

RESC Alliance

CONNECTICUT ALLIANCE OF REGIONAL EDUCATION SERVICE CENTERS



Executive Summary and Recommendations RESC Alliance Special Education Survey

September 9, 2016



Executive Summary and Recommendations

RESA Alliance Special Education Survey

The Regional Education Service Centers (RESAs) have a long history in Connecticut of providing collaborative and regionalized services to public school districts. Each of the six RESAs has a governing board or council that is comprised solely of representatives from member district's boards of education. The councils work closely with the administration and staff of each RESA to identify the necessary services designed to meet the unique needs of each region. As such, the RESAs welcome this opportunity to assist districts in gathering information on the current framework of special education, recognizing that the future decisions and offerings will continue to be guided and approved by our respective councils.

The RESAs recognize the ongoing need to assist districts in providing the most cost-effective and efficient high-quality services for some of our most challenged youth, while also maintaining the requirements and intent of state and federal law with a focus on providing services to students with disabilities within the "least restrictive environment." This fundamental requirement of the legislation will, at times, determine, and perhaps limit, opportunities to provide regionalized services to youth who can and should be served in their local home school districts. One goal has, and will continue to be, to assist our districts with serving students with disabilities within the district as much as possible, maintaining the full and rich opportunities offered by the district, including the critical need for interactions with non-disabled peers whenever possible.

The survey was conducted to address the following legislation. Public Act 15-5 Sec. 284 *An Act Implementing Provisions of the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2017, Concerning General Government, Education, Health and Human Services and Bonds of the State* required:

"Not later than July 1, 2016, each regional educational service center shall conduct, in consultation with the Department of Education, a survey of special education services and programs provided in the region serviced by the regional education service center for the purpose of identifying the need for enhanced or new special education services and programs provided by the regional education service center. Such survey shall include, but need not be limited to (1) an inventory of the special education services and programs provided by local and regional boards of education and private providers to public school students, (2) the number of students receiving special education services or in special education program provided by a local or regional board of education or private provider, (3) the total cost incurred by each school district for all such special education services and programs and (4) the cost incurred by each school district for each such special education service and program. Each regional educational service center shall develop and maintain its own survey procedure and may conduct subsequent surveys as necessary.

Process

In response to the state law, a survey was developed by special education directors from Connecticut's six regional educational service centers: Area Cooperative Educational Services (ACES); Cooperative Educational Services (CES); CREC; EASTCONN; Education Connection/Ed Advance; and LEARN. The regional educational service center special education directors worked in conjunction with representatives from the Connecticut State Department of Education, including Isabelina Rodriguez, Chief Academic Officer, Connecticut State Department of Education, and Glen Petersen, Division Director of Regional School Choice and Sheff.

The special education directors from the RESAs met with special education directors from each region to provide feedback on a draft of the survey, which was ultimately delivered electronically and disseminated via Survey Monkey.

District superintendents from all Connecticut local education agencies received the survey in late February. The survey was closed and responses were due by the first week in April 2016.

The survey consisted of both closed response questions—ones that used rating scales and open-ended items that asked for opinions and reflections. Both quantitative and qualitative (narrative) data were reviewed for trends, and the full report contains tables, graphs, and written summaries of the survey results.

In an effort to eliminate duplication of reporting, the regional educational service centers requested and received the following special education information from the Connecticut State Department of Education:

- Prevalence rates of students with disabilities by category and by district
- 2014-2015 special education expenditures by district, state, and federal share
- Total number of students with disabilities placed in approved private, non-approved, and regional educational service center programs organized by disability
- A list of all approved and non-approved special education programs in Connecticut and the number of students with disabilities they serve.

A copy of the complete report is available on the Connecticut State Department of Education website at www.sde.ct.gov/sde.

