



RAMAPO INDIAN HILLS
Regional High School District

Special Education Program Review

July, 2021

Prepared By:



Palestis Educational Consultants

Introduction to the Study

This study began during the 2019-2020 school year with the goal of completion by the end of the school year. Unfortunately, in March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and associated governmental restrictions that were implemented by the federal, state and municipal governments caused the closing of Ramapo and Indian Hills High Schools. Accordingly, work on the study was postponed.

It is important to note that much of the data presented here was gathered prior to the mandatory school closing. Additional data needed to complete the study was gathered toward the end of the 2020–2021 school year.

Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ramapo Indian Hills High School District, along with almost all districts in New Jersey, were forced to develop schedule modifications. As a result, district students were educated utilizing a remote format during major portions of the school year.

We would like to thank the members of the Ramapo Indian Hills staff who contributed to this project. We would also like to acknowledge and thank all who participated in our focus groups and surveys.

Lastly, we would like to offer thanks to the Ramapo Indian Hills Regional District Board of Education for initiating this Special Education program review. The Board should be commended for asking a simple, but critical question: How are we doing in Special Education and how can we improve? This demonstrates real leadership.

Respectfully submitted,

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SCOPE OF WORK AND METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct an objective review of the Special Education program at the Ramapo Indian Hills Regional High School District (the “District”), multiple sources of information were gathered and multiple research strategies were followed. The study was conducted in collaboration with District personnel.

Palestis Educational Consultants (the “Consultants”), with the input of District administration and the Ramapo Indian Hills Regional District Board of Education, designed a program review that consisted of four stages.

Stage 1 – Focus Groups, Curriculum Review, IEP Review, Surveys

Numerous visits to the District were conducted in order to meet with various stakeholders and conduct focus groups with staff, including central office administrators, Special Education teachers and paraprofessionals, principals and supervisors, child study team members, general education teachers, guidance counselors, and nurses. In order to maximize staff participation in the focus groups during the COVID-19 pandemic, an additional set of focus group meetings were conducted via Zoom.

The Consultants also conducted a series of focus group meetings with parents. In-person meetings were conducted at each high school and additional parent focus group meetings were conducted via Zoom.

In total, there were 28 focus group meetings conducted, with most meetings lasting one hour.

The Consultants also reviewed and analyzed District curriculum documents, Individualized Education Plans (IEP), and other available data. This provided an in-depth view of changes necessary to ensure that District resources are being utilized in a legally compliant and effective manner.

Using the IEP review as a basis, the Consultants: (i) reviewed current out-of-district placements to determine whether these out-of-district placements are appropriate; (ii) explored opportunities to return students to in-district placements, as appropriate; and (iii) made recommendations regarding the transition of Special Education students from grade eight to grade nine.

Finally, an online survey was provided for staff and parents.

The purpose of soliciting stakeholder involvement in information gathering groups is to not only ensure that all stakeholders had the opportunity to have their opinions acknowledged, but to ensure that the process is not perceived as a personnel evaluative tool. Rather, the purpose of the study was to focus on best practices in the field of Special Education, compliance with Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and other legal requirements, and to determine the degree to which the District is meeting the needs of its Special Education students.

Stage 2 – Recommended Action Steps

After meeting with the groups identified above, the Consultants met with District officials in order to collaboratively create a series of findings and recommendations that can serve as the basis for additional research.

A major focus of the collaborative findings and recommendations was the provision of long-term budget, staffing, and professional development implications to the Board of Education for consideration.

The Consultants suggest a timeline that can be followed in order to address issues identified through our program review.

This timeline includes:

- Action steps that should be taken during the 2021-2022 school year
- Action steps that should be taken during the 2022-2023 school year
- Action steps that should become long term goals

Stage 3 – Independent Data

The Consultants conducted an analysis of independent data with regard to the District's Special Education program. This included New Jersey Department of Education data regarding enrollment patterns, classification rates and procedures, program placements, out-of-district placements, transportation, staffing patterns, and shared services. This independent research enables Ramapo Indian Hills Regional High School District officials to determine how the District program compares to that of similar districts in New Jersey. This perspective can be an invaluable tool in reflection and planning.

Stage 4 – Executive Summary

Upon completion of the steps outlined above, the Consultants analyzed the data and compiled an executive summary for the superintendent and central office administration, and the Ramapo Indian Hills Board of Education. After the review of the executive summary, the Consultants provided a full report that included all data analysis, commendations and recommendations.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Community Information

The Ramapo Indian Hills Regional High School District serves the communities of Wyckoff, Franklin Lakes, and Oakland in Bergen County, New Jersey. The three communities are primarily residential communities located 40 miles west of New York City. Residents are employed in northern New Jersey as well as New York City. The New Jersey Department of Education has designated the District as an “I” District Factor Group. This means that, based upon 2010 United States census information, the District is considered to be in the second highest socio-economic tier of New Jersey districts.

School District Composition

The District is comprised of two high schools: Ramapo High School and Indian Hills High School.

The Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2019 indicates that the District “is in a strong economic position.”

The District follows a three-year curriculum renewal cycle in which curriculum is evaluated, revised, and implemented. All District curricula is aligned with the New Jersey Student Learning Standards and follows the adoption schedule established through the Quality Single Accountability Continuum (QSAC) for the New Jersey Department of Education.

The District was awarded Future Ready Schools Bronze Tier Certification for 2018 – 2019.

District and Special Education Enrollment

Overall District Enrollment

The District reported 2,320 students in the *Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2019*. The following chart documents overall enrollment during the last several years. Special Education students are *included* in the overall enrollment.

Fiscal Year	Overall Enrollment
2019-2020	2,271
2018-2019	2,320
2017-2018	2,325
2016-2017	2,309
2015-2016	2,325
2014-2015	2,330
2013-2014	2,350
2012-2013	2,352
2011-2012	2,308
2010-2011	2,388

Special Education Enrollment

All New Jersey School Districts submit, on an annual basis, a document known as the Application for State School Aide (ASSA). This submission to the Department of Education utilizes the cohort survival method to project future enrollment. Both overall and Special Education enrollment projections are available in the ASSA.

