

**NEWTOWN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**SPECIAL EDUCATION REVIEW**

**FINAL REPORT**



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# Newtown Public Schools

## Final Report: Special Education

### **Background**

Newtown Public Schools contracted with two (2) independent external consultants to review the special education programs and services provided to the District's students with disabilities. The request was precipitated by the Public Comment period of the Newtown Board of Education Meetings in August and September of 2018. During the Board of Education Public Comment period in both meetings, a number of parents expressed concern regarding the special education program and/or services their child was receiving. The issues raised by these parents included: (a) District implementation of specialized reading programs; (b) whether District personnel had the appropriate credentials/certifications to implement a specialized reading program; and (c) the extent to which parents were viewed as partners in the planning and placement team (PPT) meetings for their child. The District, with Board of Education approval, made a decision to pursue and hire independent external consultants to review the special education and related services provided by Newtown Public Schools to eligible students with disabilities. The primary goal set forth was to collect information from parents and staff that would identify possible areas for continuous systemic improvement of the special education programs and services provided to students with disabilities by the District. The Newtown Board of Education approved the contract for an external review at their September 2018 meeting and a contract with the external consultants was signed in October 2018.

### **Context**

In 2017-18, Newtown Public Schools provided 530 students with disabilities special education reflecting a 12.1% special education prevalence rate in the District. The 2017-18 school year is the most recent year of published valid and reliable data for public school students receiving special education and is available through the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), EdSight Portal. That published data reflects students in grades Kindergarten through Grade 12, ages 5 through 21, receiving special education. Data reviewed over the prior 5 years shows a steady growth in the District's special education population. For comparison, using available data through EdSight, in the 2013-14 year, Newtown Public Schools served 406 students in Kindergarten through Grade 12 receiving special education, reflecting a prevalence of 8.3%. The 2018-19 unverified count of those students receiving special education and those in the process of eligibility determination is 614 students with disabilities.

Federal special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has 13 disability categories under which an individual student is found eligible to receive special education. The CSDE reported data for 2017-18 identifies that the largest disability category under which a student received special education in Newtown Public Schools was Specific Learning Disability (SLD). There were 156 students with SLD reflecting 3.6% of the population of students receiving special education in the District. The other disability categories serving the greater number of the students in special education reflected the following: Other Health Impaired (OHI) had 123 students at 2.8%; Autism had 98 students at 2.2%; Speech and Language (SL) had 70 students at 1.6%; Emotional Disturbance had 41 students at 0.9%; Other (which included Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment, Orthopedic Impairment, Deaf/Blindness, Multiple Disabilities, Traumatic Brain Injury and Developmental Delay) had 23 students at 0.5% and Intellectual Disability (ID) had 19 students at 0.4%. The largest growth in Disability Categories since the 2013-14 school year occurred in the following Disability Categories: SLD which then had 101 students at 2.1%; Autism which then had 80 students at 1.6% and ED which then had 20 students at 0.4%.

The 2016-17 school year District Profile and Performance Report is the most recent publicly available data reported to the CSDE and compiled into an annual report. The District Profile and Performance Report identifies that there were 304 general education staff with 35 paraprofessional/instructional assistants in general education. In special education, there were 36 special education teachers/instructors with 83 paraprofessional/instructional assistants in special education. Newtown Public Schools reported 20 district level administrators and 9 central office administrators.

### **Method of Collecting Information**

Two (2) Parent Forums were convened on Monday, October 29, 2018. One Parent Forum was held in the afternoon from 1:30 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. The other Parent Forum was convened in the evening from 6:30 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. After the Parent Forums, a Parent Survey (see Appendix A for a copy of the Parent Survey) was sent to every parent of a student in the District who was receiving special education and those who were in the process of having their eligibility for special education determined by a planning and placement team (PPT). In addition, both external consultants provided their email addresses for parents to contact them directly, including to arrange individual calls for those parents who wished to contribute their experiences and perceptions of special education in the District.

There was one (1) District Administrator Forum and one (1) Forum for Central Office Special Education Administrators convened on Tuesday, October 30, 2018. In addition, all staff, general and special education and paraprofessionals, were invited to one (1) Staff Forum scheduled on November 6, 2018. A Staff Survey (see Appendix B for a copy of the Staff

Survey) was sent to all staff and administrators following the forums to collect any additional information.

The external consultants utilized a Power Point presentation that included questions related to the District's Programs, Procedures and Perceptions (see Appendix C for a copy of the Parent Power Point). The same Power Point was used for both Parent Forums with the same external facilitator and note taker ensuring consistency and a standardization of the questions asked and feedback documented. Similar questions asked in the Parent Forums were reflected in the Parent Survey.

