



New England School Development Council

Celebrating over sixty-five years of service to education

**Tewksbury Public Schools
Tewksbury, Massachusetts 01876**

Special Education Program Review

January 2016

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Tewksbury Public School District (TPS) is a PK-12 system comprised of 5 elementary schools, 1 middle school and 1 high school. In November 2015, the TPS leadership team contracted with the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) to complete a review of the district's special education programs and delivery of services. The review team focused primarily on district-wide changes in both general and special education since a previous independent review completed in 2010. The specific scope of the current review included an analysis of selected documents, a review of the district's use of best practice and evidenced-based instruction, program implementation related to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and a review of out-of-district placements. On-site confidential interviews with administrators, staff and parents were conducted on November 18th and December 7th. Program visits were completed on December 9, 2015.

Based on our previous reviews, the review team has determined that the most important factor in creating an inclusive school environment is administrative commitment and leadership. The review team found that the TPS administrative leadership team, faculty and support personnel have embarked on a mission to create a student-centered, inclusive environment that is welcoming of all students and their families. It was most encouraging to observe that general education best practice options typically recommended by the review team have already been initiated; full implementation is emerging. More importantly, a cultural shift was observed where special education is destined to no longer be the only support system for struggling learners.

Special education administrative changes have resulted in clear lines of inter-departmental communication, enhanced general and special education collaboration, joint professional development opportunities and an expanded special education program continuum. The majority of parents report a high degree of satisfaction with the overall special education of their children and they consider themselves to be active participants and an equal partner with regard to the IEP process.

Although total school and special education enrollments from 2011-2016 have steadily declined, the community is to be commended for its continued financial commitment to school district goals. As a result, the district-wide culture is shifting toward a more inclusive school system promoting the values and belief that all students are general education students, regardless of need. Student needs, however, will not change thus requiring continued support whether placement is in a general or special education program.

It is anticipated that the emerging general and special education evidenced-based best practices will be a significant asset in meeting future TPS challenges. Moving forward, the following suggestions are offered for consideration:

- TPS should continue development of the cultural shift supporting general education taking the lead for implementing evidenced-based intervention and prevention strategies prior to referral for special education services. The trend of hiring staff with multiple levels of experience, e.g. general education, special education, ELA, etc. should continue to be a district priority.
- Continue enhancement of the current best practice initiatives in all seven schools: MTSS, Co-teaching, Differentiated Instruction, reading and math supports. Current implementation is varied throughout the district. Full implementation will require continued embedded professional development similar to that currently offered by WestEd.
- Develop district-wide universal MTSS terminology, definitions and expectations. Building level pre-referral data should be uniform and consistent throughout the district; intervention effectiveness should be measured and shared among the schools.
- There are numerous transition points as students advance through the TPS grades. Some staff and families are reluctant to reduce or terminate special education services as students move to a new school. Although transition meetings do take place, the degree to which transitions negatively affect dismissal from special education services, parent fears or MCAS scores requires further investigation. A more effective transition process is needed.
- Based on the interviews, the incidence of social/emotional or behavioral disabilities is increasing at all grade levels. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a school building proactive approach for establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students to achieve social, emotional and academic success. PBIS should be considered as an additional district-wide evidenced-based initiative.
- A TPS student with disabilities placed in programs out of the district continues to exceed the state average. The district should consider developing a 3-4 year long range plan to bring OOD placements more in line with the state average.
- It is anticipated that effective general and special education interventions will ease the financial stress on district-wide expenditures. As the cultural shift becomes more grounded, however, general education will require additional resources. Accordingly, consideration should be given to shifting, rather than simply reducing future financial resources.

INTRODUCTION

In November 2015 the leadership of the Tewksbury Public Schools contracted with the New England School Development Council (NESDEC) to complete a review of the district's Special Education Programs and Services in order to assist with future planning. The primary focus of this study included a qualitative (staff and parent interviews) and quantitative (review of district and state department data) analysis of the current allocation of special education resources and documentation of the factors associated with effective implementation of special education services. The specific scope of the review included:

1. A review of selected documents provided by the district and the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)
2. A review of in-district use of best practice as related to:
 - a. Student access to the general curriculum
 - b. General/special education interface (Pre-referral Interventions; Co-Teaching; Differentiated Instruction; Curriculum Alignment; Accommodations and Modifications)
 - c. Uniformity and communication of special education services across all district schools
 - d. Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
 - e. Special education staffing patterns: teachers, paraprofessionals, related service staff, consultants
 - f. Continuum of program options
3. A review of the out-of-district special education placements (OOD) including
 - a. Process for determining placements
 - b. Cost-benefit
 - c. Capacity for developing local programs
4. On-site interviews with key stakeholders
5. On-site program observations
6. Written report of the findings

The specific methodology included confidential personal interviews with more than 40 key stakeholders, on-site program observations in all seven schools, and a review of district and state documents including a previous (2010) special education program audit and parent surveys. A topic of particular interest to the reviewers was the changes in both general and special education since the 2010 audit and parent survey.