Fiscal Year	Projected Overall Enrollment	Projected Special Education Enrollment
2020-2021	2,154	338
2021-2022	2,047	340
2022-2023	1,932	341
2023-2024	1,876	342

Finally, the ASSA can also be utilized to document the historic enrollment trend of Special Education students in the District.

Fiscal Year	Historic Special Education Enrollment
2019-2020	338
2018-2019	355
2017-2018	335
2016-2017	331
2015-2016	326
2014-2015	336
2013-2014	330

The enrollment analysis is important to the District as a future planning instrument. The District is experiencing a slight decrease in overall student enrollment and this trend will continue in the future. On the other hand, Special Education enrollment is slowly increasing. Therefore, future staffing in Special Education may need to be increased.

PROCEDURES FOLLOWED IN CONDUCTING THE STUDY

Objectives of the Study

The overall purpose of the study was to focus on best practices in the field of Special Education, compliance with LRE and other legal requirements, and to determine the degree to which the District is meeting the needs of Special Education students.

Activities Conducted

Focus Groups

A total of 28 focus group meetings were conducted. Focus groups provide participants an opportunity to express their feelings about a subject. Focus groups, for the most part, deal with *perceptions* about the Special Education program in the District. Use of this methodology is

valuable, however, *perceptions* are typically based on the real-life experiences of focus group participants. Although perceptions are not necessarily facts, they are opinions that can be used to identify potential issues. Some focus group participants responded by asking questions whereas others made statements. Data analysis by the Consultants is then used to determine if an “issue” is really an issue. The following is an overview of some of the perceptions and questions posed during these focus group sessions.

Special Education Teachers, Support Staff, Guidance, Nurses, Supplemental Teachers

- Teachers are doing a great job communicating with the students, especially with the challenges of the pandemic.
- We need someone who can create a team. We need teamwork. There are issues with consistency.
- The ways that the accommodations are placed in the IEP is not consistent. Why can't goals be imputed by someone other than teachers?
- The pandemic has worsened the problem of teamwork. We need to be on the same page. Some students have slipped through the cracks. We need to catch issues before they become severe.
- One student is in danger of failing core classes. We should have put a plan together. The pandemic has magnified communication issues.
- We need to address what is happening in every class so we can see the big picture for each student.
- The paperwork needs to be streamlined. One person should be responsible for entering goals. Anything to streamline would be helpful.
- The case manager and the teams should talk more.
- I would like to see common planning time with the teachers. This could help with accommodations and modifications for the students. We could be way more effective if teachers and supplemental teachers planned together.
- I don't see the emails from other departments (supplemental teacher). If there is an email from the English department, I don't get it, even if it affects my student. I only receive emails from the Special Education department.
- Some supplemental teachers have no Special Education training. I would love more training, especially practical things. This should be department wide. What are strategies that will help a student with dyslexia?

- For the annual IEP meetings, I am only invited if I am free during the time of that meeting. I am not there during the meetings to talk to the parent. I am not invited. This is a scheduling issue. I should be a part of the annual review meeting.
- Sometimes I am invited to a meeting to serve legal purposes, but then I leave the meetings because this is not my student.
- I don't even know the students that I am meeting about.
- Class sizes are large. I have one CP class with 24 students, but 70% have IEP's.
- We are "up against it" in resource center classes. We have 12 students in one resource center. There should be a liaison who can help the students be properly placed.
- We've got to ratchet up the continuity and communication. This is not just about communication in the two schools. I am talking about communication within each school.
- Going to an IEP meeting where you don't know the students makes no sense.
- We need two supervisors, one at each school. How can they be talking about only one supervisor for the District?
- We need to accommodate the parents too.
- I just think that we keep asking more of our teachers. Teachers are great, but have to do too much. To add more to their plate is not going to work. They can't take anything more on.
- We are very hesitant about this meeting because we don't trust this Board of Education. They will use your report for their own personal gain.
- A big issue is that in the past the two supervisors did not get along.
- We were discouraged from talking to teachers from the other high school.
- Students are attending Ramapo because of sports.
- We need more Special Education and staff at Ramapo.
- What is happening with the supervisors at each building? Will each building have a supervisor?
- We have kids in crisis each day and need a supervisor at each school.
- SAGE is now at both schools and this has saved lives.

- SAGE helps us to identify students who need help. This is much faster than in the past.
- There are a significant number of kids who have emotional needs.
- We have great professional relationships.
- There is no self-contained resource center at Ramapo.
- The District choice program is the worst in the world.
- There is a huge discrepancy in how the grade eight districts do their IEP's.
- There was a big push to collaborate with the middle schools about five years ago, but that is not the case anymore.
- In one eighth grade district, the kids can retake a test as many times as they want. These kids are shocked when they get to high school.
- The high school staff really respects each other.
- The subject supervisors are really helpful.
- There is no supplemental for science.
- We need push in resource.
- One of the negatives with supplemental is that the general education teachers look at us as aides.
- A real co-teaching model is needed.
- There is no time built into the schedule for general education and supplemental teachers to collaborate.
- The teachers make the Special Education program work.
- We help anyone new who joins the department.
- Our supervisor gives us the freedom to do our job.
- The District makes many decisions based on the budget.
- We do things differently than the other school because we are told to.

General Education Teachers

- My number one observation is that the people who are in my class to help the students are not very good. I had a large CP class and the “para” was not trained to help the students and could not handle classroom discipline.
- There needs to be training and a clear expectation of the duties for supplementals and paras.
- We get copies of the IEP. We read them and prepare a spreadsheet that lists the accommodations. This works well.
- We have 504 kids in the same classroom as Special Education kids.
- Teachers were not informed that a child in their class had a seizure disorder. Teachers are not given enough information. Sometimes information is redacted from the IEP, but teachers need this information
- I wish communication with the Child Study Team was better.
- Teachers need time to meet together in order to share good ideas.
- I use games to teach my students and this works well.
- Some of the younger teachers don’t believe that their students have Special Education issues.
- The general education teachers need more training in how to help the Special Education students.
- I have been through two supervisors. When I have students who have IEP’s, I felt that it was never made clear what the responsibilities of the in-class support teacher were. There were never guidelines.
- As the general education teacher, I found that I was doing the job of the Special Education teacher. Some in class support teachers are very aggressive and others are reluctant to help out. Sometimes, if the Special Education teacher is there for one student, they will not help other Special Education students in the class.
- Some kids take advantage of the IEP or 504 plans.
- There is not really any communication between general education teachers and Special Education teachers. Communication is on a “need to know” basis.
- The general education teachers would be responsive to workshops about Special Education.

