academy program so that students with behavior challenges will be supported throughout their school years in an appropriate setting. As part of this plan, it is recommended that a program aligned with the Academy Program be created for individuals with behavioral disabilities at the middle school level.

Curriculum

There were numerous concerns about curriculum, particularly at the middle and high school levels. Participants from various stakeholder groups expressed concern that students who are struggling, whether at-risk or average ability, often are referred for special education evaluations. Various respondents expressed frustration that there were no classes for children in these categories, who probably do not need special education services. This may be the result of a district-wide effort to eliminate the "pull-out" support model, which is appropriate to current practice of inclusive education. The shift from pull-out to inclusive practice was supported by providing a great deal of professional development for classroom teachers to differentiate instruction, particularly in reading and math. However, it was suggested that this situation has caused a rising number of I & RS and ultimately special education referrals, particularly in the intermediate and middle school grades. This situation should be reviewed to determine how to best encourage teachers to practice effective differentiation and thus provide support for students who might need it.

Math Curriculum

On several occasions, frustration was also expressed with recent revision of the math curriculum. Participant comments indicated the perception that the new curriculum was more focused on higher-functioning students, and that students who were average or below average would not get the appropriate amount of support. Clearly, it is appropriate educational practice to revise curriculum on a regular basis. However, when programs are revised, it is appropriate to consider the impact on students who are at-risk or identified with disabilities, with a focus on how these students will be supported in rigorous programs, such as the ones in West Windsor-Plainsboro. A review of the NJASK and HSPA scores for students in special education indicate a greater need in math proficiency.

Resource vs. LLD

Other placement concerns that emerged from the data were related to LLD vs. Resource classes, particularly at the middle school levels. Resource support is considered to be less restrictive than self-contained LLD placement. However, it was inconsistent as to how the level of support is determined for each child. In some cases, at the middle school level, it was suggested that this is sometimes driven by scheduling. It is recommended that criteria for resource vs. LLD placement be explored for consistency across child study teams and teachers.

Options for At-Risk Students

There was a consistent theme throughout this review about district expectations for high achievement and high performance. It was suggested that most of the focus and resources of the district are for those students who perform at the “upper end”, and that those with disabilities are not considered important. The concept of “district disabled” was repeated over and over, in a variety of meetings from different stakeholders. It was reported that there are increasing numbers of students who transfer into the district (many move to West Windsor for the quality of the schools), and that these students are behind in skills as soon as they arrive. Many of these students end up in the I & RS process (see Table 4) and often as special education referrals, because they are unable to keep up with the high pace and curricular level of classes in the district. Many stakeholders expressed concerns that there are not appropriate classes and places for “average” children, and the only choices when these students cannot keep up is to refer them for special education services. It was consistently implied that, if there were more choices for “average” or “struggling” students, there would be fewer referrals and students identified as having a disability. At the high school, concerns about the course choices for students with disabilities were a concern expressed by various stakeholders. There was a consistent theme that there was a focus on meeting the needs of high achieving and performing students, where choices for students who had disabilities or “average” were minimal, and some of these were being eliminated.

World Language Offerings

Another consistent concern with curriculum and continuum of services was the issue with world languages for students with disabilities. Since the initial data collection for this report, however, this issue has been addressed by the establishment of in-class resource programs for world languages, with one at each high school specifically for Spanish, and another at each high school for other world languages. It should be noted that it is often challenging to find qualified staff who are highly qualified in a variety of languages. This is a situation that should be examined to determine alternative,

possibly creative solutions. Perhaps there could be targeted training for world language teachers in differentiation and adaptations for students with disabilities. Professional development in appropriate inclusive strategies and techniques for all world language teachers would benefit all students and enable students at various levels to take the world language of their choice. One possibility is to provide a vehicle (perhaps an on-site course) for world language teachers to receive special education certification.

LARKS

Most of the students with more severe disabilities are housed at High School North, including the LARKS program, which is designed for high school students with multiple disabilities. This appears to be a strong program, where students receive a great deal of individualized attention. Students in this program are included in general education classes as appropriate, providing the least restrictive environment and social experiences with peers without disabilities. The participants involved suggested that more emphasis be placed on job sampling and work opportunities. There are job coaches that work with the students, but the challenge was reported to be related to scheduling, as some of the students are enrolled in other classes at High School North and it is hard to get students into job experiences for reasonable blocks of time.

Inclusion Facilitators

At the high schools, an “inclusion facilitator” consulting model was implemented (first at HSS, then later at HSN) to provide as-needed support for junior and senior students who are included in general education classes but are in need of support in various contexts. These facilitators have an open-ended schedule, where they respond to requests from general education teachers to come to classes when support is needed for specific students. They also provide support to individual students in the “support room” when requested by students. The facilitators reported that they also try to communicate with students in their caseload on a regular basis, to check on their progress and see if support is needed. The fact that, as students get older, it is important to encourage independence and self-advocacy was explained as part of the rationale for this model, which is appropriate for students with specific learning disabilities.

Participant comments about this structure were inconsistent. First, there did not appear to be data collection related to the effectiveness of the model. Some of the teachers involved in the facilitator program felt it was effective, while others perceived that it was not meeting the needs of the students, and was too inconsistent. Many of the parents of students expressed their dissatisfaction with this model, reporting that students who need the most help may not be the ones to show the initiative to ask for it, and therefore not be noticed or receive the support needed. It was perceived that this is

simply a way to save money on staffing. Clearly, this is a new initiative that has a great deal of potential, but it should be monitored and evaluated with reliable and valid data to support the impact. This data collection could be qualitative, with impressions from participant stakeholders, but should also be quantitative, with logging of contact hours per student, what takes place, student grades and progress toward IEP goals, etc.

Programs for Students with Autism

The participants expressed considerable concern about programming for the growing population of students diagnosed on the autism spectrum in the district. Several programs have been established, particularly at the preschool level, to serve these students. Many students with autism have been brought back to the district from out-of-district placements. This growth has created a variety of needs for services unique to students with this diagnosis. The autism spectrum includes a continuum of behaviors and characteristics that support this diagnosis, ranging from high functioning abilities, such as Asperger's Syndrome, to lower functioning abilities. Areas of need common to many individuals with a diagnosis on the Autism Spectrum are adaptive behaviors, particularly social skills and communication skills (Klin, Saulnier, Sparrow, Cicchetti, & Volkmar, 2007; Reichow, & Volkmar, 2010). The data in this review indicate that the district has worked hard to meet the growing numbers with rapid expansion of classroom programs for individuals with autism in the district. However, with this rapid growth, it is suggested that careful attention be paid to service delivery options that are research-based best practices and specific to the unique and individual needs of students. Some of these options are social skills training, ABA, and assistive technology.

Participant comments indicated a clear need for a consistent, comprehensive social skills curriculum. Training and ongoing support in this area is important for all individuals working with students with autism, particularly teachers and instructional assistants. This also applies to individuals in general education who might work with individuals with autism who are included in the general education population (for example, social skills are critical during lunch or recess, so individuals supervising during that time should be trained to handle interactions). It was reported that, in April of 2007, the Parent Advisory Committee created a subcommittee to look into issues related to social skills, and made several similar recommendations in a PowerPoint Presentation (April 2007). However, there were no data to determine the results of this presentation.

There are a variety of resource opportunities for support with improving services to individuals with autism in the West Windsor Schools. With Eden Institute, Princeton Child Development Center (PCDI), and the Mercer County Special Services School district located nearby, there is a plethora of expertise available to provide information,

resources, and consultation. The district does utilize consultant services from these agencies, and might explore ways to enhance these relationships and take advantage of these resources through shared professional development, partnership programs, etc.

One of the most widely used, research –based strategies for addressing needs for individuals with autism is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) (*Howard, J. S. , Sparkman, C. R., Cohen, H. G., Green, G., & Stanislaw, H.. (2005).* Reichow & Volkmar, 2010; United States Government Accountability Office, (2005). U. S. Office of Public Services, 2000). The research indicates that ABA can be highly effective in educating individuals with autism related to learning new functional and academic skills, social skills, and communication (all). ABA is also found to be most effective in the early years, suggesting that early intervention is critical. The establishment of several preschool programs in the West Windsor-Plainsboro School District supports this need for early services. ABA is a highly structured and systematic approach that is not always delivered effectively, and requires a considerable amount of training and expertise (Howard, et. al., 2005). The intensive training and certification is offered by various schools and agencies for individuals to become certified in ABA, with certification given by the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (2011). It appears that some West Windsor-Plainsboro teachers have had some training related to ABA, and one is currently working on her BCBA certification. Inquiries indicated that there are few individuals with BCBA certification in the district, and one of these individuals functions in the role of a child study team member.

As the district bring students with disabilities on the autism spectrum back to the district and creates new preschool and early intervention programs, it is critical to enhance the skills of faculty and staff that work with these students. Consistent training is essential, and a focus on seeking new hires that have training as behavior specialists with BCBA certification and experience would continue to support these programs. All individuals working with students with autism should be encouraged to work together to provide effective, research-based practices consistently and comprehensively across levels.

Another area of need for individuals with autism, as well as some with other disabilities, is assistive technology. Assistive technology is rapidly changing to provide a vast number of opportunities for individuals with disabilities to facilitate communication and functioning in a variety of ways. There are new and ongoing advances in the options for Assistive Technology, such as I Pads and educational apps, computer software, etc. Students with autism, who often have challenges related to communication, can be instructed using assistive technology, but someone must be responsible for keeping current with changing technologies, their application, and training of students, parents, and teachers in order to provide consistent use of

hardware and software (United States Government Accountability Office, 2005). As technology advances and the number of students with autism in the district grows, it will be necessary to consistently monitor assistive technology use in the district (United States Government Accountability Office, 2005).

