

Independent Review of Special Education Programs

Harvard Public Schools

Harvard, Massachusetts

Conducted:
Fall 2008

Submitted by:
Gagliardi Consulting Associates
Melrose, Massachusetts
02176

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

A. Purpose

B. Principal Reviewer

II. Methodology

III. Commendations

IV. Factors Effecting Programming

V. Findings

VI. Responses to The Scope of The Study

VII. Recommendations

VIII. Summary

Appendices

I. Introduction

Under the auspices of the Harvard School Committee, The Special Education Task Force commissioned Gagliardi Consulting Associates to conduct a full review/evaluation of the special education services and expenditures that the Harvard School System provides for the purpose of fulfilling its responsibility to implement the state and federal special education acts, Chapter 766 and IDEA, respectively. The Special Education Task Force set forth five areas that are to be studied, evaluated and responded to through recommendations. These five areas are:

- 1) The process the system utilizes to determine eligibility for receiving an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the impact on the school system's expenditures in comparison to like communities.
- 2) The process by which the system determines which special education services a student receives and whether the Harvard criteria, processes, and expenditures are equal to, greater than, or less than state and federal mandates.
- 3) The core values of the Special Education Department which drive the decision making process, procedures and expenditures, and how they impact the cost of providing special education services.
- 4) Identify recommendations that can assist in enhancing existing programs and services that will enable the system to provide a more inclusive environment and lead to more in-district program development.
- 5) Identify opportunities for greater efficiencies in the areas of processing, procedures, and the increased use of technology.

In addition to these five areas of study, this review also gathered additional data that will be provided in the form of recommendations to assist the new Director of Special Education in her role as she begins to focus on areas of special education programming and service development.

A. Purpose

The purpose of an independent review of specific programs and services is to provide a school system with an objective report that identifies areas of strength, needs and recommendations. An independent review allows for the system to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well in the system, but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened. This review 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 Committee, the school system'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:

- Identifying trends and patterns in referrals to special education
- Identifying the main characteristics in the students who are referred
- Identifying similar profile characteristics in the non-referred and referred students
- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel, and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students in Individualized Educational Programs (IEP)
- Identifying trends in the program placements of students
- Determining the effectiveness of current program and service interventions
- Staffing and resource needs 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

This review process brings forth information that will enable the system administrators and school based special and regular education personnel to develop an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective approaches for serving the students of the Harvard Public Schools.

It is important to recognize that for the information contained in this report to be beneficial to the school system and the Special Education Department, the stakeholders must come together to discuss the Findings and the Recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the school-based special education and regular education personnel can develop short and long range action plan(s) that will address the agreed upon issues.

B. Principal Reviewer

Dr. James B. Earley has thirty-nine years of public education experience as a teacher, teaching assistant principal, Massachusetts Department of Education Supervisor and Acting Regional Special Education Director, twenty-eight years as Administrator of Special Education and thirteen months as Interim Superintendent of Schools for the Watertown Public Schools. Dr. Earley has been a Senior Lecturer at Lesley University and Wheelock College and an Adjunct Professor at the University of

Massachusetts/Boston. In addition to his role as Staff Consultant to Gagliardi Consulting Associates, Dr. Earley is the Managing Director for Walker Partnerships, and a Senior Consultant for the Center of Social Development and Education, University of Massachusetts/Boston. Dr. Earley has consulted for numerous educational organizations, participated in a variety of special education task forces and has conducted numerous independent program reviews, evaluations and professional development trainings for school systems within Massachusetts and several other states.

II. Methodology

This Program evaluation was conducted based on a three-prong approach.

1. A thorough review was conducted of written documentation pertaining to this report. Included were the Harvard Special Education Task Force Report, the Special Education Survey Data Analysis, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Coordinated Program Review report, the End of Year and Census Reports, several years of budget reports for special education, case load data, various special education descriptive materials and special education entitlement grant allocations. In addition to these special education documents, the system's Strategic Planning Document was also reviewed.
2. Site visits were conducted at the two schools with visits to ten (10) regular content classes and two (2) Academic Support classes at The Bromfield School. Four (4) regular education classrooms, two (2) Resource Rooms and the Integrated Preschool Program at the Harvard Elementary School (HES) were visited. Each visit was approximately fifteen (15) minutes in length.
3. One-on-one interviews and discussions were conducted of the following twenty (20) positions:
 - Superintendent of Schools
 - Director of Special Education
 - Bromfield School Principal
 - Bromfield School Associate Principal
 - Elementary Principal
 - Elementary and Secondary Special Education Coordinators
 - Preschool Coordinator
 - School Psychologist
 - One Speech/Language Therapist
 - Two Elementary Regular Education Teachers
 - One Elementary Guidance Counselor
 - Two Elementary Special Education Teachers
 - One Preschool Teacher
 - Three Regular Education High School Teachers
 - One Special Education High School Teacher

The interviews were approximately thirty (30) minutes in length, with emphasis placed on the focus of the service that the individual provides and their interfacing with special education, inclusion efforts, and overall roles and responsibilities. A set of specific questions were utilized for each interview. Questions and discussion focused on the following:

- What are their roles and responsibilities relating to special education, inclusion, and the pre-referral process (Teacher Support Team, TST)?

- What are their main concerns with respect to the needs of special education students?
- What challenges are they experiencing; what issues do they believe are affecting their instruction?
- What strengths of special education can they identify?
- Is the eligibility determination process outcome well structured and the outcome accurate?
- What trends are they experiencing in the student population?
- What program 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 special education, and the placement of special needs students within regular education classes?
- What are some parental concerns?
- How can technology enhance their instructional repertoire?

