



Township of Union Public Schools Special Services Department Review

Educational Services Commission of New Jersey

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Educational Services Commission of New Jersey

Founded in 1977 as the Middlesex County Educational Services Commission, the Educational Services Commission of New Jersey (ESCNJ) provides Shared Educational and Business Services to meet the needs of the thirty member school districts and to school districts throughout NJ.

- Services including, but are not limited to:
 - Special Education Instructional Programs
 - Professional Development
 - Nonpublic School Services
 - Transportation
 - Cooperative Purchasing Program
 - Collaborative Educational Services (e.g., Department Reviews, Paraprofessional services, Professional Development, etc.)
- The primary mission of ESCNJ is to provide high quality, shared services programming



Union Special Services Department Review



Scope of Special Services Department Review April – September 2023

- Record Review/Examination of a sample of 46 student records representing the following: Initial Classification, Re-Evaluation, Transition (ages 5, 14, & 16), ESLS
- Placement/LRE Data Review: In-district self-contained class programs & special class programs
- Document/Report Review: School Report Card/State Performance Data
- Special Class Program Observations of 7 Union classes: Teacher interview, curricula, and instructional materials review
- Central Office & Building Level Administrator Interviews
- Child Study Team Interviews
- Parent Survey





Special Class Program Observations

- ❑ Seven (7) classrooms observed across the elementary, middle, and high school grade levels
- ❑ Classroom types included self-contained, pull-out resource, and in-class resource
- ❑ Classroom teachers were interviewed following the observation to gather additional information
- ❑ Several School Administrators were interviewed following the observation to gather additional information



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Special Class Programs Commendations

- Teachers well-prepared for lessons & created a safe environment where students are comfortable sharing
- Teachers demonstrate knowledge of individual student needs and provide individualized support
- Effective use of instructional technology to promote student participation and learning
- Collaboration between special education teachers and related services providers
- Teachers incorporated various best practice strategies such as activating prior knowledge, highlighting major ideas, guiding information processing, and providing opportunities for making connections and generalization, to improve students' comprehension skills.
- Inclusion Opportunities & work-based learning including running of a middle school "Coffee Shop"



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Special Class Programs Commendations

- ❑ Other inclusion opportunities include the following: Unified Club, Unified Sports & Track events which meet monthly with students from self-contained classrooms and neurotypical students
- ❑ A unique offering for inclusive opportunities is the Unified eGaming (Esports), which is located in one of the self-contained classrooms. There are approximately 100 students that participate in the Unified activities
- ❑ Teachers in select schools were provided Professional Development in SONDAY, which is a curriculum that includes Orton Gillingham methods
- ❑ Professional Development opportunities are accommodated when requested by staff
- ❑ The climate and culture, as noted from faculty across the schools indicates a positive environment with support from building administrators



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Union Special Education Faculty & School Administrators Interviews

- Special education students are included in special activities, trips, assemblies, special area subjects, etc. They are included with general education students for content areas when deemed appropriate
- Overall, special education services are supportive, however, the decrease from three (3) to two (2) Supervisors impacts the quality of services at the building level
- Inclusive education is strongly valued among the ICS classrooms and Resource Rooms. The Unified Clubs are an example of including all students in some activities



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Union Special Education Faculty & School Administrators Interviews

- Some seasoned principals are able to provide little oversight of special education due to administrative staff shortages. Additional administrative staff will make it possible to provide the necessary oversight of class sizes and supports that students need.
- Staffing concerns in general are reported at most of the schools. There are not enough faculty to adequately meet the needs of students and families.
- There is a lag in time in providing feedback to teachers from behaviorists.
- General education teachers need more training in order to properly accommodate different learners who could easily remain in the general education classes if teachers knew what to look for and how to adapt materials to increase student success.



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Union Child Study Team (CST) Interviews

- Advocate for student needs, assisting in the development of district programs to meet the identified student needs
- Union offers a wide variety of programs and services
- Special education students are accepted in the community and are provided services in the Least Restrictive Environment
- Transition planning process is well established and working for transitions across all grade levels and to post-secondary options
- Need to improve communication and consistent practices between school buildings across all grade levels
- Lack of training and Professional Development opportunities in the district specific to CST
- Examine ways to enhance Mental Health supports for students
- Explore programs to bridge the gap between general education and special education



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Union Child Study Team (CST) Interviews

- CST felt positive about Project Unify with regard to inclusive practices. Project Unify is a program where students with IEPs participate within the general education environment. In addition, “Buddy Lunches” at the Middle School are seen as a positive inclusive experience.
- CST conveyed they have complete support, receive immediate feedback as appropriate, and they are provided with mandated policy updates regularly from the Director and Supervisors of Special Services.
- The CST feels there should be more professional development for general education teachers with regard to differentiation, modifications/ accommodations, behavior management strategies for addressing ADHD, and reading interventions.
- The CST feels that counseling services and access to counseling lack consistency from building to building.