A Power Point with similar questions to those asked of parents were asked of District Administrators, Central Office Special Education Administrators and staff (see Appendix D for a copy of the Staff Power Point). The same Power Point was used for all District administrators and staff with the same external facilitator and note taker ensuring consistency and a standardization of the questions asked and feedback documented. Similar questions to those presented at the District Forums were reflected in the District Survey.

## **Participants**

A total of 37 parents attended the Parent Forums. The following represents the number of participants in the forums held on October 29, 2018 for parents:

1. For the Parent Forum on the afternoon of October 29<sup>th</sup>, there were 14 participating parents and one member of the Newtown Board of Education. One parent identified herself as a concerned parent who did not have a child receiving special education and one was a parent of a child with a 504 plan. Twelve parents provided information to assist the external consultants in obtaining information on District programs, practices and parent perceptions of special education in the District. Of the participating parents, 4 had a child with Autism; 4 had a child with a SLD; 2 had a child receiving Speech and Language; and 2 had a child with OHI. The majority of parents had a child at one of the elementary schools (8 parents), 2 parents had a child in the Intermediate School and there were parents who had one child in Preschool, Middle and High School. The majority of children were first identified as needing special education in Preschool (6 children) or in the Elementary School (6 children).
2. For the Parent Forum in the evening of October 29<sup>th</sup>, there were 23 participating parents and one Newtown Board of Education member who did not stay for the forum. Two parents had a child receiving accommodations and modifications through a 504 Plan. Of the participating parents who had a child receiving special education, some of whom were couples, 6 identified themselves as parents of a child with Autism; 6 had a child with SLD; 3 parents had a child with OHI; 2 parents had a child with ED; 1 parent had a

child with ID and 1 parent had a child receiving Speech and Language. The majority of parents had a child in the Elementary School (8 parents); followed by the High School (5 parents); Intermediate School (3 parents); Middle School (3 parents); Preschool (2 parents) and one parent had a child in the Transition Program for 18-21-year-old students. The majority of children were first identified as eligible for special education at the Preschool (6 children) or Elementary School level (8 children); and one child was first identified in High School.

A District Administrator Forum was convened on October 30<sup>th</sup>: There were nine (9) participating district administrators that represented each of the District's Elementary Schools, Reed Intermediate School and the High School. The only school not represented at the District Administrator Forum was the Middle School.

A forum for Central Office Special Education Administrators was also convened on October 30<sup>th</sup>: There were four (4) participating administrators that included the Director of Special Education and each of the Supervisors assigned to the Elementary, Intermediate, Middle and High Schools.

A Forum for Newtown Public School Staff was convened on November 6<sup>th</sup>: There were approximately 98 participating district staff. The breakdown of participants included approximately 18 General Education Teachers; 29 Special Education Teachers; 28 Related Service Personnel; 8 Special Education Paraprofessionals; 2 General Education Paraprofessionals; and 1 Student Teacher.

A total of 155 parents responded to the Parent Survey (see Appendix E for parent data) representing 145 students. This was 23.6% of the unverified 2018-2019 count of 614 students receiving special education and those who were in the special education referral process. The parents represented students with the following disability categories: Autism, 44 parents (29%); Specific Learning Disability, 27 parents (18%); Speech and Language, 20 parents (13%) and Other, 37 parents (24%). The largest number of parents, 60 or 39%, represented students in elementary school with parents at the intermediate, middle and high school represented in relatively equal numbers and percent from 20 (13%) at the middle school to 28 (18%) at the intermediate school. In addition, the external consultants spoke with two (2) parents who expressed a preference to speak one-on-one. One was a parent of a student receiving a 504 Plan. The other parent had a student receiving special education.

A total of 361 staff, 61.2%, responded to the District Survey (see Appendix F for staff data). In addition, there was one (1) individual who requested an opportunity to speak one-on-one with an external consultant.

## **Analysis of Parent and Staff Responses**

Information reviewed and analyzed included feedback from 152 individuals, 149 of whom participated in either the staff or parent forums and 3 individuals who had a one-to-one discussion with one of the external consultants. The 152 individuals consisted of 39 parents and 112 administrators, general or special education teachers, related service personnel or paraprofessionals. A total of 1,795 individual comments were reviewed that were received through 8 open-ended questions in the Staff and Parent Survey. There was a total of 563 individual comments from parents and 1,232 individual comments from staff in response to open-ended questions. There were five specific questions asked of parents and five asked of staff that yielded a percent of satisfaction or agreement in response to the question.

