



A Special Education Analysis

For

The Boise School District

Independent School District of Boise City





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Superintendent of the Boise School District (BSD) commissioned this comprehensive review of the district's special education program. The review team employed proprietary methodology from a pre-established paradigm (i.e., a Clinical Services Analysis), which triangulates information gleaned from qualitative and information and established benchmarks with respect to school-based practices to achieve this broad operational objective.

More specifically, the qualitative analyses comprised: 1) a series of interviews with service providers, special and regular education personnel, parents, and administrators; and 2) a review of documents (i.e., IEPs) to determine the degree and appropriateness of educational programming. Quantitative analyses included multidimensional descriptive and inferential statistical analyses of information contained within the IEPs.

Results of this analysis revealed an overriding commitment, dedication, and effectiveness in the quality of supports provided by the BSD staff for its students. Several recommendations across the areas of investigation are offered throughout this document in order to promote further programmatic quality.



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INTRODUCTION

As mutually agreed upon between the Futures HealthCore (hereafter, referred to as Futures) and the leadership of the Boise School District (BSD), this analysis was designed to provide an assessment of specific and mutually agreed upon areas of interest. Although the primary areas under investigation are inter-related, for ease of presentation we present each of the four areas that constituted the original proposal as single entities. A presumptive underlying construct is provided for each; the reader is referred to Appendix A for the specific questions corresponding to each section. When appropriate and applicable, recommendations are provided at the end of each section.

ACCESS TO LEAST RESTRICTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (LRE)

Statistical Analyses

- A stratified sample of 125 IEPs across educational disabilities and age groups (spanning preschool through high school) was analyzed with respect to the amount of time each student was designated to regular education classrooms (i.e., receiving education with non-disabled peers). Three discrete categories, listed from most to least restrictive, comprised this last variable: 0-39%; 40-79%; and 80-100%. Across all ages and educational disabilities, the 80-100% category was modal, or most frequently occurring one. With respect to each individual educational disability,¹ except the Intellectual Disability and Multiple Disabilities categories, the 80-100% category was modal (the Emotional Disturbance category was bi-modal with 0-39% and 80-100% being the most prevalent). It is equally commendable that, contrary to the reviewers' experience, the educational disability of autism is well-represented in the least restrictive category. These data strongly suggest that there a concerted and successful effort to integrate Boise's special education students into LREs; this will be discussed further in subsequent sections.
- A correlation analysis was conducted across the variables of age and intensity of related services within the collective domain of speech-language pathology, occupational therapy, and physical therapy (as measured by total minutes of treatment) with the assumption that a negative correlation may reveal important information in that diminution and eventual discharge of services will by necessity lead to more LRE opportunities. In point of fact, the modest negative correlation of .21 did support this supposition. Furthermore, the configuration of service providers in the district does suggest that younger students are receiving more intense therapy than are older students; this trend, known as front-loading, adheres to best practices and is strongly supported by the authors of this study. In keeping with this trend, it was extremely encouraging to observe that many students with

¹ These comprised: Autism, Intellectual Disability, Visual Impairment, Orthopedic Impairment, Hearing Impairment, Speech, Language, Emotional Disturbance, and Learning Disability



educational disabilities that have required the interventions of related service providers until the age of 21 (e.g., Cognitive Impairment) in other districts that we have analyzed, contained IEPs devoid of such service provision; this represents further evidence that all educators are stakeholders in the education of its students and that the provision of special education in general, or related services in particular, need not be considered de facto.

“Cultural” and Supportive Underpinnings

- The manifestation of this “cultural” support for LRE generally starts during the IEP meetings. More specifically, interviews with clinicians, administrators, and teachers revealed that the concept of LRE is typically “part and parcel” of the IEP meetings and is frequently tied into discussions of programming decisions. It was equally encouraging that the parents who were interviewed were able to articulate the “essence” of LRE, implying that they have been educated on this concept. This was underscored in particular by one parent who reported that her son “should not be in a more restrictive class if he can perform in a typical classroom.....he would never have improved so much in an autism classroom. The regular education component is invaluable.”
- The site visits by the Futures review team corroborated the aforementioned descriptive statistics; the special education students whom we observed are clearly part of their school “community.” The only school where these opportunities did not exist was a preschool that housed self-contained preschool and a head start programs.² As will be elaborated upon in a subsequent section, there is a growing and pervasive culture within the district in which all educators-general and special- “own” the students; as elegantly stated by one interviewee “we are all in this together.” Thus, the concept of LRE can be said to be an important an omnipresent principle within the district.
- Although the reasons for having trailers are obviously well-thought out and driven by physical plant needs, there is a pervading belief among some of the interviewees that the trailer classrooms are reserved for students with special needs, thus jeopardizing the perception, if not the reality, of LRE opportunities for those students housed in the trailers.
- Another important “cultural” consideration is the “culture of dismissal” from either special education or related services. With respect to speech-language pathologists, the over-riding opinion is that parents typically view this as a positive and as a reason to celebrate.

