

Evaluation of the Special Education Programs

Department of Special Education

Dartmouth Public School District

Dartmouth, Massachusetts

Conducted:

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Submitted by:

Walker Partnerships

A Division of Walker

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I. Introduction:

The Pupil Personnel Administrator, Elizabeth Cabral-Townson requested that Walker Partnerships conduct an evaluation of the special education programs for the Dartmouth Public School District. The overall focus of this review is to gain a greater understanding of the current status of special education programs and services within the district, identify the strengths of the existing programming, and determine what issues need to be addressed to enhance current programming. The administration wants to procure recommendations that will assist them with addressing future program needs, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes and activities, and the instructional supports that may be required to ensure greater access to the general curriculum for students with special needs.

A. Purpose:

The purpose of an independent evaluation of a specific program and service is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strengths, needs, and recommendations. An independent evaluation allows for the district to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well in the district, but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened. This evaluation is focused on the specific domain of programming and services that serve students with special needs.

The review process is designed, through a multi-step approach, to assist the school district's leadership team and the school-based special education personnel in having a guided and focused discussion that will enable effective short and long-range planning to occur while recognizing and addressing issues such as:

- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students on Individualized Education Programs within the Dartmouth Public School District
- Determining if the district provides a continuum of services to meet the diverse needs of the special education population
- Determining the efficacy of the current models (inclusion classes, co-teaching) to maximize access to the general education curriculum
- Determining what strategies and professional development resources are needed to enhance the current special education model
- Identifying staffing and resources that reflect student needs
- Creating a long-range plan that addresses the agreed upon needs of the student population
- Establishing a comprehensive approach to program and service development that is linked to the budget planning process
- Determining the need to develop capacity to provide support to students who require more intensive services in order to make effective progress

This review process brings forth information that will enable the district administration and the school-based special and general education personnel to develop an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective approaches for serving the students of the Dartmouth Public Schools.

It is important to recognize that, in order for the information contained in this report to be beneficial to the school district and special education services, the stakeholders must come together to discuss the findings and recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the school-based special education and general education personnel can develop short and long-range action plan(s) that will address the agreed upon issues.

B. Reviewer:

Mr. James A. Shillinglaw, CAS, Southeast Region Associate Manager of Walker Partnerships, has thirty-nine years of public school experience. He has been a teacher and building coordinator. Mr. Shillinglaw was an Administrator of Special Education and Director of Pupil Personnel Services for thirty years for the Provincetown Public Schools, Provincetown/Truro Public Schools, the Barnstable Public Schools, the Hanover Public Schools, and the Duxbury Public Schools. Mr. Shillinglaw has been an Adjunct Professor for Lesley University and Framingham State College as well as a presenter at numerous conferences. He was also the president and a member of the executive board of the National Association of Pupil Service Administrators for six years. He has conducted over thirty-five independent program evaluations and conducted numerous professional development sessions for school-based personnel.

II. Methodology

This program evaluation was conducted based on a three-step approach:

1. A review of written documentation pertaining to this evaluation was conducted of the following:
 - Data and statistics provided by the Dartmouth Special Education Department
 - Data and statistics provided by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
 - Professional development training
 - Special education budget
 - Out-of-district census
 - Special Education Procedure Manual

2. Small group and individual interviews and discussions were conducted with individuals occupying the following positions:
 - Director of Special Education
 - Principals, 5
 - Assistant principals, 2
 - Dean of students, 2
 - School psychologists, 4
 - General education teachers, 7
 - Special education teachers, 15
 - Instructional assistant, 4
 - Speech/language therapists, 3
 - Occupational therapists, 2
 - Early Childhood administrator, 1
 - Outreach workers, 3
 - Guidance counselors, 4

3. Observations of programs and classrooms were conducted of the following:
 - Seven special education programs
 - Twenty-four general education/co-teaching classrooms

The interviews/discussions that were conducted with individuals were 30 minutes in length. Emphasis was placed on the focus of the service and program under review. Questions and discussion focused on the following:

- What are their roles and responsibilities to the program being reviewed?
- What are their main concerns?
- What is working well?
- What strengths of the program can they identify?
- What trends are they experiencing in the program?
- What changes do they believe need to occur?
- What topics of professional development need to be addressed?
- What practices need to be in place to enhance the program?

These questions varied, somewhat, depending on the specific role of the individual who was interviewed. Discussion expanded beyond these specific questions based on the individual's experience

within their respective role, their experience in the field of education, the length of time that they have been in their current position, and any other factors that emerged from the interview process.

III. Commendations

This section of the report is for the purpose of recognizing the efforts put forth by the district and the administration in their plan to meet the needs of the students. Special education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. There are competing interests that continue to place a significant pressure and financial burden on the school district. Dartmouth Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of the students.

Specific Commendations:

- The Pupil Personnel Administrator for commissioning this review in order to gain insight into program/service enhancements and improvements for the district's special education programs.
- The commitment and support of the district's principals for the special education programs in each building.
- The very high level of dedication and commitment of school-based personnel to fulfill the requirements of special education and students' IEPs.
- The district's commitment to develop and implement an RtI process at each level. The Walker Partnership has conducted over 125 program evaluations during the past five years. The RtI process in Dartmouth is one of the most effective practices we have observed.
- The Director of Special Education for providing an opportunity for general and special education teachers to attend professional development on developing a co-teaching model.
- The district's commitment to developing an effective co-teaching model at the elementary level. Instead of an over reliance of paraprofessionals to support the co-teaching model the district has invested heavily in developing special education teacher positions. The district has also provided and sustained effective professional development to general and special educators.
- The district's successful implementation of a Positive Behavior Support (PBIS) initiative at the elementary and middle school levels. The program has had a major impact on the decrease of discipline referrals and the necessity of developing therapeutic programs.
- Special education teachers have been able to maintain low caseloads (the district average is approximately 10 students). The success of RtI has contributed to decreased special education referrals for eligibility.
- The district's commitment to provide schools with support staff such as reading and math specialists, and Title I services to targeted schools. The support staff serve as "safety nets" providing necessary interventions for students who may otherwise become eligible for special education services.
- Administration at the Potter School for developing a professional learning community for paraprofessionals utilizing a "book talk" format to discuss the role and responsibilities of the paraprofessional in a co-teaching classroom.
- Administration at the Potter School for providing an after school book club for students who would benefit from a more challenging educational activities.