The external consultants determined that the majority of responses received during the Administrative, Staff and Parent Forums, as well as from the Staff and Parent Surveys, fell within five major categories because they were issues that prompted the external review and/or were identified as a major theme in the feedback obtained from parents and staff. The areas included: (1) specialized reading programs; (2) confidentiality; (3) professional development and training; (4) District staffing; and (5) planning and placement team (PPT) meetings and the individualized education programs (IEPs) of students with disabilities.

It is important to note the most salient and significant finding of this external review is the *overwhelmingly positive view of the district's teaching and related service staff*, a view that is equally shared by both parents and District personnel. This was most clearly stated during the Parent and Staff Forums and to a degree in the Parent Survey as well as the Staff Survey. District personnel are generally seen as putting the child first and were described as competent, caring, collaborative (i.e., general education and special education staff working well together), hardworking and giving of their time. Examples of parent accolades reflect the following comments:

- ✓ *Caring teachers who truly the want the best for our child and who work together to ensure that her needs are met.*
- ✓ *The district has a tremendous amount of extremely dedicated, loving, talented, qualified teachers and other staff members who I will be forever grateful to.*
- ✓ *Again, great at the middle school. It was a community of educators, family and professionals working together to develop programs and services for our son.*
- ✓ *We have stayed in this system because of the wonderful staff.*
- ✓ *My son has an amazing team at the preschool. I'm more than happy and grateful for the people we have taking care of our children. The teachers are amazing.*

Staff and administration comments included the following:

- ✓ *Some of the best aspects of the District's special education programs are the knowledge, compassion and professionalism of the special education case managers.*

- ✓ *The teachers - knowledgeable, talented, hard-working and dedicated professionals. We are passionate about teaching and learning and will do whatever it takes to help students access the curriculum.*
- ✓ *The dedicated teachers and paraprofessionals who service our kids [are a positive attribute]. They are wholly focused on the children they serve, and consistently go above and beyond.*

It is within this context of the District that the information presented in this Report should be considered.

## Programs, Practices and Perceptions

The following represents the major findings following a review of information obtained at the forums, through the surveys and in the one-to-one discussions.

### 1. Specialized Reading Programs

Reading, specifically specialized reading programs, along with qualified ‘certified’ personnel to deliver those programs, were identified as an area of concern at the August and September Board of Education Meetings. This was one of the primary issues that precipitated the external review of the District’s provision of special education. Parent experiences and information was obtained from the two Parent Forums regarding whether a specialized reading program was provided to individual students requiring such intervention and support and the sufficiency of certified reading personnel to implement a specialized reading program. Some comments were also received through the Parent Survey. The issue of the delivery of a specialized reading programs by staff certified by a particular reading program was also identified in the forum for District administrators. Parents indicated that issues existed in appropriately identifying students, intervening early, the fidelity of implementation and the level of training and/or certification of staff. In comparison, while reading was an issue, the number of comments in this area was not as great as some other issues that came forward through the forums and surveys. Within the area of reading, the primary issue identified was the implementation of specialized reading programs, namely the Wilson or Orton Gillingham reading programs, and whether the implementation of these programs was provided by individuals ‘certified’ by the organization. Parent comments reflecting concern included the following: *“The District has denied evidence-based dyslexia services with fidelity for our son despite external expert assessments and [he is] reading at barely a first grade reading level in third grade.”* There were also positive comments such as: *“Once [my child] was identified as a student with dyslexia, he was provided direct Wilson-based instruction for recording and encoding. Because he has no difficulties with reading comprehension the team engaged thoughtful planning on how to include him in as many classroom reading activities as possible so that he did not miss out while still providing him with the direct instruction he needed to make growth with his independent reading goals. He has made great progress with this instructional model and I am very pleased with the levels of training, delivery of services and communication with his special education teachers.”*

Feedback obtained reveals that while the identified issues regarding the provision of specialized reading programs did exist, the District did not take action to remedy the issues until concerned parents brought the issues to the attention of the Newtown Board of Education and District administration. Since then, the District has taken a number of action steps to remedy the situation identified by the parents. The external review indicates that the District currently has four individuals certified in the Wilson Reading Program which



include: one (1) District-level Wilson certified individual who provides services at the Middle School and elementary schools, as assigned; one (1) Wilson certified individual at Hawley Elementary School and two (2) Wilson certified individuals at Reed Intermediate School. Another individual will be certified in Wilson by the end of the school year providing three (3) certified individuals at Reed Intermediate School, bringing the District total for Wilson certified staff to five (5). Currently, there are at least 5, and as many as 7, individuals receiving Orton Gillingham training. Information obtained from forums and the surveys indicate that the District has and is offering training and certification to staff in specialized reading programs. There are two challenges: one, few staff are stepping forward to obtain training or certification in a specialized reading program and two, the retention of staff who have become certified in one of the specialized reading programs.