DISTRICT PROFILE

- Tewksbury, Massachusetts is located 25 miles north of Boston with an estimated population just shy of 30,000 residents. The Tewksbury Public School District (TPS) is comprised of seven schools: Loella F. Dewing Elementary School (Gr. PK-2), Heath Brook Elementary School (Gr. K-2), North Street Elementary School (Gr. 3-4), Louise Davy Trahan Elementary School (Gr. 3-4), John F. Ryan Elementary School (Gr. 5-6), John W. Wynn Middle School (Gr. 7-8) and Tewksbury Memorial High School (Gr. 9-12). The 2015-2016 October 1st total student enrollment PK-12 is approximately 3,553 students. Approximately 618 students (17.4%) have been identified as students with disabilities.
- The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) requires all school districts to comply with Common Core State Standards (CCSS). For that reason, the DESE Center for Curriculum and Instruction has developed the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks in core subject areas and the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) student testing system. All students, including students with disabilities, are expected to meet specific grade level framework standards and pass the MCAS tests in order to receive a high school diploma.
- "Prior to referral of a child for special education evaluation...the principal of the child's school shall ensure that all efforts have been made to meet such child's needs within the regular education program" (MGL, Ch. 71B, S2). Massachusetts has developed the Massachusetts Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to assist principals in developing tiered and targeted intervention supports prior to requesting a special education evaluation.
- Special education programs and services are governed by federal and state legislation. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA) and DESE Special Education regulations require that, to the maximum extent appropriate, students with disabilities be educated alongside their nondisabled peers in the "least restrictive environment" (LRE). Students identified as in need of special education services must be provided with an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Beginning with the general education classroom as the least restrictive site, districts must develop a continuum of program options that will ensure full compliance with federal and state regulations. When written as a component of an IEP, student-centered goals and objectives must align with Massachusetts Curriculum Framework standards in the least restrictive environment.
- Whereas the early national focus of special education legislation was on access (i.e. LRE), the most significant issue facing present day educators is *effectiveness*. The 2004 IDEA re-authorization places emphasis on effectiveness and requires more accountability for what works and what does not. Current best practice requires that unproven and

ineffective methodologies be replaced by evidence-based, scientifically researched programs and services. Accessibility, accountability and effectiveness require a dedicated commitment to collaboration between general education and special education staffs. The inclusion of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment is no longer the sole responsibility of the special education department.

- TPS has initiated the move toward becoming a more inclusive school district. A continuum of general education intervention and prevention programs designed to meet the needs of all students in the least restrictive environment, i.e. the general education classroom, are emerging (e.g. tiered supports, co-teaching, Differentiated Instruction and reading, writing and math supports).
- The TPS special education continuum is a robust series of classroom programs and services for students with disabilities ages 3 through 21. In addition to classroom and community-based program options, the continuum includes related services (e.g. Speech/Language, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Psychological counseling and behavioral support from a Board Certified Behavior Analyst [BCBA]) which enable students to access the general curriculum.
- The total 2015-2016 TPS student enrollment is 3,553. Approximately 17.4% of these students have been identified as students with disabilities, which is just above the state average of 17.2%. TPS total student and special education enrollments have declined steadily over the last five years. From FY11 – FY15, total enrollment declined 9.7% while special education enrollments declined 16.2%. During this same period, however, the percentage of TPS students with disabilities placed out of the district has increased 33%.
- While enrollments have declined, the community and TPS have remained fiscally committed to providing quality services for all students. Since FY11, the total school budget has increased 17.7%. Special education over the same period has increased 22.3% and accounts for 31.5% of the total FY16 budget.
- TPS is in full compliance with regard to DESE Special Education Program Quality Assurance (PQA) standards.

FINDINGS

Least Restrictive Environment

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act 2004 (IDEA) and DESE Special Education regulations mandate that, to the maximum extent appropriate, "students with disabilities be educated with nondisabled peers in the 'least restrictive environment' (LRE)". Although a continuum of program options is permissible, the least restrictive environment is the general education classroom.

