

Cambridge Public Schools Special Education Program Review Executive Summary

Kristin Reedy, Ed.D
Vicki Hornus, M.S.
Nancy Hurley, Sr. Research Associate

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Executive Summary

Purpose

The City of Cambridge issued a request for proposals for an independent agency to conduct a review of the special education programs and services in the Cambridge Public Schools (CPS). Upon completion of the bid process, Learning Innovations at WestEd was selected as the agency to complete the program review. WestEd is an independent, not-for-profit educational research agency, located in San Francisco with offices in Woburn, MA and Williston, VT. Information about WestEd may be found on the agency's Web site at www.wested.org.

The review was intended to evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency, and costs of special education programs and services to determine (1) if the district is meeting the needs of students with disabilities including their entitlement to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and (2) if district resources are being used appropriately and effectively.

The purpose of the Special Education Program Review was to provide:

- Recommendations for strengthening CPS special education programs (substantially separate and inclusion)
- Recommendations for improving communication with the public in order to build confidence in CPS programming, staffing, and organization around special education
- Recommendations for cost containment measures which do not compromise the quality of services provided
- Recommendations for the development of additional programs to serve students who currently receive services outside of the district
- Clear definitions of educational terminology

WestEd commends the Cambridge Public Schools for undertaking this external review of special education in the district, which clearly demonstrates the district's commitment to improving services, systems and supports for students with disabilities and their families. We especially appreciate the cooperation and support of Dr. Aida Ramos, Executive Director of the Office of Special Education (OSE), during the review process. We also thank Central Office administrators, building-based administrators and staff and parents for their participation in the various components of the review.

Methods

The methodology used for the Cambridge Special Education Review was a mixed methods design that enabled WestEd to gain a variety of perspectives from multiple sources of data. The project was designed to offer multiple “lenses” through which to view the district’s programs and services. Stakeholder involvement was a critical component of the review and helped to develop an attitude of data-based inquiry and reflection with an eye to continuous improvement that will ultimately result in improved outcomes for the district’s children and youth with disabilities.

Over 100 individuals were interviewed either individually or in focus groups. An online survey was distributed to more than 800 education staff. Parent focus groups and a parent survey of all parents of students currently receiving special education services were conducted. Classroom observations across settings were conducted in all thirteen Cambridge schools and the High School Extension Program. The evaluation also included a review of a selection of individual student records, data analysis, and document review. Taken together, these various data collection strategies have provided WestEd with a comprehensive and nuanced picture of the current status of special education programs and services in the Cambridge Public Schools.

Summary of Conclusions

Strengths

- The quality, level of experience, and commitment of teaching staff across the district is a definite strength.
- Classroom observations confirmed that inclusive practices and high-quality instruction are being provided in many classrooms and most schools throughout the district. Two examples of where effective inclusive practices seem to be working well are co-teaching at CRLS and at the Haggerty School and the Special Start Integrated Pre-school classrooms.
- District leadership is committed to high expectations and improved results for all students.
- Cambridge is in compliance with state and federal special education requirements, according to MADESE’s Coordinated Program Review (CPR) report.

Continuum of Services and Inclusion

- There is a comprehensive continuum of services and placement options for students with disabilities in Cambridge, but some gaps exist, particularly for students with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities and students with “language-based learning disabilities.”

- Cambridge demonstrates high rates of “full inclusion” of students with disabilities in the regular classroom for the majority of the school day. However, there is little flexibility for “partial inclusion” options for students who may need that type of setting or approach.
- There is a good deal of variability in staffing across schools that is not explained by either enrollment or the location of sub-separate classrooms.

Student Outcomes

- There continues to be an achievement gap between students with disabilities and nondisabled peers, and a number of schools are not meeting AYP targets for the students with disabilities subgroup. However, proficiency rates for students with disabilities in Cambridge are comparable to state averages.
- Other outcomes for students with disabilities (e.g., graduation and dropout rates) are above average for the state and similar districts.
- There is evidence of disproportionate representation of students from minority groups in special education in two of the district’s schools. However, the district’s overall numbers do not show disproportionality based on the state’s definition.

Service Delivery

- The district uses a categorical, centralized organizational structure for special education that may be contributing to fragmentation and inefficiency with regard to utilization of resources.
- Special education services are primarily arranged by classroom or program type and disability category (e.g., sub-separate classes for particular types of students). Location of strands of sub-separate classrooms in different schools creates unnecessary transitions for some students with particular disabilities.
- A number of resources are available through general education to support struggling students prior to a referral to special education. However, these resources are not systematically coordinated into a schoolwide system of instructional and behavioral supports. Special education functions as a separate system from general education.

Special Education Expenditures

- Child count, cost per pupil, and utilization of out-of-district placements in Cambridge are high by comparison to state averages and to similar and neighboring districts.
- The overall cost of special education as a percentage of total expenditures is high (approximately 30% for FY 2011). Growth in special education expenditures is dramatically exceeding the growth in general education.

Parent Engagement

- Communication between the schools, the Central Office/OSE administration, and parents needs direct attention. The negativity expressed by some parents regarding their treatment and interaction with school personnel is a concern that needs to be a priority focus for improvement. However, as shown in the Parent Survey results, parents' perceptions vary from one ethnic group to another.

