

Special Education Recommendations

Caldwell - West Caldwell Public School District

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Introduction

From March 2019 to October 2019, I served as the Interim Director of Special Services for the Caldwell - West Caldwell Public School District. This report outlines my recommendations for the Department in the areas of Pre-Kindergarten, K - 12, Programming, Paraprofessionals, and Processes/Procedures/Systems. Some of the recommendations can be implemented immediately; those cases in which some changes have already been made are indicated. For other recommendations, the district will likely need to prioritize and address where feasible.

Pre-Kindergarten

The district offers a continuum of programs for Pre-Kindergarten Students at Harrison School which includes:

- Integrated Pre-K
- ½ Day PSD
- Full Day PSD
- 2 PSD ABA (full day) Programs

Recommendations:

1. In general, the needs of Pre-K students can be met within one of these four programs. A student's assignment should be in portions of two programs only if one of the programs represents a transition to a less restrictive environment. E.g., a student might spend a portion of his or her day in a PSD or ABA program and a portion in the Integrated Pre-K.
2. Complete evaluations for aging out Pre-K students by March/April. This time frame allows for the most student growth while also having the placements determined in a timely manner. This would allow Kindergarten placements, for example, to be shared with elementary school principals in time for them to make classroom assignment decisions in early Spring.
3. To the greatest extent possible, children should be assigned to the grade for which they are age-appropriate. Research does not generally support the repeating of a grade in order to "catch up." Any recommendations to retain students must be made very carefully, with consideration of all academic and social-emotional aspects. Special education students, by definition, are deemed to have a disability, and that must be taken into consideration when making these decisions.
4. The district should no longer use the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI). The BDI is an assessment used to determine whether students are meeting certain developmental milestones. Since children in the Pre-K program have already been assessed with the BDI through the early intervention program, the district does not need to use it. The test was introduced to CSTs throughout the state by the NJDOE and OSEP as a means to obtain data regarding the success

of district PSD programs. The state had been very clear that this was never to be used as a sole means of evaluation and eligibility. The NJDOE has subsequently abandoned the test altogether for children ages 3-5. It is not a valid instrument for assessing PSD eligibility. (The Caldwell - West Caldwell Special Services Department ceased administering the BDI in 2019.)

K - 12

Resource Room and In-class services for students in grades Kindergarten through Grade 5 are provided at all four elementary schools in the district with varying amounts of consistency. Currently, the LLD1 and LLD2 are housed at Jefferson, the MD class is housed at Wilson, and the Elementary ABA class is housed at Washington. GCMS and JCHS both offer Resource, In-class, and self-contained classes.

Recommendations:

5. Consider a hybrid Resource/In-class literacy program. The district currently uses the Readers/Writers Workshop approach in its literacy program. This approach is also very appropriate for Special Education students, as it involves significant differentiation and individualization. It would therefore be worth exploring options whereby elementary students are able to split their time between Resource Room (“pull out”) and the General Education classroom with support (“push in”).
6. Strengthen the I&RS/RTI Model throughout the district. I&RS (Intervention and Referral Services) is actually a General Education initiative, but it has a significant connection to the Special Education program of a district. A high-functioning I&RS program can facilitate the addressing of student needs in a timely manner, in some cases reducing or eliminating the need for Special Education services. In situations where a child does ultimately end up referred to the CST, a well-run I&RS program can mean better data and a more efficient process when the CST does become involved. (This review of the I&RS model has been undertaken by Ms. Alyna Jacobs, Director of Elementary Education.)
7. Continue to develop district expertise in multi-sensory literacy instruction at the elementary level. Multi-sensory literacy programs (e.g., Wilson, Orton-Gillingham, etc.) are an important complement to the Readers/Writers workshop. When students are struggling in literacy (and the majority of elementary Special Education students have some kind of literacy struggle), a multi-sensory program can provide support. The district should begin systematically developing expertise among both General Education and Special Education staff in multi-sensory programs, so that each school has multiple resources upon which to draw.
8. Bolster transition services at the high school level. The district has partnered with other local districts--e.g., West Essex--to explore the expansion of transition services for its graduating students. Since CWC is a relatively small district, and the needs of its graduating seniors are

unique, such collaboration is critical for providing students with as many post-secondary options as possible.

9. Develop increased consistency throughout the elementary schools in offerings and methodologies. Some variability in programming, e.g., due to differing areas of expertise among staff members, is inevitable in any school district. However, the district would benefit from increased consistency in areas such as literacy programs (such as the multi-sensory resources mentioned above), types of Resource/Inclusion offered, I&RS processes and procedures, etc.