² As stated in the Idaho Special Education Manual (2007): Public schools that do not operate early childhood programs for preschool students without disabilities are not required to initiate such programs solely to satisfy LRE requirements. Public schools that do not have an inclusive public preschool that can provide all the appropriate services and supports to meet the individual needs of preschool students with disabilities, shall explore alternative methods to ensure LRE requirements are met for preschool students ages 3 to 5 years, which may include: providing opportunities for participation (even part-time) of preschool students with disabilities in public or private regular early childhood programs operated for preschool students without disabilities by other agencies, such as Head Start (p. 171)



Among psychologists, occupational, and physical therapists, parent reaction is viewed as mixed: Parents are often “thrilled,” but if they feel needs have not been met, they are disgruntled. The concept of the “culture” of dismissal will be elaborate upon in a subsequent section of this report.

- In order to promote LRE for students with behavioral issues by maximizing their coping skills, it is essential for behavioral health professionals to provide necessary support. Counselors (who reside in each school) and social workers (who are itinerant) provide direct intervention, both individually with students and in small groups. Social Workers describe their direct service as involving mostly group work to maximize service utilization for students with special needs. Both counselors and social workers identified themselves as part of a strong team-based approach, where they meet regularly with school psychologists and special and general education teachers to discuss options for providing intervention to students exhibiting difficulties with learning, behavior, and social adaptation.

School psychologists also provide consultation to both special education and general education teachers; the primary focus of consultation is on behavioral issues. *Direct Behavioral Intervention* by school psychologists involves (a) small group education and counseling for behavioral and social skills development; (b) immediate intervention for serious behavioral issues and intervention as part of a Threat Assessment Team that evaluates students presenting as at-risk for harming self or others; and (c) assessments, such as Functional Behavior Analyses (FBA) to provide guidance in behavioral management for both General Education Teachers and Special Education teachers. School psychologists also provide direct intervention via small group counseling to students who are identified as needing behavioral and social skills training.

In addition, the district also should be applauded for providing supports to at risk adolescent students via its Alternate High School Program.

Response to Intervention (RTI)

The primary function of a *Response to Intervention* (RTI) model is to allow for the implementation of accommodations, strategies, and other environmental interventions that will presumably allow a student the “best chance” to remain within the general curriculum; this increasingly important function ensures that students’ educational needs can be met in the least restrictive manner, without the need to identify them as requiring special education programming. In essence, from a formulaic perspective, the pre-referral team serves, en toto, as a “gatekeeper,” thus minimizing false positives (i.e., students who do not need additional specialized therapeutic supports and interventions, but are identified as requiring them) and false negatives (i.e., students who may require special education, but are not identified as needing it).



- There was consensus among those interviewed that movement toward a District-wide policy involving RTI is, in many respects, associated with special education despite the fact that RTI exists as a general education initiative.
- Interviews with personnel suggest that, although BSD as a whole does promote a process that is congruous with establishing *Least Restrictive Environments* for pupils receiving both General and Special Education services, RTI is unevenly implemented throughout the district.
- This inconsistency was underscored by a number of factors that include:
 - The actual “names” of the RTI process frequently varied from school to school (the *Problem Solving Team* appeared to be the most common)
 - There appear to be clear distinctions between those administrators and schools that are pioneering creative RTI initiatives and those who are merely adopting its more rudimentary aspects
 - The involvement of psychologists and therapists varies from virtually no involvement to “sitting” in on weekly meetings to *I’m not sure what my role is*

Summary and Recommendations

Federal (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004), state (Idaho Special Education Manual, 2007) and BSD’s policies mandate that special education students receive opportunities to receive a *Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* within *Least Restrictive Environments*. The quantitative and qualitative analyses that comprised this particular area overwhelmingly point to the fact that BSD’s special education students are afforded these opportunities. The authors of this study propose the following recommendations in order to further promote and enhance this hallmark of the district’s program:

- The practice of reverse mainstreaming, which is defined as having regular education students in special education classrooms in order to interact with special education students, is not universally employed across the district. However, when interviewed, all principals demonstrated a profound interest in this concept and appeared eager to learn more about it. Should the district decide to pursue this as a district-wide initiative, then reverse mainstreaming will provide another meaningful platform to provide LRE opportunities. This initiative has traditionally included a lunch bunch program, which allows typical students to eat with disabled peers and is a wonderful opportunity for the typical students to provide social role modeling in a naturalistic activity and milieu; it should be noted that this program would address the desire for two parents of special needs students who reported (verbatim): *It is inappropriate that students with special needs are segregated at lunch which appears to be more for the benefit of staff than the child; and I*



would like to see more effort to connect the students as friend and not just an "odddity in the class."

- If not yet explicitly stated, all initial IEPs should contain language that states that eventual discontinuation of services should be viewed as a celebration and not a denial of services. This recommendation is neither meant to script nor remove the professional latitude from IEP participants, but it is essential that the “culture of dismissal” be broached day one in order to prevent potential contentious meetings in the future. This will be elaborated upon in a subsequent section.
- In order to “tighten up” and provide greater uniformity to the RTI process³, the district is encouraged to:
 - Select schools within each quadrant that are considered to be exemplary in its current implementation of RTI and allow this team to meet at regular intervals with the other identified schools from the other three quadrants to ensure that they are all “on the same page” with respect to processes and procedures. It is equally important that the leadership involved in this process agree to a single name that will define the RTI process in each school. Subsequent to these initial meetings, the personnel may then visit other schools within their own quadrants in order to provide mentorship and ongoing support for their colleagues, thus ensuring an effective and uniform RTI process throughout the district.
 - Ensure that school principals take an identified and consistent role with RTI in their buildings going forward; such visibility is important both from an accountability standpoint as well as a symbolic one, as their collective presence will convey the essential message that RTI is a regular education initiative and that the process itself is of particular import. As a corollary to this, it may be beneficial for all personnel to be informed (perhaps via an already established newsletter) that RTI is, in all respects, a regular education initiative.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND SUPPORT

Cultural Underpinnings

- As alluded to in the previous section, there is a pervasive culture within the Boise district whereby educators “own” the students, thereby effectively breaking down the artificial, yet all too frequent, schism that exists between special and regular educators.

³ These actions will support Boise’s Strategic Plan to: *Maintain a District-wide and school-wide program of timely intervention for students who do not show growth or adequate development in learning.*



According to several interviewees, many of the “old guard” principals wanted to “get kids out” of the regular education classrooms, so that special education personnel could “fix them.”

- Although there is general culture of acceptance and these are “our students,” there are some lingering attitudes of “we don’t want those (special education) students” within some schools. The variability of openness to inclusion was also perceived by some therapists: many expressed that they are welcome into the general education classrooms, whereas others perceived that the teachers do not yet “get” the educational model vis-à-vis the role of school-based therapy service providers. It was the perception among several personnel that the variability of teacher flexibility fell upon generational lines, with younger teachers generally more welcoming of inclusion and service providers than the more experienced teachers.

The theme that regular educator’s flexibility fell along generational lines was also echoed among Special Education teachers and administrators in that there was some concern that general education personnel may not be as flexible or accepting as they can be in response to inclusion of some students receiving special education services.

Staff Satisfaction

- Virtually all of the personnel interviewed stated an extremely high regard for their colleagues, schools, and departments. Comments such as, “The best system in the state,” and, “I really feel supported and not alone or isolated,” were prevalent and reflect a general state of job satisfaction. In this regard, staff reported the following:
 - Excellent interactions with administration and professional peers.
 - Professional camaraderie (i.e., departmental journal clubs).
 - A high degree of support, availability and quality consultation from school psychologists, specialists in counseling and other special education service providers.
 - Satisfaction with opportunities for professional development and continuing education⁴.
 - Satisfaction with the process of establishing special education *eligibility* as a team-driven process that consistently ensures students the maximum opportunity for regular education and the *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)* for learning.