Summary of Recommendations

Cambridge Public Schools should restructure services and programs for students with disabilities, moving from a categorical system based on program types and disability categories to one where special education is fully integrated into the overall educational system in Cambridge.

Given the findings from the review that show that special education in Cambridge is approached as a system separate from general education, the overall recommendation from the WestEd evaluation team is to set a goal of moving to one unified system of education that will result in improved results for all students. This goal is consistent with the district's mission to develop "a diverse urban school system that works with families and the community to successfully educate all of its students at high levels." This will require a change in the way all staff and administrators "think" about general education, special education and education overall, moving from a categorical system based on program types and disability categories to one where special education is fully integrated into the overall educational system in Cambridge. It will require a system-wide acceptance of responsibility for the education of all students and the understanding that special education students are general education students first.

Cambridge Public Schools should strive to improve communication with the public and the parent community in partnership with the Cambridge Parent Advisory Council on Special Education (C-PAC).

The Office of Special Education should strengthen its collaborative relationship with C-PAC Leadership, joining with C-PAC to develop plans to improve outreach and support to parents of children with disabilities in Cambridge, with particular emphasis on reaching out to under-

represented parent groups. As a preventative measure, develop an “early warning system” to address parent-school disagreements in a timely and respectful manner before they become irreconcilable disputes. The addition of the Parent Advisory Council Coordinator for the 2010-11 school year may help to facilitate and improve communication between parents and OSE staff.

Cambridge Public Schools should engage in a “bottom up” budget planning process that uses the school building as the unit of analysis, provides a core level of staffing for each building, and then adds services and supports based on the demonstrated needs of individual students.

Special education cost drivers in Cambridge appear to be numbers of students identified, the intensive needs of some individual students, and the number of costly out-of-district placements. Cost containment while maintaining a full continuum and high quality services is a responsible goal for the district and one for which the community should hold the administration accountable. Cost containment in special education is most likely related to capacity in general education. In other words, to the degree that the general education system in Cambridge has the capacity to address the diverse instructional and behavioral needs of each and every student, the need for special education may be reduced. Early intervention is the most effective way to prevent the need for special education and/or to reduce the need for more costly and intensive services.

Cambridge Public Schools should continue to develop in-district capacity to serve students who are currently placed outside the district, particularly for students with Emotional or Behavioral Disabilities, students with Autism and students with Specific Learning Disabilities.

The results of this special education program review have indicated that there are gaps in the continuum of services in Cambridge that are likely contributing to the need or demand for specialized private placements outside the district. Data analysis has shown that most out-placed students are at the high school level and that students with Emotional Disabilities represent the largest disability category, followed by Specific Learning Disabilities and Autism. An overall strategy for reducing the need for out-of-district placements should be further developing the capacity within the district to serve students with these exceptional and intensive needs. Reduction in out-of-district placements will require both a system-wide and individual student approach. It is also important to acknowledge that while reduction in out-of-district placements is a long range goal, some students may continue to require an out-of-district placement due to their unique needs and the nature of their disability.

Cambridge Public Schools should initiate a long range planning process that begins with the development of a common language and a culture of shared responsibility and accountability for the education of all students including students with disabilities.

The district should initiate a long range planning process for special education services in Cambridge, coordinated with the district's overall goals and improvement initiatives; one that involves multiple stakeholders including community and parent representatives and begins with a discussion of what "inclusion" means within the context of a unified educational system that is designed and structured to "successfully educate all of its students at high levels" (CPS District Goals 2010-12). This process will help to build a culture of collaboration and shared responsibility for all students.

Concluding Reflections

The Cambridge Public School District is a diverse, multi-faceted and complex community. This external review of Cambridge special education programs and services was undertaken with the intent of improving programs and supports for students with disabilities. The district demonstrates many strengths including a well qualified and dedicated staff, strong and committed district and building leadership, a range of high quality programs, adequate resources, and a diverse and involved community of parents. Challenges to the district demonstrated in this review include high numbers of children in special education, high costs overall, and high numbers of out-of-district placements which present a strain on the overall budget for special education and detract from resources that might be spent more effectively within the district. Additional challenges relate to consistency and equity across schools in how resources and staff are distributed and relationships with the parent community.

This external review has used a mixed methods design intended to capture a variety of perspectives using multiple sources of data and to solicit the perspectives of diverse stakeholders from administrators to staff to parents. The recommendations of the WestEd evaluation team are offered with the acknowledgement that the people most closely involved and responsible for management of the Cambridge Public Schools and those most directly impacted by services provided by the school system are in the best position to judge its effectiveness and to plan future priorities and directions. Nevertheless, recommendations for improvement have been offered based upon the understanding that the WestEd team has at this point in time about the district. This report will hopefully provide the impetus for a new beginning in thinking about the delivery of special education services in Cambridge within the context of an overall education system that is focused on improving results for all students.



Learning Innovations at WestEd
426 Industrial Ave, Suite 160
Williston, VT 05401
ph: (802) 951-8220