- I would feel more comfortable if someone would explain the accommodations to me.
- There is a strange system to deal with. I don't know who to communicate with. Who is the first point of contact?
- The in-class support teachers may not have a Special Education background.
- But the system works because the teachers seem to find a way to help the students. We need a more formal communication system.
- The expectations are not clear. Who is responsible for what? It gets confusing.
- Are 504 kids special ed? (*Ms. Palestis provided a response*)
- We haven't trained teachers on differentiated instruction.
- It is hard to keep straight 504, I&RS, and Special Education.
- Some parents feel they have free rein to dictate to the teacher. Others are very supportive of the teacher.
- We have the SAGE people, but it is never clear who we should ask questions of – is it the case manager or the SAGE staff? Students have serious emotional issues. Nobody has said what the protocol is to deal with a SAGE kid. I get emails from the SAGE people, but I don't know who they are and what their role is.
- I have not received any real professional development about Special Education. Some faculty meetings had brief PowerPoints that lasted twenty minutes.
- The one thing that must change is clear expectations. A flow chart would help. “This is who you go to for this ...” Also, what is the parent role and how should they communicate with teachers? They send emails but then expect the teacher to immediately respond.
- The exit meeting on the IEP ... “I have never understood what my role is and no one has ever explained this to me.” Sometimes I have to attend meetings, but when I get there, I am told that I don't need to stay. I just have to sign it.
- Our CST is amazing. They are great communicators and work together. This is a super-duper plus.
- I teach freshmen. There are three middle schools. I feel like the verbiage of the grade eight IEP's is confusing. The IEP's are different and they take a long time to be changed at the high school.
- In class support works well, but we don't have it in all areas.

- To me, the supplemental instruction has two teachers with more content knowledge. The supplemental person is a part timer and not a Special Education teacher.
- We need dual certified teachers.
- When a student has anxiety, we go to the case manager for suggestions. I would also work with the supplemental teacher. The supplemental teacher has more time to provide individualized support. I do the main content teaching.
- I am not sure if I had any professional development about the supplemental program, but I remember a discussion of it during orientation.
- The ninth graders have a hard time transitioning to the high school. They have a hard time with high school expectations.
- Some of my students go to the study skills class. I don't have much contact with the study skills teacher, but my supplemental teacher does more of this. She is the liaison.
- Some students need simple things like organizing a notebook.
- I feel like the schools are different. I taught at both. One class had a supplemental teacher, but the identical class at the other school did not.
- There is no time built into the schedule to meet with my supplemental. Our prep periods don't line up. In other words, there is not a dedicated time.

Child Study Team

- There is a clear lack of communication between the two Child Study Teams.
- There is a need for co-teaching that includes one certified Special Education teacher in collaboration with one certified general education teacher.
- The “supplemental teacher” model that currently exists in the district does not support the needs of Special Education students.
- The “supplemental teacher” model that currently exists in the district provides two teachers for general education students.
- An “in-class support” model is needed and this currently exists in all three middle schools.
- “Push in resource centers” are needed.
- There should be a unified approach in Special Education lead by one administrator.

- There is no in-class support for science.
- Resource Replacement is working well.
- The Orton-Gillingham language/reading program should be district wide.
- When “CP Enhanced” is scheduled the classes (which consist of primarily general education students) are smaller than “CP” classes (which consist of primarily Special Education students).
- The para-professionals are the backbone of the Special Education department.
- More para-professionals and certified Special Education teachers are needed, not more supplemental teachers.
- If the number of Special Education students is about the same at Ramapo and Indian Hills, why does Indian Hills have so many more Special Education teachers and aides?
- The District needs in class support and collaboration on a higher level.
- Special Education and supplemental teachers must have a common prep.
- Our teachers do not co-plan.
- Some supplemental teachers are treated like aides.
- Common planning time would be easy to do because we run a traditional (non-block) schedule.
- Common planning time would create more buy in for all of the teachers.
- It is not uncommon to see Special Education teachers taking notes for students.
- In science we use supplemental support with an instructional assistant.
- Supplemental instruction for other subjects is with a teacher.
- We have very talented staff and a “great esprit de corps”.
- Everyone works well together here.
- There are no “alpha” personalities here.
- The Child Study Team supports the teachers and the staff talks with each other.

- Teachers should be paid to come in during the summer and write collaborative lesson plans, modify tests. This should be followed up with common planning time after the school year begins.
- We accept the eighth grade IEP's.
- There is no in-class support with a certified Special Education teacher in science. This is a weakness in the District.
- We have very little contact with the other high school.
- The supervisor attends all grade eight student IEP meetings.
- When there are siblings we assign the same case manager.
- Study guides should be flexible.
- The high school case managers do not attend eighth grade meetings.
- There is no uniform district wide paper work or forms.
- The system for communicating with the parents of kids who are in crisis is pretty good.
- We have high numbers of kids in distress. SAGE helps.
- SAGE helps kids from going out of district.
- The director is always available.
- There is a normal amount of litigation and settlement agreements.
- We need more time in order to focus on out-of-district students. The model that we have for out of district students works well.
- We are devoted to our students.
- Our caseloads are big - around seventy students.
- There are a lot of kids being classified.
- Accommodations from the grade eight IEP do not always fit into the high school model.
- We need to increase communication with the grade eight districts.
- We have pull out replacement classes and they are subject related such as Algebra I class.