It was reported that there are numerous assistive and augmentative technology devices available to students throughout the district. Devices included are: 31 Phonak (assorted receivers, handi mics, PFM systems, et al) + Microlink; 1 Microear; 10 Bag of Sound; 20 Sound field/sound systems; 9 Dynavox (inclusive of a Go Talk, Say-It, and Listen to Me) 1 TELE Type System ; and 1 Esprite Processor. A speech teacher from Dutch Neck School provides part-time support and conducts evaluations across the district. There is also a part-time outside consultant who monitors equipment.

A strength of the autism program is the establishment of several specific programs for preschool children, many of whom have been identified as having autism. This supports the research that early intervention is critical for children on the autistic spectrum (United States Government Accountability Office, 2005; U. S. Office of Public Health, 2000). Currently, there are also two programs offered at Millstone River, one for grades 1-3 and another for grades 4-5. As these students are brought back to the district and the numbers continue to grow, it is important to have a clear, specific plan for how these young students will progress as they move through the grades. It is recommended that a multi-year plan be created to insure that there are consistent programs across the grades, and that quality, assessment, and interventions are somewhat consistent, with individual differences considered.

Throughout the grades, some students with autism appear to be placed in MD (multiple disabilities) classes, where they are instructed with students who have other disabilities, particularly those with cognitive disabilities. Classification data, as compared to statewide numbers, indicate that West Windsor-Plainsboro has a higher percentage of students identified as having multiple disabilities (see Table 5). The research indicates that the needs of students with autism are often different than the needs of students with other developmental disabilities, particularly related to communication and intensity of social skills (Klin, Saulnier, Sparrow, Cicchetti, & Volkmar, 2007). Observations of some classes, particularly the LARKS program, indicated students with various disabilities being instructed together. The federal classification categories, as well as the New Jersey categories, identify students with autism as a discrete classification, with a clear definition that is different from the other classification definitions, including "multiple disabilities". It should be noted that it was the impression of the reviewer that many of the parents who had serious concerns about the appropriateness of the instruction and services provided to their children were parents of children diagnosed on the autism spectrum. This is particularly true for students diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, who are at the higher functioning end of

the spectrum and in need of very different services than other students with autism or developmental disabilities. Based on these data, it is recommended that a review of student placement and curriculum at both elementary and secondary levels be examined to determine appropriateness for students with autism, as compared to students with other disabilities in the “MD” classes.

Middle School Scheduling

The schedules at both middle schools are extremely complex, with different grade levels on different schedules. With the team model, students are placed in classes and organized into teams. However, in order to meet the IEP and placement needs of many students with disabilities, they are often “off team” and are in classes with other students and not always with their teams. It was reported that this is often very challenging for middle school students with disabilities, when social interaction is very critical in their development and often an area of difficulty. It was evident that child study team members, who create the schedules, attempt to avoid placing students outside of their teams, but this is often impossible. It is recommended that scheduling structures at the middle schools be examined to determine how students with disabilities might be placed more efficiently.

Effectiveness of Program Delivery

There is a need to create structures for monitoring the effectiveness of special education program delivery across the district. NJASK and HSPA scores reflect that NJASK – 60.5% proficient or advanced proficient in language arts, and 64.3% proficient or advanced proficient in math (2009-2010 scores, for students that took the test). HSPA scores indicate that 89.8% proficient or advanced proficient in language arts, and 72.0% proficient or advanced proficient in math. However, test scores are only one indicator of effectiveness. With the culture of parent dissatisfaction, it is critical to look at individual progress and performance from a variety of perspectives. One critical way to monitor program delivery is through teacher supervision. A new supervision model has just been implemented, with the creation of a specific observation assignment schedule for administrators. This schedule is designed so that special education supervisors and building administrators will be supervising special education teachers. It is important to examine the expertise of these observers related to best practices in special education. For example, when observing co-teachers in an in-class resource classroom, will the supervisors be aware of models for effective service delivery related to co-teaching? It is recommended that there be some structures in place for administrators to have professional development to provide continuity of expectations that are appropriate to the needs of the students and best practices in special education.

Staff Roles and Relationships

Child Study Teams

In West Windsor-Plainsboro School District, child study teams have considerable impact on special education programming for students with disabilities. These 33 individuals are responsible for the entire process of evaluation, placement, and writing reports and Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for all students who are referred for or classified as having special educational needs. The current Child Study Team staff has strong qualifications, with three school psychologists and three learning disabilities teacher consultants having doctoral degrees. When a child is classified, they are assigned a child study team member as a case manager. In the role of case manager, a child study team member is responsible for coordinating services for the student. This requires being a liaison between the school and the child's parents, responding to parent questions and concerns. They are expected to interface with and support the child's teachers, observing and monitoring student progress based on IEP goals. Child study team members are often asked to provide support and suggestions to teachers, in both general and special education, to provide appropriate interventions for students. They coordinate and write annual reports, and coordinate annual IEP meetings. In addition, many child study team members are on I & RS teams for their assigned schools. It was reported that some of this work was supported by secretarial staff in the past, but this was recently reduced. Clearly, this is a daunting job in a district with very involved parents, highly motivated teachers, and ongoing numbers of students who are referred for evaluation. The roles of child study team members and case managers are outlined in NJAC 6A (NJDOE, 2006), and the district is in compliance with these guidelines and roles. However, the code does specify that case managers have "an apportioned amount (p. 44).

The average caseload for each child study team member in the district is approximately 34 students. The data from this review, however, indicated that it is a struggle for child study team members to do their jobs effectively. Balancing students and teachers in more than one school is a challenge. It was clear that child study team members were hard-working, dedicated professionals who had a desire to their job and were somewhat frustrated with conflicting demands on their time. The paperwork that is mandated by law seems to take precedence over their work with children and teachers.

Currently, only middle and high schools have full-time, three-member child study teams who are assigned to their buildings. In addition, there are part-time child study team members at the elementary schools that are assigned to at least two schools. Although they have scheduled days to be at certain schools, they are often needed at their other assigned school for meetings or student emergencies. Since they rotate schools, child study team members may only be together as a "team" one day per

week, and work with others as a different “team” in their other assigned school. Clearly, this is not a team model. The data was overwhelming, from most stakeholders, that this inconsistency due to CST movement from school to school was inefficient and ineffective. There are not enough opportunities to see teachers and observe students. Several teachers stated that they used to see the child study team members and interact with them as resources to support the children, but now child study team members were not available when needed. Parents reported their perceptions that their case managers did not know their child well, and had not observed their child in the classroom (which was also reported by other stakeholders), coming to IEP meetings to make recommendations for placement and programming for the students without knowing them. These perceptions are of serious concern, as many of these decisions have lifelong impact on the child.

This situation is clearly connected to the challenge of parent interactions and expectations. It is reasonable for parents to expect that the case manager know their child and the child’s abilities if they are making decisions about the child. When parents perceive that these decisions are arbitrary, their dissatisfaction is understandable. The other side of this dilemma is that a frequent concern expressed by participants is that the child study team members often spend an inordinate amount of time addressing the concerns and needs of parents, answering phone calls and e-mails, re-writing or revising paperwork, etc.

It was indicated that the overall structure of grade levels in schools in the district has impact on inconsistency of case management for children with disabilities. If diagnosed very early (which is not always the case), a given student with special education needs might spend 4-5 years in an elementary school with one case manager. They then move to Village School or Millstone River, and spend two years with another case manager. Next, they go to Grover or Community, where they spend three years with another case manager. Last, they go to high school and spend four years with a new case manager. This results in a minimum of 4 case managers over their time in school. Changes in staffing might result in additional case managers. Some parents reported working with 6-7 case managers. If the case managers are the primary liaison with parents and families, this structure makes it extremely difficult to establish relationships, particularly ones of trust and effective communication. Case managers have difficulty getting to know the child, particularly if they only see them a minimal number of times in a two year placement. This creates challenges in the system, and may be the impetus for much of the parent frustration and dissatisfaction. During parent meetings, there were clear cases where the parents and case managers had conflicts, and parents were told that they were unable to change case managers. Additional parent concerns may stem from critical decisions for their children made by case managers who may not know them, and when parents find these placements

inappropriate, they are told that there is no choice. Often, parents talked about “they” when reporting their stories of frustration and conflict with the district. When I asked who “they” were, most times it was the case managers. Although there is a perception that “they” might be special education administrators, these individuals reported that they do not attend most child study teams and that child study team members are trusted to make appropriate placement decisions for children. A few parents reported a “hidden agenda”, or an underlying mandate to save money on placements, but this was not supported by any information in the data from district stakeholders. However, child study team members consistently reported that they had they autonomy to decide what was best for individual students, and were supported by administration in providing what was needed. Inconsistent with parent perceptions, child study team staff stated that they did not have to get permission from administration to make these decisions.

Another aspect of child study team assignments is a recent change in case management for out-of-district placements. In the past, there were CST members who were responsible for students placed out of the district, and formed relationships with those schools. A recent change in structure was to assign out of district case management to the team members in the child’s home school. The rationale for this was reported to be that the CST member would know more about the child’s home school and activities there, as students out of district are entitled to participate in activities at their home school. However, most stakeholders felt that this structure was inefficient. In addition to their other responsibilities and assignments, child study team members had to travel to other schools out of the district, which can be time consuming. Often, there might be several West Windsor-Plainsboro School District case managers assigned in one out of district school, such as New Grange. This has an impact on developing relationships with the school and inefficient use of case manager time.

Overall, the child study team structure should be reviewed and revised to provide more consistency and efficiency. This may prevent the number of classifications, as well as proactively prevent some litigation costs over time. Most importantly, this would provide effective support to teachers, students, and families that is required for best and effective practice.

Child study team members reported that they had few opportunities to participate in appropriate and relevant professional development, often attending district initiatives that are not related to their work. It is critical that these professionals be part of rigorous and ongoing professional development, both with teachers and supervisors, on topics such as effective skills for collaboration with parents and families, District expectations for I & RS (as mentioned earlier) , and other topics relevant to their specific specialty.