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Union Special Services Administrator Interviews

- Special education faculty & staff are good at meeting students where they are, they are good at delivery of IEP Goals & Objectives.
- The CSTs go above and beyond to meet student needs. Special Education administrative team advocates for students.
- Most Building administrators support the special education team in their respective schools.
- Special education students are considered part of the school community.
- The priority to educate students with disabilities within general education classes is supported by the district administration.
- The district has a continuum of special class programs from preschool through high school.





Union Special Services Administrator Interviews

- ❑ I&RS teams and the NJ Tiered System of Supports (NJTSS) training that is in progress is not fully functional. It depends on the school and the resources available. Teachers need training on using learning and behavioral strategies with fidelity.
- ❑ General education teachers would benefit from ongoing training in Multisensory reading strategies that can be embedded in daily teaching practices.
- ❑ Continue to build the capacity of all teachers to provide quality differentiated instruction to reduce the number of students who may otherwise need to be placed in pull-out programs for this type of instruction.



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Union Special Services Administrator Interviews

- The Department of Special Services has implemented many programs that enhance student learning, special education programming, inclusive opportunities, and behavioral supports including but not limited to:
 - PBIS training and implementation: MS, HS, and two elementary schools
 - NJIETA - Preschool (NJ Inclusive Education Technical Assistance Project)
 - Project Unify Special Olympics
 - SILAS-SEL CASEL Aligned Lessons
 - CBI “Coffee Corner” and “Copy Th@t” at High School & afterschool outings
 - Planning for Adult Life – Parent training series
 - NJ Travel Instruction Program (NJTIP)
 - Dare to Dream
 - Making Action Plans for Life Club (MAPs)
 - Transition Tips Newsletter
 - Formal support meetings for newly hired CST for support
 - Updated Procedurals Manual (Committee)





Student Record Review

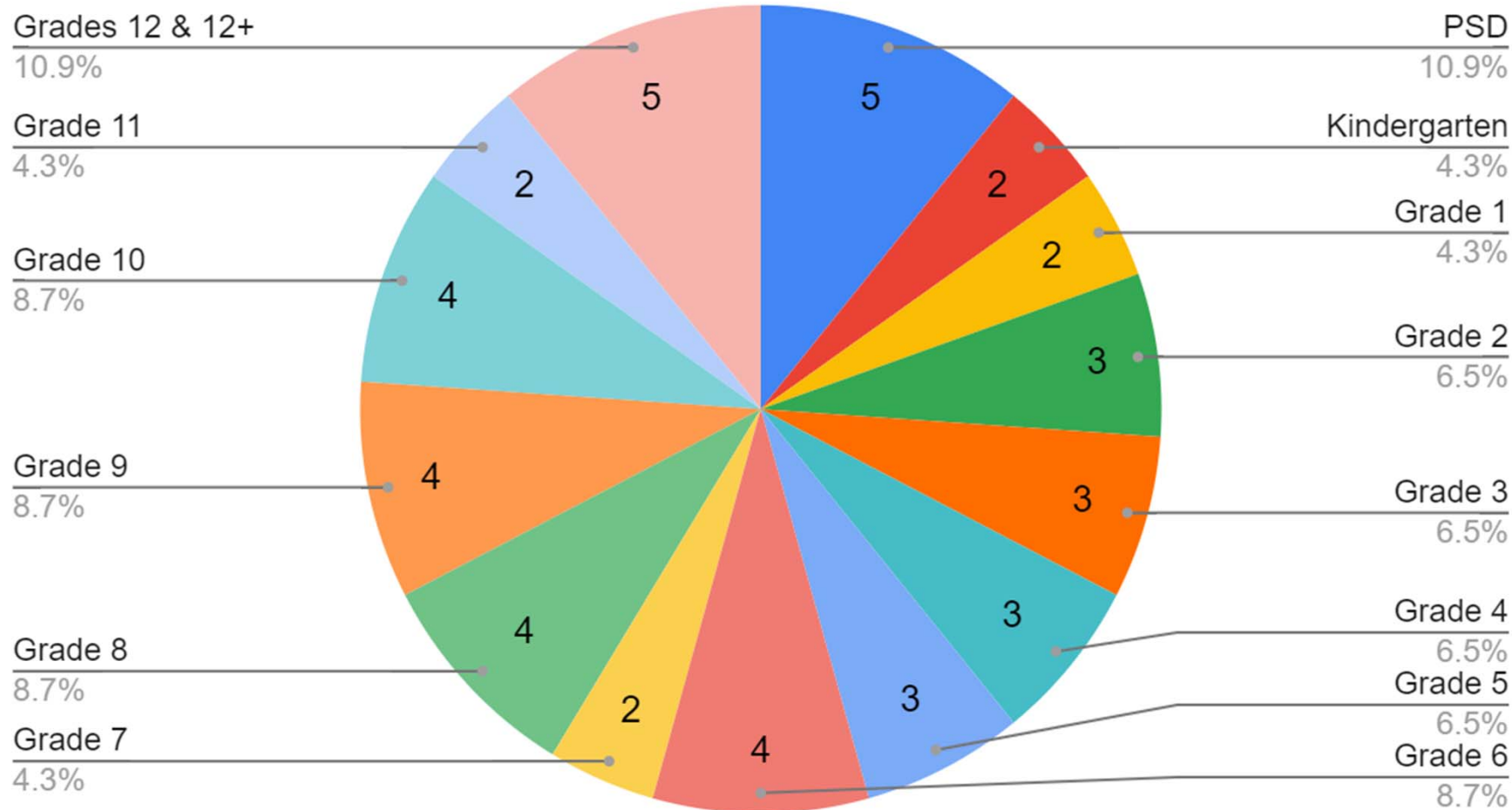
- ❑ Sample of 46 classified student records reviewed (ESERS & ESLs)
- ❑ Sample distributed across
 - ❑ Grade levels
 - ❑ Meeting type
 - ❑ Special Education Category