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, 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 system and the administration in their plan to meet the needs of students who are eligible for special education. Special education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. There are numerous competing interests that continue to place significant pressures and financial burdens on a school system. Harvard Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Specific Commendations:

- The cooperation of school administrators, faculty and support staff in their assistance in completing this evaluation.
- The very high level of dedication and commitment of school-based personnel to fulfill the requirements of special education and the IEP.
- The strong commitment by the system to Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and inclusion of students with special needs.
- Consistent practice of enabling students with special needs to have access to the general curriculum.
- Efforts by the system to offer several different special education instructional models that are considered best practices; such as in-classroom support, the co-teaching model, the Teacher Support Team (TST) and the Integrated Preschool Program.
- Efforts to initiate the implementation of components of the Response To Intervention (RTI) model at the Harvard Elementary School.
- Use of Project Adventure at the HES as a positive behavioral support initiative.
- The very well defined and structured process for the conduct of the Teacher Support Team at the HES and grades six through nine at The Bromfield School.
- Structured bi-monthly meetings conducted by the Director of Special Education and the Business Coordinator/Director of Finance to review the special education warrants, budget and other related spending matters.
- Scheduled weekly meetings by the Director of Special Education with the Elementary and Secondary Special Education Coordinators to review the current status of concerned cases and related issues.
- Establishment of and implementation of the position of Special Education Coordinator for The Bromfield School.

- The Director of Special Education’s participation in the Department Leaders Group at the Bromfield School.
- Establishment of the “Red-Folder Students” weekly status monitoring approach by the Director of Special Education to assess high-need cases, their current level of performance and need for additional interventions as a preventive strategy.
- A variety of interventions and efforts by the school system to impact students within regular education which have assisted in having the percentage of students eligible for special education support below the state average.
- Allocation of appropriate instructional space for the Academic Support, Integrated Preschool Program and Resource Rooms.
- Professional development offerings that have focused training on literacy and math instruction.
- Current efforts to maintain more students with special needs in the system and reduce the exiting of students from the school system.
- Creation of the Intervention Period within the schedule to provide greater coordination of support instruction for students.

IV. Factors Effecting Special Education Programming and Services

There are numerous factors that impact the school system's ability to deliver special education instruction and related services to students within the Harvard Public Schools.

- None of these factors are more pressing than the number of students with special needs (census) and the individual needs (severity of disability) of the students. These two factors drive program development and service initiatives. Within the Harvard Public Schools, the percentage of students with significant disabilities continues to be low in number and in incidence. There is not present in the system a large enough number of students with similar substantial needs, either throughout the grade structure, or concentrated at a grade level, for the system to develop and implement long-term programming. This low census factor must be continually recognized whenever discussions and decisions are being made with respect to program development and implementation. The establishment of a program will, in many cases, serve a few students for an abbreviated period of time. The needs of the students are also a major influence on the types of programs and services that the system develops and implements. Though the Harvard Public Schools has representation of many different disabilities, the number of students with substantial disabilities that can be grouped or matched is very low; therefore this factor does influence how programs and services are designed and implemented. Additionally, because these factors may change gradually over time, the administration must address the census factor as programs evolve over a period of time. Many out-of-district placements could be served within the district if there becomes a sustainable cohort of an identified disability group allowing for development and ongoing operation of internal school-based programs and services.
- The next factor that has to be constantly considered when addressing the needs of students with substantial disabilities is: To what extent can the system provide an appropriate comprehensive educational experience for these students? There is little question or doubt that the system is willing to meet the educational needs of students with substantial disabilities. The question is whether the system can provide for the social and interpersonal development with appropriate peer experiences that will enhance the overall development of these students. This issue needs to be continually assessed for each individual student, with respect to program and service options. It is a factor that all Evaluation Team members must seriously consider when developing and designing placement recommendations for this student population. Over time, this issue needs to be readdressed and continuously reviewed on a case-by-case basis.
- Special education personnel's roles and responsibilities, as well as allocation of their time, is a major factor that influences programming. Harvard Public Schools currently does not have in place the appropriate special education personnel to meet the needs of more involved specific groups of students. However, as

circumstances change, the roles and responsibilities of various special education and support personnel need to be reassessed in order to determine how they can be utilized more effectively, given the needs of the students. Individuals in key positions of instruction and service, who can serve in a different role or capacity when needed, should be identified. Current levels of positions may have to increase should there be a sudden or even gradual increase in the number of students with substantial needs. As the system attempts to maintain students within the district, staffing patterns will need to be altered and most likely increased. The roles and responsibilities that current personnel are assuming may be affected by changing student needs even if current levels remain constant. Allocation of personnel time for specific tasks also may be impacted over time. In the future, potential changes need to be continually assessed in order to provide the most effective delivery of service for these students.

- With the development of in-system programming to meet the needs of a specific population, appropriate instructional space will become a need that the system will be required to address in a planned approach. As populations of students are recognized, instructional and related service space will need to be in place to appropriately serve the needs of the designated population.
- A final factor that needs to be addressed is setting aside time to conduct meaningful professional development for all school-based personnel. Without sufficient dedicated time for training, conferencing, and common planning time among the school-based personnel, the efforts to maintain students with special needs in the system will not succeed. School-based personnel must have access to well-planned and structured professional opportunities so that they can acquire the necessary skills to maintain an inclusive instructional environment.

V. Findings

Through the review/evaluation process, it was very apparent that the school system administration is aware of the needs of the system as a whole, the individual buildings and the students. The following findings are provided to assist the system with the work that needs to be completed. These findings are presented in no particular order of priority.