Instructional Assistants

The focus group with the most attendance was the meeting for instructional assistants in the district. Many of these individuals are very qualified, with some holding advanced and bachelor's degrees in education and other subjects. Their participation in the focus group indicated that they are very dedicated, with a clear focus on their students. There are 125 instructional assistants employed in the district, and the majority of them serve students with disabilities. They expressed a critical need for communication, particularly time with teachers to discuss student needs and progress, and to be aware of what is happening on an ongoing basis. Often, instructional assistants work in more than one classroom, with multiple teachers and students, particularly at the middle and high school levels. They expressed a need for more time to communicate with teachers, and professional development relevant to the students they serve. A consistent message from instructional assistants was the desire to know how "their students" progressed as they moved on through the grades. They expressed a need to know if what they are doing has helped the students to make progress.

Instructional assistants indicated that they do not receive information about their assignment until after the school year has started. They emphasized that they wanted to begin working earlier in the school year, and requested that placement be done before school begins. Another concern expressed was the need for consistent placements, so they would be able to stay with their assigned teacher from year to year. Once they have developed a comfortable relationship, it creates a more efficient work environment.

The quality and dedication of the paraprofessionals interviewed was impressive. These individuals are clearly dedicated to the children and teachers they serve, and their focus was to improve their own performance. Clearly, this is a strength of special education programs in the district, as many of the students are directly supported by one-to-one and classroom paraprofessionals.

Consistency and Articulation between Schools

A theme that emerged in the data that overlaps with various other themes is articulation and consistency. With rapid growth in the district, there are ten schools, all with individual cultures, practices, and processes that have evolved over time and experience. It was reported that there is a need for more interaction between staff at schools and across the district. Although it is important for schools to have their own identity and culture, this also creates inconsistency, which provides a challenge for efficiency, particularly related to special education programs, which span all schools. Many staff work in multiple schools, requiring an adjustment in practice and processes whenever they move from one school to another. It is recommended that a plan be put

in place to create structures for programming, assessment, identification and referral, parent interactions, etc. that are consistent, while still preserving the culture and identity of the school. Perhaps an articulation committee, with representation from each building and special education staff that work in multiple buildings, would be able to make recommendations for creating and implementing a plan.

Administrators

Critical participants in any plan for improved articulation are the school building administrators. Clearly, there are regular administrative meetings, but it was not clear as to how the special education administrators fit into the administrative structure. Principals report to the Superintendent, while special education administrators report to the Deputy Superintendent. Some assistant principals participate in I & RS teams, before there is special education involvement. There is a designated administrator at each building who serves as the liaison to special education. It was reported that students with disabilities in a school are served by the special education budget, which is different from the building budget. Perceptions were that this results in a building administrators' lack of perceived responsibility for the students who are classified in their building. Although this may only be a perception, building administrators may not have preparation and training in special education, yet they have a critical role in the effectiveness in special education programs (Stoner & Angell, 2006). The relationship between building administrators and parents of students with disabilities is a key factor in student progress (Stoner & Angell, 2006).

Relationship between General Education and Special Education

A strong connection between general and special education is essential to modeling an inclusive culture. A large number of students are included in general education classrooms for part of the school day in the district, and this means that general education teachers are working with students with disabilities on a regular basis. In order to practice effective inclusive practice and instruction, school administrators should communicate clear expectations for communication and interaction between general and special education. This should start from the top down, through their own interaction with special education administration. Next, district and building administrators should create and communicate a clear vision of what they expect from inclusive classrooms, particularly those that have co-teachers or instructional assistants present. General education teachers should receive training and support related to inclusive practice, differentiated instruction, and structures for co-teaching when appropriate. This requires modeling from administration, creation of a clear vision and expectations, communication of the vision and expectations to all relevant stakeholders, and consistent professional development, where everyone receives the same messages. This will improve the delivery of instruction and make it

more efficient and effective. In order to accomplish this it is recommended that the district create a professional learning community related to inclusive practice. Members of this community should be teachers, parents, staff, and administrators in both general and special education. This group should craft a vision and related expectations, with action plans for implementing this vision.

Another aspect of articulation is the need for a more consistent process for transition from school to school for students with disabilities. It is often very challenging for a student with a disabilities to change placements and move to a new school. When this is challenging for the children, it is stressful for the family, and families may need support through this process. Sample reviews should be done on various students to examine how they move through the school system. Although it was reported that child study team members and teachers meet when groups of students are getting ready to transition to the next level, this appears to be more informal than systematic.

In-Class Resource/Inclusion

The in-class resource model is implemented in several schools, sometimes on a full-time basis beginning in the in the upper elementary grades, middle and high schools. Most participants involved in ICR reported that it can be extremely effective with the "right" teams. Although this model is reported to be working for students, there are several ways to improve the structure. First, it was reported that currently co-teachers have little or no training to work together, even though there was some training in the past, team members have changed. It was also reported that expectations for co-teachers are not always clear. There is literature and research related to effective implementation of co-taught classrooms (Friend & Cook, 2004), and professional development for co-teachers in in-class resource models is critical. As mentioned earlier, clear expectations should be communicated, coming from both general ed and special ed administration. Some teachers reported the "legend" that when observed, if both teachers are teaching together, they are not doing their job. This results in unclear roles and does not efficiently maximize the impact of having two teachers in a classroom. Professional development and clear expectations can accomplish this. Administrative support is also critical to effective co-teaching, so administrators should participate in related professional development and provide time for co-planning (Friend & Cook, 2004)..

Another concern that emerged related to in-class resource is the fact that many students who are determined to be at risk, in addition to those who are classified, are placed in ICR classes because there are two teachers present. This creates very large classes with primarily needy students, making it challenging to meet the needs of all students in the room. This is reported to be a result of the elimination of the "pull-out" model of support classes. The need for programs for "average" students, new transfers

to the district, or those who are struggling with the challenging curriculum emerged frequently throughout the review as a reason for increasing referrals and needs for evaluation of students who might not have a disability.

Special education staff typically participate in district-wide professional development when this is provided on designated days. Many reported that this is often irrelevant for them, and they are sometimes left out of sessions. Clearly, this time could be use more efficiently, when so many areas of professional development are needed to provide knowledge and consistency. If there is relevant professional development for special education staff and service providers, everyone will be on the same page when implementing services for students.

Special education staff expressed a need for articulation amongst themselves, indicating the desire for more interaction and communication with one another as well as special education supervisors. Although there are staff meetings for special education staff, it was recommended that these be held more regularly to communicate district initiatives, share ideas and concerns, and explore current issues.

Parent Relations

The West Windsor-Plainsboro School District serves students from West Windsor Township in Mercer County, NJ and Plainsboro Township in Middlesex County, NJ. In West Windsor, the 2007-2009 mean family income was \$188,702; in Plainsboro, the 2007-2009 mean family income was \$135,552 (U.S. Census Bureau). These diverse suburban communities consist of many professional families. Education is highly valued, and parents are very involved in their children's education. Throughout this review, parent participation was a priority, and input was solicited from parents through focus groups, surveys, e-mail communication, document review, etc.

A consistent and overarching theme was related to the interactions between parents of students with disabilities and the school district. Comments from various stakeholder groups indicated that there is a strong culture of mistrust and adversarial relationships between parents of students with disabilities and school district personnel. Some stakeholders indicated the perception that there are an unusually high number of lawsuits, with reports of district personnel telling parents to "go ahead and sue us". During parent focus group meetings, several parents expressed strong negative experiences in their interactions with the district and reported that inadequate or inappropriate services were provided to their children. On several occasions, parents indicated that they had to "fight for every little thing".

The perception that West Windsor-Plainsboro has a consistently high number of lawsuits may be a result of this adversarial culture of mistrust. A review of the number

of cases submitted for mediation or due process over the last five years revealed a relatively high number of cases, above the state average, from 2006-2007 and 2007-2008 (see Table 3). However, in the last three years, there has been a decrease in the number of cases. It should also be noted that there is a pattern where several families have filed multiple cases, making the number of cases seem higher than they actually are. Not all cases go through to due process; most cases are settled, parents withdraw the case, or they go to mediation.

It was reported that some parents feel compelled to get independent evaluations at their own expense. Several parents expressed the perception that the district would not acknowledge these evaluations. The context of the specific situation, child, family and evaluation should be considered in order to determine the appropriateness of this claim. It should be noted that the New Jersey Administrative Code (NJAC: 6A) states that independent evaluations must be considered in decisions made by the school district (New Jersey Department of Education, 2006).

The data were not conclusive as to whether the culture of mistrust and adversarial relationships represents the majority of parents in the district, or a smaller number of parents who have had negative experiences who are actively expressing the challenges they have faced. At some of our focus group meetings, I observed parents telling others who are new to the district about the difficulties they have had and warning the new parents about what they will encounter. Several stakeholders mentioned the idea that adversarial relationships might be due to unrealistic expectations that parents might have for their children, or their expectations for the scope of responsibilities and capabilities of the school district. Various participants from the district reported that several parents were extremely demanding and difficult, causing personnel to expend a disproportionate amount of time and resources on specific, individual cases. The term "entitlement" was frequently seen in the data. A few parents contacted me individually, indicating that they were reluctant to speak out in a positive way in a focus group setting. It should be noted that the reviewer requested observations of IEP meetings to observe interactions, but was unable to do so due to privacy concerns.

Parents have several venues for providing feedback and input to the school district. As required by law, the district has a Parent Advisory Council that meets approximately three to four times a year to discuss issues related to special education. Respondent comments indicated the perception that the agenda for these meetings was determined by district personnel, and that parents involved did not perceive that they had a voice in what took place in these meetings. It was reported that participants in this group were selected to create balanced representation of parents of students with various classification categories and at varied grade levels. In addition, there is a Parent Connection Group, "a parent/teacher resource and support network", organized by a

district faculty member, that meets about three times per year. This group is "open to all" and offers relevant guest speakers and information for parents of students with disabilities. There is also an independent, organized group called "Special Kids, Special Parents" who meet regularly to discuss issues related to special education. The data was not clear as to what the mission of this group was, but it was suggested that this is an adversarial group that is dissatisfied with special education in the district. Recently, a parent was interested in forming a Special Parent Teacher Association, and the district worked with her to create another venue for parent participation. It is my understanding that this is now a working and successful group.

