



Date Issued: 11/05/2013

SUMMARY MEMORANDUM

Quality Review of Special Education Service Delivery in District of Columbia Public Schools and Charter Schools: American Institutes for Research Final Study Report

Background

In January 2012, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education's Division of Specialized Education partnered with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) to launch a project designed to assist the District in assessing special education program quality in the District of Columbia and develop tools for continuous improvement.

As a component of the work, AIR was asked to conduct a qualitative research study in a sample of schools the District of Columbia. This study was designed to help inform the District of Columbia's special education capacity-building strategy by assisting decision-makers with identifying promising practices and barriers to providing a continuum of high quality education services for students with disabilities.

AIR was tasked with developing quality program indicators to review programs. Once these indicators were developed, they also served as the basis for a Special Education Quality Review (SEQR) Tool, a web-based self-assessment tool to be used by local education agencies (LEAs) and schools serving District of Columbia students.

Study Overview: Key Findings and Recommendations

Study indicators were based upon three sources of data: research and policy literature, current quality indicators established in the field, and stakeholder input gleaned from a series of community forums held with educators, community advocates, and families.

The final assessment domains include: IEP development, access, instructional supports, behavior supports, staff collaboration and professional development, data-driven decision making, family engagement, and leadership.

As part of its analysis, AIR reviewed data gathered in the 2011-2012 school year from surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and document review from a sample of 20 public schools and one nonpublic school.

As noted in the executive summary of the report issued on March 12, 2013, "[the final report] describes the findings for each domain, summarizing the evidence ratings, key practices, and challenges for selected indicators. The report also reviews findings from the school-level interviews regarding system-level challenges, and concludes with a series of recommendations intended to assist OSSE in supporting the implementation of quality special education programs across the District."

The report includes findings about both the successes and challenges experienced by representative schools. Key promising practices identified by the report include the following:

- The schools studied were found to use standards-aligned instruction, differentiation of instructional strategies, including scaffolding, and evidence of targeted behavioral supports to meet the needs of students with disabilities.
- The majority of schools demonstrated evidence that general and special educators meet regularly and that cross-disciplinary collaboration has been formally established and supported.
- In all but one site visit school, evidence indicates that data is collected and used to modify instruction and inform intervention planning; and nearly all schools practice concerted efforts to engage families in decision-making and progress monitoring.
- Last, nearly all schools have leadership with subject matter expertise related to special education, and these school leaders make professional development a priority.

Some practice challenges highlighted by the study include the following:

- While the majority of schools demonstrate evidence that IEPs were supported by their evaluations, the schools needed further support creating measurable IEP goals.
- Overall, although schools are collecting and using data to differentiate instruction, more support is needed to assist staff with differentiating work assignments and student projects to allow students with disabilities to demonstrate mastery of concepts.
- Schools identified a need for further professional development in evidence-based instructional and behavior support, including co-teaching, and cited a need for more professional planning time to ensure effective collaboration.
- Schools also identified a need for more staffing support and, specifically, for enhanced curriculum support related to implementation of the Common Core State Standards.
- A number of school professionals identified a desire to shift the focus from an emphasis on compliance to an emphasis on student outcomes.

As noted above, in addition to school-level findings, AIR developed a set of recommendations for OSSE and other education partners to assist in understanding and removing barriers to create pathways for student success, anchored in enhanced collaboration among OSSE, the District of Columbia Public Schools, and the Public Charter School Board. OSSE is pleased to note that many of the AIR report recommendations are already in practice, including:

- The provision of comprehensive foundational professional development on IEP development, Common Core State Standards implementation, co-teaching, and data driven intervention planning;
- The development of State-level Communities of Practice (CoPs), including the planned launch in 2013-2014 of a CoP with a focus on instructional best practices anchored in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and common core implementation for students with disabilities;
- Continued training and technical assistance with implementing school-wide positive behavior support, and trauma-informed functional behavior assessment and crisis intervention at the classroom and student levels;

- Data-driven tiered technical assistance for LEAs which includes foundational training, on-site coaching, root cause analysis, and improvement planning;
- The expansion of OSSE's special education parent and community team in FY 14, and development of an expanded parent advisory group to inform the Division of Specialized Education's work;
- The creation of the Special Education Quality Review (SEQR) tool, which is currently available to LEAs and nonpublic schools and provides the framework for shifting toward quality outcomes; and
- Ongoing monthly collaboration between OSSE, PCSB, and DCPS to ensure coordinated planning and support for LEAs.

At the conclusion of the study, each study participant received a tailored report on findings. In addition, OSSE has distributed the report to partner agencies and continues to utilize the report's findings to inform refinements of the District's special education reform strategy.

OSSE thanks the participating LEAs and their leaders for responding to our request to engage in critical conversation with schools and other stakeholders regarding quality special education programming. We look forward to continuing sustained improvements in the delivery of high quality special education services that benefit all of the District's children and their families.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Jesus Aguirre', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jesus Aguirre
Acting Superintendent of Education



Quality Review of Special Education Service Delivery in District of Columbia Public Schools and Charter Schools:

Final Study Report

Office of the State Superintendent of Education
Government of the District of Columbia

Contract Number DCGD-2012-C-0053

March 12, 2013

Submitted by:
American Institutes for Research
Jenifer Harr-Robins
Stephanie Jackson
Stacia Rush
Ray Myrtle
Melissa Kutner
Amy Elledge

Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Executive Summary..... | iii |
| Chapter 1: Study Overview and Methods..... | 1 |
| Quality Indicators..... | 1 |
| School Sample..... | 13 |
| School Recruitment and Participation | 14 |
| Data Collection Methods | 15 |
| Analytic Methods | 18 |
| Caveats..... | 21 |
| Report Overview | 22 |
| Chapter 2: IEP Development..... | 23 |
| Are evaluation reports comprehensive and used to guide the development of an IEP? | 23 |
| Do IEPs include measurable goals that are aligned to grade-level standards? | 28 |
| Chapter 3: Access | 30 |
| Do SWDs receive instruction in a curriculum aligned to their grade-level standards? | 30 |
| Are SWDs placed across a range of general education classrooms at their grade level? | 32 |
| Chapter 4: Instructional Supports..... | 34 |
| Do teachers differentiate instruction for SWDs?..... | 34 |
| Do teachers differentiate products for SWDs to demonstrate their proficiency? | 37 |
| Do SWDs and teachers use technology in the classroom? | 38 |
| Chapter 5: Behavior Supports..... | 41 |
| Are there school-wide expectations with clearly defined consequences? | 41 |
| Do teachers effectively manage behavior in the classroom? | 44 |
| Chapter 6: Staff Collaboration and Professional Development..... | 47 |
| Do general and special educators meet frequently?..... | 47 |
| Are there supports in place for new teachers or educators new to teaching SWDs?..... | 50 |
| Is information about students and successful practices shared during transitions? | 51 |
| Are staff needs related to SWDs assessed and reflected in the professional development plan? | 53 |
| Do general education and special education teachers receive ongoing training on issues related to students with disabilities?..... | 55 |
| Chapter 7: Data-Driven Decision Making..... | 59 |
| Do teachers frequently collect data on the progress of SWDs? | 59 |
| Do teachers use data to design and modify instruction and to identify students for interventions? | 62 |
| Chapter 8: Family Engagement..... | 65 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Do schools frequently communicate with families of SWDs and provide accessible materials and events? | 65 |
| Do schools involve parents throughout the school year and at IEP meetings to address student needs? | 68 |
| Do schools provide educational information to parents of SWDs on how to support their child's learning? | 69 |
| Challenges | 71 |
| Chapter 9: School Leadership | 74 |
| Are principals knowledgeable about special education issues? | 74 |
| Do principals meet regularly with general education and special education teachers? | 77 |
| Do principals hold all teachers accountable for educating SWDs? | 78 |
| Chapter 10: Systems Support | 82 |
| Supports | 82 |
| Special Education Programs | 88 |
| Decision Making Processes | 92 |
| Chapter 11: Recommendations | 95 |
| Appendix A: Coding Results for the IEP Development Indicators | 98 |
| Appendix B: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Access Indicator | 102 |
| Appendix C: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Instructional Supports Indicator | 103 |
| Appendix D: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Behavior Supports Indicator | 105 |
| Appendix E: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Staff Collaboration Indicator | 107 |
| Appendix F: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Professional Development Indicator | 108 |
| Appendix G: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Data-Driven Decision Making Indicator | 109 |
| Appendix H: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Family Engagement Indicator | 110 |
| Appendix I: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by School Leadership Indicator | 112 |

Executive Summary

Under contract with the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE), the American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted an in-depth quality review of education programs for students with disabilities (SWDs) across District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and charter schools. The purpose of this review was to assess the quality of school-level special education programs, understand barriers to providing a continuum of high quality education services for SWDs, and gather information on best practices to help inform the District of Columbia's special education capacity-building strategy.

To carry out this quality review, the AIR team developed a set of quality indicators across eight domains to assess special education programs. The domains include IEP development, access, instructional supports, behavior supports, staff collaboration and professional development, data-driven decision making, family engagement, and leadership. In conducting the review, AIR gathered and analyzed information from surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and document review from a sample of 20 public schools and 1 non-public school.

The final report for this review describes the findings for each domain, summarizing the evidence ratings, key practices, and challenges for selected indicators. The report also reviews findings from the school-level interviews regarding system-level challenges, and concludes with a series of recommendations intended to assist OSSE in supporting the implementation of quality special education programs across the District.

This executive summary provides a brief summary of the findings for the selected indicators for each domain, including key practices and challenges associated with implementation. We then discuss findings related to the overall system and conclude with our recommendations.

IEP Development: The development of comprehensive IEPs, including the composition of the IEP team and specification of data-based and age-appropriate goals, services, accommodations, and transition plans

Are evaluation reports comprehensive and used to guide the development of an IEP? Overall, 91 percent of the sampled students had evaluation reports in the IEP system. However, there were inconsistencies in the comprehensiveness of the evaluation reports. Some lacked appropriate assessment data, the student's history, information about the student's disability, and formal assessments for academic performance. Regarding the alignment between the evaluation report and the IEP, all of the sampled IEPs in 17 schools listed all of the areas identified as a concern in the evaluation report, while all of the IEPs in 15 schools contained goals that reflected the information found in the summary of concerns in the evaluation report.

Are IEPs comprehensive, complete, and written in an understandable manner? The comprehensiveness of an IEP is determined, in part, by the quality and comprehensiveness of the

evaluation. Some IEPs were missing an evaluation altogether in the IEP system, and in others the evaluation data did not appear sufficient or appropriate.

Do IEPs include measurable goals that are aligned to grade-level standards? Only 10 schools had IEPs that specified measurable targets. All of the school's sampled IEPs with English language arts (ELA) or mathematics goals referenced academic standards in only 7 schools, and 10 schools did not have *any* IEPs in which all of the goals for ELA or mathematics referenced a standard, with inconsistent results in the remaining schools.

Schools reported that having more skilled clinicians to conduct the comprehensive evaluations resulted in improved quality. Respondents also described making the IEPs more accessible by sharing information with families in an understandable manner and having interpreters available at IEP meetings where needed. At the same time, schools identified rushed eligibility determination as a challenge that limited the appropriateness and thoroughness of evaluations. Respondents noted the lack of accountability for actual implementation of the IEPs as another challenge; they believed that IEPs were written with a focus on compliance rather than quality.

Access: Access to an appropriate curriculum, equal academic and social opportunities, and interactions with peers

Do SWDs receive instruction in a curriculum aligned to their grade-level standards? All 21 schools showed evidence across the data sources that SWDs received instruction in a standards-based curriculum.

Are SWDs placed across a range of general education classrooms at their grade level? Fourteen of 17 schools showed evidence of distributing SWDs across general education classrooms.

To facilitate access, teachers in more than half of the study schools reported using instructional strategies and modifications to enable SWDs to access standards-based curriculum. In addition, respondents in eight schools described aligning IEP goals to the standards as a way to ensure access. Staff from seven schools reported that SWDs were assigned to teachers purposefully, so that they were distributed evenly across classrooms in grade levels or subject areas.

However, schools reported insufficient curriculum support and materials geared toward teaching grade-level standards to SWDs with significant skill gaps, and reported limited curriculum support for the implementation of Common Core State Standards, including a lack of textbooks aligned to these standards. With regard to student placements, in a few schools, students were assigned to teachers based on whether the teacher had a background in special education, which resulted in grouping most of the SWDs in a few classes. Schools also reported challenges in providing a full range of placement options, from inclusive general education classrooms to self-contained special education classrooms.

Instruction: Instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction, the use of modifications and accommodations, and technology, to support the education of students with disabilities

Do teachers differentiate instruction for SWDs? Eighteen schools showed evidence of at least one type of instructional strategy, format, or student grouping to meet the academic needs of SWDs.

Do teachers differentiate products for SWDs to demonstrate their proficiency? Fewer than half of the schools had evidence across the data sources that teachers differentiated student work, assignments, and projects for SWDs to allow the student to demonstrate mastery of a concept.

Do SWDs and teachers use technology in the classroom? Although 14 schools showed evidence of teachers' use of technology in the classroom across the data sources, fewer than half had evidence that SWDs had access to and used instructional technology.

To differentiate instruction, schools reported using scaffolding strategies to build student independence as a key practice. Other scaffolding strategies included the use of sentence starters, writing templates with explicit instructions, graphic organizers, visual aids, and pictures. In addition, schools used collaborative learning activities and peer-mediated instruction to differentiate instruction for SWDs.

To further support learning, teachers differentiated student work products in various ways. Eleven schools provided examples of how work products were adapted to a student's academic level, such as giving the option to create a poster after reading, providing oral rather than written responses, and using tiered assignments with differing difficulty levels.

Despite these practices, scaffolding practices were inconsistently observed in study schools. Only two schools provided examples of a range (i.e., five or more) of scaffolding strategies, while respondents in eight schools described just one or two specific strategies. Furthermore, there appeared to be a lack of understanding and acceptance by general educators in differentiating products for SWDs. Another challenge was the limited availability of technological resources. Staff reported a need for more technology, including a working computer lab, computers in classrooms, assistive technology, Promethean/SMART Boards, and laptops. Staff expressed concern about what they perceived to be an inequitable distribution of resources for technology across and within schools, as well as bureaucratic challenges in getting appropriate assistive technologies for SWDs.

Behavior Supports: Consistent school-wide, classroom-level, and student-specific behavior strategies that support a positive and conducive learning environment for students with disabilities

Are there school-wide expectations with clearly defined consequences? Across the 21 schools visited, 15 showed evidence of targeted behavior expectations that are consistently reinforced and clearly communicated to staff, families, and students. On a related indicator, 15 schools demonstrated evidence of a clearly defined system of positive and negative consequences for student behavior.

Do teachers effectively manage behavior in the classroom? The study found that in more than half of

the schools, teachers were using classroom behavioral strategies, even in schools where a school-wide plan appeared to be lacking.

Schools supported school-wide behavioral approaches by providing student incentives for good behavior, establishing an incentive system with clear goals that are frequently reinforced, and clearly conveying behavioral expectations to parents, students, and staff. More than half of the study schools were using incentive systems and rewarding students with points, tokens, or “bucks” for good behavior.

However, a major challenge with school-wide and classroom behavior management was the inconsistency in practices within and across schools. When school-wide approaches were not enforced consistently, schools appeared to be noisy and chaotic, instructional time was lost during transitions, and students were not engaged in tasks. Although teachers were observed using effective classroom strategies in their classrooms, these varied considerably in their approach and expectations. In addition, a number of schools noted a lack of system-wide supports and trained staff to address behavior concerns.

Staff Collaboration and Professional Development: Staff practices and opportunities that promote the sharing of cross-disciplinary knowledge to support the education of students with disabilities

Do general and special educators meet frequently? The majority of schools visited showed evidence across data sources that cross-disciplinary collaboration was formally established and supported, and many demonstrated evidence that general education and special education teachers met frequently to discuss student needs.

Are there supports in place for new teachers and for educators new to teaching SWDs? Twelve schools showed evidence across the data sources of supports for teachers new to educating SWDs. There was, however, no mention during the site visits of formal mentoring or supports in place that specifically addressed the needs of new teachers or teachers new to teaching SWDs.

Is information about students and successful practices shared during transitions? While 14 schools exhibited evidence of strategies for sharing information during grade-to-grade transitions, no school reported a process for sharing information on successful strategies for SWDs to facilitate the transition of students from school to school.

Strategies to support collaboration included extended time, staff assignments, and use of space. Schools created extended blocks of collaborative time during periods in which the students were regularly off-site (e.g., shortened school day twice each week, off-site arts opportunities every other week). Other examples included paying staff to work an extended day, assigning special education teachers to one grade level to improve communication and common planning, and building partnerships with other schools to benefit from their expertise in special education practices. Collaborative and transparent lesson plans were used to foster collaboration between general and special education teachers in a number of schools.

To facilitate the transfer of information during grade-to-grade transitions within schools, teachers shared written narratives of each SWD with the student's special education case manager, as well as with any general education teachers that the student would have in the next grade.

However, staff collaboration was often informal and unstructured. Schools found it difficult to coordinate schedules across general education and special education teachers, because special education teachers support multiple grades or have other assigned duties that prevent them from establishing common planning time. In addition, no formal supports were available for special education teachers, new teachers, or teachers new to teaching SWDs. Coaching was generally provided by instructional coaches without special education expertise. Lacking a formal system to share information about SWDs, respondents from seven schools in particular identified problems with the lack of transition planning or alignment across schools and school systems.

Are staff needs related to SWDs assessed and reflected in the professional development plan? The majority of schools in our sample showed limited or no evidence of assessing staff needs as they explicitly relate to instructing SWDs and creating a professional development plan that reflects those needs. Only 7 of the 17 schools that provided school documents submitted a professional development plan or offerings. Nine schools reported simply using informal observation data and staff conversations to determine professional development needs.

Do general education and special education teachers receive ongoing training on issues related to students with disabilities? Half of the schools in our sample showed limited or no evidence that teachers received ongoing formal professional development on topics regarding SWDs.

Where professional development was strategically planned, schools used teacher surveys to guide the planning. Two schools reported using formal or informal observation data to assess professional development needs, in addition to teacher surveys. To meaningfully involve both general education and special education teachers in staff development, two schools rotated staff through professional development stations so that all topics were covered with all grade-level teams and assigned individual special education teachers to grade-level teams to work on strategies and instructional methods.

At the same time, however, a number of schools did not appear to formally plan for professional development related to the instruction of SWDs. Teacher respondents were unaware of attempts to identify staff needs related to teaching SWDs, or described efforts as ineffective or irregular. Staff expressed concerns about inconsistency and ineffectiveness of needs assessments and the lack of a survey format for assessing staff professional development needs. Teachers reported that they had received little or no professional development, or that if it was available, it was insufficient and did not provide ongoing support for practicing new skills. They expressed a need for focused professional development that would enhance their skills in teaching SWDs and co-teaching, in particular.

Data-Driven Decision Making: Practices that contribute to the frequent collection of student achievement and behavior data, the accessibility of data, and the use of data to guide instructional and programmatic decisions regarding students with disabilities

Do teachers frequently collect data on the progress of SWDs? In all but one site visit school, evidence indicated that teachers collected data at regular and frequent intervals. However, these activities pertained to collecting data on all students and did not have an explicit focus on SWDs.

Do teachers use data to design and modify instruction and to identify students for interventions? Using data to design and modify instruction and to identify students who need additional support was evident in nearly all of the 21 site visit schools.

Schools implemented collaborative data meetings to facilitate the use of data. Interview respondents in more than half the schools reported collaborating about data, most often through informal or formal data meetings, such as “kid talks” and “data talks.” Some schools set one day aside each week for teachers to look at the performance of groups of students, including SWDs, by reviewing student work, progress, grades, and discipline data, and some schools have baseline meetings at the beginning of the school year to review goals in each student’s IEP or 504 plan. A few schools described collecting data on SWDs, focusing on IEP goals, and designating staff to support and lead data activities. Teachers at these schools submitted weekly progress reports on SWDs. To track IEP goals, schools collected IEP data on a regular basis, and teachers reviewed students’ progress on IEP goals regularly and used an IEP tracker.

Measuring progress on IEP goals posed challenges for the schools. Since some special education teachers did not provide the instruction received by all of the SWDs on their caseload, it was difficult for them to monitor progress on IEP goals. Other teachers mentioned that IEP goals were not a priority. The responsibility of tracking SWD progress primarily rested with the special education teacher and was not consistently shared between special education and general education teachers. The fact that IEP goals were not often integrated into data systems or data trackers also posed a challenge for schools. Other challenges involved the lack of follow-through, guidance, and supports for using data consistently and effectively, and the limited availability of baseline data, which made it difficult to design instruction.

Family Engagement: School practices to proactively include parents and students as partners by establishing a clear policy on parental involvement, providing comprehensive and accessible communication, and offering family education and supports

Do schools frequently communicate with families of SWDs and provide accessible materials and events? All or nearly all schools with sufficient information showed evidence that staff frequently communicated with parents (16 of 18 schools), provided accessible materials (17 of 19 schools), and scheduled school events at various times to facilitate participation (all 21 schools).

Do schools involve parents throughout the school year and at IEP meetings to address student needs? Nearly all schools with sufficient information (18 of 19 schools) showed evidence that the school supported family involvement in IEP meetings and at other times to support student learning. Staff from 15 schools described using different approaches to get families involved in IEP meetings, including

multiple attempts to contact families to attend IEP meetings, considering family input during the meetings, or presenting student data to family members in an accessible manner.

Do schools provide educational information to parents of SWDs on how to support their child's learning? While the majority of the site visit schools ($n = 17$) showed evidence that they provided information to families on educational practices to support their child's learning and behavior needs, four schools had limited evidence.

To engage families, schools described hosting social events to facilitate family engagement, displaying photos or information that reflected the cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity of the school community, and making home visits. Some schools used technology such as Google Docs and a parent portal as ways for families to communicate with school staff. All study schools reported scheduling school events and meetings at times that were convenient for families to attend. More than half of the schools reported using translation services for families that needed them, and a few schools had printed information available in languages other than English.

To encourage active family involvement in IEP meetings, some schools used multiple modes to contact families, and provided families with options for the timing of the meeting. Staff provided time for questions during the IEP meeting, explained technical jargon in parent-friendly language, and encouraged parents to be active partners in creating goals for their children.

In educating parents of SWDs, schools conducted workshops, provided families with information on strategies to support children at home, and offered school-based resources. Workshops addressed both general topics such as homework support and basic academic skills, and topics more specific to SWDs such as how to address social and behavioral needs of children at home and differentiated instruction.

Respondents reported challenges in engaging families, including the need for additional funding, personnel resources, and training for school staff. For example, schools had limited staff to attend IEP meetings, resulting in shorter meetings, which hampered in-depth discussions with families. Another issue was persistent low parent turnout and parent follow-through, which some attributed to family distrust of DCPS in general, and special education in particular.

School Leadership: Ways in which school leaders facilitate positive student and staff outcomes, support a shared responsibility, and foster a culture of high expectations for students with disabilities

Are principals knowledgeable about special education issues? In 15 of the 21 schools visited, there was evidence that school leadership was experienced or knowledgeable about issues related to special education.

Do principals meet regularly with general education and special education teachers? Although there was evidence in a majority of the schools visited ($n = 17$), four schools showed limited evidence that the school administration met regularly with grade-level teams.

Do principals hold all teachers accountable for educating SWDs? Although the school leadership met regularly with staff in several schools (as described above), explicit accountability for SWDs did not appear as prevalent.

Schools that engaged in formalized collaborative planning had principals who facilitated such efforts. Principals in these schools held grade-level student support meetings with all relevant staff, established meeting cycles to ensure intensive and continuous follow-up on staff and student needs, and created common planning time for all staff, including special education teachers. Principals reported using formal and informal classroom observations, teacher evaluations, reviews of lesson plans, and reviews of student data to hold teachers accountable. Some also enhanced accountability by requiring teachers to submit lesson plans that incorporated a specific focus on SWD needs.

Inconsistent meetings of administration and teachers were an issue for some schools, which had limited or no evidence of school leaders meeting regularly with teaching staff. Interviews suggested that the practice was inconsistent or nonexistent in six schools. Teachers identified poor and inconsistent follow-through on supervisory practices as a challenge in some schools, and reported frustration with erratic or untimely observations and feedback. In addition, a number of respondents pointed to lax accountability for progress of SWDs. Another challenge included high turnover in school leadership, which created disruption in practice and inconsistency in the school's operation. Finally, the study identified limited support or lack of support from school leadership for obtaining appropriate materials and supports for teaching students with disabilities in one-third of the study schools.

Systems Support

In addition to reviewing quality indicators at the school level, we also explored how the overall system supported or created challenges for the schools in this study. The following summarizes the systems findings under three main themes: supports, special education programs, and decision making. Although the overarching system includes charter local education authorities (LEAs), the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), and the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), school respondents primarily focused on OSSE and DCPS supports.

Supports

Compliance focused. Respondents described the system as being overly focused on compliance. While monitoring compliance is an important function of LEAs and OSSE, respondents at five schools expressed concerns that this focus overrode efforts to create quality programs, and resulted in schools receiving limited financial and personnel resources and insufficient and inaccessible professional development.

Staffing. Although a few school leaders believed that the system provided schools with the necessary resources, multiple respondents in nearly all of the study schools reported inadequate resources to provide quality special education programs. Schools reported deficits in system-provided resources for curriculum, technology, and behavior. The level of staffing, however, was the most widespread concern, with the majority of schools indicating that their special education programs are understaffed.

Respondents also noted disparities in resource levels across schools, and described the allocation and funding mechanism as not being sensitive enough to address differences in school and student needs.

Professional development. The delivery of professional development is yet another important function that the system undertakes. Respondents from 15 schools highlighted professional development provided by DCPS and OSSE as being particularly useful. However, schools also described experiencing issues in making full use of these opportunities. The sessions were not scheduled at accessible times, which made it difficult for many to attend. Schools were sometimes unable to release teachers (special education teachers in particular) due to limited staffing and a lack of substitute coverage. Schools also reported that the professional development lacked content-rich training focused on SWDs.

Special Education Programs

Case management. Respondents from a majority of the DCPS schools—10 of 14—expressed concerns about balancing case management and teaching SWDs. Interestingly, this did not emerge from interviews with the charter school respondents. Rather, case management appeared to be handled centrally by the LEA for charter schools.

Appropriate placement options. Another area of concern pertained to the availability of appropriate placement options for SWDs and the placement process. In particular, they described a lack of therapeutic programs for students with severe disabilities and those with serious emotional disturbance.

Inclusion. Respondents from 10 schools raised issues related to implementing an inclusion, or co-teaching, model. The model was described by a respondent as DCPS “mandate” that did not bring with it the supports and resources needed to implement such a model effectively.

System-wide alignment for special education. Respondents at seven schools identified a lack of alignment across and within school systems (e.g., DCPS and charter schools) in terms of communication and services and transfer of information from one school to another. In addition, respondents reported concerns about discrepancies in services and a lack of accountability.

Decision Making Processes

Management. Respondents in 10 schools reported challenges with the system’s top-down decision making process, which resulted in a lack of buy-in, trust, and continuity in program implementation. The lack of input and the perception that administrators within the system did not understand schools resulted in what the respondents believed were arbitrary decisions that were not well designed or logical.

Continuity. Respondents at seven schools reported a lack of continuity with programs and system staff, which was described as disruptive and frustrating. They particularly noted that policies and the curriculum seemed to be constantly changing without any evaluation of their effectiveness. Others expressed concern about the high rate of turnover of staff at the district and state levels.

Respect. Respondents from six schools perceived a lack of respect from the system or a negative atmosphere that focused on the problems, rather than solutions. They noted that school staff were not always treated in a professional manner and that DCPS staff became defensive when questions were raised about policies.

Recommendations

Below we present a series of system-level recommendations for areas that we believe are critical for implementing quality special education programs based on the findings presented in this report. Although we direct these recommendations to OSSE, other system-level structures—DCPS, charter LEAs, PCSB, and DME—play vital roles in supporting quality programs, and they must be actively engaged in this process of reform. We acknowledge that these organizations may already be developing and providing supports that align with some of our recommendations, in which case we encourage further work and coordination in these areas. The order of the recommendations below reflects the study team’s prioritization of importance and impact, given the unique context of the District of Columbia’s education system.

1. All LEAs and public schools should be required to participate in system-wide reform efforts related to special education, including system-wide studies. The large numbers of charter LEAs that declined to participate in this study not only impacted the representativeness of our findings, but also reflects the challenges of implementing system-wide reform efforts in the District. If each LEA—of which there are more than 50 in the District—is allowed to opt out and manage its special education programs completely independent of other LEAs, it will result in a fractured, ineffective approach to improving programs and outcomes. We understand that the law allows charter LEA autonomy, but coordination across the system needs to improve for reform to occur.
2. Given the high student mobility within the District, OSSE should consider developing a special education consortium of DCPS, PCSB, charter LEAs, and non-public schools to articulate alignment of standards and curricula for SWDs within and across LEAs and schools. This is intended to facilitate smooth transitions and continuity of programs for SWDs moving across and within school systems.
3. OSSE, DCPS, and charter LEAs should provide more supports around academic standards used in DCPS and charter schools, including appropriate curriculum, materials, and professional development as they relate to instruction of SWDs. The alignment of standards described in the second recommendation above will help improve the impact and efficiency of such supports.
4. OSSE, in concert with DCPS, PCSB, and charter LEAs, should develop a Master Plan for implementing site-based, ongoing professional development that will address the provision of appropriate academic instruction and behavioral supports for SWDs. Training topics should focus on effective differentiated instruction, literacy strategies for non-proficient students, and strategies for effective co-teaching and collaboration. The plan should delineate how professional development opportunities will include—and address the specific needs of—

general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and other school staff, as appropriate. This plan should integrate site-based coaching and mentoring specifically related to instructing SWDs, with a particular emphasis on supports for new teachers and teachers new to teaching SWDs. OSSE, DCPS, and charter LEAs should provide supports to schools to implement the Master Plan. Because the existing District-wide professional development may not be accessible to many staff members across DCPS and charter schools, it is critical to have targeted, school-based training that aligns with the needs of staff in the school and allows staff to receive ongoing face-to-face, interactive experiences rather than relying extensively on one-time professional development sessions provided to a limited number of individuals or provided through online options.