The more common term for describing LRE in schools is *inclusion*. Implementation of and participation in an inclusive school, however, cannot be achieved unless the entire school community, including the superintendent, principals, program directors, teachers and support personnel, fully understand and support its implications.

TABLE 1 *EDUCATION ENVIRONMENTS 2013-2014*

<u>Environment</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>DESE</u>	<u>DESE Target</u>
Full inclusion in general classroom 80-100%	45.7%	61.1%	60.0%
Partial inclusion 40-79%	21.7%	17.3%	NA
Local sub-separate <40% inclusion	22.8%	14.7%	11.5%
Separate Schools (OOD)	9.7%	6.8%	5.5%

(DESE School District Profiles 2016, SPED Population Environments)

- Based on the most current DESE school district profile data from 2013-2014 (Table 1), 45.7% of TPS students with disabilities participated in general classes 80-100% of the time as compared to the state average of 61.1% and a state target of 60%. Conversely, TPS exceeded the state average with regard to partial inclusion, sub-separate classes and out-of-district (OOD) placements. More importantly, over the last five years, OOD placements have steadily increased from 60 to 80 students (33%), accounting for 12.9% of the 2016 TPS special education population. It should be noted, however, that over the last 18 months, 12 OOD placements can be attributed to families unexpectedly moving into the district.
- Recognizing the challenge of creating a more inclusive environment for all students, TPS has initiated a series of administrative reforms and developed a K-4 school improvement plan designed to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. Having identified a gap in the academic achievement of

students with disabilities as compared with their non-disabled peers, TPS developed a research-based, *Improvements to the K-4 Inclusive Special Education Model, Fall 2015* plan with the following goals:

- Improve the academic outcomes for students with disabilities
- Improve relationships between students with and without disabilities
- LRE

Key components of the plan design include:

- Co-teaching – general and special education teachers; two classrooms each grade K-4
- Embedded year-long co-teaching professional development (WestEd contracted services)
- Focused general classroom instruction; minimal pull-out services
- Intensive tiered supports

(Improvements to the Inclusive Special Education Model, Fall 2015, TPS Special Education Department website)

- Previous analyses completed by the review team have documented that the most important factor in creating an inclusive school environment is administrative commitment to promoting the values and belief that all students are general education students, regardless of need. An effective inclusive school is dependent upon social values and the worth its constituents place on individuals as they grapple with the challenge of determining the value of education for all children. The TPS administrative leadership team, faculty and support personnel have embarked on a mission to create a student-centered educational environment that is welcoming of all students and their families. This positive student-centered cultural shift was observed to be emerging throughout the district and clearly evident in personal interviews, classroom observations and the parent survey. All personnel are to be commended for promoting and enacting a district-wide commitment to the belief that students with disabilities are, in fact, general education students first.
- Previous analyses have also documented that school building principals functioning as strong instructional leaders is perhaps the most important factor in adopting educational best practice for ensuring curriculum access and program effectiveness for all students. Stated differently, effectiveness is highly correlated to principal leadership. Within the last five years, the TPS administrative team has laid the foundation for general education to assume the leading role in support of inclusive schools. As stated by a newly hired TPS principal, "I was hired through the lens of inclusion. When I hire I look for staff with both general education and either special education or ESL qualifications."

All principals interviewed acknowledged the importance of their leadership in support of an inclusive school environment.

Pre-Referral and Tiered Interventions

- An important and commendable initiative observed by the reviewers during the TPS visit was the district's early-stage effort toward implementing best practice regarding pre-referral of students prior to accessing special education services. As defined in both federal and state regulations, embedded, regular formative assessment, tiered intervention and the use of proven effective instructional strategies and materials is a function of general education and become the foundation of the pre-referral process if needed. This cultural shift is clearly emerging in the Tewksbury schools.
- Pre-referral is an early identification process that is considered a function of general education which allows for the implementation of focused learning strategies to assist students at risk. Typically in the form of a *Response to Intervention* (RTI) model, focused lessons using progressively more intensive "tiers" of instruction are designed to ensure that student needs are fully taken into account prior to referral for special education. Massachusetts has developed the *Massachusetts Tiered System of Supports* (MTSS) designed as:

"...a framework for school improvement that focuses on system level change across the classroom, school and district to meet the academic and non-academic needs of all students, including students with disabilities, English language learners, and students who are academically advanced. It guides both the provision of high-quality core educational experiences in a safe and supportive learning environment for all students and academic and/or non-academic targeted interventions/ supports for students who experience difficulties and for students who have already demonstrated mastery of the concept and skills being taught."