- The district's support to provide current technology in all of the classrooms.
- Administration at Dartmouth High School for making an after school "Homework Hangout" available for students. The school provides tutors and late buses to provide access for students.

IV. Factors Affecting the Implementation of Programming and Services

There are numerous factors that impact the district's ability to deliver instructional and related services to students within the Dartmouth Public Schools. The most pressing factors are the number of students (census) with special needs, balancing the level of need, and the impact of providing required services.

Benefits of Full Inclusion

In 2011, Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Dr. Mitchell D. Chester, commissioned Thomas Hehir and Associates to conduct a review of special education in the Commonwealth. The purpose of this review was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the identification, placement, and academic performance of students with disabilities in Massachusetts and to recommend strategies that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education might use to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The following are several of the findings and recommendations that have come from the culmination of the three reports that Dr. Hehir has conducted. Dartmouth Schools should be commended for their efforts in implementing effective co-teaching, Response to Intervention (RtI), and Positive Behavior Supports (PBIS) initiatives to coincide with the recommendations from these comprehensive reports.

Overarching Finding #2: Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements appeared to outperform similar students who were not included to the same extent in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers.

Across each of our studies, we found evidence suggesting that students with disabilities benefitted from being included in the general education classroom with their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements (spending 80 percent or more of the school day in general education classrooms), on average, earned higher MCAS scores, graduated high school at higher rates,¹ and were more likely to remain in their local school districts than students who were educated in substantially separate placements (spending less than 40 percent of the day in the general education classroom).

Like students across the country, the proportion of time Massachusetts students spent being educated in classrooms with their non-disabled peers varied for students with different disability designations. For example, students with disabilities in the high incidence categories had full inclusion placements with their non-disabled peers at higher rates than students with other disability classifications. Students with intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, and emotional disturbance had higher rates of substantially separate placements than students with other disability classifications.

Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: A synthesis Report

Benefits for developing and implementing PBIS and RtI initiatives

1. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should promote adoption of a Response to Intervention (RTI) model in kindergarten through grade three to promote early literacy development

Response to intervention, when implemented with fidelity, has strong research support as a vehicle to improve early reading development for struggling readers and as improved means to identify students who may have a more intractable reading disability such as dyslexia. We believe that a more focused effort on early reading such as RTI might be helpful in promoting better literacy overall and reducing inappropriate referrals to

special education. The Tucker School in Milton has implemented such a program and it served to reduce over-placement of students of color in special education while improving literacy scores throughout the school.

2. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education should promote universally designed behavior supports.

As we recommend above, programs such as Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (Sugai et al., 2000) have been shown to improve student behavior in schools and reduce suspensions, while allowing schools to focus support on those students most in need. Allowing students to stay engaged in school is central to improving performance for many students who struggle. For example, Worcester East Middle School has successfully implemented this approach.

Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2012

Developing a Continuum of Services

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as amended in 2004, does not require inclusion. Instead, the law requires that children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate to meet their unique needs. The IDEA contemplates that the least restrictive environment analysis begins with placement in the general education classroom.

However, IDEA recognizes that it is not appropriate to place all children in the general education classroom. Therefore, the law requires school districts to have a continuum of placements available, extending from general education classrooms to residential settings in order to accommodate the needs of all children with disabilities. Using the continuum concept makes it more likely that each child is appropriately placed in an environment that is specifically suited to meet his/her needs. The law intends that the degree of inclusion be driven by the individual student's needs as determined by the IEP team.

In developing the Individual Education Program (IEP) for a child with disabilities, IDEA requires the IEP team to consider placement in the general education classroom as the starting point in determining the appropriate placement for the child. Should the IEP team determine that the least restrictive environment is not the general education classroom, consideration must be given to determine what other services outside of the general education classroom are necessary in order for the student to make effective progress.

The challenge for smaller school districts, when considering the feasibility of developing programs for a small population of students with more intensive needs, is whether or not it is more cost-effective to place students in collaborative programs. A factor to consider is the long-term cost of out-of-district placements when you factor in that many of these students will require services until turning twenty-two years of age.

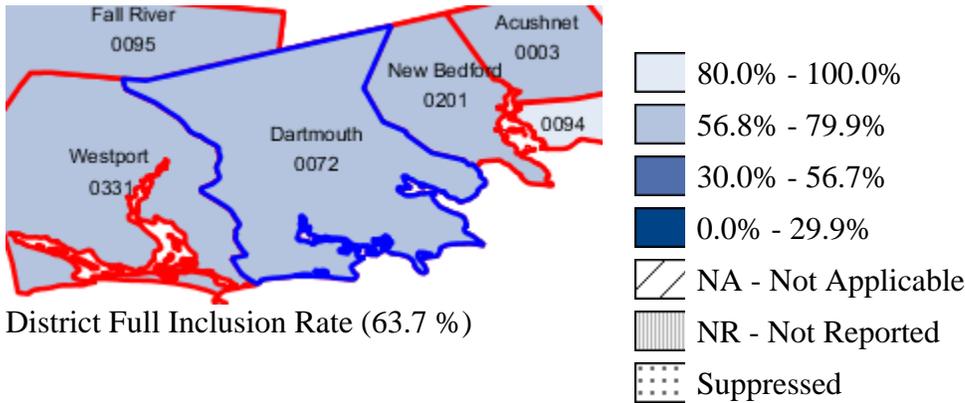
Indicator 5 - Educational Environments for Students Aged 6 - 21 with IEPs

For 2012-13, the state target for the % of Students with IEPs served in Full Inclusion is 59.7%, the target for % of Students with IEPs served in Substantially Separate placements is 14.5%, and the target for % of Students with IEPs served in Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital placements is 5.5%.

	Enrollment	District Rate	State Rate	State Target
Enrolled students with IEPs	427	--	--	--
Full Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the day)	272	63.7 %	59.2 %	59.7%
Partial Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 40%-79% of the day)	109	25.5 %	18.8 %	--
Substantially Separate (inside the general education classroom less than 40% of the day)	17	4.0 %	15.0 %	14.5%
Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital placements (does not include parentally-placed private school students with disabilities)	29	6.8 %	6.9 %	5.5%

Special Education data are suppressed for enrollment counts fewer than 6.

Dartmouth Public Schools is above the state target (63.7% Dartmouth, 59.7% State Target) for providing a full inclusion environment for students on IEPs.