- We have push in supplemental support from a general education teacher.
- It can be a struggle for the two supplemental teachers because they do not know how to support Special Education students.
- The supplemental model is flawed. There is no team teaching.
- The supplemental teachers have not received the professional development that is needed.
- There is no supplemental support from a second teacher in science. Aides are used.
- We do not communicate on a regular basis with the other high school.
- There is a slight difference in the SAGE program at the other school. The other school has more SAGE teachers.
- The study skills program is helpful.
- There is no scheduled time built into our schedule to talk with teachers or departments.
- We could use interdepartmental meetings.
- An in-service for PLAFF writing and how to write IEP's would be very helpful.
- The PLAFF's from the grade eight schools are very detailed and very good.
- General education teachers sign into IEP meetings as Special Education teachers.
- We have a collaborative program with THRIVE. This was through SAGE, THRIVE hired a clinical social worker. This is a real strength of our school.
- Our Transition Life Skills program is very effective. The teacher is wonderful and collaborates with us.
- I would like to have a full child study team. We do not have a social worker. We had this part time and now we have no one. This was a major loss. The social emotional needs of the students really require this.
- The social worker at Ramapo is full time and helps out but it would be helpful to have a social worker of our own.
- We have in-class support except in science. We are not privy to the certifications of the teachers. They may be certified in Special Education, but we don't know.
- We have in class supplemental instruction. These are the people who do in class support.

- We have resource replacement for academics. This is small group.
- In science we have aides. In world civilization we have support by subject certified teachers.
- There is no formal process for communication. The teachers often approach us. Dialogue is continuous throughout the year. I think that communication is not a problem.
- Teachers could use professional development that is differentiated. We provide a lot of great professional development but teachers could use help in “how can I incorporate this in my resource center” The mechanics of how to use professional development in my specific classroom is needed. The teachers do figure this out on their own, but there should be more of this at the actual workshop.
- We have department meetings for Special Education teachers, but Child Study Team does not attend.
- We do not meet with the Child Study Team from the other high school. We have not met since I have been in the district.
- Both high schools use “IEP Direct”.
- The individual Special Education teacher and case manager usually write the PLAFF. This works for us.
- The most important change that we need is to add a social worker.
- We also need certified staff in the science classrooms, but they are hard to find.
- The buildings are similar, but not identical. We do a lot right. We are incredibly flexible. We have a nice variety and range of services that we offer to our students. We modify programs to meet the needs of our kids.
- SAGE has been a phenomenal success and keeps kids in the district.
- The staff is flexible and it is not the Special Education department vs. the general education department.
- The dedication of the staff to get our kids through this year has been phenomenal. My teachers want to actually do more to help kids.
- Overall, we meet the needs of the vast majority of our students.
- We are missing a transition social worker who has the knowledge base and connections in the community. This person could work with the parents before we get to senior year.

- Our self-contained program has grown and we have two sections. We are turning kids away, particularly children with autism. They need more supports. We get to a point where it is “now what.”
- They are not finding jobs in which they can realistically support themselves as adults in the workplace. They need more life skills education. I don’t think our job coaching program here is robust. The kids need more.
- Mental health support is needed and this year has highlighted the stress. The child study team is always under pressure from the teachers, the parent attorney’s, and the kids who are struggling.
- There are so many kids with serious problems. There are a group of kids who are a real mess.
- There is a burden in multiple places. There is a burden on the teachers. We are making accommodations this year that we would never have made in the past.
- In this District I think there needs to be an improvement in communication between the Central Office and the building people. There is a reactive focus in Central Office.

Building Administrators, Subject Supervisors

- The Special Education department is responsive, the case managers are always available.
- The support is there for us. They are genuinely invested in the kids and families.
- Human capital is our greatest investment and we have that here.
- We have experienced a lot of turnover. We have deficiencies in administration and a disconnect with Central Office. We have administrators who have not set foot in our building for well over a year.
- The IR&S and 504 team process needs work. There are inconsistencies at that level. We have real student mental health issues and need help here.
- The SAGE program is really great. The uptick in mental health issues is significant and we need even more options.
- People work together well in the building, but we don’t feel that from other administrative levels.
- I see some kids get some supports but other kids not get the support that they need. The mental health component has taken over. It is great that we got some more money, but we need the tools.

- There is significant burnout by the staff because they feel they are not supported at higher levels. This kills morale. We never get recognition for a job well done.
- There is a great sense of wanting to do the right thing and always what is best for the students, but sometimes the expectations are very unclear. There are no timelines.
- There are inconsistencies. There is no district way for teachers to become more expert.
- Professional development is a big part of this and we should make it available. There are so many opportunities to learn about wellness and mindfulness, but it is not here in the district.
- We need to create a better circumstance for students.
- There is no collaboration in science. This is not a good situation. We need people who know the subject of Special Education.
- The supplemental model works, but the collaboration is challenging and the teachers are not taught that. There is an aide and not a certified teacher and parents don't know this.
- We are not trained in mental health. We have only one SAC (Student Assistance Counselor) person in the building.
- I receive a lack of support in my role.
- We need a collaborative teaching approach for science.
- It would be wonderful if this District used co-teaching across discipline lines like a science and math teacher.
- Instruction should be student driven, but we can't accomplish this without professional development for the staff.
- We need to build in professional development.
- We don't have common time to work together, we need common planning time, not just a faculty meeting.
- We have district goals every year, but we don't work smart. No one size fits all.
- Leadership must be trained in Special Education. Great ideas are dumped on the teachers. The wellness goal does not come with training for staff. What about wellness for the staff?