Four focus group meetings were held with parents of students with disabilities. Attendance at each of the meetings was approximately 8-15 parents, with approximately 30 parents attending the daytime meeting. A few parents attended more than one meeting. In addition, the reviewer received individual feedback in e-mails from various parents. Those that attended expressed disappointment with the way the meetings were advertised, suggesting that not all parents knew about the meetings and that the announcements were "hidden" in the web site so parents would not notice them. Again, this perception reflects the culture of mistrust.

It is important to note that, with 1,317 students enrolled in special education programs, focus group attendance was not representative of the majority of parents of students with disabilities in the district. It was suggested that parents who are satisfied with district programs were uncomfortable attending adversarial meetings, so they might not attend. In order to reach a more representative number of parents, an electronic survey was sent out via e-mail/Survey Monkey, so that parents could express their perspectives on an individualized basis. The results of this survey are discussed later in this review.

The findings from the parent stakeholder focus groups were inconsistent. Most of the parents who attended reported extremely negative experiences, and were clearly very passionate about the lack of support for their children. A few reported positive experiences, support, and student progress. Data from a few parents via phone conversations or e-mails were very supportive and had very positive feedback about their child's experiences in the District. The inconsistency of parent perceptions suggests that many relationships with families may be dependent on the individuals they encounter in the district. Several participants stated that they had good experiences with some case managers, but when their child changed schools, their interactions changed with a new case manager.

Parent Survey Findings

Since attendance at parent meetings was not representative of the number of students in special education, a brief electronic survey was created on Survey Monkey. The survey was distributed with the intent of soliciting data from parents who might not have been able to attend a focus group. In addition, some participants may have been more comfortable responding in private. At first, the link was made available through the district web site, which yielded approximately 55 responses. Later, the link was sent via e-mail directly to parents, which resulted in an additional 104 responses, for a total of 159. It is important to note that this result supports the finding that more direct communication with parents will result in greater participation.

A total of nine questions, some with drop-down choices and some open-ended, were included in the survey. The questions solicited the following information:

Schools Attended:

The majority of responses (53.2%) were from parents of secondary students, with 18.2% from Millstone River and Village Schools. Only 33.8 % of parents responding had children in grades P-3.

Services Received:

When asked what kinds of services their children received, the largest number of respondents had speech services, while the next largest group were in general education with in-class resource (34.8%). It was interesting to note that 18.1 % of the parents who responded had students working with an inclusion facilitator, and 11.6% had students in out-of-district placements.

Length of Services:

Parents of students who have received services for 1-3 years was the largest group, with 43.9 %, while 41.3% of respondents had students who have been receiving services for 4-7 years, and were “veterans” of special services participation in the school district. Several were parents of students who have been receiving services for 7-10 years (12.3%), and only 5.2 % for more than 10 years. This appeared to be a distribution that was representative of most parents.

Meeting the Child's Needs:

When asked if they believed their child's needs had been met, 58.8% of the respondents said yes, while 41.2 % said no. Most of the responses were very specific to their individual child rather than programmatic, which was also evident in the focus group meetings. The next survey question asked the participants to explain these answers. Some parents are very pleased, with comments such as:

- *“Our son has improved significantly and this is due to his IEP”*
- *“Yes, it gives her the amount of time to process information where with this she would be rushed and unable to understand the work”*
- *“The teachers truly seem to care and the way they teach is very effective. “*
- *“1:1 and regular meeting with Child Study Team help us keep on top of my child’s educational needs”*
- *“He’s highly functional and has been able to receive the help needed at each crossroad and each year we have decreased the amount of services”*
- *“The District has been very helpful and flexible”*
- *“My child would not be able to function totally in a regular ed class without the support of his special ed teacher. It is a wonderful system for him”*
- *“A huge improvement in my child’s reading and writing were shown in a short time with special education”*
- *“The school district has gone above and beyond to ensure the needs of both my kids are met”.*

However, other responses support the negative reports from parents in focus groups. Some related comments were:

- *“My child’s IEP was basically ignored”*
- *“For my in-district child there needs to be more emphasis on social skills training for the student and teachers”*
- *“The program does not allow enough flexibility to offer instruction at the right level. Students need to fit the level being taught. If they are able to do more there isn’t a good solution”*
- *“The district is not interested in students’ special needs, only fitting child into what exists. The district does not care about whether or not it follows the laws. The attitude is generally take it or take us to court.”*
- *“District does a very poor job of responding a complete and timely fashion to parental requests. District fosters an adversarial relationship with parents.”*
- *“The focus of their programs has been on what they don’t do well to the exclusion of what they do well”*
- *“The IA assigned to him was not trained and negatively impacted my child’s performance and progress. Half way through the school year, his aide was replaced. The new aide may or may not have been trained.”*
- *“Teachers in this district do not seem to have an understanding of or willingness to make modification in the mainstream or least restrictive environment. More training is needed in inclusive practices and benefits.”*
- *“He needs social skills and that is not offered”*
- *“Availability of taking certain classes is limited due to resources available”*

- *“I also believe the school district moves way too fast catering to those who are achieving and beyond”*
- *“Both of my children have had their case manager change each year and I usually only hear from them to arrange the IEP meeting.”*

Perceived Progress:

The next question asked “Is your child making educational progress?” Surprisingly, there were a considerable number of positive responses. Out of a total of 139 responses, there were approximately 12 definitive “no” answers, with 17 reporting fair progress, or were unsure of whether progress was being made. Four had other non-specific answers, while 3 reported they were making progress due to supports provided from home. The remainder of comments were positive, some more emphatic than others. Twenty survey respondents skipped the question. These results are somewhat contradictory in comparison to previous responses from focus groups and earlier questions about whether students’ needs are being met. Perhaps parent expectations of students’ needs are not commensurate with their ability to make progress.

Communication with District Staff:

The next survey question was related to parent satisfaction with their communication with district staff. Parents responded on a Likert scale, ranging from “very satisfied” to “very dissatisfied”, for various staff that work with students with disabilities (case managers, child study team members, teachers, administrators, services providers, and special education supervisors). Overall, the respondents indicated more satisfaction than dissatisfaction with their communication with staff. With the exception of the teachers, who were mostly rated in the very satisfied or satisfied category, there were more respondents with a neutral rating than those with negative ratings. The numbers in these ratings are inconsistent, supporting the previous data related to parents relations.

The largest number of neutral ratings were related to communication with administrators. Although there were some satisfied ratings, the high number of neutral comments may support the focus group data related to the relationship between general and special education (discussed later in this report). Many administrators, particularly those at the building level, are not primarily involved with parents of students with disabilities and do not communicate on a regular basis. The fact that special education administrators received the highest number of dissatisfied ratings (35 out of 139), but yet had 54 neutral ratings, supports the inconsistency of interactions and communication with parents.

Recommendations for Improvement:

Question 8 solicited ideas for improvement of special education programs in the district. This question was also asked in all of the focus groups, but responses usually reverted back to complaints about individual children. In Question 9, participants were asked to provide additional comments and suggestions. The survey participants had a considerable number of recommendations in their responses, which might be due to the comfort level of responding in private rather than in a group. Some of these recommendations were:

- *“ More social skills training programs”*
- *“Hire someone who can do social skills training and develop a social skills program. I would also support more inclusion in the mainstream of special ed kids”*
- *“Fix your programs, they don’t pertain to every student”*
- *“Continue doing your very important job”*
- *“Please keep it as is”*
- *“None ...excellent in every way”*
- *“The inclusion classroom facilitators seem to be stretched too thin in terms of work load and responsibilities. We need more classroom inclusion facilitators”*
- *“Communication is KEY. Please have the case manager communicate more proactively with parents and come up with multiyear plan rather than focus on just one year”*
- *World language needs to be revamped for students with IEPs and other children that struggle with your inclusion philosophy”*
- *“I can’t even get an IEP document prior to sitting down in my IEP meeting, and then it’s written in technical terms with so much fluff that it’s hard to find any significant information”.*
- *“Having an aide and an in-class support teacher with a regular education teacher. At times there has been too many children in one class who need support the in-class support teacher cannot handle them all.”*
- *“Better communication between the parents and district”*
- *“Programs that children are sent out of district for should be developed in-district”*
- *“Please accept our kids. All the kids in this school district cannot be A students”.*
- *“it would be great if the new supervisors help change the tone of hostility in special services”*
- *“Training and supervision of Instruction Assistants Staff. Staff training about autism. Staff training on inclusion. Staff training about [working] collaboratively with parents”.*
- *“One of the biggest problems that we’ve experienced is the abrupt change in case manager . . .”*

Overall, the theme of these suggestions supports the need for ongoing, effective communication with parents. Many of the comments indicate that parents want information and explanations of IEPs and other things that are happening with their children. They also want to know what is available – not just in the current school year, but in the future for their child. Parents want to be heard, have input into what is happening with their children, and be part of the team. The comments indicate the need for consistency in programming, teaching methods and services provided. A comment/suggestion was to “arrange meetings with all parents together at least three times a year so that we can all voice our concern and satisfaction together.” This would create three shared district-wide meetings for parents and district personnel to communicate and share feedback and ideas. Another suggested a PTA for parents of children with special needs. Based on preliminary feedback from this review, this group is now established. .

The survey data provide many more positive comments than those shared in the focus groups, with many respondents expressing some satisfaction with district programs, student progress, and communication. However, many of the open-ended comments are consistent with the patterns and themes found in the focus group data about parent relations and continuum of services. Recommendations for addressing these concerns are documents in the “implications” section of this report.