Specific Findings:

- The pre-referral process, the Teacher Support Team (TST), at the elementary level is well formulated and established. For grades 6-9 the process is in place, but needs improvement. There is an effort underway to have the TST process in place for students in grades 10-12.
- There is a lack of ongoing support for the TST members with respect to specific professional development.
- There is a lack of coordinated professional development for all staff addressing a more comprehensive understanding of spectrum disorder students and their needs.
- There is a lack of special education professional development for all staff that is topic focused, in-depth and ongoing throughout the year.
- There are some fundamental differences of understanding among regular education staff regarding different disabilities, characteristics of the disabilities, learning styles of students with disabilities and how to address these varying learning needs.
- Professional development is not specifically tailored to the needs of staff given their varying years of experience and knowledge bases.
- Learning Assistants do not have the opportunity to participate in a well-structured training program that is conducted in an ongoing manner.
- Learning Assistants are not receiving ongoing focused training on their roles, responsibilities, or how to implement instructional strategies and behavioral accommodations.
- There is a lack of stated guidelines of what practices Learning Assistants should be implementing when working with a student in a content class.
- There are no stated guidelines for Learning Assistants when providing academic testing support for special needs students outside the content class.

- There is inconsistency among staff as to the differences between curriculum and instructional accommodations, modifications and adaptations.
- Establishment of a single-child centered program model is not consistent with evidence-based best practices.
- The academic support periods across all grade levels lack an established skill-based curriculum that enables students to learn the “how to” in getting work assignments completed, prepare for content subject examinations, complete term projects and other content-based work for which students are responsible.
- The co-teaching model, though in effect, is very limited in scope.
- There is not in place a planned professional development schedule for those teachers who participate in the co-teaching model.
- There is not an established criteria for determining which students with special needs participate in a co-taught class.
- There is no established common planning time for staff participating in the co-teaching model.
- There is a lack of a programmatic description of the principles of what the co-teaching model of instruction is for each school.
- There is a lack of a descriptive outline of the standards and characteristics of a co-teaching class.
- There is a lack of defined roles and responsibilities of the two teachers in a co-teaching class.
- There is a lack of agreed-upon standard measurements that will assist in determining the overall effectiveness of the co-teaching model.
- There is no structured opportunity for all the teachers of the co-teaching model to meet as a group on a consistent basis.
- There are no stated standard operating procedures for the co-teaching classes, (i.e. how issues are addressed and resolved; what the expectations are for the teachers and students).
- There is not a formulated position on how a content teacher is selected to participate in the co-teaching model. There are no stated prerequisites such as years of experience, background in special education, previous experience with the co-teaching model, skill sets, etc.

- There is no incentive-based approach to increase recruitment and retention of content teachers to participate in the co-teaching model.
- Teaming of the special education teachers and content teachers is not subject to a set of standards that will assist in determining which pairs are appropriately matched.
- School-based staff, primarily at The Bromfield School, have an unclear understanding of how the grading system is to be equalized for all students.
- There appears to be a lack of clarity among staff as to what defines the mental health needs of students and how the system should respond.
- There is not in place a Special Education Procedural Manual to which all staff have access.
- Student performance data is not consistently reviewed during the school year to determine what adjustments or changes can be made to the IEP.
- The Speech/Language Therapist for the Integrated Preschool Program is unable to conduct in-classroom support for the students due to the position being part-time and the extent of the case load.
- The School Psychologist is not able to utilize her group and individual treatment skills due to the case load of assessments and testing that is required.
- For special needs students who are struggling with the curriculum content, there is limited course flexibility to meet the requirements through other options or choices.
- There lacks a consistent, standard protocol for assessing specific suspected disabilities. What instruments are utilized for which disability assessments?
- Computer-assisted instruction and other forms of technology utilization are at a minimum throughout the system.
- The elementary special education instructional staff case load (numbers and needs of the students) is at a level that is beginning to make their effectiveness diminish, given the system's efforts to maintain students in the system.

VI. Response to the Scope of the Study

The Special Education Task Force has requested that five specific issues be responded to in this report. The follow is an itemized response to each of the five issues set forth in the agreement document. These five issues, along with the Findings from the previous section of this report, will be the foundation for the Recommendation section of this report.

Specific Issues of Study

1) Evaluate Harvard's criteria, processes and expenditures related to the process of deciding which students advance to an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Findings and comments should indicate whether Harvard's criteria, processes and expenditures are equal to, greater than, or less than state and federal mandates.

Response:

Harvard Public Schools has a pre-referral process, the Teacher Support Team (TST), in place for grades kindergarten through grade nine. The program has appropriate procedures and protocols that ensure the system is taking the necessary and required steps within regular education to provide the personnel support, strategies of alternative instruction, behavioral, environmental and physical accommodations and supplemental material. Through the TST process a substantial amount of data is collected regarding the needs of the student and what strategies are effective, what issues continue to be of teacher concern and what other steps may be attempted. Once the TST process has been completed, the school-based personnel either need not make a referral to special education for an evaluation, or based on the student's status, determine that a referral is required due to the lack of *effective progress* by the student following substantial intervention.

The referral process then leads to the special education evaluation to determine whether the student is eligible for specialized instruction and/or related support through special education. Following a review of the data and interviews with numerous school-based personnel it can be stated that the referrals are of a legitimate nature for the special education evaluation process. With respect to grades ten and eleven, the process of the TST is beginning to come in line similar to that in the other grades this year. This excludes referrals for evaluations that are made by other sources, such as parents, doctors or non-public school personnel.

Expenditures by the school system as part of the special education budget for the evaluation cannot be determined to be excessive or compared to other school systems. The reason for this is that expenditures related to the evaluation process are strictly tied to the salaries of the Evaluation Team members. That is, whether it is formulated on time spent on evaluation (by the hour) or for the entire year, the cost is directly related to the salaries of the individuals who comprise the Evaluation Team. Therefore should a system

have more senior staff involved in the evaluation process the cost of evaluation will be higher than that of staff that are less experienced and are on a lower salary step and scale of the compensation plan. Expenditures for the evaluation process can only be controlled through one of two approaches: less experienced personnel comprising the Evaluation Team or fewer evaluations conducted in a given school year. It is apparent that the Harvard Public Schools has taken the necessary and required steps through regular education interventions and the TST process to keep the annual referrals to special education to a minimum, reflecting an approach that is consistent with state and federal mandates.