- There is such a disconnect between the teachers and administrators and Central Office. Don't send us emails at 4:30pm on Friday afternoon and expect an answer on Monday morning.
- We had a superintendent in the past who actually came to the building and was approachable. I appreciated that. We could have actual conversations.
- We don't have a weekly administrative meeting. They are often cancelled. We need direction in our own building. No one talks about this stuff.
- Work for everyone has gotten more intense. What I find most frustrating is that I don't see administrators. It is difficult to meet the level of detail that we need to do. The forms go on forever and ever. We are checking off boxes, but we should be thinking about what we want to accomplish with our evaluations.
- What is our common mission? I do not get to be creative because I am doing tasks.
- What I really want is to be a part of a belief system. The message and the vision are really important.
- For math our supplemental math teachers are supported by certified Special Education teachers. This is not always the case in other disciplines.
- We have a lot of different dynamics. I encourage new supplemental teams to go in and observe supplemental teams that work well.
- The model works well in social studies. We have certified Special Education teachers too. Sometimes we struggle with new staff who do not know the expectations. We work on this because there is an absence of district training for the new teachers. There is no district formal process.
- Modifying the curriculum is so important and we need professional development in this area. We could all benefit from this.
- There is confusion when someone starts after September. They miss the orientation.
- The teachers (Special Education, supplemental, general education) do not necessarily know what their role is. They seem to work this out. We need professional development in this area.
- We need in class support with dual certified teachers.
- I have never been in a district that is organized this way (referring to supplemental).
- I have a lot of concerns (with the supplemental model). This is not an efficient model and it is difficult to retain supplemental teachers. We need to reorganize and have true in-class

support with certified Special Education teachers. We have a lot of room for growth. We can recruit high quality Special Education staff.

- The world languages department does not have in-class support or supplemental instruction. Special Education students come from small special classes, but are now in general education classes of 18–20. Our teachers do a great job, but they have no support staff to offer to the kids.
- In science we have in-class support sections and resource rooms, but we don't have staff trained in making accommodations.
- We need common prep time for planning. We have never been able to schedule this between general education and Special Education teachers.
- I wish that we could have professional development so that we can help parents with growth mindset.
- If we tied together growth mindset everyone would benefit, but we can't have these one - day workshops and then never revisit the topic.
- Professional development that targets our own subject is needed. We need to target growth and also use our own staff to share best practices.

Central Office Administrators

- Are there strategies that can be implemented to improve the overall Special Education program?
- Are the Special Education programs at Ramapo and Indian Hills equal?
- The SAGE Day therapeutic program works very, very well.
- The Eastwick College Partnership is good for our kids.
- Are the level of services provided at both schools appropriate based on the IEP?
- Why does one high school have so many more Special Education staff than the other, given that the student population is the same?
- Are Special Education students being appropriately challenged in the District?
- Do you (the Consultants) have recommendations about our current services and other services that should be provided?
- Is the current Special Education study skills program effective?

- Do our students ever move from a more restrictive environment as freshmen to a less restrictive environment as seniors?
- Are there ways to improve transition into high school as well as transition for 18-21 year old students?
- What are your (the Consultants) recommendations about our current Special Education organizational chart?
- How do we compare to other school districts?
- What are some best practices in the field of Special Education? Where do we need to grow?
- We want what is appropriate for our students.
- There are good intentions with Special Education, but there is a divide. There are really no true meetings with the director and the child study teams. We need a separate director and the same approach in each building.
- There are outside and inside stressors.
- There is a lack of consistency in Special Education and even in the schools as a whole.
- Some Board members overstep their role.
- Everyone wants what is best for students.
- We have an above state average percentage of Special Education students at both schools.
- We need common prep time for general education and Special Education teachers.
- We need uniform staffing between the schools.
- We need in-class support teachers in science, not aides.

Parents

- Don't expect a lot of parents to attend, they fear retribution.
- Barriers are set up to keep the parents of Special Education students from communicating with each other.
- SEPAG is very ineffective.
- Some key Special Education staff have left the District.

- The number of settlements means that the District cannot work with parents.
- I have been at child study team meetings in which the IEP of another student was on the screen and visible.
- What is the cost for legal fees for Special Education in the District?
- SEPAG just fills the legal requirement to meet twice a year. There is no parent to parent exchange. They just have presentations. We are talked to.
- The District engages in predetermined placements. There is really no discussion with parents.
- No one observed my child in the out-of-district placement.
- Non certified staff have written IEP's.
- The "hands" of the case managers are tied.
- The District needs to rebuild trust.
- No parent wants to have their child in an out-of-district placement.
- IEP's always come back the same. Nothing changes from year to year.
- The staff really cares about the kids, but their "hands" are tied.
- The top staff do not have experience in Special Education.
- The board attorney writes the part of the IEP regarding why the student is in a particular placement.
- I think that it is hard to make any judgments because of this year, but this year no one checked in on the kids. No one asked how are you doing with this virtual. My child had to reach out to every teacher. They need to reach out to the kids more. Prior to the pandemic communication was better.
- No one thinks outside of the box.
- Teachers often do not show up to the IEP meetings. To be honest, I would love their input. The case manager does the PLAFF.
- In our case the PLAFF was done in March, but the IEP was done in August.

- My child is a senior this year. He had an IEP in kindergarten and is on the spectrum. They had accommodations all through elementary school and middle school. I was told the middle school does not give any information to the high school. He never had a 504 at the high school as a freshman, but finally got one as a sophomore. It took a traumatic event for the school to finally do something about it, but then the teachers in his junior and senior year never knew he had a 504 plan.
- My son has extreme, extreme anxiety but he has been very lucky to have an excellent guidance counselor. The counselor helped with the teachers
- Does the IEP apply to sports and clubs? *(Ms. Palestis provided a response)*
- The district states that my child is ready to graduate based upon credits, but he is not. *(Ms. Palestis provided an explanation of the transition plan process)*
- If a child wants to go to Ramapo is it legal for them to force the child to go to Indian Hills? *(Ms. Palestis provided a legal explanation of program and placement as there is a self-contained class at only one school in the District)*
- My child is failing in the virtual school environment. Is the school obligated to provide something to support him? *(Ms. Palestis provided a response)*
- I object to self-contained programs. *(Ms. Palestis provided a response)*
- The district does a poor job of introducing technology options.
- The district should do a much better job and review the new “bridge year” legislation.
- If a student is out of district should RIH update the transcript each year?
- The district tries to graduate Special Education students who are not ready and have not fulfilled graduation requirements.
- My son had in-class supplemental support and it was extremely helpful.
- My son also had good experiences in the supplemental class.
- The most important thing that must be improved is communication.
- Why can't the supplemental teachers be full time like in class support teachers were in middle school?
- The District needs to have empathy for Special Education students and their parents.