Parent Relations: Related Research

Parental dissatisfaction with special education programs is not unique to West-Windsor Plainsboro School District. There is considerable research in the professional literature surrounding this challenge (Fish, 2008, Lytle & Bordin, 2001, Rock, 2000). Spann, Kohler, & Soenksen (2003) wrote: “Because of the potential consequences of these negative perceptions and relationships, there is a dire need to continue to examine relationships between schools and families of children in special education. The core elements of this relationship are communication, parent input in the IEP process, and parent satisfaction with school services“(p. 229). Parent participation in a child’s education, particularly parents of students in special education programs, is critical to effective services, as parents know their children better than anyone (Fish, 2006; Goodall and Bruder, 1986; Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, and Crowley, 2005).

The research emphasizes the critical need for trust between parents and educators, especially between parents of students with disabilities. Trust in a parent/school relationship is critical to academic success for students (Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). In a study of parent perceptions of relationships with educators, Stoner and Angell (2006) concluded, that “The degree of perceived parental trust in education professionals correlated with the degree of engagement by parents in the roles of negotiator, monitor, and supporter. When parents described low levels of

trust, an increase in the time spent as negotiators and monitors occurred. Conversely, when parents indicated higher levels of trust, their time spent as supporters increased.”(p. 185). When parents feel they need to “fight” for services for their child, the result is a loss of trust, and often creates an environment where parents feel the need to obtain services through litigation (Stoner, et al., 2005). In a study of parent relationships with school professionals, they found that “Foundations of trust were developed when expectations between parents and professionals were clearly defined, when promises and expectations were met, and when parents believed that professionals’ genuine intent was to do the best they could for their children. (p.47). Lake and Billingsley (2000) conducted a study of conflict between educators and parents of students with disabilities, and identified various factors that contribute to conflict, and subsequently some kind of litigation. These are: “discrepant views of a child or a child’s needs, knowledge, service delivery, constraints, valuation, reciprocal power, communication, and trust” (p. 244).

When parents perceive that they are treated as equal partners in IEP meetings, they also perceive it to be welcoming and therefore comfortable (Fish, 2008; Lytle & Bordin, 2001). “Although parents often take the initiative to educate themselves, school districts’ personnel should educate families on special education services and the IEP process through initiatives such as periodic workshops and seminars. If school districts provide services to educate parents, then these parents will perceive that educators value the importance of facilitating positive relationships with them” (Fish, 2008, p. 13). This research provides recommendations for team meetings that include ample time for parent participation, and the creation of a welcoming atmosphere, making sure parents know at least one member of the team (Fish, 2008; Lytle & Bordin, 2001). These factors were some of the key reasons for negative relationships cited in this study. When positive relationships are built with parents by treating them as equal, participating members of the team, relationships will be less adversarial. It was evident from the data in this report that parents want a voice in their child’s education, and this is supported by Fish (2008), who found that better relationships will be fostered by valuing and encouraging parent input.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that the district create a professional learning community to explore a vision and action plan for improving relationships between parents of students with disabilities, as well as students who might be at risk, and the school district. This group should consist of all stakeholders, with clear representation from parents at varied levels and with children on the continuum of needs. A primary charge of this group should be to design specific and targeted professional development to be provided to all district professionals who interact with parents of students who are at-risk or have been diagnosed with a disability. This would include I & RS team members, child study

teams, teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals. New employees would need to participate in this training so that they are familiar with district policy.

Creating a common vision and guidelines for practice would a) communicate clear expectations for parent relations in practice and performance, b) create continuity in interactions with parents across schools, teams, and individuals as students and their family's progress through the district, and c) create practice that is based on current research and theory. This common vision should be communicated to everyone in the district, in written format, to clarify expectations to all.

CSTs should receive professional development in understanding parent perspectives and roles of effective teams. For example, as district personnel work together on a regular basis, they develop relationships. Parents, on the other hand, often meet with the team once a year, and do not have the same collaborative experiences with the team members, which results in their perceived lack of team membership. In addition, much of what is communicated in team meetings and interactions is non-verbal, and team members may not be aware of how their non-verbal behaviors are perceived by parents (Lytle & Bordin, 2001). Conflict resolution training might also help to mitigate some of the negative interactions, and enable compromise and solutions at the team level (Henderson, 2008). With training, awareness, and reflection, interactions with parents has the potential to improve relationships.

The data consistently highlighted the amount of time and effort exhausted by interfacing with families, keeping supervisors, child study team members from various other aspects of their responsibilities. Other districts and states have used various methods to resolve disputes with parents, in order to prevent the need for due process (Henderson, 2008). It is recommended that the district come up with a plan to be more responsive to parents proactively, by responding quickly to parent phone calls and consistently responding to parent concerns. This plan might help to prevent parent-school challenges from escalating.

An initial recommendation from this report was to form an active support group for parents of students in special education programs, and I believe this has since been established. This group should be run collaboratively by parents and district representatives. Meetings should be held regularly for a variety of purposes, to be determined by the group and their current needs. This group should also be a vehicle for providing parent information and training. The data suggest that it might be beneficial to run parent trainings related to appropriate and collaborative advocacy for their children, how to interact with your child study team, etc. Speakers could be brought in on topics relevant to group members, such as transition, assistive technology, etc. This group would also be a way to share and keep parents informed on relevant district initiatives, changes in personnel, etc. Group members might also

have sessions for new parents, or transfer parents, in the district, to help them to navigate procedures. An active parent group, with a clear mission and positive, collaborative focus, would provide a way for parents to have an active role and voice in the district, fostering a collaborative relationship built on trust and respect. Another suggestion is to have a regular orientation for parents new to the district, providing them with information, curriculum, processes and procedures. Provide some “training” here for them, discussing how to collaborate with your child’s teachers and case managers.

Implications for Practice and Program Improvement

The West Windsor-Plainsboro School District provides a continuum of high quality programs for students with disabilities. A considerable amount of resources, time, and hard work is dedicated to providing strong programs to all students with varying disabilities, at all grade levels. A recurring theme of this review is that all of the district administration, faculty, and staff were focused on the individual needs of students, and were dedicated to providing the best possible programming within the context of the district and the resources available. With the rapid growth over the last several decades, it has been challenging to provide programs for all of the students moving into the district, and many program additions and revisions have been implemented on an ongoing basis. Most of the participants were reflective about the areas of need, but acknowledged the strength of the programs in the district compared to those in other surrounding districts. However, in the spirit of program improvement inherent in this review, many of the themes here are focused on recommendations for program improvement.

An overwhelming implication that runs throughout all of the findings in this review is the need for comprehensive, consistent, and focused professional development related to special education programs. With the number of students determined to be at-risk or receiving some kind of special education services, almost everyone employed by the district will interact with parents and students with educational needs. District-wide professional development should address some of the key issues highlighted in this report, in order to provide consistent understandings and expectations for staff and administration.

The findings indicated a need for consistent, accurate data collection across the district related to program and procedural effectiveness. Ongoing data collection is warranted to determine the effectiveness of new and ongoing initiatives before they are expanded or duplicated at various grade levels. In addition, procedures and structures should be clear and communicated to stakeholders involved. For example, as part of

this review, I asked to see a copy of the district's organizational chart, and how special services fit into that structure. There was an existing chart, but this was not current or readily available. This should be updated regularly and shared with administration and staff to clarify roles and responsibilities for all involved.

Another focused area of data collection should be to monitor the specific time spent on different tasks by child study teams. With their key role in identification, placement, and service delivery to children with disabilities, data is critical to determine effectiveness and make sure there are enough staff to provide effective services to students, teachers, and families.

There has recently been a considerable amount of turnover in district administration. Although this brings challenges, it also provides opportunities for growth and change. With the hiring of new special education supervisors, it is possible to change the adversarial context that has built up over the years, and to begin to explore the possibilities for establishing positive relationships with parents. It is highly recommended that, beginning immediately, the district hold a "welcoming" meeting and orientation for parents, letting them know that change is going to occur, and asking for their participation in this change.

The most important implication of this review is the need for a focused, organized effort to develop positive relationships with parents. There is a need to be more transparent with parents, and utilize communication vehicles, such as e-mail, newsletter, and the website. Parent groups, regular meetings, dissemination and sharing of information are all key strategies. Critical to this process is professional development across the district about effective practice for parent/school interactions, effective communication, and conflict resolution.

There are a considerable number of recommendations implied in this review; these have been listed by theme in Table 6. This template may be adapted to create a planning guide. Rather than do many things at once, it is suggested that the district prioritize these recommendations, and create action plans with targeted dates for completion. There should be a strategic plan for focused change and improvement, with a clear plan to address needs and growth. Of course, resources are limited, but many of these activities can be accomplished through reflection and restructuring. Those that require additional funding may be analyzed for cost effectiveness.

Reviewer's Professional Impressions

West Windsor-Plainsboro is an outstanding school district that serves the students and community with an array of services and opportunities for all students to be "passionate, confident, life-long learners", as stated in the district's mission statement. Facilities in the district are exceptional, providing comfortable, appropriate

spaces for teaching and learning, with a great deal of current technology. Throughout my interactions with district employees, it was evident that the district consists of highly knowledgeable, hard working professionals who care about students and are exceptionally student focused. All of the administration and staff seemed to enjoy their job and liked working in West Windsor-Plainsboro School District. Special education programs are thriving and an array of services and staff are available to students. During data collection, it was clear that there is a considerable amount of ongoing reflection and program improvement taking place, as many of the findings of this review were already being considered and actively improved. The process of this review helps to support this reflection. However, with every situation, there is room for improvement. The fact that the District requested this review supports this ongoing reflection and desire to refine and improve programs for children.

I found that most parents in the District are highly educated, caring, and involved in their child's education. They want what is best for their children, and to work with the district to accomplish this. They are dealing with all the challenges of parenting a child with disabilities, and may not know how to navigate the "system", or interact collaboratively. It was clear that the process of completing this review was cathartic for parents, giving them a place to vent, hope for change, and participation represented a voice in that change.

It was also my impression, from my work during the review and subsequent interactions with teachers, administrators, child study teams, and other professionals in the district, that their common goal is to provide the best programs and opportunities for every student. A recurring theme in all of my conversations, observations, and interviews with West Windsor professionals and staff always focused on the students and their needs. In a school district of this size, consisting of such a diverse range of students, this is an indication of high quality education. Programs are important, but the attitudes of those who implement these programs is critical to effectiveness.