5. OSSE, in conjunction with DCPS and the charter LEAs, should provide a clear definition of and expectations for the inclusion model being implemented across DC schools. To facilitate successful implementation, OSSE, DCPS, and the charter LEAs should offer supports for needed training, staffing, and resources to implement an inclusive philosophy that addresses the needs of SWDs in the least restrictive environment. This training should include a focus on the co-teaching model, as well as how to develop IEPs in a manner that facilitates a successful inclusion model that is appropriate for that student.
6. OSSE, DCPS, PCSB, and charter LEAs should expect all schools to have in place a school-wide behavior plan that is consistently implemented and reinforced across the school. OSSE, DCPS, and charter LEAs should provide supports, such as training and behavior specialists, as needed and requested, and conduct monitoring to ensure consistent and ongoing implementation of school-wide behavior management.
7. OSSE, in conjunction with DCPS and charter LEAs, should provide mentoring and coaching for future and new principals that has an explicit focus on special education issues. We recommend that such ongoing coaching and mentoring be provided by principals with expertise in special education and those who have been successful in implementing quality special education programs in their schools. These “expert” principals might be identified through nominations from existing principal organizations within the District and from special education program staff in schools.
8. OSSE and DCPS should proactively consider the unique needs of public special education schools when planning, developing, and implementing supports and policies. Although the report did not explicitly discuss the staff and student needs at such schools, respondents delivered a powerful message that they were often overlooked in the process. These schools serve an important role in providing a continuum of services, and should be viewed as partners in the implementation of high quality special education programs.
9. OSSE should identify schools that are demonstrating exemplary practices in providing quality special education programs to serve as models for other schools. OSSE should establish

infrastructure to encourage and facilitate school-to-school learning opportunities so that more schools can benefit from these exemplary practices.

10. OSSE should conduct a more in-depth study of the process of student evaluations and development of IEPs in the District. Our review of the documentation revealed concerns about the quality and process that merit further examination. OSSE should conduct ongoing review of a sample of student evaluations and IEPs, as was done in this study, to monitor their quality and appropriateness and to tailor technical assistance and professional development to improve areas of concern.
11. OSSE, in conjunction with the other system-wide entities, should institute mechanisms to meaningfully seek input from schools during the decision-making process and to improve communication across the District. This may be accomplished through site visits and on-site focus groups, which will also give system staff an opportunity to not only learn first-hand about the schools but will also help raise OSSE's profile.
12. OSSE, DCPS, PCSB, and charter LEAs should reinforce the importance of family engagement by establishing expectations that all schools will have parent handbooks, parent resource centers, and a designated, trained parent coordinator at each site. Because of the inconsistency observed in the study schools, the systems should provide the necessary resources to support family engagement, and set an expectation that the schools should tailor their efforts for families of SWDs (e.g., ensure that parent resource centers include information for families of SWDs).

Chapter 1. Study Overview and Methods

Under contract with the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE), the American Institutes for Research (AIR) conducted an in-depth quality review of education programs for students with disabilities (SWDs) across District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and charter schools.¹ The purpose of this review was to assess the quality of school-level special education programs, understand barriers to providing a continuum of high quality education services for SWDs, and gather information on best practices to help inform the District of Columbia’s special education capacity-building strategy. To distinguish between DCPS and the overall District of Columbia system (which includes charters), we will refer to the District of Columbia as the “District” in this report.

The System

The Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) provides oversight and support for all education-related agencies, including DCPS, the District Public Charter School Board (PCSB), and OSSE. Within this organizational structure, the District of Columbia public school system is composed of schools managed by DCPS and schools managed by individual charter local education authorities (LEAs), which may be responsible for one school or several campuses. PCSB has oversight over the charter LEAs and is the sole authorizer of charter schools in the District. OSSE is the state education agency for the District and sets state-wide policies, provides resources and support, and oversees accountability for all public education.

Sources: (1) <http://dme.dc.gov/DC/DME/>; (2) <http://osse.dc.gov/page/about-osse>; (3) <http://www.dcpubliccharter.com/About-the-Board.aspx>

To carry out this quality review, the AIR team first developed a set of quality indicators to assess special education programs. The team then collected data through surveys, interviews, classroom observations, and document review from 20 public schools and 1 non-public school (NPS).

Quality Indicators

One of the objectives of this study was to develop a set of special education quality indicators tailored to the District that are based on research and on special education program assessment tools, as well as on input from special education stakeholders. A quality indicator is defined as “a specific measurement of the performance of functions and processes used to make informed decisions regarding whether a

¹ Students with disabilities in this report are defined as students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and eligible to receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

process is in control or to identify opportunities for improvement.”² In the context of this study, quality indicators are statements of specific practices that have been documented through research and school-based experiences to promote quality educational programs for students with disabilities. The indicators developed through this study were used to assess current practices and their levels of implementation in the study schools and to identify priorities for improvement and capacity building.

In developing the indicators, the AIR team drew upon three sources of data: research and policy literature, existing quality indicators in the field, and stakeholder input. We first conducted a literature and practice review of effective special education practices. The literature review was conducted using the following databases: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, and EBSCO Host Online Research Databases of Education Research Complete, Education Full Text. Search parameters limited results to peer-reviewed articles published after 2004 to ensure that high quality and up-to-date research informed the literature review. Federal legislation, practice guidelines, and scholarly books were also consulted to guide the review. This search of the literature and legislation revealed topic areas used to write the literature synthesis. Only practices that were supported by at least three different sources were included in the synthesis. If online sources provided an insufficient number of studies to support the practice, the team expanded the timeline of searches. Preference was given to literature that included large-scale experimental designs that identified, or verified the effectiveness of, practices to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. Literature that predated 2004 but was frequently referenced by our initial sources on these selected practices was also included in the synthesis.

From this literature review, we identified an initial set of key domains, or areas of practice, that were supported by the literature as being important foundations for educational programs for SWDs. To support and supplement the domains emerging from the literature review, we also identified other existing quality assessment tools of special education programs in the field, using Internet search engines.³ Fourteen program assessment protocols were located, and we created a matrix identifying the overlap among the program domains examined in the protocols.

From the list of domains extracted from the literature and protocol reviews, we identified eight broad areas that captured the themes observed in these documents: *individualized education program (IEP) development; curriculum; instructional strategies and supports; behavior supports; data-driven decision making; school leadership; staff collaboration, supports, and professional development; and family involvement*. To tailor the domains and specific practices within each domain to the District, we conducted a series of focus groups with stakeholders with a vested interest in the school system. These stakeholders included parents, community advocates, educators, and representatives from OSSE, DCPS,

² Mayo Clinic Medical Laboratories Framework for Quality;
<http://www.mayomedicallaboratories.com/about/quality/framework/glossary.html>

³ Terms used for this search included “quality indicators,” “quality review,” “program review,” and “quality program” in conjunction with “special education.”

the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), nonpublic schools, and the State Advisory Panel (SAP).⁴ During the focus groups, the AIR team presented the study objectives, described each of the domains, shared examples of specific practices (i.e., indicators), and sought input from the participants about domains and practices they thought were important for a quality education program for SWDs in the District. An AIR team member took notes on the issues raised by the focus group participants during these sessions. Feedback from the groups aligned with the issues identified in the literature review; the participants also raised concerns that appeared unique to the District system (e.g., access to the online IEP system).

Individual AIR team members were then assigned to specific domains and were responsible for examining the literature review, existing quality indicators, and field notes from the focus groups to develop a preliminary list of indicators for their assigned domain based on the frequency with which the practice appeared in the three sources (literature, existing indicators, and focus group participants) and relevance to the District. For each proposed indicator, the team member documented the supporting evidence from the three sources. The whole team then convened over a three-day period to discuss the preliminary list for each domain, review the evidence, develop additional indicators as needed, and finalize the individual lists. For indicators in the final lists that emerged from the focus groups but were not explicitly addressed in the literature review, we conducted searches for research that supported the practice. In addition, the team discussed the appropriateness and comprehensiveness of the initially proposed domains in conjunction with the focus group input, and refined the domains, sub-domains, and indicators to the following:

IEP Development: The development of comprehensive IEPs, including the composition of the IEP team and specification of data-based and age-appropriate goals, services, accommodations, and transition plans

Sub-domain: Eligibility and IEP Team

1. An evaluation report based on a comprehensive, multidisciplinary psycho-educational evaluation is used to determine special education eligibility and guides the development of an appropriate IEP, if indicated.
2. IEP team is made up of a multidisciplinary team that includes teachers, professionals, families, and students as appropriate.
3. School staff on IEP teams understand and receive professional development on all aspects of IEP development, including the continuum of service delivery options, the principles of least restrictive environment (LRE), and general education classroom practices that support inclusion of SWDs.

⁴ The recruitment efforts for the educator groups included outreach to general and special education teachers, special education coordinators, and school leaders. Two focus groups to solicit input from school leaders were scheduled for February 15 and March 6, 2012; however, no participants attended.

Sub-domain: Goals, Service Prescriptions, and Accommodations

1. IEPs are comprehensive, complete (i.e., include performance evaluation, service prescriptions, goals, and transition plans), and written in a manner that is comprehensible.
2. IEPs include measurable goals that are aligned to grade-level standards.
3. IEP service specifications and goals are age-appropriate and individualized to reflect a student's disability(ies), strengths, and needs.
4. IEP instructional programs, service prescriptions, and instructional goals are supported by data from diagnostic, development, and educational assessments using a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach, and created with input from the student, when appropriate, and family.
5. IEP teams consider providing each student with services in the general education classroom, with supplementary aids and services appropriate to that student's needs, before proposing a more restrictive environment.
6. IEP service specifications and goals are, at least annually, revised to reflect current individual student need, abilities, and progress.
7. IEPs include rationale and description of the types of instructional and assessment accommodations the student will receive. If the IEP team determines that a student should take an alternate assessment, the IEP includes a statement of why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment.
8. When behavior may be impeding academic achievement, IEPs include targeted positive behavior goals and related supports, and if necessary, a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) based on a functional behavior assessment (FBA).

Sub-domain: Transition Plans

1. IEPs for students who are 16 years or older contain measurable and targeted transition goals that reflect postsecondary transition planning.
2. Recent assessment information relevant to postsecondary goals is used to identify students' preferences, strengths, interests, and choices to create transition plans

Access: Access to an appropriate curriculum, equal academic and social opportunities, and interactions with peers of students with disabilities

Sub-domain: Access to Appropriate Curriculum

1. SWDs receive instruction in a curriculum that is aligned to the standards at their grade level.
2. Special and general education teachers provide direct instruction on IEP goals across subject

areas within the general education curriculum, and the instruction is reinforced by the related service providers.

3. SWDs are provided instruction in study skills, self-advocacy, and learning strategies as appropriate.
4. SWDs receive instruction, as appropriate, in daily living, transportation, mobility, and recreation and leisure as these relate to their postsecondary goals (i.e., college and career readiness).
5. SWDs are taught how to, and actually use, assistive technology throughout the school setting as needed for meaningful participation in educational activities.

Sub-domain: Access to General Education Opportunities

1. Efforts are made to assign SWDs across general education classrooms in order to reflect the existing natural proportion of SWD within each grade level, rather than clustering SWDs in only one or two classrooms.
2. SWDs are included in general education academic and non-academic opportunities and participate with general education peers throughout the school day, as appropriate.

Instructional Supports: Instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction, the use of modifications and accommodations, and technology, to support the education of students with disabilities

Sub-domain: Strategies and Practices for Differentiating Instruction

1. Teachers use a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies (e.g., scaffolding, modeling, and collaborative learning structures) in the instruction of SWDs.
2. Teachers use a variety of instructional formats (e.g., direct instruction, project-based, and peer-mediated instruction) to meet the needs of SWDs.
3. Teachers use whole class, small group, and individual instruction to meet the academic needs of SWDs.
4. Teachers differentiate the products required of SWDs to demonstrate proficiency on lesson objectives.
5. Teachers activate or develop student background knowledge and use this as a foundation for new content and learning for SWDs.
6. Instruction of SWDs is culturally and linguistically responsive in the choice of materials and topics.
7. Tiered academic interventions are provided when necessary, based on continuous assessment (progress monitoring).

8. Teachers use appropriate evidence-based supplemental materials for additional support when necessary for SWDs.
9. A system is in place for implementing instructional strategies for struggling students through a pre-referral process monitored by the student support team.

Sub-domain: Accommodations and Modifications

1. Teachers provide instructional accommodations, as necessary, to address the specific skills, abilities, and educational needs of SWDs.
2. Teachers provide assessment accommodations as indicated in students' IEPs.
3. Teachers use appropriate instructional modifications (e.g., summarized reading passages, reduced assignments) to meet the needs of SWDs.

Sub-domain: Technology

1. SWDs have access to and use various forms of instructional technology in the classroom.
2. Teachers integrate instructional technology seamlessly into their lessons (e.g., Web Quests, SMART Boards, DVDs, PowerPoint).

Behavior Supports: Consistent school-wide, classroom-level, and student-specific behavior strategies that support a positive and conducive learning environment for students with disabilities

Sub-domain: School-wide Behavior System

1. Targeted number of positively stated school-wide expectations for student behavior are consistently reinforced throughout the school environment and clearly communicated to staff, families, and students.
2. A clearly defined system of positive and negative consequences related to student behavior exists in the school.
3. Behavior and discipline data are regularly collected and analyzed by designated staff members to plan how to proactively meet behavioral needs of all students.
4. Increasingly intensive behavioral supports are in place for students who do not meet or respond appropriately to the school-wide behavior goals and expectations.
5. There are clearly stated and consistently implemented procedures for responding to, and appealing the response to, disciplinary infractions of SWDs; the provision of services during in- and out- of- school suspension for SWDs; and responding to students in crisis, in seclusion, or under restraint. These procedures are communicated to parents in an understandable manner, and staff are trained in the procedures and appropriate disciplinary responses.

Sub-domain: Classroom Behavioral Systems

1. Teachers consistently use class-wide strategies, routines, and procedures to effectively manage the classroom and support learning, and are consistent with the school-wide behavior plan.
2. Students are taught to self-regulate, to monitor and change behavior, and to plan future behavior when faced with new situations.

Sub-domain: Behavior Interventions

1. Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) are informed by multiple sources of data to clearly define a student's problem behavior(s) in concrete, measurable and observable terms.
2. Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) for students with chronic and severe behavioral disabilities contain evidence-based intensive individualized interventions, positive behavior goals, and a data system to monitor progress, and are informed by the student's FBA.

Staff Collaboration and Professional Development: Staff practices and opportunities that promote the sharing of cross-disciplinary knowledge to support the education of students with disabilities

Sub-domain: Staff Collaboration

1. All members of the school's faculty work together to implement general and special education school initiatives.
2. Cross-discipline staff collaboration is formally supported and instituted in the school, and general and special education teachers frequently meet to discuss and systematically share information on the instructional and behavioral needs of their SWDs and collaborate on collecting and interpreting student data.
3. Specials subject teachers (e.g., music, art, and physical education teachers) have regular opportunities to consult with a special educator about how to work with SWDs who are in their classrooms.
4. Related services personnel collaborate in the planning, delivery of services, supports, and assessments of student progress with special and general education teachers.
5. Supplemental coaching, mentoring, and support strategies are in place to assist new teachers or teachers new to the role of instructing SWDs in the school.
6. Teachers plan with paraprofessionals who work with SWDs so they may support behavior strategies, instructional accommodations, program modifications, and culturally responsive practices for SWDs.

7. Grade-to-grade and school-to-school articulation strategies are in place to facilitate the sharing of successful instructional strategies, instructional accommodations, and modifications that have been developed for SWDs.

Sub-domain: Professional Development Planning

1. A periodic needs assessment is conducted to assess staff capacity with respect to educating SWDs.
2. A multiyear school professional development plan is produced with input from all stakeholders, is based on a current assessment of staff needs and student achievement and behavior data, and explicitly addresses professional development needs related to educating SWDs.

Sub-domain: Professional Development Delivery and Content

1. Professional development related to SWDs is characterized by coherent and focused training sessions delivered in different formats.
2. All special educators and general educators receive ongoing training in the legal requirements in all areas of special education.
3. The school provides ongoing training on awareness, knowledge, and adoption of best practices in inclusive classrooms for SWDs.
4. School staff receives ongoing training regarding students with specific disabilities and how to best manage their behavior and meet their educational needs.
5. General education and special education teachers and paraprofessionals receive training to clarify their respective roles for instructing SWDs.
6. General education and special education teachers receive training on how to collect, interpret, and use student data to guide instruction and interventions.
7. All school staff, including support services and paraprofessionals, receive ongoing training in how to interact with families of SWDs in a culturally responsive manner.

Data-Driven Decision Making: Practices that contribute to the frequent collection of student achievement and behavior data, the accessibility of data, and the use of data to guide instructional and programmatic decisions regarding students with disabilities

Sub-domain: Data collection and accessibility

1. There is a school-wide system in place to collect summative and formative data on student achievement and behavior, and it is used by all grades and teachers.
2. Teachers and other providers use a variety of formal and informal methods at frequent and regular intervals to collect data on the progress of SWDs in the curriculum and on IEP goals.

3. Teachers have regular and timely access to IEPs and relevant current and historical student-level data on SWDs, including formative, summative, and progress monitoring data, in a useable format.

Sub-domain: Data analysis and use

1. Design instruction: Teachers use baseline data and profiles of student skill and performance deficits and strengths as the starting point for designing instruction and establishing instructional goals for SWDs.
2. Modify instruction: Teachers use information from student assessments for SWDs to guide decisions to reteach, change pacing, regroup, and plan or adjust activities/strategies.
3. Identify individual student needs and provide interventions: Teachers use the results of progress monitoring to identify students in need of additional support and to identify the appropriate intervention(s).
4. Improve programs: School administrators use student-level and school-level data to evaluate the effectiveness of, and to modify and improve, instructional and behavior programs for SWDs.

Family Engagement: School practices to proactively include parents and students as partners by establishing a clear policy on parental involvement, providing comprehensive and accessible communication, and offering family education and supports

Sub-domain: Staff Expectations and School Culture

1. The school has a clear policy outlining the shared responsibility of school and home in improving educational outcomes for SWDs.
2. The school has a parent resource center and a trained parent-school coordinator, who oversees communication with families, serves as a liaison, and develops programs and opportunities to encourage the involvement of, and sensitivity towards, SWDs and their families.

Sub-domain: Accessibility and Communication

1. The school encourages families of SWDs to visit and to communicate regularly with school staff.
2. Frequent communication: School staff, SWDs, and families of SWDs share frequent and timely reports of student behavior, performance, and achievement.
3. Accessibility of materials: Materials and communications are comprehensive, accessible, and provided in a variety of formats and in the family's preferred language.
4. Accessibility of school events: School events are scheduled at times convenient for parents and measures are taken to facilitate their participation.

Sub-domain: Family Involvement

1. Families of SWDs are included in advisory, decision-making, and advocacy activities in the school (e.g., advisory committees, school improvement teams).
2. The school encourages and supports active family involvement in the information gathering, at the IEP meeting where decisions are made about the child's supports, and later in problem solving when concerns or questions arise during the course of the school year.

Sub-domain: Family Supports and Education

1. The school provides information to families of SWDs regarding research-based educational practices and ways that families can support their child's learning, academic and behavior needs, interests, and IEP goals at home and school.
2. The school provides families and students with information on the requirements of IDEA, the process of student referrals and evaluations, development of IEPs, and their role in the IEP process.
3. The school assists families of SWDs in accessing informal support networks and community resources.

School Leadership: Ways in which school leaders facilitate positive student and staff outcomes, support a shared responsibility, and foster a culture of high expectations for students with disabilities

Sub-domain: Shared Vision

1. The school's mission and vision statement reflects a belief in and commitment to high standards for all students, including SWDs; a culture of professional practice; continuous learning; and accountability for student performance.
2. The school has an advisory or leadership team (e.g., Local School Advisory Team) that includes teachers and families of SWDs. The team meets regularly to examine student achievement, behavior, and discipline data and make program recommendations based on findings, as well as provide advice to administration on teaching and learning initiatives in the school.
3. The school has a school improvement plan that includes targeted goals and priorities for improving educational outcomes of SWDs.
4. The school administration communicates an expectation that SWDs are the responsibility of all staff, and not exclusively special education staff.
5. The school administration develops policy handbooks for staff, students, and the community delineating expectations for school behavior and academic issues, including the specific needs of SWDs.

Sub-domain: Instructional Leadership

1. The school administration provides leadership, guidance, and policies consistent with an inclusive philosophy that addresses the needs of SWDs.
2. The school administration conducts frequent classroom visits and is visible in the halls, cafeteria, playground, and locker areas to ensure that there is a school environment conducive to learning for SWDs.
3. The school administration ensures that teachers have appropriate materials needed (e.g., books, adaptive materials, technology) for teaching SWDs.
4. The school administration meets with grade-level planning teams and special educators, related service providers, and intervention teachers on a regular basis to monitor the progress of SWDs.
5. The school administration establishes clear expectations for the use of school-wide data (including achievement, behavior, and discipline data), is knowledgeable about data use, and provides supports that foster a data-driven culture within the school.
6. The school administration is knowledgeable about special education issues, policies, and procedures, and participates regularly in IEP meetings.
7. The school administration holds all teachers accountable for planning, delivering appropriate instruction, and monitoring the progress of SWDs.

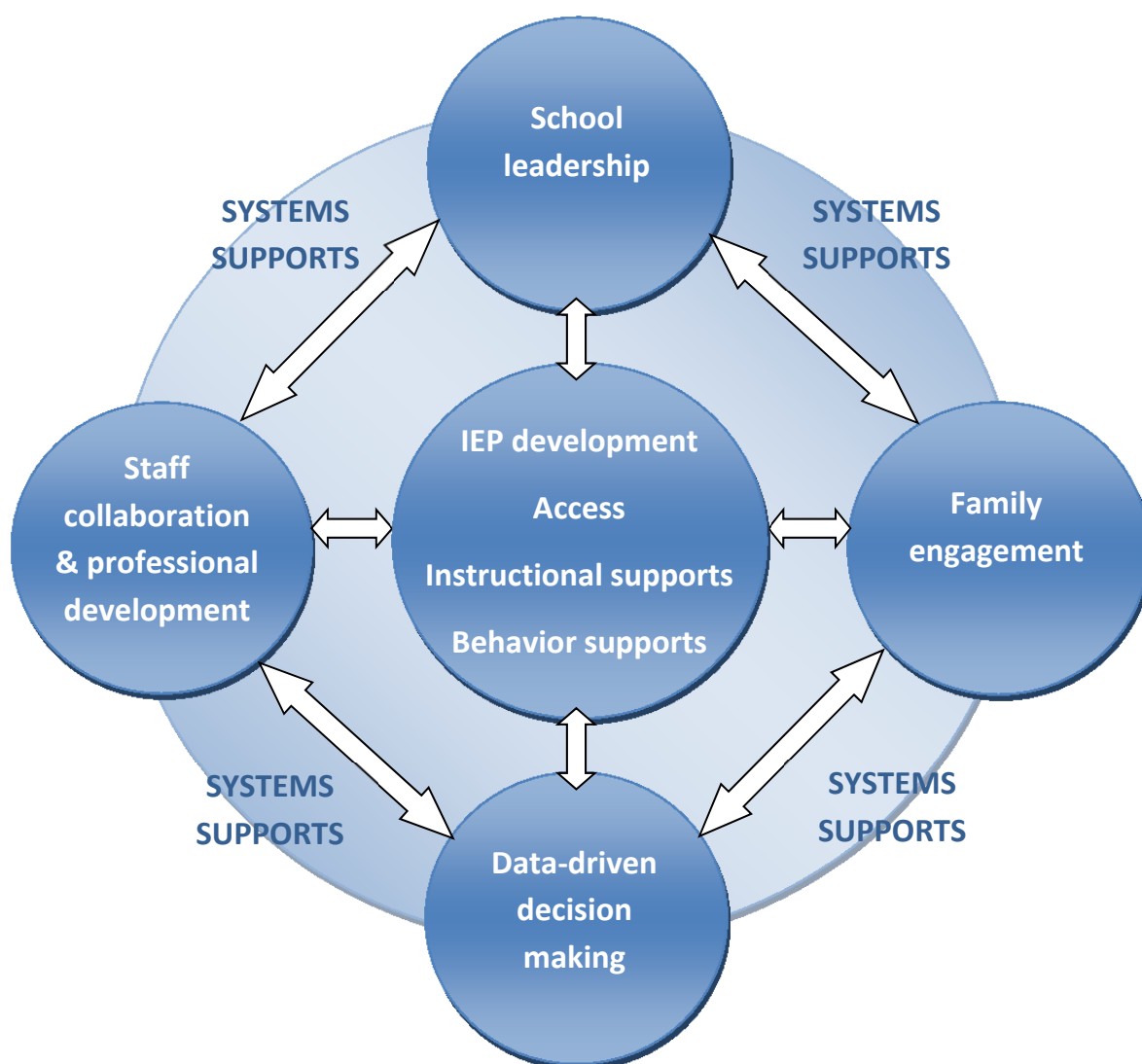
Although the above domains focus on school-level practices, schools in the District operate within a larger education system that includes the DME, OSSE, DCPS, the PCSB, and individual charter LEAs. We collected information from school respondents on how system-wide policies, procedures, and structures support and challenge the implementation of school- and classroom-level practices identified in the above domains.

These indicators are not intended to evaluate the quality of the overall education program and are not intended to be an exhaustive list of best practices that schools should be implementing in each domain. Rather, the indicators identify key foundational practices that should be in place in order to support an appropriate education of SWDs. Although many of the indicators may be beneficial to all students, the focus is on how these practices explicitly relate to the education of SWDs. For example, school staff may have high expectations for students, but we were interested in whether and how those high expectations explicitly include SWDs. Furthermore, the indicators are intended to reflect the needs of school-age students and do not include a specific focus on early childhood needs delivered through IDEA Part C programs. And finally, the purpose of the indicators is not to assess compliance with federal and state regulations, but rather measure the *quality* of education programs for SWDs.

The indicators do not operate in isolation; the practices positively interact with other indicators within and across the domains. For example, data-driven decision-making activities should reinforce and facilitate instructional practices. Exhibit 1.1 depicts the relationships among the domains at the school

level, as well as the importance of the larger system (DME, OSSE, DCPS, and PCSB) in supporting school-level practices. As shown, four domains—IEP development, access, instructional strategies, and behavior supports—directly impact the education programs for SWDs. These appear in the circle at the center of the graph. These sets of indicators are influenced by four supporting domains (shown as circles on the border of the graph): school leadership, staff collaboration and professional development, family engagement, and data-driven decision making. The arrows demonstrate the inter-relationships among all of the domains. Underlying all of these domains are system-wide policies, procedures, and supports put in place by DME, OSSE, DCPS, and PCSB (noted as the large “Systems Supports” circle in the graph).

Exhibit 1.1. Domains of indicators for measuring the quality of education programs for SWDs



After developing the indicators, we conducted school reviews to assess the implementation of practices identified by these indicators, using the methodology described below.

School Sample

In the 2011–12 school year, the District’s public school system had 128 DCPS schools and 53 charter LEAs (representing 103 schools), including regular, special education, and alternative schools and adult programs, that served a total of 76,753 students, of whom 10,719 (13 percent) were students receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).⁵ In addition, there were 101 approved non-public schools and programs that served 1,733 of the District’s SWDs, of which 21 were located within the District boundaries.⁶ For this study, we originally sampled 25 schools to conduct the quality review. Although the results of the review cannot be generalized to the entire school population, the various LEA types (DCPS, charter) and school levels (elementary, middle, high school, and education campus) in the original sample reflected different perspectives and contexts. We randomly sampled 22 general education schools, stratified by LEA type and school level, 2 special education schools (1 DCPS and 1 charter), and 1 non-public school (NPS) serving SWDs within the District.⁷ The population from which the sample was drawn was restricted to the schools meeting certain criteria to improve the efficiency of the data collection. Alternative schools, adult programs, single-grade schools, and schools whose highest grade was preschool were not included in the sampling frame. To ensure that our reviews collected meaningful data on programs for SWDs, we drew the sample from a sub-population of schools that enrolled a sufficient number of SWDs. Because we intended to observe classrooms and interview regular education teachers who taught at least three SWDs, we established a minimum threshold number of SWDs equal to the number of grades in a school multiplied by three. For example, a school with a grade span of K–6 would need to have at least 21 SWDs (7 grades multiplied by 3) to be part of the eligible population. Although this strategy did not guarantee that there would be at least three SWDs in a given class, this improved the likelihood, and therefore improved the efficiency of our data collection.

Based on these criteria, 159 regular education schools were eligible for selection. Exhibit 1.2 below shows the population of schools, the eligible sample based on the SWD threshold, the target sample, and the final sample based on school participation. DCPS schools and charter schools made up 62 percent (=98/159) and 38 percent (=61/159) of the eligible school population, respectively. Proportional to the distribution of schools in the overall eligible population, we randomly selected 14 DCPS schools (64 percent of the regular school sample) and 8 charter schools (36 percent), for a total of 22 regular

⁵ <http://osse.dc.gov/release/2011-2012-dc-public-school-enrollment-audit-complete>

⁶ <http://osse.dc.gov/publication/osse-approved-nonpublic-schools-list> (Approved as of December 19, 2011); Counts of SWDs attending these schools obtained from a data file provided by OSSE on March 12, 2012.

⁷ Although the study objective is to collect information from public schools within the District, OSSE believed it was important to include an NPS in the review, given the large number of SWDs served by these school types.

education schools.⁸ Furthermore, we restricted the eligible NPS population to schools that were within the District boundaries.

Due to LEAs and schools declining to participate, our final sample comprised 1 NPS and 20 public schools, which included 13 DCPS schools and 6 charter schools.

Exhibit 1.2. DCPS and charter regular school population, target sample, and final sample for the quality review study

| | N and % of schools in the population ¹ | N and % of schools with the minimum threshold of SWDs | Target sample N and % | Final sample N and % |
|---|---|---|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| DCPS | (A) | (B) | (C) | (D) |
| Regular elementary | 64 (55%) | 53 (54%) | 7 (50%) | 6 (46%) |
| Regular middle | 13 (11%) | 13 (13%) | 2 (14%) | 2 (15%) |
| Regular high school | 19 (16%) | 15 (15%) | 2 (14%) | 2 (15%) |
| Regular education campus | 20 (17%) | 17 (17%) | 3 (21%) | 3 (23%) |
| Total regular DCPS schools | 116 (100%) | 98 (100%) | 14 (100%) | 13 (100%) |
| Charters | | | | |
| Regular elementary | 34 (40%) | 19 (31%) | 2 (25%) | 1 (17%) |
| Regular middle | 12 (14%) | 12 (20%) | 2 (25%) | 2 (33%) |
| Regular high school | 9 (11%) | 9 (15%) | 1 (13%) | 0 (0%) |
| Regular education campus | 29 (35%) | 21 (34%) | 3 (38%) | 3 (50%) |
| Total regular charter schools | 84 (100%) | 61 (100%) | 8 (100%) | 6 (100%) |
| Total regular schools | 200 | 159 | 22 | 19 |
| Public special education schools | 5 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| Non-public schools² | 21 | — | 1 | 1 |

¹ Excludes DCPS and charter schools whose highest grade is preschool, single-grade schools, alternative schools, and programs serving adult students.