In comparison to the overall feedback received through the forums and surveys, the area of specialized reading programs and certified personnel to implement such specialized reading programs indicates that the District has recognized this area as one for improvement. The District has staff certified in Wilson, staff who have received training in Wilson and staff who have and are participating in Orton Gillingham training. The District is offering training and certification opportunities and the ratio of trained and certified staff to students for a specialized reading program appears to be sufficient to meet district need. Comments and feedback obtained through the forums and surveys related to the area of reading/specialized reading program indicates attention should be given to: (a) collaborative planning time and (b) on-going training and professional development. Comments included:

- ✓ *I would like to see Reading and Special Education collaborate and work together using evidence-based programming.*
- ✓ *I realize there has been some recent discussion amongst parents regarding training in methods that target dyslexic learners. Perhaps this is a direction that we should be looking at.*
- ✓ *Special education teachers need to be included in training in reading and writing best practices.*
- ✓ *Getting at least 2 people trained per building in evidence-based programs (Wilson, OG, VV, TCRWP).*
- ✓ *The district has offered Wilson certification for years to our special education teachers, but for years staff have turned this offer down. There needs to be more in place as an additional incentive/requirement for staff to get this certification (perhaps contractually).*

## **2. Confidentiality**

Results from the Parent Survey indicate that 59% of parents felt that the District kept their child's information confidential with 26% neither agreeing nor disagreeing and 14%

disagreeing entirely. In the Parent Forums, parents identified receiving reports or information that belonged to another student, and/or which had another student's name in the report or document. A few comments were provided through the Parent Survey that included:

- ✓ *We have received another child's confidential PPT paperwork home before and [have been] asked to throw it out.*
- ✓ *I have received confidential info about other kids multiple times, and I can only assume that my child's info was similarly shared with other families. Central office typically doesn't notify parents when this happens, so you're likely only to find out if you know the person who received your child's info.*
- ✓ *Wrong paperwork has been mailed home and in my child's bag.*
- ✓ *I like to believe the district keeps my child's information confidential but I have received information on other children (mail delivered home, someone else's PPT, [with] someone else's name on my child's PPT)*

Interviews with administrative staff indicate that there is a system for the production and distribution of student specific information that relies on the student's teacher(s) and the school psychologist. Parents and staff report that communication between the school and parents occurs daily, weekly, monthly or other based on individual students. Such communication that may include reports, data and other that is provided to parents as a communication vehicle does not seem to be the primary issue. Rather, it was the production of reports, such as evaluation reports, that would contain another student's name and other identifying information. Aside from the production of student specific reports, parents also identify receiving special education notices and IEPs of other students. These latter responsibilities were identified as belonging to the school psychologist along with the other duties that individual may hold. Central office does identify a monitoring system in the distribution of notices and IEPs, not all of which have remediated the occurrences and which, in some cases, have been linked to specific staff. In addition to the information collected from parents regarding confidentiality, some staff have raised the issue of confidentiality as well including the following comment from a staff person: *"I am leery of certain paraprofessionals because they are not confidential. They make comments about other teachers as well as students."*

While the data reflects that 14% of respondents indicated a concern regarding confidentiality, it is important to note that the obligation for a District to hold safe and secure student specific information is articulated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). There were comments received from parents and verified by school administration and staff that would indicate a need to review the system in place for the production and distribution of information to parents about their child. Please see **Recommendations** for confidentiality.