Over-identification of Students Requiring Special Education and Related Services

Massachusetts has the second highest rate of special education identification in the United States. Currently, the state average is 17%. Rhode Island has the highest rate at 19%. In a study requested by the Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), conducted by Thomas Hehir and Associates, there were several key findings that related to the over-identification of students eligible for special education.

Nearly two out of three Massachusetts students with a disability is identified as belonging in one of three categories: specific learning disability, communication, or other health impairments. Due to the potentially subjective nature of their diagnosis, rates of identification for these categories may be more sensitive to policy decisions than rates for the more strictly defined categories.

Rates of special education vary substantially across Massachusetts districts, ranging from a low of approximately 9% to a high of 29% of a district's students identified as eligible for special education and related services. Local school districts are given substantial flexibility in their interpretation of these specific categories.

Comparison of Disability Compared to the State by Percentage

Disability	FY12 State (%) Students by Disability)	FY12 % of Dartmouth
Autism	8.1%	8.0%
Communication	18.0%	16.2%
Developmental Delay	10.7%	10.5%
Emotional	8.5%	4.0%
Health	9.4%	2.7%
Intellectual	6.2%	3.4%
Multiple Disabilities	2.9%	3.0%
Neurological	4.9%	1.0%
Physical	0.8%	0.8%
Sensory/Deaf/Blind	0.1%	0.0%
Sensory/Hard of Hearing	0.7%	0.6%
Sensory/Vision Impairment	0.4%	0.6%
Specific Learning Disabilities	29.4%	49.2%
	100.1%	100.0%

SPED %

17.0%	12.8%
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As indicated from the data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2014, the identification of students with Specific Learning Disabilities is significantly higher (20%) than the state average.

Breakdown of Disabilities by Category and Percentage

Disability	FY12 # of students by disability Dartmouth	%
Autism	38	3.0%
Communication	77	16.2%
Developmental Delay	50	10.5%
Emotional	19	4.0%
Health	13	2.7%
Intellectual	16	3.4%
Multiple Disabilities	14	3.0%
Neurological	5	1.0%
Physical	4	0.8%
Sensory/Deaf/Blind	0	0.0%
Sensory/Hard of Hearing	3	0.6%
Sensory/Vision Impairment	4	0.6%
Specific Learning Disabilities	234	49.2%
Total # of Students on IEPs	476	100.0%
Total School Enrollment	3727	State:
SPED %	12.8%	17.0%

- The district (12.8%) is significantly below the state average (17%) for identifying students for special education services.

Utilization of Instructional Assistants

The Walker Partnership has conducted over 125 program evaluations during the past five years. Consistently in many of the school districts that we evaluate if there is an over-dependence on the utilization of paraprofessionals. In many cases paraprofessionals are the primary staff responsible for the implementation of student IEPs. This creates a dynamic where you have the least qualified staff responsible for a majority of service delivery. Dartmouth Schools has been an exception to this. The reviewer has been impressed with the district's efforts to ensure that students receive services from highly qualified special education teachers. During the course of conducting the recent review several staff stated during interviews that there should be more paraprofessional assistance in the district. I do not support this recommendation. The district has gone to great lengths to develop and implement an effective co-teaching model. Any effort to supplement the model utilizing paraprofessionals would lessen the effectiveness. The following information outlines some of the potential pit falls for districts who over utilize paraprofessionals.

In a Technical Assistance Advisory SPED 2014-3 advisory issued on March 20, 2014, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education found that according to data from the DESE Educator Personnel Information Management System (EPIMS), Massachusetts has over 25,000 paraprofessionals working in the Commonwealth schools with approximately two thirds of the paraprofessionals identified as special education paraprofessionals.

As students with disabilities are increasingly placed in general education classroom settings, the use of instructional assistants (paraprofessionals) has greatly expanded. Recent national figures estimate that over 500,000 instructional assistants are employed in public schools, and increases are anticipated in the coming years. The proliferation of instructional assistants in public schools often has outpaced conceptualization of team roles and responsibilities as well as the training and supervisory needs of instructional assistants. Nowhere is this more evident than in schools where students with severe or multiple disabilities are included in general education classrooms.

Instructional assistants are playing an increasingly prominent role in the education of students with disabilities. With pressure from parents who want to ensure that their children are adequately supported, and general educators who want to make sure that they and their students are adequately supported, the use of special education instructional assistants has become a primary mechanism to implement more inclusive school practices.

- Good Inclusion vs. Bad Inclusion
- What is it?

Common Issues to be Aware of for Special Education Assistants

Interference with Ownership and Responsibility by General Educators

- Many general educators do not think it is their responsibility to educate special needs students.
- The availability of instructional assistants creates an opportunity to avoid assuming responsibility and ownership for special needs students in the general education classroom.
- In many cases, the instructional assistants, not professional staff, are making and implementing many of the day-to-day curricular and instructional decisions.
- In many cases, the instructional assistants do not receive the supervision to make these decisions. They “wing it.”
- Often, the instructional assistants may not be doing the same activity that the class is.
- In many cases, the education of the most challenging students is given to instructional assistants who do not have the training and classroom experience.
- If the role of the instructional assistant becomes ill-defined, the general education instructional assistants can be relegated to performing clerical duties.

Separation from Classmates

- Often, special needs students are removed from the main setting of the general education class and receive their instruction either in another part of the classroom or outside the classroom.
- With appropriate modifications and/or accommodations, many of these students can participate in the same classroom activity.

Dependence on Adults

- The student becomes dependent on the instructional assistant for all behaviors in the classroom, e.g., picking up the pencil, using materials, or following along in the book.

- There is little evidence of fading prompts to decrease dependence on the assistant and encourage the student to respond to other people.
- The instructional assistant stays involved with the student much longer than is necessary.
- The long-term relationship of the instructional assistant with the student can become counterproductive.
- The relationship of the instructional assistant can create boundary issues with parents. The instructional assistant becomes “part of the family.”

Impact on Peer Interactions

- When the instructional assistants are not in close proximity to the special needs students, peers are more likely to become involved with the students.
- Having an instructional assistant assigned to the special needs student can become an additional stigma attached to the student, especially as the student gets older.
- It is a more effective utilization of staff to assign instructional assistants to the classroom or the program. They can work with specific students on activities that require 1:1 assistance.