² Includes only non-public schools located within District boundaries.

School Recruitment and Participation

To recruit the schools for this study, OSSE first contacted the LEAs of the sampled schools to share information about the study objectives and approach. To encourage participation, OSSE offered substitute funding to cover teachers' release time for the interviews, as well as a limited number of hours from a consortium of specialized special education and related service providers to provide specialized consultation and direct service support during the fall of the 2012–13 school year. Once the

⁸ To facilitate geographic representation of DCPS schools, we randomly sampled one elementary school from each ward with at least one eligible school (n = 7). We were not able to stratify the middle and high school sample by ward due to the small number of these schools in the sample.

LEA provided approval to approach the schools, the study team then contacted the principal of each school directly to provide background of the study, describe the site visit data collection needs, and schedule a date for the visit. AIR also conducted two informational webinars in the spring of 2012 for principals of the sampled schools to share information about the study, to prepare the schools for the data collection activities, and to answer any questions.

DCPS Participation

Following DCPS approval, two schools declined to participate. These were replaced by random schools at the same school level that met the sampling criteria. Another school initially agreed but then declined. Due to the late timing (August 2012), we did not replace the school, resulting in 13 DCPS schools in the final sample.

Charter School Participation

The process of securing the participation of the charter schools was more complicated, as it involved seeking approval from multiple charter LEAs. After the initial outreach, OSSE made at least one follow-up attempt with charter LEAs that either declined to participate or were non-responsive. If the follow-up attempt was not successful, we selected a random replacement from the remaining pool of charters within that school level. However, because some of the LEAs represented multiple campuses, the number of eligible charters sometimes dropped by more than one with each refusal. Four charter LEAs representing five schools in the first sample declined to participate. In the first replacement sample, one charter LEA declined and two others were non-responsive. In the second replacement sample for these three LEAs, one charter LEA agreed but then pulled out at a late date and was not replaced, and two other LEAs were non-responsive. In the third replacement sample, the two LEAs were non-responsive and were not replaced due to the lack of time to incorporate additional replacements into the fall 2012 data collection. In summary, 11 charter LEAs, representing 26 charter schools in the eligible population, declined to participate. The final sample included six charter schools.

Data Collection Methods

The overall design of the quality reviews involved the collection and analysis of multiple sources of data, with a focus on gathering information related to the special education quality indicators developed in the earlier phase of this study. To assess the extent to which the quality indicators are present in each school, AIR gathered and analyzed information from surveys, interviews, classroom and school observations, and school- and student-level documents. One-day site visits were conducted to 12 schools in May 2012 and to 9 schools in September 2012.⁹

During these visits, a two- or three-person AIR team conducted interviews and observations to collect data on the instructional delivery program for SWDs, including critical factors such as access to the general education curriculum, use of data to guide instructional and programmatic changes, existing

⁹ Delays in the original start date for the contract prevented the study team from completing the site visits in spring 2012.

professional development resources, and the extent of parent and family engagement in the instructional program and IEP development.

Data Collection Protocols

Our data collection was guided by the quality indicators developed for this study. The protocols for the survey, interviews, classroom observations, school walk-throughs, document reviews, and site visitor ratings were intended to collect measurable information on each indicator, and to identify best practices and barriers to special education service delivery at the school level. The purpose of gathering information on the same topics from multiple sources was to cross-verify (i.e., triangulate) the data and to generate a comprehensive, valid assessment of school performance on the various indicators from multiple perspectives.

School-Level Interviews

During each site visit, researchers conducted one-on-one interviews and small group interviews. Between 7 and 13 respondents were interviewed at each school, and typically included the principal, special education coordinator, special education teachers, regular education teachers serving SWDs, the parent-school coordinator, instructional coaches, data coordinator or data team members, and in some schools, members from the local school advisory team.¹⁰

Different respondent groups were asked similar questions to facilitate the triangulation of data from different sources and perspectives. The interviews also collected information on the extent to which systems supports are in place and facilitate or hinder the development and implementation of quality education programs for SWDs. The interviews lasted no more than one hour, and with permission from the interviewee, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.¹¹

Classroom Observations and School Walk-Throughs

Observations and walk-throughs provide an opportunity to collect data on classroom and school activities corresponding to the key areas of the quality review. The classroom observation protocol focused on behavior management, grouping strategies, differentiated instruction, accommodations, and modifications. Practices were rated on a 4-point scale to reflect the level of implementation in the classroom.¹² A minimum of three classroom observations (and as many as eight in one school) were conducted at each school for 30–60 minutes each. The school administration identified the classes for observation, among classrooms that had at least three SWDs.¹³

The school walk-through protocol was used to collect information on general school environment, school-wide behavior management, data transparency and use, academic expectations, and family

¹⁰ Due to the small size of the NPS campus, however, only four respondents were interviewed.

¹¹ In two cases, the respondents did not want to be interviewed and the interviewer took notes by hand.

¹² The scale ranged from 0 to 3: 0 = no evidence of use; 1 = evidence shows infrequent use or almost never; 2 = evidence shows moderate use; 3 = evidence shows extensive use.

¹³ We did not require that observed classrooms be taught by the interviewed teachers.

engagement. For example, the visitors noted whether student behavior rules were posted prominently and consistently throughout the school and used positive behavior language.

Surveys

In addition to the site visit interviews and observations, all teachers, the principal, and special education coordinator in each sampled school was administered a survey. Designed to quantify the quality indicators developed for this study, the survey contained a series of closed-ended items about the extent to which certain practices were present in the classrooms or schools using a four-point agreement scale.

The survey was available to the schools in both hard copy and electronic forms, and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. We asked the school administration to set aside time during a staff meeting for teachers to complete their surveys individually. To maintain confidentiality, we provided self-sealing envelopes for the teachers to submit their completed surveys. To encourage participation, the team followed up multiple times (at least five attempts) through emails and phone calls with the school staff member overseeing the survey effort. We also sought follow-up assistance from OSSE, DCPS, DME, and PCSB, and extended the survey administration window by several weeks.

Document Reviews

AIR collected and coded copies of relevant documents from each of the sampled schools. Documents included student evaluation reports, IEPs, the school's comprehensive school plan, school-wide behavior plan, staff and parent handbooks, and professional development plans.

For the evaluation report and IEP review, AIR drew a random sample of approximately 5 percent of the SWD enrollment, with a minimum of 5 students and a maximum of 25 students, from each participating school. OSSE staff obtained the evaluations and IEPs from the central online system. OSSE redacted IEPs and all student specific supporting documents prior to providing them to AIR, and steps (e.g., non-disclosure agreements) were taken to uphold confidentiality and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

Site Visitor Ratings

A final source of school-level data was the site visit team. Immediately following the site visit, the visitors rated each quality indicator along a four-point scale that identified the extent to which each indicator is being implemented in the school.¹⁴ This assessment was based on the professional judgment of the visitors developed from information gathered from the interviews and observations. The site visitors completed the ratings independently and then convened to reach a consensus on the ratings.

District-wide Interviews and Focus Groups

¹⁴The scale ranged from 0 to 3: 0 = no evidence of use; 1 = evidence shows infrequent use or almost never (e.g., infrequent, informal use by few teachers) 2 = evidence shows moderate use (e.g., frequent use by several teachers/subjects); 3 = evidence shows extensive use (e.g., consistent regular use by all teachers/subjects).

To further identify strengths, areas for improvement, facilitators, and barriers to quality service delivery in the District, we also conducted interviews and focus groups at the system-wide level. Interview respondents included DCPS, PCSB, DME, and OSSE staff supporting special education programs. A separate focus group was held with parents. Two sessions were held for related service providers (one for DCPS providers and the other for charter school providers). In consultation with OSSE, AIR identified key District staff with responsibilities related to special education programs and conducted a one-hour interview. For the parent focus group, announcements were sent to DCPS, PCSB, and the OSSE parent listserv to solicit participants. For the related service providers, AIR sent flyers announcing the focus group sessions to DCPS and to the DC Special Education Co-operative, a group that provides special education services to member charter schools. The purpose of the system-level data collection was to gather information on systems-level (e.g., LEA- and state- level) issues related to education programs for SWDs to provide additional context to the findings emerging from the study schools. These protocols addressed the same school-level domains identified above, specifically exploring how LEAs (DCPS, charters), the DME, and OSSE contributed to or hindered school-level provision of a quality special education program.

Analytic Methods

The objective of the analysis approach was to determine the quality of education programs for SWDs, identify barriers to special education service delivery, and identify best practices at the school level for the sampled study schools. To enable combining information across different data collection methods (e.g., surveys and interviews) and to provide a comprehensive picture of the quality of the school's education program for SWDs from multiple perspectives, the protocols contained similar questions. For each school, the interview, observation, and document review data used the same coding structure aligned to the domains and indicators.

Given the extensiveness of the indicators (nearly 90 in total), the report findings focus on selected indicators. To select the indicators, the team convened at the end of the site visits and before the data syntheses to collectively identify two to four indicators from each domain (irrespective of sub-domain) that were critical to the implementation of other indicators within that domain. During the selection process, we also considered the level of data that we had available to address the indicators. Some sub-domains were excluded from the report because the associated indicators were not rated as critical. Following this selection process, we considered the indicators in the excluded sub-domains, but determined that the information collected on these indicators was limited and would not yield useful observations.

Interview Coding and Analysis

Using ATLAS, a qualitative data analysis software program, the AIR team coded each transcribed interview using codes aligned to each indicator (or a set of related indicators). Each indicator had two codes: one was used when the respondent reported the practice was in place and another was used when the respondent reported that the practice was not implemented, or implemented infrequently or inconsistently. The team coded 170 interviews across the 21 schools. Each interview was coded by an

individual team member, and two coders coded the principal, special education coordinator, and one of the teacher interviews for each school to improve the reliability of the coding.

To identify key practices and challenges related to the selected indicators, team members reviewed all of the interview text coded for a given indicator. The team members then created detailed syntheses for each of the selected indicators that described how the practice was typically implemented in the schools, key practices described by the respondents that supported the implementation of the indicator, and factors that created challenges in implementing the indicator, whether identified explicitly by the respondents or based on patterns across the schools. Information from these syntheses is presented in the report for each selected indicator.

Document Review Coding and Analysis

AIR also coded each individual (redacted) IEP and accompanying evaluation report to assess the extent to which the evaluations were comprehensive and contained assessment information appropriate to the student, the IEP reflected the strengths and needs of the student as described in the evaluation report, the IEP goals were measurable and aligned to the general education curriculum, and to identify the evaluation data used to support the service prescriptions and goals.

For the school document review, AIR developed a single coding protocol to capture information across multiple documents. For example, we used this protocol to look for evidence across all provided documents that the school had school-wide behavior expectations and that these expectations were communicated to parents and staff. The protocol was used to also record evidence across the documents that parents were encouraged to visit the school, that staff were expected to frequently communicate and involve parents, and that the school provided professional development to both special education and general education teachers on issues related to instructing SWDs.

Of the 20 public schools in the sample, 17 provided at least one document, and there was considerable variation in the types of documents provided. We report the number of schools whose documents met the coding criteria in the relevant chapters to supplement the findings from other data sources.

Surveys

Of the 21 schools, 17 returned teacher surveys, ranging from 1 teacher in 1 school to 53 teachers in another. In addition, 8 principals and 14 special education coordinators returned surveys. Because the analysis generated school-level averages, we needed to ensure a reasonable representation of teachers in each school to report the results. We set a threshold of a 25 percent teacher response rate, and we also excluded the non-public school from the district-wide results. This resulted in 11 public schools—6 DCPS schools and 5 charter schools—with teacher response rates ranging from 39 percent to 75 percent. For each of the 11 schools, we derived the percentages of teacher respondents who strongly disagreed/disagreed and those who strongly agreed/agreed with an item, and then averaged the school-level results to derive district-wide percentages. Due to the limited number of returned principal surveys, we do not show those results. We refer to the results of the surveys from the special education

coordinators on occasion to demonstrate differences between the teachers and special education coordinators.

The survey also included an open-ended question that asked respondents, “If you could change one thing about the District school system related to your school's capacity to educate students with disabilities, what would it be?” This item received 100 teacher responses across the 17 schools that returned at least one teacher survey. The responses were categorized into thematic groups, such as professional development, staffing, and technology, and were used to further illustrate the prevalence of certain issues in the report.

Classroom Observations

When observing the classrooms, the site visitors used a protocol aligned to specific indicators and rated each indicator on a 0–3 scale to reflect the level of implementation (0 and 1 indicated no or low use; 2 and 3 indicated moderate and extensive use). Using these individual classroom ratings, we assigned each school to a “consistency of use” group for each observed indicator:

- Consistently implemented or consistently not implemented (e.g., either all the ratings were 0 and 1, or all the ratings were 2 and 3),
- Mostly implemented or mostly not implemented (e.g., all but one of the ratings were 2 and 3), or
- Inconsistent implementation.

We then summed the number of schools for each group. These results are reported in the chapters, where relevant to further illuminate the use of practices in the study schools.

Evidence Ratings

Using the collected information, we assigned an average rating that identified the extent to which a given indicator was present or not present each school. A rating of “evidence” or “limited to no evidence” was derived as an average across multiple data sources: interviews, classroom observations, surveys (where available), and site visitor ratings. We first generated a score from 0 to 1 for each data source. To do this, we converted the data from these sources to a 0/1 scale. The 0 and 1 scores from the classroom observations and site visitor ratings were each converted to 0 to represent no or low use, and the 2 and 3 scores were each converted to 1. For the surveys (all respondents, including the principals and special education coordinators, if available), the strongly disagree and disagree responses were changed to 0 and the strongly agree and agree responses were changed to 1. The classroom observations and survey results were then averaged, separately, for each indicator, for each school.

Using the interview codes, we generated school-level counts of respondents who reported that the practice was implemented; these counts had a value of 1. We also generated school-level counts of respondents who reported it was not implemented or implemented inconsistently, each which had a

value of 0.¹⁵ These counts were then used to generate an average score. For example, if one respondent reported that a practice did not occur and four respondents reported that it did occur, the average would be 0.8 (the average of one zero and four ones). Finally, we then averaged the scores across all of the available data sources. Exhibit 1.3 provides three school examples of averages scores for a particular indicator.

Exhibit 1.3. Examples of average scores by data source

| Indicator: Teachers use a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies in the instruction of SWDs. | Site visitor ratings | Interview | Class observations | Survey | Average score | Rating |
|---|-----------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| School 1 Example | 1 | 0.86 | 1 | 0.96 | 0.95 | <i>Evidence</i> |
| School 2 Example | 0 | 0.5 | 0.83 | 0* | 0.33 | <i>Limited to no evidence</i> |
| School 3 Example | 1 | 0.67 | 0.67 | n/a | 0.78 | <i>Evidence</i> |

* This survey score is based on a single special education coordinator survey. No other respondents submitted a survey for this school.

We then assigned a rating of “evidence” if the average score across the data sources was above 0.5, and a rating of “limited to no evidence” if the average score was 0.5 or below. If only one data source had information for a given indicator, we did not assign an evidence rating and excluded that school from the counts that we present in the findings. We did this exercise for every indicator and every domain except for IEP development, due to the fact that the primary data source for that domain was the evaluation and IEP documents. The counts of schools by evidence rating for each indicator can be found in Appendix B through Appendix I.

Caveats

Some caution is needed in interpreting the findings in this report. One concern is the large number of charter LEAs and the 4 DCPS schools that declined to participate, hence impacting the representativeness of the findings. We do not know whether the schools that did not participate would have performed differently on the indicators, therefore changing the overall findings.

Another point of caution is the teacher survey results, which we present for 11 of the 20 public schools in the sample. Again, the schools that did not respond, or had low teacher response rates, might have changed the overall results had they participated. In fact, the team found that the schools that provided surveys generally demonstrated a more organized administration. As a group, schools that returned

¹⁵ It is possible that a single respondent fell into both groups if they reported that one aspect of an indicator was implemented and another aspect was not.

sufficient teacher surveys were more likely to have an “evidence” rating than the schools that did not submit sufficient teacher surveys, suggesting differences between these school groups.

A third issue to consider when interpreting the findings is that methodology relied on staff perspectives—through the use of interview and survey data—which may not be entirely objective. Although we attempted to balance the staff perspectives with site visitor ratings and classroom observations, data from the interviews and surveys, if provided, may have driven the evidence ratings for some schools upwards.

Report Overview

The remainder of this report reviews the findings from this methodology. Each chapter focuses on a specific domain and presents findings for selected indicators, focusing on the evidence ratings, key practices that supported the implementation of the indicator, and associated challenges. The report also reviews findings from the school-level interviews regarding system-level challenges and concludes with a series of recommendations intended to assist OSSE in supporting the implementation of quality special education programs across the District.

Chapter 2: IEP Development

The development of comprehensive IEPs, including the composition of the IEP team and specification of data-based and age-appropriate goals, services, accommodations, and transition plans

Within this domain, we examined evidence that student evaluations and IEPs were comprehensive and included appropriate goals and services that were supported by data. The *IEP Development* domain has 13 indicators in total (see Chapter 1 for the full list), and this chapter focuses on three of those indicators:¹⁶

- An evaluation report based on a comprehensive, multidisciplinary psycho-educational evaluation is used to determine special education eligibility and guides the development of an appropriate IEP, if indicated.
- IEPs are comprehensive, complete, and written in a manner that is comprehensible to the student's family members.
- IEPs include measurable goals that are aligned to grade-level standards.

Please see Appendix A for the results of the documentation review process for the larger set of indicators.

Are evaluation reports comprehensive and used to guide the development of an IEP?

In the majority of study schools ($n = 15$), all of the sampled students had an evaluation report on file in the Easy IEP system (see Exhibit 2.1). One student was missing an evaluation report in the remaining five schools, and three students were missing a report in one school. Overall, irrespective of school, 91 percent of the sampled students—112 of 123—had evaluation reports in the IEP system. To assess comprehensiveness, we examined the reports for information on the student's history and from assessments related to the student's disability.¹⁷ In just 6 schools did the reports for all of the sampled students contain such information; in the other 15 schools, between 1 and 7 reports did not contain any or all of the information relevant to the student's disability. In two schools, all of the evaluations lacked appropriate assessment data. For example, in one report for a re-evaluation of a student identified as Other Health Impaired (OHI) due to Attention Deficit Disorder, there were formal assessments for math, reading, written language, and speech/language, but there was no assessment data, formal or informal, for behavior. In another re-evaluation report for a student identified as having an emotional disorder, there was no formal or informal behavior assessment, no Functional Behavior Assessment and no

¹⁶ Indicators from the "Transition plans" sub-domain are not reviewed in this chapter. The sole source of information for these sub-domain indicators were the IEPs, and only six schools had students in the IEP sample that were 16 years or older. Because of the small sample size, we did not discuss the results in the body of the report. However, the numbers of schools (among the six) that met the IEP coding criteria are shown in Appendix A.

¹⁷ Such assessments might measure the student's cognitive, academic, speech-language, fine and gross motor, and/or social-emotional abilities.

records of past evaluations. In an evaluation report for an initial identification of a student with math, reading, and written language concerns, there existed only classroom observations, student work samples, and reading responses rather than any formal assessment in any of the academic areas of concern. Across all students, less than two-thirds (63 percent) of the 112 evaluation reports obtained had complete assessment data.

Exhibit 2.1 Number of Schools in Which All of the Sampled IEPs Met the Coding Criterion for: An evaluation report based on a comprehensive, multidisciplinary psycho-educational evaluation is used to determine special education eligibility and guides the development of an appropriate IEP, if indicated.

| Indicator and coding criteria | N of schools | |
|--|--|---|
| | In which all of the IEPs met the criterion | In which some or none of the IEPs met the criterion |
| Is there an evaluation report? | 15 | 6 |
| Does the evaluation report contain information on the student's history, individual cognitive, academic, speech/language, fine and gross motor, and social/emotional assessment, as appropriate? | 6 | 15 |
| Is the summary table in the evaluation report for each area complete? | 11 | 10 |
| Does the assessment data in the evaluation report support the eligibility determination? | 15 | 6 |
| Does the primary disability match the IEP disability? | 18 | 3 |
| Are all of the areas for which the assessments show performance concerns listed in the IEP? | 17 | 4 |
| Is the "summary of concerns" for each area in the evaluation report reflected in the IEP goals? | 15 | 6 |

To further assess completeness, we looked at whether the summary table of concerns was completed, and whether the assessment data supported the eligibility determination. In half of the schools ($n = 11$), all of the evaluations had a completed summary table. However, even within schools whose evaluations had completed tables, the information was often sparse. The eligibility determination in all evaluation reports in 15 schools appeared to be supported by the assessment data, but this was inconsistent in the remaining 6 schools.

To determine if the evaluation reports guided the development of the IEPs, we looked for alignment between the information in the evaluation report and the IEP. Specifically, we looked at whether the primary disability in the evaluation report matched the IEP disability and whether all of the areas for which the evaluation assessments showed performance concerns were reflected in the IEP (i.e., through descriptions of baseline performance and goals). In nearly all schools ($n = 18$), the primary disability in the evaluation report matched the IEP disability in all sampled cases. In 17 schools, all of the IEPs

included the areas of concern noted in the accompanying evaluation report while all of the IEPs in slightly fewer schools ($n = 15$) contained goals that reflected the information found in the summary of concerns. In four to six schools, the sampled IEPs showed mixed results.

While additional formal assessments are not required for a re-evaluation, the review of IEPs indicated that data as old as six years were used to make continued eligibility determinations. In some cases, there was no updated history or mention of formal or informal assessment in the specific area of need (e.g. student behaviors were listed as impeding academic success on an initial referral; however, no social/emotional/behavioral assessment was conducted in the re-evaluation and there were no updated speech/language data for a continued determination of speech/language impairment). In addition, there were no records of past or current vision and hearing screenings in many of the evaluation reports.

Interviewed school respondents indicated that evaluations and evaluation reports were strengthened by skilled clinicians, especially those who were site-based and had the opportunity to spend time with teachers interpreting assessments and suggesting instructional strategies based on the results. The greatest concern expressed was in regards to the haste with which some referrals are made. There was also some concern that jargon within evaluation reports was not easily understood by parents, the use of the Woodcock-Johnson as the only academic measure was not aligned to grade-level standards or instruction, little or no training was provided to test administrators, and there was a lack of cultural sensitivity in the choice of assessments and in the administration of these assessments.

Key Practices

- **Improving the quality of evaluations with more skilled clinicians.** School staff at five schools reported that while there had been concerns with previous evaluation reports, recently hired, skilled clinicians have improved this practice. One special education coordinator (SEC) reported that the psychological testing was comprehensive and results were written in a manner that parents can understand. She equivocated by saying, “And I’ve been lucky to have some very, very intelligent psychologists...who know their profession and they seriously interview the teacher, the parents, the students.” Another SEC attributed the comprehensiveness of the evaluations to the fact that the school had its own clinical team and the evaluators were all on site and available to work with teachers who may need more information to guide instruction. One SEC shared that while it had not always been the case, current evaluations were comprehensive and helpful in providing the eligibility determination.

Challenges

- **Rushed eligibility determination limits the appropriateness and thoroughness of evaluations.** Three schools reported that the haste with which referral decisions were made, and the evaluations completed, resulted in inappropriate determination decisions. For example, one SEC reported that the school was not taking advantage of the Response to Intervention (RTI) and Student Support Team (SST) processes. Interventions were not appropriately implemented prior to a referral for an evaluation, resulting in an incomplete picture of the students’ strengths and weaknesses. Another SEC stated, “I think because we’re on such a fast track to get [the referral

and identification process] moving, we fail to really drill down into those assessments, and really look at the results of the assessment and the child.”

Are IEPs comprehensive, complete, and written in an understandable manner?

The comprehensiveness of an IEP is determined, in part, by the quality and comprehensiveness of the evaluation. As described above, some IEPs were missing an evaluation altogether in the system, and in others, the evaluation data did not appear sufficient or appropriate. Even if an IEP incorporated all of the information that appears in an evaluation report, it still may not be a comprehensive reflection of the students’ needs. Above, we looked at the alignment between the evaluation report and the IEP, and found that all of the IEPs in 17 schools listed all of the areas identified as a concern in the evaluation report, while all of the IEPs in 15 schools contained goals that reflected the information found in the summary of concerns in the evaluation report. However, we also found that over a third (37 percent) of all evaluation reports did not have complete information on a student’s history or assessments related to the student’s disability. If we account for this incomplete evaluative information, then we might assume that the IEPs based on those evaluations are not a comprehensive reflection of the students’ needs. When we adjust for this, we found that all the IEPs in just 6 schools included the areas of concern identified by the evaluation, a significant drop from the 17 schools.

Exhibit 2.2 Number of Schools in Which All of the Sampled IEPs Met the Coding Criterion for: IEPs are comprehensive, complete (i.e., include performance evaluation, service prescriptions, goals, and transition plans), and written in language that is comprehensible to the student’s family members.

| Coding criteria | N of schools | |
|--|--|---|
| | In which all of the IEPs met the criterion | In which some or none of the IEPs met the criterion |
| Does each “Area of Concern” of the IEP contain information on a) present level of performance, b) needs, and c) impact on student? | 20 | 1 |
| Does each annual goal have information on the a) baseline, b) anticipated date of achievement, and c) evaluation procedures and schedule? | 16 | 5 |
| Does the “Special Education and Related Services” section identify the service, setting, begin and end date, and the time/frequency? | 20 | 1 |
| Do the other IEP sections have complete information (other classroom aides and services, dedicated aides, LRE, classroom accommodations and state assessment participation; transportation, compensatory education, and extended school year)? | 19 | 2 |
| Is the IEP “jargon-free” or if there are technical terms, are they explained in clear terms? | 11 | 10 |

To assess whether the sampled IEPs were complete, we examined whether certain components of the IEPs were completed in full. All of the sampled IEPs in all but one school had complete information for the “Area of Concern” and the “Special Education and Related Services” section.¹⁸ However, when examining the annual goals, this was consistently true in fewer schools. All IEPs in 16 schools had complete information for all annual goals, which included the baseline, anticipated date of achievement, and evaluation procedures.

Another component of this indicator is that the IEPs should be written in a clear and understandable manner for all IEP team members and for the parents in particular. We found that all of the sampled IEPs in just half of the study schools were written in jargon-free language, and this was mixed in the other ten schools. Examples of potentially confusing language included the following:

“zone of proximal development”

“lack of sufficient attention threshold, and single concept instruction....presently, a cursory examination of... oral facial mechanism...”

“will spontaneously use a dynamic tripod grasp”

“use numeral and computational skills to relate real world experience to demonstrate and ability to match quantity to symbols”

Key Practices

- **Making information accessible.** Interviewed respondents shared examples of efforts taken to ensure that IEPs are comprehensive, including offering bilingual testing when necessary and having interpreters at IEP meetings. Additional practices include sharing educational implications of assessments and goals, and sending home draft IEPs several days prior to the IEP meeting with encouragement for parents to call the school with any questions before the parent meets with the IEP team. These strategies are further detailed in the *Family Engagement* chapter.

Challenges

- **Lack of accountability for actual implementation.** Interviewed respondents in a few schools expressed concern that IEPs were written with a focus only on compliance. One special education teacher stated that as long as the IEPs were submitted on time, “there is no accountability for my IEPs, if I actually teach anything that’s on my IEPs. Even, to an extent, if the kids are getting the service hours on their IEPs unless an advocate steps in, we don’t have any systems in place to ensure that.” One SEC believed that there was no flexibility in the time staff

¹⁸ The “Area of Concern” sections contain information on the present level of performance, needs, and impact. The “Special Education and Related Services” section contains information on the service, setting, begin and end date, and duration and frequency.

can spend developing an IEP for a student, and therefore what is crafted for an individual student may not meet that student's needs. Insufficient information hindered one general education teacher's ability to provide appropriate instruction. The teacher expressed concern that teachers had access to the IEP goals but not enough information to really understand the student, saying, "I want to know exactly what it is that they are displaying in the test that we give them, and I don't. All I get are the goals."

Do IEPs include measurable goals that are aligned to grade-level standards?

For this indicator, we examined all goals for measurable targets, and whether the evaluation procedures and schedules for assessing student progress toward the targets were specified.¹⁹ For English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics goals, we also looked for references to an academic standard, such as the Common Core State Standards. In less than half of the study schools ($n = 10$), all of the goals in the sampled IEPs had measurable targets. All of the IEPs in 17 schools had information in the evaluation procedures and schedule field for all of the goals. However, an evaluation procedure may be pointless if there is no measurable target. The IEPs in the other four schools that did not meet this criterion were either missing information or had "at opportunity" instead of a set schedule for some or all of the goals. All of the IEPs with ELA or mathematics goals referenced academic standards in just seven schools. Ten of the remaining schools did not have *any* IEP in which all of the goals for ELA or mathematics referenced a standard; the pattern was mixed across the IEPs for four schools.

Exhibit 2.2 Number of Schools in Which All of the Sampled IEPs Met the Coding Criterion for: IEPs include measurable goals that are aligned to grade-level standards.

| Indicator and coding criteria | N of schools | |
|---|--|---|
| | In which all of the IEPs met the criterion | In which some or none of the IEPs met the criterion |
| Does each goal include a measurable target (e.g., 80% accuracy)? | 10 | 11 |
| Does each goal include information on the evaluation procedures and schedule? | 17 | 4 |
| Do the English Language Arts goals contain a reference to an academic standard? | 7 | 14 |
| Do the mathematics goals contain a reference to an academic standard? | 7 | 14 |
| Does the "Classroom accommodations and state assessment participation" section specify types of classroom accommodations? | 17 | 4 |
| Does the "Classroom accommodations and state | 15 | 6 |

¹⁹ In the Easy IEP system, each goal has a field for entering the evaluation procedures and schedule for measuring student progress.

| Indicator and coding criteria | N of schools | |
|---|---|---|
| | In which all of the IEPs met the criterion | In which some or none of the IEPs met the criterion |
| assessment participation” section specify types of statewide assessment accommodations? | | |
| Does the IEP include a statement of why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment? | Easy IEP does not have a field for documenting this information | |

Special education coordinators (SEC) in seven of the study schools reported that their IEPs included measurable goals aligned to grade-level standards. One SEC shared that all special education teachers received training on how to write standards-based IEP goals, indicating that it is the “job of special education teachers to write goals that...depending on the child’s needs, align in some way to [the] standards.”

Please note that the IEPs were the sole data source for this indicator. Because of the standardized nature of the Easy IEP format, the data did not provide sufficient information to identify key practices and challenges for this indicator.