### 3. Professional Development/Training

Professional development and opportunities for training was one of the major themes that emerged in the forums and surveys from parents and staff. While there was not a specific question at the forum or in the survey regarding training, the identification of professional development and training crossed all staff including general education, special education, and paraprofessionals and was also identified as a need area by parents. A topical area that was frequently identified as a professional development need was behavior and the social/emotional needs of students. Some staff feedback indicated that professional development opportunities are available such as: *“I have found that whenever I have asked to go to a professional development opportunity I have been allowed to go and the district funds it.”* Other staff provided comments which indicated there was no training such as: *“Staff are qualified but there are no opportunities for professional development.”* While there appeared to be a difference of opinion, most comments did identify one or more areas of need that could or should be addressed through professional development. Some of the identified training needs were specific and others more general. Examples of comments from general and special education staff regarding their own professional development needs included:

- ✓ *There seems to be a need to improve the understanding of the referral process and how the SRBI process is crucial in making sound decisions when determining eligibility, for both special and general education staff. Navigating this process seems challenging to both general and special education staff due to a lack of understanding and training in special education eligibility as well as the SRBI process.*
- ✓ *I feel the general education teachers need more training in how to handle student behavioral concerns and the role of special educators.*
- ✓ *We need more training in research-based interventions.*
- ✓ *Also, meetings are not held by special education administration with staff on a regular basis to share information/ updates from the state or current trends in special education.*

There were also professional development/training needs that were specific to ensuring and enhancing the knowledge, skills and abilities of paraprofessional staff. Comments included:

- ✓ *There is very little, to NO time for training or meeting with staff (paraprofessionals) in order to assist them in development of skills.*
- ✓ *We rely heavily on our paraprofessionals to work with special education students. I find that they (paraprofessionals) need more training in dealing with students in the classroom, and maintaining boundaries with the classroom teacher.*
- ✓ *There are a number of paras in the district that are responsible for reinforcing the instruction of my students. I feel that my paras are not adequately trained to provide the appropriate instruction to meet their (student) needs.*

Parent comments provided through the survey was a reflection of many of the same comments and recommendations from staff including:

- ✓ *The team is extremely dedicated and I do not doubt their competence in general. At the same time, they seem to lack autism-specific training. ESPECIALLY the paraprofessionals.*
- ✓ *Staff do not appear to have any special/additional training and do not know how to support my child.*
- ✓ *I feel that paras should have better training.*
- ✓ *There is no training on concussion or brain injury or visual issues*

Information obtained through the staff and administration forums indicate that professional development for general and special education staff is supported but that there is a challenge in providing training to paraprofessionals. One challenge is the scheduled hours of work for the individual and the other is the availability of funds to compensate paraprofessionals to attend training. Some paraprofessionals do avail themselves of training opportunities even if they receive no compensation. The District has a committee working on this issue. The District indicates it is seeking to align all paraprofessional hours to the school day and to make available and support training opportunities for paraprofessionals.

Lastly, it appeared that some parents may not have correct information or understandings regarding special education and the obligations of the school district in delivering special education. While every child receiving special education has special needs, not every child with special needs requires special education. For example, some parent comments were received regarding one building having a specialized program (such as for children with autism) while another building did not but the IDEA does not require the duplication of specialized programs in every building. In the forums, parents indicated that in prior years, central office special education administration had helped to arrange educational opportunities, in the form of workshops, specifically for parents on special education related topics. An example provided was a training on understanding special education provided by the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center (CPAC). There is a newly formed Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) that may be useful in this regard. Further **Recommendations** are offered to address professional development/training for staff and parents.

#### **4. Staffing**

##### Special Education Teachers and Paraprofessionals:

While both parents and district staff view the district as having caring and hardworking personnel, there was a general perspective from staff that there are an insufficient number

of both special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Specifically, among general and special education staff, this was a strongly and somewhat overwhelmingly held opinion. A shortage of BCBA's and behavior therapists was also noted, particularly in buildings with special programs for students with behavioral, social emotional and/or mental health needs. One principal opined that there is sometimes *"a feeling that they are containing rather than instructing some students."* Staff also noted that special education teachers and case managers are particularly overworked by large caseloads. Staff believe, however, that they usually *"make it work"* at their own expense. This was frequently stated during the staff forum and in the staff survey. As one member of the staff said in the survey, special education teachers are meeting the needs of students, *"However, this comes at a cost to the staff members. There simply isn't enough time in the day for the teachers to do all that needs to be done. Case Managers are responsible for everything – direct teaching, testing, meetings, student behaviors, phone calls, etc. Some days one student's needs can take up an entire day. At the elementary level, classroom teachers get one hour and 40 minutes without students per day. The SpEd teachers do not get guaranteed planning time, lunch time, and additional prep time. A lunch may be in their schedule, but staff is often required to attend meetings, complete testing and observations, respond to crisis calls, etc."* Teachers are often stretched too thin – *but always seem to keep doing more and giving more in order to meet the needs of students."* Parents and staff also stated that substitutes are not provided for paraprofessionals and at times, regular education paraprofessionals are pulled from their usual duties to cover for a special education paraprofessional leaving gaps in coverage.