⁴ In keeping with the Strategic Plan to: *Maintain a rigorous and relevant professional development program at the District and school level with a focus of improving student learning.*



- The structure of the special education department appears quite conducive to staff needs, and all respondents reported feeling supported by both their supervisors and principals. It was the pervading belief that the administrators representing both regular and special education work extremely well together; thus the “message” that regular and special education should function as complimentary entities may be said to be filtering down to the field.
- Staff reported that the re-institution of the Special Education Directorship in the person of Dr. Charlene Silva added another layer of support and provided the special education department a definitive and needed leadership presence that, in many interviewees opinion, had been lacking prior to her arrival.
- Although staff were extremely laudatory in their appreciation for the quality of support and programming in the special education department, one theme that came through “loud and clear” was their collective dissatisfaction with the amount of paperwork required of their jobs. Special education teachers were most vociferous in their belief that paperwork demands were “absurd.” For example, the school psychologists were variable in their responses to inquiries regarding paperwork demands: The reported percentage ranged from 40% to 70% of their time documenting their services via reports of assessments and consultation. Two out of the eight school psychologists (25%) described the requirements for written documentation as, “overwhelming,” or “unreasonable.” The remaining six regarded their paperwork as reasonable, necessary, and not excessive. The S-LPs reported a 75/25 or 80/20 “split” between direct treatment and documentation demands.

At the center of many of the special education teachers’ dissatisfaction with the volume of documentation demands is the district’s computerized IEP software program, Excent Terra. Although most of the “bumps and bruises” appeared to have taken place during its initial introduction two years ago, frustrations persist with what the teachers’ perceive as both logistical difficulties and the over-burdensome elements with the program. It is notable that the service providers reported no such difficulty with the Excent Terra program⁵ for, as one therapist put it, “we are only responsible for a small piece of it (the IEP), where the special education teachers need to do the whole thing.”

Parental Perceptions

As stated in the original proposal: *An essential content area of the proposed interviews will be devoted to staff, parent, and Boise citizens’ understanding of the scope and mission of special education. They will be queried on the extent that they perceive their disabled students are included in school-based activities with both disabled and non-disabled peers. A representative sample of ten individuals for each these three demographic groups will be*

⁵ One reported that she “loved it”



interviewed. As an extension of the parent interviews, they will be asked to comment on their perceptions of access to, participation in, and communication and advocacy within, the special education process.

- One parent likened progress with BSD's special education program to the game of *Chutes and Ladders*, stating that after progress is made they (the students) get a new teacher, aide, principal -- and they slip down the chute and have to start all over again. Another perceived that the system is driven by the "good will of individuals" and not a systemic response to the needs of our students.

Frustrations emerged as the slowness of staff to respond to change versus standing their ground. The comments *they waited too long* and *took so long for intervention* was stated more than once. One parent perceived that there are variances and inconsistencies in special education services depending upon the area and the principal.

- However, it was readily apparent that the parents whom we interviewed, when considered as a whole, possess extremely favorable views of both the quality of the education that their students are receiving and the staff involved in that education-from the principal to the bus aides. Below, we include some of the verbatim responses that attest to this overriding perception:

- *Grateful for this opportunity and safe program*
- *I don't know what I would do without them*
- *Wish it was a model for all kids with autism*
- *Whole program is just about perfect for my grandson*
- *They treat her like a person with a mind to grow*
- *The teachers can attend to kids; the schools have what they need*

As mentioned earlier, parents possessed a good understanding of the two of the kernel elements contained within IDEA: FAPE and LRE. In their own words, each parent quickly verbalized the "requirements of IDEA" and FAPE, adding comments like "extra attention in specific areas," "monitored," "team negotiated," and "integrated as part of the school, and with no stigma."

- In response to their perceptions of having a "voice" in their child's education, one parent stated that the process of education her son was a *joint venture-very open*. Another parent stated: *If I didn't, I wouldn't have him in the school*. Opportunities to communicate with educators included: scheduled meetings, a "talk" with aides every morning; a daily journal; and notepad every day. It was the parents' perception that regular education teachers, counselors, and the school principal were accessible by phone or email.



- When asked what their perception of the program strengths are, many of the recurring themes that were reported included: communication between teachers and parents; the quality of the staff; and staff's willingness to listen to feedback.
- Suggestions for further support included:
 - The institution of a monthly parent group
 - A class for parents to prepare their students for a transition into a new program
 - A class to help parents understand the child's behavior and specific needs
 - A mental health series by Dr. Pine.
 - An extended school day for structured socialization and improve reading in the lower grades
 - Engage students with disabilities more in the daily activities of the school
 - More focus on "life skills" by getting students out into the community

Summary and Recommendations

The following recommendations are provided in order to further promote BSD's organizational supports to its staff and parents. Although perhaps beyond the initial scope of this analysis, the authors of this study posit that the issues of programmatic excellence and stakeholder morale are inexorably intertwined and warrant consideration, if not further exploration.