Programming

The following recommendations refer to the overall approach the district takes in all of its educational offerings, rather than anything at a particular grade level.

Recommendations:

10. Monitor the overall achievement of Special Education students. One of this year's District Goals is to "Develop a systematic process for monitoring student achievement, analyzing data, and creating action plans for improvement." Included in those kinds of processes should be the regular measuring of academic achievement of Special Education students.

11. Promote inclusion. The hybrid Resource/In-class approach to literacy mentioned above is a specific example of this general principle of "Least Restrictive Environment." According to IDEA, Special Education students should spend as much time as possible with their General Education peers. The individualized nature of student programming makes it difficult to pre-determine precisely where more inclusion will be feasible. However, the district should look for opportunities following the model we used this year with the Kindergarten LLD program. In the past, these students had been in a self-contained classroom for half of their school day (in Harrison School) and then transported to a General Education classroom for the afternoon. For 2019-20, we integrated these students fully into the Kindergarten classes at Washington School. Following the principle of Least Restrictive Environment means seeking to implement inclusion opportunities such as this whenever appropriate to the individual student needs.

12. Follow the criteria for Extended School Year Eligibility. The criteria for needing ESY are that, over the summer, a student would likely:

- lose two-thirds of what they learned during the school year; and
- take six to nine weeks of the next school year to recoup that lost learning.

This is known as the Regression and Recoupment Model.

13. Fine tune the continuum for ABA. Over the past few years, the district has created two ABA classes (one at Washington and one at Harrison), with the positive outcome that several students who might have had to go out of district are now having their needs met by high quality services in their own community schools. Given the increasing rates of autism, the demand for ABA services can only be expected to increase. Fine tuning what that continuum of services that can be offered in-district will look like will facilitate the assignment of students to classes.

Paraprofessionals

Paraprofessionals are important members of the educational team and should be respected accordingly. Their roles need to be thoughtfully developed, and they need to be provided with appropriate training and guidance.

Recommendations:

14. Continue to move to full-time paraprofessionals where appropriate and feasible. For the 2019-20 school year, the Department began assigning full-time paraprofessionals to certain placements. This strategy has multiple benefits for Special Education programming. First and foremost, certain students require more consistency, and having the same person throughout the day can have a positive influence on their development. In addition, it means that some of the district's most effective paraprofessionals will have a greater impact on overall programming. Finally, it makes the position of paraprofessional more attractive to potential candidates, thus increasing the likelihood of having highly qualified personnel.

15. Continue to provide training and guidance for paraprofessionals. While the district has always provided guidance to paraprofessionals, increasing the consistency and quality of that training is needed. For the 2019-20 school year, the district developed a handbook for paraprofessionals, which is a good step forward. In addition, a dedicated school safety training was established for paraprofessionals. This is an area which would benefit from annual review by the Department.

16. Establish a set of appropriate criteria for paraprofessional assignments. One step we have already taken in the direction of assigning paraprofessionals with more attention is to create an administrative form for use in situations in which a paraprofessional has been requested. Strict attention must be given to the use of this form prior to IEP meetings. This will provide consistency and alignment with best practice when assigning paraprofessionals.

17. Appoint paraprofessionals in May/June. The district currently appoints paraprofessionals in the late summer, just before school begins. This process should instead take place at the conclusion of each school year. This allows the district to secure the most highly qualified individuals for the main positions needed. Some adjustments will invariably be needed just prior

to the start of the school year, but the bulk of the assignments should be in place in May/June. This is a change which should be made beginning in the current school year.

Processes/Procedures/Systems

The recommendations below concern operational aspects of the district's program, rather than particular curriculum and instruction offerings.

Recommendations:

18. Establish a clear process and timeline for transportation assignments. Prior to 2014, almost all of the district's transportation needs were met by contracting with external companies. Over the past five years, the district has greatly expanded the amount of busing that is covered in-house, which has had the positive effects of improving the service to families and decreasing costs (Contracted bus services are typically very expensive and the quality is uneven.) Since more coordination is now required between the Department of Special Services and the Transportation Department, it would be worthwhile to establish procedures and timelines in writing, e.g., when Special Services will provide Transportation with the expected needs for the upcoming school year, in what format the list of students should be provided, etc.