It is noted that in the 2017-2018 school year, Newtown's total student count was 4407 including 530 special education students. Newtown employed 87.7 special education paraprofessionals (all numbers are full time equivalents) and 36.9 special education teachers. In addition, Newtown employed 39.3 general education paraprofessionals and 300.8 general education teachers. These numbers yield an approximate ratio of 1 special education paraprofessional for every 6 special education students and 1 special education teacher for every 14.36 special education students. Newtown's District Reference Group, or DRG B (a district classification system developed by the State Department of Education, and revised in 2016, to compare districts who have public school districts with students who have similar socioeconomic status) is comprised of 36 school districts. Special education staffing cannot be precisely compared between districts as all districts experience variability from year to year in the number of special education students, the nature and severity of student needs and the personnel required to implement each student's IEP. However, a brief review of district staffing and special education student statistics in DRG B indicates that Newtown's ratio of special education students to special education paraprofessionals is within an average range for DRG B. Newtown's ratio of special education students to special education teachers is slightly higher than average for DRG B.

### Occupational Therapy:

Occupational therapy (OT) was another area of concern that arose during the staff forum. The Newtown Public Schools website lists 4 occupational therapists: two are part-time and one works only in the preschool. There was a perception on the part of the occupational therapists that their caseloads are overly large. But, like the special education teachers, they are devoted to their students and “make things work” even if it comes at the expense of their own time. A comment in the staff survey reflected this theme: *“There should be an Occupational Therapist assigned to each elementary school, one OT for the Preschool only and one for Reed, Middle and the High School to meet the needs of all students. There are many more responsibilities of an OT besides giving direct service such as: performing evaluations, consultations, organizing and running groups and going to PPTs/parent meetings. Direct service time always gets met but everything else has to be done outside our hours and it is exhausting.”*

### Student Support Staff: School Psychologists, BCBAs, Behavior Therapists, Social Workers:

Some of the discussion during the staff and administrative forums focused upon a perceived need for additional personnel to support students including BCBAs, Behavior Therapists and Social Workers (who are not available in the elementary schools). In buildings with specialized programs for students with behavior issues, there is a perception that Central Office is not providing staff with the assistance or additional supports they believe are needed for a student’s special education program to be successful.

School psychologists are perceived by building level administrators and staff as having too many responsibilities. Within Newtown Public Schools, school psychologists are responsible for all aspects of PPT meetings including all paperwork (some of which is perceived to be clerical) and chairing every PPT meeting. This work is in addition to the more typical work of a school psychologist which generally includes student assessments and counseling.

Comments from staff included:

- ✓ *I think that we need more mental health service providers (school psychs or social workers) to meet the needs of our students. We received additional grant funded support after the tragedy, but we never had enough in the first place and now it is extremely difficult given the population we are working with.*
- ✓ *In some cases, more staff are needed. At RIS, there has been a reduction in mental health/social emotional staff at RIS (school psychologist and social worker reduction) at a time when we have more students with behavioral and emotional challenges--the decision made later last year to decrease support by .5 psychologist at the same time as decreasing by 1.0 social worker, going from 4 people doing IEP’d counseling to 2.5 all at once. We have more students with behavioral and emotional needs moving into district and in our population so this has made it more difficult to provide counseling, assessment, produce quality reports, and consult with staff.*
- ✓ *At high school, school psychologists are now asked to facilitate PPT's and complete the IEP paperwork. Previously the Department Chair ran all of the meetings. However, this was too much for them. Given the needs of the high school, despite removing one of our*

*job responsibilities (attendance at some 504 meetings), this still limits our availability for both regular and special education students. In addition, our job and expertise still requires us to be at some 504 meetings at the high school. Special education numbers are also rising at the high school, thus the number of evaluations, which school psychologists conduct are increasing... While pupil personnel support has increased at the high school, these social/emotional needs continue to rise.*

- ✓ *The higher numbers of students with behavioral and emotional disturbance issues has become a drain on our ability to meet student needs. They consume an enormous amount of time. Overall student population is down, but Sped population is growing.*

The ultimate question regarding special education staffing, whether by special education staff, related service personnel, paraprofessionals or personnel such as BCBA's is whether students' IEPs are being implemented with fidelity. While the majority of parents and staff feel that IEPs are generally being implemented as intended, the district should review staffing as set forth in the **Recommendations** that address staffing.