Limitations on Receiving Competent Instruction

- Many classroom teachers expect capabilities from instructional assistants that are unrealistic.
- Inappropriate help can be given by the instructional assistant such as doing the student’s work, providing answers on a test, or giving inappropriate instruction.

Loss of Personal Control

- Dependence on instructional assistants can be a detriment to students wanting to advocate for themselves.
- Often, decisions and choices are made without the input of the student, the parent, or the team.

A very important factor may be the budgetary impact of maintaining a large number of paraprofessionals versus the competing needs of other important services and interventions.

Students with Serious Emotional Disturbance

The primary focus of state and federal special education regulations since their inception has been to keep special needs students in the least restrictive environment (LRE). One of the most vulnerable populations for placement in out of district programs are students with behavioral needs. Many districts have little tolerance for students who are disruptive to the school climate. The other population of students who have quickly emerged in recent years are the “emotionally fragile”. Districts have noticed an increase of students with significant psychiatric issues who require intensive, specialized programs.

Well defined, stated program practices, procedures, student expectations, strategies of intervention need to be in place, fully understood by all staff and consistently practiced by all staff to support these high risk students.

The unfortunate reality for many of these students is placement in more restrictive, out of district programs. Once they are placed they rarely return to the district. Currently 41% of Dartmouth’s students in day or residential programs (approximately 39 students) are placed because of behavior or mental health issues. Tuition for these programs on average is \$64,700 (based on proposed South Coast Educational Collaborative FY 16 tuition for SED programs) per student. This represents over one million dollars of the special education budget being spent annually. If the district can limit the number of students exiting, they can reinvest funds to

increase their capacity to develop more effective programs and increase staffing to service this population. This would not only limit future placements, but potentially return students to the district.

V. Findings

Through the review process, it was apparent that the school administration is very aware of the needs of the district as a whole and the needs of its individual buildings. Although considerable effort has been put forth to develop and implement quality programming for students with disabilities, there are a number of issues that have been identified and will need to be addressed over a reasonable period of time. The following findings are provided to assist the district with the work that needs to be completed. These findings are presented in no particular order of priority.

Specific Findings:

- At DeMello Elementary School there is a general education classroom at each grade level (grades 1-5) that is designated for co-teaching. There are four special education teachers that service the building. Grade 1 is serviced by the first and fourth grade special education teachers as well as the kindergarten teacher from Cushman Early Childhood Center. She travels to DeMello 1.5 hours a day.
- The district's preschool program is housed at the Cushman School. All of the preschool programs are full day. Kindergarten students who would normally attend the DeMello School are also housed at Cushman due to space limitations at DeMello. The special education teacher at Cushing services the kindergarten as well as her responsibilities working in the first grade classroom at DeMello. Her primary responsibility at Cushman is conducting assessments as part of the progress monitoring process. There is currently only one student on an IEP at the Kindergarten level, although several are being monitored.
- There is a strong Portuguese community in Dartmouth. One of the cultural traits revolves around families wanting to keep their children at home until they enter kindergarten. Staff are concerned that the limited early intervention impacts student readiness as they enter kindergarten. This also presents issues with children and families who may be limited in their ability to communicate with the school district.
- There are limited opportunities for staff from Cushman and DeMello to meet as part of the transition process for students entering DeMello.
- The district makes a conscious effort not to place students on an IEP until second grade. There is concern that some students would benefit from special education services prior to entering second grade. The district does maintain special education programs at the preschool for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and significant cognitive deficits (DRR-Developmental Resource Room). The Quinn Schools houses the district's sub-separate programs.
- There is a lack of clarity in determining eligibility in both of these programs. There is a common belief that students require a formal diagnosis before they are placed in either program. In observing the programs at the Quinn School there appears to be a wide range of abilities in several of the programs. Due to lack of less restrictive options students may be inappropriately placed in the more restrictive programs.
- Paraprofessionals assigned to the sub-separate programs have extensive experience working with challenging students. They have schedules that rotate supervision of students on a daily basis. They would like to have more professional development in the area of curriculum to enhance their ability to modify student assignments.

- Each grade level at the DeMello School has a pull-out intervention block serviced by the corresponding special education teacher. Students receive tier I & II interventions as part of the school's RtI model.
- In general the co-teaching teams meet three times a week to develop the scope and sequence and create materials for instruction. Special education teachers also meet two times a week with the grade level team of teachers. Both general and special education teachers collaborate on report cards and other required reports and assessments.
- To maximize service students from other grade level (non co-teaching) classrooms with similar needs will be incorporated into small group instruction.
- Caseloads across the three elementary schools are manageable. Each special education liaison is responsible for around ten students. It is important to understand that all special education staff are also responsible for students who are receiving RtI services and interventions. This includes providing the interventions as well as progress monitoring. Frequently staff referred to the term caseload versus workload in describing their daily responsibilities. The caseload versus workload issue has particular impact on related service providers who service a range of students including the sub-separate programs as well as RtI interventions at the earlier grade levels.
- Several staff members commented on the increased number of families moving into the district with students on IEPs and an increase in the number of homeless families.
- A consistent theme expressed by staff at the elementary schools revolved around their inability to provide services for students who required more intensive services. In the past the district maintained resource room programs for students who needed additional pull-out services for language based difficulties. These programs were eliminated when the district adopted the current co-teaching model. There was a similar concern for students who experienced social/emotional issues.
- Paraprofessionals at DeMello are not designated as either special or general education. They are placed where additional support may be needed within the classroom.
- There was concern expressed by several general education teachers at DeMello that the current ELA curriculum, Story Town, was outdated and not aligned with the common core.
- Throughout the classroom observations at the elementary level there were small teacher student ratios (usually no more than 22 in a classroom), with teachers utilizing differentiated instruction, flexible grouping that included; direct skill instruction, directed reading, interest groups, paired learning, and cooperative learning groups. The co-teaching model was very effective. Administrators try to keep co-teaching teams together to ensure consistency and providing opportunities to improve the model on a yearly basis. In fact this observer often had trouble determining who the classroom teacher and the special education teacher were. The district tries to maintain no more than 30% of the students on IEPs in the co-teaching classroom. This is a constant challenge. In several classrooms at Quinn the percentage was closer to 40%.
- One of the major reasons RtI is so successful is because of the district's support of general education interventions. There are math and ELA specialists in each building that provide tier II interventions. Some schools also have access to Title I services that are utilized to provide interventions.