Table I supports the efforts of the system, through regular education intervention approaches, to provide the support for students. Referrals to special education were below or near the state, CASE, and LABBB Collaborative averages of students enrolled in special education.

Table I (FY07)

	AGES 3-5	AGES 6-21
CASE Districts	9.2%	90.8%
LABBB Districts	8.0%	92.0%
State Data	8.7%	91.3%
HARVARD	8.4%	91.6%

- The percentage of Harvard special education students, ages 3-5 (8.4%) approximate the statewide average (8.7%) and the average of all CASE districts (9.2%) and LABBB districts (8.0%)
- Of the 9 Harvard students who are preschoolers (ages 3-4) only (2) are three years old. (see appendix A)

Table II
Comparison of Students by Disability:
Harvard vs. State (FY07)

Disability	State	Harvard	Variance from State
Autism	4.6%	8.9%	92.8%
Communication	16.6%	18.7%	13.1%
Developmental Delay	9.7%	7.4%	-23.9%
Emotional	8.5%	8.4%	-1.2%
Health	5.7%	9.4%	63.1%
Intellectual	7.2%	0.5%	-93.2%
Multiple Disabilities	3.1%	3.0%	-5.6%
Neurological	3.4%	5.4%	58.9%
Physical	0.9%	1.0%	9.5%
Sensory/Deaf/Blind	0.2%	0.0%	-100.0%
Sensory/Hard of Hearing	0.8%	0.0%	-100.0%
Sensory/Vision Impairment	0.3%	1.0%	189.8%
Specific Learning Disabilities	39.0%	36.5%	-6.6%

- Harvard reported for FY07 having almost twice as many students with Autism than the statewide average and almost 35% more than the average of all the CASE districts. (see appendices B & C)

2) Evaluate Harvard’s criteria and process for deciding what services will be delivered to students as part of their IEP. Findings and comments should indicate whether Harvard’s criteria, processes and expenditures are equal to, greater than, or less than state and federal mandates.

Response:

The Evaluation Team Process, as outlined under state and federal statutes, requires that school systems provide a multidisciplinary team of professionals who conduct assessments that are age-appropriate and designed to address specific educational needs. The assessment results must accurately reflect the child’s aptitude or achievement level or whatever other factors the test purports to measure. The Evaluation Team must review the evaluation data and determine that the student is not making effective progress and requires specialized instruction. The data from the evaluation must demonstrate the student has a defined recognized disability as stated in the statute; the student is not making effective progress as a result of the disability; and the student does require

specially designed instruction. When the Evaluation Team determines that these three criteria are met, then the student is eligible for special education. The Evaluation Team must, in their deliberations, then determine what types, frequency and duration of specially designed instruction needs to be put forth in an IEP. The determination is based on the evaluation data and the three stated criteria for eligibility being met. The decision is not an arbitrary decision, but one based on the findings of the various evaluations, the student's current performance and the indicated needs.

This process determines which services the student will receive. The team, under the direction of the Team Chairperson, must ensure that the IEP is structured in a manner that will ensure development of the skill deficit(s) that have been identified as requiring the specialized instruction. The team recommends services based on the assessment findings, the specific needs of the student, and the members' knowledge of child development, strategies of intervention and support.

It is apparent from a review of student placements, the Coordinated Program Review Report and current support services through special education that the teams are adhering to the eligibility determination process that is defined in state and federal mandates. There is no indication that services being assigned to students are excessive or inappropriate.

The cost of special education services within the system is directly tied to the salaries of the individuals assigned to provide the services. The cost is directly related to the number of personnel required to fulfill the IEP requirements and their individual compensations. Given that the number of students eligible for special education is below the statewide average, there is no current indication that the system's expenses are excessive for the services that are being provided.

FY07 Comparison of Student Placement – CASE Districts

- The percentage of special education students in Harvard during FY08 (14.9%) was lower than the state average (16.7%) and lower than the average of all the CASE districts (15.2%- not including Harvard).
- The percentage of students in FY07 who were fully included in Harvard (78.8%) was significantly higher than both the statewide average (54.6%) and the average of all the CASE districts (63.7%- not including Harvard).
- More than 88% of all special education students in Harvard during FY07 were either fully or partially included.
- For FY07, 10.8% were being educated in private special education day placements other than other LEAs or Collaborative Programs.
- Harvard for FY07 had a higher percentage (10.8%) of special education students in special education private placements schools and/or Collaborative Programs

than the state average (5.3%) or the average of the CASE districts (5.7% -not including Harvard).

- Harvard does not appear to have a sufficient number of students to educate the privately placed students within the Harvard Public Schools. (see appendix D)

3) Identify and comment on the core values related to Harvard’s special education programs and the extent to which they guide and drive Harvard’s decision-making processes, procedures and expenditures.

Response:

The Harvard Public Schools maintains very high standards and expectations for all of its students. This became quite evident through the review of various written documents pertaining to the school system, such as the strategic plan, and the one-on-one interviews with school personnel. The interviewed personnel represented a cross section of positions from the Integrated Preschool through the high school level. There was a consistent theme that was evident in their remarks about the high expectations and the rich and rigorous curriculum. The core values of the system are clear. There is a very dedicated force of personnel providing a rigorous instructional environment for all students. The efforts put forth by the system to meet the needs of all students are evident and commendable, though there are difficulties that are present due to the small size of the school system. There are also a number of benefits due to the small enrollment numbers, and it appears that the administration and the instructional personnel are utilizing these benefits. There is evidence of attention to and care for the overall welfare of the students, their continuous growth and development, purposeful and meaningful learning, and the effort to provide an extensive inclusionary experience for all students with special needs.