- I think that when kids have a lot of issues it would be helpful to have an upper-level person at the meeting. I don't know who to go to for help as a parent.
- Out of all of these years in school only three teachers ever reached out to my son. I think that the teachers need to know their kids and actually read the IEP's. They shouldn't depend on the parents to tell them about the IEP.
- There is no "typical" student involvement with the Special Education kids.
- The teacher needs to know the child.
- We need to have a director who has experience as a child study team member or as a Special Education teacher.
- My child is borderline autistic and is doing very well. She is very happy. She really needs social skills. She doesn't have the skills that are needed to make friends. She may finish the school year virtually. *(Ms. Palestis provided a response)*
- When the van picks my daughter up, she doesn't talk to the kids in the van. The case manager did respond when we asked questions about the summer.
- My ninth grade son had to go into the transition program because he wouldn't log on. He is still not trying but goes in for a four hour program. We invested into online tutoring. Is there anything that we can do in the summer that will help him catch up? The tutoring is teaching him how to study and how to organize. *(Ms. Palestis provided a response)*
- There is a real communication problem in this District. I called the school to make sure that this meeting was still on. The school said they knew nothing about this meeting. Then I called Special Education and they said, "What meeting?" How could the Special Education department and the school not know about a meeting about Special Education? Believe me, this happens here all of the time.
- When you constantly having changes in case management, they don't know your child.
- It makes me crazy when I look at kids and disabilities. It is a form of discrimination. The kids with disabilities should be with other kids.
- You have to do your own research. The case managers don't know the out-of-district schools. I had to go to an advocate and she helped me find a school. The case managers don't know about the resources that are available. Once he went out-of-district, the school cut him off.
- Now he finally gets home hours, but there are problems with staffing, even pre-covid.
- The teachers are nice, but the virtual has been a nightmare.

- They are not working on a transition plan and my son is sixteen.
- I have not received much parent training. It is so-so.
- The District does not have an autism program.
- They do an IEP annually, but I don't hear from the case manager for the year. Who is monitoring the IEP and the goals after the IEP is signed? I don't know when the case manager goes to the out-of-district school.
- This is the first parent meeting that I have ever come to. I think that the district has some parent meetings.
- There is no consistency in the district
- How often does the district visit the out-of-district schools?
- I feel that we try to keep the students in-house, but this should always be in the best interest of the student.
- My child had services when he was young, but aged out.
- Parents need to be advocates for their children.
- There should be a balance between the needs of the Special Education student and the other students in the class.
- The District has not provided everything to the children that should be provided by the law.
- The District is sometimes too quick to send children out-of-district. This separates the child from their friends.
- The people who are in charge must have the education background that is needed to take care of these students.
- We need to have better people in place in order to make better decisions.
- Our elementary districts have programs for autistic children, but RIH does not. We need more programs within our District.
- We need to provide the therapy in-house, but why not educate our students here?
- Our District loves to say we are one district, but it is not. Eleven sciences were cancelled at Indian Hills, but only three at Ramapo. The high schools are not identical. We have some Special Education programs only at one school.

- There is a serious communication problem and balance problem in the District.
- The students who are in the middle get lost.
- I think that the District is finally recognizing that the Special Education population is significant, around 20%.
- The District is making a real effort to avoid sending the students away.
- We need people with more expertise.
- There has been an improvement in teacher culture than years ago when some teachers thought that giving extra help or extra time was a form of “cheating”.
- I think that the CST teams can see the improvement. The teams now feel that their opinions are more valued than they were in the past.
- Some people want to get rid of Indian Hills HS and make Ramapo an elite school. What will happen to the Special Education students? I am worried about that.
- Some community members believe that Special Education students are sent to Indian Hills on purpose. This is not caused by the middle schools because the middle schools have about the same number of Special Education students.
- Some people want to get rid of Ramapo Special Education students so that Ramapo test scores are higher.
- My child entered the high school with no IEP. My child was bullied in middle school.
- When my child was placed in high school classes it was a disaster.
- The District enforces “secret” rules that are not in writing.
- Some teachers did not want to provide my child with extra time.
- The District goes “after” some parents when there is a dispute. If you fight too hard, the District will fight you even more.
- The District needs to address the needs of students who have anxiety. The District doesn’t understand how devastating anxiety can be for a student.
- The District needs to include Special Education students in sports. Our numbers are so low.

- The District has deficiencies in the field of social and emotional needs of students. There must be empathy for Special Education students.
- We need to improve the education of our Special Education kids.
- There needs to be communication and understanding. Parents should know what is available and this could avoid friction with the parents.
- There is a need to have administrators who have empathy and actually taught in the field of Special Education.
- The parents have a lack of trust with Special Education leadership, including some members of the Child Study Team.
- We need to help the kids. This is the bottom line.
- The whole problem with the District is that we don't have District wide supervisors and as a result, we have completely different schools. There is no consistency.
- Maybe we need a K-12 curriculum or Special Education director.
- It is great that the District is doing this study. Someone from the outside is exactly what was needed.
- Parents have a significant perspective and should be involved rather than labeled because they ask questions. If a parent asks questions around here, you get labeled.
- I have no positive experiences with the District. My child was bullied in middle school. The middle school labeled my child.
- RIH forced certain classes on my child. This was very contentious because only one of our high schools had the class that my child needed. There really is no choice when you are a Special Education parent.
- The District does not help out-of-district students. There was no follow up by the District once my child was out-of-district.
- The District did not do evaluations of my child when I asked. They were hostile towards me. They have been egregious.
- There are not enough people in the District who really know Special Education. There have been some very kind teachers and some that are not very kind.
- There is very little professional development for Special Education

- When this District has a good Special Education kid who is quiet, the kid falls between the cracks, but the District responds very fast to the students who are out of control.

Focus Group Discussion / Content Analysis

As indicated previously, focus group comments are the perceptions expressed by the participants. Data analysis is then compared with perceptions in order to determine the significance of feedback provided by focus group participants.