It was a pleasure to be a part of this program review. All of the participants were supportive, enthusiastic, and focused on improving programs for children. I was made welcome in all of my encounters, and was given a great deal of support, particularly by the Department of Special Services. This indicates a culture of caring, student-focused professionals who embrace the possibilities of improvement and growth. Thank you to everyone who participated in this review.

Respectfully submitted,

Michele Wilson Kamens, Ed. D.
August, 2011

References

Behavior Analyst Certification Board (2010). Retrieved July 25, 2011 from <http://www.bacb.com/index.php>

Fish, W. W. (2008). The IEP meeting: Perceptions of parents of students who receive special education services. *Preventing School Failure, 53* (1), 8-15.

Friend, M. & Cook, L. (2010). *Interactions: Collaboration skills for school professionals (6th ed)*. Boston: Pearson.

French, N. (2001). Supervising paraprofessionals: A survey of teacher practices. *Journal of Special Education 35* (1), 41-53.

French, N. & Chopra, R. V. (1999). Parent perspectives on the role of the paraprofessional in inclusion. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 24* (4), 1-14.

Henderson, K. (2008). Optional IDEA alternative dispute resolution. Project Forum. Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Retrieved from ERIC Database, July 30, 2011.

Howard, J. S. , Sparkman, C. R., Cohen, H. G., Green, G., & Stanislaw, H.. (2005). A comparison of intensive behavior analytic and eclectic treatments for young children with autism. *Research in Developmental Disabilities, 26* (4), 359-383.

Klin A, Saulnier, C. A., Sparrow, S. S., Cicchetti, D. V., Volkmar, C. L. (2007). Social and communication abilities and disabilities in higher functioning Individuals with autism spectrum disorders: The Vineland and the ADOS. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 37*, 748–759.

Lake, J., & Billingsley, B. (2000). An analysis of factors that contribute to parent-school conflict in special education. *Remedial & Special Education, 21*, 240–252.

Lytle, R. K, & Bordin, J. (2001). Enhancing the IEP team: Strategies for parents and professionals. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 33*, (5), 40-44.

Mc Carney, S. B., & Wunderlich, K. C. (2006). *Pre-referral intervention manual (PRIM)*-3rd Ed. Hawthorne Educational Resources, Columbia, MO

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

New Jersey Department of Education (2006). *Chapter 14: Special education, New Jersey administrative code title 6A*. Retrieved May 14, 2010 from <http://www.state.nj.us/education/code/current/title6a/chap14.pdf>

Rafoth, M. A., & Foriska, T. (2006). Administrator participation in promoting effective problem-solving teams. *Remedial & Special Education, 27* (3), 130-135.

Reichow, B. & Volkmar, F. (2010) Social skills interventions for individuals with autism: Evaluation for evidence-based practices within a best evidence synthesis framework. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 40*,149–166.

Shelden, D. , Angell, M. Stoner, J. B., Roseland, B.D. (2010). School principals' influence on trust: perspectives of mothers of children with disabilities. *Journal of Educational Research, 103* (3), 159-170.

Slonski-Slonski-Fowler, K. E., & Truscott, S. D. (2004). General education teachers' perceptions of the prereferral intervention team process. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 15* (1), 1-39.

Stoner, J. B. & Angell, M. E. (2006). Parent perspectives on role engagement: An investigation of parents of children with ASD and their self-reported roles with education professionals. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 21* (3), 177–189.

Stoner, J. B, Bock, S. J., Thompson, J. R., Angell, M. E., Heyl, B. S. & Crowley, E. P. (2005) Welcome to our world: Parent perceptions of interactions between parents of young children with ASD and education professionals. *Focus On Autism And Other Developmental Disabilities, 20* (1), 39–51.

Truscott, S. D., Cohen, C. E., Sams, D. P. Sanborn, K. J., & Frank, A. J. (2005). The current state(s) of prereferral intervention teams: A report from two national surveys. *Remedial and Special Education, 26* (3), 130-140.

Turnbull, A. P., Turnbull, H. R., Erwin, E. & Soodak, L. (2006). *Families, professionals, and exceptionality: Positive outcomes through partnership and trust* (5th ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

U. S. Census Bureau (2011). American fact finder. Retrieved July 20, 2011 from <http://factfinder.census.gov>

U.S. Department of Education. (2010). Building the legacy: IDEA 2004. Retrieved May 14, 2010 from <http://idea.ed.gov/>

U. S. Government Accountability Office, (2005). Special education: Children with Autism. GAO 05-220. Retrieve July 26, 2011 from www.gao.gov/new.items/d05220.pdf.

U.S. Public Health Service (2000). Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General. U. S. Department Of Health And Human Services. Retrieved on July 25, 2011 from <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/mentalhealth/toc.html>

Young, H. L., & Gaughan, E. (2010). A multiple method longitudinal investigation of pre-referral intervention team functioning: Four years in rural schools. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation*, 20 (2), 106-138.

Table 1
Mercer County Classification Rates

| COUNTRY NAME | New Jersey Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs 2010 District Classification Rates, Ages 3-21 (Districts and Charter Schools) As of October 15, 2010 | Clsfd Rate |
|--------------|---|------------|
| | DISTRICTNAME | |
| MERCER | EAST WINDSOR REGIONAL | 14.09 |
| MERCER | EWING TOWNSHIP | 16.96 |
| MERCER | HAMILTON TOWNSHIP | 18.60 |
| MERCER | HOPEWELL VALLEY REGIONAL | 14.89 |
| MERCER | LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP | 14.71 |
| MERCER | MERCER COUNTY VOCATIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT | 3.57 |
| MERCER | PRINCETON REGIONAL | 15.77 |
| MERCER | ROBBINSVILLE | 12.71 |
| MERCER | TRENTON | 16.47 |
| MERCER | WEST WINDSOR-PLAINSBORO REGIONAL | 11.84 |

Table 2
Special Services Department
Staffing and Enrollment Data
10/15/2010

| Group Description | Oct 2010 | Oct 2009 | Oct 2008 | Comments |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Special Education Students | 1052 | 1124 | 1113 | 6.4% reduction from 2009 |
| ESLS (Speech Only) Students | 158 | 143 | 135 | 10.5% increase from 2009 |
| Total Sp Ed and ESLS | 1210 | 1267 | 1248 | 4.5% reduction from 2009 |
| Out-of-District Students | 107 | 135 | 132 | 21% reduction from 2009 |
| Special Education Teachers | 112.334 | 111.8 | 107.42 | 3.0 new positions this year but fewer adaptive classes (varies by year) |
| Child Study Team Staff | 34.4 | 35.2 | 35.2 | .8 FTE reduction in staff during 10-11 budget process |
| Speech-Language Specialists | 15.9 | 15.1 (15.7 w/ consultants) | 14.1 (15.1 w/ consultants) | Increases due to new programs – PS, MD/Autistic |
| Occupational Therapists | 4.2 | 4.0/4.2 | 3.8 | Mid-year increase in 2009 |
| Physical Therapists | 1.8 | 1.8 | 1.8 | |
| Teacher of the Deaf | 0.4 | 0.2 | 0 | Mid-year increase in 2009 |
| Sign Language Interpreters | 0.0 | 1.0 | 2.0 | |
| Instructional Assistants | 125.87 | 125.55 | 117.73 | |
| Secretaries | 6.0 | 6.2 | 6.2 | Decrease .2 in 2010 |

Notes to Table 2:

Staffing Initiatives/Factors:

- Consultation/Indirect Service Delivery Model for Secondary Level Speech, OT, and PT services
- New Programs (see list) in 2008, 2009, and 2010
- More significant related services needs for students/programs brought back to district
- Middle School Schedule – different bell schedules for each grade restricts sharing special education staff across grade levels
- HQ Requirements for secondary teachers impacts flexibility in assignments
- Case Management duties
- Preschool Assessment Team – 100 Referrals (7/09-6/10) - .4 LDTC, .4 Psych, .3 SW, .3 SP
- District Eligibility/Re-Evaluation Meetings – 442 (7/09-6/10)

General Ed Services Funded through Special Education Budget:

- All District Home Instruction (Medical, IEP, Disciplinary)
- Tuition/Transportation for Alternative and/or Interim Placements for Gen Ed Students (Rubino, etc.)
- Some 504 Services (consultants, special instructional programs)
- IDEA Early Intervening Services – 6 one day/week consultants in K-3 and 4-5 schools

Other Budget Factors:

- ARRA (Stimulus) Grant ends August 2011
- Extraordinary Aid Funding
- Non-Resident Tuition paid to WW-P for Special Ed Programs – 2 in HSN MD, plus 3 group home placements (paid by home districts)
- SEMI Medicaid Program

Table 3
West Windsor Plainsboro School District
Mediation and Due Process Cases

| Year | # of Cases | # of Families Involved* | Average of Cases in Other Districts | Range of Cases in Other Districts |
|-------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|
| 2010-2011 | 16 | 12 | Not Available | Not Available |
| 2009-2010 | 15 | 12 | 14.3 | 9-42 |
| 2008-2009 | 11 | 11 | 13.6 | 8-73 |
| 2007-2008 | 23 | 18 | 13.9 | 10-27 |
| 2006-2007 | 24/22? | 21 | 12.5 | 9-22 |