- The district uses multiple assessments to collect data as part of the RtI process. To begin the process the school psychologist gives the classroom teacher the Academic Competence Evaluation Scales (ACES). Completing this rating form begins the problem solving process to design an intervention plan based on the initial data provided by this assessment. The district also uses the Standard Test for the Assessment of Reading (STAR), Fountas & Pinnell, and DIBELS.
- Currently the district contracts with outside vendors to consult on students who exhibit significant social/emotional issues. The district also contracts for a part time school psychologist at the Potter Elementary School. School psychologists have been decreased from five district-wide to four.
- At Quinn there is an effort to designate certain classrooms at each grade level for their co-teaching model. At grades K-2 each special education teacher divides their time between two classrooms. At grades 3-5 special education teachers spend the full day in the co-teaching classroom.
- The co-teaching model is more effective at the elementary level. There were several examples of Team Teaching where two or more people do what the traditional teachers has always done; plan, teach assess and share the responsibilities. There were also examples of Parallel Co-Teaching, when two or more people work with different groups of students in different sections of the classroom. At the middle school it was primarily Supportive Co-Teaching when one teacher takes the lead instructional role and the other rotates among the students to provide support. At this point co-teaching has not evolved at the high school as it has at other levels.
- The change in the co-teaching model from the elementary level to middle school presents problems in the development of IEPs. Matching the same services a student receives in a full time co-teaching model at the elementary level is difficult for special education staff at the middle school who do not have the level of involvement in the classroom.
- The district utilizes out-reach workers who function as social workers/school adjustment counselors. They provide small group counseling based on the needs of students, social skill training, involvement with the sub-separate programs, as well as contact with parents to assist in making referrals to appropriate community agencies.
- The co-teaching model has evolved during the past six years at Potter Elementary School. Much of the change has been supported by administration to provide more access to curriculum for students in the general education classroom. Historically there had been two resource room classrooms where students were pulled out to receive support in ELA and math. As co-teaching evolved the resource room programs were eliminated and three special education teachers were added. The principal actually eliminated a general education position to increase special education services. Currently the model supports a full time special education teacher in designated co-teaching classrooms grades 1-5. Common planning time is scheduled 2-3 times a week during specialists. Students in kindergarten receive services primarily through related services (SLP and OT). They provide a co-treatment model.
- Many of the co-teaching teacher teams have been together for several years. They openly discussed the advantages of working together for an extended amount of time.
- The reviewer had an opportunity to observe the involvement of a 1:1 paraprofessional with a Down Syndrome student in first grade. The paraprofessional had the opportunity to work with the student to before she was formally hired. The student has made significant progress in the classroom through a combination of individual intervention, and modification of curriculum materials.

- The principal at Potter has established a professional learning community for paraprofessionals utilizing book talks related to co-teaching.
- Potter is also in the process of implementing differentiated instruction strategies. The focus “splashing” was initially in grades 1-3. They are expanding to grade 4 during the current year.
- At Dartmouth Middle School there are three special education teachers assigned to each grade level (grades 6-8). At grade 6 there are seven two teacher teams. Each sixth grade special education teacher is assigned to two teams. At grade seven and eight there are three teams of four teachers. Each special education teacher is assigned to a team. They divide their time providing in class services in the areas of ELA and math. There is one period a day dedicated to providing pull out services for students primarily for organization. Although special education teachers do spend a significant amount of time in the classroom it is more of a supportive co-teaching model where one teacher (in this case the general education teacher) take the lead instructional role and the special education teacher rotates among the students to provide support. Special education teachers do not loop with students. They remain at the same grade level. This has enabled them to learn more of the grade level curriculum. The special education teacher is responsible for developing student accommodations and grading the students he/she are liaison for. Administration visited several similar middle schools to develop this service delivery model. It is a model that is evolving. Support for science and social studies is provided during a common planning time period (one time during a six day cycle) utilizing paraprofessionals in a pull out model.
- The Dean of Students oversees the RtI process for the middle school. There is an RtI support room for students who have been identified by the team. The team uses information obtained through various assessments, and teacher recommendations. An intervention plan is developed detailing the specific interventions usually in the areas of math and ELA.
- There are very few initial evaluations at the middle school level. If there are any they usually are made by parents.
- The middle school has a very effective PBIS program called RARE (Responsibility, Accountability, Respectability, and Esteem). For students who require intervention there are staff assigned for check in at the beginning of the day, and check out at the end of the day. There are RARE activities that students participate in. Staff send RARE post cards home letting parents know about positive behaviors their child has exhibited. There are behavior expectations posted throughout the building cueing students to exhibit appropriate behaviors i.e. protocol for walking in the halls, bathrooms, cafeteria, etc.
- Several years ago the district supported an off campus alternative program for students exhibiting social/emotional issues. Once the program was eliminated staff were placed at the middle school. There are currently 9-10 general and special education students who are monitored by the teacher assigned to the program. Each student has an individualized behavior plan. The teacher works closely with the PBIS team to monitor students on a regular basis.
- There are two programs at the middle school for students who require more intensive instruction. The Developmental Resource Room (DRR) program currently has eleven students. The program focus is on developing functional academic skills in preparation for the life skills program at Dartmouth High School. Several of the students require 1:1 assistance for safety and behavior concerns. It is difficult to develop curriculum and find appropriate materials for the diverse needs of the students.

- There is also an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that is more of an inclusion model, providing support for students within the classroom.
- As with the programs at Quinn Elementary, program descriptions and entrance/exit criteria are lacking.
- A co-teaching model is not currently implemented at the high school. When special education teachers are placed in the classroom they are utilized primarily as paraprofessionals. The general education teacher is the primary instructor. Most classrooms that were observed were primarily lecture oriented. The common belief at the high school is that special educators are the strategy specialists and the general education teachers are the curriculum specialists.
- Special education liaisons loop with their caseloads for two years. Several teachers that were interviewed preferred staying with their students for four years. Teachers spend two block periods (a block is 86 minutes) in subject area classrooms, one block period providing academic support, and one block as a prep
- Special education teachers appear to be randomly assigned to different subject areas. Subjects may change every semester (there is a trimester schedule). Several of the special education teachers that were interviewed expressed their lack of knowledge in the subjects they were assigned to, while some teachers exhibited good knowledge of challenging curriculum such as Biology. Teachers are not aware of where they will be assigned until the beginning of the school year. Special education paraprofessionals are assigned to history and science classes.
- It did not appear through the course of several observations that the class even required special education support. One class in particular was broken into twenty minute segments, utilized a multi-sensory approach, power point was provided to each students, and designated students had differentiated homework assignments.
- Social workers at the high school receive referral through the guidance department. They provide social skills groups for students who require it on their IEP. They also provide support services to the DRR and ASD programs.
- The guidance department is instrumental in assisting students with the development of their transition planning form (TPF). The high school has recently developed an extensive career exploration center. Guidance also maintain contact with students who are placed in out of district programs in order to update credits, and monitor each students' transcript to ensure they successfully graduate