These core values transcend through the staff and are part of the belief systems of those who are providing for the needs of students with special needs. The system’s beliefs regarding inclusion and meeting the needs of all students is equally represented in the personnel who comprise the Special Education Department. These individuals maintain a very high degree of student-centered dedication. Their decision making is based on how best to meet the needs of the students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) while attempting to effectively balance the discrete instructional needs that a student may require. The special education personnel are uniquely aware of the limitations of the system from a programmatic perspective and the finite resources that are available to the school system. While some decisions may be constrained by the finite resources, it appears that several other factors affect decisions that are not directly linked to immediately available resources for the individual student. Space limitations are a major factor for further program development which would lead to more in-system programming. This is evident not only for special education, but for regular education as well.

Overall, it can be safely assumed, based on the classroom observations and one-on-one interviews, that the values and culture of special education, with respect to meeting the needs of the students, is met through the tireless efforts and dedication of the special education and regular education personnel at all levels. These professionals are making it work for the students. They are putting out substantial effort on a daily basis to address the ever-expanding needs of the population of students with special needs.

4) Identify and comment on areas where improvements in providing more inclusive environments and programming in-district might be able to accommodate more out-of-district students.

Response

There are three factors that go into the efforts to reduce the exiting of students with special needs from the district and possibly returning students at some point to the system:

- a) Cohorts: Numbers of students with similar needs with a reasonable age span that can be clustered together in groups in a separate instructional setting or inclusive settings.
- b) Space: Without adequate and reasonable space, the system cannot provide instructional settings for groups of students with similar needs to be appropriately programmed. Should a more separate setting be required for a group of students on a limited scheduled basis throughout the school day, space must be available. To create an instructional environment that replicates settings that are similar to out-of-district placements, the system will need to have designated space available that will provide for the multiple needs of the designated population.
- c) Staffing: For any program development to occur for a population of students currently not in the system, or potentially to be placed out of the system, adequate staffing will need to be in place. This staffing will also require the support of related service providers, such as Speech/Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Learning Assistants and other positions, either full or part-time, to adequately support the students' needs.

Obviously all three factors have to be considered when designing in-system program options. Without the appropriate number of students, space and staffing, the realization of having more students remain in the system will not occur. The internal development of programming that enables a system to provide for the needs of a specific group or groups of students will, in the long-term, if not reduce special education expenditures, contain the growth in the expenditures for special education. This fact is the only approach that will directly impact on the special education budget, while creating greater options and choices within the system. New options and choices provide the system with the ability to redesign programs over time as needs change. To have in place the resources that can be reallocated when one need is no longer warranted enables the system to shift resources to another area of need without incurring new start-up costs.

5) Identify and comment on opportunities for efficiency improvements in Harvard's processes and procedures, including the increased use of technology.

Overall there do not appear to be major inefficiencies with respect to processes and procedures within special education. There are several areas that are well spelled out in the Recommendations section that more specifically address this issue. Areas that are addressed include professional development for all staff, Learning Assistants and TSTs, creation of more co-teaching models, expansion of preschool support staff, related services and elementary special education staff, training on the use of technology as an instructional tool, greater coordination and articulation among and between regular and special education, more uniform practices regarding procedural requirements, time lines and other regulatory practices. Potential program development and the use of the Reciprocal Student Exchange Model with surrounding school systems may lead to further efficiencies and cost savings both with tuition and transportation costs.

VII. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the review process that was recently completed of the Special Education Department of the Harvard Public Schools. The Findings listed previously and the Responses to the Scope of the Study 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 that needs to be taken 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.

The stakeholders will need 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. These recommendations are presented in no particular order of priority.

1) The Pre-Referral Team and the Teacher Support Team (TST) processes need to be more uniformly practiced at The Bromfield School.

Explanation:

- Though there are varying degrees of implementation and very good effort regarding the pre-referral process at the elementary level, and somewhat at the middle school level, there needs to be a more deliberate structure for the process to be more effective in grades 10 through 12.
- The TST process, when utilized, is reported as an effective tool. When a referral is made to special education for an evaluation, it is the consensus of interviewed personnel that it is a legitimate referral.
- The members of the TST need to periodically review their roles and responsibilities.
- Building administrators need to participate in the process of being a TST member. Research clearly demonstrates that when building administrators participate in the pre-referral process more effective change occurs in teaching practices.
- TST members need to rotate through team memberships on a scheduled basis so that all building staff eventually participate in the TST process.

- A building-based TST should be allocated limited funds to use at their discretion when developing interventions for students. These funds can be used for activities such as short-term tutoring, counseling, specific staff training, consultation, specific materials or supplies, related service treatment or other services that the TST deems necessary. These funds should be derived from each school building fund and should not be part of the special education budget. The budget amount will need to be piloted for a year or two to determine the appropriate amount. Common practice would suggest \$5,000.00 per level for elementary, middle, and high school.
- Professional development needs to be made available to the TST for the purpose of gaining greater awareness and insight into effective strategies of intervention. Coaching of the team members should also be part of the training experience. This approach allows for their strategies of intervention to be assessed, revised and expanded.
- A manual should be in place that specifically outlines the purpose and function of the TST. Included should be the roles and responsibilities of team members, uniform forms that are consistently being used, and a suggested list of strategies of interventions based on the presenting child's central issue(s).

2) Roles and responsibility descriptions for special education positions need to be fully reviewed and updated.

Explanation:

- There is confusion among staff regarding some of the roles and responsibilities of various special education staff at both schools. Some of the confusion has evolved over time with the changing of position functions and responsibilities.

3) There needs to be a clear understanding of the criteria for placement of a student into an out-of-district placement.

Explanation:

- Though space availability and singleton disabilities are impacting factors, all staff members need to have a clearer understanding of the criteria for an out-of-district placement.
- Staff report differing influences and factors, all legitimate, but not consistent as to the criteria for placement.
- “We do all we can to maintain students in the building,” speaks to the dedicated effort of administrators and instructional staff to maintain students in the system. However, “we do everything” needs to be quantified so that there is a clearer

understanding by all staff of what that actually means with respect to interventions and supports. Case study models could be one method to assist with gaining a greater understanding.

