Special Education Plan Spring 2016 Feedback Report

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Key Findings

1. In Spring 2016, over 150 respondents gave feedback on the recently updated Special Education Plan.
2. Overall, the majority of respondents rated the draft plan and sections within as somewhat or very strong.
3. The structure and content of the document could use additional editing – both in grammar and in clarity and family-friendly nature of language (e.g., use of acronyms and jargon).
4. Respondents craved communication and engagement – they appreciated its inclusion in the plan, and they wanted more information conveyed, and they would like meetings and trainings to be more welcoming, accessible, and parent-driven.
5. Comments about service delivery were generally in favor of allocation of resources/staff based on student need, and respondents encouraged the inclusion of special education students in the classroom; however, they wanted more clarity around different service delivery processes and accountability.

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Background

During the 2015-16 school year, the Department of Student Services worked on updating the district's Special Education Plan. Feedback from stakeholders played a crucial role in plan development throughout the year. An initial report from the Research & Program Evaluation Office summarized feedback received in the Fall 2015. Based on that input, the plan was updated, and a second round of feedback sessions on the updated plan occurred in Spring 2016. These feedback sessions were open to staff, parents, and community members. In this report, we summarize the feedback received in the Spring of 2016 to the *Special Education Plan 2016-2019 (Draft)*.

Feedback Collected

Student Services staff collected feedback on the Special Education Plan with a focus on its three main components – *Systems and Organizational Improvements to Support Student Learning, Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning*, or *Improve Student Outcomes through Data Use/Analysis*, as well as the plan as a whole. These data were collected via two venues:

- **In-person feedback sessions –** There were 12 sessions with 23 small breakouts led by Student Services staff, each lasting 1-2 hours, and involving a total of more than 130 respondents. At the sessions, Student Services staff provided an overview of the feedback session process, and then split the session into three groups to discuss an assigned section of the report. Respondents in the smaller sections read the assigned section (or a summary of it) and then there was an open discussion about the strengths of the section and the overall plan, as well as discussion around anything missing from the plan overall or recommended changes to the section. Each group included at least one note-taker responsible for capturing as much of the discussion as possible.

    Nine breakouts focused on *Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning*, six breakouts emphasized *Systems and Organizational Improvements to Support Student Learning*, five breakouts related to *Improve Student Outcomes through Data Use/Analysis*, and three talked about all of the sections at once. Note-takers recorded some background information on participants, when available. Of the 133 respondents, 58 (44%) were parents, 51 (38%) identified as staff, 16 (12%) were students, and 7 (5%) were community members. Some participants chose not to identify their role or chose to identify in multiple roles. Thirty-six (27%) respondents had previously attended feedback sessions and 96 (72%) had not, and 55 (41%) were familiar with the plan and 70 (53%) were not familiar with the plan. Totals may not equal 100% because of missing information regarding whether respondents had previously attended feedback sessions and/or their level of familiarity with the plan.

- **Online form –** The online feedback form was available on the [MMSD Special Education website](#) and was open from March 15 through May 31, 2016. The form consisted of 14 questions and asked respondents to identify their connection to MMSD, their participation in previous MMSD Special Education Plan feedback sessions, and their level of familiarity with the draft *MMSD Special Education Plan 2016-19*. For each section of the plan (provided via a hyperlink), respondents were asked to evaluate the strength, identify specific strengths, and recommend changes. Finally, they evaluated the strength and pinpointed anything missing from the current plan *overall*. Exact questions from the online form are in Appendix A.

  A total of 21 responses were received between March 16 and June 4, 2016. Respondents were asked to identify their role in the district, and 13 (62%) described themselves as MMSD staff. The other 8 (38%) were a mix of parents and community members. Ten respondents (48%) reported attending a previous feedback session and 11 (52%) had not participated in the previous feedback sessions. Twelve respondents (57%) reported being very familiar with the Special Education Plan, 8 (38%) reported being somewhat familiar, and 1 (5%) reported not being familiar with it.

To recruit respondents, throughout March, April, and early May information about both the sessions and the links were sent out in multiple staff, family, and student services newsletters, in the Principal's Bulletin, and in emails to staff and parents. Robocalls were made, and information appeared on the MMSD staff log in and website banner.

