

Norwalk Special Education Review

March 10, 2009
(Based on CREC Report)

Intent of the Review

Central Office Administration requested that this study be done in order to:

- Provide Norwalk Board of Education and school personnel with information and recommendations to guide future direction and practice in special education;
- Develop a shared understanding of priorities and recommended activities among all relevant and interested parties.

Value of the Report

- This is an advisory report; it is not a compliance report.
- The District is well served by examining the recommendations and implementing those changes that will improve its processes and efficiency, but there is no requirement to implement the recommendations as developed.

Review Process

- 5 month process from July-December 2008
- CREC staff collected and analyzed a variety of data in order to answer six evaluative questions related to:
 1. Organizational Structure
 2. Special Education Processes
 3. Communication
 4. Compliance
 5. Impact on Student Learning
 6. Cost Effectiveness/Efficiency

Data Used For Review

- Documents & reports: Norwalk, SDE, other towns
- Observations of students with disabilities in educational settings
- Individual and group interviews: 339 parents, teachers, related services, paraprofessionals, office staff, board of education, outside agencies, administrators
- Survey of 160 parents

Data

- Student file review: 63 files representative sample of disability categories, educational placement, and schools
 - Educational benefit and compliance protocol
- In-depth review of 20 students: observation, interviews with case manager, general education teacher, and parents

Organizational Structure

Summary of Findings

- Frequent changes in administrative leadership has resulted in a lack of continuity
- Need for updated job descriptions of supervisors
- Primarily decentralized system
- Lack of direct authority for responsibilities
- Limited strategic, supervisory, and quality assurance functions
- Assignments for special education administrators need to be revised to allow for greater consistency through all levels

Special Education Processes

Summary of Findings

- Need to update special education procedures manual

- Inconsistent processes:
 - Early intervention
 - Identification for special education
 - Procurement and reallocation of resources
 - IEP development and implementation
 - Staff hiring, evaluation, and supervision

Communication

Summary of Findings

Issues across the district:

- Lines of authority do not align with job responsibilities
- Numerous administrative changes
- Processes unclear and inconsistent
- Poor customer service
- Lack of trust between and among groups
- Inadequate collaboration and proactive time
- Few opportunities for formal feedback from “customers”
- Inadequate “reaching out” to parents and outside agencies
- Culture and communication problems with and among schools, parents, and wider community

Compliance

Summary of Findings

- Suspension rate for SPED students is too high
- IEP planning and implementation
 - Inconsistent services and service delivery
- Location of confidential files needs to be uniform
- Monitoring of IEPs needs to be uniform
- Identification procedures
 - Disproportionate over-identification
 - Inconsistent outcomes based on testing processes

Impact on Student Learning

Summary of Findings

- Special education subgroup not specifically identified in district improvement plan
 - 2008 CMT scores below state scores in all areas in all grades: biggest gaps grade 5 math, grades 3,4, and 5 reading, and grade 3 writing
- but
- CMT growth points for matched cohorts in many cases are higher than state scores

School Data on Impact on Educational Benefit*

- 11 data sources from 58 files across the District
 - File reviews: percent educational benefit and compliance
 - In-depth reviews: program effectiveness, all services provided, observation percent indicators
 - Parent survey: percent positive responses
 - CMT vertical growth points or CAPT at or above proficiency
 - Compared to average for school level
 - Concern: N size for each school is very small that no generalizations should be made
- * Table 12 in report

Impact on Student Learning (What the Data Shows)

- Skills Checklist grades 3-6 within range of state scores
- 2008 CAPT scores (district-wide) lower than state scores
- There is evidence of educational benefit (impact on student learning) but it is not well documented in student files
- Assistive technology – although provided, is not well documented
- Condition of classrooms at Norwalk HS and access to technology needs to be addressed

Parent Survey Results (N=160)

- 80% responses in the agree category
Satisfaction with child's program
- 71% responses in the agree category
Transition services from Birth – 3
- 79% responses in the agree category
Secondary transition services
- 78% responses in the agree category
Learning skills to be independent after school
- 39% in agree category
Parent opportunities for training