DARTMOUTH

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	-- In-District Instruction--		- Out-of-District Tuition -		Combined	Total	Special	
		Other	Mass. Public	Mass Private	Special Ed	School	Education	State
Fiscal	Teaching	Instructional	Schools and	and Out-of-	Expenditures	Operating	Percentage	Ave.
Year			Collaboratives	State Schools	(A+B+C+D)	Budget	Budget	Per.
2004	2,800,773	787,629	80,312	398,982	4,067,696	29,120,394	14.0	18.6
2005	2,927,931	733,449	264,972	1,137,471	5,063,823	31,534,930	16.1	18.9
2006	3,041,043	786,245	670,748	1,102,547	5,600,583	33,025,493	17.0	19.1
2007	3,250,146	740,100	454,255	1,282,795	5,727,296	34,869,126	16.4	19.4
2008	3,519,446	694,093	368,656	1,122,138	5,704,333	34,895,372	16.3	19.8
2009	3,665,019	802,728	180,453	1,249,088	5,897,288	35,530,114	16.6	20.1
2010	3,776,864	828,800	153,973	1,455,219	6,214,856	35,987,837	17.3	19.8
2011	3,937,431	737,392	324,630	1,353,914	6,353,367	37,042,437	17.2	19.9
2012	4,387,738	730,689	145,705	1,031,917	6,296,049	37,030,615	17.0	20.5
2013	4,519,274	729,065	233,712	1,378,960	6,861,011	39,158,646	17.5	20.9

- The district's special education budget has consistently (2004-2013) stayed below the state average as a percentage of the overall district budget. It is not unusual to see the percentage around 25% of the district's budget.

Percentage of Students on IEPs by School

School	School%	District %	State %
Andrew B. Cushman*	10.4%	12.8%	17%
DHS	10.2%	12.8%	17%
DMS	13.5%	12.8%	17%
George H. Potter	11.8%	12.8%	17%
James M. Quinn**	14.9%	12.8%	17%
Joseph DeMello	9.5%	12.8%	17%

*Includes the preschool and kindergarten program

** Includes the ASD and DRR sub-separate programs

- During the interview process at Dartmouth Middle School the interviewer inquired about the percentage of students on IEPs. The school percentage was above the district average. There appear to be very few referrals for special education, and relatively few are found eligible after the evaluation process. The district should investigate the possibility that students may be found eligible prior to transitioning to the middle school.

OUT OF DISTRICT COSTS AS A % OF SPED BUDGET			
FISCAL YEAR	TOTAL OUT OF DISTRICT COSTS	TOTAL SPED BUDGET	OUT OF DISTRICT COSTS AS A % OF TOTAL SPED BUDGET
2013	\$1,612,672	\$6,861,011	23.5%
2012	\$1,177,622	\$6,296,049	18.7%
2011	\$1,678,544	\$6,353,367	26.4%
2010	\$1,609,192	\$6,214,856	25.9%
2009	\$1,429,541	\$5,897,288	24.2%
2008	\$1,490,794	\$5,704,333	26.1%
2007	\$1,737,050	\$5,727,296	30.3%
2006	\$1,773,295	\$5,600,583	31.7%
2005	\$1,402,443	\$5,063,823	27.7%
2004	\$479,294	\$4,067,696	11.8%
2003	\$791,905	\$4,081,878	19.4%

- Out of district costs as a percentage of the special education budget have remained relatively consistent for the past ten years. When looking at the cost it is important to understand that one or two unexpected placements can severely impact the budget.

VI. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the review process that was recently completed for the Dartmouth Public Schools. The findings listed in the previous section are the foundation for the following recommendations. Each recommendation is followed by an explanation that is intended to further expand on the rationale for the recommendation. These recommendations are intended to provide insight and direction for the administration and school personnel in making decisions regarding the direction in which they determine to go with respect to the existing programs and services. These recommendations should be viewed as a point of departure for involved personnel to engage in discussions that will lead to the development of programs and services that truly meet the needs of the student population.

There will be a need for the stakeholders to come together and develop an action plan that is comprised of short and long-term steps. Budget implications, as well as structural and organizational issues, need to be well understood so that appropriate program development can be instituted. Through an inclusive process of discussion, a plan will emerge that is comprehensive, meaningful, and purposeful.

1. An effective co-teaching model at Dartmouth high School will require clear and explicit understanding of each teacher's role and responsibilities.

Explanation:

- A committee should be developed including stakeholders who represent general education, special education, and guidance to create a vision and mission statement related to the development and implementation of a co-teaching model that will enhance the access to curriculum for special needs students.
- Special education teachers have many responsibilities to ensure compliance with regulations and procedures. Adequate time should be built into each teacher's schedule to ensure that there is not a conflict with his or her co-teaching responsibilities.
- It is important that support in the classroom is based on the academic needs of the students. In some cases, the general education teacher may not require additional support and is very capable of implementing required accommodations and ensuring access for all students.
- As the co-teaching model evolves, it will improve the utilization of special education staff.

2. Professional development activities need to be an ongoing activity for the teachers of the co-teaching model.

Explanation:

- The Director of Special Education and the school administration need to plan, with the teachers of the co-teaching model, a professional development program that is uniform, consistent and ongoing.
- The model of training needs to have options for the various staff based on their exposure and experience with the model.