Analysis Methods

To analyze respondents' perceptions of the strength of the plan overall, we calculated what percentage of respondents felt the plan was "Not Strong," "Somewhat Strong," or "Very Strong" based on feedback provided in the in-person sessions and the online form. Only the webform asked respondents to rate each of the specific sections of the plan, so we used those responses to calculate the percentage of respondents who felt that each section was "Not Strong," "Somewhat Strong," or "Very Strong."

To analyze comments made in the in-person feedback sessions and the open-ended comments from the online form, we performed a qualitative analysis using a multi-step procedure. First, we structurally coded (i.e., assigning the same code to all responses to a particular question) comments in the online form and comments made in the in-person sessions. 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. Next, we established codes within the responses to each question after reading through the data multiple times for trends, commonalities, and key words, allowing codes to emerge based on respondents' input. This coding structure was reviewed by special education staff and recommended modifications were considered and implemented by RPEO staff.   Due to the open-ended nature of the in-person sessions, any ambiguous, singular, or unrelated comments were coded into an Other category. Code lists by question are available in Appendix B.

The first section focuses on the strength of the plan overall – its strength as respondents rated it in the online form and in the sessions, and what session respondents said about its strengths. We then report data on the strength of each section as it was reported in the online form. Next, findings are separated by section within the plan. In each of these sections we report themes related to the strengths of the section and how each section could be changed. Both the online form and the in-person sessions focused on strengths and suggested changes to each section, so comments related to those issues have been collapsed across the different data sources. The final section focuses on what should be added to the plan overall.

Note that findings from the in-person sessions regarding the plan overall are based on limited responses because not all sessions reached the end of their questions before their time was up. Since the questions related to the plan overall were at the end of the protocol, this means that many groups did not have the opportunity to discuss the plan writ large because they spent the majority of their time praising and critiquing their assigned sections. Some sessions simultaneously critiqued sections of the plan and the plan as a whole.
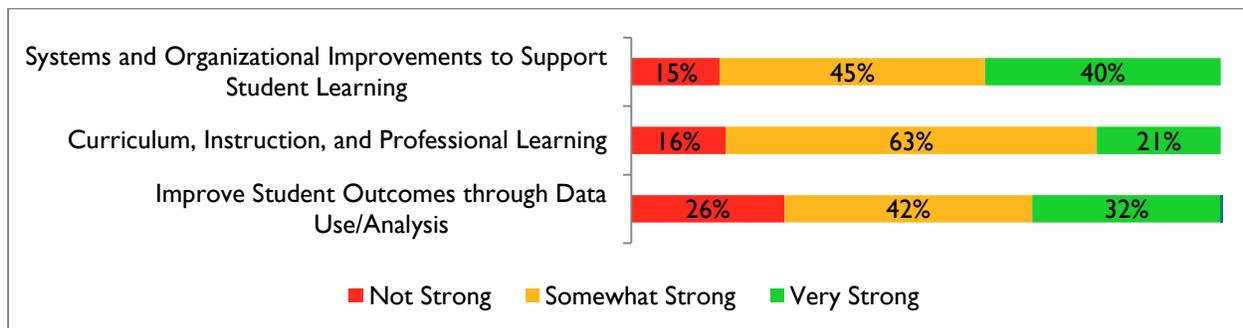
Findings

Strength of the Plan

Respondents were asked to rate the strength of the Special Education Plan overall in the online form and in the in-person sessions using one of three response options: Very Strong, Somewhat Strong, or Not Strong. Of 55 respondents, 38% believed that the plan was very strong as a whole. Almost half (45%) perceived the plan as being somewhat strong, and 16% felt that the plan was not strong.

Special Education Plan Overall	16%	45%	38%

■ Not Strong ■ Somewhat Strong ■ Very Strong
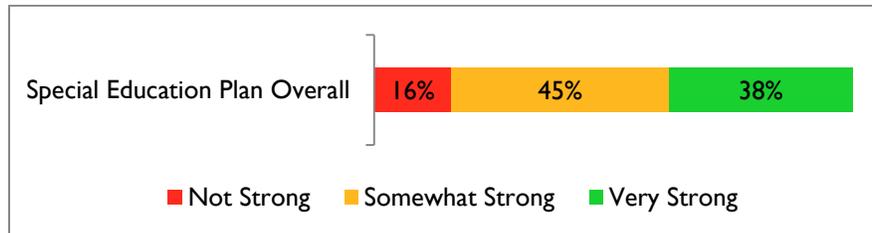
Overall, respondents found strengths in **service delivery** aspects of the plan as a whole. In particular, respondents discussed the importance associated with understanding, sharing, and utilizing the accommodations of Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that result in success. Comments about **staffing** were important to a few as well.