Summary of Findings:

The response rate from the survey was considered strong given the length and complexity of the survey. The response can reasonably be used to interpret regional and statewide findings. In some cases, analysis is more appropriately based on district reference group than regional educational service center region. There was a low response from the large urban districts; perhaps because the size of their population of students with disabilities is so large. Urban districts typically run their own programs rather than participating in regional initiatives given their size. Despite the demographic differences in each region, the priorities and needs of the districts statewide were fairly consistent.

Multiple themes appeared throughout the survey regardless of the survey questions.

Keeping Students in the “Home” District

1. Districts currently have many in-district programs that are designed to meet the needs of specific populations of students with disabilities. These programs are often offered to students from other districts and designed to keep students in-district—as close to home as possible.

Addressing Mental Health Needs

2. There is a need for additional resources and services to support the mental health needs of students and their associated challenging behaviors, and there is need for clinical interventions. This need was articulated in many forms, including staffing, expertise, professional development, and specifically designed programs for students in preschool through high school.

Out-of-District Placements are Cost Prohibitive

3. There is a need to offer more collaborative, small, regional programs as options to reduce the number of students placed in out-of-district programs. The cost of out-of-district programs, including transportation to these programs, is a significant cost for local districts.

Litigation Costs are a Driver for Settlement

4. The high cost of litigation often forces districts to make a choice between using resources for litigious purposes and settling with a family prior to a due process hearing through a formal mediation agreement or an arrangement outside of the formal dispute resolution system as a business decision rather than adhering to the beliefs of what is best for the particular child.

Staffing

Special Education Teachers

1. Districts reported that teachers are the largest group of certified full-time equivalent staff who work with special education students. This is followed by guidance counselors, speech language pathologists, and school psychologists. For non-certified staff, districts reported that paraeducators comprise the vast majority of full-time equivalents who work with special education students followed by school nurses.

Variance by District Reference Group

2. Districts in-district reference groups G, H, and I have, on average, more students per special education teacher and per paraeducator as compared to the staff-to-student ratios in the other district reference groups. Districts from district reference group C have the lowest average ratios. The prevalence rate for students with disabilities in-district reference groups G, H, and I is substantially higher than the rate for districts in-district reference groups A, B, and C, and this contributes to larger caseloads for staff who work with students with disabilities in the less affluent reference groups.

Targeted Staffing Needs

3. Audiologists, speech language pathologists, teachers of the hearing impaired, and teachers of the visually impaired were the most frequently reported and contracted certified positions. Responses indicate that districts have more contracts with agencies than regional educational service centers for these positions.

Specialization is Key

4. Board certified behavior analysts are the non-certified positions that districts contract for the most. Sixty-nine districts report at least one contract for a board certified behavior analyst. This is followed by assistive technology specialists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, psychiatrists, and neuropsychologists. There are more contracts with regional educational service centers than with other agencies for assistive technology specialists, but a similar number of contracts with regional educational service centers and other agencies for board certified behavior analysts.

Open Certified Positions are the Norm

5. More than one quarter of the districts (26.7 percent) say they had at least one vacancy for a special education teacher position, 19 percent said they had at least one vacancy for a speech language pathologist, and 18.1 percent indicated at least one vacancy for a school psychologist. These data corresponds with known shortage areas, and for speech language pathologists in particular, correspond with the information regarding contracts for the certified staff positions noted above. Maternity and medical leave and the inability to find appropriately certified staff were the most frequent reasons for special education teacher vacancies. Districts reported that 12 school psychologist positions remained vacant due to the inability to find appropriately certified staff. These data demonstrates that there is a need to develop regional pools of certified and qualified staff and that there is a need to develop a regional solution for filling short-term vacancies due to medical or maternity leave.

Open Non-Certified Positions are the Norm

6. Districts reported 105 unfilled paraeducator positions at the time of the survey. The second highest number of vacancies was reported for school nurses. Districts reported that the high rate of vacancies for paraeducator positions is due, in large part, to the inability to find staff with specialized training. It should be noted that the low rates of reported vacancies for many of the non-certified positions could be due to the relatively higher rates of contracting for these positions and related services.