## **5. The Planning and Placement Team (PPT) and Individualized Education Program (IEP)**

The Planning and Placement Team (PPT) process and resulting individualized education program (IEP) of individual students was identified as an area of concern for those parents who identified their concerns at Newtown Board of Education Meetings. The primary identified concern was the extent to which parents felt they were viewed as valued partners in the PPT meeting for their child. Parents, as well as staff, responded to questions presented at the forums and through the surveys about their perceptions on participation in a PPT and the resulting IEP. There was relative agreement in responses between parents and staff. In the Parent Survey, 72% of responses indicated that parents felt like valued participants in the PPT. The greatest representation of being valued at a PPT was for parents who had a child in K, Grade 10 or 12. Staff responses indicate that 69% of staff felt that their opinions were valued in the PPT. Seventy-two percent (72%) of parents felt that the PPT developed an appropriate individualized education program (IEP) for their child and 79% of staff agreed. Comments included:

- ✓ *When discussing the needs of a student our team takes the time to consider all ideas and works together to create a plan which supports the needs of the student.*
- ✓ *During a PPT with parents and outside consultants, I have always felt my opinions were well supported during that meeting by both my elementary supervisor and principal.*
- ✓ *I always feel like I am being listened to, and when I do have questions, the team is always willing to help.*

Feedback from the forums and survey results indicate that there were two (2) factors which seemed to impact the PPT process. One was the participation of special education

administrative staff in the PPT. There was feedback that praised special education administrative personnel and their participation and support in the PPT meeting for a student. However, there were also comments that indicated the participation of Central Office personnel in the PPT was a challenge. During the forums, both parents and staff expressed that they did not always receive prior notice that administrative personnel would be attending a PPT and that their presence prevented other PPT members from speaking freely. In addition, some parents and staff voiced their perception that this occurred even when the special education administrative staff seemed to know little about the student. There were enough comments about special education administrative staff in both the forums and the surveys to identify this as an area needing continued review and improvement. The other factor that appeared to impact the PPT and IEP was the advocacy by parents, advocates and attorneys. Comments, positive and critical, from staff included:

- ✓ *Past administration directed teachers not to speak unless asked a question, however, current administration encourages an open dialogue. I am getting better but am still afraid to speak up as parents tend to lash out.*
- ✓ *My principal and special education supervisor respect my opinion and input. Members of our team have contacted the director with questions and concerns directly and have had positive experiences. I welcome their presence at PPT meetings and appreciate that administration will attend PPTs for difficult and complex cases.*
- ✓ *Sometimes parents can be disrespectful or unkind at a PPT meeting when they disagree and in these cases I have felt supported by administration and my colleagues.*
- ✓ *Colleagues and administrators respect my opinion. At times, parent, advocates and lawyers, question my opinions, qualifications and also, the data that I have collected and presented.*
- ✓ *I strongly agree with this statement, with the exception of when a Special Education supervisor was directly involved with the PPT. I feel that my opinions and experiences are not considered nor respected by central office special education administrators.*
- ✓ *My opinions feel valued when I meet with our building staff. They are open minded and willing to hear perspectives of all staff who work with a child. However, I do not feel comfortable sharing my opinions with the special ed supervisors. I have shared my opinions in the past and they were belittled.*

Comments, positive and critical, from parents included:

- ✓ *We are part of the process the whole way through.*
- ✓ *Staff always seem genuinely caring; however, we have noticed in meetings, administrators keep staff reined in from voicing opinions or concerns (resulting in private conversations not recorded in PPT meetings).*
- ✓ *PPTs don't have all the necessary people in attendance. Teachers and aides are not allowed to voice views even though they are the ones with the most contact. Often feels*



*rushed. Facilitators manage the process to get through it. Objectives are not met or followed through with.*

- ✓ *They are amazing - constantly trying to help improve the plan and its implementation.*
- ✓ *When I am working with just my son's PPT team that works directly with him at school I feel part of team and valued. When SpEd supervisors are present at his PPT I feel like my input is not heard and is drowned out by a predetermined path the supervisor has decided upon prior to our PPT.*

Feedback received during from the forums and surveys indicate that the majority of both parents and staff believe that the district is in compliance with state and federal procedural requirements related to PPTs and IEPs. PPT meetings are scheduled as required and IEPs are appropriately completed and received by parents in a timely way with some exceptions. In addition, parents receive evaluation reports and other written materials that are to be reviewed at the PPT meeting several days before the meeting, allowing parents sufficient time to review the evaluation information.