Chapter 3: Access

Access to an appropriate curriculum, equal academic and social opportunities, and interactions with peers of students with disabilities

Within this domain, we examined evidence that students with disabilities (SWDs) have access to appropriate instruction aligned to grade-level standards and access to general education opportunities. The Access domain has seven indicators in total (see Chapter 1 for the full list), of which two are discussed in this chapter:

- SWDs receive instruction in a curriculum that is aligned to the standards at their grade level.
- Efforts are made to assign SWDs across general education classrooms in order to reflect the existing natural proportion of SWDs within each grade-level, rather than clustering SWDs in only one or two classrooms.

Please see Appendix B for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings.

Do SWDs receive instruction in a curriculum aligned to their grade-level standards?

All 21 schools showed evidence across the data sources that SWDs were provided instruction in a standards-based curriculum (see Exhibit 3.1). The survey results supported this finding, with an average of 83 percent of teacher respondents across 11 schools agreeing that this occurred in their school. Classroom observations also pointed to a high level of implementation, with all or nearly all of the teachers in the observed classrooms in 13 schools providing standards-based instruction to SWDs. In four schools, the observations showed that instruction was inconsistent across teachers, whereas another four did not have enough data to rate the consistency.

Exhibit 3.1 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected Access Indicator

| Selected access indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | Limited or no evidence | Excluded ²⁰ |
| SWDs receive instruction in a curriculum aligned to the standards at their grade level. | 21 | 0 | 0 |
| Efforts are made to assign SWDs across general education classrooms in order to reflect the existing natural proportion of SWD within each grade level, rather than clustering SWDs in only one or two classrooms. | 14 | 3 | 4 |

²⁰ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

As described by the interview respondents, SWDs in all schools were taught grade-level standards, which for many schools involved moving toward implementation of the Common Core State Standards initiative. Teachers in most schools facilitated this access by implementing a variety of strategies for SWDs, which are described in this chapter. As one special education teacher explained,

The standards are the same. They're just modified, so the students can still pick up the concept even though their [basic skills] are not on grade level. If it's [an] eighth-grade student, then we teach eighth-grade standards. If it's a seventh-grade student, seventh-grade standards.

Key practices

- Implementing strategies that allow SWDs to access the general education grade-level standards.** Teachers in more than half ($n = 12$) of the study schools reported using instructional strategies and modifications to enable SWDs to access standards-based curriculum. In particular, they highlighted the importance of efforts to develop basic skills SWDs may be lacking that are necessary to access grade-level general education curriculum. Some teachers reinforced the acquisition of these skills through remedial instruction at the beginning of the school year, while others provided this instruction in one-on-one settings as needed throughout the school year. Additional strategies included scaffolding, re-teaching, breaking down objectives into smaller learning tasks, and creating and using supplemental materials at lower skill levels that teach the grade-level standard. One special education teacher described this “back-mapping” strategy:

[We make] sure that the standards are [being taught] first and then, seeing what the students can do on his or her own individual basis, and then once again to make sure that they can achieve [the standard] at the same [grade] level. They may not grasp as much of the concept but the standards still remain the same. To me, they can still learn. It's just that they may learn a little bit slower or a different way, but they do for the most part gain a good acceptance and grasp of the concept. It just may not be as quick and it may not be as thorough as the regular education students.

- Aligning IEP goals to grade-level standards.** This practice was reported in eight schools. Teachers described using grade-level standards as a guide for instruction, and then “marrying” IEP goals as closely to these standards as possible to ensure mastery of the standard. Some schools reported teaching grade-level Common Core State Standards and then, based on the skill level of the student, writing IEP goals to include skills needed to access these standards.

One special education teacher described this practice:

Instruction is based from their specialized instruction in the IEP, and so we merge [instruction on IEP goals and grade-level standards] together to make sure that the students are receiving instruction to access grade-level standards with the incorporation of IEP skills.

Challenges

- **Insufficient curriculum support and materials geared toward teaching grade-level standards to SWDs with significant skill gaps.** Interview respondents across six schools reported that there was limited curriculum support for the implementation of Common Core State Standards, including the lack of textbooks aligned to these standards. One teacher expressed concern that the tiered-instructional modules associated with the Common Core State Standards did not offer support for the instruction for students with significant skill gaps, while another teacher argued that there needed to be more resources for teachers to support the Common Core State Standards. According to this teacher, “[I]t’s great to have all of these standards, but it’s not great to not have received any resources or materials to be able to teach these standards.” Two respondents described their schools as being “curriculum-material starved.” One principal described insufficient curriculum material and training support:

We’ve been told that the third, fourth, and fifth grade students are all going to be using the Common Core [State] Standards for Math. [We’ve been told] “You’re not going to get any curriculum, you’re not going to get any textbooks, you’re not going to get any workbooks, but you do have access to a database where you can watch teachers do lessons on these particular concepts.” And that’s what the teachers have been given to go home for the summer. Now, you plan how you’re going to teach, you know, fifth-grade division next year. You can watch the demonstration lessons.

Are SWDs placed across a range of general education classrooms at their grade level?

As shown in Exhibit 3.1, 14 schools showed “evidence” of this, 3 showed “limited or no evidence,” and 4 were excluded. This is reflected in the survey results, with just over half (54 percent) of the teacher respondents, on average, agreeing that their schools did not cluster SWDs in a limited number of general education classrooms.

School staff in 13 schools described the process of assigning SWDs to teachers: respondents in nearly half of these schools (7 of the 13) reported attempts to more equally distribute students across classrooms. Of these seven, staff in five schools reported clustering students with certain teachers.²¹ Student assignments varied by grade in one school; in another school there was only one class per grade, so all SWDs were taught in general education settings.

Key practices

- **Strategically distributing SWDs across classes by grade level or subject areas.** Staff from seven schools reported that SWDs were assigned to teachers purposefully, so that they were distributed evenly across classrooms in grade levels or subject areas to the greatest extent possible. In six of the seven schools, special education coordinators either worked with administrators to assign students to classes or made the assignments on their own. One

²¹ One educational campus spanning elementary and middle-school grades is included both in the count of seven and the count of five schools, because the practices vary by grade level.

interviewee commented that when schedules were made, a certain number of seats were held in each classroom for SWDs. Respondents from two schools noted that they made conscious efforts to distribute high-performing students, as well as SWDs, evenly across classes. One special education coordinator reported that the school's principal used student data to assign classrooms, and spoke of it as a strength of their school:

[The principal] uses multiple pieces of data to really figure out where the kids should be so.... We really wanted to get away from having all kids with disabilities in one to two classes, which, I'll admit is hard, scheduling ways to get their hours in if they're across different classrooms. But we've done it. It was a lot of finagling, but we did it and you just see that the kids have so many more peer models versus in the past. You know, I've been in a classroom where there were like 20 kids and 12 of them had disabilities. I mean, they're not having their peer models and they're not going to be as successful.

Challenges

- **Reported and perceived limited general educator ability to effectively instruct students with disabilities.** This was reported in three schools. The special education coordinators at two schools commented that students were assigned to teachers based on whether the teacher had a background in special education, which resulted in grouping most of the SWDs in a few classes. One of the respondents commented that, although they know they are supposed to assign SWDs evenly, the coordinator and special education teachers are “just not comfortable doing that.” Instead, if a teacher is trained in special education, then that teacher will have “a class that will have all the special [education] kids.” Another teacher at that school also noted, “You’re not supposed to assign kids to teachers. But for kids who have IEPs already, we do.” However, one special education coordinator also noted that general education teachers at their school are “territorial” over who they allow into their class, and, in particular, they try to avoid having the frequently older students in special education in their lower-level (and younger-aged) classes.
- **Difficulty in providing continuum of services to meet the needs of all students.** In discussing the practice of student assignments, five schools—two charter schools and three District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)—reported challenges in providing a full range of placement options, from inclusive general education classrooms to self-contained special education classrooms. One charter school principal reported attempting to assign SWDs evenly across classes to meet the mandate that students be included in English and math classes, but being limited by having too few special education teachers to support those students. Therefore, to ensure SWDs were able to access the curriculum, the school formed special support classes for remediation where most of the SWDs were placed in a de facto special education class. In addition, an interviewee from another school commented that the school did not have the staff or space to provide special education classrooms, so students were assigned evenly across all general education classrooms. As a result, students who needed higher levels of service had to go to a different school.

Chapter 4: Instructional Supports

Instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction, the use of modifications and accommodations, and technology, to support the education of students with disabilities

Within this domain, we examined evidence of differentiated instruction, modifications and accommodations, and use of technology to support the learning of students with disabilities (SWDs). The *Instructional Supports* domain has 14 indicators (see Chapter 1 for the full list), and this chapter reports the findings for six indicators:²²

- Teachers use a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies (e.g., scaffolding, modeling, and collaborative learning structures) in the instruction of SWDs.
- Teachers use a variety of instructional formats (e.g., direct instruction, project-based, and peer-mediated instruction) to meet the needs of SWDs.
- Teachers use whole class, small group, and individual instruction to meet the academic needs of SWDs.
- Teachers differentiate the products required of SWDs to demonstrate proficiency on lesson objectives.
- SWDs have access to and use various forms of instructional technology in the classroom.
- Teachers integrate instructional technology seamlessly into their lessons (e.g., Web Quests, SMART Boards, DVDs, PowerPoint).

Please see Appendix C for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings.

Do teachers differentiate instruction for SWDs?

This question encompasses the first three indicators from the list above: the use of instructional strategies, formats, and student grouping to meet the academic needs of SWDs. As shown in Exhibit 4.1, a large number of schools ($n = 18$) showed evidence of at least one type of these practices across the data sources. This was particularly evident in the survey results, in which more than 80 percent of the teachers, on average, in 11 schools confirmed that they used evidence-based instructional strategies (86 percent), instructional formats (83 percent), and grouping strategies (87 percent) to meet the needs of SWDs. However, some caution should be exercised in interpreting this information. Because the teacher interviews and survey data relied on self-reports, we also examined the special education coordinator responses to these survey items and data from the classroom observations. The percentages for the special education coordinators in 14 schools were lower than the teacher survey responses, with 64

²² Indicators from the “accommodations and modifications” sub-domain are not reviewed in this chapter. We did a preliminary synthesis of the interview data related to accommodations and modifications and determined that the information was insufficient for identifying key practices and challenges. Please see Appendix C for the evidence ratings.

percent and 79 percent agreeing that teachers used a variety of instructional formats and evidence-based instructional strategies, respectively.²³

Exhibit 4.1 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected Instructional Supports Indicator

| Selected instructional supports indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ²⁴ |
| Teachers use a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies (e.g., scaffolding, modeling, and collaborative learning structures) in the instruction of SWDs. | | | |
| Teachers use a variety of instructional formats (e.g., direct instruction, project-based, and peer-mediated instruction) to meet the needs of SWDs. | 18 | 3 | 0 |
| Teachers use whole class, small group, and individual instruction to meet the academic needs of SWDs. ²⁵ | | | |
| Teachers differentiate the products required of SWDs to demonstrate proficiency on lesson objectives. | 8 | 12 | 1 |
| SWDs have access to and use various forms of instructional technology in the classroom. | 10 | 11 | 0 |
| Teachers integrate instructional technology seamlessly into their lessons (e.g., Web Quests, SMART Boards, DVDs, PowerPoint slides). | 14 | 7 | 0 |

In addition, the classroom observations revealed inconsistencies within schools as to whether teachers implemented these practices. All or nearly all of the observed classrooms in approximately half of the 21 schools showed implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies and instructional formats. However, the results were mixed across the observed classrooms in seven schools, and in one school, teachers in most of the observed classrooms did not use a variety of instructional formats.²⁶ Varied instructional groups were more common in all or nearly all of the observed classrooms in 15 schools, demonstrating the use of a range of grouping strategies.

²³ More schools provided special education coordinator surveys ($n = 14$) than teacher surveys.

²⁴ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

²⁵ Because of the overlap in teachers’ interview responses to questions about these practices, interview data pertaining to these indicators were coded with the same code.

²⁶ Due to scheduling challenges, the study team was not able to do random observations. Instead, the principal selected classrooms that met our criteria for observation. We acknowledge that these classrooms may not necessarily be reflective of the practices in the non-observed classrooms.

While teacher interviewees in all schools reported using scaffolding in their classrooms, interviewees at only a few schools described using several different types of strategies, suggesting that the use of a variety of practices within a single school may not be as widespread.²⁷ For example, respondents provided examples of five or more scaffolding strategies at only two schools during the interviews. Fewer teachers described the use of different instructional formats. With respect to instructional groups, interviewed teachers from all schools described regrouping practices, with teachers in half the schools describing one-on-one instruction in the classroom while other students worked in small groups or independently, and seven schools used learning stations to facilitate small group work.

Key practices

- **Using scaffolding strategies to build student independence.** Described by respondents in 18 of the 21 schools, a common scaffolding method was to assign different levels of reading text based on the students' instructional level (i.e., tiered reading). In half of the schools ($n = 11$), teachers reported that they used sentence starters or writing templates with explicit instructions for developing paragraphs, essays, and writing cues to help students by structuring the writing process. Scaffolding instruction allowed students to be "supported in having their own autonomy" in learning, as described by one general education teacher. Another said, "I may give them sentence starters or cues to scaffold the level of instruction to get them to the point where they are able to do it on their own. I can gradually release the responsibility to the [student]." A third general education teacher noted, "I try my best in scaffolding to just break it down into the bare bones and give them the minimal amount of success so that they can say, 'Okay, I can do this.'"

To support student learning, 10 schools reported using graphic organizers, visual aids, and pictures. One school specifically reported using Frayer diagrams and Cornell Note-taking as specific scaffolding strategies. In addition, at six schools, teachers reported using concrete manipulatives to help students understand abstract concepts. These included connector blocks, computer games, and interactive SMART Boards. At seven schools, teachers used repetition, modeling, guided practice, and demonstrations to reinforce the learning of a concept. A general education teacher said, "I notice that if I scaffold for them and model it over and over, they get an understanding of how they should approach the questions."

- **Using collaborative learning activities and peer-mediated instruction.** Ten schools reported using these strategies. In-class collaborative strategies, such as "Turn and Talk" and "Think, Pair, Share," were used to assist struggling students by pairing them with stronger students. One general education teacher said, "A lot of times, I'll make sure the high performing student is partnered with one of the students with [an IEP]." Another said, "I encourage study buddies and group collaboration to find answers."

²⁷ Scaffolding refers to specialized teaching strategies geared to support learning when students are first introduced to a new subject, including strategies such as activating prior knowledge, breaking into smaller steps, and modeling.

Challenges

- **Inconsistent use of scaffolding strategies.** Although the survey results suggested high use across 11 schools, scaffolding practices were inconsistently observed in 7 of the study schools.²⁸

Furthermore, there appeared to be differences between general education and co-taught classrooms. According to the observations, approximately 89 percent of the co-taught settings utilized instructional strategies such as scaffolding, in comparison to 74 percent of the general education settings. Differences were also evident in the use of a variety of instructional formats, with 82 percent of teachers in co-taught settings being observed using these, in relation to 70 percent of teachers in general education settings. It is important to note that the large number of schools rated as “evidence” was likely driven by the use of reduced reading text and grouping strategies, which were more prevalent across the schools. However, these strategies alone may not be sufficient to address the needs of SWDs. As mentioned above, just two schools provided examples of a range (e.g., five or more) of scaffolding strategies, while respondents in eight schools described one or two specific strategies. These results suggest a need for more professional development on how to differentiate instruction, a concern expressed by interview respondents in six schools.

Do teachers differentiate products for SWDs to demonstrate their proficiency?

As shown in Exhibit 4.1, fewer than half of the schools had evidence across the data sources that teachers differentiated student work, assignments, and projects for SWDs to demonstrate mastery of a concept. In seven schools, the site visitors found no evidence of this in all or nearly all of the observed classrooms, and in nine schools the classroom observations showed mixed results (with some teachers differentiating products, and some teachers not). Although 80 percent of teacher survey respondents across 11 schools agreed that they differentiated products, interview respondents in just half of the site visit schools provided examples of how they did this.

²⁸ We acknowledge that the timing of the second cohort of site visits in September 2012 was not optimal for collecting data. At the same time, if scaffolding practices were firmly established in a given school, the practices would be expected to carry over from one year to the next and to be used consistently throughout the school year.

Key practices

- **Differentiating student work products in various ways.** Eleven schools provided examples of how work products were adapted to a student's academic level. One school reported that SWDs might be given the option to create a poster after reading a short story. A general education teacher at another school described asking some students to develop a character sketch after reading *Romeo and Juliet* instead of writing a report on William Shakespeare. Teachers at other schools allowed students who had difficulty writing to provide oral rather than written responses. A special education teacher described a range of student products to demonstrate understanding of the same concept: one student created a book, another made his own trailer or commercial, and another wrote a poem. Two schools reported tiered assignments with differing difficulty levels to show mastery of the same concept. To address the challenge of assessing the knowledge of students who are significantly below grade level, one general education teacher designed alternative assignments, stating, "I offer tiered assessments. So we offer them bachelors, masters, or PhD [levels of assignments], and they actually get to choose."

Challenges

- **Lack of understanding and acceptance of general educators in differentiating products for SWDs.** One principal described the challenge of general educators' low level of understanding and acceptance of differentiation:

It's hard to get the general [education] teacher to understand that [students don't] have to complete every single one of those standards to show that they demonstrated a good understanding of the concept. That's kind of been hard. There are some teachers that unless [students] do every single part of this (they don't feel) they should get the same kind of credit the other kids get.

Do SWDs and teachers use technology in the classroom?

Although 14 schools showed evidence of teachers' use of technology in the classroom across the data sources, less than half (10 of the 21) had evidence that SWDs had access to and used instructional technology (see Exhibit 4.1). Nearly a quarter (24 percent) of teacher survey respondents, on average, in the 11 schools that returned the surveys disagreed that they integrated technology into lessons, while 19 percent, on average, disagreed that SWDs had access to and used technology.

This limited use of technology was also reflected in the classroom observations. The SWDs in all or mostly all of the observed classrooms in 6 schools had no access to technology, and access was mixed in classrooms in 10 schools. In no school did SWDs have access to technology in all or mostly all of the observed classrooms. The practice was slightly better for the teachers' use; in four schools, teachers used technology in all or in most of the observed classrooms; in six schools, teachers did not use technology; and in nine schools, some teachers did but others did not.

Of the 11 schools with interview data for this indicator, respondents from 10 schools commented that their school needed access to more technology for teachers and students. Most respondents reported that their school had a limited number of computers that teachers could access, and many described

how computers were used to deliver supplemental materials for students. Interviewees from just three schools described teachers integrating technology into their classroom instruction.

Key practices

- **Using technology to support instruction.** Staff from three schools described how staff used tablets and applications to help them track and meet the needs of their students. In two schools, teachers used iPads and education applications to help them tailor instruction. One respondent reported that the applications contained pop-up features to remind teachers when they needed to monitor the progress of their students, and that the tablet also had online components to provide teachers with instructional ideas and links to websites for targeted lesson plans on how to reach certain students. Teachers also allowed students to use the tablets to watch a video or lesson to support specific concepts or skills within the classroom. At one school, the special education teachers who taught in self-contained settings had tablets with interactive reading programs that they used with SWDs.

Challenges

- **Limited technological resources.** Staff from all 11 schools with interview data reported a need for more technology. One interviewee identified a deficit of technological resources, such as a working computer lab or enough computers for a class, as one of the biggest challenges for their school in educating students. This challenge was identified across a range of respondents. Special education teachers, general education teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators across another five schools also commented that their schools needed greater access to technology. As noted above, site visitors found little to no use of instructional technologies by teachers in six schools, and interview respondents from just two schools reported that computers were readily available in all classrooms. In the surveys, teachers from six different schools identified technology as an area they would change to improve the education of SWDs, and identified the need for more assistive technology and iPads for their students, Promethean/SMART Boards, and laptops. One survey respondent wrote that there needs to be more resources for SWDs in the DCPS system as a whole: “Technology is very important, yet DCPS does not provide schools with quality, working technology or money in the budget to purchase technology.” The need for greater technology resources persisted even after two of the schools received grants from outside companies.
- **Inequitable distribution of existing technology and delays in securing assistive technology.** Through surveys and interviews, staff from five schools expressed concern about what they perceived to be an inequitable distribution of resources for technology across and within schools. At one school, a teacher commented on the disparity between general and special education resources: “All of our technology resources are specifically reserved for general education classrooms, none for special education specifically.” Staff in other schools noted that there seems to be inconsistent availability of technology across the district, with some schools having a lot and others having little to none. In addition, administrators and teachers reported bureaucratic challenges in getting appropriate assistive technologies for SWDs. One respondent commented that when they identify a piece of equipment that an SWD needs, the school has

“to meet a lot of requirements from the system before we can get that. So, sometimes a whole school year can go by before we can secure the equipment for the student.” A family coordinator from another school noted that in the previous year, technology written into an IEP for a student in the spring did not arrive until the fall, and when it did there was no training for the student’s teachers on how to use it.

Chapter 5: Behavior Supports

Consistent school-wide, classroom-level, and student-specific behavior strategies that support a positive and conducive learning environment for students with disabilities

Within this domain, we examined evidence of practices that support school-wide and classroom-level behavior supports. The *Behavior Supports* domain contains nine indicators (see Chapter 1 for the full list), of which three are discussed here:²⁹

- A targeted number of positively stated school-wide expectations for student behavior are consistently reinforced throughout the school environment and clearly communicated to staff, families, and students.
- A clearly defined system of positive and negative consequences related to student behavior exists in the school.
- Teachers consistently use class-wide strategies, routines, and procedures to effectively manage the classroom and support learning, and are consistent with the school-wide behavior plan.

Please see Appendix D for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings.

Are there school-wide expectations with clearly defined consequences?

Across the 21 schools, 15 showed evidence across data sources of targeted behavior expectations that are consistently reinforced and clearly communicated to staff, families, and students (see Exhibit 5.1). On a closely related indicator—a clearly defined system of positive and negative consequences for student behavior—15 schools demonstrated evidence across the data sources. Although there was evidence of these practices across several schools, a sizeable percentage of the teacher survey respondents in 11 schools disagreed that these indicators were present in their schools. At least one-third of teachers, on average, disagreed that behavior expectations were consistently implemented by all staff (35 percent) or that there was a clearly defined system of positive and negative consequences (33 percent).

²⁹ Indicators from the “Behavior interventions” sub-domain are not reviewed in this chapter. The data for these indicators came primarily from documentation reviews and were insufficient for assigning evidence ratings.

Exhibit 5.1 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected Behavior Supports Indicator

| Selected behavior supports indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ³⁰ |
| A targeted number of positively stated school-wide expectations for student behavior are consistently reinforced throughout the school environment and clearly communicated to staff, families, and students. | 15 | 6 | 0 |
| A clearly defined system of positive and negative consequences related to student behavior exists in the school. | 15 | 6 | 0 |
| Teachers consistently use class-wide strategies, routines, and procedures to effectively manage the classroom and to support learning, and are consistent with the school-wide behavior plan. | 16 | 5 | 0 |

A review of school documents also raised concerns about this area.³¹ Among the 17 schools that provided documents, documents from only 13 described a school-wide behavior plan. Regarding whether expectations were clearly conveyed, expectations in just nine schools were described in documents, such as a parent or staff handbook, suggesting limited efforts to communicate this with parents, students, and staff. Documents from 12 schools included behavior expectations that were positively stated. In terms of clear consequences, documents from seven schools described both positive and negative consequences, two others described only positive consequences, and five described only negative consequences.

Based on the interviews and documentation review, site visitors determined that four schools did not have a school-wide behavior plan in place; another three schools had a plan, but its implementation was not discernible.

In describing their school-wide approach to managing behavior, interview respondents from seven schools reported that they had a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system, with two being District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) School-wide Applications Model (SAM) schools.³² As

³⁰ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

³¹ Please note that due to the inconsistencies in the provided documents (and the fact that several schools sent no documentation), we did not include information from the documentation review in the averages across data sources for each school. Instead, this information was used to further confirm or refute the findings emerging from the other data sources.

³² SAM schools use response to intervention to identify instructional and behavior supports for students. Under SAM, schools receive ongoing professional development and technical assistance.

detailed below, several other schools had implemented incentive programs for student behavior.

Key practices

- **Providing incentives for good behavior.** Described by 14 schools, rewarding students with points, tokens, or “bucks” for good behavior was a common approach to instituting clear consequences for student behavior. However, one secondary school in our sample did not have an incentive program, despite concerns raised by interviewed respondents about student behavior. Schools varied in how incentive programs were implemented. One school provided students with “bucks” at the beginning of each day, which were then deducted for infractions. Students with bucks at the end of the week were given school rewards. Schools described short-term (weekly redemptions) and long-term (accumulating points) rewards, and some described earning points for both academics and behavior, including attendance. Across all examples, students redeemed their bucks or points at the school store or used them to participate in school events (e.g., access to the “Fun Room,” movie night, school dances, end-of-the-year cookout). One respondent noted that the token/point economy had the added benefit of teaching students with disabilities (SWDs) functional skills. There was also evidence that teachers provided their own incentives for appropriate behavior, both in absence of or in addition to the school-wide approach.
- **Establishing an incentive system with clear goals that are frequently reinforced.** A number of schools have implemented incentive systems that have clear goals that are reinforced across staff. For example, one school set daily goals for each student, and paraprofessionals systematically collected data on students’ progress toward those goals for the purpose of assigning points. In another, the related service providers participated in the system by bestowing bucks on special education students during their sessions with them. Another school focused on specific character traits for each month of the school year; these were conveyed through daily presentations and character boards throughout the school. Staff at one school drew up contracts with students with behavior concerns to identify goals, supports to reach those goals, and rewards.
- **Clearly conveying behavior expectations to parents, students, and staff.** Although clear expectations were not evident across all schools in the sample, in some, the expectations were obvious to the visitors immediately upon arrival. In 12 schools, behavior expectations were posted prominently throughout the hallways and classrooms. In addition to posting the expectations on the walls, one school posted the student code of conduct in the student planners. One school conducted a presentation on its character policy and consequences at the new parent orientation. Another sent home weekly behavior progress reports to reinforce the school-wide expectations.
- **Designating staff to oversee and support behavior management.** Five schools had a Dean of Students, which facilitated a school-wide focus and expectations of student behavior. A few schools reported supplemental staff such as social workers and behavior specialists; others noted that the schools had teams to examine data and address student behavioral needs. In one

school, a behavior team served as a resource to teachers when they had a challenging student; at least one team member responded immediately when they received an alert, which enabled the teacher to continue instruction while the student's behavior was being addressed.

Challenges

- **Inconsistency in practices.** Inconsistency *within* schools threatens to undermine the effectiveness of behavior management in schools both with and without school-wide approaches. A respondent at a school that submitted a school-wide behavior plan, but had little evidence of implementation, described the classroom management as “situational,” in that it varied from teacher to teacher and from student to student. Similarly, interview respondents in another school with a school-wide behavior plan noted that it was not enforced across the buildings and reported that the inconsistency was disruptive for students. One general education teacher at this school remarked that she “detested” the behavior ladders used to track student behavior in classrooms. In another school where school-wide expectations existed, each grade level had its own behavior management system. Inconsistency appeared particularly problematic if there were separate special education programs or self-contained settings. One special education teacher noted that she “never” gave incentives to her students in special education, despite the existence of a school-wide incentive program. A special education coordinator described the implications of discrepancies in management:

Unfortunately, [teachers' responses to student behavior are] inconsistent. And that's what makes it difficult when we go to place our students because we have four or five teachers per grade. And unfortunately oftentimes, you know, 50 percent of those teachers are the ones that you know you can rely on for consistency for behavior management, for differentiating, and all that kind of stuff. And then there are other teachers that I know if I were to put my child in there with the type of behaviors that he or she has they would never survive.”

Probably the most striking example of within-school inconsistency, in a school in which most of the observed teachers effectively managed student behavior in their own classrooms, the administration reprimanded the students over the public announcement system for “acting like farm animals,” and threatened to suspend them.

Do teachers effectively manage behavior in the classroom?

At the classroom level, we were interested in whether teachers consistently and effectively managed student behavior. As shown in Exhibit 5.1, in 16 of the 21 schools, we found evidence of teachers' use of behavior strategies, even in schools in which a school-wide plan appeared to be lacking. The survey results supported this finding, with 78 percent of teacher survey respondents on average across 11 schools agreeing that teachers consistently used behavior management strategies. However, evidence was lacking across the data sources in five schools, and 16 percent of the teacher survey respondents on

average disagreed that there was consistency in implementation.³³ While teachers in the observed classrooms varied in their approaches to managing behavior, classroom strategies appeared more effective when implemented consistently school-wide.

Key practices

- **Reinforcing expected behaviors, systematically and frequently.** One simple but essential way to reinforce positive behavior is to clearly define and display behavior expectations in classrooms. This was found in all observed classrooms in eight schools and in most classrooms in five schools. Teachers in two schools, in particular, showed excellent use of their school's school-wide behavior plan, consistently verifying appropriate behavior with incentives and referring to possibilities for reward.
- **Using strategies to minimize disruptions.** Teachers in three schools used hand signals to minimize noise levels and, therefore, disruptions. In two of these schools, students in some classrooms used thumbs up/down to convey understanding of teachers' instructions and prompts, and teachers in a third school used hand signals that were implemented across all classrooms. In this school, students used a series of signals to depict responses in whole class and small group activities and discussions. The same school also had noise level charts with four levels posted throughout; teachers used the charts to identify appropriate voice volume for each activity (e.g., "use your restaurant voice"). Finally, although inconsistent within schools, some teachers ensured that each desk had a set of needed materials at the start of the class, which minimized downtime.

Challenges

- **Inconsistency in practices.** Inconsistency in school-wide behavior management practices reported by the interview respondents above was also apparent in the classroom observations. While teachers used effective classroom management strategies across all observed classrooms in 13 schools and across most observed classrooms in two schools, teachers varied considerably in managing behavior in four schools.³⁴ One site visitor noted that "chaos rules" for one classroom, and then reported that students in the next classroom observation exhibited respectful behavior. Furthermore, clearly defined and posted behavior expectations were not visible in any of the classrooms in two schools and were inconsistently implemented in four schools.³⁵
- **Lost instructional time and poor student engagement.** Classrooms in five schools were described by the visitors as being noisy and chaotic, which made for a disruptive learning environment. Instructional time was lost during transitions, particularly at the beginning of class.

³³ The remaining 5 percent of teacher respondents responded "don't know."

³⁴ In two schools, the visitors did not collect data from enough classrooms to rate the consistency across classrooms.

³⁵ In two schools, the visitors did not collect data from enough classrooms to rate the consistency across classrooms.

In one instance, it took more than 5 minutes before the students were settled at the start of class, and 10 minutes in another while materials were being distributed. In another school, one class took 20 minutes to organize for center activities. Visitors described the lack of student engagement and time spent on task as a concern, even in settings where student behavior was not disruptive. In some classrooms, teachers made no or limited efforts to actively engage students. Poor student attendance was described as a challenge by respondents from both elementary and secondary schools; one special education teacher at a secondary school reported that one student missed more than 100 days.