- One of the consistent responses by special and regular education teachers to the question *How Could the Program Be Improved*⁶ was to have more time to expand their opportunities to discuss strategies, successes, challenges, etc. with each other. Although there may be contractual and logistic issues to consider, providing greater opportunities for special and regular education staff to discuss specific students outside of the RTI process may be explored. In addition, expansion of these consultative opportunities would appear to conform the district's strategic plan to: *Support the use of collaborative teams at all levels for the purpose of using data to improve programs and instructional practices.*
- Again, while not unique to Boise, many feel there is too much paperwork and non-instructional tasks for teachers to deal with, thereby limiting their time with students. During the interviews, many staff offered solutions regarding additional secretarial,

⁶ Other salient responses to this question are provided in Appendix C.



- clerical, and paraprofessional assistance. Although these solutions have budgetary implications, some possible reconfiguration of procedures and resources as described below might be explored to minimize this issue.

By allowing teachers access to instructional resources through a professional lending library would enable them to investigate and experiment with innovative and scientifically research based materials, programs, instructional strategies and materials, etc. If the above strategy works, it might be possible to redeploy fiscal resources from supplies and materials to clerical personnel because the system-wide savings on purchasing inappropriate materials could be used for clerical support to minimize paper work. This support may not be required all year given that teachers indicated that the paperwork load was seasonal.

- Although it is believed that this process is currently occurring, providing a “compromise” within the Excent Terra is clearly advantageous. In such a scenario, the special education teachers will be able to use information that remains relevant (e.g., demographic data, most recent triennial evaluation results, etc.) from previous IEPs, while the system may retain “fail safe” triggers ensuring that novel information (e.g., updated Present Levels of Educational Performance, goals, objectives, etc.) must be inputted. This will contribute to lessening IEP-related paperwork.
- The authors of this study commend, and strongly recommend, that BSD’s leadership continue, the practice of strong, clear, and candid communication with parents regarding the educational, fiscal, and logistical realities of special education with formal meetings at specified times throughout the year. In view of dwindling federal, state, and municipal resources (which all districts are facing), such formal communication is important to allay the uncertainty of many parents who reported that they are fearful that “impending budget cuts” may imperil their students’ special education supports.

EQUAL ACCESS TO SUPPORTS

Eligibility for Services

- Among the psychologists there is consensus that the process of determining eligibility for those requiring special education within the domain behavioral supports is functional and efficient. With respect to identification of Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), however, eligibility is currently based on a *discrepancy model* that requires a 15-point discrepancy between cognitive ability and academic achievement scores. This is certainly provides a standard model for establishing eligibility under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, but may not adequately recognize students who may otherwise genuinely require support as might be established and served by a robust RTI program, as previously discussed. Alternatively, it is the prevailing belief that ADHD may be over identified.



- A random sample of IEPs representing students matched for age, educational disability, and therapeutic profiles across different schools was conducted and, based on the quantitative and qualitative information contained within the IEPs, it could be inferred that there were clear and uniform criteria in determining eligibility for these students.
- Although the use of paraprofessional supports throughout the district is certainly not over-utilized, and appears to be generally allocated based on student need within the context of providing least restrictive educational opportunities, one interview reported that a “very affluent student” currently has a paraprofessional, validating the view of another interviewee that the process of assigning aides to students can potentially be ad-hoc and based on factors other than the specific need of the students.
- Of the three core therapies (i.e., speech-language, occupational, and physical), the speech-language pathologists are the most advanced with respect to adopting rigorous and uniform entry and exit criteria; however, one S-LP stated that the 7% criterion score is “hard and fast” for language-based issues, but there is “wiggle room” to qualify a student for articulation therapy. Additionally, one S-LP professed to being confused as to what constitutes “adequate academic progress” for discharge from services. It is also not surprising that the issue with the ELL population, regarding what constitutes a language disorder vs. lack of exposure, was a prevalent theme. It is notable that issues of overall eligibility for the ELL population are a challenge for all educators in the district. In general, the S-LPs appear quite adept in articulating the dual concepts of the educational model and the “culture of discharge.” It was the collective opinion of the S-LPs that parents for the most part “get” the role of speech-language services and “celebrate” the discharge of their students, which may be a function that many S-LPs typically broach the issue of discharge at initial IEP meetings.

