

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation of the Cumberland Special Education Program

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. The Phase II Evaluation examined a wide array of factors that have an impact on program effectiveness and the outcomes achieved by special education students. A total of 103 Cumberland Public Schools staff participated in the Phase II interview process, as well as nine representatives of the Cumberland Special Education Advisory Committee (CSEAC).

Summary of Phase II Findings and Recommendations for Improvement

Shared Responsibility and Accountability Across General and Special Education

Cumberland Public Schools should establish a more unified leadership and accountability structure for the learning and achievement of special and general education students. While a Leadership Team has been established and there is a clear commitment at the Cumberland district level to providing a high quality education to all students, shared leadership responsibilities for ensuring the progress of special education students need to be more clearly defined for directors and administrators at the district and building levels. Cumberland Public Schools should develop a strategic plan that addresses this area and specifies the mutual roles and shared responsibilities of general and special education administrators in such areas as: determining the effectiveness of the curriculum in supporting the learning and achievement of special education students, ensuring consistency and quality in curriculum modifications, determining the effectiveness of reading and mathematics interventions, ensuring adequate staffing support for Response to Intervention (RTI), and providing a more integrated approach to professional development for general and special education teachers and teaching assistants. Addressing any of these areas as "separate" special education issues does not represent either a viable or cost-effective approach to program effectiveness and improvement.

Allocation of Special Education Director Responsibilities

The mutual responsibilities of the Director and Deputy Director of Special Education should be reviewed in light of their roles in a more unified district leadership approach, and to reflect the IDEA shift in focus toward program effectiveness. The IDEA shift in focus has created new challenges for school districts in re-directing leadership and accountability structures to move beyond compliance toward a more integrated approach across general and special education. This shift has implications for the roles of the Cumberland Director and Deputy Director of Special Education. The hiring of a Deputy Director offers an opportunity to redefine all central office leadership

responsibilities and how they interface with the responsibilities of principals in areas related to instructional effectiveness and collaboration across general and special education. The district should also examine whether clerical support for the directors is adequate, and take steps toward automating the budgeting system to minimize clerical and manual budget demands that take away from other program responsibilities.

Cumberland Public Schools Teaching Staff

The dedication and commitment of the Cumberland teaching staff is an area of program strength that the district should draw upon in developing action plans for program improvement. At the elementary level the positive collaboration of general and special education teachers was frequently cited as an area of strength, and teacher interview data at all levels reflected a genuine commitment to provide special education students with the support and instruction they need to achieve success. Teaching assistants are generally viewed as competent, effective in providing assistance, and dedicated. In developing future action plans, the district should draw upon the strengths of the teaching staff and actively engage them in defining strategies and solutions that address the areas for improvement identified in this report.

Teacher Collaboration and Co-Teaching

While Cumberland Public Schools has placed a strong emphasis on co-teaching, the implementation of a co-teaching model needs to be strengthened and better supported at every level. Co-teaching is strongest at the elementary level, but varies from teacher to teacher with considerable inconsistency across classrooms. Common expectations and norms for co-teaching at the middle school level need to be established to ensure more consistent collaboration from team to team. At the high school level, co-teaching is evident only in isolated cases in inclusion classrooms. At all three levels, the common planning time that is necessary to support the co-teaching process is minimal, and teachers indicated the need for more professional development on effective co-teaching strategies.

The Identification and Referral Process in the Three Non-RTI Schools (Academic RTI)

The identification and referral process in the three non-RTI schools is based on a sound set of procedures, but more support in addressing reading skill deficits and more consistency across schools in the use of the TST is needed. All three schools are implementing pre-referral intervention practices, and the collaboration of general and special education teachers around the referral process is an area of effectiveness. However, some referrals result from teachers not having sufficient support to respond to students with the most needs, particularly in the area of reading. Teacher Support Teams (TSTs) feel challenged by the time needed to review referrals, and the use of the TST was inconsistent across the three schools. Other areas for improvement include: revising the referral form so that teachers and parents complete one form together; pre-screening of incoming kindergarten students; and establishing a more consistent process for classroom teachers to provide data to substantiate their referrals.

The Identification and Referral Process in the Two RTI Schools (Academic RTI)

In both schools, RTI represents an improvement over previous approaches, but the district needs to more carefully examine the challenges of RTI implementation in moving toward district-wide implementation. The benefits of RTI include earlier support for students prior to referral to special education, the referral process proceeding more efficiently because of the intervention and documentation that occurs prior to a referral, and more focused use of data on student progress.