Contracted Services

Districts Use Contracted Services

1. Districts that reported having contracts for professional development, evaluation, and consultative services used independent consultants most frequently for coaching, program oversight, independent evaluations of students, and independent evaluations of programs. Regional educational service centers were most frequently cited by districts as being the provider of professional development related to special education. Most districts frequently cited with having contracts, have five or less contracts with these organizations for various purposes.

Districts Need Specialized Expertise

2. Specialized expertise was the most frequently cited reason for contracting with outside agencies. This was followed by mediation and settlement agreements, cost effectiveness, and support for low-incidence disabilities. Open-ended comments from survey respondents indicated that the most common reason districts seek an outside contract is for support with behavior and mental health, including board certified behavior analysis services and psychological and neuropsychological evaluations. Furthermore, districts indicated that the need for independent evaluations, as a result of due process orders or mediation and settlement agreements, contributes significantly to the need for outside contracts.

District-Run Programs

Targeted District-Run Programs

1. Many districts reported district-run programs that are specifically for students with autism spectrum disorders, students with significant developmental disabilities, and students with specific learning disabilities/dyslexia at various levels (elementary, middle, and high school). In-district transition programs for older students were also reported by many districts. The least frequently noted program or service type was wrap-around or extended day services.

Districts Provide Services

2. Several districts did say they may not run a specific program for students with the needs indicated, but said that they would adapt services and supports based on any and all student needs, and students would receive the services they require even without specially designated programs.

Districts Meet a Wide Variety of Needs

3. The data does reveal that districts offer a significant number of programs for a range of disabilities and needs across all age spans. In contrast, few districts reported that they provide wrap-around and extended day services. Although these services are only necessary for a small number of students, this may indicate that, as the level of student need increases, districts struggle to find the necessary resources to meet the intensity and duration of services required for this population of students.

Districts Accept Students From Out-of-district

4. Districts most frequently reported accepting students from out-of-district with behavioral and mental health needs, significant developmental disabilities, and students on the autism spectrum. There are more programs offered out-of-district to high school students than students at other grade levels. Transition programs are also frequently open to students from other districts. These indicate that there is a willingness on the part of districts to accept students from other districts, particularly in high school and during transition years, if the home district does not offer specific services or programs. There may be an opportunity to develop more community-based programs for older students with disabilities from different districts.

Out-of-District Placement

Students are Outplaced to Both Private Schools and RESCs

1. Ninety-three districts reported that they outplace students with disabilities to private schools that have been approved by the state to provide special education to students with disabilities. Eighty-five districts reported that they outplace students to regional educational service center programs as well.

Negotiations Often Drive Out-of-District Placements

2. When asked about the factors that drive out-of-district placements, due process order, mediation, and settlement agreements were cited as the primary reasons for outplacements by most districts. State agency placement was noted as the least significant driver for out-of-district placements.

Some Populations of Students are More Likely to be Placed Out-of-District

3. Most districts indicate that students with emotional disturbance and students with autism have comprised the majority of outplaced students in recent years. Students with orthopedic impairment, deaf or blindness, visual impairment, and developmental delay are least likely to be outplaced.

Districts Work to Develop Options for Outplaced Students

4. Districts reported that students who are eligible for special education due to emotional disturbance need mental health supports and psychiatric services and that they are the most difficult to serve in-district. Unsurprisingly, since districts indicated that students with emotional and mental health needs and students with autism comprise the majority of out-of-district placements, efforts to reduce the frequency of placing students out-of-district include developing in-district capacity to service students with significantly challenging behaviors and mental health issues and students with autism.

Program Options Continue to Expand

5. Districts have specific initiatives in place to reduce the number and frequency of out-of-district placements. Many districts described efforts to expand their programming options by either contracting with external consultants or providing additional training to staff to bolster or refine in-district expertise.