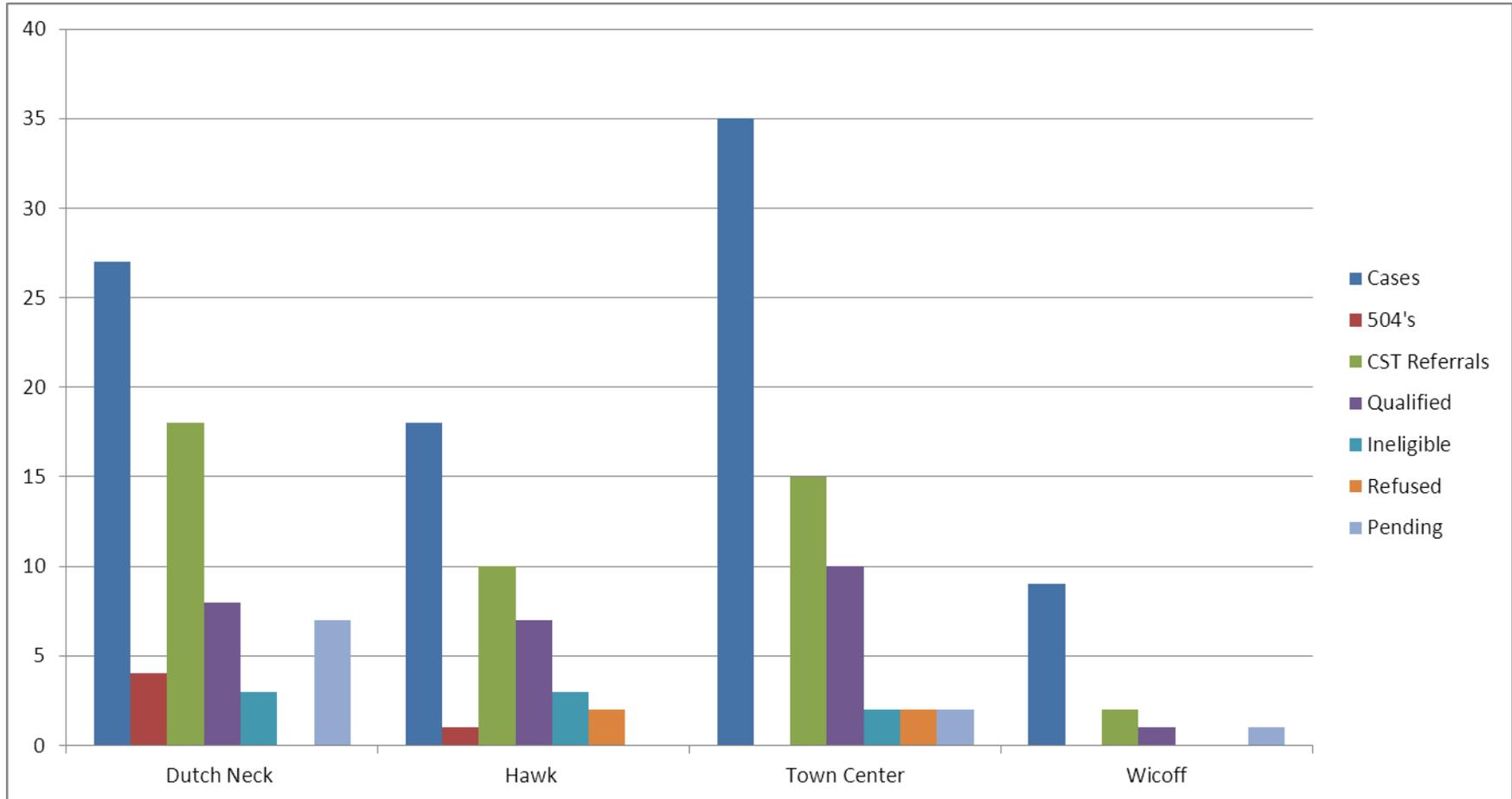
*Some families have filed multiple complaints, each counted as a single case

Note: A single family filed cases in 2008-2009 (1) , 2009-2010 (1), and 2010-2011 (4)

