

**Program Review**  
**Hanover Public Schools Special Education Department**  
**February 2022**  
**Executive Summary**

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In December 2021, the Hanover Public Schools engaged Dorsey Yearley to review the district's special education programs and services. The basic charge of this review was to gather information about all aspects of special education programming with the purpose of identifying any areas that may require more extensive information gathering and strategic planning in order support improved outcomes for students with disabilities. The review focused on guiding questions identified by the Director of Student Services related to the continuum of services for students, the experience of parents and guardians in the IEP process, the organizational structure of the department, and other concerns identified by the information gathering process. The review process included gathering qualitative information by visiting each school and conducting 17 interviews and focus groups with over 50 school staff members. Parent feedback was gathered through an interview with the SEPAC leadership and an evening parent focus group. In addition, an analysis of publicly available data, district specific quantitative data and a review of documents provided by the district was completed.

Comparative data with similar communities supported the frequent feedback from stakeholders that overall Hanover provides effective services for students with disabilities. Areas that warrant further discussion, which have been identified as issues supported by both quantitative and qualitative data, include the special education eligibility process, substantially separate programming, the roles of paraprofessionals, home-school relationships, and the administrative structure of the department. Each of these areas is discussed below.

Given the data and feedback from a variety of stakeholders, it seems appropriate at this time to engage in a district-wide review of the eligibility process. Parent feedback about the timing and thoroughness of the eligibility process related to certain disabilities, as well as a change in the assignment staff related to the evaluation process, creates an opportunity to review the entire process and make clear the district expectations for eligibility. In addition, the district has engaged an outside consultant from the Landmark School to support the development of programs for students who have been identified as having language-based learning needs. Using the expertise of this consultant to help clarify the early literacy needs of at-risk readers and sharing information about these efforts could help increase the confidence of parents who have concerns about the early literacy supports and the special education identification process related to dyslexia. Creating a process that is used consistently across the grades, as well as providing ongoing training in both the formal assessments and the informal information gathering process, will help create consistent practice and increase parent confidence.

Hanover is a small district that is doing a good job managing the many challenges related to providing supports for students with intensive needs; however, several stakeholder groups raised questions about the alignment of the substantially separate programs, commenting that because the nature of these programs changes from school to school, parents are sometimes confused or concerned about the appropriate programs at the next level. Stakeholders within the district have asked for the opportunity to meet to share information about these programs so that they can describe the receiving program at the next level with confidence. The district leadership is aware of these needs and is very supportive of continuing to focus on both the alignment and the improvement of services for these learners, including continuing their current work with consultants from the Landmark School and from the New England Center for Children in support of the existing programs for students with dyslexia and autism spectrum disorder. In addition, several stakeholders commented on the unique nature of the role of the lead teachers in these programs in providing both instructional support and program management support and suggested that these roles be better defined and supported.

Currently, Hanover employs instructional support staff in two roles: paraprofessional and ABA tutor. Feedback from stakeholders within the district identified the need to clarify both the specific job descriptions for these roles and the decision-making process for determining whether to use an ABA tutor or a paraprofessional in a specific position. In addition, several stakeholders raised a concern that the professional learning provided to the instructional support staff varied by role and building, and that some staff could benefit from more professional support.

Based on both survey data and input from stakeholders, there is a belief among some parents that they must engage outside experts to secure the services that they feel are appropriate for their children. Recent survey data showed that the overall level of confidence in the IEP process remains high, and although there was a slight decline in the confidence of the success of the IEP in the most recent survey, 86% of parents were still confident that their child's IEP would be successful. Clearly maintaining the trust and confidence of all parents is critical to an effective IEP process, but it is also important to be clear about the specific issues that selected parents are raising, both to be able to address them effectively and not to conflate those issues with the concerns of all parents.