Connecticut State Department of Education Provided Data on Students Who are Outplaced

6. The Connecticut State Department of Education provided data on the number of students who attend in-district and out-of-district programs. The total number could not be aggregated since any program with less than six students was reported as such (<6). This was in accordance with Connecticut State Department of Education guidelines regarding the non-disclosure of student information with an “N” size of less than 6. There is a significant number of in-district and out-of-district placements reported in this manner. For a complete review of the data, see Attachment 4 of the full report.

Professional Development

Support Needed for General Education Staff

1. The most frequently indicated priority for professional development was support for general educators who work with students with disabilities. This was followed closely by professional learning on the topic of complex mental health and trauma-related needs. Additional topics included support for managing student behavior, services for students with autism spectrum disorder, and training on dyslexia.

Barrier to Professional Development is Time

2. The most frequently cited barrier to providing professional development to staff in the area of special education was time, or rather lack thereof. Another commonly cited barrier was competing priorities for professional development given multiple state and federal mandates.

Districts Explore Options to Provide Professional Development

3. Districts reported success with providing professional development by using job-embedded models, on-going coaching models, and teacher choice or self-directed learning opportunities.

Funding

Connecticut State Department of Education Provided Data on Special Education Funding

1. Information from the Connecticut State Department of Education about special education financing indicated that the proportion of total school district budgets allocated for special education ranged from 9 percent to 34.6 percent throughout all Connecticut public school districts. The average proportion of the budget spent on special education in 2014-2015 was 21.3 percent. Keeping in mind, in that same year in Connecticut public school districts, the prevalence rate for students with disabilities averaged 12.9 percent. The specific allocations for each district and the prevalence rate for students with disabilities in each district are listed in Attachment 5 of the full report.

Collaborative Efforts

Districts Participate in Many Collaborative Programs

1. Many districts provided examples of successful collaborations with other local education agencies in the area of student transportation. Several districts also reported successful collaborations with other districts to provide interdistrict or regional programming to students with disabilities. Collaborative or regionalized transition programs were mentioned by several districts. References were made to programs facilitated by regional educational service centers, as well as programs organized by a consortium of local education agencies that are independent of the regional educational service centers.

Districts Express a Need for Increased Mental Health Services

2. When asked about specific special education or related service needs that could be addressed by pooling regional resources, comments from districts converged on a few very specific areas of need: support for students with mental health needs and behavioral challenges; pooling resources for evaluations and for the provision of related services; and the regionalization of programs to reduce transportation needs. Approximately a third of the responding districts highlighted a need for more support and regional efforts that address the increasing need for mental health evaluations and services.

Districts Identify Barriers to Collaborative Transportation

3. Districts were asked to indicate what barriers, if any, they have encountered that prevents them from collaborating with other districts when transporting students with disabilities to outplacement programs. The two most significant barriers reported were time and travel distance. Student behavior was also noted as a barrier. Also cited was the varying start and end times of programs and varying school year calendars.

Recommendations

1. Collaborative Regional Program Needs

- a. The state should support regional diagnostic and intervention programs for students with social emotional, mental health, and behavioral challenges. The programs can be sustained through collaborative arrangements between member districts once established. Seed money would allow for program planning, identification of location, and renovation as necessary to prepare the space. Districts can choose to administer the program by themselves, work with the RESCs to set up the program, and then assume responsibility for day-to-day management of the program, or they can work with the RESCs on a long-term, collaborative effort to administer the program on their behalf. The goal of the program would be to provide short-term diagnostic work-up on students and to assist with transitioning students back to their home district if possible with support and training for district staff. A potential service in these programs could include a support staff or paraeducator from the district, attending the program with the student to learn the appropriate strategies that will be used once the student is able to return to the home district.
- b. There should be opportunities for additional regional community-based programs for students ages 18 to 21.
- c. In an effort to reduce potential litigation, the RESCs could develop a cadre of professionals that districts can access to broaden the availability of impartial planning and placement team facilitators should be developed¹.