19. Implement SEMI more thoroughly. The district qualifies for the Special Education Medicaid Initiative. This is a mandated program which provides partial federal reimbursement for certain Special Education services. In the overall context of the district budget, it is not a significant amount of funds. In all likelihood, the district qualifies for approximately \$20,000 - \$25,000 of reimbursement. However, if SEMI is implemented fully, the level of reimbursement could be \$25,000 - \$35,000 or greater. The additional funds would offset the administrative/secretarial costs the district faces to implement this mandated program.

20. Explore additional space. The district is constrained by lack of classroom space. The more classroom space available in each building, the easier it will be to facilitate new programs and to be flexible and efficient when assigning staff. While this is clearly a recommendation which would require significant financial resources, it also has the potential to be a savings to the district in the long run. When the district can provide a program in district for a group of students, it is often a significantly more efficient way to meet their needs.

21. Consider hiring a part-time or full-time Supervisor of Special Education. Pequannock, Verona, and Madison are districts of relatively equivalent enrollment (Verona has fewer students), and all three districts have two administrators dedicated to Special Education. A district this size cannot be adequately managed by one person. Having a second administrator in the department will improve programming and efficiency. Such improvements, such as

increasing reimbursement for SEMI (discussed above) and expanding the efficacy of in-district programming, may greatly or completely offset the initial increased expenditure.

22. Periodically conduct an administrative review of all IEPs. Child Study Team members typically have the autonomy to develop IEPs, with administrators becoming involved only in cases where there are questions or concerns. However, it is a matter of good practice for administration to conduct complete reviews of IEPs as frequently as possible. I am currently assisting the Department in an administrative review of all IEPs, and the district should look to make this a regular practice.

23. Formalize CST operations. (This recommendation has already been implemented.) Some of the processes that CST members follow can be greatly facilitated by increasing the use of forms to guide decision-making. Such forms have now been developed and shared with Child Study Team members, and should be used in on-going CST operations.

24. Increase Professional Development opportunities for Special Education Teachers and Child Study Team members. We have implemented additional professional development programming for 2019. In October, a workshop was provided on improving the development of IEPs, and in December a workshop was provided on improving the development of Goals and Objectives. The Department of Special Services should be more closely involved in the district Professional Development planning process, so that Special Education Teachers and CST members:

- more consistently are integrated into General Education professional development which is relevant to their work; and
- more consistently are provided with Professional Development opportunities specific to their needs (such as the ones offered in 2019).

Action Plan

Below is a recommended action plan. The numbers listed refer to the order of recommendations in the previous section. Further details and prioritization would need to be worked out by the Board of Education and district administrators.

Items Already Addressed Which Should Be Maintained

#1 - To the greatest extent possible, meet the needs of students within an individual Pre-K program. For the 2019-20 school, we attempted to reduce the number of split assignments; this effort should be continued. Moving forward, the only dual programming should be in an effort to provide exposure to general education peers.

Profiles of the different PSD/IPS programs have been developed for CST use in placement. Parent brochures have been created to give potential PSD parents a thumbnail sketch of our different offerings within our Preschool Continuum.

#3 - Use retention with extreme caution. In making assignments for 2019-20, we adhered to this policy. As explained above, retention is generally not a sound way to address the special needs of a classified child. It should be used rarely and with extreme caution. Since research is being constantly conducted on this question, it is also advisable to monitor any updates with this area.

#4 - Discontinue use of the Battelle Developmental Inventory (BDI). This change was initiated in the district in 2019, and CST members have begun using more appropriate alternative evaluative instruments that provide standardized scores for PSD.

#13 - Fine-tune the continuum for ABA. The district has recently hired a third ABA teacher. The expectation for 2020-2021 is that there will be a Pre-K ABA class, a K - 2 ABA class, and a 3 - 5 ABA class. The district will need to consider plans for students beyond 5th grade.

#14 - Continue to move to full-time paraprofessionals where appropriate and feasible. Many self-contained paraprofessional positions, most notably in the ABA programs, have been changed to full-time positions. Results thus far have been very positive; further transitions to full-time should be made.

#15 - Continue to provide training and guidance for paraprofessionals. As mentioned above, a handbook and a dedicated school safety training were established for paraprofessionals in 2019. Restraint training has been provided for paraprofessionals, and could be expanded to all. Paraprofessionals were offered an in-house professional development training focused on Behaviors in the Classroom This was well-attended and feedback was positive. It was offered by our district behaviorists.

#16 - Establish a set of appropriate criteria for paraprofessional assignments. The new administrative form for paraprofessional needs is in place with mandatory utilization by all CST members. This form must be used prior to any IEP meetings involving requests for paraprofessionals.