Of 20 respondents, the majority of online form respondents (85%) believed that *Systems and Organizational Improvements to Support Student Learning* section of the plan was either somewhat or very strong. Of 19 respondents, 84% believed the *Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning* section of the plan was either somewhat or very strong. Almost three quarters of 19 respondents (74%) felt the *Improve Student Outcomes through Data Use/Analysis* section was somewhat or very strong. Overall, respondents were the least confident in the strength of the *Improve Student outcomes through Data Use/Analysis section*, but the other two sections had over 80% approval.

Systems and Organizational Improvements to Support Student Learning	15%	45%	40%
Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning	16%	63%	21%
Improve Student Outcomes through Data Use/Analysis	26%	42%	32%

■ Not Strong ■ Somewhat Strong ■ Very Strong

Systems and Organizational Improvements to Support Student Learning

Section strengths: Respondents most often described the **layout of the section** on paper as the section's greatest strength. Respondents said things like, "Structure of the document allows for readability," while others commented on the "organizational format" and the specificity of this section of the plan. Besides the layout, respondents reacted well to the section's emphasis on **communication and engagement.** They appreciated the general attention the plan gave to communication and family engagement, and others specifically valued the communication and engagement surrounding parent trainings and communication around IEPs and access to IEPs online. Respondents also praised the plan's response to the need for more consistent and inclusive **service delivery**, that is, allocations based on the needs of students and the inclusion of special education students in the classroom. "It recognizes that allocations should be based on the needs of the students, not the numbers," wrote one commenter. Respondents also felt that attention on

training and professional development and **additional staffing** were important as well, highlighting that this section of the plan "…addresses the teacher shortage and what to do with that."

Suggested changes: While respondents perceived aspects of **communication and engagement** as strengths, many also made suggestions for change around that component. For example, respondents desired access to more information about student progress, they wanted more communication about IEPs, and they wished for details concerning trainings and meetings (e.g., IEP). Respondents suggested things like "under the family engagement section discuss how understandable communication to parents will be incorporated into the IEP process." Respondents also wanted more responsiveness and communication from the school "not just when things are going wrong," and they wanted help in understanding services available to students with special needs. Respondents had many thoughts on how to improve parent meetings and access to information. Specifically, their suggested changes ranged from IEP meetings being more welcoming, attendees being provided a "cheat sheet" of information about the meeting, and essentially creating a network of parents and staff to participate and share information. One respondent said something to the effect of "There should be a special education Newsletter [that] should have trainings example of classes that are offered training sessions to teach parents to be advocates. We should be hearing from the district. It should go out to all parents with children with special needs." Respondents additionally wanted a resource guide or methods of connecting to community resources. Finally, respondents wanted meetings to be driven by their needs and information on a "chain of who to contact with questions/concerns." Their feelings can be summed up: "clear communication between all stake holders." Respondents wanted the plan's response regarding **service delivery** to "be more clear" and to include a consistent staff member/team that "travels" with students. They desired clarity around different service delivery processes (e.g., planning process, allocation process) and accountability. Furthermore, respondents wanted special education to be inclusive to students, and matching teachers and students was mentioned. Additionally, respondents exposed weaknesses related to the **layout of the section**, such as editing the language and explaining jargon. In terms of **staff hiring**, respondents wanted additional staff hired, and some questioned the "Grow Our Own" program and if it would solve the issue of being understaffed. To a lesser degree, respondents called for additional information on what **training and professional development** would look like.

Conclusions: Respondents were satisfied with the inclusion of communication and engagement, the layout of the section, and the service delivery, training and professional development, and staffing proposed in the plan, but they also had suggestions for changes that they wanted to see, especially related to those components. More specific strategies would have made the plan stronger, as would clarity around how the needs identified in previous feedback sessions would be implemented. Respondents felt very strongly about incorporating more communication and engagement with families. They supplied many of their own ideas of how to make communication and interactions between the schools and parents more effective and helpful (e.g., opportunities for parents to organize and attend meetings).

Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning

Section strengths: This section fills a gap for respondents regarding staff **training and professional development**, "which is currently especially lacking." Some respondents called out the "reading skills" training and the "Orton-Gillingham training" as positive additions. Respondents liked the suggested changes around **curriculum**, such as including a "specific curriculum for special education children," addressing transitional planning, creating a shared forum for modified curriculum, and having curriculum and instruction "individualized to the needs of the child." Less frequently but still notable, respondents described the strengths of a **Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) model** "looking at whole child." Again, respondents commented on the **layout of the section**.

Suggested changes: In this section, respondent criticisms of **curriculum and instruction** surrounded issues of what Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is and how it will be implemented, the perceived heavy focus on testing, the need for social emotional learning (SEL), and the limitations of the core curriculum. The **layout of the section** presented challenges to some respondents who wanted more accessible language, more specific language, and clarity around acronyms. Furthermore, respondents wanted more information and opportunities for staff **training and professional development**. In particular, they wanted training to be more planned, to address the needs of students (both cognitive

and physical), and they wanted more opportunities for staff to participate in the training. A few also talked about aspects of **staffing and responsibilities**.

Conclusions: In general, respondents supported the emphasis on training and professional development, but they also wanted other topics to be available and the time to attend these events. Similarly, participants found strength in the proposed curriculum (e.g., modified curriculum, goals and expectations, etc.), yet they also wanted less of a sole focus on academics and testing, and they wanted more clarity around UDL and transitions.

Improve Student Outcomes through Data Use/Analysis

Section strengths: Respondents felt that **data use**, usually for decision-making purposes or the identification of needs, was an asset of this section. Other respondents more specifically identified data use tied with **accountability and ameliorating disproportionality**, for example reevaluating "to make sure that students actually need an IEP," as a strength. The "good information" provided in the **layout of the section** was also hailed by respondents.

Suggested changes: The biggest complaint of this section resided in the **layout of the section**. In particular, more explanation of jargon and data, less repetition, "less writing" in general, and grammar editing was desired. Moreover, respondents made recommended changes for the **type of data/data use** for the section. In general, one commenter wrote, "…I'd like to see more specifics about the data tools we'll use and how we'll use them." Some criticized the use of standardized testing as a metric. "That statistics are not the only criteria used to implement educational needs," a commenter wrote. "Students are not just numbers on a spreadsheet of quotas to be filled." Another suggested looking at academic data if a child is having difficulty with behavior, while others talked about wanting behavior data because of its association with academic success. Concerns surfaced over measures taken to reduce **disproportionality and increase accountability**—in particular, the corresponding amount of time it could take for students to get help with their special needs.

Conclusions: Respondents applauded the use of data, but wanted its use more clearly laid out in the plan. They wondered about additional types of data/data use and wanted more explanation around data. Regarding the accountability and disproportionality piece, respondents generally liked those components. However, respondents were concerned about the delicate balance between the time it would take to get a student help while going through the process of being evaluated for special education services and the need for a process to ensure students who needed assistance were getting appropriate help, while also ameliorating disproportionality.

Additions to the Plan

The items that respondents perceived as missing were all across the board and spanned the topics brought up in conversations surrounding various sections of the plan. Many responses in this discussion clustered around three areas. **Service delivery** was mentioned by respondents, especially consistency in staff, allocation of resources, inclusion of students, and accountability. One respondent wanted inclusion addressed beyond the amount of time they spent in a classroom. Respondents underscored issues related to **staffing**. They wanted additional staff and smaller caseloads, and they were concerned about staff allocations. Finally, considered by one commenter to be an improvement that has "potential to be very powerful," respondents want to be **communicated with and engaged**. They want resources, they want to learn, and they need help doing it. They want to know who to contact and how because not having that help can be frustrating and isolating. Respondents generally provided similar responses to their critiques of the sections above, which suggests that while groups and online form commenters were asked to address specific sections of the plan, larger issues related to the plan as a whole may have seeped into their section-specific feedback.

Conclusion

The majority of respondents believed that sections of the Special Education Plan and the plan as a whole are somewhat or very strong. They celebrated the inclusion of various components in each section of the plan, but they also had numerous suggestions for ways to improve or clarify these very same components. This suggests that the plan is on the right track in addressing the concerns of stakeholders, but that it could use further refining.

In general, the structure and content of the document could use additional editing – both in grammar and punctuation and also in clarity and family-friendly nature of language. Respondents discussed the inclusion of an acronym guide to help readers understand the plan more clearly.

