

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation of Cumberland Special Education Student Outcomes

Public Consulting Group's Center for Resource Management (PCG-CRM) was contracted by the Cumberland Public Schools to conduct an evaluation of the district's Special Education Program. The overall purpose of the evaluation was to determine its effectiveness in supporting positive outcomes for students receiving special education services. The evaluation was organized into two phases – an Outcome Analysis (Phase I) and an Organizational and Program Analysis (Phase II). The Phase I evaluation involved an analysis of the characteristics of the Cumberland special education population and their outcomes in areas related to attendance and performance on the NECAP reading and math assessments. It was designed to provide Cumberland Public Schools with a rich and integrated profile of the performance of students receiving special education services and the extent to which services are resulting in engagement with school (high attendance) and positive progress in reading and mathematics.

Improving Data Access and Data Use

Cumberland Public Schools should take steps to improve data quality and data access across the district. The process of acquiring data for the outcome evaluation revealed serious data system gaps, and highlighted that special education program data are not easily available on an ongoing basis to inform decisions within the district. It is recommended that the district take several steps to improve data quality and access: 1) ensure that SchoolMax, the district's student information system, contains complete and accurate information on all students, including special education students, and that it is updated in a timely manner; 2) ensure that special education staff and school personnel are familiar with the range of reports that can be generated from SchoolMax, and establish a district-wide data access, dissemination, and analysis schedule that will support the timely distribution and use of pertinent data; and 3) archive regular education and special education information to allow longitudinal analysis of demographic and performance trends.

Improving the Administration and Use of the Developmental Reading Assessment System

The district should provide training to school staff to ensure the consistent administration and use of the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) system across classrooms. A review of DRA record forms indicated that teachers were not completing them in a uniform manner across schools/classrooms, which makes the reliability of the information highly questionable. The district should also consider using software applications available from the publisher of the DRA to improve the quality and use of student assessment results.

Special Education Trends

Variations in special education rates at different grade levels should be examined by the district to ensure they do not reflect procedural differences or a lack of supports that would inhibit students exiting from special education. Between the 2005–06 and 2007–08 school years, the percent of Cumberland students identified as needing special education services declined by 1% –

from 20% to 19%, but rates varied at different grade levels. In 2007–08, grade levels where the special education rate was higher than the district average were 5th grade (21%), 6th grade (21%), 9th grade (20%), 11th grade (23%), and 12th grade (23%).

Special Education Demographics

The district should critically examine the high percentage of male students and low economic level students identified for special education. In 2007–08, compared to the total Cumberland student population, the special education population included a significantly higher percentage of male students (67% vs. 52%) and students on free/reduced lunch (25% vs. 16%). The gender and economic differences in the special education population should be examined in terms of possible over-identification. Issues that have been identified in the literature on special education are that male students and students from poorer economic environments are frequently more likely to be struggling readers or exhibit behavior problems in the classroom versus having an actual handicapping condition.

Special Education Population by Disability

In the current school year, Cumberland Public Schools is providing services to a range of disability groups with students identified as having a learning disability comprising 27% of the K–12 population, followed by speech/language (26%), other health impaired (26%), emotional disability (9%), autism (6%), and other (6%). The distribution of the population by disability varies at school levels, which has implications for the types of services offered. Students identified as having a speech/language disorder comprised nearly half of the special education students at the elementary level, while students with a learning disability comprised about a third of the middle and high school special education populations. Across grade levels, there is a steady increase in the proportion of special education students identified as other health impaired, from 16% at the elementary level to 35% at the high school level.

Attendance

The district is to be commended for exemplary elementary attendance patterns for both special education and regular education students, but needs to monitor the increase in absence in grade 8, and proactively address the attendance problems at the high school. High absence increases for special education students as they move through grades 9–12. In 2006–07, more than half of the grade 12 special education students missed 3 weeks or more of school compared to 34% in grade 9 and 29% in grade 8.

Longitudinal Special Education Student Achievement in Reading

The district is to be commended that on the 2007 Grade 3 reading assessment, more than half of the tested special education students achieved proficiency. However, downward trends at other grade levels should serve as a caution to the district and an indicator to the special education program of the need for more intensive ongoing progress monitoring to improve performance.

Across three years, with the exception of the 3rd grade assessment, the district did not show progress in reducing the percent of special education students who perform at Level 1. Longitudinal trends for the grades 6–8 assessments also showed no progress in reducing the percent of special education students scoring at Level 1.

Longitudinal Special Education Student Achievement in Math

Longitudinal increases in the percent of special education students scoring at Level 1 on the NECAP math achievement tests also underscore the need for more systematic monitoring of ongoing progress. The fact that nearly 60% of special education students scored at Level 1 on the 2007 NECAP grade 4 and 5 math assessments is a very strong indicator that these students are not receiving the math support and intervention they need at the elementary level. The high percentages of students scoring at Level 1 on the 6–8 NECAP math assessments indicate that most middle school special education students are performing significantly below grade level, and lack the math skills they will need to succeed in middle and high school math coursework.

Cohort Progress in Reading and Math

Cumberland Public Schools needs to intensify its efforts to provide the depth of reading and math intervention special education students need to improve their skills. An analysis of the longitudinal progress made by two same-group cohorts of students on the NECAP reading and math assessments from 2005 to 2007 showed that these students made minimal progress in moving toward proficiency. Also, as students moved from one grade to the next, the majority who were at Level 1 in the previous grade continued to score at Level 1. Progress or growth data provide important findings about the extent to which specific students are improving from one grade to the next, and provide a more robust indicator of program effectiveness than trend data. The cohort results indicated that the reading and math instruction provided to these special education students did not lead to improved performance on the NECAP assessments.

Improving the Performance of the Lowest Performing Students

The district needs to critically examine a lack of progress in improving the performance of the lowest performing special education students and develop a district-wide plan to address this issue. An analysis of the progress made by same-group cohorts of special education and regular education students who had scored at Level 1 on the 2005 NECAP reading and math assessments showed that the special education group made minimal or no progress. Progress for the regular education students was more positive, but about half showed no change in their performance from year to year. These results indicate a need for instructional improvement in meeting the needs of low performing students.

NECAP Reading and Math Performance by Disability

The Special Education Program should more closely monitor the ongoing reading and math performance of specific disability groups. While variations in performance may be expected, it is important that the special education program strategically examine the extent to which the reading and math support that is being provided to specific disability groups is resulting in students mastering essential skills. This is particularly true for the learning disability population at the elementary level where 2007 results showed more than half of these students scored at Level 1 on the NECAP reading and 80% scored at Level 1 for NECAP math.