2. Improving Mental Health Supports in Schools

- a. The state should work with the established Behavioral Health Partnership Oversight Council to establish a subcommittee, including RESC representatives, that focuses on the resources and needs for schools in providing mental health services. This should include support by the Connecticut State Department of Education to develop a long-term behavioral health plan that includes strategies to increase access to mental health services in schools through school-based health centers and a statewide initiative to create trauma-sensitive schools similar to the initiative in the state of Massachusetts².

The following recommendations would require seed money from the state, but once established, they would be maintained on a fee for service basis by local school districts:

- b. Service intervention teams that would be available to enter districts to provide on-site observation and technical assistance for students with challenging behaviors to maintain students in their home district should be developed.
- c. Programs that provide extended day clinical services to students with significant mental health needs should be developed.
- d. Partnerships with universities to create a formal training program to increase the number of board certified behavior analysts and registered behavior technicians should be identified. A method for supporting candidates in the field in order to receive the necessary supervised field experience needs to be identified. Maintain a cadre of board certified behavior analysts that districts can contract for on an as-needed basis should be maintained. Opportunities for supervision and required continuing education units and professional development for district board certified behavior analysts should be provided.
- e. A research-based model of crisis intervention and create a network of trainers to provide ongoing training and certification for district personnel should be identified.
- f. A statewide crisis support team to respond to significant tragedies in local school districts that require outside mental health supports and crisis intervention should be created.

¹ CADRE: The National Center on Dispute Resolution in Special Education (<http://www.directionservice.org/cadre/>)

² Cole, S., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., Ristuccia, J. (2013) *Helping Traumatized Children Learn: Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools*. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

3. Assistance with Staffing and Related Services or Shortage Areas

- a. A cadre of school psychologists, speech pathologists, board certified behavior analysts, and assistive technology specialists who can provide training, technical assistance, direct service, and coverage for short- and long-term leaves for district personnel should be maintained. These personnel could provide evaluation, program consultation, training, and technical assistance to district personnel regarding meeting the needs of students with unique disabilities.
- b. Statewide regional councils, similar to current curriculum and transition councils, for discipline-like groups (speech pathologists, school psychologists, and school social workers), including the state professional organizations for the disciplines and university training program representatives should be established. These councils would serve to provide ongoing networking, mentoring, and professional development, including national speakers. The RESCs would identify a lead RESC or RESCs for each discipline group.
- c. Support to districts for supervision, evaluation, and mentoring of related service personnel should be offered.
- d. The Connecticut State Department of Education should review the role of the comprehensive system of personnel development in meeting the needs of shortage areas for related services personnel.
- e. A task force of district representatives to identify the components of comprehensive, in-district evaluations. These criteria would be used to maintain a list of verified evaluators that districts may use for independent educational evaluations should be established. Vendors on the list must agree to meet the qualifications, evaluation criteria, and process, and they must agree to set rates for the evaluation.
- f. Collaborations with institutions of higher education should be established to prepare and graduate increased numbers of highly-qualified special education teachers should be developed.

4. Professional Development

- a. A needs assessment tool and training program that districts may use to assess the need for training of general education staff to work with students with disabilities and determine a plan for training, including in-district embedded support for general education teachers should be identified.
- b. A needs assessment tool and training program that districts may use to assess the need for training of paraeducator staff to work with students with disabilities and determine a plan for training including in-district embedded support for paraeducators and their supervisors should be identified.
- c. The need for specialized instruction training for special education staff on research-based, national models should be identified for districts to reduce the cost of individual districts arranging for national trainers should be identified.

5. Regionalized Transportation of Students with Disabilities

- a. An electronic online system for districts to share non-identified student information on transportation routes for the purpose of sharing rides to out-of-district programs should be established. This data could be analyzed for the purpose of proposing a regionalized transportation system run by the RESCs or for use by other currently contracted vendors.
- b. A program for their training and contracting of bus monitors, aides, and nurses for local school districts who require such personnel on buses and vans should be developed