Resource Allocation

Summary of Findings

- Documentation and record keeping
- Budget process
- Unclear lines of authority regarding budget
- Lower percent of special education expenditures than DRG H and state averages
- IDEA are only grant funds for special education
- Fewer non administrative special education staff and special education teachers than other districts
- Out of district placements comparable to State

Commendations

- Response to Intervention Model
- Collaborative partnerships
- Electronic IEP system
- Data driven decision making and effective teaching strategies training
- CMT/CAPT participation
- Intervention/Inclusion specialist

Commendations (Continued)

- High level of Medicaid reimbursement
- 2008 Skills checklist scores comparable to state average
- Positive impact on student learning according to 11 sources of data from file and in-depth reviews, standardized tests, parent survey
 - Tracey school all indicators at or above level average
 - Rowayton and Nathan Hale schools - all but 1 indicator at or above level average
- Growth points for matched cohorts exceeds State
- Effectiveness of Assistant Superintendent and Director team

Recommendations

- Incorporate recommendations into District Improvement Plan
- Work collaboratively with State Department of Education similar to CALI project
- Reporting Progress
 - Monthly report to Assistant Superintendent, Superintendent and Curriculum Committee of the Board. Quarterly updates to board and public via website, newsletters etc.

Strategic Plan

Two-Three Year Implementation

Five Goals

1. Improve organizational structures for greater efficiency and effectiveness
2. Improve the consistency in special education processes across the district
3. Improve communication within district, outside agencies, and parents on all levels
4. Increase educational benefit to students with disabilities
5. Review and revise budget processes

Activities and Timelines

Timelines indicate when activity should be underway or completed

For Recommendations to Be Successful

- Improve collaboration between and among Board of Education, district administrators, staff, union, and parents
- Share responsibility and accountability for the plan
- Create an atmosphere and culture of support
- Provide proper funding
- Create sense of urgency and need to go "above and beyond"

Goal #1: Improve organizational structures for greater efficiency and effectiveness

December	Status
Senior leadership meet with SDE	Begun on 1/9/09 and ongoing
Review recommendations in district improvement plan	DDDMT reviewed and incorporated plan into DIP on 12/10/09
Consultant work with BOE, administrators, and union to improve culture and communication	Consultant identified and meeting in planning stage
Superintendent: organizational chart, cabinet meetings, reorganize lines of authority	Organizational chart in place; Cabinet meetings and reorganizing lines of authority in process
January	
Senior leadership rewrite job descriptions	Drafts completed, awaiting consultant assistance
Director convene 2 district-wide teams: CMT/CAPT and Professional Development	Work of teams embedded in school and district teams
Assistant Superintendent assign a contact administrator for each building	Completed on 1/9/09
March and Balance of 2008/09 SY	
Streamline hiring practices and process for "hard to find" staff	Creation of "Standing PPS Hiring Committee" Relationship established with SCSU
Reorganize special education administrator assignments	In process
Review structure and processes for preschool	In process

Organizational Structure Resource Needs

Resource	Status
Outside Consultants	To be determined
Facilitate meetings with BOE, administrators, union, etc	Interviewing Consultants
Special education specialist to work with central office special education 1-3 times a week from December-February and reduce in later months to help implement recommendations for goals 1-4	Special education consultant needs to be identified to work with central office staff
Database for HR	MUNIS data base to be modified or in-house DB to be developed by March 31

Goal #2: Improve consistency across the district in special education processes:

- Identification of students for special education eligibility
- Allocation and reallocation of resources, budget
- IEP services and delivery model
- IEP development & monitoring and confidential file maintenance

December	Status
Update procedures manual	completed
January	
Train staff on procedures manual	To be scheduled
Special education staff to be provided time to consult around testing	To be scheduled before PPTs
Response to Intervention district-wide committee	Training on 2/27 and in April
February	
Procedures for paraprofessional, out of district/school	To be scheduled
Case manager responsibilities to be defined	In procedures manual
<i>IEPdirect</i> training and file maintenance	To be scheduled