4) The administration needs to develop a plan that will address the impact of a cohort of special need students that they may have in a class or grade.

Explanation:

- There are times when clustering of special education students may occur in a classroom for reasons related to the delivery of services. When this occurs, it can create an imbalance or burden within a classroom. There needs to be a plan to react to this situation that will enable the clustering to be a positive experience for all the students.
- Long-range planning through a standing committee of special education personnel and building principals can address this concern by analyzing trends in the population's needs.
- Re-allocation of resources and disbursement of services at the building level, in anticipation of the need to cluster students in a class, will be a result of the planning to improve efficiency.
- Budget implications are always a factor and with adequate planning this issue also can be dealt with more effectively.

5) The administration needs to respond to the growing trend expressed by all interviewed school-based personnel on the increase in demand for services for students with social/emotional/behavioral needs.

Explanation:

- When the question was asked in every interview, "What are some trend lines that you are observing in the student population?," virtually everyone interviewed indicated the increase in mental health issues.
- This applies not only to students determined eligible for special education, but also for non-eligible students.
- More specific data collection should occur to validate this recommendation.
- The caseloads for the guidance counselors, school psychologists, social workers and others to address the social/emotional/behavioral needs of students are growing.

- Individuals see themselves as mental health workers, but without the time and support which is necessary to be effective.
- Case management, clinical supervision and clinical consultation will need to be factored into the support system. On-site support will need to be planned for and developed over several budget cycles.
- Professional development will need to focus on topics related to social/emotional/behavioral needs to assist staff in gaining a greater understanding and awareness of the profile of the population, how to support their needs, strategies of intervention, and methods of instruction.

6) The administration and staff need to develop a more comprehensive approach to the professional development experience for all school personnel, focusing on numerous regular and special education topics.

Explanation:

- Interviewed staff expressed an interest in having more frequent in-depth training opportunities that focus on specific disabilities, learning styles, needs of the student population and the “how to” with respect to instructional practices and intervening strategies.
- Interest was expressed for training in the areas of eligibility determination. Staff members wanted a greater understanding of the difference between a typical student and a student who is eligible for specialized instruction.
- Curriculum and instructional accommodations, how to instruct students with various disabilities, conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments, writing behavioral plans, the co-teaching model of instruction, learning styles of students, more regular education types of interventions and strategies, and positive behavioral interventions were many of the topics for training that need to be considered.
- A consistently mentioned topic by all staff was greater awareness and understanding regarding students on the spectrum disorder and how to effectively integrate them into regular class instruction.
- Learning Assistants should receive periodic updates on their roles and responsibilities.
- Learning Assistants need to have greater exposure to training opportunities so that they have a fuller knowledge of the various disabilities, curriculum frameworks, strategies of instruction and intervention, managing behavioral issues, providing in-classroom support, and making curriculum accommodations and modifications.

Assistants need to have a greater understanding of how instruction is provided to students with special needs.

- Training needs to be designed by groups of professional and support staff. The training experience needs to be designed based on the audience and their experience, so that it is more meaningful to them. Not all staff should be presented with the same information.
- Training needs to be structured so that topics are dealt with in-depth and are combined with follow-up opportunities to review implemented practices. Coaching should also be an ongoing experience for participating staff.

7) There is a need to develop a stated description of the co-teaching model.

Explanation:

- Given the very high percentage of students on IEPs that are served through the LRE approach, inclusive model of instruction, there needs to be a greater use of the co-teaching model throughout the schools.
- To properly operate the co-teaching model of instruction, there needs to be a clear, concise, and agreed-upon statement that stresses the purpose and intent of the model.
- A co-teaching program description needs to be framed, based on the belief system and culture of the schools, as well as their missions and the goals of the Department of Special Education.
- The description needs to incorporate research-based best practices and reflect the positive components of current practices at the two schools.
- Additionally, the description needs to be developed in collaboration with all current participants of the co-teaching model and be subject to periodic review and update.

8) There is a need to develop an operating manual that addresses all aspects and elements of the co-teaching model.

Explanation:

- Current participating staff strongly articulated that there is a lack of guidelines to address the roles and responsibilities of the two teachers within the model.

- An operating manual needs to provide guidelines with respect to grading, homework assignments, examples of curriculum and instructional accommodation, sample behavioral intervention strategies, types of shared teaching activities that can be conducted, effective use of common planning time, suggested strategies for problem solving, sample test forms, progress reporting forms, suggested systems of communication, etc.
- The manual needs to provide guidelines so that confusion between the co-teachers is minimized, if not eliminated.
- The teachers involved with the co-teaching model, with administrative assistance and oversight, should develop this operating manual.

9) Special education teachers need to be limited in the number of content subjects that they are assigned to co-teach.

Explanation:

- As with a content teacher, special education teachers cannot be expected to co-teach in more than two disciplines. The fact that a teacher would have to prepare for more than two is an unreasonable expectation, given their other responsibilities. This factor needs to be taken into consideration should the development of more co-teaching opportunities take place.
- Special education teachers need to have the opportunity to gain greater knowledge and understanding of the content subjects prior to their assignment.
- Teacher preferences should be taken into account whenever possible. Assigning a staff member to a subject that is beyond their own ability is unreasonable. Though at times this may not be avoidable, there needs to be a carefully discussed plan with regard to how someone is selected to co-teach a specific subject.
- Once the selection is finalized, appropriate support needs to be provided.
- First-year special education and content teachers, with no prior experience in the co-teaching model, should not be assigned to the model.

10) 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 co-teach and effectively share the responsibilities of the classroom. To do this, they need to be able to meet and plan their lessons.