- **Lack of school- and systems-level supports.** Interview respondents across 11 schools identified student behavior as one challenge that they faced in providing quality education programs, and 4 teacher survey respondents identified behavior supports as one area they would change in the system. Despite behavior being a top concern in some schools, there appeared to be a lack of focus and support directed toward this issue in particularly problematic schools. Three teachers at a single school remarked on the lack of support from the administration to address behavior within the school, with one teacher saying that as long as her students are “contained and not killing each other,” the perception of the administration is that a good job is being done. Respondents from six schools noted a lack of system-wide supports and trained staff, even among those with special education training, to address behavior concerns. One principal noted, “One of the biggest problems we have with our special education students that there's been such a lagging support for the behavior problems by the time they get here.” A staff member from another school commented, “One place we found very constrained is the quality in social emotional supports... and I never heard that as a priority.” One principal expressed concerns about how a lack of centralized support resulted in school staff and services being tied up with one or two students:

When asking for [behavior] supports, we absolutely have been let down in that regard...when literally students are running out of our building or staplers are being thrown at teachers' heads. When books are being chucked at other students, students are being stabbed with a pen. And I just feel like we could really use a lot more support in terms of how to best provide supports for those students....We're taking a lot of services away from the students that can use them because we're all being used on one child.... And I think it would be helpful for folks to come out [to] the building and see what we're working with. And maybe there are supports that we can put into place in the building but we need support with that, and how to best implement that. So in terms of the way that different initiatives or changes have been rolled out, I think that's a complete growth area that [the Office of the State Superintendent of Education] and DCPS should work together on.

Chapter 6: Staff Collaboration and Professional Development

Staff practices and opportunities that promote the sharing of cross-disciplinary knowledge to support the education of students with disabilities

This chapter reviews findings of two primary sub-domains: staff collaboration and professional development.

Staff Collaboration

Within this sub-domain, we examined evidence of practices that support formal and informal opportunities for special education and general education teachers, as well as other staff members, to collaborate to support learning for students with disabilities (SWDs). The *Staff Collaboration* sub-domain has seven indicators (see Chapter 1 for the full list), and this section reviews the findings for the following:

- Cross-discipline staff collaboration is formally supported and instituted in the school.
- General education and special education teachers frequently meet to discuss and systematically share information on the instructional and behavioral needs of their SWDs and to collaborate on collecting and interpreting student data.
- Supplemental coaching, mentoring, and support strategies are in place to assist new teachers or teachers new to their role of instructing SWDs in the school.
- Grade-to-grade and school-to-school articulation strategies are in place to facilitate the sharing of successful instructional strategies, instructional accommodations, and modifications that have been developed for SWDs.

Please see Appendix E for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings.

Do general and special educators meet frequently?

This covers the first two indicators listed above: is collaboration a part of the formal schedule and do teachers meet frequently? Across the 21 schools visited, 15 showed evidence across data sources that cross-disciplinary collaboration was formally established and supported, and 17 schools demonstrated evidence that general education and special education teachers met frequently to discuss student needs (see Exhibit 6.1). Although the majority of schools were rated as having “evidence,” it is a concern that four to five schools in the site visit sample fell short.

Exhibit 6.1 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected Staff Collaboration Indicator

| Selected staff collaboration indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ³⁶ |
| Cross-discipline staff collaboration is formally supported and instituted in the school. | 15 | 5 | 1 |
| General and special education teachers frequently meet to discuss and systematically share information on the instructional and behavioral needs of their SWDs and collaborate on collecting and interpreting student data. | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| Supplemental coaching, mentoring, and support strategies are in place to assist new teachers or teachers new to their role of instructing SWDs in the school. | 12 | 9 | 0 |
| Grade-to-grade and school-to-school articulation strategies are in place to facilitate the sharing of successful instructional strategies, instructional accommodations, and modifications that have been developed for SWDs. | 14 | 7 | 0 |

The findings from 11 schools that returned the surveys corroborate this concern. On average, more than a quarter (28 percent) of the teacher respondents in each school surveyed disagreed that staff collaboration was formally supported. Similarly, more than a quarter, on average, disagreed that general education and special education teachers met frequently to discuss academic needs (29 percent), behavior needs (30 percent), or to collect and interpret data (32 percent). There was a marked difference in these perspectives between District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and charter schools, with an average of 41 percent of teacher survey respondents in five charter schools disagreeing that staff collaboration was formally supported, in comparison to an average of 17 percent in five DCPS schools.³⁷ Among the open-ended survey responses, seven teachers from six schools identified having more time and supports for general and special education collaboration as one aspect they would change about the system.

While general education and special education teachers reported frequent collaboration, this was often informal and unstructured. According to the interview respondents, general education and special education teachers typically met formally at least weekly in 16 schools and biweekly or monthly in two schools. Respondents from 14 schools reported that informal opportunities for cross-disciplinary collaboration occurred several times a week, and often daily, through hallway and workroom encounters, e-mails, and common lunches. One respondent shared:

³⁶ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

³⁷ A school that exclusively serves students in special education was excluded from these comparisons.

We're in constant collaboration. I can say there isn't a day that goes by that I don't collaborate in some form or another with all the people involved in my children's program. It can be on the fly. It could be in a more formal setting in our meetings that we have in the afternoon—our collaborative.

Key practices

- **Facilitating collaboration through extended time, staff assignments, and use of space.** These practices were evident in four schools. Two schools created extended blocks of collaborative time during periods in which the students were regularly off-site (e.g., shortened school day twice each week, off-site arts opportunities every other week). While these times for collaboration were not exclusively spent on SWDs, topics related to inclusion were often on the agenda. When blocks of time without students being in the building were not an option, a third school paid staff to work an extended day to facilitate collaboration. Regarding staffing, one school assigned each special education teacher to one grade level to improve communication and common planning.

One school creatively designed a teacher workroom with workstations for each teacher. Special education teachers' desks were intentionally placed next to the desks of general education teachers with whom they work to facilitate communication.

- **Building knowledge through cross-school collaboration.** Respondents from one school reported building partnerships with two other schools in the District that had demonstrated successful practices related to instruction of students with disabilities. Expert practitioners from these schools delivered professional development to staff in the partner school related to these successful practices. Another school identified a similar arrangement, and a third was part of a network of schools, in which teachers visited other schools within the network to learn about successful practices.
- **Encouraging collaborative and transparent lesson plans.** Collaborative and transparent lesson plan practices were described in six schools. Respondents from three schools reported strategies for collaborating around designing lesson plans. For example, one school used a planning template for the inclusion specialist, and included a section that required the teacher to specifically identify how and when the specialist would collaborate with the general education teachers. In other schools teams of teachers generated lesson plans, which were then submitted for peer review and feedback. As a strategy to encourage more teachers to submit lesson plans, one school had teachers review each other's lesson plans and provide feedback as a group once a week.

In efforts to explicitly share lesson plans with special education staff, one school submitted weekly lesson plans to the administration for feedback, and when they were finalized, the plans were sent to all staff supporting those students. A staff member reported,

And then when we e-mail them, everyone gets a copy that's on the team... the inclusion [specialist], special education teacher or any other therapist because I also have ELL

students in my class. So they would get a copy and [so does] anyone else who comes in to support [the student,] so that we're...all on the same page and can touch base.

One school reported sharing six-week lesson plans with special education teachers, while another school put three-week instructional plans into a Dropbox folder, and special education teachers were expected to access these.

Challenges

- **Schools find it difficult to coordinate schedules across general education and special education teachers.** Scheduling cross-disciplinary formal collaboration presented challenges due to the role of a special education teacher, who was often supporting multiple grades and serving as the “on duty” teacher in the hallways and responding to student crises, as well attending IEP meetings during scheduled collaboration opportunities and filling the role of the special education teacher. Ten schools reported challenges regarding the coordination of schedules for cross-disciplinary staff. Particularly at the elementary level, special education and general education teachers found it difficult to establish common planning time due to the caseloads of SWDs spanning several grades, which prohibited the special education teachers from attending all grade-level collaboration opportunities. Even when special education and general education teachers had common planning periods, special education teachers reported that they sometimes used this planning period to conduct IEP meetings, or they were on duty in the hallway. One special education teacher expressed this concern:

We're supposed to collaborate every day, but the reality is that I go once a week because I have other things to attend to. If there is a student crisis or a student needs help we just have to let the meeting go and help the students.

Another respondent reported that the overall system did not invest sufficient resources and time for collaboration: “Collaboration takes time. It takes training, planning, re-evaluating those plans. It really is a process. And I don’t think that the school district accommodates that time and resource for that process.”

One of the seven teachers, who identified collaborative time as an aspect the teacher would change within the school system in the open-ended survey response, wrote that the current structure perpetuates the separation between general and special education. She wrote about the need for

Improving the communication and teaming of the teachers and staff, with set scheduled times and key objectives for sharing information, so that we can meet the needs of our SWDs from a more holistic perspective. The way their needs are being met at school is often reflective of the systems that they are a part of out in the community: silos!

Are there supports in place for new teachers or educators new to teaching SWDs?

Approximately half of the study schools ($n = 12$) showed evidence across the data sources of supports

for teachers new to educating SWDs (see Exhibit 6.1). Fewer than half (45 percent) of the teacher survey respondents, on average, agreed that such supports were in place. Similarly, on a related item, just 38 percent of teacher survey respondents, on average, agreed that there was supplemental training available to teachers new to teaching SWDs. These results suggest that this as an area schools and the overall system may want to develop further.

Although 12 schools appeared to have mechanisms in place for supporting teachers, in general, there was no mention during the site visits of formal mentoring or supports in place that specifically addressed the needs of new teachers or teachers new to teaching SWDs. While respondents sometimes described coaching and informal supports, there was no reported distinction in the supports provided to new teachers or to teachers new to teaching SWDs than what was offered to all teachers. Teacher support, where available, was generally provided by instructional coaches with no special education background, so they were not equipped to address issues related to teaching SWDs. In one school, two instructional coaches met with new teachers once a week. Although the coaches were not certified in special education, they attempted to include special education topics in their sessions. In the absence of a formal support system, teachers requested informal assistance from veteran teachers, instructional coaches, or special education coordinators.

Key practices

- We did not find any key practices related to this indicator. The 12 schools that show “evidence” of this had informal supports in place available to teachers in general.

Challenges

- **No formal supports are in place for special education teachers, new teachers, or teachers new to teaching SWDs.** As mentioned, none of the schools visited shared examples of formal supports that specifically addressed the needs of teachers new to teaching SWDs. Furthermore, instructional coaches generally did not have experience or certification in special education, which contributed to a lack of support in this area. Previously, in some schools, the special education coordinator served as a coach or mentor to new special education teachers. Now that this position has been eliminated in DCPS, schools face challenges in filling in the knowledge gap and providing SWD-specific supports to teachers. These concerns were summarized by one special education teacher, who said, “Now we have an instructional coach but she’s not here for the special [education]. So, I think what’s relied upon is the special [education] teachers who have been around.” This lack of support for new teachers was echoed by a general education teacher, who reported,

The expectation is that we deliver a highly effective lesson each and every day but if a new teacher is coming in from nowhere, that’s hard to do when not given much to work with besides, “Here, take the books, here’s our lesson.”

Is information about students and successful practices shared during transitions?

While 14 schools exhibited evidence of strategies for sharing information during transition periods (e.g., grade to grade), it is important to note that information sharing between schools was virtually

nonexistent. On average, 41 percent of the teacher survey respondents across the 11 schools did not know whether there were strategies for sharing information between schools, and 21 percent disagreed that these were in place. While more than half of the teacher survey respondents, on average, agreed that strategies existed for sharing information between placements and between grades, between 39 percent and 48 percent did not know or disagreed with this.

Other than receiving an IEP of transferring students, no school reported a process for sharing information on successful strategies for SWDs to facilitate the transition of students from school to school. Additionally, only six schools mentioned formal strategies for sharing information when a student transitions from grade to grade within a school.

Key practices

- **Sharing written narratives about each SWD for grade-to-grade transitions.** Three schools reported asking teachers, both general education and special education, to write a narrative or snapshot about each of their SWDs at the end of the year. That narrative was then shared with the student's special education case manager, as well as with any general education teachers that the student will have in the next grade. The narratives or snapshots included such information as what strategies worked well, what progress had been made, and areas of concern.
- **Easing student transitions to middle school.** The spring prior to a student's transition, the special education coordinator paired students in special education in the feeder schools with students at the middle school. The students in special education then followed a schedule similar to one that they would have the following year. The coordinator also hosted an open house each fall for parents of SWDs, and each spring attended the IEP meetings of all rising sixth graders.

Challenges

- **No formal system is in place to support the transition within and across schools of information about SWDs.** Most often, teachers were left on their own to talk with one another or to find information in individual student IEPs. One general education teacher said, "It's something we do on our own because we know how important it is for us to have some type of knowledge of where children are." Respondents from seven schools in particular identified problems with the lack of transition planning or alignment across schools and school systems. Said one DCPS school respondent,

One of the system-wide challenges is the transfer of information when, specifically students come to us from charter schools, and the timeliness of their IEPs [arriving]. And being in a form that people can work with, or...not [arriving] and not ever being told that the student had an IEP. So, some of that communication and documentation when students enter the system [is a challenge].

One school reported that staff did not know a student had a pre-existing IEP until they started the evaluation process. A special education coordinator at another school reiterated this

concern: “We do a lousy job of that.... We don’t collaborate between middle school and high school. We don’t collaborate between elementary and middle. And so it’s almost like starting all over with each student as they transition in.”

Professional Development

Within this domain we examined evidence of practices that promote ongoing staff development to support the needs of SWDs. The *Professional Development* sub-domain has nine indicators (see Chapter 1 for the full list), of which four are discussed in this section:

This section focuses on four professional development indicators:

- A multiyear school professional development plan is produced with input from all stakeholders, is based on a current assessment of staff needs and student achievement and behavior data, and explicitly addresses professional development needs related to educating SWDs.
- All special education and general education teachers receive ongoing training in the legal requirements in all areas of special education.
- The school provides ongoing training on awareness, knowledge, and adoption of best practices in inclusive classrooms for SWDs.
- School staff receives ongoing training regarding specific disabilities and how to best manage their behavior and meet their educational needs.

Please see Appendix F for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings.

Are staff needs related to SWDs assessed and reflected in the professional development plan?

As reported in Exhibit 6.2, the majority of schools in our sample showed limited or no evidence across the data sources of assessing staff needs as they explicitly relate to instructing SWDs ($n = 12$) and creating a professional development plan that reflects those needs ($n = 13$). On average, 41 percent of the teacher survey respondents across 11 schools disagreed that staff needs regarding SWDs were periodically assessed, while 18 percent did not know. On average, 31 percent and 22 percent of teacher survey respondents disagreed or did not know, respectively, that the professional development plan explicitly addressed those needs. The “don’t know” responses suggest a lack of school-wide focus on this population; if a school were doing this systematically, all teaching staff would be aware of this effort.

Issues regarding this indicator are reflected in the documentation review. Only 7 of the 17 schools that provided documents submitted a professional development plan or offering. Only one—a special education school—described the collection of information on staff needs related to educating SWDs, and the information from four schools (including the aforementioned special education school) included specific professional development offerings to address staff needs regarding SWDs.³⁸

³⁸ The non-public school in the study sample was excluded from these counts.

Exhibit 6.2 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected Professional Development Indicator

| Selected professional development indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ³⁹ |
| A multiyear school professional development plan is produced with input from all stakeholders, is based on a current assessment of staff needs and student achievement and behavior data, and explicitly addresses professional development needs related to educating SWDs. | 5 | 12 | 4 |
| All special education and general education teachers receive ongoing training in the legal requirements in all areas of special education. | 8 | 12 | 1 |
| The school provides ongoing training on awareness, knowledge, and adoption of best practices in inclusive classrooms for SWDs. | 9 | 12 | 0 |
| School staff receive ongoing training regarding students with specific disabilities and how to best manage their behavior and meet their educational needs. | 10 | 11 | 0 |

Interview respondents from only six schools indicated that needs assessments were conducted to determine staff needs related to instructing SWDs and that a formal plan had been developed that specifically addressed these needs. In the absence of formal needs assessments, nine schools reported simply using informal observation data and staff conversations to determine professional development needs. School-level professional development was described as being focused more on general education strategies, where SWD-specific professional development appeared to be less formal and frequent.

Key practices

- **Using surveys to guide professional development planning.** Staff needs regarding professional development related to instruction for SWDs were determined through formal surveys in only six schools. Some surveys were completed at the beginning of the school year, some at the end of the school year, and one school reported gathering this information at several opportunities through a Survey Monkey platform. Two schools reported using formal or informal observation data to assess professional development needs, in addition to teacher surveys. A principal at one school described matching professional development opportunities with expressed needs in this way:

³⁹ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

We assess professional development needs through a survey at the beginning of the year and in a more informal basis throughout the year based on the results of [SWDs'] evaluations and based on what the data is telling us. So if the data were telling us that there's a very high rate [of academic weakness] among special [education] students, then we would arrange for [professional development] on how to intervene with special [education] students before they fail. So it's kind of embedded and organic, depending on what we're seeing as far as...results.

Challenges

- **Professional development plans were not developed and implemented with fidelity.** As already noted, fewer than half of the 17 schools that submitted school documents provided a professional development plan. Interview respondents shared challenges regarding the development and implementation of professional development plans for schools. A staff member at one school was not certain that a professional development plan for the school existed. At another school, a respondent shared that professional development on school initiatives other than instruction of SWDs seemed to take priority when planning training opportunities.
- **Teachers were unaware of attempts to identify staff needs related to teaching SWDs, or described efforts as ineffective or irregular.** As described above, 18 percent and 22 percent of the teacher survey respondents, on average, did not know whether staff needs related to SWDs were assessed and whether the school plan explicitly addressed those needs, respectively. Concerns about inconsistency and effectiveness of needs assessment were noted by respondents in three schools, with one of these respondents expressing a desire for a survey format for assessing staff needs for professional development opportunities.

Do general education and special education teachers receive ongoing training on issues related to students with disabilities?

Half of the schools in our sample showed limited or no evidence across the data sources that teachers received ongoing formal professional development on topics regarding SWDs. Across the 11 schools returning surveys, 45 percent of the teacher survey respondents, on average, disagreed that they had received ongoing training on inclusive practices, 50 percent disagreed that they had received training on special education legal requirements, and well over half (58 percent) disagreed that they had received training on how to address academic and behavior needs of specific disabilities. On average, across the surveyed schools, general education teachers were nearly twice as likely as special education teachers to disagree that they received training on legal requirements and inclusive practices.⁴⁰

Concerns about training figured prominently in the responses to the open-ended survey question, in which respondents were asked to describe one thing they would change in the school system to improve capacity to educate SWDs. A quarter ($n = 25$) of the 100 teachers who provided a response

⁴⁰ This analysis is based on 10 schools that had both special education and general education teachers.

identified the need for more professional development, with several of them noting the particular need for improving the knowledge of general education teachers.

School respondents who did receive professional development related to inclusive practices reported that most of these opportunities were available to both general education and special education teachers. Topics covered included co-teaching, differentiated instruction, reading strategies, and working with students with autism and Asperger's syndrome. However, training on the legal requirements of special education, particularly around IEP development, appeared to be limited and infrequent, and primarily targeted to special education teachers.

Key practices

- **Strategically involving both general education and special education teachers in staff development.** Although respondents from several schools agreed that professional development was open to both educator types, two schools approached this in a strategic manner. In one school, the special education team was large enough so that each member was assigned to work with a grade-level team on strategies and different instructional methods. The special education team rotated, so that all topics were covered with all grade-level teams. Additionally, once a year, the school held a daylong professional development event, which included eight stations, each covering a different topic (e.g., data, occupational therapy, behavior). All teachers rotated through the eight stations during the day. Another school conducted workshops for general education teachers around the same strategies being used for students receiving special education services. The principal of this school said,

We did workshops with the general education teachers on Touch Math so that they could use the exact same strategies in the classroom.... The special education kids see the general education kids using some of the exact same strategies and techniques. I think that's really kind of powerful.... These strategies can be used by lots of different people. I think we are working hard at better differentiating in the general education class so that we can better meet the kids before they get into special education.

Challenges

- **Teachers reported they had received little or no professional development, or if it was received, it was insufficient.** This was reported by respondents at 15 of the 21 study schools. None of the respondents described formal professional development opportunities related specifically to special education topics as being "ongoing." This issue was highlighted by a general education teacher who said, "We don't get anyone coming in from the district to give us professional development...we don't have that ongoing support. Support is not just one [professional development session]. It's not just, 'take this book,' 'read this book.' We don't have that ongoing support here."

When asked if staff received professional development on special education issues, responses from both special education and general education teachers included statements such as, "I would not say a lot—very little," "I don't remember a time when we have had a special education PD," and "Most PD has been around general education." One general education

teacher described a need for professional development related the instruction of students with disabilities in this way:

How am I supposed to work with my co-teacher because there's a lot of good will and energy, but I feel like particularly in special education that's only going to take you to a certain point [where] you need expertise and specific targeted strategies and we don't have those. And I think that the biggest problem is just...ignorance, that we don't know.

The concern regarding the need for focused professional development in this area is underscored by the open-ended survey responses, in which 25 teachers identified this as an area for improvement. One teacher wrote,

Instruction on methodology provided on a periodic basis for the entire staff would also assist in keeping staff current. The training we have had over the past years has been excellent. It really becomes an issue of too much other "necessary" training being required so there is no time for the really critical need to educate ourselves on current practices in special education and communicate about students in our building.

- **Limited professional development on legal special education requirements.** In five schools, respondents reported limited training on this topic, and this concern crosscut both general education and special education teachers. One special education coordinator described sharing IEP information with teachers:

But with regards to a real drill down of what the IEP really means, short of me being able to have some time to meet individually with teachers, there is no structure provided for that kind of intensive training that I think we need.

General education teachers reported that all of the special education documentation can be daunting and there was no training on how to handle this. On the other hand, some special education teachers reported that paperwork, including IEP documentation, was the only training that is offered regarding legal requirements around special education.

- **Teachers expressed a need for more professional development on co-teaching.** Teachers from eight study schools expressed concerns regarding their lack of understanding of co-teaching models. One teacher shared that while there were pockets of successful implementation of co-teaching models within the school, it was typically the case that the general education teacher was the lead teacher while the special education teacher floated among students who were struggling with a lesson. One general education teacher said, "I wish there was a co-teaching institute [with] a training period for teachers that co-teach for both the general education and the co-teacher before the school year starts." Another teacher echoed this concern:

There is a need for co-teaching [professional development] because the general education teacher is not making good use of the special education co-teacher. The general education teacher wants [the] special education co-teacher to do more, but [the

special education teacher] just doesn't know how to [teach the content to all students as the lead teacher].

Chapter 7: Data-Driven Decision Making

Practices that contribute to the frequent collection of student achievement and behavior data, the accessibility of data, and the use of data to guide instructional and programmatic decisions regarding students with disabilities

Within this domain, we examined evidence of practices that support the collection and use of data to guide decisions regarding the instruction of students with disabilities (SWDs). The *Data-Driven Decision Making* domain includes seven indicators (see Chapter 1 for the full list), and this chapter reviews the findings for four of those indicators:

- Teachers and other providers use a variety of formal and informal methods at frequent and regular intervals to collect data on the progress of SWDs in the curriculum and on IEP goals.
- Design instruction: Teachers use baseline data and profiles of student skills and performance deficits and strengths as the starting point for designing instruction and establishing instructional goals for SWDs.
- Modify instruction: Teachers use information from student assessments for SWDs to guide decisions to re-teach, change pacing, re-group, and plan or adjust activities/strategies.
- Identify individual student needs and provide interventions: Teachers use the results of progress monitoring to identify students in need of additional support and to identify the appropriate intervention(s).

Please see Appendix G for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings.

Do teachers frequently collect data on the progress of SWDs?

In all but one site visit school, evidence across the data sources indicated that teachers collected data at regular and frequent intervals on the progress of SWDs in the curriculum and IEP goals (see Exhibit 7.1). However, schools did not necessarily implement every aspect of this indicator to the same degree. For example, more than 90 percent of the teacher survey respondents, on average, in 11 schools reported that they used a variety of formal and informal methods (93 percent) and collected data at regular intervals (91 percent). However, when asked explicitly about SWDs, the percentages dropped. On average, 79 percent collected data on the progress of SWDs in the curriculum and 65 percent collected data on IEP goals. This varied by teacher type, with an average 61 percent of general education teachers with SWDs in their classes reporting that they collected information on progress made on IEP goals, in comparison to an average 93 percent of special education teachers.⁴¹

⁴¹ This comparison is based on 10 schools that had both special education and general education teachers.

Exhibit 7.1 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected Data-Driven Decision Making Indicator

| Selected data-driven decision making indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁴² |
| Teachers and other providers use a variety of formal and informal methods at frequent and regular intervals to collect data on the progress of SWDs in the curriculum and IEP goals. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| Design instruction: Teachers use baseline data and profiles of student skill and performance deficits and strengths as the starting point for designing instruction and establishing instructional goals for SWDs. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| Modify instruction: Teachers use information from student assessments for SWDs to guide decisions to reteach, change pacing, regroup, and plan or adjust activities/strategies. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| Identify individual student needs and provide interventions: Teachers use the results of progress monitoring to identify students in need of additional support and to identify the appropriate intervention(s). | 18 | 3 | 0 |

Interview data indicated that all schools had a school-wide data system in place that housed and tracked achievement data.⁴³ All but two schools reported monitoring the progress of all students on a regular basis (i.e., at least monthly). In 15 schools, interview respondents reported using the same assessments (with modifications in many instances for students with disabilities) as for general education students. In 10 schools, teachers assessed student understanding on a daily basis through informal means such as exit slips or exit tickets. It is important to note that the above activities pertained to collecting data on all students and did not have an explicit focus on SWDs.

Key practices

- Collecting data on SWDs.** Respondents at two schools mentioned regular reporting methods to track the progress of SWDs. At one school, the special education director asked teachers to submit a weekly progress report that described how each SWD performed that week. In another school, the instructional coach sent out a survey each week to the special education

⁴² In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

⁴³ However, the survey results suggest that the school-wide data systems are necessarily transparent and used by all teachers. On average, 79 percent of the teacher survey respondents across 11 schools agreed that there was a school-wide data system in place, while 13 percent disagreed and 9 percent did not know.

coordinator, department chairs, special education teachers, and the small learning community team. Each person had to report back on the progress of SWDs—current grades, missing assignments, status of current projects, etc. This information was then compiled into an Excel spreadsheet so that the teachers could identify patterns for each student.

- **Focusing on IEP goals.** Interview respondents mentioned a number of ways in which they kept track of IEP goals for their SWDs. One school exclusively serving SWDs collected data on IEP goals at least three times a week. Teachers at another school kept check sheets for IEP goals that they completed on a regular basis. Another school used learning laboratories where inclusion teachers reviewed students' progress on IEP goals. One school's special education coordinator created an IEP assessment (administered every quarter) aligned to IEP goals for every student at the beginning of the year. She identified the IEP goal associated with each assessment item so that teachers could assemble their own assessments. A school principal described using an IEP tracker whereby both teachers and students were made aware of their goals and could track progress. At another school, teachers took a baseline of student performance on IEP goals at the beginning of the year and then collected data at every interim assessment point (approximately every five weeks). At the end of the year, this information was used to determine the effectiveness of the teacher in enhancing the education of each student.
- **Using informal and frequent data collection.** In several schools, an exit ticket or exit slip was used to monitor student progress on a daily basis. One teacher described her exit ticket as a one-question quiz that she used to see if her students comprehended a concept. She then used that information to pull together small groups or to change instruction for the following day. A respondent at another school mentioned the use of "comprehension sticks": if a student, particularly an SWD, held up a red stick when reviewing a concept, the teacher would stop and spend more time building and checking for understanding.
- **Designating staff to support and lead data activities.** A number of interview respondents mentioned the presence of data teams or other designated staff that led data collection and analysis. One school in particular used data leads for specific grade spans; there was one lead each for prekindergarten, Grades K–2, and Grades 3–5. These data leads examined data and made a plan as to what information needed to be retaught.

Challenges

- **Challenges with measuring progress on IEP goals.** Throughout the interviews, several challenges emerged that were specifically related to IEP goals. For example, at only three schools did general education teachers mention being responsible for IEP goals, suggesting that this is largely viewed as a special education responsibility. Some special education teachers did not provide the instruction received by all of the SWDs in their caseload, making it difficult to monitor progress on IEP goals. This points to the need for shared responsibility between general education and special education teachers to track IEP progress. Special education resource teachers expressed concern over not being able to address each student's IEP goals when they had a dozen or more SWDs in one class. Other teachers mentioned that IEP goals were not a

priority. For example, a general education teacher remarked, “[IEP goals] are not specifically addressed because, again we’re focusing on the school district standards and so when the students are being assessed, they are being assessed on the school district’s standard.” The fact that IEP goals were not often integrated into data systems or data trackers also posed a challenge for schools. One school respondent mentioned that even if the IEP goals were in a database, that database did not align with or “talk to” other databases in use.

Do teachers use data to design and modify instruction and to identify students for interventions?

This question covers the three indicators on how data are used by teachers to support learning. Using data to design and modify instruction and to identify students who need additional support was evident in nearly all of the 21 site visit schools (18 to 20) (see Exhibit 7.1). More than 80 percent of teacher survey respondents, on average, reported using data to design instruction (81 percent), to modify instruction (85 percent), and to identify struggling students (88 percent). In interviews, personnel in 14 schools reported using assessment data to set baselines and/or to use diagnostic assessments at the beginning of the year. In all but one of the 21 schools, school personnel reported using assessment data to design or change instruction. Respondents in two-thirds of the schools indicated using assessment data to identify areas of student need, and in more than half of the study schools, personnel reported using assessment data to establish goals or targets for students.

In 19 schools, school personnel described using data from various assessments to reteach problematic concepts, and in nine schools, teachers created a data action plan that addressed areas of instruction to be retaught. In terms of analyzing problematic concepts or topics, respondents from five schools indicated that they conducted a task or error analysis of items missed on assessments. In three schools, assessment results were presented in levels as a way to track student progress. Schools also described team approaches to using the data. Collaborative data meetings were held in 13 schools, during which data were reviewed and used for informing instruction and next steps. Respondents in six schools mentioned the presence of a student study team for students who were struggling.