(DESE, Special Education, The Massachusetts Tiered system of Supports)

- Along with the LRE commitment, TPS has established a district-wide goal to improve the tiered intervention system. As noted earlier, the principal shall ensure that all efforts have been made to meet a child's needs within the general program. Based on principal and case manager interviews, it is fair to say that TPS implementation of pre-referral best practice varies from school to school and is considered to be at the emerging stage throughout the district.
- District-wide, evidenced-based pre-referral intervention and prevention options have been initiated, in varied degrees, in each building (e.g. MTSS, Co-Teaching, Differentiated Instruction [DI] along with reading, writing and math supports were

evident during site visits). Although all schools have established an MTSS model and student support teams, most interviewees agreed that the practice is new to the district and implementation varies from school to school. Staff awareness and acceptance of DI and behavioral interventions are uneven across the schools. Currently, each school maintains its own pre-referral data; the data is not consistently shared. An area of reported concern is the numerous transitions required of students as they ascend through the grades. As the program develops, it will be important to establish uniformity, share data across the district and measure effectiveness based on the data. Staff must determine what works and what does not. Toward that end, teachers and principals would benefit from enhanced RTI-type embedded professional development similar to that currently being provided by the WestEd co-teaching model.

Co-Teaching and Differentiated Instruction

- Co-teaching is a recognized best practice that provides opportunities for students with disabilities to receive focused learning strategies and targeted supports within the general education classroom. Differentiated Instruction is a teaching strategy that recognizes differences in the way students learn and provides a framework for accommodating the differences, i.e. one size does not fit all. Ideally, all students benefit from general and special education teachers delivering seamless content and individualized instruction as a result of collaborative planning. Examples of co-teaching, and DI were observed, in varied degrees, in all seven TPS schools.
- The review team recognizes that implementing a co-teaching program is a complex task requiring a significant paradigm shift from traditional teaching methods. Interviews and site observations revealed that co-teaching in TPS is in its initial phase and well-positioned for advanced implementation. Although the practice currently is inconsistently implemented in the seven schools, TPS has contracted with WestEd to provide embedded, year-long professional development for both general and special education teachers. Where it is working well, the “why we should do this” phase is well passed; staffing levels are adequate and schedules have been synchronized; teachers clearly value their co-planning time. Not all staff, however, are comfortable teaching along-side a peer. For these teachers, the paradigm shift from the “why” phase will likely require training beyond the current year.

Special Education Programs

In addition to systemic changes in general education, the review team focused on TPS special education changes over the last five years.

- Special Education Administration

In the spring of 2010, TPS engaged the services of Gagliardi Consulting Associates (GCA) to complete a special education program audit to assess the then current status of special education services. The goal of the audit "...was to examine peripheral compliance issues that concerned parents while attempting to obtain credible, reliable, unbiased data upon which to draw conclusions (p.4)." A comprehensive report was completed in May 2010 with a focus on DESE compliance, administrative processes, range of programs and parent concerns. Key findings included:

- The DESE Coordinated Program Review (CPR) "...indicated very few areas of partial compliance issues and none of non-compliance. The areas to be addressed through corrective action were minimal in relation to the myriad program compliance issues that would deny FAPE to Tewksbury students (p.1)."
- "Despite the numbers of concerns expressed regarding special education in Tewksbury which drove this audit, there are clear indications from multiple unbiased and randomly selected sources that the significant majority of parents report strong satisfaction, trust and gratitude for how the department has helped their child (ES, p7)."
- However, at a legal workshop attended by staff and parents, several staff members were overheard identifying "hard to work with" parents. "This sort of unprofessional behavior is the type of single incident that spreads as a descriptor through an already uneasy segment of the special education parent population, confirming the worst fears of new or already upset families (p.11)."
(Unfortunately, a couple of years following the GCA report, TPS central office administration was the focal point of a second parent breach, further confirming parent worst fears and lack of trust in the TPS administration. Although the superintendent publically apologized and has spearheaded a series of district-wide reforms, resentment on the part of some parents has not subsided and, in part, is a focus of the NESDEC review).
- Commenting on the efficiency of the special education department, GCA concluded that "...the organization of the Special Education Department is confusing to staff and parents. As outsiders...we found it confusing. There is a tangled line of authority outside the buildings. This is a very good system and a very strong department in a very good system. The pieces are there. Reassembling them in a coherent pattern will simply add strength to an already

strong district (p.37-38)." (Gagliardi Consulting Associates, *Audit Report Tewksbury Special Education Department*, May 2010)

Subsequently, the TPS special education department has undergone numerous administrative and programmatic changes within the last five years. The review team found clear lines of communication and responsiveness among building principals and special education administration; both departments are working collaboratively to establish a more systematic pre-referral, intervention, referral and eligibility process.