- The regular education teachers for the co-teaching model must have a foundation of knowledge and information regarding specialized instruction in the same way the special education teachers do. This will become an important factor as the school integrates special education students into higher level courses.
- Special education teachers must have a foundation of knowledge regarding subject area content related to the curriculum frameworks to effectively participate in the co-teaching model. They will not be able to incorporate effective learning strategies if they do not have a clear understanding of the content being taught.
- The content of the training program needs to cover the range of issues that the teachers identify as well as some standard topics that are relevant to the shared teaching experience. Each teacher needs to know what his/her co-teacher knows; what he/she is comfortable doing; and how he/she plans to conduct his/her assignment.
- Training should focus on developing a continuum of co-teaching models. Currently the prevalent model is “supportive co-teaching”: when one teacher takes the lead instructional role and others rotate among the students to provide support. In most observations the lead instructor was the general education teacher. As co-teaching evolves, the model should move towards “complementary co-teaching,” when co-teachers do something to enhance the instruction provided by the other teacher(s), and ultimately a “team-teaching” approach when both teachers plan, teach, assess, and assume responsibilities for all of the students in the classroom.
- Coaching should be available for the team so that its teamwork skills can be critiqued in order to gain greater insight into sharing the teaching responsibilities.
- As part of their professional development, the teachers should meet with the combined school and special education administration on a scheduled basis, (i.e. monthly), with regards to following an agenda of items identified by the teachers.
- An annual orientation for all new staff should occur prior to the opening of school. Full explanation of the model should be presented to new staff by teachers of the model. This may encourage new staff to consider participating in the model in the future and give them the opportunity to follow-up with their colleagues.

3. Common planning time for teachers of the co-teaching model must be in place and conducted on a scheduled basis.

Explanation:

- How the administration constructs the common planning time is not important, but it is important that such time be implemented. The expectation is for teachers to work effectively and share the responsibilities of the classroom. To do this, they need to be able to meet and plan their lessons.
- Co-teaching teams should be determined prior to the end of the school year. Providing time over the summer would give teachers an excellent opportunity to begin the planning process for the coming year. Teachers should be aware of the special education students that will be in their classrooms. This will

give both teachers an opportunity to understand each student's learning profile and differentiate the curriculum to accommodate his or her learning needs.

- To assist teachers in the planning process, they should be encouraged to use “The Co-Teaching Lesson Plan Book.” This book was developed by Dr. Lisa Dieker, who is nationally known for her work in developing effective co-teaching models. The benefits of the book include clarified roles of both teachers; ownership of planning; and improved documentation of the development and use of specific accommodations for reporting IEP progress.
- Depending on the teachers and whether or not they have teamed together in the past, the planning time may not need to be as frequent if they have had previous experience together.
- Increasing the frequency that the grade level teams meet is another approach that could provide more opportunities for common planning time.
- Staff schedules will have to be aligned with each other to ensure that teachers have the same open periods. Currently common planning time is sporadic based on the teacher's schedule.
- Common planning time for two teachers who have worked together for a number of years may only be two or three periods a week, whereas first year teams should have the opportunity to meet daily.
- School administrators will need to develop the common planning time schedule prior to the close of the school year and before the student assignments are completed.

4. To ensure the effectiveness of the co-teaching model, close consideration should be given to the individual skills and effectiveness of the special education staff.

Explanation:

- Special education teachers should be selected to co-teach based on their knowledge of curriculum and content area. Consideration should be given to designating special education teachers who are strong in instructing learning strategies, organization, and remediation to be responsible for the resource rooms. Utilize teachers with good knowledge of the curriculum to be the co-teachers. It is not effective to place special education teachers in a classroom for an 86 minute block who have a poor understanding of curriculum and are not fully utilized.
- Successful co-teaching models will take time to evolve and develop, as teachers begin to feel more comfortable with the concept, and have an opportunity to spend planning time together. In order to develop continuity, it would be helpful for co-teachers to work together for several years. This will potentially advance co-teaching models from a “supportive co-teaching” approach to a “team teaching” approach.
- Special education paraprofessionals with a solid understanding of the curriculum content can be effectively utilized in the co-teaching model.

- Some classes will not require a co-teacher based on the ability of the general education teacher to differentiate instruction, provide organizational strategies, and incorporate accommodations.

5. Administration should evaluate the current placement and scheduling of students to ensure that students receive the full benefit of the co-teaching model.

Explanation:

- The special education staff at the high school should develop a rubric to determine which special education students require in-class support to meet the objectives on their IEP. Not all special education students require in-class support.
- Representatives from the special education and guidance department need to collaborate in the scheduling of special education students into the co-teaching classes that they require. This will allow for better utilization of special education staff.
- Special education liaisons need to be scheduled with the students they are responsible for in order to ensure that their IEP is being fully implemented, as well as fulfilling other regulatory responsibilities.

6. A task force of stakeholders needs to be in place to develop comprehensive program descriptions for the Developmental Resource Room and Autism Spectrum Disorder programs district-wide.

Explanation:

- Currently there is not a clear understanding on the eligibility for placement in each of the programs. There is confusion on whether a student requires a diagnosis to be considered for the programs. This is especially true for the ASD programs. This lack of clarity begins with the preschool programs and continues into elementary school. With the development of eligibility criteria the diagnosis issue should become secondary. Although a diagnosis can be helpful it should not be the sole factor in determining placement. Many students may have the diagnosis and not require a restrictive placement because they are making effective progress.
- Currently at the DRR program at Quinn there appears to be a wide range of students placed in the program. There are students with significant developmental issues as well as students who have low average abilities, but are having difficulties being successful in a co-teaching model. They may not be appropriate for the DRR program, but staff feel that their needs are not being met with the current continuum of services.
- The vision and mission of the programs should have a vertical consistency from preschool through high school. The models look different at each level. Will students with ASD have all of the interventions associated with their disability they require with an in-class model at the secondary level? Does the DRR program at the high school have all of the necessary components to ensure a successful transition to post-secondary life? Do student transition plans include:
 - Appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based on age, appropriate transition assessment related to: education, employment, training, and independent living skill. Are there currently opportunities to explore career options in the community?
 - The high school has recently developed a career center. Could this be utilized as part of the DRR program at the high school?

- Staff for both programs (ASD and DRR) should have more opportunities for common planning time. There should be scheduled time for them to meet with paraprofessionals assigned to their program as well as opportunities to meet district-wide to discuss programmatic implications.
- As the process for developing program descriptions evolve it is important to understand that programs need to be flexible based on the needs of students, not fitting students into a program concept that is not appropriate. The needs of students change from year to year. Programs need to adjust to the census of students.

7. Administration should explore options for providing services for students who required interventions beyond the current co-teaching model.