Alternatively, there appears to be considerable variation with occupational and physical therapy vis-à-vis entry and exit criteria; therapists across both disciplines cited actual students whom they inherited and that they would not necessarily have qualified themselves. Perhaps, as a consequence of this ambiguity regarding eligibility, more than one OT reported that they felt compelled to keep students on service from their administrators. Additionally, because parents and teachers appear to be unsure as to what the roles and responsibilities of OT and PT are in a school, and are clinging to the traditional “medical” model, are as a result more apt to seek these services as pull-out.

- In keeping with the aforementioned theme of discharge, it was the perception of educators that some students are being held on too long for special education and that there are no clear processes to “get students off” once they qualify.
- Across all disciplines and psychologists, there was some variability in the administration of three-year evaluations; although many clinicians opt to conduct comprehensive assessments, others use more informal measures or rely on those assessments administered by other specialists.



- There appears to be a resistance to minimizing excessively long IEP meetings. It is commendable that staff members are sensitive to parents. However, by allowing some of these meetings to go on for two and three hours, staff time is being taken away from instruction and frustrating teachers.

QUALITY AND CONSISTENCY OF IEPs

- Across all parameters, IEPs were comprehensive and excellent in terms of their *internal consistency*, or the degree to which the elements of the document were mutually supporting, and thus “painted” a cohesive profile of the student. The majority of goals and benchmarks were measurable and referred to educational need. *Best Practices* was suggested across assessments and utilized modalities, which corroborates the department’s over-riding philosophy of employing evidence-based practice patterns. All reviewed IEPs contained pertinent information as mandated by the Idaho State Department of Education, including transition planning for students ages 16 and older.
- A longitudinal analysis of selected set of IEPs revealed that the objectives changed appropriately over time, reflecting an appreciation of both the students’ growth and fluidity of curriculum needs.
- The reviewers did note two trends that may pose a potential challenge to external consistency, or the degree to which all students within the district are allowed equal access to services as reflected in the IEPs. The first concerns the “tie in” of the Present Levels of Educational Performance (PLEP) to eligibility. On several occasions, the wording for service providers on this particular section referred to *typical students can...as* a rationale for initial (or continued) services. Because related services exist to support the students’ access to the curriculum, it is suggested that the wording in the PLEP refer to how the manifestation of the educational disability uniquely affects the student’s access to the curriculum.

The second area concerns measurement parameters for one special education teacher wrote mastery for a matching goal at 50% accuracy. However, choose responses (i.e., that he or she is not simply guessing) it is not enough to write the statistical criterion as 50% for an objective that corresponds to a “forced” choice task with two possibilities (e.g., A or B). A student who achieves 50% has not exceeded chance levels, which is the gold standard for forced choice tasks; the reader is referred to Appendix B to determine how many correct responses across trials and choices constitute mastery above chance levels (at the .05 confidence interval).

Recommendations

- The district is strongly encouraged to revisit the creation of systematic, district-wide entry and exit criteria for occupational and physical therapy. It is recommended that the related service providers convene to create this document to ensure that all of the stakeholders



agree on the requisite criteria, thereby ensuring their equitable application. At the outset, this document should focus on the binary issue of whether or not a student should qualify for (any or all) related services based on functional educational performance and performance on standardized tests; future protocols may be amended to specify the intensity of service delivery based on the variables of age, effect(s) of the disability on academic performance, and the nature of the educational curricula. Ideally, this document will incorporate guidelines from the state of Idaho as well as best-practices deemed to be paramount by the district.

- Because the Idaho State Special Education manual specifies eligibility for speech-language services in greater detail, the S-LP's may want to further operationalize what defines an adverse effect on educational performance as it relates to entrance and exit decisions and also specify intensity of treatment across the variables noted above thereby further ensuring equal access to services.
- The special education department may want to develop a systematic approach in re-examining the appropriateness of 1:1 personnel assignments on at least a semi-annual basis in order to ensure that all assigned paraprofessional positions continue to be warranted. To this end, exit and entry criteria may be established to determine initial and continued candidacy for 1:1 supports, which the authors of this study would be pleased to provide the district with.
- All team members at BSD should work together to continue to foster a "culture" that promotes discharge, or at the very least, a reduction from (all) special education services when appropriate at the initiation of each IEP. To this end, team members should consider the following:
 - Introduce the concept of discharge at the first IEP meeting; the mastery levels for each goal and objective should be highlighted, and a general discussion of anticipated timelines for treatment should occur
 - Parents should be encouraged to see discharge as a positive, as a reason for celebration, rather than as a denial of services. In addition, the use of an RTI may be used a "step-down" approach, thereby providing student with needed supports that not need be under the aegis of special education.
 - If a student is making sufficient progress toward goals, a transition to a less intrusive consultation model with requisite service providers with classroom staff may ease the transition.
- Additionally, a choreographed IEP meeting procedure may be developed to sensitively "move" the process along and ensure that meetings last a specified period of time (unless extenuating circumstances require a longer meeting). Another option is to limit the time