Most notable changes include:

- A full-time Director of Special Education
 - A Team Chairperson dedicated to each of the 7 school buildings
 - A Team Chairperson for OOD placements
 - Redesign of PK-4 PDD to Developmental Learning Center classrooms
 - Redesign of summer programs
 - Creation of Developmental Learning Centers
 - Numerous parent and staff training programs
 - Continued support of the TSEPAC; collaborated with other districts
 - Targeted home-based and after school services
 - Development of related services entry/exit criteria
 - Initiation of behavior supports in PK-8 schools
 - Collaboration with principals to enhance LRE and best practice in each school
 - Redesign of inclusion classes K-4 to co-taught classrooms
- Special Education Program Continuum

In meeting its responsibility to provide all students with a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, TPS has developed a range of special education programs and services in accordance with federal and state regulations. Although the options listed below are available, a clear goal of the district is the successful inclusion of students with disabilities in the general classroom:

- Co-teaching: general and special education teachers working collaboratively in making core curriculum content available for all students
- Inclusion Classes: general education classrooms with special education support
- Pre-K: a range of services for young children ages 3-4 including community outreach and child-find screening, itinerant related services (e.g. Speech/Language, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy), Tewksbury Integrated Preschool ½ day classroom options, extended day option, full-day program for young children with intensive needs, and a high school Child Development class for juniors and seniors.

- Developmental Learning Centers (DLC): separate classrooms for students requiring targeted instruction more than 60% of the time out of the general class environment
- Bridge Program: separate classroom experiences for students requiring academic and social/behavioral support from the Bridge teachers, paraprofessionals, and school psychologists
- Life Skills Program: highly individualized special education services for students with intensive instructional needs
- Transitional Services (LEAP): serves students with disabilities ages 18-21 who require a bridge between high school and adult life; the community is, in large part, the classroom
- Out-of-District: a more restrictive alternative for students with disabilities when less restrictive local settings have not been successful
- Support Services: related therapy services including speech/language, occupational therapy, physical therapy and counseling

Excluding Out-of-District programs, the reviewers were able to complete a walk-through observation in portions of most programs listed above. The observations confirmed the existence of a comprehensive continuum designed to meet the needs of students with varied disabilities PK-12 and for students ages 18-21 when necessary.

- Enrollments and Budget

TABLE 2 *TEWKSBURY STUDENT ENROLLMENTS*

<u>Fiscal Year</u>	<u>Total District</u>	<u>Special Education</u>	<u>% SPED</u>	<u>% DESE</u>
2016	3556	618	17.4	17.2
2015	3658	648	17.7	17.1
2014	3756	627	16.7	17.0
2013	3805	670	17.6	17.0
2012	3952	715	18.1	17.0
2011	4049	761	18.8	17.0

(DESE 2011-2014; TPS data 2015-2016)

A review of the data in Table 2 shows that from FY11 to FY16 the total TPS student enrollment has declined 12.2% and special education has declined 18.8%. Over this same period, however, the community has remained financially committed to school district goals. Budget data provided by TPS indicates that overall spending from FY11-FY16 has increased by 17.7% while special education has increased by 22.3%. The FY16 special education budget accounts for 31.5% of the total school budget. Whereas the expected range for special education spending would be 23-27%, the community

and TPS are to be commended for supporting the cultural transition to a more inclusive school environment for all students.

Two significant factors contributing to the current special education expenses include the increased incidence of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and students diagnosed with social/emotional and behavioral disabilities. In response, TPS has developed local program options including Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) support, highly individualized Discrete Trial programming, home-based supports, DLC targeted intervention classrooms, inclusion classrooms and the Bridge program. Although the programs are costly due to a high staffing requirement, the options are cost effective when compared to OOD programs.