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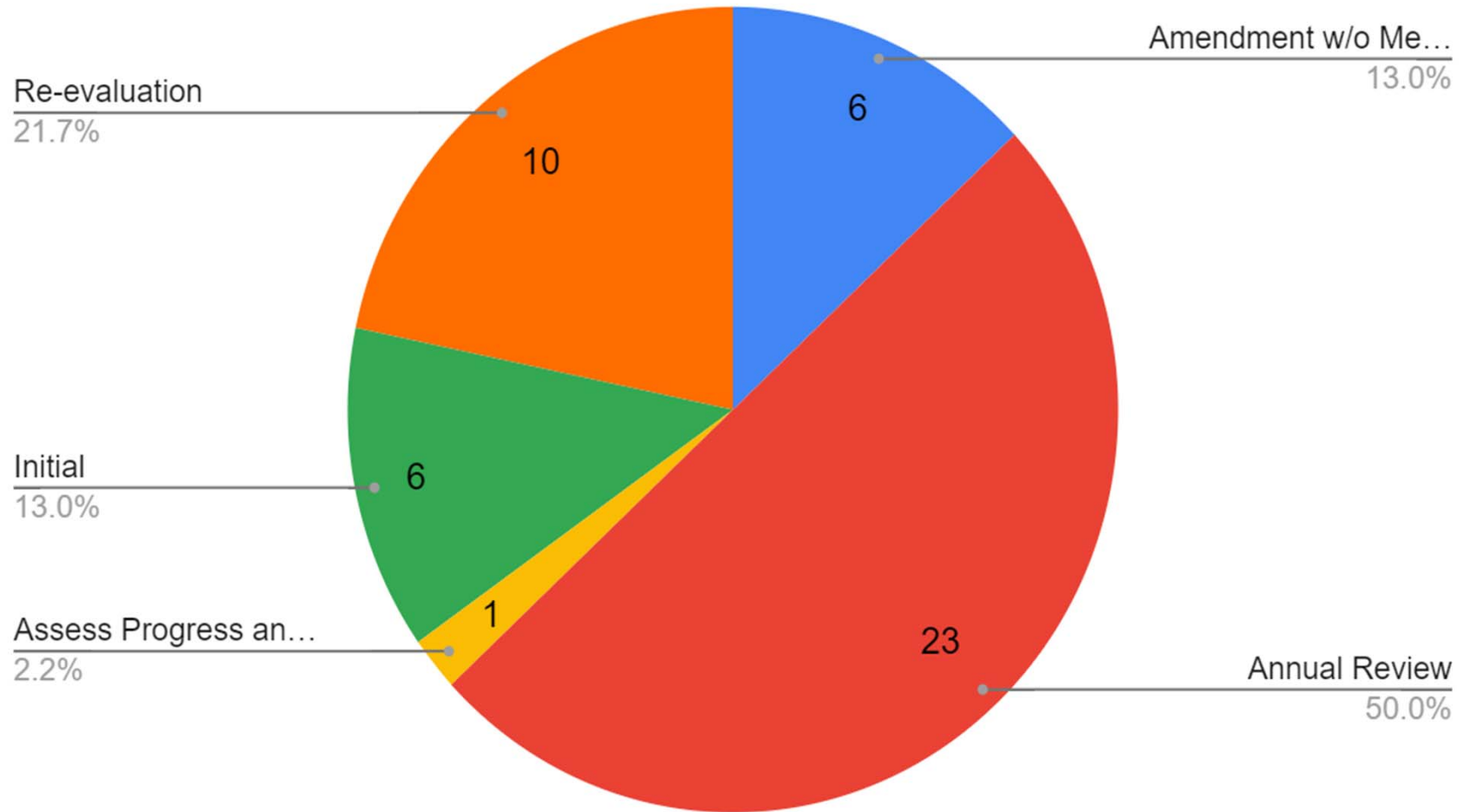
Distribution by Grade



