MADISON METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT   RESEARCH & PROGRAM EVALUATION OFFICE

Special Education Plan Fall 2015 Feedback Report

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Key Findings

1. MMSD's Department of Student Services collected parent, staff, and community feedback on serving students with disabilities via nine in-person meetings with 100+ participants and a survey that yielded 145 responses.
2. The majority of feedback came from individuals identifying themselves as MMSD staff, although feedback processes were open to all.
3. Feedback was organized around seven discussion questions which had minimal overlap, so drawing overarching themes from the data is challenging. This report summarizes the feedback received by the question asked.

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Background

During the 2015-16 school year, the Department of Student Services is updating the district's Special Education Plan. Part of the update process includes collecting staff and community feedback about key questions to help guide plan development and refinement. In this report, we summarize the feedback received in the fall of 2015.

Feedback Collected

Student Services staff crafted a plan for collecting feedback that focused on two venues:

- **In-person feedback sessions –** A total of nine sessions led by Student Services staff, each lasting 1-2 hours and involving a total of more than 100 participants. Three sessions focused exclusively on principals and had a total of 13 attendees across all levels (elementary, middle, high). The other four sessions were open, and attendees were a mix of MMSD staff, parents, and community members. At the sessions, Student Services staff provided a presentation on the preliminary plan and then asked for feedback on a series of questions.
- **Online form –** A total of 145 responses, received between October 19 and November 17, 2015. Respondents were asked to identify their role in the district, and 128 (88%) described themselves as MMSD staff. The other 12% were a mix of parents and community members. The feedback form was available on the MMSD Special Education website. Information about the Special Education Plan was emailed to all parents and staff via MMSD News on November 4, 2015, under the header "Share your feedback on the Special Education Plan;" the feedback form was not linked directly from the email, but it appeared on the main page which the email linked to. The website also included a copy of the preliminary plan.

Student Services used many methods to solicit feedback via the online form and attendance at the open in-person feedback sessions. These included entries in several district newsletters, phone calls and emails to all families of students with disabilities, fliers posted and shared in schools, staff notification through Infinite Campus, voluntary informational meetings led by PSTs, and both online resources and in-person translation for feedback sessions available in Spanish and Hmong, as well as English.

For four of the six in-person sessions and for the online form, participants had the opportunity to answer a series of seven questions:

1. What do you believe is going well for students with disabilities in MMSD?
2. What do you see as the single most important priority when designing services for students with disabilities?
3. How should we improve our services for students with disabilities?
4. How can we help students with disabilities achieve access to a challenging and well-rounded education, including fine arts, world language, extracurriculars, and advanced coursework?
5. How can we reduce the disproportionality of students of color in special education?
6. What information or data is important for measuring the success of our special education program?
7. How should we communicate with families of students with disabilities?

The two in-person sessions with principals were less structured and involved a free-form conversation. All meetings included one or more notetakers responsible for capturing as much of the discussion as possible. In addition, two Central Office cross functional team meetings informed the development of the plan, as a total of 19 department heads

or representatives worked to determine ways to connect, collaborate, and create cross-departmental guidance for schools around the plan. However, these meetings did not follow the feedback collection structure and are not incorporated into this report.

When analyzing the findings of this report, it is extremely important to keep in mind the characteristics of participants in this feedback process. Although some parents and other community members participated, a large majority of feedback came from individuals who identified themselves as MMSD staff. Therefore, this report likely reflects the feelings of MMSD staff, rather than the MMSD community at large.

It is often the case that one group of stakeholders will be much more interested and engaged in a feedback process than another. In this case, MMSD staff participated at higher rates than parents or other community members. That is not necessarily a problem, as some topics or issues might naturally call for overrepresentation of a certain group. But it is important that staff collecting feedback take the time to review who has provided feedback while the process is still underway and make any necessary adjustment to the outreach and collection strategy to hit the target audience. By doing so, the district is less likely to reach the end of a feedback process and realize that not all groups are represented in preferred proportions. This would be particularly important when feedback is largely electronic, as it is impossible to see the demographics of respondents, which might be more obvious if feedback is largely collected in person.

Analysis Methods

We coded the responses to questions 1-5 in NVivo, a software designed for qualitative data analysis. Coding is a way of organizing and sorting qualitative data that involves assigning labels, or codes, to each comment or response, which make it easier to draw themes from and summarize the data. Given the significantly different responses to each of the seven questions, we chose to adopt different single stage coding schemes for each of questions 1-5 (with the exception of questions 2-3, which used a uniform scheme due to the similarity of responses provided). We established these coding schemes after reading through the data multiple times for trends, commonalities, and key words, allowing codes to arise organically based on respondents' input. Each author developed coding schemes for distinct questions, which were then reviewed by the other author for clarity and distinctness. Each author reviewed sections coded by the other author to confirm the relevance of the codes used. We refined the schemes as we were coding so they better fit with our data. Code lists by question are available in the Appendix.