Generally, the majority of parents and staff feel that they are valued members of the PPT and that the PPT develops an appropriate IEP for students receiving special education. The District may wish to review the parent and staff responses to ascertain if there are specific issues that can be addressed from an improvement perspective. A lack of feeling valued and consequently of feeling that an IEP is not appropriate, often appears to be related to the level of agreement between participants in a PPT. The resulting feedback obtained from the survey indicates that the measure of value regarding a person's participation and the perception of a well-written IEP appears related to the level of agreement or disagreement with a parent or supervisor and whether they at least feel their opinions have been sincerely considered. Please see **Recommendations** related to the PPT and IEP.

## Programs, Practices and Perceptions

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations are a result of the consultants' review of the district's current programs and practices and the staff and parent perceptions of these programs and practices based upon the information obtained from the forums and surveys. The perceptions of staff and parents have led to recommendations in the areas of special reading programs, confidentiality, staffing and PPT/IEPs. Current district policies and practices need to be reviewed in the areas of confidentiality, staffing and PPT/IEPs.

**Specialized Reading Programs and Certified Staff:** Specialized reading programs were an area that precipitated the special education review of the District. Since issues were first identified the District has taken significant action in ensuring sufficient trained and/or certified personnel in one or more specialized reading programs. In addition to current efforts, the District should review the IEP of all students identified as SLD/dyslexia to ensure that an appropriate reading program is in place for the student. Such a review should also take place for each newly identified student with SLD/dyslexia within this school year to ensure a system is in place to appropriately identify students and ensure an appropriate and timely implementation of a specialized reading program by appropriately trained and/or certified staff. The District appears to be engaged in ensuring training, professional development and certification opportunities for staff for the implementation of specialized reading programs such that programmatic concerns with regard to this issue are being addressed. The District should continue the focus on ensuring a sufficient number of trained and/or certified personnel. Monitoring and supervision of staff in delivering a specialized reading program with fidelity should occur by the District special education administration. Attention to staff concerns regarding time for collaboration and professional development should be addressed.

**Confidentiality:** There is a perception by parents that breaches of student confidentiality are somewhat frequent and happening throughout the district. The district should review their current practices and the system in place for the distribution of information to parents about their child. A review of the District policies and procedures, analysis of the system currently in place that utilizes the school psychologist, and the administrative monitoring by administration might identify targeted areas for improvement. Targeted training/professional development for all school staff, including paraprofessionals, on confidentiality and the protection of student information should be considered and incorporated into the trainings/professional development opportunities offered to staff,

particularly those working with students receiving special education or by experts in the area of reading.

**Professional Development/Training:** The District should review the needs of general and special education staff, to include but not be limited to academic content and the behavior/social emotional needs of students. The District should: (a) ensure that training and professional development needs are identified annually for general and special education staff; (b) continue to redefine and align paraprofessional hours with the school day and to incorporate and/or compensate, to the extent appropriate, paraprofessionals for participation in training; and (c) work with the newly formed SEPTA to identify needs and resources to provide training to families. Providing information, training and support to parents on federal and state special education requirements including identification, evaluation (including IEEs), eligibility, development and implementation of an IEP, and dispute resolution would be helpful in fostering communication and collaboration between parents and District staff and administration.

**Staffing:** As previously stated, the crucial issue in a review of special education staffing is whether students' IEPs are being implemented with fidelity. Newtown clearly has a dedicated staff that works to ensure that all IEPs are implemented with fidelity although there is a perception that this may not *always* be the case, or, that appropriate implementation requires staff to give up essential planning and collaboration time and work longer hours than they should. The District should undertake a review of staffing patterns in the District to determine: (a) whether the District employs the appropriate number of staff including instructional, related service and non-certified personnel; (b) whether staff is being appropriately utilized and deployed throughout the district to ensure that IEPs are being implemented with fidelity; and (c) whether job responsibilities are appropriate to staff skills and time (including, for example, a review of caseloads and how school psychologists are utilized in the PPT process).

**The Planning and Placement Team (PPT) and Individualized Education Program (IEP):** The district should consider providing parent information, resources and educational opportunities to families regarding PPT meetings and the development of IEPs. In addition, the development of district-wide policies, procedures and practices around planning, leading and participating in PPT meetings, to be implemented consistently throughout the district, will be helpful to both staff and parents. These could include how and when school staff and parents will be informed when a special education administrator will be at a PPT and the role and responsibility of that person in the PPT. Policies and practices to be considered could also include the use of meeting agendas that provide time for parents to have their concerns addressed and considered. It is also important to address mechanisms for communication to ensure that all staff has the ability to participate and provide information and their professional opinion to the team through various means.

**Respectfully Submitted:**

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Gail Mangs

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Maria Synodi