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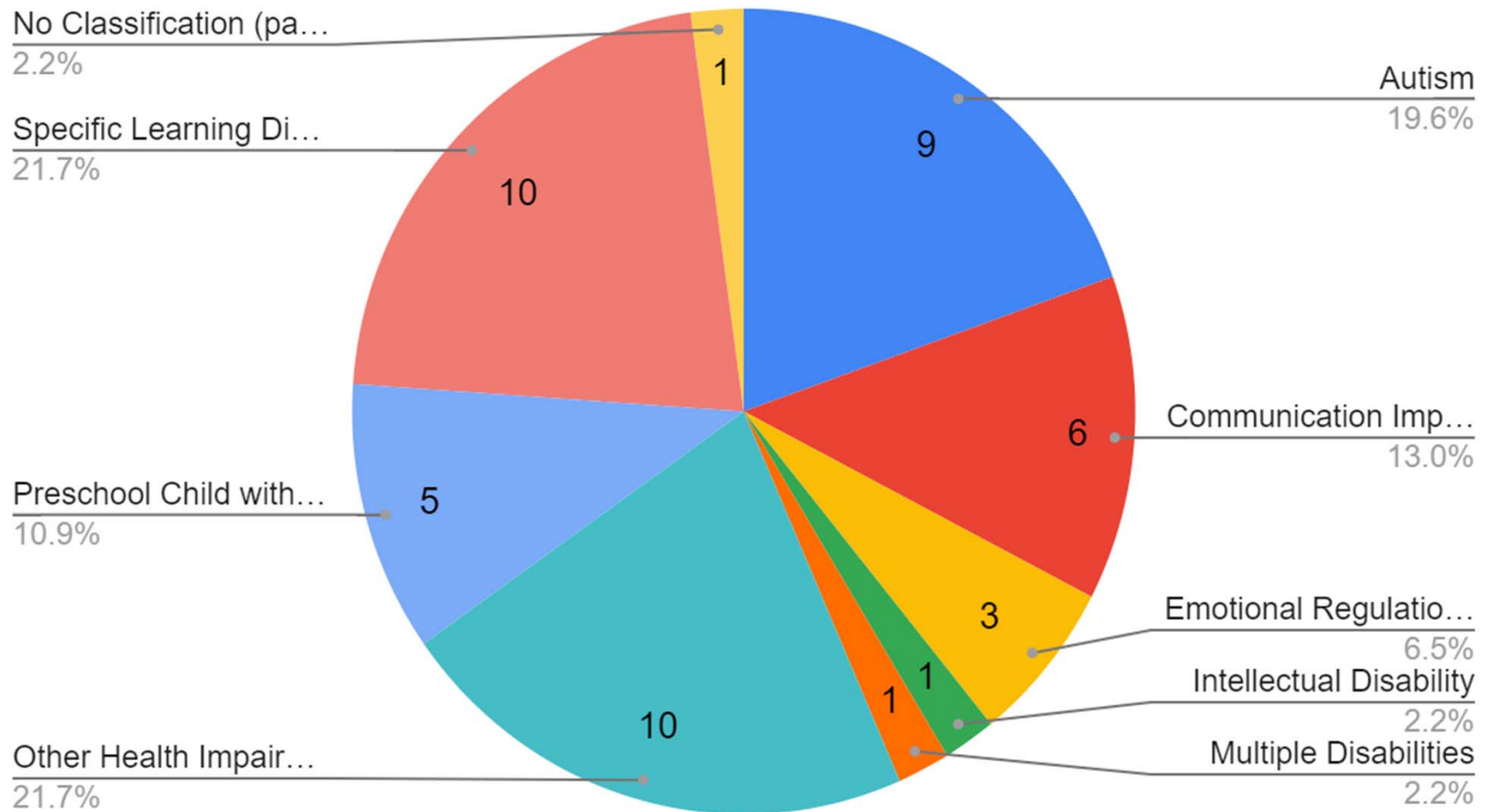
Distribution by Meeting Type