Process Recommendations continued

March-June	Status
Budget process and hard to find staff	If student identification requires a position, irrespective of budget, HR may offer contract
Review OT/PT for cost savings	In process
Staffing standard and service hour guidelines	In process
Train staff on Response to Intervention Model for learning disabilities identification	Awaiting State guidelines
2009/2010	
Evaluation coordinator	Budget consideration
Specialists to support evaluation teams	Budget consideration
Review of confidential file location	completed

Process Resource Needs

Resource	Status
Special education administrators currently on academic year, increase time by 20 days	Done
Additional clerical support in central office special education during peak times	Budget consideration
Consultant, discussed earlier, 1-3 times a week	Budget consideration
Coordinator of Evaluation Services - stipend	Budget consideration
Funds for testing materials	Done

Goal #3: Improve communication within district on all levels and with outside agencies and parents

January	Status
Redesign central office space for greater efficiency and to be customer friendly	Directory established and posted
February	
Forums for regular consistent communication within and outside of SPED department (website, newsletters, etc)	In process
Central office committee with stakeholders	Letters of invitation sent to all SPED parents
Design parent training and information series	To come from stakeholder group
March-June 2009	
Complaints and due process analysis	In process
Parent handbook with informational sessions	Committee formed - first meeting on 3/3/09; second meeting scheduled
Improve process for referrals from outside agencies	In process
Formal feedback from parents	To come from stakeholder group

Resource Needs for Communication

Resource	Status
Consultant to work with administrators	To be determined
Funds for parent training and informational sessions	Exploration of grant funds
Webmaster and technology specialist with regard to website and newsletters	Use in-house support in process
Funds to redesign offices	Internal redesign

Goal #4: Increase educational benefit to students with disabilities

January	Status
High school technology and space	Technology repairs completed; space to be reassessed
Schools below average develop action plan for improvement: Brookside, Columbus, Cranbury, Jefferson, Kendall, Silvermine, Wolfpit, Ponus Ridge, West Rocks, Briggs, Norwalk HS, McMahon HS	To be specifically addressed during review of school growth plans
February	
District-wide data team for special education to inform practice	Completed – DDDMT voted to include special education expectation on all goals to be monitored by PPS member on all committees

Goal #4: Increase educational benefit to students with disabilities continued

March - June	Status
All special education and related services staff trained on writing IEPs to ensure educational benefit	Consultant to be identified and training to be scheduled
Schools below average develop action plan for improvement: Brookside, Columbus, Cranbury, Jefferson, Kendall, Silvermine, Wolfpit, Ponus Ridge, West Rocks, Briggs, Norwalk HS, McMahon HS	To be specifically addressed during review of school growth plans
2009-10	
Analysis of students out of district and out of neighborhood school	To be scheduled
Two intervention/inclusion specialists	Budget consideration

Resource Needs for Educational Benefit

Resource	Status
Consultant to help facilitate data-wide special education team	Embedded in the work of DDDMT as recommended by State Ed. Dept facilitator
Professional development funds for training on educational benefit and other goal activities	Budget consideration
Two intervention/inclusion specialists	Budget consideration
Transition specialists and job coach	Budget consideration
Three full time substitute teachers to release staff for training and	Budget consideration

collaboration

Goal #5: Review and revise budget process, management, and authority for all funding allocations

2008-9	Status
Establish clear lines of responsibility, authority and accountability within central office for budgeting of federal and state funds	In process
Develop a process consistent with requirements for use of federal funds and maintain a system of documentation that is effective and ensures that all expenditures assigned to special education budget are appropriate	In process
Review out-of-district placement of students	Part of annual review
Investigate alternative funding such as grants and donations	Agencies and foundations have been contacted and will continue to be explored

Goal #5: Review and revise budget process, management, and authority for all funding allocations continued

2009-10	Status
Building and central office administrators work together to develop budget using guidelines on staffing and service hours	Will review procedures to determine process for future
Review need for additional special education teachers	completed

Resource Needs for Budget

Resource	Status
Consultant to review reporting for federal grant expenditures	Process being developed internally; district auditor to review for compliance

Value of the CREC Report

As a learning organization, we are committed to continuous improvement. We requested this report to learn what we are doing well, and what we need to do to improve our practice and effectively serve our students . Each of the recommendations is being given serious consideration and will be implemented as quickly and practically as possible within our available resources.