Focus group participants are ***MOST SATISFIED*** with:

- Quality of the staff
- Dedication of staff
- SAGE program

Focus group participants are ***LEAST SATISFIED*** with:

- Sense of teamwork
 - With central office
 - Within each school
 - Between the two child study teams
 - Between school and parents
- Sense of consistency in the District
 - Child Study Teams act independent of each other
 - Some paperwork is actually different based on each school
 - Direction from Central Office sometimes ignored or misinterpreted
 - Limited coordination with middle schools
 - Unclear expectations for staff
 - Staffing not based on actual student enrollment
 - No uniform written district procedures
- Communication
 - From the District
 - Within each school
 - From child study team to child study team
 - From school to parents
 - Between Special Education and general education teachers
 - SEPAG has school developed agendas and meets infrequently
- The supplemental program
 - Large class sizes
 - Lack of professional development
 - No supplemental teachers in science
 - No support from certified Special Education teacher
- Instructional Issues
 - No built-in common planning time
 - Limited professional development
 - Child Study Team and teacher workload
 - Limited co-teaching opportunities for students
 - Self - contained resource center scheduled at only one school

- IEP Issues
 - Case load for Child Study Team members
 - Transition to high school
 - General education teachers sign in as Special Education teachers
 - Transition plans for after high school
 - Incomplete PLAFF
 - Identical goals, year after year
 - Out of district placements not consistently visited by Child Study Team
- Support for students
 - Mental Health support for the students is urgently needed
 - One school does not have a full - time social worker
 - Job coaching needs expansion
 - Out of district students should be visited in their placement
 - Need consistent case managers
 - Parents need training from the district in how to help their Special Education child
 - More social and emotional skills training is needed for the students

Survey Discussion / Content Analysis

Surveys also reflect the perceptions expressed by the participants. Survey responses can then be compared to the data analysis and the focus groups responses in order to determine whether there is either a consensus or a disconnect concerning the Special Education program. The Consultants believe that a combination of data analysis, focus group discussion and survey results provides us with a more complete picture of the Special Education program.

A total of 36 parents and 23 staff members participated in the survey. Readers of this report are encouraged to review each data chart, as they were designed as a way to corroborate other information that was reviewed and analyzed.

There are a number of areas in which the staff and parents were consistent in their responses. Based on this consensus, the Consultants can easily identify the strengths and opportunities for improvement within the District program and guide the District on ways to utilize its strengths to improve its areas of weakness.

One of the strengths identified is the competency and knowledge of the staff. Parents have a very favorable view of the staff at both high schools. Staff members identified their colleagues as being willing to go the extra mile. As any recommendations in this report will have to be carried out by staff members, it is extremely important that the staff is viewed as being willing to do whatever is necessary to assist their students. In more simple terms, they care.

Another strength are the specialized programs, such as the SAGE program. Both groups identified this as a positive program while recognizing that more may need to be done to address the social and emotional needs of the students when they return to school (in-person) following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moving on to areas that require improvement, both the focus group participants and survey results indicate that the Indian Hills and Ramapo Special Education programs are different indicating a need for consistency. Professional development is viewed as a need by both staff and parents. Additionally, lack of communication between and among staff members, as well as lack of communication between both high schools and the sending middle schools is viewed by all participants as an area requiring improvement.

The supplemental instruction program, which provides for an additional part time teacher or aide to be placed in a general education classroom, was identified as a genuine problem for both students and staff. These teachers are not Special Education teachers, despite the fact that this is a requirement for any in-class support as per the New Jersey Administrative Code. Both staff and parents believe this current program is ineffective and does not meet the needs of students. It is important to note that parents and staff believe that general education and Special Education students benefit when they learn together and this is a critical element of truly inclusive education and co-teaching/in-class support.

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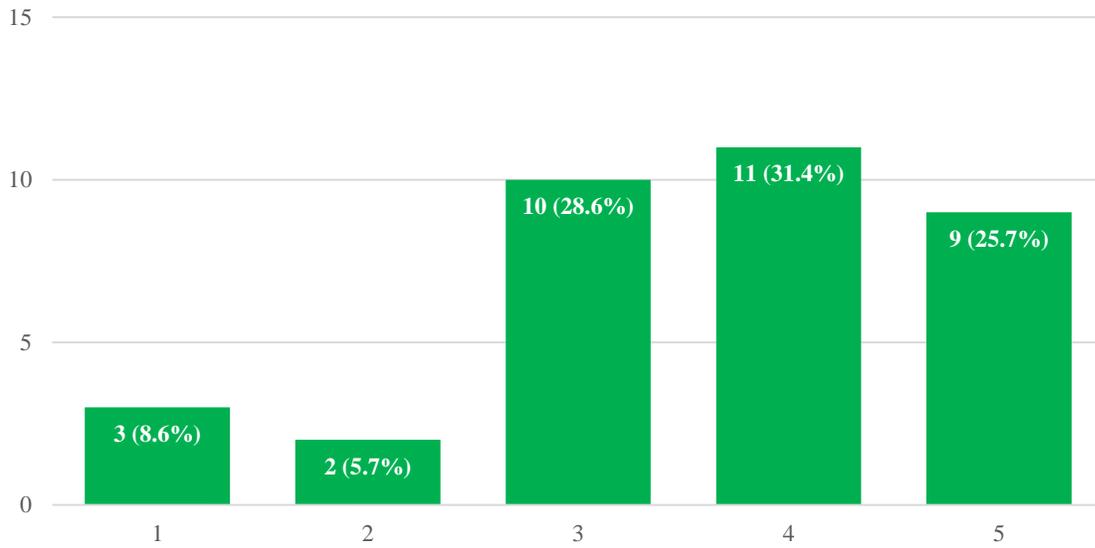
{SURVEY RESULTS START ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE}

Final Ramapo – Indian Hills Regional District Special Education Parent Survey Results