Key practices

- **Collaborating on interpreting and using data to modify instruction.** Interview respondents in more than half the schools reported collaborating about data, most often through informal or formal data meetings. One principal held “kid talks” every Friday, where teachers gathered in small groups to discuss challenges related to individual students. Another school had similar meetings, called “data talks,” where teachers from every content area and from special education met. At another school, teachers had data meetings in which they used a protocol to guide their data analysis, looking for trends or problems. One school set one day aside each week for teachers to look at the performance of groups of students, including SWDs, by reviewing student work, progress, grades, and discipline data. Another school’s schedule was set up so that grade-level teachers had an opportunity to meet collaboratively at least five times per week, with an expectation that at least one of the meetings would include all of the special

education teachers. During these meetings the teachers examined assessment results and made any adjustments needed (e.g., to instruction or grouping arrangements).

- **Using baseline and progress data on SWDs to design instruction.** Two schools reported having baseline meetings at the beginning of the school year, in which every teacher that had a student in special education met with the special education coordinator to review goals in each student's IEP or 504 plan. These schools stated that the purpose of these meetings was to establish a common understanding between the general education and special education teachers of what each student needed and how they best learn. In another school, teachers collected baseline data at the beginning of the school year on IEP goals and monitored student performance throughout the year, with particular data-points at paced interim assessments. An interviewee elaborated: "We take like a baseline and then we see where the kids are and that's where we teach. Strengthen the strength and also strengthen their weakness. And then you know if this way doesn't work, try another way." Interview respondents reported using a mix of commercially available and teacher- or school-designed assessments. Several schools used the Wide Range Achievement Test 3 (WRAT3) for a beginning-of-the-year snapshot; other schools used tests designed by the data coach or other school personnel.

Schools also reported using progress-monitoring data to design instruction. One school reported using the Burst intervention for small groups of students. Student needs were identified through DIBELS assessments, and the Burst program scripted teachers through lessons that were designed to target those identified needs.

- **Using tools to improve data analysis.** Two schools mentioned having additional tools through which they gathered data and made instructional decisions. One principal described a system called Nesso, which produced predictive performance on the quarterly assessment based on previous testing history and demographics. The principal remarked, "And then we get an actual score and so you can see how they did in comparison to how they were supposed to do, which is additional helpful information." Another teacher mentioned that the school recently implemented an assessment program from Scantron.

[Through Scantron] all the data is inputted into the system and instantly we get feedback. We get graphs. We get numbers. We can see right away the areas that we may need to review or lessons that really weren't effective. So you know I continuously say data really drives the instruction here.

Challenges

- **Responsibility limited to special education teachers.** Responsibility for the progress of SWDs is not consistently shared between special education teachers and general education teachers across schools. Two schools reported that the responsibility of consulting data on the current performance of SWDs fell only to special education teachers, and not to general education teachers. A resource teacher at another school indicated that the data meetings held with general education staff did not address SWDs, leaving it up to the special education staff to do

so. “Hopefully we can kind of shift some of that focus...bring up special education as a focus here because a third of our students receive services and we don’t talk about that.”

- **Lack of follow-through, guidance, and supports.** Teachers and school personnel were aware of the importance of using data to drive instructional decisions, but in some schools they were not always given the tools to use data consistently and effectively. In eight schools, teachers talked about being unsure of the extent to which staff used data to drive instruction. At one school, when asked about whether data are consulted at the beginning of the year to design instruction or establish targets, a teacher said, “No. It is talked about but it is not done.” Asked about how often data were consulted, another teacher said, “Unless there’s a crisis, we don’t.” One school indicated that they use “whatever data they choose” and thus were not using data as effectively as they could. A teacher reported, “[S]o then we were supposed to develop plans for reteaching. I don’t think it necessarily happened in the way that it was supposed to.”

In terms of guidance from the school administration on how to use data, one teacher reported that there was a lot of talk about data but not a lot of hands-on guidance on how to use it effectively. Another teacher reported that while data use was encouraged, there was no clear expectation on how to use it. An instructional coach at another school reported that setting expectations for data use by the administration was an area of challenge for them, saying that in the previous year it was “stated but with not a lot of follow through.”

In addition, respondents from three schools indicated that there had been no professional development in the last year on how to use data to guide instruction. Another teacher reported that although there had been professional development on collecting, interpreting, and using data to guide instruction, none of it was focused on SWDs. When asked about how staff at the school used data to inform instruction, an advisory team member from another school summarized this way:

{W}e want to use data to drive our instruction. As to what that looks like, I don’t think we’re there yet. I don’t think we have fully articulated what that looks like; what that sounds like in your classroom. And so, it’s one of those things that is good to say.... [I]t sounds nice but are we really doing it to the appropriate degree? ... [D]o we all understand what we’re supposed to be doing?

- **Limited baseline data.** In several schools, interview respondents indicated that they have limited sources of data to use to design instruction. Two schools reported only having the DC Comprehensive Assessment System results available to them at the beginning of the year, which they viewed as the end result rather than a place from which to start. Another school explained that they only had access to the student IEPs at the beginning of the year, and as the year got underway, they had to incorporate other data into their decision making.

Chapter 8: Family Engagement

School practices to proactively include parents and students as partners by establishing a clear policy on parental involvement, providing comprehensive and accessible communication, and offering family education and supports

Within this domain, we examined evidence of school practices that actively engage families of students with disabilities (SWDs) as partners in improving outcomes for students. The *Family Engagement* domain has 11 indicators (see Chapter 1 for full list), of which 5 are discussed in this chapter:⁴⁴

- Frequent communication: School staff, SWDs, and families of SWDs share frequent and timely reports of student behavior, performance, and achievement.
- Accessibility of materials: Materials and communications are comprehensive, accessible, and provided in a variety of formats and in the family’s preferred language.
- Accessibility of school events: School events are scheduled at times convenient for parents and measures are taken to facilitate their participation.
- IEP involvement: The school encourages and supports active family involvement in the information gathering, at the IEP meeting where decisions are made about the child’s supports, and later in problem solving when concerns or questions arise during the course of the school year.
- Family education: The school provides information to families of SWDs regarding research-based educational practices and ways that families can support their child’s learning, academic and behavior needs, interests, and IEP goals at home and school.

Please see Appendix H for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings. Because of the overlap in challenges across the selected indicators, we do not present indicator-specific challenges in the following sections; rather, this information is presented in a *Challenges* section at the end of the chapter.

Do schools frequently communicate with families of SWDs and provide accessible materials and events?

As shown in Exhibit 8.1, all or nearly all schools showed evidence across the data sources that staff frequently communicated with parents (16 of 18 schools with ratings), provided accessible materials (17 of 19 schools with ratings), and scheduled school events at various times to facilitate participation (all 21 schools). The survey results also pointed to a high level of agreement related to these activities: 76 percent of teacher survey respondents, on average, across 11 schools agreed that the school encourages families of SWDs to visit and to communicate regularly with school staff; and 79 percent, on average,

⁴⁴ Indicators for the “staff expectations and culture” sub-domain are not reviewed in this chapter. The collected data were insufficient for identifying key practices and challenges. Please see Appendix H for the evidence ratings for these indicators.

agreed that school events were scheduled at times convenient for parents. Communication approaches varied greatly across the schools; interviewees typically reported that their school tried to be flexible when scheduling meetings or events and used many different types of communication modalities to meet the needs of the families. In addition, many interviewees described a welcoming and open school culture as key to establishing trust and effective communication with families.

Exhibit 8.1 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected Family Engagement Indicator

| Selected family engagement indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁴⁵ |
| Frequent communication: School staff and families of SWDs share frequent and timely reports of student behavior, performance, and achievement. | 16 | 2 | 3 |
| Accessibility of materials: Materials and communications are comprehensive, accessible, and provided in a variety of formats and in the family's preferred language. | 17 | 2 | 2 |
| Accessibility of school events: School events are scheduled at times convenient for parents and measures are taken to facilitate their participation. | 21 | 0 | 0 |
| IEP involvement: The school encourages and supports active family involvement in the information gathering, at the IEP meeting where decisions are made about the child's supports, and later in problem solving when concerns or questions arise during the course of the school year. | 18 | 1 | 2 |
| Family education: The school provides information to families of SWDs regarding research-based educational practices and ways that families can support their child's learning, academic and behavior needs, interests, and IEP goals at home and school. | 17 | 4 | 0 |

Key practices

- Facilitating accessibility of meetings and communications between schools and families.** All 21 schools reported efforts to schedule school events and meetings at times that were convenient for families to attend. Multiple schools reported using a variety of strategies, such as scheduling meetings and events in the morning, evening, or at lunchtime; outside normal school hours or on weekends; or alternating times of day or days of the week throughout the school year.

⁴⁵ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of "evidence" or "limited or no evidence" for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

Respondents from 13 schools reported that translation services were available for those families that needed them, via the district call line or informally by bilingual staff. However, just four schools reported or were observed to have printed information available to families in languages other than English. Staff in eight schools used communication logs to track their communication with families, but the logs were implemented differently across the schools. Some schools used the communication log in the Easy IEP system, and others created their own approaches. Two respondents described how their schools used their own communication logs as a source of data in conjunction with student achievement or behavior information to understand the needs of struggling students.

As part of their Academic Parent Teacher Teams (APTT), one school held grade-level educational meetings for parents once every two months at the school to present a reading skill and a map skill. The meetings were held at different times in the evening (4:30 p.m., 5:30 p.m., or 7:00 p.m.), and make up meetings were available in the morning before school started (these were usually smaller groups or one-on-one sessions). Attendance rates for these meetings for some grades and classes were greater than 80 percent. One respondent credited the high turnout with the administration incentivizing teachers with a bonus day off during the district's parent-teacher conference days. The school administration held the conferences on behalf of teachers who reached the goal of 70 percent of their parents attending the APTT meeting. One interviewee noted that these meetings are "the biggest way that we enforce or emphasize home school collaboration."

- **Building rapport with parents.** Most schools ($n = 15$) reported that they held social events to encourage families to come to the school and build a sense of community. Events included opportunities to meet and talk informally with principals, international night, family night, block parties, and programs for or by students (e.g., award ceremonies, Black history month). Across the schools, there were inconsistent levels of turnout reported at these events. Moreover, schools reported that high attendance rates at the social events did not necessarily translate into higher levels of participation in parent groups, such as the PTA. Respondents from 12 sites reported that their school allowed families to visit throughout the school day and observe classrooms, with one school providing family members with a survey to report what they did or did not like about what they observed and what needed to be improved. Most schools also created a welcoming environment by displaying photos or information to reflect the cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity of the school community, and many had welcome signs for parents and suggestions on how to contact school administrators or staff. Four schools conducted home visits and reported this as a successful strategy to build trust and communication with families. One respondent credited the home visits conducted by the staff over the summer with being "the tipping point for us in terms of starting the year off on a great foot."
- **Using technology to increase parent communication and involvement.** Respondents from four schools described ways in which they used technology to provide information to families about their children's academic progress on an ongoing basis. Two schools described using Google Docs as a way for families to communicate with teachers and related service providers,

particularly about behavioral progress and services received by SWDs. One school created a parent portal, which gave families access to their children's grades and attendance records and allowed them to e-mail teachers directly with comments or questions. One school held PTA and school information meetings as webinars, which were then saved and posted online. The special education coordinator of that school noted that family members were able to ask her questions directly through the webinars: "You can ask me any questions you have right there, you can do it through the comfort of your own home."

Do schools involve parents throughout the school year and at IEP meetings to address student needs?

When examining evidence across the data sources, nearly all schools (18 of 19 schools) showed evidence that the school supports family involvement in IEP meetings and at other times to support student learning. On average, a large percentage of teacher survey respondents in 11 schools agreed that parents were involved prior to the IEP meeting (68 percent), during the IEP meeting (83 percent), and during the course of the school year (72 percent). Other teacher respondents, on average, did not know (14 percent to 20 percent) or disagreed (3 percent to 12 percent).⁴⁶ Staff from 15 schools described different approaches to getting families involved in IEP meetings, including multiple attempts to contact families to attend IEP meetings, considering family input during the meetings, or presenting student data to family members in an accessible manner.

Key practices

- **Encouraging active family involvement at IEP meetings.** Respondents from 13 schools described various ways to involve families in the IEP process. Nine schools described using multiple modes to contact family members (e.g., in-person talks, phone calls, e-mails, texts, certified letters sent to the home) to encourage them to attend IEP meetings; these multiple attempts align with recent changes in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) policy. One school that reported high attendance at IEP meetings noted that during the scheduling process, families were provided at least three options of when the meeting could be held.

Staff from 11 schools reported that they actively involved families during IEP meetings by engaging family members in conversation, having a trusting environment, watching families' reactions and body language, making sure they understood the process, and providing time for and encouraging questions. Staff from three schools specified that they engaged family members as active partners in creating goals for their children. One special education coordinator commented,

When we develop the goals and present them to the parent, we present them [by] saying, "These goals were presented based on the observation in the school and the

⁴⁶ Because of the degree of "don't know" responses for these items, we examined the special education coordinator/lead special education teacher (SEC) responses. Across 14 schools, 93 percent of SECs agreed that parents were involved prior to an IEP meeting, and 100 percent agreed that parents were involved during an IEP meeting (13 schools; one school was missing data) and throughout the school year (14 schools).

testing that was performed at school. What do you see at home that we may not have added? Or “Do you see the child doing those things that we stated?” So...they do get an opportunity to talk about some of the weakness[es] that they may discover that their child has that maybe we didn’t see. So we do have an open discussion about the [written] behavior and academic goals.

Many schools commented that the special education coordinator traditionally served as the main liaison to and resource for family members in ensuring that families attend IEP meetings and are meaningfully included. However, the elimination of this position in DCPS may have created a serious gap in who will serve as a resource for families in the IEP process.

- **Making data meaningful and understandable for families.** To facilitate family involvement in the IEP process, 12 schools helped families understand data and reports and explained technical jargon prior to and during student evaluations and IEP meetings. To address technical jargon, teachers or staff who collected and compiled the IEP information in eight schools explained the data point by point to ensure that family members understood the information being presented and discussed. Seven schools described providing evaluation reports or draft IEPs to family members prior to the IEP meeting to allow them time to think about aspects of the IEP they may want changed or need clarified. In one school, staff reported that the general education teachers talked to parents prior to referral meetings to let them know if they should bring any special documentation to the meeting and to discuss possible concerns or questions they may have, so that the team could be prepared to answer them.
- **Updating and involving families in decisions about their child’s education.** Throughout the school year, some schools updated families on their child’s progress and involved them in decisions about their child’s education. Staff from 10 schools reported that teachers frequently communicated with families throughout the year to share information on how their child was doing. Four of these schools shared daily behavior charts, and one school also sent home updates on the special education services that the student received during the day. Two schools specifically scheduled parent conferences midway through each quarter to discuss student progress and to allow time to help improve the student’s performance before the grading period was over. In addition, staff from four schools reported that they offered to reconvene IEP meetings to reexamine student goals or to have follow-up discussions, at the request of either teachers or family members. In addition, staff from a few schools described using informal cultural approaches to include families throughout the year; one teacher commented that their school’s philosophy is not “just waiting until parent conferences to talk about a problem. We try and address it right then.”

Do schools provide educational information to parents of SWDs on how to support their child’s learning?

While the majority of the site visit schools ($n = 17$) showed evidence across data sources that they provided information to families on educational practices to support their child’s learning and behavior needs (see Exhibit 8.1), evidence from four schools was limited. On average, a quarter of the teacher

survey respondents in 11 schools did not know if this practice occurred, 62 percent agreed, and 13 percent disagreed. Teachers from charter schools, on average, were more likely than teachers from DCPS schools to disagree that this happened in their schools (22 percent versus 6 percent).⁴⁷ In schools where this happened, families were often educated at school-sponsored workshops or during meetings with teachers on ways to support the educational needs of their child at home.

Key practices

- **Conducting workshops and disseminating information to educate families.** According to interview respondents, 12 schools held meetings and disseminated information to assist families in their efforts to support their child’s learning needs. Eleven schools described providing information to families of students on general topics, such as homework support, basic reading, literacy, and math skills, through school workshops and sending printed materials home with students (e.g. newsletters, information packets). Five schools also described topics more specific to SWDs, such as how to support children with autism, how to address social and behavioral needs of students at home, positive behavior supports, and differentiated instruction (a workshop given to both teachers and family members). Workshops were frequently organized or supported by family coordinators, social workers, or members of outside organizations.
- **Providing families with information on strategies to support children at home.** Fourteen schools provided families with specific information to help them meet the educational needs of their children. Staff from nine schools described how strategies that are used in the classroom were shared with parents in formal (e.g., parent–teacher conferences) and informal meetings. For example, one special education teacher noted that when she used the Wilson Technique in her classroom, she “want[ed] them to be [tapping sounds out] at home,” and in meetings, she told family members, “this is something that is coming up; this is something that you can do at home.” In addition, staff from nine schools described how they shared tips and strategies during multidisciplinary and IEP meetings to meet the needs of students who were struggling and SWDs. One special education coordinator noted that in student evaluations: “There are always recommendations that parents can do, but teachers basically facilitate that in terms of what works best for [their] child” specifically.

As described previously, one school had Academic Parent Teacher Teams and invited all family members to a meeting with grade-level teachers every two months. Prior to the meeting, grade-level teachers, working with literacy, math, or special education teachers, agreed on an essential skill (e.g., multiplication) that students in general needed to work on. At the meeting, the teachers presented the skill to parents and shared data about how students are doing as a class and individually. The teachers also provided materials and modeled how families can work with their children to improve the skill at home (e.g., flashcards). In addition, all the family members set goals for what they were going to do and how they hoped their child’s performance might

⁴⁷ This comparison includes five charters and five DCPS schools, and excludes a special education school that exclusively serves SWDs.

improve. At the next meeting, teachers reviewed student progress on the initial skill and introduced a new skill. One interviewee noted that these meetings sent the message to students and families that “learning doesn’t stop at school,” while recognizing the school’s role in giving family members the tools they need to help their child learn.

- **Offering school-based resources.** Seventeen schools had parent resource centers, with 10 of these schools offering resources for families of SWDs. Almost all of the resource centers were located within the offices of guidance counselors or social workers, though a few were in separate rooms or the main office. In general, resource centers included information on the school, community services, and educational opportunities for students. In two schools, this information was available in multiple languages to meet the needs of families. A few schools had available computers that family members could use, and at one school the social workers bookmarked relevant websites for families on their computers’ browsers.

However, as discussed below, the degree of school-level resources used for family involvement was a concern in some schools. For example, among the 17 schools that provided documents for review, just 12 included a parent handbook. Nearly one-third (29 percent) of the teacher survey respondents, on average, disagreed that their school had dedicated resources to engage parents, whereas 15 percent did not know, which suggests that this not a transparent priority for schools. A similar percentage of teacher respondents disagreed that there was a staff member to oversee communication with families (28 percent, on average, disagreed, and 13 percent did not know).

Challenges

- **Need for additional monetary and personnel resources.** Interview respondents from eight schools mentioned this challenge. Staff from three schools described challenges faced in trying to engage families in a meaningful way during IEP meetings, which stemmed from a lack of systems-level guidance or resources. For example, two respondents noted that their school had limited human capital to attend the number of IEP meetings required at their school, which meant that IEP meetings could not be as long as needed to engage families in in-depth discussions to address all issues. Four other schools reported that they do not have adequate resources to involve parents in school events or meetings. For example, one respondent noted that they cannot apply for funding for food for meetings, which forces schools to work individually to establish local partnerships. As a result, this creates disparities between schools, as noted by a family coordinator:

We can work independently but I think it’s a challenge if you’re trying to implement a system-wide policy or procedure or best practice. If you can’t provide the resources from central office [then] some schools are going to have better partnerships than others. Some schools are going to have more resources to put [toward] it than others and it’s hard to equalize that from school to school.

Respondents also commented on the inconsistent or missing guidance and support from the district systems on how schools should work with families, including any special education-specific issues.

One social worker commented that aside from paperwork detailing the responsibilities of parents, the school is “not getting a lot right now from downtown in terms of what I can do.”

One school principal stated,

I think one of our biggest challenges is defining what we mean when we want parent involvement. There isn't clear guidance from the district on what they mean when they say parent involvement either. To me, that's more than them just visiting the school or showing up for an IEP meeting—how do we equip them to help us?

Another interviewee suggested that the central office could provide specific rubrics for schools, which could detail administrative and teacher responsibilities for family communication and education. With respect to special education, two interviewees noted that they see a need for the Office of the Superintendent of Education (OSSE) to provide more guidance and resources to families so that they have a better understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the IEP process. In addition, one respondent said that there have been efforts from OSSE to help families connect with DC agencies on transition plans for SWDs, but they were unsure if these efforts had gone anywhere. Interviewees also suggested that, in general, family members could be better informed on and involved in district directives and decisions regarding the education of SWDs.

- **Persistent low parent turnout.** Five schools commented that they have recommended resources that could be helpful for students and their families and have worked to create support groups specifically to respond to the needs of families of SWDs, but they are challenged by low rates of parent follow-through. In addition to general meetings, staff from five other schools noted that families cannot or do not want to be involved during IEP meetings, despite what staff described as their school's best efforts. One respondent commented that this is a particular challenge when there was a need to modify a student's IEP, but the school could not get the family to attend. Some of the reasons attributed to low family involvement by respondents included family distrust of DCPS, in general, and special education, in particular. They commented that families have had negative experiences. One special education coordinator noted, “[W]here [parents] lose their empowerment [is] often at the table because they don't understand what's going on. They sit and say yes, but the reality is as a school, sometimes, our staff just glosses over and moves on.”

Some respondents also noted that family education levels and cultural differences were sometimes a challenge. One special education coordinator commented that the biggest challenge to engaging families in their school was “making the parents realize that their kids still need them at [the middle and upper grades], sometimes more so than they did in elementary school.” In order to address family disengagement or disenfranchisement, one respondent

suggested more professional development for school staff on engaging families, and another noted, “[W]e need to educate them that school is not something that is always punitive.”

Chapter 9: School Leadership

Ways in which school leaders facilitate positive student and staff outcomes, support a shared responsibility, and foster a culture of high expectations for students with disabilities

Within this domain, we examined evidence of practices and supports provided by the school administration that foster accountability and a quality-learning environment for teachers and students with disabilities (SWDs). The *School Leadership* domain has 12 indicators (see Chapter 1 for the full list), of which 3 are discussed in this chapter:⁴⁸

- The school administration is knowledgeable about special education issues, policies and procedures, and participates regularly in IEP meetings.
- The school administration meets with grade-level planning teams and special educators, related service providers, and intervention teachers on a regular basis to monitor the progress of SWDs.
- The school administration holds all teachers accountable for planning, delivering appropriate instruction, and monitoring the progress of SWDs.

Please see Appendix I for the full set of indicators and their evidence ratings.

Are principals knowledgeable about special education issues?

In 15 of the 21 schools visited, there was evidence across the data sources that school leadership was experienced or knowledgeable about issues related to special education (see Exhibit 9.1). Three schools showed limited or no evidence, while three schools were excluded from the ratings due to insufficient data sources. On average, 72 percent of the teacher survey respondents in 11 schools agreed that their school administration was knowledgeable; however, this average dropped to 58 percent when asked if the school administration regularly participated in IEP meetings.

⁴⁸ Indicators for the “shared vision” sub-domain are not reviewed in this chapter. The data for these indicators came primarily from documentation reviews and were insufficient for identifying key practices and challenges. Please see Appendix H for the evidence ratings for these indicators.

Exhibit 9.1 Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Selected School Leadership Indicator

| Selected school leadership indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁴⁹ |
| The school administration is knowledgeable about special education issues, policies and procedures, and participates regularly in IEP meetings. | 15 | 3 | 3 |
| The school administration meets with grade-level planning teams and special educators, related service providers, and intervention teachers on a regular basis to monitor the progress of SWDs. | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| The school administration holds all teachers accountable for planning, delivering appropriate instruction, and monitoring the progress of SWDs. | 13 | 5 | 3 |

According to the principals interviewed ($n = 17$), six possessed degrees in special education and had extensive special education experience. Seven did not possess formal degree work but had considerable experience supervising special education programs in school and/or were commended by interviewed staff for their abilities in this field. Four principals noted a lack of both formal background and school-related experiences.

Key practices

- Leveraging principal experience and expertise.** Some principals used their experience and expertise in working with SWDs to prioritize and improve their schools' special education programs. This was particularly true in four schools. Principals at these sites made certain that special education teachers and general education teachers had collaborative time built into their master schedules to plan consistent programs for their students. They also set aside the funds necessary in their school budgets to ensure teachers had appropriate books, adaptive materials, and technology to instruct SWDs. These principals also collected and used data about academic performance and behavior of SWDs. They tailored their supervisory practices to make certain that teachers accommodated and modified academic standards in a manner appropriate for a special education setting. They also sought to foster an inclusive philosophy regarding SWDs. One school's mission statement was recently revised to include a commitment to a philosophy of inclusion. At this school, there was good communication with all stakeholders, including parents, regarding how the special education program was benefiting SWDs and general education students as well.

⁴⁹ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of "evidence" or "limited or no evidence" for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

- **Scheduling regular opportunities to provide special education information.** More experienced principals set aside time to provide information about special education to teachers and other staff. Two principals used morning collaborative times to keep staff abreast of special education practices and updates. One attended professional development sessions provided by the Office of the Superintendent of Education (OSSE) and shared the information on the latest research and best practices with teachers in the school. Another worked with the school data team to design professional development for the staff during the morning collaborative time. At a third school, the principal worked with the special education coordinator to use the faculty bulletin board to keep the staff up-to-date about special education issues.

Challenges

- **Inexperienced principals or those not knowledgeable underscore the need for adequate preparation and training for school leaders.** Four principals in our study schools described themselves as inexperienced or not knowledgeable about special education issues. Among those, a second-year principal believed that the system (e.g., OSSE) should put training plans in place to provide essential information regarding programs and practices for those principals without a special education background.
- **A principal experienced in special education does not guarantee responsive and proactive leadership.** Staff at one school reported that, in spite of their principal's background in special education, they received no professional development in special education, were not informed of training opportunities, and did not receive updates regarding changes in special education regulations. Instead, they relied on the teachers' union to keep them informed of opportunities for special education professional development.
- **Turnover in school leadership.** Respondents at six schools identified turnover in leadership as creating disruption in practice and inconsistency in the school's operation. One charter school campus reported having four different leadership teams in five years. Its leadership stated that each new administrator had his or her own way of carrying out the school's mission, which caused confusion and miscommunication. Teachers at another school reported that they had had three principals in five years. Another teacher remarked that she had been at a school for five years and had a different principal every year. Another teacher noted that one of the assistant principals was placed in a special program at midyear, causing shifts in responsibilities that staff found disruptive.
- **Limited support or lack of support from school leadership.** Although 14 of the site visit schools showed evidence across data sources that the administration ensured that teachers had appropriate materials and supports for teaching students with disabilities, this appeared to be lacking in seven schools. On average, a quarter of the teacher survey respondents in 11 schools disagreed that the administration provided appropriate materials, and this was more pronounced in charter schools (38 percent in charter schools versus 18 percent in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), on average).

Interview respondents across 10 schools corroborated this lack of support. One teacher noted that there were “a lot of expectations, but not a lot of support.”

At one school, an instructional coach complained that teachers lacked intervention programs to support students with disabilities. A special education teacher at the same school remarked that there was nothing for teaching transition skills or remedial reading and that the span of skill levels in her case load was hard to address because she did not have the materials she needed. A respondent at another school stated there were not enough books for every child and she had to photocopy books in order to have the needed instructional materials for each student. At one school, a member of the staff remarked that the school’s financial resources were adequate but that the school lacked an organized process for allocating them. Three teachers at one school all noted that if they wanted supplemental materials, such as those needed for students reading at lower levels, they had to purchase them with their own money. One teacher summed it up by saying, “I’ve been trained...in two reading remediation programs... [neither] of which is appropriate for the kids in my classroom...nor do I have the materials if I decided to run the remediation programs anyway. That’s not really a best practice for teaching....”

Do principals meet regularly with general education and special education teachers?

There was evidence across the data sources in a majority of the schools visited ($n = 17$) that the school administration met regularly with grade-level teams (see Exhibit 9.1). However, four schools showed limited evidence. On average, a quarter of the teacher survey respondents in 11 schools disagreed that the administration met with staff on a regular basis. Teacher respondents in the charter schools were more than twice as likely to disagree that this practice occurred as those from DCPS schools (40 percent versus 15 percent, on average).⁵⁰

According to interview respondents, school administration or their delegates in 15 schools met on a regular basis with staff to discuss data and student progress. In six of these schools, meetings were frequent and actively involved the principal or assistant principal, often occurred daily (during morning collaborative time) or weekly. In nine of the 15 schools, the meetings occurred less frequently, usually when the schools received data from their local education authority, and the principal was likely to delegate his or her attendance to other staff members. In 6 of the 21 schools, the administration had inconsistent or no meetings with staff.

Key practices

- **Establishing formal mechanisms for staff to collaborate.** As described earlier, several schools engaged in collaborative planning, and the principal’s role and presence were important in ensuring the success of those efforts. One educator remarked about team planning with the school’s administration, “[Our principal]...has done an excellent job with that. That is built in and it is part of her expectations. We all sit down as a team, as a school, as a community.” The

⁵⁰ This comparison includes five charters and five DCPS schools, and excludes a special education school that exclusively serves students with disabilities.

principal in another school created a common planning time for all staff, including special education teachers. This school administration also held grade-level student support meetings with special education staff, subject area specialists, and general education teachers to make certain all students were receiving the supports they needed. Their principal could not attend every meeting given other commitments, but was present as often as possible. Another principal established meeting cycles, which involved the administrative team and ensured intensive and continuous follow-up on staff and student needs. On Mondays, teachers engaged in instructional planning with members of the administrative team. On Tuesdays, there was professional development planned by the administration and school leadership using the data from their classroom observations, which revealed staff instructional areas for improvement. Wednesdays and Thursdays were spent analyzing academic and nonacademic data, respectively, while both days involved strategizing on best practices for struggling students. In yet another school, they held weekly meetings with special education teachers.

- **Assigning administrators to grade levels and content areas.** In one school, the administration played an active role in reviewing data with staff by assigning each of its administrators to a grade level for which they were responsible. The administrators met regularly with grade-level staff as well as with special education teachers who were designated to serve students in those grades. At these meetings, the administration, general education teachers, and special educators reviewed data and planned for reteaching skills that students failed to master. They then monitored those plans and made changes as necessary.

Challenges

- **Inconsistent meetings of administration and teachers for the purpose of monitoring student progress.** As noted above, four schools had limited or no evidence across the data sources of school leaders meeting regularly with teaching staff, and interviews suggested that the practice was inconsistent or nonexistent in six schools. Asked if the administration met with grade-level teams and administrators, one interviewee stated,

To my knowledge, no. Not...unless a teacher brings forth a concern and the teacher is vocal about the student, then the administration is available to listen and discuss...but in terms of meeting specifically with a special education teacher...no. We do have weekly special education meetings but those meetings are geared toward case management as opposed to teaching and learning.