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Distribution by Category



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Student Record Review - Commendations

- Planning meetings were scheduled within 20-days of receiving a referral
- Annual reviews were completed in a timely manner
- The Child Study Team completes thorough reports and evaluations
- Goals are consistently aligned with needs identified in the IEP
- LRE statements tend to be very well written
- 100% of the Re-evaluations were completed within the three-year requirement
- Parental notice of eligibility conference was included for all relevant records reviewed
- All files had a sign-in sheet



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Student Record Review - Compliance Notes (Systemic, *the compliance citations are deemed de minimis*)

- Evidence of evaluation reports being mailed to parents included in only two (2) of the nine (9) records. It is not possible to determine if the evaluation reports were sent to the parents/guardians 10 calendar days prior to the meeting as per NJAC 6A:14-3.5(a)
- Meeting signature page not documented consistently, missing in seven (7) of the forty-six (46) records reviewed
- Annual Review was completed within one (1) year for thirty-seven (37) of the forty-six (46) records reviewed



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Student Record Review – Recommendations

- All PLAAFP statements should be data-based in nature. While parent concerns were noted in the PLAAFP, most statements lacked specific information
- All Goals & Objectives should be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound)
- Continue provision of appropriate Professional Development for improving best practices. Recommended topics:
 - Best practices in IEP development
 - Accommodation vs. Modification
 - Writing objective and data-based PLAAFP statements
 - Developing SMART Goals & Objectives
 - Appropriate Mastery Criteria for Goals & Objectives
 - Differentiation of Instruction in the General Education Setting
 - Overview of Assessment Tools to inform Goal Development and Progress Monitoring
 - Data Collection Methods and Uses in the Classroom (e.g., academic and behavioral)



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Special Services Relevant Document Review

- Department of Special Services should be commended for the demonstrated completion of all necessary requirements from NJDOE Monitoring and Targeted Reviews
- A thorough system in place to continuously monitor special education enrollment, placements, workflow and timely completion of mandated tasks
- Given the additional challenges presented by the Pandemic over the past four years, it is commendable to note the maintenance and monitoring of the needs of students and program requirements for Special Education and Related Services was a priority



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Special Services Relevant Document Review

- District's classification rate (students with disabilities) is 18%, similar to NJ Average classification rate of 17%
- In the past two years, the percentage of students with disabilities has increased approximately 2.6%
- Referrals to the CST have increased significantly over the past three school years (2020 – 2023)
- In a three-year span, referrals for CST Evaluations increased from 106 to 390
- District is commended for meeting NJDOE requirements to serve students in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for grades K – 12



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Special Services Relevant Document Review

- ❑ High parent referral rates may be related to 1) the need for a consistent best practice and data-driven NJTSS supports and services for academic, social-emotional needs, and 2) students struggling as a result of remote/hybrid learning during the pandemic
- ❑ District-wide strategies and targeted instructional, social-emotional, and mental health interventions should be considered and implemented with fidelity prior to referral to the Child Study Team. This is necessary to rule out the effects of pandemic instructional gaps and obtain valid and reliable data with regard to the existence of a disability that impacts learning and requires special education services



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Parent Survey Overview

The following data is based on the sixty-seven (67) responses to the online parent survey during the month of May 2023. The survey was emailed to 1,145 parents, for a response rate of 14%.