Challenges include: resolving budget issues related to the blurring of RTI and special education and how to count the service hours being provided through RTI; defining the referral process under RTI more clearly at the district level to ensure consistency across schools; identifying appropriate interventions; scheduling time for interventions; and having sufficient staff to provide the scope of interventions needed during pre-referral and after referral. In addition, the RTI process becomes far more challenging at the 4th grade level, and more RTI experience is needed for the process to work at the upper grade levels.

Assessments Used for Referral/Re-Evaluation and Progress Monitoring

The range of assessments used for referral/re-evaluation and for progress monitoring needs to be expanded, and the district needs to define a core set of assessments that are consistently used across schools. The profile of assessments reported by schools should be critically reviewed at the central office level to ensure it represents what the Special Education Directors view as an adequate assessment framework for referral and re-evaluation purposes. Progress monitoring is an area that needs to be strengthened and schools will need an array of assessments that go beyond the limited measures currently used in the schools. Principals particularly highlighted the need for a system to assess student progress, noting the fact that students may be progressing in ways that are not assessed by the current measures.

Student Placement in the Least Restrictive Environment

Cumberland Public Schools has created a structure for special education services that addresses the needs of students with varying levels of disability in the least restrictive environment. However, Special Education Directors need to examine the level of services provided in grades 8 and 9, and address issues with placement decisions at the high school level. Cumberland places a strong emphasis on inclusion, and the majority of special education students are in general education classroom more than 50% of the time. There are some pull-out services for students needing additional support, and self-contained classes for students with the most severe disabling conditions. Special Education Directors need to examine the lower level of service support occurring at grades 8 and 9 where more than half of the special education population receives less than one hour of service support each day. Whether students are getting sufficient support in reading and mathematics needs to be critically reviewed. At the high school level the placement process also needs to be critically reviewed, and perceptions that too many special education students are placed in the lowest level fundamental courses, which were described as being like “self-contained classrooms,” need to be addressed.

Middle and High School Transition

The transition process from the elementary to the middle schools and from the middle schools to the high school needs to be improved. There was widespread consensus that current transition processes do not effectively support special education students’ transition to the upper grade levels. Better communication at transition points and transition activities for special and general education staff, students, and parents are needed to facilitate understanding of the school programs at the next level, and enhance the transition process. Middle school staff felt that elementary staff needed to develop a better understanding of the middle school program, and high school staff felt that middle school staff needed to develop a better understanding of the high school program to develop appropriate Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) as students transition from one level to the next.

Expectations for Learning

Cumberland Public Schools has made progress in shifting toward a culture of high expectations for students receiving special education services, but continued emphasis by district and school leadership is needed to reinforce this orientation and raise current performance expectations.

Elementary and middle school teachers are viewed as having high expectations for special education students within the context of different ability levels, which can represent an inherent contradiction. Teachers recognize the challenge of holding all students to the same Grade Level Expectation (GLE) standards while making modifications for those with special needs. There is a general perception that expectations at the high school level are driven by the defacto tracking of the course level system, resulting in low expectations for special education students.

Issues Identified by Representatives of the Cumberland Special Education Advisory Committee Special Education Directors should work collaboratively with the Cumberland Special Education Advisory Committee (CSEAC) in continuing district efforts to strengthen home-school communication, and to further examine and address issues identified by CSEAC representatives.

Interviews conducted with nine representatives of the CSEAC suggested that home-school communication is strongest at the elementary level and needs to improve at the middle and high school levels. Other issues identified by the CSEAC representatives related to: raising expectations for special education students; student transition to the middle schools and high school; an overall perception that the level of service and parent-school communication decreases as students move into the secondary level; and high school special education students being forced into a course structure that has the negative impact of segregating them into the lowest level courses.

Access to the General Education Curriculum

Grade Level Expectations/Grade Span Expectations (GLEs/GSEs) provide the curricular framework for all Cumberland students and are the basis for IEP objectives, but the issue of students needing to work on GLEs/GSEs below their grade level needs to be addressed. The district should provide clearer guidelines on the use of GLEs/GSEs with students who are performing significantly below grade level, and more training on the use of modifications and differentiated instruction is needed. At all levels the excellent support of special education teachers in developing modifications was cited, but general education teachers need more guidance, support, and professional development in helping students with varied abilities meet the GLEs/GSEs. The district Leadership Team should critically examine and address the following identified issues: the limited utility of GLEs/GSEs in guiding instruction for students needing the most support; difficulties with the “broadness” of GLEs and GSEs in writing meaningful IEP objectives; students not being able to meet the GLEs on schedule and not mastering them before they have to move on; students not understanding the content specified in the GSEs; and a high school curriculum that is more “textbook driven” than GSE driven.