#23 - Formalize CST operations. Forms and directives to guide the decision-making processes of Child Study Team members were developed and distributed in 2019. These should continue to be used, and of course modified when necessary.

#24 - Increase Professional Development opportunities for Special Education Teachers and Child Study Team members. Targeted professional development training has been provided to several teachers and CST members, as well as opportunities to observe Master Teachers in their classrooms in other districts. Such training should be continued in a consistent, coherent manner.

Focal Points for Spring 2020

#2 - Complete evaluations for aging out Pre-K students by March/April. As mentioned above, this is the ideal time frame for determining fall placements. Ms. Abramovich will work with the Pre-K CST to ensure schedules are determined appropriately. Preschool CST will be staffing students with the administrative team.

#5 - Explore a Hybrid Resource/In-class literacy model. Ms. Abramovich, Ms. Grinkin, and I have been working with Elementary Principals and the Director of Elementary Education to determine potential grade levels where this would be appropriate to implement. I have been working school-by-school to assure this can be done in an efficient manner.

#6 - Strengthen the I&RS/Response to Intervention model throughout the district. The Director of Elementary Education has been working with a committee of educators to make some initial changes. It should be noted that this is very important but also extremely difficult work. Ms. Abramovich, Ms. Grinkin, and I have been sitting on the committee.

#7 - Continue to develop district expertise in multi-sensory literacy instruction. We have arranged for training some of the teachers in the district over the past year, and we now have at least one teacher in each elementary building with some training in a multi-sensory approach. We need to continue and expand this training; this will need to be fostered in a systematic fashion. If possible, training should be provided in the summer of 2020.

#8 - Bolster transition services at the high school level. Discussions are occurring with all stakeholders at the high school level to provide a more appropriate learning environment for our most challenged learners in JCHS. This needs to continue so that all students can receive a meaningful education that prepares them for the future.

#10 - Monitor the overall achievement of Special Education students. The Assistant Superintendent has been leading the development, per the district goal, of a “systematic process for monitoring student achievement, analyzing data, and creating action plans for improvement.” This system will include the monitoring of the academic achievement of Special Education students.

#11 - Promote inclusion. As class assignments are made for 2020-2021, the Kindergarten classes should follow the model established in 2019. That is, the Special Education teachers will work with the General Education teachers in an inclusive classroom for Readers and Writers Workshop as well as Math.

#12 - Follow the criteria for Extended School Year Eligibility. Ms. Abramovich and Ms. Grinkin have been meeting with CST members to clarify the ESY determination process. As IEP meetings are occurring in the spring, use of the Regression and Recoupment model promoted by the state will be utilized.

#17 - Appoint paraprofessionals for the subsequent school year in May/June. As noted above, this change in practice will be beneficial for all involved, and should begin with the current planning for the 2020-21 school year assignments.

#21 - Consider hiring a Supervisor of Special Education to work with the Director of Special Education. As noted above, a district of the size of Caldwell - West Caldwell requires more than one administrator dedicated to Special Education. While it is a considerable dedication of resources during what are lean budget times, it can, as also noted above, prove to be cost-effective for the district in the long run.

Considerations for 2020-2021, 2021-22, and 2022-23

#9 - Foster consistency among the elementary schools. In the coming years, it would be valuable for the Director of Special Services to work closely with the principals to ensure consistency in areas such as those mentioned above--I&RS, multi-sensory literacy, etc.

#18 - Establish a clear process and timeline for transportation assignments. The two main assignment times for transportation and Special Education are early spring (for summer ESY) and late spring/early summer (for the upcoming school year). Because these matters can be quite involved, it would be best to create a written protocol describing which responsibilities will be completed by whom in creating these assignments.

#19 - Implement SEMI more thoroughly. Ms. Grinkin has created a separate Action Plan for the implementation of SEMI according to NJDOE guidelines. This plan should be followed in the coming years.

#20 - Explore ways to increase classroom space. Increasing classroom space is obviously a very involved and complicated process. Since the district will be looking into this with respect to general education anyhow, with the addition of full-day kindergarten, it should also consider additional space for Special Education programs. Within a few years, for example, the district went from having zero ABA classes to having three. Even if district enrollment remains steady, it can be expected that there will be a greater need for Special Education classroom space in the future.

#22 - Periodically conduct an administrative review of all IEPs. Administrative reviews of IEPs can help with many of the other objectives outlined above. For example, it allows the administrative team to get a district-wide picture of consistency and inconsistency across the district. This is a very time-intensive process. While I have conducted some of this work through my consultancy for the district, it would be good to establish a periodic review as a set practice.