Commendations

- Parents' ideas and concerns are considered at IEP team meetings
- Parents are treated as equal partners and feel valued in the IEP process
- Parents have a good understanding of their child's IEP and are aware of their rights and procedural safeguards
- Parents know who to contact when there is a need. Teachers and CST members are available to meet/speak with parents whenever there is a need
- Special education students are accepted members of the school community



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Parent Survey Overview – Recommendations

- Communication with parents should be consistent from teacher-to-teacher and CST case managers. The 24-hour rule should be followed at a minimum
- Consider developing procedures for district special education administrators to systematically respond to parent questions/concerns in a timely manner. (To address the 44% satisfaction rate in the survey)
- Parent workshops and training should be held on a regular basis. These meetings may be organized by topic and the age/grade level of the students. Some topics to consider;
 - Parental Rights in Special Education & LRE
 - Progress Reporting & Data-based Measures
 - Behavior or Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) for Parents
 - Implementing ABA Interventions in the Home/Community Settings
 - Sibling Support
 - How to Support Student Learning Needs
 - Transition to Adulthood and Post-21 Options



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Key Takeaways – What Union Does Well

- ❑ District related service providers, building administrators, special education administrators, and CST members are viewed as supportive and available to speak to teaching staff, as needed.
- ❑ Cooperation and collaboration between general education and special education teachers across all schools.
- ❑ Inclusion of special education students. Inclusive education is supported among the ICS classrooms and Resource Rooms. The Unified Clubs are an example of including all students in some activities.
- ❑ The climate and culture, as noted from faculty across the middle and high schools, indicates a positive environment with support from building administrators.
- ❑ Continuum of Special Class Programs and placement options.
- ❑ Professional collaboration between multi-disciplinary team members to best meet student needs.
- ❑ Union provides a robust Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG)



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Key Takeaways - Professional Development Recommendations:

- Behavioral Supports for Students
- Trainings for paraprofessionals on ABA topics and how to appropriately support a student receiving 1:1 services
- Student communication aps (e.g., ProLoQuo, TouchChat, etc.)
- Co-teaching best practices
- RBT training for paraprofessionals
- Social/Emotional Learning best practices
- Accommodations and differentiation best practices for general education teachers
- Multisensory reading training for special education teachers targeted primarily at the elementary and intermediate levels is required



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Key Takeaways - Professional Development Recommendations:

- Training to specifically target executive functioning for students
- Ongoing training and professional development on the NJTSS process, especially for new team members, for consistent implementation and effectiveness
- More CST related programs (e.g., Developing Informative, Compliant, and Defensible IEPs, PLAAFP development, Accommodations and modifications, etc.)
- General Education Professional Development:
 - Instructional Differentiation and Implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports
 - Behavioral and Social/Emotional Learning Strategies
 - Trauma-informed Instructional Approaches
 - Basics of Special Education Process and Procedures
 - Inclusive Practices and Effective Co-Teaching models



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Key Takeaways

- ❑ Consider additional options for retaining support staff to improve consistency in programming. Recruitment and retention of faculty and staff is critical, specifically: LDT/C, BCBA, Related Services providers, Paraprofessionals, Additional Supervisor of Special Services
- ❑ Consider allocating space to support the growth of Life Skills Programming that will allow students to access more opportunities to practice job-related skills, communication skills needed for the workplace, social skills, and leisure skills
- ❑ Provide access to behaviorists on a frequent basis when training paraprofessionals to ensure proper implementation of a behavior plan or academic modification



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Key Takeaways

- ❑ Consider reviewing the number of students demonstrating unsafe behaviors (e.g., elopement, aggression towards self/others) who attend the middle schools to see if the distribution of students with behavior issues is equitable across the schools to decrease teacher burnout
- ❑ Increase number of special services supervisors. The decrease from three (3) to two (2) Supervisors impacts the quality of services at the building level
- ❑ Teaching faculty should shift from using reactive to proactive measures to potentially reduce the number of students receiving Tier 3 services
- ❑ Continuously look for ways to move students to the least restrictive environment, and possibly have them declassified



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Key Takeaways

- ❑ Staffing concerns in general are reported at most of the schools. There are not enough faculty to adequately meet the needs of students and families
- ❑ Consider additional administrative staff to help provide the necessary oversight and supports that students need
- ❑ Most principals currently see the I&RS process as paper driven and suggest digitizing, wherever possible
- ❑ Increase preschool inclusive opportunities
- ❑ Explore ways to decrease the number of paraprofessionals staffed in self-contained classrooms



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Key Takeaways

- ❑ Consistent documentation of all components of student records, especially evidence of reports mailed to parents
- ❑ Enhance community-based instruction and life skills programs to include middle school and fifth grade students
- ❑ Continue to invest in and improve the Tiered System of Supports to ensure all students receive the support they need to be successful





**Thank You for Your Time
and Attention**