of the meeting and reconvene the meeting at another time if it goes longer than scheduled.

PROGRAM COMPLIANCE AND QUALITY

The primary purpose of this section is to integrate, and when appropriate revisit, quantitative and qualitative findings within the dual contexts of state policy as written in the Idaho Special Education Manual (2007) and the results from the most recent State Performance Plan (SPP; 2007) that has been published by the Idaho State Department of Education. It should be noted that, given the comprehensive nature of Idaho's special education manual our findings will be presented in the context of what the authors consider to be the seminal issues within special education and that have been the recurring themes of this analysis: *Least Restrictive Environment, Free Appropriate Public Education, Eligibility, and IEP Development.*

Least Restrictive Environment

As previously discussed, the majority of students whom we reviewed were afforded, to the maximum extent possible, education opportunities within general education classrooms. These findings are consistent with the SPP; BSD exceeded the target of having 61% of its students removed from general education classrooms for less than 21% of the time⁷. It is noteworthy that the reviewers were duly impressed during their site visits of the opportunities special education students had to interact, and participate with, nondisabled peers.

- Per the SPP, Boise has not achieved the target of less than 8.4% of its special education spending less than 60% out of the general education classroom. However, it was the reviewers' impression that the IEPs for the students who were classified in this category had educational-therapeutic needs that justified these levels of separate programming. Thus, it may be stated that the district is satisfying the state requirement: *If the student will not participate entirely in the general education classroom, curriculum, and/or nonacademic and extracurricular activities, the IEP shall include a written explanation justifying the IEP's decision* (p. 105).

It is notable that, should the district enact some of the reverse mainstreaming recommendations, it is quite possible that the "marginal" students who are on the arithmetic cusp of the 80-100% regular education category could plausibly be eligible for that designation, thus improving district performance in this area.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

There is no doubt that the BSD provides its special education students with an education that more than exceeds the FAPE standards. It is readily apparent based on the reviewers' site visits, interviews, and review of the IEPs that the term *appropriate* is not adequate enough to

⁷ This number was, in fact, 67%



describe the truly excellent programming that is occurring within the district. Although all visited programs are worthy of mention, the pre-vocational STARS (Skills Training and Real-Life Situations) program and the high-school age vocational and transition programs were especially notable for their excellence and progressive initiatives.

The authors of this study found it instructive that, in the course of interviews, both staff and parents expressed that they currently work and reside in Boise for the excellence of its special education program. Such laudatory feedback, in our experience, speaks “volumes.”

Eligibility

Per review of IEPs, it was apparent that the IEP team consistently followed the state’s sequential guidelines when determining initial or continued eligibility (p. 31):

1. the student has a disability according to the established Idaho Criteria;
2. the student’s condition adversely affects academic performance; and
3. the student needs special education, that is, specially designed instruction and related services

Once eligibility was established, it may be inferred (based on the existence of IEPs), that the team took into consideration the *findings and determine whether the student meets or continues to meet eligibility criteria.....The evaluation team will draw upon information from a variety of sources, including aptitude and achievement tests, parent and/or adult student input, teacher input, physical condition, social or cultural background, adaptive behavior, and functional assessments to interpret evaluation data and determine eligibility* (p. 40) and also took into consideration the “Three-Prong Test of Eligibility” as defined as the following criteria:

1. the eligibility requirements established by the state for a specific disability are met;
2. the disability must have an adverse impact on the student’s education, and
3. the student must need special education in order to benefit from his or her education.

Finally, once identified as requiring special education, it was equally clear why a particular educational disability was considered to best define the need for specialized instruction.