- Out-of-District Placements

A third significant factor impacting special education expenses (and contrary to the LRE goal initiative) is the number of students requiring special education services out of the district. At the time of this review, there were approximately 80 students in OOD placements comprising 12.9% of the entire special education population. The district's OOD placements exceed the state average by more than 4% and are among the highest observed by the review team. Some of the reasons contributing to the high incidence of OOD placements include:

- Students who understandably require services beyond local capacity (4-7% expected range)
- As with other districts reviewed, upper elementary and middle school are crucial transition points for both educational and non-educational reasons (e.g. higher academic expectations, anxiety, depression or other social/emotional reason)
- Limited capacity to support middle and high school students requiring alternative programming
- Unanticipated families moving into the district
- Parents are dissatisfied with local services and/or have lost confidence in the district's ability to provide quality local programs

It is beyond the scope of this review to determine the degree to which any one of the above factors, or any other factor, contributes to increases in TPS OOD placements. It should be noted, however, that the district's LRE goal is compromised by the high number of students currently placed out of the district. With OOD tuitions for comparable day programs ranging from \$50-\$70,000, excluding transportation, an "in-house" alternative is both programmatically (i.e. LRE) and cost-effective. Moving forward, consideration should be given to a long range plan to reduce OOD placements. Some of the issues impacting the return of students include:

- Availability of classroom space
- Severity of student disabilities
- Homogeneity and disparity pertaining to age and disability
- A minimum of 3-4 students to establish program integrity
- District capacity to sustain intensive program options
- Parent concerns and participation in planning

Parent Surveys

- In addition to administrative and programmatic changes, an important aspect of this review is to determine parent perceptions of the changes and their overall satisfaction with current services. In January 2016, TPS administration sent the *Tewksbury Special Education Parent/Guardian Survey* to all parents of students with IEPs. Topic areas included questions related to:
 - Educational Setting
 - General Satisfaction
 - The Development of Your Child's IEP (Individual Education Plan)
 - General

Fifty-nine (59) surveys were returned.

- In order to determine what may have changed and what parents currently perceive in regard to TPS special education services, the results from two other surveys were considered: The *TSEPAC 2009 Parent/Guardian Survey* was commissioned by Tewksbury Special Education Parent Advisory Council (TSEPAC) parent leaders and generated 91 returns. A second survey was undertaken in 2010 by TPS utilizing the services of Gagliardi Consulting Associates (GCA) which resulted in 239 returns.
- It is fair to say that these three surveys, among others, can be directly related to almost 10 years of dissatisfaction on the part of some parents toward the TPS district administration and special education delivery of services.
- The comparison of the three surveys should be understood from the perspective that the questions were not exactly the same, they did not cover all of the same topics and the response rates varied. Still, valuable information was obtained by comparing, wherever possible, key topic areas of importance to parents and school district personnel.
- Key Topic Areas: Listed below are the key topic areas from the TPS 2016 parent survey. The full report may be obtained by contacting the TPS office of the superintendent.

- General Satisfaction with your child's special education services:
 - *Overall Education:* 83% satisfied or very satisfied
 - *Overall Special Education Program:* 75% satisfied or very satisfied; 2009 TSEPAC: 48%

- Development of Your Child's IEP:
 - *Parent involvement in IEP decisions:* 88% yes; TSEPAC: 63% yes
 - *Encouraged to give input and express concerns at IEP meetings:* 85% yes; TSEPAC: 75% yes
 - *My concerns and recommendations are documented in IEP development:* 80% yes; TSEPAC: 71% yes
 - *IEP meetings are set up in a timely, convenient and professional manner commensurate with the urgency of need/request:* 78% yes; TSEPAC 71% yes
 - *Completed IEP or Amendment is provided within 10 days of the Team meeting:* 76% yes; TSEPAC 78% yes

- General:
 - *My child has opportunities to interact with non-disabled peers in nonacademic settings and in after school activities:* 86% agree or strongly agree; TSEPAC 69%
 - *My child is provided with special education services as specified by his/her IEP:* 90% agree or strongly agree; TSEPAC: 54%
 - *Communications from Team Chairs are open, honest and transparent:* 76% agree or strongly agree; *Administrators and teachers encourage parent involvement:* 78% agree or strongly agree. When a similar question was posed in the 2009 TSEPAC survey addressing these concerns, 36% agreed or strongly agreed.