Table 4: 2010-2011 Intervention and Referral Services Data

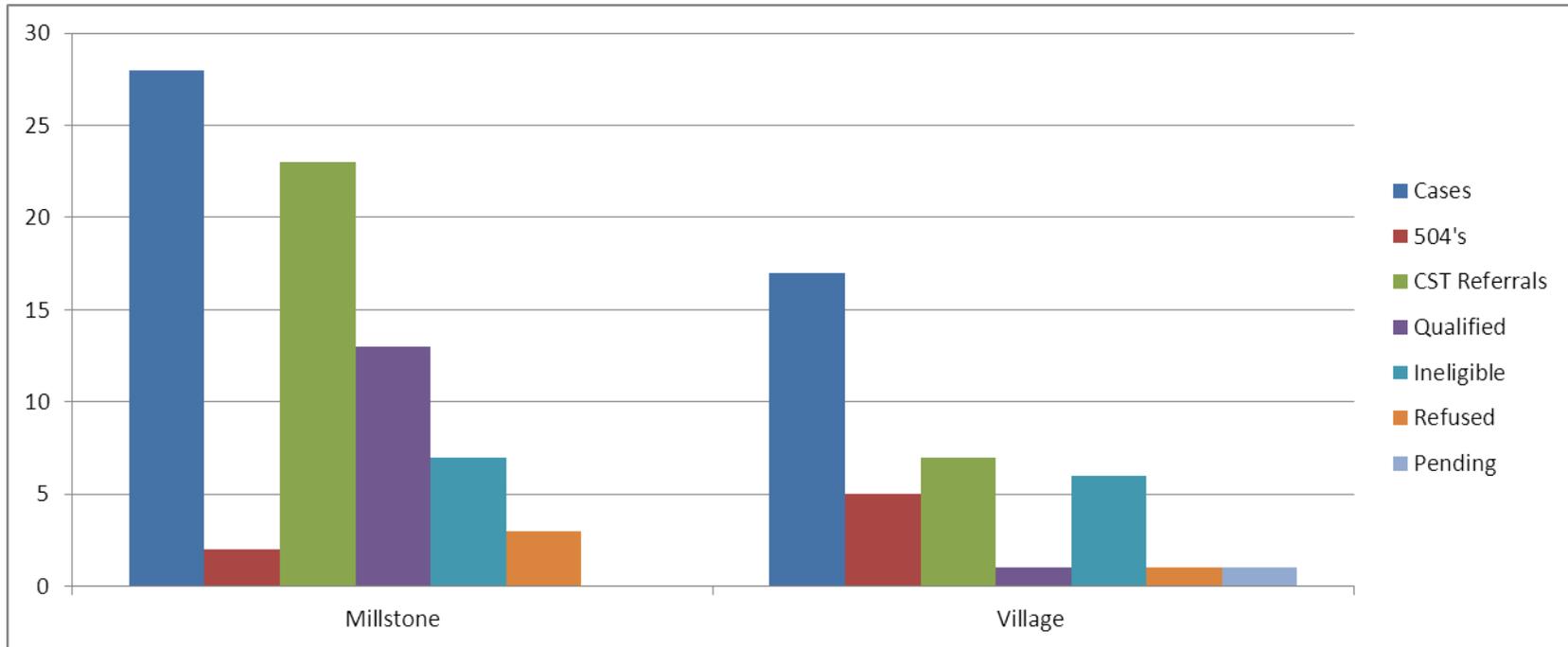
West Windsor-Plainsboro School District

K-3 I&RS DATA



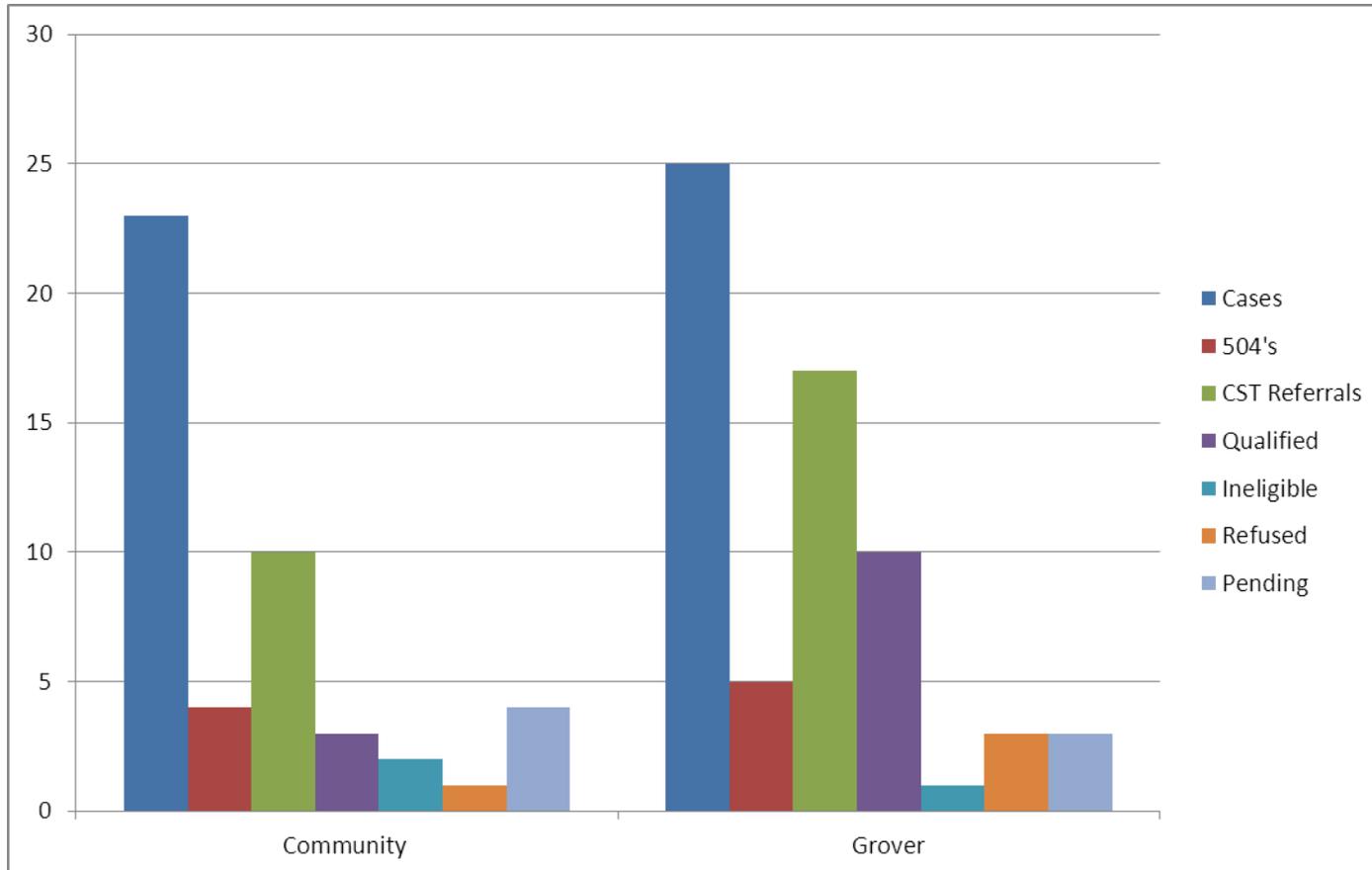
WW-P 2010-2011

4-5 I&RS DATA



WW-P 2010-2011

4-5 I&RS DATA



WW-P 2010-2011

9-12 I&RS DATA

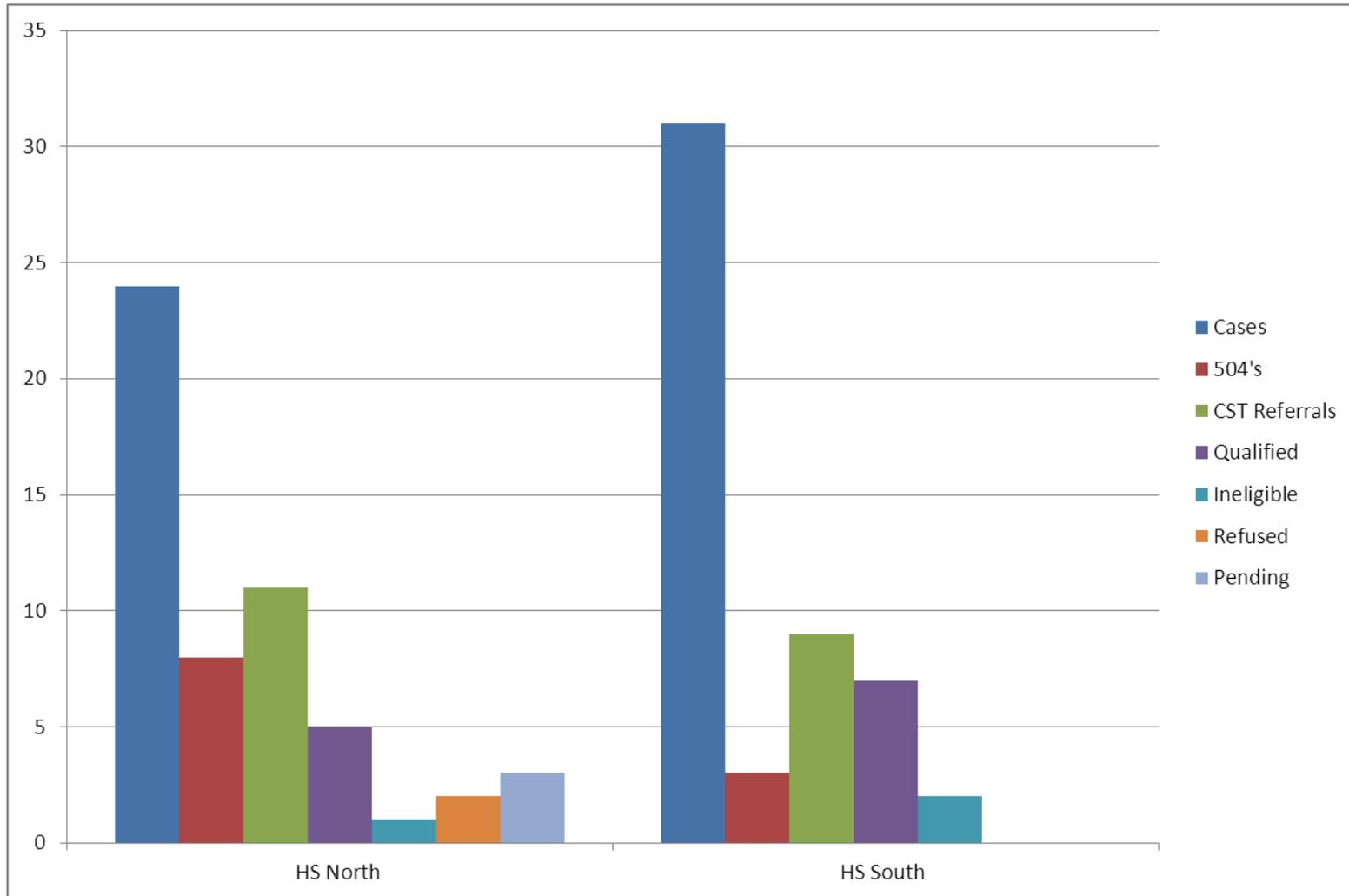


Table 5
Special Education Classification Rates
West Windsor for Years 2008-2009 compared to NJDOE 2010

| Eligibility | Classified | Percent | West Windsor 2008 | Percent | West Windsor 2009 | Percent |
|--------------------------------|----------------|---------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| Autism | 13,265 | 6 | 97 | | 66 | 6.3 |
| Communication Impaired | | | 80 | | 86 | 8.2 |
| Deaf Blindness | 13 | 0 | 0 | | | |
| Emotional Disturbance | 8,673 | 4 | 45 | | 38 | 3.6 |
| Hearing Impairments | 1,488 | .006 | 13 | | 12 | 1.1 |
| Multiple Disabilities | 20,230 | 9 | 213 | | 144 | 13.7 |
| Mental Retardation | 5,377 | 2 | 4 | | 1 | 0.1 |
| Other Health Impairments | 33,203 | 15 | 146 | | 147 | 14 |
| Orthopedic Impairments | 495 | .002 | 5 | | 4 | 0.4 |
| Specific Learning Disabilities | 79,059 | 37 | 417 | | 381 | 36.3 |
| Speech and Language Impairment | 41,935 | 19 | | | 129 | 12.3 |
| Traumatic Brain Injured | 843 | .003 | 3 | | 3 | 0.3 |
| Visual Impairments | 368 | .001 | | | | |
| Preschool Disabled | 11,329 | 5 | 55 | | 40 | 3.8 |
| Total | 216,278 | | 1078 | | 1051 | |

Blank cells indicate data was not available in this category

Table 6
West Windsor Plainsboro Program Review
Summary of Recommendations by Theme

| Themes | Recommendations | Action Plan(s) |
|-------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Parent Relations | Review standard communications and form letters for consistency and positive language | |
| | Increase vehicles for communication and dissemination of information with parents – newsletter, direct e-mail list, web page, parent groups, meetings | |
| | Create PLC to examine parent relations , create a clear vision with consistent expectations across the district | |
| | Distribute IEPs to parents before the scheduled meeting | |
| | Hire a parent liaison | |
| | Provide professional development about effective interactions and collaboration with parents for all administration and staff connected with special education, including general education administrators and/or teachers | |
| | Provide conflict resolution training, particularly for Child Study Teams | |
| | Start a PTA and/or support group for parents of students in special education | |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| | Have at least three parent meetings a year to share information, concerns, ideas, problem-solving, or parent training | |
| | Schedule an orientation for new and transfer families to provide information | |
| The Referral/Placement Process | Review and revise Intervention and Referral Process (currently implemented) with accurate data collection | |
| | Provide professional development for team members, related to effective, research-based interventions, effective teams, etc. | |
| | Provide professional development about the process, purpose, interventions, and how to participate for general education teachers | |
| | Create a professional learning community/task force to review the 504 process and criteria for the district | |
| | Explore and implement an Response to Intervention (RTI) model for identification of students with specific learning disabilities; is discrepancy model still being used? | |
| Program Offerings/ Continuum of Services/ Curriculum | Expand programs for students with behavioral disabilities before grade 9 | |
| | Explore placement options to separate students with autism and provide specific | |

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| | programming for these students | |
| | Provide program options for at-risk or struggling students | |
| | Examine structures for scheduling at the middle school to avoid on-team/off-team schedules for students with disabilities | |
| | Explore ways to provide student support in various languages (secondary level) through professional development for foreign language teachers | |
| | Explore clear consistent criteria for placement in resource vs. LLD | |
| | Examine impact of revised math curriculum on students in special education, particularly at the high school level | |
| | Implement a comprehensive, consistent social skills program that is supported by research | |
| | Explore separate, focused programs for individuals with autism; do not mix with MD population | |
| | Hire a behavior specialist who is BCBA certified and can implement ABA | |
| | Explore resources related to autism in the Mercer County area | |
| | Hire an assistive technology specialist to support use and implementation of technology for students | |
| | Explore opportunities for job sampling and work for | |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| | students in LARKS | |
| | Collect data to determine the effectiveness of inclusion facilitator program | |
| | Review possible solutions for professional development/certification in special education for language teachers | |
| Staff Roles and Relationships | Review case study management for efficiency | |
| | Collect data related to child study team activities to determine needs for effective team services | |
| | Provide relevant professional development for child study team members | |
| | Provide professional development for Instructional Assistants related to work with their students | |
| | Provide more time for Instructional Assistants to communicate with teachers | |
| | Give more advanced notice of Instructional Assistant assignments when possible | |
| Consistency and Articulation between Schools | Create an articulation committee to develop consistent structures for programming, assessment, identification and referral, parent interactions, etc. across the district | |
| | Create structures for ongoing communication between general education administrators and special education administrators | |
| | Create professional learning community related to inclusive practice. This | |

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>group would establish a clear vision and consistent expectations of what is expected in inclusive classroom; this should be shared</p> | |
| <p>Provide professional development related to inclusive practice, across the district</p> | |
| <p>Create professional development opportunities and communicate clear expectations for ICS teachers</p> | |
| <p>Include relevant professional development for special education staff</p> | |
| <p>Have regular, focused meetings for special education staff</p> | |