IEP Development

- Based on the review of the IEPs, it is apparent that, invariably, all Excent Terra IEPs contained the following mandated information as per the State manual:
 - General Demographic Components
 - Documentation of Participants



- Present Levels of Performance, Goals, and Benchmarks/Objectives
 - Progress Toward Goals
 - Statements of Special Education and Related Services
 - Supplementary Aids, Services, and Other IEP Considerations (when applicable)
 - Statewide and District wide Achievement Testing (when applicable)
 - LRE Explanation and Placement Decisions
 - Consent for Initial Provision of Special Education and Related Services
 - (when applicable)
 - Parent and/or adult Student Objection to the IEP
 - Additional Transition Components for Secondary-Level IEPs (when applicable)
- As discussed in the previous section, the IEPs were well-written, educationally relevant, and reflected the individual needs of the students; furthermore, the accommodations and modifications were appropriate, individually catered, and provided necessary supports for the students. Suggestions to modify elements of the PLEP and quantifiable parameters of specific classes of objectives were offered.

FINAL COMMENTARY

The authors of this study applaud The Boise School District's Department of Special Education, as lead by Dr. Silva, which presents as an effective and well-managed department despite the inherent challenges of operating an urban program with its concomitant logistical challenges. En toto, the department provides exemplary educational services and programs to its students that are in keeping with the letter and spirit of the policies and procedures contained within IDEA and the state of Idaho. The primary recommendations contained herein are provided to promote continued programmatic excellence:



APPENDIX A. SPECIFIC QUESTIONS CORRESPONDING TO EACH CONTENT AREA

Access to Least Restrictive Learning Environments for BSD's Special Education Students

To what extent do the efficiency and effectiveness of the current service delivery structures ensure that students with educational disabilities receive their services of a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (FAPE in the LRE)?

What supports exist to allow special educators and general educators to work together to educate students with educational disabilities in general education classrooms?

How do these supports promote access to the general curriculum for all students?

Organizational Issues

What is the organizational and programmatic relationship between general education and special education at the central office and in schools?

To what extent does an agenda exist for school improvement that is inclusive of the needs of all students including those with disabilities?

Equal Access to Supports

Curricular Parameters

To what extent are legal and procedural compliances maintained while increasing focus on instruction and student performance?

What is the efficacy and rigor of curriculum and instruction for students with disabilities?



APPENDIX . NUMBER OF CORRECT ITEMS FOR FORCED CHOICE TASKS TO ENSURE MASTERY ACROSS TRIALS AND CHOICES (AT .05 CONFIDENCE INTERVAL)

NUMBER OF TRIALS	10	15	20	25
NUMBER OF CHOICES				
2	8	11	14	17
3	6	8	10	12
4	5	7	8	10
5	4	6	7	8



APPENDIX . INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES TO THE INTERVIEW QUESTION HOW COULD SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES BE IMPROVED FROM

- Provide consistent training across the district
- Allow more time for resource teachers for paperwork (multiple respondents)
- Accountability training for teachers of special needs students
- Cultivate an understanding of diversity
- Have the director at an assistant superintendent level position with special education
- More defined Title I, counseling and related services responsibilities to “better roll out to the schools”; an organizational chart with clearly defined roles and who does what
- More equitable ways to assign programs to schools
- Many class sizes are too large to accomplish all that they would like with both regular and special education students --- fear with budget cuts the problem will only get worse
- Would like to see more emphasis on early identification and intervention
- Resolve some problems, glitches, and communication breakdowns for transferring special education students between the junior and senior high schools (multiple respondents)
- There is a need for a comparison study on resource allocation at the high schools
- Need for more space -- especially the "resource rooms" they are crowded and not conducive to learning (multiple respondents)
- Desire to see the resources keep pace with the desire of the teaching staff to be as inclusive as possible (multiple respondents)
- Need for more planning time to truly communicate with special education teachers and the child's parents
- Allow for greater coordination and communication seems better in the early grades and gets more difficult as child enters middle and is nearly non-existent in High School



- Adoption of 3:1 model of therapy (3 weeks of direct service followed by a week of non-treatment activities); provide articulation intervention via 5 minute daily sessions opposed to conventional IEPs (reported by S-LP)
- Fear that resources that they now have to meet the needs of the students will disappear over time and that the "demands and "responsibilities" will remain which will ultimately cause friction between regular education teachers, special education teachers, administration and parents
- More monthly OT/PT supervisor (no follow through); more continuing ed. that is pertinent to OT issues, fewer schools



REFERENCES

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 34 C.F.R. Part 104 (2006).

Idaho State Department of Education-Division of Student Achievement and School Accountability (2007). *Idaho Special Education Manual 2007*.