- 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.
- Substituting administrative duties with common planning sessions is one approach that could be put into place to create common planning time.
- Increasing the frequency that the grade level teams meet is another approach that could provide for more opportunities for common planning time.
- Co-teachers' schedules will have to be aligned with each other to ensure that they have the same open periods.
- Common planning time for two teachers who have worked together for a number of years may only need two or three periods a week; whereas first year teams should have the opportunity to meet daily.
- Also, if a special education teacher is to co-teach in two subjects, that information should be factored into the number of planning periods that the teacher has during the week.
- 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.

11) 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.

- 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 their co-teacher knows, what they are comfortable doing, and how they plan to conduct their assignment.
- The presenters (trainers) for most of the training experiences that are offered should be conducted by the teachers who are implementing the co-teaching model. Groups can be developed based on experience with the model. The teachers, in general, need to have the opportunity to gain experiences in areas that are unfamiliar to them. This can be determined through a needs assessment.
- Coaching should be available for the team so that their 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 administration of the school and special education 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 to the middle school 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 others to think of participating in the model in the future and give new staff the opportunity to follow-up with their colleagues.
- There are current staff that can provide many of the training experiences in which this group of teachers needs to participate. In addition to occasional outside presenters, it would be beneficial to engage current staff in the design and implementation of training for the teachers within the model.
- Teachers participating in the co-teaching model could also conduct professional development experiences for the staff at the high school. This approach would encourage other staff to actively consider working within the model.

12) There is a need to create a more balanced enrollment in co-taught and inclusion classes (in classroom support).

Explanation:

- There are a number of co-taught and inclusion classes that are virtually operating as special education self-contained classes. Administration, along with the other essential stakeholders involved in scheduling, must create a system that will lead to balanced classes.

- Student ratios in co-taught and inclusion classes should be between 70/30 and 60/40, regular to special needs students. This is the suggested ratio in current research. However, that ratio certainly can vary slightly, based on the type of needs of the clustered group of students within a section.
- Greater consideration needs to be given to matching students with similar needs when clustering them into co-taught and inclusion sections. The group of students should have similar needs so that the method of instruction presented by the co-teachers and content teachers is relevant to the needs of the students.
- Consideration has to be given to the learning styles of the students and the teaching styles of the co-teachers. Along with clustering students by needs, pairing the teachers to the students is essential for making the model more effective regarding student progress.

13) The administration and staff need to develop a list of criteria that will assist the Evaluation Team in determining which students participate in the co-teaching and inclusion models.

Explanation:

- What are the assumptions that are made when it is decided that a student with special needs will or will not participate in a co-teaching or inclusion class? This is not clear among interviewed staff; therefore, it is essential that administration and those participating in the model come together to determine what those criteria need to be.
- Other staff, such as Guidance Counselors and School Psychologists, should also participate in this discussion. It is important that all the stakeholders discuss what the determining factors for placement are in the co-teaching model.
- Established criteria will also assist in determining which content areas need to have a co-teaching section.

14) There needs to be in place a system of measurement that will assist the administration in determining the effectiveness of the co-teaching and inclusion models.

Explanation:

- Beyond a current grading system for each course and the MCAS, there is not a formal approach to determine the overall effectiveness of these models.

- Student outcomes with respect to their overall performance relative to their peers within these classes are not compared. There are some assumptions that are made, but the data is not defined nor collected.
- There is anecdotal information on how students are doing, but there is not concrete data to assist with student placement, teacher student pairings, class sizes and ratios, which content subjects and levels receive the co-teaching support, and which classes are designated for in-classroom support.
- To plan for upcoming students, it is essential that the planning process is based on a solid foundation of data that affirms what is occurring in the various classes.

15) The middle school staff need to make the decision for placement of incoming sixth graders to the middle school into co-taught and inclusion classes.

Explanation:

- When the criteria have been established for who participates in the classes, then those criteria need to be applied by the school staff when scheduling students.
- The fifth grade elementary school staff should recommend services that a student requires upon entry to the middle school, but the middle school staff should determine the “how,” “who,” “what,” “when” and “where” the services occur.
- This process allows the middle school staff to more effectively schedule students into various settings that match them up with typical students and staff more appropriately.

16) The administration needs to develop an incentive program that will encourage more regular education teachers to come forward to participate in the co-teaching model.

Explanation:

- It is not enough to indicate that someone is going to participate in the model. There needs to be a reason, beyond being told to, or that it is what is best for students.
- All staff have a responsibility to participate in a building-based practice. Staff also have their own belief systems and some of those beliefs may run counter to the model. Regular education teachers should not necessarily be exempt from participating in the model. If exemptions occur, they must require reasons that are well-founded and can be justified.

- The administration needs to develop a system whereby all have the opportunity, the requirement, and the desire to participate in the co-teaching model. Exactly what that system looks like is dependent on the thinking of the administration and staff within the building. Incentive-based approaches can be one such method. Strategies need to be developed to draw staff into the process and give them reasons why they should be participating in the model.

17) The current roles and responsibilities of the School Psychologist should be re-evaluated.

Explanation:

- The various responsibilities need to be further studied to ensure that they can be met in a timely manner. If the primary purpose of the position is to conduct the psychological assessment as part of the special education evaluation, then the system should seriously consider employing a psychomotrist for this function. The overall experience and skill level of the current School Psychologist is not being effectively utilized, when this individual is spending virtually all of their time conducting assessments. Consultation, student observation, group and individual treatment, as well as parent assistance are activities that the School Psychologist should be conducting as primary role functions. This approach would greatly assist other school staff and administration with student-centered issues and free up other support staff for higher priority type cases.
- The administration needs to reconfigure the role and responsibilities of the School Psychologist position. Consideration should be given to hiring, on an hourly basis, a number of individuals who can conduct the majority of the psychological/ability testing required by the special education evaluation process. This in turn would then free up the current School Psychologist to fulfill the role with respect to all responsibilities.