Another school set a goal for regular meetings between administration and teaching staff, but since they could not arrange common planning times for special education and classroom teachers, they could not establish this as a routine practice.

Do principals hold all teachers accountable for educating SWDs?

Although the school leadership met regularly with staff in several schools as described above, explicit accountability for SWDs did not appear as prevalent. Thirteen of the 21 schools showed evidence that the school administration held all teachers accountable for the education of SWDs; 5 showed limited or

no evidence; and 3 were excluded. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of the teacher survey respondents, on average, agreed that the administration held all teachers accountable, but 21 percent disagreed. On average, survey respondents from charter schools were less likely to agree, in comparison to the respondents from DCPS schools (81 percent versus 61 percent).⁵¹

As described by the interview respondents, accountability typically occurred through classroom observations, teacher evaluations, reviews of lesson plans, and reviews of student data. Generally supporting the learning of all students, these mechanisms, however, did not necessarily have an explicit focus on SWDs.

Key practices

- **Using formal and informal observations to ensure teacher accountability.** Most DCPS schools and all charter schools reported both formal and informal observations being administered as part of the accountability process. Formal observations were administered as part of the DCPS IMPACT evaluation process, which required a set number of observations performed by both school-based administration as well as a master educator from the central office. These observations were instrumental in providing feedback to teachers about their instructional practices. DCPS staff noted frequent informal observations conducted by administration, as well. Eight schools noted informal observations with feedback to teachers took place at least weekly. Four others reported informal observations of teachers as a standard practice, but did not specify their frequency. One school reported informal observations as taking place monthly or sometimes less frequently. Charter schools also reported formal and informal observations, but with variation in the number of types of observations across the charter schools. For example, one school did two “long observations” and two “short observations.”
- **Incorporating a specific focus on SWDs in lesson planning.** Described by respondents from 14 schools, a common way of holding teachers accountable was by requiring them to submit lesson plans (or related documents) for review and feedback. Teachers typically submitted weekly (although often less frequently for DCPS schools than in charter schools) lesson plans that were reviewed by administrators, coaches, or mentor teachers. A special education teacher described an increased sense of accountability for SWDs at her school through both meetings and lesson plans:

We have a day for them to have a morning meeting...just for [SWDs]. It's amazing because this never happened before. And the message is there...send all your lesson plans and all your assignments, and the administration keeps track to see who is trying to comply and who is at least trying to do something. So, the paper trail is picking up on who is actually doing what they're supposed to do. Because accountability is not only on me but on all of us who work with these students.

⁵¹ This comparison includes five charters and five DCPS schools, and excludes a special education school that exclusively serves students with disabilities.

While it provides some form of accountability, the practice of requiring submission of lesson plans for review does not necessarily translate to accountability for SWDs. However, six schools used lesson-planning templates that included a specific focus on accommodations and/or supports for struggling students. In one school, the template included a box in which the teacher identified a student's initials and specified the accommodations, modifications, and supports for that student. In another, teachers submitted a weekly plan called "Blackboard Configuration," which identified the accommodations, small groups, and other supports. The director of instruction reviewed and had a conversation with staff if accommodations were not being documented and implemented. The weekly syllabi for a third school included a universal design for learning (UDL) component that identified how teachers planned to differentiate a lesson so that all students had access to the materials. The plan contained specific boxes to identify how the needs of certain students would be met: students with limited English proficiency, struggling students/students with special needs, and accelerated learners. In a fourth school, teachers submitted an "objective calendar," a detailed document that included a section on modifications or accommodations they intended to use for students and why and how standards might be modified.

In addition, transparency of lesson plans can enhance accountability and professional growth. In six schools, lesson plans were posted and/or made accessible to all staff. This enabled educators and providers serving SWDs to know what was being taught (and how) in other classrooms and to hold their peers accountable.

- **Maximizing administrative visibility.** Another way for administration to support accountability is to maintain a highly visible presence throughout the schools. At one school, the principal herself supervised the cafeteria daily. At another school, the principal requested that school administrators avoid spending time in their offices and to perform routine chores such as checking e-mails in classrooms to promote maximum visibility. At one secondary school, administration had divided the school into distinct zones, and each administrator was responsible for one of them. They stationed themselves in their zones as often as possible to promote administrative visibility and to ensure that each part of the building had adequate supervision. One charter school established a Department of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, which worked with teachers in any of these areas that they believed needed support. In effect, this created a more visible presence for administrators as they worked with staff to improve classroom practice.

Challenges

- **Poor and inconsistent follow-through on supervisory practices.** Teachers at three schools reported frustration with erratic or untimely observations and feedback. One special education teacher described being observed on the last possible day in the school year for classroom observations to take place according to IMPACT regulations. The observer allegedly only stayed in the room for twenty minutes and it was too late in the year for whatever suggestions were provided to be useful. A general education teacher in a charter school noted that a forum on how the staff was going to be observed was held at the beginning of the year, but that after two

months, the system for observations stopped and was not replaced. Noting that this was not unusual, the teacher said,

At the beginning of every year that I've worked here, there's been a lot of promises in terms of people getting in and doing observations, like you're going to have a weekly informal one and then so many formal ones and that usually falls apart.

Another teacher at the same school noted that she actually did have an observation but the post-conference debriefing was rescheduled repeatedly and ultimately never held at all. At another school, a teacher reported that no observations had taken place during the year and then a large number were held at its very end, with three observations in one week.

- **Lax accountability for progress of SWDs.** Although there was a degree of accountability through evaluations, observations, and review of lesson plans and data, some respondents in seven schools did not think the administration held teachers accountable for SWDs or that the accountability went far enough. An instructional coach at one site noted that accountability was spoken, but it was not enforced. Three respondents at another school described this as an area for improvement, with the principal acknowledging that the school had been more focused on compliance than achievement. In another school, the respondent expressed a desire for more guidance and structure from the administration, including the review of lesson plans.

Chapter 10: Systems Support

The prior chapters examined how schools were implementing special education quality indicators. However, schools do not operate in isolation, and are influenced by policies, procedures, and supports offered by the larger school systems. System-level factors play a critical role in enabling, or sometimes hindering, schools' progress in developing and implementing quality education programs for students with disabilities (SWDs). Using interview data from school- and systems-level staff and open-ended responses from the surveys, this chapter explores how the overall system supported or created challenges for the schools in this study.

The overall system structures that govern education in the District of Columbia include the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), the Office of the Superintendent of Education (OSSE), District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), the Public Charter School Board (PCSB), and charter local education authorities (LEAs). The chapter is organized into three main sections: supports, special education programs, and decision-making processes. In many cases, the respondents did not identify a specific entity when describing system-wide challenges they faced. Indeed, these issues cross-cut the various governing structures and should be considered by all organizations as they coordinate to strengthen the overall education system and support individual schools.

This chapter may appear to focus predominantly on the challenges and flaws of the systems. Where expressed by respondents, we have included positive remarks regarding system supports to highlight areas that the governing structures should sustain. However, the majority of the school-level comments made about whether the overall system supports or poses challenges to providing a quality education for SWDs described concerns and problems, rather than advantages. Some of the challenges faced by schools described in each of the previous chapters have implications for system structures, such as the lack of school- and system-level supports for addressing student behavior and turnover of school leadership. While we do not repeat those issues in this chapter, they too should be considered in conjunction with the concerns raised below. We also acknowledge that the systems may be actively addressing or planning to address the challenges described in this chapter. However, in order to keep the focus on the school-level perspectives, we do not assess whether or how the structures are attempting to resolve these issues.

Although the overarching system includes charter LEAs, PCSB, and DME, school respondents primarily focused on OSSE and DCPS supports. Among the charter schools, respondents from two schools discussed their charter LEAs, and respondents from two other schools mentioned the PCSB when discussing systems supports. Furthermore, the DME was specifically mentioned just twice across the study school respondents. Because of the limited information provided on these entities, we have not included them in this summary of findings.

Supports

Systems supports for schools can come in various forms, including the creation of infrastructure to monitor compliance with federal regulations, the distribution of financial and personnel resources, and the provision of professional development and technical assistance. On average, two of nine

interviewed respondents in each study school made positive comments about the system as a whole. Among the DCPS schools, one respondent, on average, remarked that DCPS in particular was supportive, and among all study schools, an average of one respondent stated that OSSE actively supported the school's efforts, primarily through professional development (this ranged from zero respondents in three schools to four respondents in one school making positive remarks). One principal said, "I think we're getting more than enough support at least from a philosophical standpoint for the most part from those three organizations [DME, OSSE, and DCPS]." Another principal remarked, "DCPS has done a phenomenal job in my time and tenure here of making sure that we pay close attention to the needs of our students and make sure that they're adequately addressed." A charter school principal reported, "OSSE does an exceptional job of supporting us personally." Respondents from two schools believed that the District was making strides in supporting schools with regard to special education, particularly with the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI), the development of autism programs, and in revamping Early Stages.

However, other respondents in the study schools shared different perspectives. For example, respondents in 10 schools described the systems as not having an active presence, with communication, if any, limited to when there were problems or compliance issues. One respondent acknowledged, "I have no clue what OSSE even does except for the fact that I need to turn my paperwork in to them." Another summarized the support from the system as, "When there is a problem, they will show up, but other than that you don't hear from them." The lack of active support may increase the burden on schools to appropriately educate children. One principal articulated this concern as, "It's all on us, and I just feel that every DCPS school is on its own. They say it takes a village. But I feel that OSSE and those outside of the school system there are not part of the village." Some respondents noted that they did not know who to contact outside the school if they needed support. One teacher reported, "I never had this many challenges trying to locate resources or who can help me." Another teacher explained,

As far as OSSE, to be completely honest, I don't know what they do or what they do for us, and I'm comfortable admitting my ignorance as the grade-level chair, as someone who has been here for five years.... I'm not speaking as a person that just walked in this building. I really don't know what they do for us.

Compliance focused

Other respondents described the system as being overly focused on compliance. While monitoring compliance is an important function of LEAs and OSSE, respondents at five schools expressed concerns that this focus overrode efforts to create quality programs. For example, a special education coordinator believed that the school was not effective because DCPS was "so compliance driven." A principal responded, "They're focused on compliance, to be quite honest, and not necessarily excellence. You know, are all the boxes checked, is all of their paperwork in order? And unfortunately that doesn't translate to student achievement."

Respondents remarked that the long-standing focus on compliance at the systems level has meant that supports for schools have suffered. A principal noted, "[T]he District of Columbia has never gotten out of the compliance mode.... Because of that, there's no real work that I see in the central office on

curriculum and instruction.... It's not like you can expect a lot of help from anybody." Another principal explained that while there were improvements in compliance, the quality and support pieces were lacking:

I think the main point is we should be focused on instruction, the quality of instruction. And we tried to do that within the confines of our school, but there's not a [system-wide] mission or a vision for special education that reflects that. It might be on paper, but it's not transmitted to the schools and the resources are not transmitted to the school.

Respondents from two schools noted that while their sites did not have compliance issues, they were still impacted by the system-wide compliance focus because it undermined the level of support that could be provided to schools. Furthermore, the lack of flexibility for schools that do not have compliance issues is problematic because it takes effort away from providing quality programs. Respondents at one of these schools noted that they were still required to schedule all IEP meetings for the entire year at the start of the school year, even though the school had a high success rate with parent attendance. The system would not make accommodations, and warned staff that they would be subjected to disciplinary action if they did not follow through and that letters would be sent to the parent community. A principal explained,

DCPS is very compliance oriented....They've upped the ante so much for us that it actually strangles us to a certain point. Now I will say that we are very organized here; I didn't have any compliance issues; I didn't miss any timelines. But it's over the top and I think what they should be focusing on is providing us with the resources, like specialized programs and training and have a menu of services.

A teacher predicted that the overemphasis on compliance and the additional paperwork that accompanies it will result in less teaching time. She warned, "So what's going to end up happening is, you're going to get sued more and more, because we're not able to meet the needs of our students."

In addition to describing the system as not being an active player and as focused predominantly on compliance, respondents across all schools described concerns related to limited financial and personnel resources and insufficient and inaccessible professional development.

Staffing

Another function that the systems carry out is the allocation of resources. Two school leaders believed their school had sufficient resources, with one noting that the systems "provide us with the means, whether it be technical, material, human resource-wise." Respondents in two other schools commended the school modernization efforts. Yet multiple respondents in nearly all of the study schools reported inadequate resources to provide quality special education programs (all of the DCPS schools and four of the six charter schools). As detailed in previous chapters, schools reported deficits in system-provided resources for curriculum, technology, and behavior. The level of staffing, however, was the most widespread concern.

The majority of study schools described their special education programs as being understaffed and overstretched, and 17 of the 100 open-ended responses from the teacher survey identified increased

staffing as one aspect that would improve capacity to educate SWDs. “We don’t have enough bodies” was a common refrain among the school interviewees. Several comments were made about large caseloads, and class sizes and recent cuts in staffing, which, in conjunction with a growing special education population, made it challenging to provide necessary services. One respondent explained that the school was operating with a “skeleton staff,” where the absence of one or two staff made it very difficult to plan and instruct. An instructional coach highlighted the concerns with large caseloads:

When I think about my colleagues in other schools that have 90 [special education] students in their caseload, I don’t know how they’re doing that. Because last year, when I was a teacher and my [special education] teacher was with me, we had 10 students, and it was hard, but we got the hours done. We made sure that they were passing. We made sure that they were accessing the curriculum. I can’t imagine that work happening with 90 students. So, in that sense, no [the system is not supporting us] because we need more teachers. And maybe it’s because they’re still trying to clean up the compliance, but reform has been happening for a couple of years and I think that it hasn’t been felt in the classroom yet.

Understaffing creates problems in meeting the needs of SWDs. The consensus across the respondents was that schools needed more special education teachers. However, there was also an expressed need for other personnel, such as behavior therapists, to provide students with critical wrap-around services, and other specialists. One respondent described the burden on classroom teachers in the absence of such support:

We don’t have a Title I [specialist], we don’t have a reading specialist, we don’t have a math resource teacher or a specialist..... It still rests on the classroom teacher to do [these] types of things alongside everything else. So that’s why I said it could be kind of cumbersome when you don’t have kind of the personnel that you need.

Another concern expressed related to resources was that supports did not follow students placed in a given school. One principal remarked, “They just send them with little or no resources. A lot of times once that child gets here, then it’s little support from OSSE and [the] Deputy Mayor. We’re on our own; then I get the blame.” A special education coordinator said,

This is where I think that the school system as a whole needs a lot more work and I do believe they’ve failed us. When they sent children to us from outside of the school, whether it was from Early Stages or another school, they sent a child with an IEP and that’s it. They don’t send the things that come with the IEP. For example, if a child requires a bench that’s been written in the IEP to help get them up because they have physical therapy, gross motor issues. Then when that child comes here, that bench should follow the child. That doesn’t happen.

Respondents also noted disparities in resource levels across schools and described the allocation and funding mechanism as not being sensitive enough to address differences in school and student needs. Respondents at two schools talked about the need for behavior management technicians, but in both cases, these personnel were not budgeted. One principal advised,

[The system needs to do] a better job of understanding where individual schools, or at least school systems or pockets of schools, are and then [be] able to align resources. Align support to what the actual needs of the school are beyond just sending out a quarterly [professional development] calendar that might have 1 out of 15 workshops dedicated to special education.

Some school respondents noted the need to better account for student needs within the allocation system. A principal explained,

The biggest challenge is that the district does not staff schools at the level needed to really comply with all the hours that a student needs. [Special education] teachers are spread way too thin as far as having a caseload to manage, as far as all the timelines and IEPs, et cetera, and then being expected to co-teach. And so because their caseloads are too high, they can't co-teach as much as they should and the students probably don't get the real quality hours that they should. So the district does not staff schools based on the total number of hours that kids need; they staff it based on the number of kids. One kid might need two hours a week. One kid might need 20 hours a week. You really should total up the hours that are needed and staff based on that, but the district doesn't do that. So they basically understaff all their schools.

School respondents noted that the system as a whole was behind the curve in the implementation of quality programs and the allocation of resources needed to ensure their success. One principal described examining how other states delivered programs for students with emotional disturbance: "We saw that they had six people in the room. Of course, they could do great things. We had one. So the school system is not really looking at other practices that are working well in other states and taking into account the amount of resource that's needed to do that." A respondent from another school said that the system had not caught up with the programs, research, and technology needed to serve students with diverse needs. An instructional coach remarked, "I personally think that as a school system, we don't have anything different for children who have special needs.... There's nothing different or specialized for children with special needs, which doesn't make sense to me."

Professional development

The delivery of professional development is yet another important function that the systems undertake. Respondents from 15 schools highlighted professional development provided by DCPS and OSSE as being particularly useful. One teacher commended DCPS for modifying its professional development days to be more specific, and she appreciated the flexibility to choose from numerous sessions. OSSE's work in this area was described as outstanding and effective by several respondents. Respondents from two others schools spoke highly of the trainings related to autism. One DCPS principal considered the OSSE workshops to be "very, very helpful," and noted that they were largely attended by charter staff, stating, "I don't understand why more DCPS folks are not there!" A teacher at a charter school acknowledged that she was very skeptical of the appropriateness of the Common Core State Standards for SWDs until she attended OSSE trainings. The principal of that school remarked that OSSE had "an extensive [professional development] calendar, which works very well." In short, respondents across the majority of schools saw great value in the professional development offered at the systems level.

Although there was generally a favorable view of this type of systems support, schools also described issues with making full use of these opportunities or a lack of content-rich training focused on SWDs. Challenges regarding professional development were examined in the *Staff* chapter, where we reported that respondents from 15 of the 21 study schools stated that they received no or insufficient professional development on educating students in special education, and a quarter of the open-ended teacher responses also highlighted the need for training. Respondents from four schools remarked that the existing training was predominantly around paperwork or district-wide assessments, and lacked content on addressing the specific needs of SWDs. One noted, “The [professional development] that’s been provided is mostly around compliance in timelines. It’s not around innovative ways to provide services.” Another remarked,

Because of the restrictions on time and the lack of focus for what special education and general education teachers need with regard to professional development, it’s minimal at best.... I believe the restriction doesn’t come from the building; it comes from central administration. Example, we have professional development days once a month. There is no time built in those sessions to focus on special education and its initiatives and students with disabilities... I think that’s missing significantly.

Others reported that while the professional development was beneficial, particularly that offered by OSSE, the sessions were not scheduled at accessible times. Respondents at six schools reported that scheduling the workshops during the school day made it difficult to attend. Schools were unable to release teachers (special education teachers, in particular) due to limited staffing to attend to student needs and lack of substitute coverage. One teacher noted that the communication was not always effective, explaining that she would hear about them by “word of mouth,” and by the time the news reached her, the sessions were full. A principal expressed disappointment that the professional development was not effective in its outreach: “I just somehow wish it could reach more of us.... I think DCPS and OSSE need to kind of mesh it...[making] a requirement of DCPS principals to attend certain sessions.”

While many respondents viewed the system-level professional development as a critical tool in their efforts to improve their education programs, a more proactive approach to ensuring accessible sessions and a heightened focus on the needs of SWDs may be needed. One teacher remarked, “I think that we don’t develop the human capital that we have. We waste it.” Another summarized the situation as,

[General education teachers] don’t know how to use baselines, they don’t know how to write annual goals, they don’t know measurable goals and there’s no professional development for them to do so. The District doesn’t put them out, if they do, often times principals don’t allow them to go. We work in a field where you’re not encouraged to do so. Any other field you know you are encouraged to do so to sharpen your tools for your craft.

Special Education Programs

The second component of this chapter focuses on concerns related to special education programs—specifically case management, appropriate placement options, inclusion models, and system-wide alignment of services—all of which are impacted by systems-level decisions and support.

Case management

Respondents from a majority of the DCPS schools—10 of 14—expressed concerns about balancing case management and teaching SWDs. Interestingly, this did not emerge from interviews with the charter school respondents. Rather, case management appeared to be handled centrally by the LEA. Several DCPS school respondents remarked that both functions were full-time jobs, as described by one special education teacher:

Case managing 18 students and being held to all of the same expectations and time constraints as a classroom teacher [is very difficult]. I'm essentially doing two completely separate jobs.... I could definitely fill probably 30 hours a week just doing case management if I did it right. If I tracked IEP goals, if I was checking every kids' attendance every single day, if I was calling the parents when there were issues, if I was seeing how their grades are going, making sure that they're signed up for transition stuff and the SATs and making sure that their community service hours were done.

With more case management responsibilities, teachers were compelled to cut back on their instructional time. A special education teacher noted, “The largest challenge is that we’re no longer given the opportunity to spend the majority of our time teaching. Right now, 50 percent of our job is teaching, even if it’s that much.” These concerns were intensified by DCPS’s decision to eliminate funding for the special education coordinators (SEC), starting with the 2012–13 school year (schools were permitted to use their speciality funds to continue the position). Respondents at seven schools expressed uncertainty about how the school would function without an SEC and concerns about shifting the SEC responsibilities to teachers. One principal commented,

I don't know what's going to happen. They said the classroom teacher is going to have to do this. The teacher cannot teach like they need to teach and do what she has to do. The time, when are they going to have the time during the day with children to input all of the things that she's doing? We're shooting ourselves in the foot. I mean, I hate to even think about it. I don't know, I don't know where we're going but I know that's the wrong direction.

Special education teachers themselves remarked that they could not take on additional responsibilities and still sustain their teaching obligations. As described by one teacher, “How am I supposed to teach the lesson plans for individual students, coordinate it with teachers and classrooms, [and] cover all of the hours that the special education students need?” An instructional coach expressed a similar concern: “It’s negatively going to impact the kids because if the teachers are also the case managers and the LEA reps.... They really can’t put forth as much energy as they should be able to into educating the kids.” Another interviewee acknowledged that DCPS would be increasing the school psychologist’s time for all schools, but believed that would not be sufficient to carry out student evaluations and case

management. In addition to impacting the students, three SECs believed that it would negatively impact the relationships with parents.

A number of respondents suggested that shifting these responsibilities to teachers would create more compliance issues. One respondent thought that the lack of training for teachers would result in “failure.” Another remarked, “That is going to be a major, major, major issue. I say, Blackwood Jones part two.” An advisory team member who was also a parent noted that it was not a good time to cut resources:

The systems decision to remove SECs, I think, is going to be miserable. I think it's going to have dire consequences... That whole other component of the special education teacher's job is going to completely fall. And we've gotten to the point where compliance isn't as much an issue, but now is the time where we pounce and continue to invest in this area and continue to improve quality. [J]ust because compliance is set does not mean quality is strong enough and I think quality is far from where it needs to be across the district level... And compliance is going to once again, in my prediction, become an issue. Services are just not going to be rendered.... I don't think it makes sense economically to pull back resources from this area. I think you need to continue to invest.

Appropriate placement options

Another area of concern pertained to the availability of appropriate placement options for SWDs and the placement process. Four interviewees described a lack of therapeutic programs for students with severe disabilities, and eight teachers identified this as a concern in the open-ended survey response. One teacher thought it would be best to have programs serving such students in each ward. Two other respondents specifically identified the need for high quality, highly effective centers for students who are emotionally disturbed. Another believed that the push to return students to their neighborhood schools has resulted in inappropriate placements. Similarly, a respondent reported frustration with how the lack of therapeutic placements resulted in students being placed in schools that are not properly prepared or supported:

And so for our kids that are severely disabled that need a truly therapeutic environment, I do not believe that DCPS has anything to offer for them.... I think DCPS really has to look at creating a truly therapeutic environment to deal with some of these severely disabled kids. And not throw up roadblocks for us and to [not] support us. And to come in and say, “You know what, this isn't working for this child here, we need to try something else,” and to actually work with us instead of just saying, “Nope, that child is going to stay here.”

Referring to returning non-public school students, another respondent confirmed the lack of resources to accompany placement decisions:

When those children came back, we were not prepared. There was no training. There was not a fund of resources sent with those children. We had what we had when they were not here. When these kids came back, we did not receive a lot of, “Here are the tools that you're going to need to support you to help these children get to the next level,” or whatever their goals were. So that

it's a mismatch. They've not really been aligned. All they're [DCPS] following is deadlines and they're not looking at the children and their needs and making sure that we have the best people in place and the resources for them to be successful with those children."

Similar to this issue, principals from two schools expressed concerns about the placement process. One reported that SWDs appeared to be clustered in a small number of schools, and that SWDs were not enrolled in schools in certain quadrants of the city. Another principal described the system placing a student into his school without clear criteria and without appropriate supports: "They want to jump over that process and send them directly here, and to me it just wasn't fair."

Inclusion

Respondents from 10 schools (including 4 charters) raised issues related to implementing an inclusion, or co-teaching, model, which was described by a respondent as a "mandate" from DCPS. Staff across six schools were concerned that a co-teaching model was not appropriate for addressing the needs of certain students. One teacher noted that parents were wary of the inclusion model, out of concern that the students would not receive the required hours of specialized services. Another teacher said that it was not necessarily appropriate for high-stakes subjects like algebra where students needed more individualized support. Others reported a confusion and tension between co-teaching and pull-out models, and emphasized the need to strike a balance, as explained by a general education teacher:

If [students are] not getting the support that they need in these specific areas, even if they're in a room with a bunch of kids in the general education room, they're still going to feel separate because they're not getting the work.... And so I think DC would benefit from finding a system somewhere in between inclusion and full pull-out. That works best especially in a building where you have such limited resources as they relate to special education.

One special education teacher described having a student recommended for a general education class, but who she believed would be more appropriately placed in a self-contained setting with a dedicated aide in order to make progress. She contended, "The District is pushing inclusion but they have to understand that inclusion is not for everyone because it doesn't benefit the student; it doesn't benefit the other students in the class." Another special education teacher at the same school cautioned against a full inclusion approach, stating, "[DCPS] didn't, or refused to, see that there are certain children who need a small group setting and you can't throw everything [else] out." Calling the mandate a "disservice to some students," another special education teacher highlighted the confusion regarding the inclusion initiative:

There seems to be some kind of confusion as to what you want to do with the students. Do you want them to be pulled out of the class? Do you want them to be taught in the classroom? Because we get too many mixed messages.

This reported uncertainty and the misperception that inclusion is appropriate for all SWDs points to a need for more professional development. As noted earlier in this report, eight school respondents expressed a need for more clarification and training to implement a successful co-teaching model. One principal noted that it was a challenge to successfully implement a co-teaching model "where the special

education students are getting the same services they need, but [it's] not just 'Go over there and do your watered down assignment' type thing." To support schools in implementing a consistent approach, respondents pointed to the need for the systems to more clearly define inclusion. One general education teacher related the confusion that ensued when a special education teacher transferred to her school (within the same school system). The newly arrived special education teacher was not familiar with the inclusion model. The general education teacher remarked,

They really need to fine tune what inclusion looks like, and provide the models for inclusion and things that we can look to, to get guidance because I feel like every school does inclusion their own way.... Inclusion in [here] looks completely different from inclusion at [another school]. It just looks different. And I think it's DCPS or OSSE whosever responsibility to eliminate the wishy-washiness and create a definite [plan that] this is what inclusion looks like.... This is the model that everyone should be following so that there is no room for error.

In addition to the need for the system to clarify what is meant by "inclusion" and provide more professional development, respondents from five DCPS schools reported that additional resources, particularly staffing, were needed to implement inclusion appropriately. One principal noted that the school believed in an inclusive approach but believed that it required more resources to do it properly:

But inclusion can work especially if you staff it correctly. [It's not saying] five special [education] kids are going to be in class with one teacher. That's not inclusion for those kids. That's dumping. Inclusion is team-taught support, a modified class level with an aide or two aides and a certified teacher. There're many ways to do it but it costs money. And you can't think that by doing inclusion you're going to save money because you're really not.... It's got to be done right.

Another principal remarked that an inclusion model is "doable only with adequate resources and the right supports." Respondents at two other schools also concluded that schools needed more staffing to successfully implement inclusion, with one emphasizing that co-teaching needs to go beyond just math and English language arts classes. On the lack of supports regarding this approach, a special education teacher said, "And unfortunately we're watching inclusion and hoping that it doesn't just crash and burn."

System-wide alignment for special education

Respondents at seven schools identified a lack of alignment across school systems and schools in terms of communication and services. These concerns are related to the issue detailed in an earlier chapter regarding the lack of communication between schools when SWDs transfer. However, this system-wide concern transcends the capacity of individual schools. In addition to challenges with communication and transfer of information from one school to another (within or across LEAs), respondents reported concerns with discrepancies in services and a lack of accountability. One principal reported issues of an SWD transferring to his school with missing documentation and without having received services in the prior placement. Another said,

There's not alignment in what you're seeing for those students. So I'm still puzzled on how a student could have an IEP when they go to Charter and then go to Charter for two years and

come back with an expired IEP. And so, then we're playing catch up to get the documentation and this, that, and the other. So, there needs to be better alignment with what we have within the city. I've had a number of students who've come to me with expired documentation or without tests that have been completed and the rationale is, 'Oh well, we don't do that at this school setting.' I think we all should be held to the same standard.... I think that alignment is a huge piece, when it comes to that accountability piece for all of us that we should all be held to the same standard and level of accountability.

Decision Making Processes

The third component of this chapter reviews concerns about the systems that were raised by school respondents regarding management, continuity, and respect.

Management

Respondents in 10 schools reported challenges with the systems' top-down decision making process, which resulted in lack of buy-in, trust, and continuity in program implementation. One respondent called the decisions "top heavy," and respondents from three schools used the word "disconnect" to describe the relationship between the systems and schools. Six schools stressed the lack of input or collaboration in making system-wide changes, policies, or procedural decisions. One respondent reported, "We're never included and the perception is, we only want to bother you when we need something.... When you provide that type of disconnect, then peoples' perception is, you don't care about us anyway." Another respondent noted that principals and coaches were not consulted when DCPS redefined the coaches' role and reduced focus on data collection and use. One respondent lamented, "It's just a shame that [we], all the way down here, don't necessarily get a say." Principals also acknowledged this concern, with one saying,

The district does not talk to the schools.... And I think if you ask anybody here that a lot times what [it] is asked to be done, if it's asked from the top down, [it] is really not what's best for the kid.... There's not a collaborative nature outside of the building.

Another principal recommended, "Ask the schools what we need. We don't have a voice. So I think that [let] us, the people that are in the trenches, let us have a voice and help guide Central Office with what we need." In the open-ended survey question, one administrator wrote, "If they would listen to the principals, teachers, and parents they could have a great [special education] program in the district. But it all comes from the top down without any input from the school-based staff that actually implements the programming."

The importance of collaboration and input was heightened by the fact that respondents believed that individuals making decisions did not have firsthand familiarity with the schools and were removed from the ground-level efforts. One said, "A lot of the people making decisions have not even come to our school, they're not aware of the needs of our students.... I would love to see those people come and teach our students and maybe they would have a different opinion." Another responded, "Because it's easier to forget when you're like sitting in an office and you're never really around the schools that need help." A third respondent expressed doubts about the qualifications of those making decisions: "It's like 22-year-olds are deciding all teachers must do this and it's like, have you ever been a teacher? I just

haven't been impressed with the kind of transparency and communication in the recent administration."