We elected not to establish coding schemes for questions 6 and 7 because of the highly specific and varied nature of the responses received. Instead, we summarized our impressions of these comments, developed based on multiple detailed read-throughs.

Findings by Question

1. What do you believe is going well for students with disabilities in MMSD?
Above all other areas, respondents consistently cited **teachers and staff** as the most common theme in what was going well for students with disabilities in MMSD. Respondents described staff with words like "dedicated," "caring," "skilled," "knowledge," and "committed." They gave examples of teachers and staff within schools who work collaboratively to meet student needs first and foremost. Respondents also cited the perseverance of staff and praised the "tremendous staff capacity to keep ongoing focus on their sphere of influence."

Respondents also believed **inclusion** was a strong point for students with disabilities in MMSD. They praised MMSD for creating inclusive environments where students could access regular/general education environments, rather than being pulled out into separate learning spaces. They saw inclusion also in how other students and staff within buildings treat students with disabilities as integrated, valued members of the school community. Respondents believed **access to services and support** also was a strength, praising the "breadth of services available" and the "access to one-on-one help." Finally, respondents listed **specific programming or curriculum** they felt has helped students with disabilities

succeed. Examples include interventions (such as Voyager), Early Childhood Education, Speech and Language programs, and even a cooking class at a high school.

2. What do you see as the single most important priority when designing services for students with disabilities? and 3. How should we improve our services for students with disabilities?
When discussing the top priorities and improvements, respondents consistently called for attention to **staffing and resources**. In their comments, respondents wanted the district to hire and place more staff in schools to work with students with disabilities. The majority believed student needs could not be met with current staffing levels and that more staff and resources would allow for smaller caseloads, more personalized attention, and the fulfillment of IEPs. Respondents insisted that **student needs** should drive the designing of services, rather than existing staffing or resource levels. In addition, respondents discussed the need for more **equitable allocation** to buildings. The idea that "one kid does not always equal one kid" was prevalent, and respondents asked for "services allocation based on the level of students' needs, not the student numbers."

Beyond comments related to staffing and resources, the second most prevalent theme was the importance of offering a **continuum of services** to students. Respondents wanted many options for students with disabilities, from appropriate resources and spaces to curriculum tailored to students' needs, including the instructional core and interventions. They emphasized having supports for students in all areas, including academics and social/emotional/behavioral supports, as well as consistency across locations and levels. They believed in practicing inclusion as appropriate, "placing students with disabilities in the right environment at the right time," and maintaining environments within MMSD that promote this practice. They also asked for more alternative programs to allow students with disabilities to gain the skills they need in an environment designed to promote their success. Some respondents alluded to the work being done around personalized pathways in secondary schools as having potential to "help with this problem and offer more solutions, but hopefully it starts with this plan."

Respondents called for an attention to **professional development** for staff, including cross-categorical teachers, special education assistants (SEAs), and regular education teachers. They called for more training for SEAs, both in strategies for working with students with disabilities and in teaching core content areas like reading and math. They also wanted regular education teachers to have more training in special education to increase their understanding of student needs and how to accommodate them within the general classroom via varied **curriculum & instruction**. Related, respondents also wanted more **collaborative teaming** between special education teachers/assistants and regular education teachers. They called for opportunities for communication and planning between teachers so that they "begin to see and practice their joint ownership of students with disabilities." This idea of "ownership" permeated the responses, with respondents calling for all teachers to connect with students with disabilities and own their outcomes.

Since respondents had access to the preliminary Special Education Plan – either via an in-person presentation or the website – we explored how the responses to these questions aligned to the areas of focus outlined within the plan. Of the three areas outlined in the preliminary Special Education Plan, the section with the most responses relating to that area was *Curriculum/Instruction/Professional Development*, followed closely by *Organizations and Systems to Improve Student Learning*. Respondents made very few comments related to *Improving Student Outcomes through Data Use and Analysis*. Interestingly, the majority of comments actually fell outside the three areas, such as calls for increased staffing and better communication with families. There could be several potential reasons for this lack of alignment, including the feeling that the plan already covers those areas (and therefore feedback affirming their importance was not needed) or a lack of alignment between the current areas covered in the preliminary plan and the priorities of respondents.

4. How can we help students with disabilities achieve access to a challenging and well-rounded education, including fine arts, world language, extracurriculars, and advanced coursework?
The most common comments for this question fell into the theme of **student needs**. Many responses simply reiterated the value of this access and stated that we should be encouraging students to participate in these areas and providing the supports they need to be successful. They encouraged tailoring access to fit each student's unique needs and talents.

Many respondents also pointed to **staffing and resources** being the way to increase access. Common suggestions included hiring more staff and providing more time for planning and prep work around accommodations, including making "all staff aware of IEPs." In general, respondents expressed that staff were already "spread thin" and could not provide meaningful supports outside of the academic core, and that more staff should be hired to support increasing access. Other ideas included differentiating instruction or curriculum, focusing on schedules so interventions for students with disabilities are not concurrent with fine arts courses, providing additional training to staff so "every teacher in the district [has] the expectation that they will have a child with special education in their class," and providing additional transportation to encourage extracurricular participation. Noticeably absent from responses to this question was much discussion of how specifically students with disabilities should access world language or advanced coursework, as the discussion largely revolved around art, music, and extracurriculars.