The Inclusion Model

The district is moving toward full inclusion, and at all levels there is positive support for this model. However, the district will need to focus leadership efforts at both the central office and building levels in addressing aspects of implementation that are tied to multiple areas of improvement cited in this report. Issues with the implementation of an inclusion model relate to multiple areas that are interconnected and should be addressed through an integrated plan for improvement. These areas include: the need for more common planning time to support collaboration and co-teaching; adequate staffing support in inclusion classrooms; a wider array of

reading and mathematics interventions to support student learning in inclusion classrooms; professional development in differentiating instruction; the need for more inclusion classrooms at the high school level; and content area professional development for high school special education teachers.

Reporting of Student Progress

The district needs to critically review the current system of reporting on student progress, address issues related to grading criteria, and provide information to parents on how different reports are connected. A combination of reports are used to report special education student progress, which includes report cards and quarterly special education progress reports, as well as general education progress reports for students having academic difficulties. The special education progress reports are keyed to each student's IEP and both documents need to be reviewed simultaneously. The fact that modifications in grades are not noted on the report card is a particular concern of staff because this policy results in an unclear picture of a child's progress. Several groups recommended the use of a "standards-based" approach to reporting to indicate what a student has actually learned.

Behavioral Intervention

The Positive Behavioral Interventions Support (PBIS) program is having a positive impact on the culture of two elementary schools and a middle school, but the district needs to critically review how behavioral issues are being addressed at the high school level. The Alternative Learning Program (ALP) was established to address behavioral issues at the high school level, but is not viewed favorably by the high school community. Central office and high school lines of authority and responsibility for ALP need to be established to provide clearer expectations and leadership for the program. The number of out-of-district placements classified as emotionally disturbed also reflects the fact that the district does not have a sufficient number of behavioral specialists to address this area of need among older students in the district.

Reading Intervention at the Elementary Level

The RTI Tier 1 and Tier 2 intervention process is having a positive impact on reading intervention in the RTI schools and is providing an important baseline of the requirements, challenges, and benefits. These should be reviewed by the district Leadership Team to address issues and ensure adequate support for implementation across all schools. There is a general perception that the staffing, time, and professional development requirements of RTI have not been fully recognized at the central office level. Challenges to implementation include: teachers learning how to identify and match appropriate interventions to areas of reading deficit; providing teachers with a wider array of interventions; more in-depth training on progress monitoring; providing a uniform set of assessment tools; more effective scheduling of special educators across classrooms and grade levels; having a standard RTI orientation process for new teachers; and conducting a targeted assessment of the professional development needs of special education teachers who do not have extensive backgrounds in reading instruction.

Reading Instruction at the Secondary Level

Reading in the content areas is a major issue in the middle schools and high school, and schoolwide approaches that emphasize literacy across the curriculum need to be established. The reading level of middle school and high school textbooks is high and the comprehension and fluency of all students, and particularly special education students, is low across a variety of types of

text. While reading specialists address reading in the content areas, this support is not sufficient. The literacy development of Cumberland middle and high school students needs to be a schoolwide focus at both the middle and high school levels, and both general and special education teachers need professional development on content area reading and writing strategies.

The Elementary and Middle School Mathematics Program

The District Leadership Team needs to develop an action plan that addresses implementation issues with mathematics instruction and the need for more mathematics interventions for special and general education students. Implementation issues are tied to: 1) some teacher resistance to the conceptual and interactive nature of the new mathematics programs that have been implemented in the district that contrast with more traditional directive teaching methods, and, 2) the need for additional professional development and ongoing support. New program approaches require teachers to think deeply about the mathematics content and to develop fluency in mathematics skills and concepts. Both special and general education teachers need support to make this transition in their teaching. The district also needs to address the need for interventions and supplemental programs to meet the needs of students who lack the most basic mathematical skills.

Professional Development

The District Leadership Team should develop an integrated long range professional development plan for both special and general education teachers that addresses the areas of need cited in this report. The district needs a more coherent vision and plan for professional development to ensure the best use of resources and to avoid fragmentation. Goals for professional development that reflect district priorities as well as building-level priorities should be defined and communicated to staff to foster a shared understanding of what is to be achieved through professional development. Teacher participation in professional development activities that are consistent with district and building goals should be required. An approach that supports collaboration and co-teaching should be emphasized, and the ongoing embedded professional development provided by reading specialists and teacher leaders at the building level should be designed to reinforce the concepts and strategies learned in formal sessions. Representatives of the Teachers Union should be involved in developing the professional development plan so that contract limitations do not prevent teachers from getting the in-depth, high-quality professional development they want and need.