- Additional Survey Findings:
 - Thirty-six percent of the respondents reported involvement with the TSEPAC
 - Parent "satisfied" or "very satisfied" responses to General Satisfaction questions ranged from 75-90%
 - Parent "yes" responses with regard to IEP development ranged from 63-88%; excluding the one question which did not apply to all parents, the range is 76-88%
 - Although 76% of the respondents agreed that TPS routinely provides a completed IEP within 10 days of the Team meeting, there was 78% agreement in the 2009 TSEPAC survey
 - Eighty-one percent reported favorably regarding parent training and information sessions

- The results from the 2016 *Tewksbury Special Education Parent/Guardian Survey* are consistent with the 2010 GCA findings: the majority of parents report a high degree of satisfaction with the overall special education of their children, they consider themselves to be active participants and an equal partner with regard to the IEP process and they feel administrators and teachers welcome their input in order to improve services and results for children with disabilities.
- The review team met with several parents as part of the review process and the interviews were consistent with the TPS 2016 survey: there was praise for very high quality special education services, there was criticism and there was trepidation.

Two interviewees were quite pleased with how programs and services, and “especially the teachers” have developed over the years. They feel “part of a family” and are very concerned as to what exists beyond their public school experience.

Parent criticism, however, remains strong among those who felt targeted by “the most recent breach.” There is a sense that the district does not care about their children and decisions are strictly based on finances. There is little credibility and lack of trust toward the district.

And, there is hope. One interviewee who has two children with disabilities in the district indicated that her initial experiences with the special education department were not positive. Obtaining appropriate services was a consistent struggle. It was acknowledged, however, that over the last five years there have been many changes in the special education department and her second child’s experience has been quite positive. Although hopeful that parent relations in the district are moving in the right direction, there is concern with regard to sustainability.

- Based on previous program reviews, the DESE compliance review, several parent surveys and our own analysis, the review team is of the opinion that the TPS special education department provides highly rated programs and services for students with disabilities. Within the last five years, especially, district finances have been committed to supporting all students in the least restrictive environment. Systemic changes in special education administration, program and team meeting oversight and general education interventions have resulted in a higher incidence of parent awareness, communication, Team participation and overall satisfaction with regard to special education programs and services.
- All parents need to trust that their school district will consistently work toward the best interest of their child and that as parents, their opinions matter. Most parents have expressed a high degree of trust in TPS policy and procedures, but not all parents. It is unfortunate that credibility and trust toward the district on the part of some parents

continues to linger as a black cloud over an otherwise highly regarded special education program. Moving forward, parents and TPS administrators are encouraged to acknowledge the past and begin an open dialogue as to how they can build honest and trustworthy relationships. It is time to move forward, together.

SUMMARY and SUGGESTIONS

Special education departments are complex places. Although federal and state regulations use the subjective standards "adequate" and "appropriate" to regulate program services, case law requires that those standards be high ones. Special education administrators not only have to comply with myriad reporting requirements and program restrictions, they must also develop a continuum of competitive program options and hire highly-skilled staff in order to avoid state sanctions and costly out-of-district alternatives. The challenge facing TPS is similar to most other districts: How to provide mandated services with limited local and underfunded state and federal financial resources. Ultimately, the decision as to how to define "adequate" or "appropriate" for all students rests with the district administration and the community at-large.

Although this review focused primarily on special education programs and services, it was most encouraging to see that general education best practice options typically recommended by the review team have already been initiated. TPS is to be commended for initiating a series of best practice program options designed to meet the needs of all students in the least restrictive environment – the general education classroom. General education personnel have begun to assume greater responsibility for providing supports for students at risk. General and special education administration and staff are collaborating on service delivery. The local special education program continuum is high quality and competitive. Embedded professional development opportunities have been implemented for both general and special education staffs. The result is that TPS is in full compliance with DESE regulations, many students with intensive needs are able to be served in-district and the district more than appropriately meets the standard of least restrictive environment. More importantly, a cultural shift is in motion where special education is destined to no longer be the only support system for struggling learners.