The lack of input and perception that the systems did not understand schools resulted in what the respondents believed were arbitrary decisions that were not well designed or logical. One respondent said, "Either DCPS or OSSE keep coming up with crazy rules out of nowhere." Describing the decision that required IEP meetings to be held on certain days of the week, another respondent said, "[It] seems arbitrary and bizarre to me, but that's a rule from someone. Rules or policies or regulations that have no basis in logic or justification." The elimination of the SEC position was given as an example of top-down decision making that respondents highlighted. A principal remarked, "It does not seem like they have a plan for how we're going to tackle the lack of that position in our school building. They haven't been quite thoughtful about that." Another respondent summarized all such concerns:

They don't pilot programs. They make sweeping changes and implement them overnight without thinking through these things. A lot of these decisions, I believe, are not made by educators. They are made by people that have no—limited or no experience—in the classroom. So they implement things overnight and make sweeping changes without trying things out. So, for example, getting rid of the [special education] coordinator position. They did it cold turkey. They just said at the end of last year they notified all staff in like May or June. The right way to do it is to pilot a program and to find out what works before you make a sweeping change.

Continuity

Respondents at seven schools noted issues with a lack of continuity with programs and system staff, which was described as disruptive and frustrating. One respondent reported that the curriculum was "constantly changing, and it doesn't ever feel like they give it a chance to go in and work." Another respondent echoed that concern, stating, "I would like to see this school system stay with something long enough to see if it bears out. I just think some consistency is the key to any kind of achievement." A third stressed that it takes time for policies to be implemented, and, "It takes even longer to see the results of those policies, good or bad. And I think they're just too quick to throw in new ideas." Two respondents used the word "chaotic" to describe the systems. One warned, "We're going to reinvent the wheel, and if we can't keep continuity then we're just going to have kids in chaos; we'll have schools in chaos and teachers who are chaotic. And we're not going to get anywhere." The other described the chaos, confusion, and skepticism resulting from continuous change:

On Monday, you tell us this is the process; on Friday, you change it. So, it's very confusing down there. They are not reliable in that sense. And everyone thinks it's a joke. Nobody takes them seriously. Because if a mandate can come from OSSE right now, "Oh, you have to do this and that," people will just shrug it off. This is your boss, and people will shrug [it] off because two or three weeks down the road, they will change back.... I mean, we don't trust them. We just look at them like, okay, they have to be there but they don't help.

The chronic staff turnover at the systems level appeared to exacerbate the problems caused by the lack of consistent programs and policies. Four respondents identified this instability in staff as a concern. One principal reported, “The staff changes about every three minutes, so you don’t know who to call, who to contact, or who’s in charge of what.” Another respondent commented,

The district itself has had seven or eight transfers or superintendents [and] nobody seems to last more than three years. Well how do you build a school system ...when typically change instructional organizational change takes minimal[ly] three years? First year you come in [to] see what’s going on. Second year you build some programs, third year you’re evaluating, and that fourth year you need to go back and re-evaluate all of it. Well, nobody stays around that long so we seem to keep re-inventing the wheel over, and over, and over again.

Respect

Respondents from six schools perceived a lack of respect from the system or a negative atmosphere that focused on the problems, rather than solutions. As one teacher remarked, “It just feels like for us we’re being told every week...that we’re not doing something right.” Another noted that the DCPS approach to problems was to fire and replace teachers instead of supporting them and giving them time to internalize the support. One respondent reported receiving an email threatening to separate her from the school system if the school did not comply with a system-wide mandate. She said, “That is such a terrible thing for anybody to receive and I don’t treat people that way. I don’t treat my staff members here. I don’t treat parents that way, but that’s the way we’re treated from downtown.” A principal noted that school staff were not treated in a professional manner and that DCPS staff became defensive when questions were raised about policies. He remarked, “But if changes are made to the process and aren’t delivered in a respectful way, then it just makes people put a wall up and there’s a lot of pushback.” Another respondent described tension emanating from the system decisions: “There have been so many radical changes that just seem to be without merit that come from that high level that makes everyone on edge. What we’ve become is we have become test scores.”

Chapter 11: Recommendations

The previous chapters of this report presented findings related to the implementation of quality programs for students with disabilities (SWDs) in District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) and charter schools. We also reported how system-level entities support such efforts, as well as the challenges faced by schools. Against this context, we present a series of system-level recommendations for areas that we believe are critical for implementing quality special education programs based on the findings presented in this report. Although we direct these recommendations to the Office of the Superintendent of Education (OSSE), other system-level structures—DCPS, charter local education authorities (LEAs), Public Charter School Board (PCSB), and the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME)—play vital roles in supporting quality programs, and they must be actively engaged in this process of reform. We acknowledge that these organizations may already be developing and providing supports that align with some of our recommendations, in which case we encourage further work and coordination in these areas. The order of the recommendations below reflects the study team’s prioritization of importance and impact, given the unique context of the District of Columbia’s education system.

1. All LEAs and public schools should be required to participate in system-wide reform efforts related to special education, including system-wide studies. The large numbers of charter LEAs that declined to participate in this study not only impacted the representativeness of our findings, but also reflects the challenges of implementing system-wide reform efforts in the District. If each LEA—of which there are more than 50 in the District—is allowed to opt out and manage its special education programs completely independent of other LEAs, it will result in a fractured, ineffective approach to improving programs and outcomes. We understand that the law allows charter LEA autonomy, but coordination across the system needs to improve for reform to occur.
2. Given the high student mobility within the District, OSSE should consider developing a special education consortium of DCPS, PCSB, charter LEAs, and non-public schools to articulate alignment of standards and curricula for SWDs within and across LEAs and schools. This is intended to facilitate smooth transitions and continuity of programs for SWDs moving across and within school systems.
3. OSSE, DCPS, and charter LEAs should provide more supports around academic standards used in DCPS and charter schools, including appropriate curriculum, materials, and professional development as they relate to instruction of SWDs. The alignment of standards described in the second recommendation above will help improve the impact and efficiency of such supports.
4. OSSE, in concert with DCPS, PCSB, and charter LEAs, should develop a Master Plan for implementing site-based, ongoing professional development that will address the provision of appropriate academic instruction and behavioral supports for SWDs. Training topics should focus on effective differentiated instruction, literacy strategies for non-proficient students, and strategies for effective co-teaching and collaboration. The plan should delineate how professional development opportunities will include—and address the specific needs of—

general education teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and other school staff, as appropriate. This plan should integrate site-based coaching and mentoring specifically related to instructing SWDs, with a particular emphasis on supports for new teachers and teachers new to teaching SWDs. OSSE, DCPS, and charter LEAs should provide supports to schools to implement the Master Plan. Because the existing District-wide professional development may not be accessible to many staff members across DCPS and charter schools, it is critical to have targeted, school-based training that aligns with the needs of staff in the school and allows staff to receive ongoing face-to-face, interactive experiences rather than relying extensively on one-time professional development sessions provided to a limited number of individuals or provided through online options.

5. OSSE, in conjunction with DCPS and the charter LEAs, should provide a clear definition of and expectations for the inclusion model being implemented across DC schools. To facilitate successful implementation, OSSE, DCPS, and the charter LEAs should offer supports for needed training, staffing, and resources to implement an inclusive philosophy that addresses the needs of SWDs in the least restrictive environment. This training should include a focus on the co-teaching model, as well as how to develop IEPs in a manner that facilitates a successful inclusion model that is appropriate for that student.
6. OSSE, DCPS, PCSB, and charter LEAs should expect all schools to have in place a school-wide behavior plan that is consistently implemented and reinforced across the school. OSSE, DCPS, and charter LEAs should provide supports, such as training and behavior specialists, as needed and requested, and conduct monitoring to ensure consistent and ongoing implementation of school-wide behavior management.
7. OSSE, in conjunction with DCPS and charter LEAs, should provide mentoring and coaching for future and new principals that has an explicit focus on special education issues. We recommend that such ongoing coaching and mentoring be provided by principals with expertise in special education and those who have been successful in implementing quality special education programs in their schools. These “expert” principals might be identified through nominations from existing principal organizations within the District and from special education program staff in schools.
8. OSSE and DCPS should proactively consider the unique needs of public special education schools when planning, developing, and implementing supports and policies. Although the report did not explicitly discuss the staff and student needs at such schools, respondents delivered a powerful message that they were often overlooked in the process. These schools serve an important role in providing a continuum of services, and should be viewed as partners in the implementation of high quality special education programs.
9. OSSE should identify schools that are demonstrating exemplary practices in providing quality special education programs to serve as models for other schools. OSSE should establish

infrastructure to encourage and facilitate school-to-school learning opportunities so that more schools can benefit from these exemplary practices.

10. OSSE should conduct a more in-depth study of the process of student evaluations and development of IEPs in the District. Our review of the documentation revealed concerns about the quality and process that merit further examination. OSSE should conduct ongoing review of a sample of student evaluations and IEPs, as was done in this study, to monitor their quality and appropriateness and to tailor technical assistance and professional development to improve areas of concern.
11. OSSE, in conjunction with the other system-wide entities, should institute mechanisms to meaningfully seek input from schools during the decision-making process and to improve communication across the District. This may be accomplished through site visits and on-site focus groups, which not only give system staff an opportunity to learn first-hand about the schools but will also help raise OSSE's profile.
12. OSSE, DCPS, PCSB, and charter LEAs should reinforce the importance of family engagement by establishing expectations that all schools will have parent handbooks, parent resource centers, and a designated, trained parent coordinator at each site. Because of the inconsistency observed in the study schools, the systems should provide the necessary resources to support family engagement, and set an expectation that the schools should tailor their efforts for families of SWDs (e.g., ensure that parent resource centers include information for families of SWDs).

Appendix A: Coding Results for the IEP Development Indicators

| Indicator and coding criteria | N of schools | |
|---|--|---|
| | In which all of the sampled IEPs met the criterion | In which some or none of the sampled IEPs met the criterion |
| Eligibility and IEP Team | | |
| Indicator: An evaluation report based on a comprehensive, multidisciplinary psycho-educational evaluation is used to determine special education eligibility and guides the development of an appropriate IEP, if indicated. | | |
| Is there an evaluation report? | 15 | 6 |
| Does the evaluation report contain information on the student's history, individual cognitive, academic, speech/language, fine and gross motor, and social/emotional assessment, as appropriate? | 6 | 15 |
| Does the assessment data in the evaluation report support the eligibility determination? | 15 | 6 |
| Is the summary table in the evaluation report for each area complete? | 11 | 10 |
| Does the primary disability in the evaluation report match the IEP disability? | 18 | 3 |
| Are all of the areas for which the assessments show performance concerns listed in the IEP? | 17 | 4 |
| Is the "summary of concerns" for each area in the evaluation report reflected in the IEP goals? | 15 | 6 |
| Indicator: IEP team is made up of a multidisciplinary team that includes teachers, professionals, families, and students as appropriate. | | |
| Does the list of IEP participants include teachers, other professionals, parents, and students (ages 14 and above)? | 3 | 18 |
| Indicator: School staff on IEP teams understand and receive professional development on all aspects of IEP development including the continuum of service delivery options, the principles of LRE, and general education classroom practices that support inclusion of SWDs. | | |
| Indicator not coded | | |
| Goals, Service Prescriptions, and Accommodations | | |

Indicator: IEPs are comprehensive, complete (i.e., include performance evaluation, service prescriptions, goals, and transition plans) and written in language that is comprehensible.

| | | |
|--|----|----|
| Does each "Area of Concern" contain information on a) present level of performance, b) needs, and c) impact on student? | 20 | 1 |
| Does each annual goal have information on the a) baseline, b) anticipated date of achievement, and c) evaluation procedures and schedule? | 16 | 5 |
| Does the "Special Education and Related Services" section identify the service, setting, begin and end date, and the time/frequency? | 20 | 1 |
| Do the other IEP sections have complete information (other classroom aides and services, dedicated aides, LRE, classroom accommodations and state assessment participation; transportation, compensatory education, and extended school year)? | 19 | 2 |
| Is the IEP "jargon-free" or if there are technical terms, are they explained in clear terms? | 11 | 10 |

Indicator: IEPs include measurable goals that are aligned to grade-level standards.

| | | |
|---|----|----|
| Does each goal include a measurable target (e.g., 80% accuracy)? | 10 | 11 |
| Does each goal include information on the evaluation procedures and schedule? | 17 | 4 |
| Do the English Language Arts goals contain a reference to an academic standard? | 7 | 14 |
| Do the mathematics goals contain a reference to an academic standard? | 7 | 14 |

Indicator: IEP service specifications and goals are age-appropriate and individualized to reflect a student's disability(ies), strengths, and needs.

| | | |
|---|----|---|
| Are the annual goals for each "Area of Concern" written to reflect age/grade level data reported in the present levels of performance? | 17 | 4 |
| Do the annual goals reflect the student's needs (as described in the "Needs" field of each "Area of Concern")? | 15 | 6 |
| Do the service specifications (in the "Special Education and Related Services" section) reflect the student's needs (as described in the "Needs" field for each "Area of Concern")? | 20 | 1 |

Indicator: IEP instructional programs, service prescriptions, and instructional goals are supported by data from diagnostic, development, and educational assessments using a comprehensive multidisciplinary approach, and created with input from the student, when appropriate, and family.

| | | |
|---|---|----|
| Does the present level of performance for each "Area of Concern" specify the assessment used? | 7 | 14 |
|---|---|----|

| | | |
|---|---|----|
| Does the present level of performance identify in concrete, measurable terms how the student is currently performing in specific skills within the domains of Mathematics, Reading, Written Language and/or Behavior? | 9 | 12 |
| Does the baseline performance for each goal identify in concrete, measurable terms how the student is currently performing in the specific skills related to that goal? | 7 | 14 |
| Indicator: IEP teams consider providing each student with services in the general education classroom, with supplementary aids and services appropriate to that student's needs before proposing a more restrictive environment. | | |
| For students placed in self-contained classrooms only: Does the "Least Restrictive Environment" section contain a justification for why the student needs to be educated in a self-contained class? | 9 | 0 |
| <i>NOTE: Twelve schools did not have students in self-contained classrooms.</i> | | |
| Indicator: IEP service specifications and goals are, at least annually, revised to reflect current individual student need, abilities, and progress. | | |
| Is the current IEP date within the last 12 months of the last IEP review? | 19 | 2 |
| Indicator: IEPs include rationale and description of the types of instructional and assessment accommodations the student will receive. If the IEP team determines that a student should take an alternate assessment, the IEP includes a statement of why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment. | | |
| Does the "Classroom accommodations and state assessment participation" section specify the type of statewide assessment the student is to take? | 17 | 4 |
| Does the "Classroom accommodations and state assessment participation" section specify types of classroom accommodations? | 17 | 4 |
| Does the "Classroom accommodations and state assessment participation" section specify types of statewide assessment accommodations? | 15 | 6 |
| Does the IEP include a statement of why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment? | Easy IEP does not have a field for documenting this information | |
| Indicator: When behavior may be impeding academic achievement, IEPs include targeted positive behavior goals and related supports, and if necessary, a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) based on a functional behavior assessment (FBA). | | |
| <i>Note: Some schools were excluded from the counts because the sampled students did not have behavior needs.</i> | | |
| If the student has a primary disability of ED or Autism: Does the IEP contain "Emotional, Social, and Behavioral Development" goals? | 13 | 0 |
| If there are "Emotional, Social, and Behavioral Development" goals, are the goals stated positively? | 14 | 1 |
| If there are "Emotional, Social, and Behavioral Development" goals, is a Behavior | 0 | 15 |

| | | |
|---|----|---|
| Intervention Plan (BIP) based on a functional behavior assessment (FBA) mentioned? | | |
| If there are “Emotional, Social, and Behavioral Development” goals, does the “Special Education and Related Services” section specify behavior services and supports? | 13 | 2 |
| Transition plans | | |
| Indicator: IEPs for students who are 16 years or older contain measurable and targeted transition goals and services that reflect postsecondary transition planning. | | |
| <i>Note: Six of the schools had students in the sample who were 16 years or older.</i> | | |
| Does the IEP contain a post-secondary plan? | 6 | 0 |
| Does the plan include long-term goals for each of the following areas: post-secondary education and training, employment, and independent living? | 1 | 5 |
| Does each area have at least one annual transition goal? | 5 | 1 |
| Does each transition goal include a measurable target? (e.g., identify the correct bus for traveling in 80% of the attempts) | 2 | 4 |
| Indicator: Recent assessment information relevant to postsecondary goals is used to identify students' preferences, strengths, interests and choices to create transition plans. | | |
| <i>Note: Six of the schools had students in the sample who were 16 years or older.</i> | | |
| Does the “Age appropriate transition assessments utilized to determine long-range and interests” identify a specific assessment tool for each area? | 4 | 2 |
| Were the assessments conducted within in the last 12 months of the IEP date? | 4 | 2 |
| Are the results reported for each assessment? | 4 | 2 |

Appendix B: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Access Indicator

| Access indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁵² |
| Access to Appropriate Curriculum | | | |
| SWDs receive instruction in a curriculum aligned to the standards at their grade level. | 21 | 0 | 0 |
| Special and general education teachers provide direct instruction on IEP goals across subject areas within the general education curriculum, and the instruction is reinforced by the related service providers. | 18 | 3 | 0 |
| SWDs are provided instruction in study skills, self-advocacy, and learning strategies, as appropriate. | 16 | 5 | 0 |
| SWDs receive instruction, as appropriate, in daily living, transportation, mobility, and recreation and leisure as it relates to their postsecondary goals (i.e., college and career readiness). | Insufficient data to rate | | |
| SWDs are taught how to, and actually use, assistive technology throughout the school setting as needed for meaningful participation in educational activities. | Insufficient data to rate | | |
| Access to General Education Opportunities | | | |
| Efforts are made to assign SWDs across general education classrooms in order to reflect the existing natural proportion of SWD within each grade level, rather than clustering SWDs in only one or two classrooms. | 14 | 3 | 4 |
| SWDs are included in general education academic and nonacademic opportunities and participate with general education peers throughout the school day, as appropriate. | 19 | 1 | 1 |

⁵² In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

Appendix C: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Instructional Supports Indicator

| Instructional supports indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁵³ |
| Strategies and Practices for Differentiating Instruction | | | |
| Teachers use a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies (e.g., scaffolding, modeling, and collaborative learning structures) in the instruction of SWDs. | | | |
| Teachers use a variety of instructional formats (e.g., direct instruction, project-based, and peer-mediated instruction) to meet the needs of SWDs. | 18 | 3 | 0 |
| Teachers use whole class, small group, and individual instruction to meet the academic needs of SWDs. ⁵⁴ | | | |
| Teachers differentiate the products required of SWDs to demonstrate proficiency on lesson objectives. | 8 | 12 | 1 |
| Teachers activate or develop student background knowledge and use this as a foundation for new content and learning for SWDs. | 19 | 1 | 1 |
| Instruction of SWDs is culturally and linguistically responsive in the choice of materials and topics. | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| Tiered academic interventions are provided when necessary, based on continuous assessment (progress monitoring). | 12 | 8 | 1 |
| Teachers use appropriate evidence-based supplemental materials for additional support when necessary for SWDs. | 14 | 6 | 1 |
| A system is in place for implementing instructional strategies for struggling students through a pre-referral process monitored by the student support team. | 16 | 4 | 1 |
| Accommodations and Modifications | | | |
| Teachers provide instructional accommodations, as necessary, to address the specific skills, abilities, and educational needs of SWDs. | Insufficient data to rate | | |
| Teachers provide assessment accommodations as | 17 | 3 | 1 |

⁵³ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

⁵⁴ Because of the overlap in teachers’ interview responses to questions about these practices, the responses were coded using a single code and therefore the indicators were assigned the same evidence ratings.

| Instructional supports indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁵³ |
| indicated in students' IEPs. | | | |
| Teachers use appropriate instructional modifications (e.g., summarized reading passages, reduced assignments) to meet the needs of SWDs. | 16 | 5 | 0 |
| Technology | | | |
| SWDs have access to and use various forms of instructional technology in the classroom. | 10 | 11 | 0 |
| Teachers integrate instructional technology seamlessly into their lessons (e.g., Web Quests, SMART Boards, DVDs, PowerPoint slides). | 14 | 7 | 0 |

Appendix D: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Behavior Supports Indicator

| Behavior supports indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁵⁵ |
| School-wide behavior system | | | |
| A targeted number of positively stated school-wide expectations for student behavior are consistently reinforced throughout the school environment and clearly communicated to staff, families, and students. | 15 | 6 | 0 |
| A clearly defined system of positive and negative consequences related to student behavior exists in the school. | 15 | 6 | 0 |
| Behavior and discipline data are regularly collected and analyzed by designated staff members to plan how to proactively meet behavioral needs of all students. | 15 | 5 | 1 |
| Increasingly intensive behavioral supports are in place for students who do not meet or respond appropriately to the school-wide behavior goals and expectations. | 15 | 6 | 0 |
| There are clearly stated and consistently implemented procedures for responding to disciplinary infractions of SWDs. ⁵⁶ | 15 | 6 | 0 |
| Classroom behavior systems | | | |
| Teachers consistently use class-wide strategies, routines, and procedures to effectively manage the classroom and to support learning, and are consistent with the school-wide behavior plan. | 16 | 5 | 0 |
| Students are taught to self-regulate, to monitor and change behavior, and to plan future behavior when faced with new situations. | 12 | 3 | 6 |
| Behavior interventions | | | |
| Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) are informed by multiple sources of data to clearly define a student's problem behavior(s) in concrete, measurable and | Insufficient data to rate | | |

⁵⁵ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of "evidence" or "limited or no evidence" for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

⁵⁶ The full text for this indicator reads, "There are clearly stated and consistently implemented procedures for responding to, and appealing the response to, disciplinary infractions of SWDs; the provision of services during in- and out-of-school suspension for SWDs; and responding to students in crisis, in seclusion, or under restraint. These procedures are communicated to parents in an understandable manner, and staff are trained in the procedures and appropriate disciplinary responses."

observable terms.

Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) for students with chronic and severe behavioral disabilities contain evidence-based intensive individualized interventions, positive behavior goals, and a data system to monitor progress, and are informed by the student's FBA.

Insufficient data to rate

Appendix E: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Staff Collaboration Indicator

| Staff collaboration indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁵⁷ |
| All members of the school's faculty work together to implement general and special education school initiatives. | 13 | 4 | 4 |
| Cross-discipline staff collaboration is formally supported and instituted in the school. | 15 | 5 | 1 |
| General and special education teachers frequently meet to discuss and systematically share information on the instructional and behavioral needs of their SWDs and collaborate on collecting and interpreting student data. | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| Special subject teachers (e.g., music, art, physical education) have regular opportunities to consult with a special educator about how to work with SWDs in their classrooms. | 12 | 8 | 1 |
| Related services personnel collaborate in the planning, delivery of services, supports, and assessments of student progress with special and general education teachers. | 13 | 8 | 0 |
| Supplemental coaching, mentoring, and support strategies are in place to assist new teachers or teachers new to their role of instructing SWDs in the school. | 12 | 9 | 0 |
| Teachers plan with paraprofessionals, who work with SWDs so they may support behavior strategies, instructional accommodations, program modifications, and culturally responsive practices for SWDs. | 14 | 6 | 1 |
| Grade-to-grade and school-to-school articulation strategies are in place to facilitate the sharing of successful instructional strategies, instructional accommodations, and modifications that have been developed for SWDs. | 14 | 7 | 0 |

⁵⁷ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of "evidence" or "limited or no evidence" for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

Appendix F: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Professional Development Indicator

| Professional development indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁵⁸ |
| Professional Development Planning | | | |
| A periodic needs assessment is conducted to assess staff capacity with respect to educating SWDs. | 8 | 13 | 0 |
| A multiyear school professional development plan is produced with input from all stakeholders, is based on a current assessment of staff needs and student achievement and behavior data, and explicitly addresses professional development needs related to educating SWDs. | 5 | 12 | 4 |
| Professional Development Delivery and Content | | | |
| Professional development related to SWDs is characterized by coherent and focused training sessions delivered in different formats. | 10 | 10 | 1 |
| All special education and general education teachers receive ongoing training in the legal requirements in all areas of special education. | 8 | 12 | 1 |
| The school provides ongoing training on awareness, knowledge, and adoption of best practices in inclusive classrooms for SWDs. | 9 | 12 | 0 |
| School staff receive ongoing training regarding students with specific disabilities and how to best manage their behavior and meet their educational needs. | 10 | 11 | 0 |
| Special education and general education teachers and paraprofessionals receive training to clarify their respective roles for instructing SWDs. | 5 | 11 | 5 |
| Special education and general education teachers receive training on how to collect, interpret, and use student data to guide instruction and interventions. | 16 | 4 | 1 |
| All school staff, including support staff and paraprofessionals, receive ongoing training on how to interact with families of SWDs in a culturally responsive manner. | 3 | 11 | 7 |

⁵⁸ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

Appendix G: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Data-Driven Decision Making Indicator

| Data-driven decision making indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁵⁹ |
| Data collection and accessibility | | | |
| There is a school-wide system in place to collect summative and formative data on student achievement and behavior, which is used by all grades and teachers. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| Teachers and other providers use a variety of formal and informal methods at frequent and regular intervals to collect data on the progress of SWDs in the curriculum and IEP goals. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| Teachers have regular and timely access to IEPs and relevant current and historical student-level data on SWDs, including formative, summative, and progress monitoring data, in a useable format. | 19 | 1 | 1 |
| Data analysis and use | | | |
| Design instruction: Teachers use baseline data and profiles of student skill and performance deficits and strengths as the starting point for designing instruction and establishing instructional goals for SWDs. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| Modify instruction: Teachers use information from student assessments for SWDs to guide decisions to reteach, change pacing, regroup, and plan or adjust activities/strategies. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| Identify individual student needs and provide interventions: Teachers use the results of progress monitoring to identify students in need of additional support and to identify the appropriate intervention(s). | 18 | 3 | 0 |
| Improve programs: School administrators use student-level and school-level data to evaluate the effectiveness of, and to modify and improve, instructional and behavior programs for SWDs. | 12 | 7 | 2 |

⁵⁹ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of “evidence” or “limited or no evidence” for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

Appendix H: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by Family Engagement Indicator

| Family engagement indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁶⁰ |
| School expectations and climate | | | |
| The school has a clear policy outlining the shared responsibility of school and home in improving educational outcomes for SWDs. | 12 | 9 | 0 |
| The school has a parent resource center and a trained parent-school coordinator, who oversees communication with families, serves as a liaison, and develops programs and opportunities to encourage the involvement of, and sensitivity toward, SWDs and their families. | 12 | 9 | 0 |
| Accessibility and communication | | | |
| The school encourages families of SWDs to visit and to communicate regularly with school staff. | 21 | 0 | 0 |
| Frequent communication: School staff and families of SWDs share frequent and timely reports of student behavior, performance, and achievement. | 16 | 2 | 3 |
| Accessibility of materials: Materials and communications are comprehensive, accessible, and provided in a variety of formats and in the family's preferred language. | 17 | 2 | 2 |
| Accessibility of school events: School events are scheduled at times convenient for parents and measures are taken to facilitate their participation. | 21 | 0 | 0 |
| Family involvement | | | |
| Families of SWDs are included in advisory, decision-making, and advocacy activities in the school (e.g., advisory committees, school improvement teams). | 9 | 5 | 7 |
| The school encourages and supports active family involvement in the information gathering, at the IEP meeting where decisions are made about the child's supports, and later in problem solving when concerns or questions arise during the course of the school year. | 18 | 1 | 2 |
| Family supports and education | | | |

⁶⁰ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of "evidence" or "limited or no evidence" for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

| Family engagement indicators | N of schools: | | |
|---|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁶⁰ |
| The school provides information to families of SWDs regarding research-based educational practices and ways that families can support their child's learning, academic and behavior needs, interests, and IEP goals at home and school. | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| The school provides families and students with information on the requirements of the IDEA, the process of student referrals and evaluations, development of IEPs, and their role in the IEP process. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| The school assists families of SWDs in accessing informal support networks and community resources. | 19 | 0 | 2 |

Appendix I: Number of Schools by Level of Evidence, by School Leadership Indicator

| School leadership indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁶¹ |
| Shared School Vision | | | |
| The school's mission and vision statement reflects a belief in and commitment to high standards for all students, including SWDs, a culture of professional practice, continuous learning, and accountability for student performance. | 18 | 2 | 1 |
| The school has an advisory team that includes teachers and families of SWDs, meets regularly to examine student achievement, behavior and discipline data, and makes program recommendations based on findings, as well as provides advice to administration on teaching and learning initiatives in the school. | 9 | 5 | 7 |
| The school has a school improvement plan that includes targeted goals and priorities for improving educational outcomes of SWDs. | 9 | 0 | 12 |
| The school administration communicates an expectation that SWDs are the responsibility of all staff, and not exclusively special education staff. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| The school administration develops policy handbooks for staff, students, and the community delineating expectations for school behavior and academic issues, including the specific needs of SWDs. | 12 | 2 | 7 |
| Instructional Leadership | | | |
| The school administration provides leadership, guidance, and policies consistent with an inclusive philosophy that addresses the needs of SWDs. | 20 | 1 | 0 |
| The school administration conducts frequent classroom visits and is visible in the halls, cafeteria, playground, and locker areas to ensure that there is a school environment conducive to learning for SWDs. | 18 | 3 | 0 |
| The school administration ensures that teachers have appropriate materials needed (e.g., books, adaptive materials, technology) for teaching SWDs. | 14 | 7 | 0 |

⁶¹ In order for a school to be assigned a rating of "evidence" or "limited or no evidence" for a given indicator, there needed to be information from at least two data sources (e.g., site visitor ratings and interviews, or interviews and surveys). If there were fewer than two data sources for a given indicator, the team excluded the school from the evidence rating.

| School leadership indicators | N of schools: | | |
|--|---------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| | With evidence | With limited or no evidence | Excluded ⁶¹ |
| The school administration meets with grade-level planning teams and special educators, related service providers, and intervention teachers on a regular basis to monitor the progress of SWDs. | 17 | 4 | 0 |
| The school administration establishes clear expectations for the use of school-wide data (including achievement, behavior, and discipline data), is knowledgeable about data use, and provides supports that foster a data-driven culture within the school. | 19 | 2 | 0 |
| The school administration is knowledgeable about special education issues, policies and procedures, and participates regularly in IEP meetings. | 15 | 3 | 3 |
| The school administration holds all teachers accountable for planning, delivering appropriate instruction, and monitoring the progress of SWDs. | 13 | 5 | 3 |