18) The Speech/Language Therapist position for the Integrated Preschool Program needs to be increased to a full-time position.

Explanation:

- The current half-time Speech/Language position does not allow for any in-classroom group or individual student support due to the number of students at the HES that are scheduled to be seen by the therapist. Due to the high case load the Speech/Language therapist has to schedule all students on a pull-out basis.
- This practice runs contrary to an integrated language-based model of instruction. The position needs to be full-time so that those students who require pull-out time for individual or small group support can also receive

in-classroom support and those students who will benefit from in-classroom support assistance can receive that support on a daily basis.

19) The HES presently needs one additional full-time special education teacher.

Explanation:

- Given the case load and the increase in the defined needs of the current special needs population at the HES, the current special education instructional staff is substantially overburdened in continuing to meet the needs of the current population.
- There are more students with significant needs being maintained in the school. With the increase in numbers and needs, the current staff of special education personnel cannot adequately meet the intense needs of a significant number of students. The staff members who serve students on the spectrum that require a substantial amount of instructional support time cannot also fulfill their other requirements in a timely manner.
- Case load data indicates that staff members are currently pushing the limits of reasonableness with respect to instructional hours of service in a given week. An example of this is a special education teacher with a case load of seventeen (17) students who require fifty-six (56) hours of instructional support within a week, plus an additional thirteen (13) students who are assigned to the case load for Liaison Activities, and additionally, time for the supervision of Learning Assistants. This does not account for all the other responsibilities that are required by the IEPs and special education in general.

20) Creation of a comprehensive program of options and choices will be essential to assist students on the spectrum of special needs.

Explanation:

- As the system attempts to reduce the number of students that are placed out-of-district, it will need to create programming from which the students will benefit within the system. Having programming options and choices that allow them to build meaningful social skills, develop their self-worth and independence will be necessary.
- Pre-vocational, community-based experiences, after school programming and school-to-work placements are several approaches that will greatly enhance the overall development of this population.

- Opportunities to participate in more frequent scheduling of electives and specialty courses are approaches that can have a positive impact on this specific group of students.
- Creating strategies that ensure that the students are part of the school community is essential for successful engagement by these students in the community of the school. Program and service development will need to be studied and acted upon in the very near future as these students continue to have access to the general curriculum.

21) A Special Education Procedural Manual needs to be developed for the system.

Explanation:

- The Director of Special Education has indicated that the development of a Special Education Procedural Manual is an agenda item for her to complete. It is essential that this procedural manual outlines in detail the operational aspects of special education in the Harvard Public Schools.
- This procedural manual needs to be comprehensive and detailed. All aspects of how special education operates within the system needs to be clearly presented. Roles, responsibilities, procedures, definitions, various screening processes, the referral and evaluation process, development of the IEPs, transportation guidelines, questions/answers, sample forms, emergency evaluations, extended evaluations, independent evaluations, grading practices, transition planning progress reports, development and various other information regarding the “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” and “how” of special education needs to be contained within one document.
- All staff should be briefed on the manual with special education staff given in-depth training. Policies and practices that the system has in place with respect to various issues related to the operation of special education need to be contained in the manual.
- Other components that should be contained in the manual are assessment guidelines and protocol, Learning Assistants’ guidelines for assisting students in regular content classes and outside of classes, the TST process, a discipline policy for students on IEPs, and MCAS requirements for students with disabilities.

22) Consideration should be given to the establishment of Evaluation Team meeting dates for each school for the entire school year.

Explanation:

- This approach would assist with creating a more uniform structure to the evaluation process at all four levels: preschool, elementary, middle and high school. This approach would allow for more effective coordination of team assessment schedules, coordination for team meetings, fewer conflicts of scheduling, and coordination of itinerant staff schedules. In addition, the only component that needs to be scheduled, once a case is assigned a team meeting date, is the time of the meeting scheduled by the chairperson. It is estimated that three to four team meetings can be conducted on a school meeting date.
- There would also need to be open dates for each building so that the chairpersons could schedule make-ups and other meetings that may need to occur.
- In this system, each level is assigned specific dates from September to June. The actual days of the week can vary each month but each level would be allocated two to three dates per month.

23) Greater utilization of technology and computer-assisted instruction needs to be made available to all students.

Explanation:

- School systems continue to struggle with the increasing pace of technology development and how to effectively integrate technology into daily instruction.
- Resources and training are the two main factors that affect the increased utilization of technology and computer assisted instruction. Can special education students benefit from increased access to technology? The answer is obviously “yes,” but the resources need to be in place to support the effective implementation through purchasing equipment and training the instructional staff.
- School personnel have varying degrees of knowledge when it comes to the various technologies that are available and how to effectively integrate the technology into their instruction. Significant training needs to occur before the benefits can be realized in instructional settings.

VIII. Summary

The Special Education Task Force requested a study be completed of various issues that directly impact special education within the school system. Issues reviewed included the evaluation process of students referred to special education, the decision making process that leads to services for a student on an IEP, core values of the Special Education Department, areas of program improvement and methods of improving efficiency that impact on expenditures, processes, and procedures.

This evaluation was conducted through a three-pronged approach: review of written documentation, on-site visits to numerous instructional settings at all four levels, and one-on-one interviews with twenty individuals within the system.

The data collected from this process has been compiled in this report which is comprised of specific findings, responses to the five major issues requested by the committee, and recommendations. Each recommendation is supported by in-depth explanations.

This report is also designed to act as a catalyst for further discussion and planning by the stakeholders for special and regular education.

Appreciation is extended to the Superintendent of Schools, the Director of Special Education, and the two Coordinators of Special Education for their assistance in completing this evaluation.

APPENDICES

Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Tables from FY07

A. Special Education Enrollment

B & C. Comparison of Students by Disability

D. Comparison of Students to CASE Collaborative

FY07 data was used since FY08 data was not fully available.