Content-wise, respondents craved communication and engagement overall. They wanted more information conveyed to them and they want meetings and trainings to be more welcoming, accessible, and perhaps parent-driven. Respondents agreed that professional development was vital to the successful delivery of special education services, and they wanted more variety and detail about these opportunities. They were cautious to not put too much more on current teachers and would rather see more teachers hired if necessary. Comments about service delivery were generally in favor of allocation of resources/staff based on student need, and they encouraged the inclusion of special education students in the classroom. They also did want additional clarity around service delivery processes and accountability as well. Finally, IEPs represented a central part of the feedback sessions in terms of the services they provide and the accountability, meetings, and trainings surrounding them.

Appendix A: Online Form Questions

The online form questions and response options are below.

1. What is your connection to Madison Metropolitan School District? Check all that apply.
    Staff – Special Education teacher; Staff – Classroom teacher; Staff – Principal; Staff – Other; Parent/Family Member; Community Member
2. Did you participate in the previous feedback sessions or survey on the Madison metropolitan School District Special Education Plan (Fall 2015)?
    Yes; No
3. How familiar are you with the draft MMSD Special Education Plan 2016-19? Link: https://goo.gl/Vz0qua
    Not familiar; Somewhat familiar; Very familiar
4. How strong is the section called Systems and Organizational Improvements to Support Students Learning? Link: link: https://goo.gl/0HFdAo
    Not strong; Somewhat strong; Very strong
5. What are the strengths of this section?
    Open-ended
6. What changes would you suggest to this section?
    Open-ended
7. How strong is the section called Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning? Link: https://goo.gl/F5Ew7u
    Not strong; Somewhat strong; Very strong
8. What are the strengths of this section?
    Open-ended
9. What changes would you suggest to this section?
    Open-ended
10. How strong is the section called Improve Outcomes Through Data Use/Analysis? Link: https://goo.gl/Muzgpd
    Not strong; Somewhat strong; Very strong
11. What are the strengths of this section?
    Open-ended
12. What changes would you suggest to this section?
    Open-ended
13. How strong is the Plan overall?
    Not strong; Somewhat strong; Very strong
14. Is anything missing in the current Plan?
    Open-ended

Appendix B: Coding Schemes and Results

Below are the coding schemes used in the analysis of the in-person sessions and the open-ended comments from the online form for the plan overall and each section of the plan. Note that percentages may not equal 100% because some comments were assigned to more than one code. Also note that comments solely assigned to the Other category are not included in the percentages below, therefore the percent of coded comments refers only to the codes listed.

Plan Overall:

Strengths	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Service Delivery (e.g., IEPs)	69%
Staffing	31%

Missing Items	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Service Delivery (e.g., Consistent Staff, Allocation of Resources/Process, Inclusion, Accountability)	42%
Communication & Engagement	30%
Staffing (e.g., Additional Staff, Smaller Caseloads, Staff Allocations)	28%

Section 1: Systems and Organizational Improvements to Support Student Learning:

Strengths	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Layout of Section	37%
Communication & Engagement (e.g., Parent Trainings, IEPs)	24%
Service Delivery (e.g., Allocations of Staff/Resources)	17%
Training & Professional Development	11%
Additional Staffing	11%

Changes	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Communication & Engagement (e.g., Access to Info, Explanations, Trainings & Meetings)	58%
Service Delivery (e.g., Consistent Staff, Process Clarity, Inclusivity)	15%
Layout of Section	13%
Staff Hiring	10%
Training & Professional Development	4%

Section 2: Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Learning:

Strengths	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Training & Professional Development	45%
Curriculum (e.g., Transitional Planning, Modified Curriculum, Shared Curriculum)	37%
MTSS Model	10%
Layout of the Section	8%

Changes	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Curriculum & Instruction (e.g., UDL, Testing, SEL, Core Curriculum)	35%
Layout of the Section	28%
Training & Professional Development	24%
Staffing & Responsibilities	13%

Section 3: Improve Student Outcomes through Data Use/Analysis:

Strengths	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Data Use	47%
Disproportionality & Accountability	37%
Layout of the Section	16%

Changes	
Code	**Percent of Coded Comments**
Layout of the Section	49%
Type of Data/Data Use	41%
Disproportionality & Accountability	10%