The district divides the responsibility for the administration of special education among the Director of Student Services, three building level administrators and one coordinator. Converting the coordinator position at the Cedar School to an administrative position would support an administrative structure that could better address both the needs related to the eligibility process and the alignment of programming across the district. In addition, it is essential that the responsibility for supporting the out-of-district students be removed from the district-wide Director of Student Services so that he can have increased time to support both educators and parents as they strive for continued improvement.

### **Commendations and Recommendations**

The special education programs in Hanover are staffed by experienced and skillful professionals and support staff, who are committed to the children that they serve. The district is to be commended for creating a collegial and collaborative culture where teachers feel supported and are proud to be members of the faculty. There are many strong initiatives currently underway in the district that are addressing several of the identified needs in this review. In addition, the district leadership is both open to feedback and to change, and parents have expressed their optimism in the district's commitment to improvement. All parties are to be commended for their openness and willingness to work together to support the progress of their students.

### **Recommendations**

1. Revise the administrative structure of the special education department by converting the coordinator position at the Cedar School to an administrative position and by eliminating the responsibility for managing the out-of-district caseload for Director of Student Services.
2. Implement a review of the eligibility process, including ongoing support and training for special education staff related to the formal assessment process and the provision of guidelines for determining eligibility that can be implemented with consistency across grade levels.
3. Focus on improving the transition process from school to school by providing greater administrative oversight of the process, opportunity for job-alike meetings across grade levels and attention to consistent procedures, which may require additional staff.
4. Continue to review and refine the substantially separate programming in the district to better align the programs across schools and to meet the needs of students as they progress through the grades. Identify the continuum of supports for students within each disability category who don't require substantially separate programming. Provide additional support to the lead teachers in these programs to meet the administrative needs related to managing the support staff in these programs.

5. Review the current job descriptions related to instructional support staff and revise them to include the various roles that tutors are currently providing. Use these new descriptions to create consistent deployment of support staff based upon job responsibilities.
6. Continue to seek feedback and to collaborate with parents around ongoing procedural and programmatic improvement, including information gathering and sharing sessions with parents, school staff and consultants regarding planned program improvements. Actively engaging with parents to identify and address areas of concern will provide the foundation for improving the trust and confidence of those parents who have expressed their concerns about the IEP process.

### **Summary**

Based upon the information gathered in this review, the following answers to the guiding questions are provided.

*1) What are the identified concerns, if any, related to special education programs and services from a variety of stakeholders, including parents, administrators, and faculty?*

Based upon the feedback of all stakeholders, concerns were raised about the consistency and alignment of programming and procedures among schools, the special education identification process, the supports for students with more intensive needs, and the role of instructional support staff.

*2) Has the context and need for the substantially separate programming in the district changed since the programs were developed, and if so, what adjustments should be explored?*

The substantially separate programs in the district are for the most part well regarded, but the needs of students within the district continue to change. The district is working with outside consultants with expertise in the areas of language-based learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder to continue to develop and align these programs with student needs. These programs would benefit from clear entrance and exit criteria as well as clear planning for students with these disabilities who do not require substantially separate programming.

*3) Does the current administrative structure support compliant, effective, and collaborative special education programming?*

The current administrative structure supports compliant and effective programming; however, the structure could be improved significantly by relieving the Director of Student Services of some administrative duties and by creating a full-time administrator at the Cedar School, with the goal of creating an administrative team that can focus on the issues related to both consistent practice and parent engagement.

*4) What is the experience of families as they enter and engage in the IEP process and collaborate with school staff in the planning and delivery of special education services for their children, and what, if anything, would support a stronger collaborative partnership?*

Based upon survey data, most parents are both confident and satisfied with their experience with the special education department. However, over time there has been a slight decline in confidence and a growing feeling among some parents that they need the support of outside resources both in the identification process and to provide supplemental services. The current district leadership is committed to engaging with parents to better understand these issues and to work collaboratively to maintain their confidence.

The district is to be commended for engaging in this process. It is clear that the openness to feedback and the commitment to improvement will benefit the students of the Hanover Public Schools.