It is anticipated that over the next few years, the currently emerging evidenced-based best practices will be a significant asset in meeting TPS challenges. It is in that context that the following suggestions are offered:

- Best practice with regard to intervention and prevention is at the emerging stage. Based on interviews and site visits, it does not appear that the practices are fully embraced or operational across the district. TPS should continue development of the cultural shift supporting general education taking the lead for implementing evidenced-based intervention and prevention strategies prior to referral for special education services. All principals need to continue their awareness and enhancement of proper best practice strategies; they must also evaluate general education staff with respect to their effectiveness in delivering specialized tiered instruction. The trend of hiring staff with multiple levels of experience, e.g. general education, special education, ELA, etc. should continue to be a district priority.
- Continue enhancement of the current best practice initiatives in all seven schools: MTSS, Co-teaching, DI, reading and math supports. Although site visits were limited to a short

"walk-through," the reviewers observed varied implementation of co-teaching and differentiation of instruction. Some staff are at the "why" stage while others appeared ready for more advanced training in co-teaching and differentiation of instruction. TPS is to be commended for engaging the services of WestEd to provide year-long co-teaching and DI training. Caution should be taken in thinking that full implementation will take effect in only one year. Co-teaching and Differentiated Instruction is a cultural shift in TPS requiring annual goal setting. General and special education teachers will benefit from further joint training opportunities. Future trainings might include a train-the-trainer model. Paraprofessionals are a valuable resource in the general education classroom but appear to have received little training as to their role. Consideration should be given to including paraprofessionals in any additional training.

- An effective MTSS process is dependent upon well-trained and informed teachers and strong principal support. Current MTSS and general education intervention strategies are varied across the district. Some staff are confused as to the differences between intervention and special education; is Tier 3 special education? Literacy and math instruction is not well-aligned across the schools; reading and math curriculum should also be aligned with special education. For example, *Wilson Foundations* is a research-based prevention program integral to tiered intervention systems. If the Wilson Reading Program is used as the special education supplemental approach, *Foundations* should be considered as a general education supplemental reading support system in all K-3 elementary schools. Additionally, each school maintains its own pre-referral data and the data is not consistently shared across the district. Common definitions are lacking.

However, central office administration and building principals have committed to supporting all students in the least restrictive environment. It will be important moving forward to develop district-wide MTSS terminology, definitions and expectations and to maintain and share data as to which strategies work and which do not, i.e. document effectiveness and implement change when necessary based on the data. Teachers would benefit from training geared toward targeted, small group lesson development.

- There are numerous transition points as students advance through the TPS grades: PK-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8 and 9-12. With the exception of the high school, students move to a new school every two years. Based on the interviews, these transitions have created a culture where special education personnel are reluctant to reduce or terminate services as students move to a new school. Previous analyses would also suggest parents fear support services will be compromised. As with most districts, the transition to intermediate school or middle school is especially problematic. It was also posited that the numerous transitions have contributed to lower MCAS scores. Although transition meetings do take place, the degree to which transitions are negatively effecting dismissal from special education services, parent fears or MCAS scores should be fully determined; a more effective transition process is needed. Staff time immediately at the

end or beginning of the school year might be a good time for staff to solidify student transitions.

- Based on the interviews, the incidence of students with social/emotional or behavioral disabilities is increasing at all grade levels. Learning centers and the Bridges program have been developed to address the needs of students requiring adult intervention or removal from the general classroom. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is another district-wide evidenced-based best practice that should be considered. PBIS is a school building proactive approach for establishing the behavioral supports and social culture needed for all students to achieve social, emotional and academic success. In doing so, its purpose is to establish a school building climate in which appropriate behavior is the norm.
- The high incidence of TPS students with disabilities placed in programs out of the district continues to be a problem. Although the TPS percentage of students with disabilities is slightly above the state average, OOD placements exceed the average by more than 4%. Contributing factors have been cited earlier in this report. For several reasons, it is imperative that TPS develop a long range 3-4 year plan to bring the OOD placements more in line with the state average:
 - LRE is compromised and subject to future DESE sanctions
 - There is a belief among some parents that any program out of the district is better than a local option; it is time for parents and TPS to set aside differences and reach consensus for the benefit of all students
 - Finances matter; TPS projected FY16 special education expenses are more than 30% of total district expenses; the expected range is 23-27%
 - Reduced OOD costs can be utilized to create local options and support LRE in the general education environment

It is suggested that TSEPAC, parents of OOD students and TPS special education staff form a working focus group with a goal for developing high quality, local program options for students who currently attend programs or might otherwise be placed in programs out of the district.

- As noted earlier, TPS has made commendable strides in implementing evidenced-based best practices. It is anticipated that effective interventions, both general and special, will result in a continued decline in special education enrollments easing the stress on district-wide expenditures. Reducing OOD placements in favor of local programs will also relieve a costly encumbrance. Assessing effectiveness and revising practices in both general and special education will be critical. As the cultural shift in expectations and responsibilities become more grounded, general education will require additional resources. Accordingly, consideration should be given to shifting, rather than simply reducing future financial resources.