Explanation:

- There was a great deal of concern expressed throughout the interview process related to students who require a more intensive setting for language based issues that the co-teaching model does not provide support for. Several staff discussed the Resource Room model that had previously been a program option, but was eliminated to convert to the current co-teaching model. There should be extensive discussion held with stakeholders at each level to discuss this issue before considering either another resource room model or a sub-separate program. Although a need for extending the current continuum of services was expressed there was a lack of clarity on the specific profile of the student who would benefit from more intensive services.
- The co-teaching model and the RtI process have been very successful at the elementary level. It is clear the district has done a commendable job based on the low percentage of students that require special education services. There may be just a small cohort of students who will require more services. Developing a sub-separate program should be the last option considered after lesser restrictive school based interventions have been discussed.
- Providing another service option for students may eliminate the need to place students in a more restrictive placement such as the DRR program at Quinn.

8. Administration should explore options for providing services for students exhibiting significant social/emotional behaviors.

Explanation:

- Similar to the previous recommendation there was also consistent discussion related to students experiencing disruptive behaviors in the classroom. This was particularly unique to the elementary schools. It did not seem to be an issue at the middle or high school. The middle school developed an in school alternative utilizing staff that had previously worked in an alternative program. This intervention successfully monitored inappropriate behaviors.
- Again, close study needs to happen before a sub-separate or more restrictive alternative is considered. The district has the benefit of a very effective PBIS program that could provide extensive data and feedback to help define the population of students who are consistently beyond tier III behavior interventions.

- Administration should also consider during discussion the number of students who are placed in out of district programs due to serious emotional disturbance. Currently sixteen out of the thirty nine students who are in out of district programs are in various programs who service students with emotional disturbance.
- Six out of the eleven students who are at South Coast Educational Collaborative (SCEC) are in SED programs. Next year the tuition for the six students will be approximately \$388,284 (including summer programs).
- The grade range for the six students placed at SCEC was; one in first grade, two in second, one in third, one in fourth, and one in sixth.
- Six out of seven of the new out of the students who were placed in programs during the current year were placed in SED programs
- The district may want to consider utilizing the Facilitated Discussion format to begin the planning process if they are considering the development of a SED programs. This format incorporates the following issues that would be beneficial in exploring program options:
 - Student learning expectations
 - Identification of students that should be in the program
 - Core values of the program
 - Program goals
 - Entrance/exit criteria
 - Data collection
 - Staff roles and responsibilities
- Consideration should also be given to the difficulty in developing SED programs. These programs need to be staffed with instructors who have a proven track record for being successful in comparable programs. To develop a therapeutic model the district needs to consider the supports these students will require, case management (usually a social worker who can work with collateral agencies and parents), clinical supervision, and trained paraprofessionals

9. Administration should consider adding an additional school psychologist and an additional special education teacher at the DeMello Elementary School.

Explanation:

- Prior to the current school year the district staffed five school psychologists, which provided full time support for each school, with the exception of the early childhood Cushman School. The district contracts with a school psychologist to provide part time support for the Potter School.
- One of the other school psychologists has to dedicate part of her time to provide supervision for the part time school psychologist.
- School psychologists in the district play an important role with the RtI process. They conducted the initial assessment (ACES) to assist in the development of a student's intervention plan. They continue

to be an integral part of the data collection process. They are also responsible for conducting initial and three year reevaluations.

- In consideration for their value it would be more cost effective to utilize the current funds dedicated to contracting the part time school psychologist and reestablish another full time position.
- Currently there are four full time special education teachers at DeMello to service five grade levels. Two of the special education teachers as well as the special education teacher from Cushman assist in providing coverage for grade one at DeMello. There are several disadvantages to this deployment.
- The grade one teacher spends a great deal of time scheduling planning time with the three teachers as well as the related service providers (OT, SLP, and PT).
- This limits the amount of time the fourth grade special education teacher can support her caseload.
- The special education teacher from Cushman has to spend 1.5 hours daily traveling to DeMello to support grade one. This time could be better used at Cushman to consult with kindergarten staff, assist in monitoring data as part of the RtI process as well as servicing students at risk.
- An additional teacher would ensure adequate support at each grade level and provide more consistency at grade one.

10. The district should continue to support the current model for providing special education teachers for the co-teaching model.

Explanation:

- As stated in the Commendation section of this evaluation, Dartmouth has developed one of the most comprehensive and effective co-teaching models at the elementary level that this reviewer has observed. An essential component of that success is the commitment to provide extensive special education support utilizing highly qualified teachers.
- In many school districts the classroom support is provided by paraprofessionals. This support usually consists of the paraprofessional making sure students are on task, or providing small group support in another area of the classroom. The general education teacher is the primary instructor. Some co-teaching models do utilize the special education teacher, but often they are utilized more as a paraprofessional rather than a co-teacher.
- The current model in Dartmouth fully utilizes the expertise of the general and special education teachers to maximize classroom instruction through differentiation, small group instruction, and adequate common planning time.

11. There needs to be clear and concise entrance and exit criteria in place for determining eligibility for specific learning disabilities (SLD).

Explanation:

- Specific learning disability is one of the most common disabilities that is misidentified. *Nearly two out of three Massachusetts students with a disability is identified as belonging in one of three categories:*

specific learning disability, communication, or other health impairments. Dr. Thomas Hehir report commissioned by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

- Based on data provided by DESE in 2012, Dartmouth's percentage of students identified with SLD was 49.2% compared to the state average of 29.4%. This is a significant discrepancy which would indicate that there is a systemic lack of understanding on what constitutes a specific learning disability.
- Entrance and exit criteria need to be in place that are based on evidence-based practice, current research, and determined on the student not making effective educational progress for his/her age.
- Professional development needs to be provided to review/reeducated staff on the four components of the Specific Learning Disability Eligibility Requirements that are required as part of the IEP eligibility process.

VII. Summary

The Director of Special Education from Dartmouth Public Schools requested that Walker Partnerships conduct an extensive onsite review of the district's special education programs. The purpose of the review was to assist the administration and the school district in determining the effectiveness of current programs. The review process identified several needs to be considered and provided recommendations for strategies to improve programs.

Through the review of documentation, onsite visits, and one-on-one interviews, data was collected to formulate the Findings and Recommendations sections of this report.

The findings and recommendations have been presented and supported with explanations to assist the administration and school-based personnel in formulating an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective programming for special needs students.