5. How can we reduce the disproportionality of students of color in special education?
The most common themes about reducing disproportionality were **families and out-of-school factors** and **practices and interventions.** Many respondents spoke to the need for parent engagement in education, teaching parenting strategies, and offering better services to children "even before they get to school" or reducing poverty as a society. Practices and interventions encapsulated many different ideas, and common suggestions included "more intensive intervention early," improving our Multi-Tiered System of Supports so students can be supported through other means than special education services, and helping students as early in their educational careers as possible.

6. What information or data is important for measuring the success of our special education program?
When asked what data elements are important for measuring success, respondents shared a wide variety of ideas. Many respondents listed data elements already used by the district on a routine basis, including proficiency and growth on standardized tests, grades, graduation rates, attendance, and behavior data. However, others believed that standardized tests were not ideal ways to measure the progress of students with disabilities, particularly when it comes to proficiency.

Suggestions for new types of data fell into three major categories: implementation data, parent/student/teacher feedback, and post-graduation data. For implementation data, respondents wanted to see more information on things like IEP compliance and, in particular, whether students were meeting their IEP goals. For parent/student/teacher feedback, respondents suggested using surveys or interviews to determine things like "if parents think their children's needs are being met." The most common desire was for opportunities for parent feedback, although respondents also suggested that staff and students should share information about their satisfaction with special education services. Finally, for post-graduation data, respondents wanted to know about postsecondary education and workplace outcomes.

7. How should we communicate with families of students with disabilities?
Similar to the previous question, respondents also shared many different suggestions for how to communicate with families. They advocated for almost any imaginable option, including home visits, other face-to-face individual and large group meetings, email, paper mail, Infinite Campus, notes, and telephone calls. Many requested more frequent contact; others described themselves as overwhelmed by the amount of contact they currently receive. Some respondents also mentioned the qualities they would like to see in communication, including respect, a willingness to communicate in multiple languages, and clarity. They also wanted communication to help parents understand their rights, as well as their children's rights and services provided, without using too much education jargon. Several expressed that schools should communicate with families of students with disabilities the "same as any other family." In short, the responses suggest that families have very different communication preferences, and that any attempt at a blanket approach to communication will be less successful than working with individual families to learn their preferences and tailor communication strategies accordingly.

Appendix: Coding Schemes and Results for Questions 1-5

As part of this feedback process, respondents were asked directly about seven distinct topics. These topics often had very little overlap, leading us to develop several different coding schemes and making it much harder to draw holistic themes across the feedback collected. This appendix includes the coding schemes used for Questions 1-5 in this report. For each question, we have included the method used to create the scheme and the codes used, listed in order from most to least prevalent in the data.

Question 1: What do you believe is going well for students with disabilities in MMSD?
Method: We developed codes based on word frequencies and preliminary review of data.
Code List:

Code	Percent of Coded Comments
Teachers and Staff	36%
Inclusion	20%
Other	18%
Access to services and support	16%
Specific programming or curriculum	10%

Question 2: What do you see as the single most important priority when designing services for students with disabilities? and Question 3: How should we improve our services for students with disabilities?
Method: We began by using the three areas outlined in the preliminary plan presented at feedback sessions and posted to the plan website: *Organizations and Systems to Support Learning, Curriculum/Instruction/Professional Development,* and *Improve Student Outcomes Through Data Use/Analysis.* Within each category, the plan outlines subcategories organized by action. After preliminary review of the data, we created codes based on the categories and/or subcategories most frequently discussed in the responses. We also added codes for any subject which was not explicitly outlined in the plan but occurred frequently in the responses. In the end, we developed a set of 11 codes, which are as follows:
Code List:

Code	Percent of Coded Comments
Increased Staff & Resources	19%
Continuum of Services	17%
Professional Development	10%
Curriculum & Instruction	10%
Student Needs	10%
Collaborative Teaming	7%
Equitable Allocations	6%
Other	6%
Family Communication	6%
Data Use	5%
Organization/Systems	4%

Question 4: How can we help students with disabilities achieve access to a challenging and well-rounded education, including fine arts, world language, extracurriculars, and advanced coursework?
Method: We developed codes based on preliminary review of data.
Code List:

Code	Percent of Coded Comments
Student needs	33%
Staffing and resources	25%
Accommodations and instructional models	17%
Training	10%
Extracurriculars and out-of-school	10%
Other	4%

Question 5: How can we reduce the disproportionality of students of color in special education?

Method: We developed codes based on preliminary review of data.

Code List:

Code	Percent of Coded Comments
Families and out-of-school factors	40%
Practices and interventions	38%
Training	11%
Other	6%
Staffing and resouces	5%