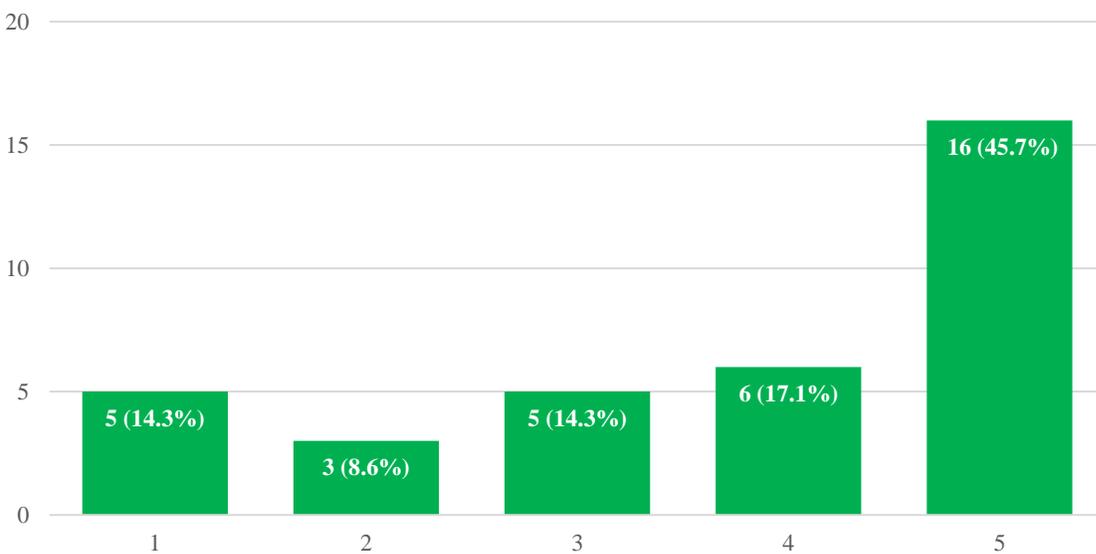
Development of the IEP

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I am pleased with the progress my child has made this year
35 responses



I have been kept informed of my child's progress this year
35 responses

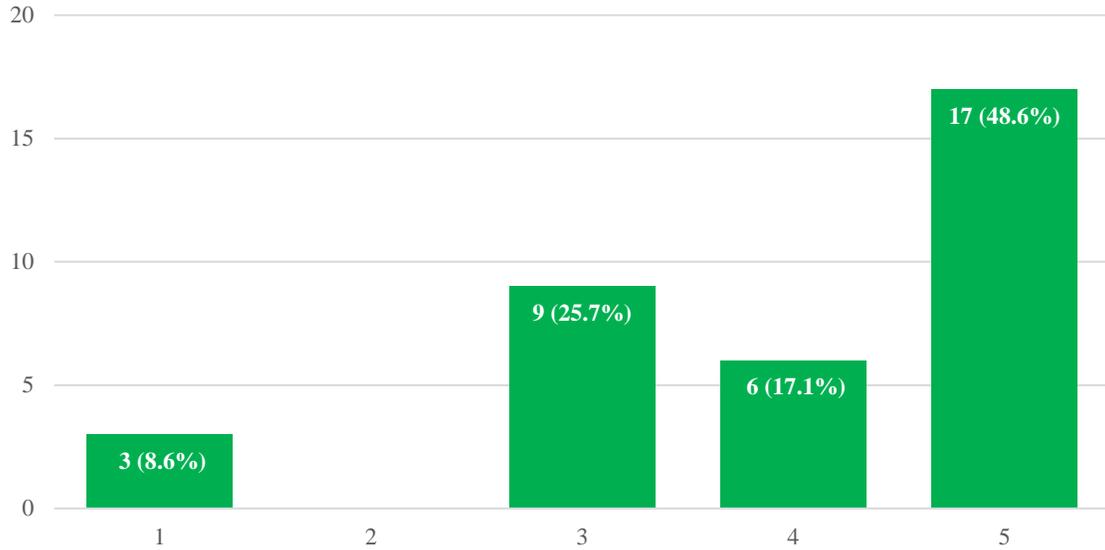


Development of the IEP

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

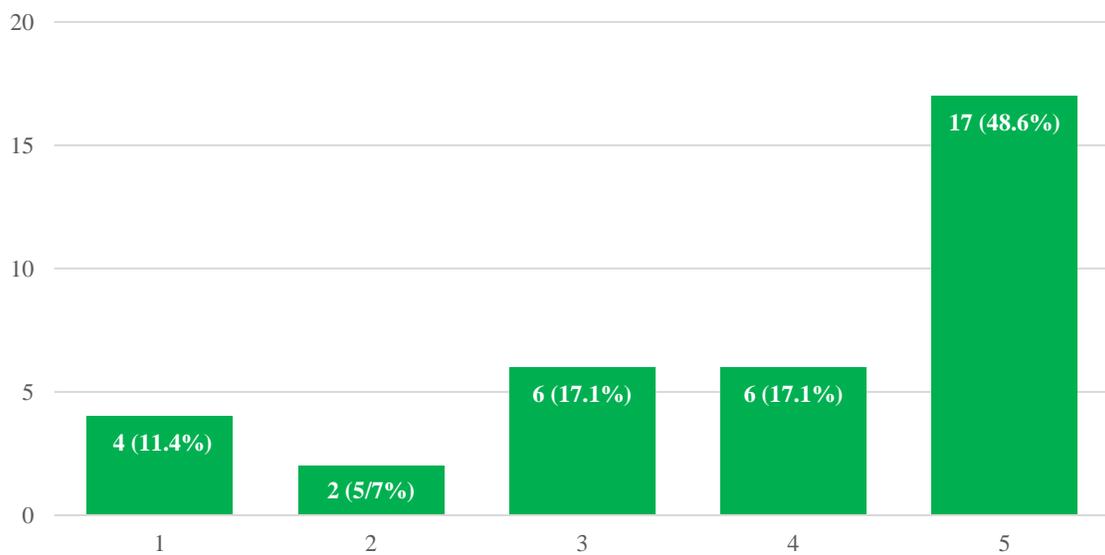
My questions and concerns have been addressed satisfactorily

35 responses (no participants selected "2")



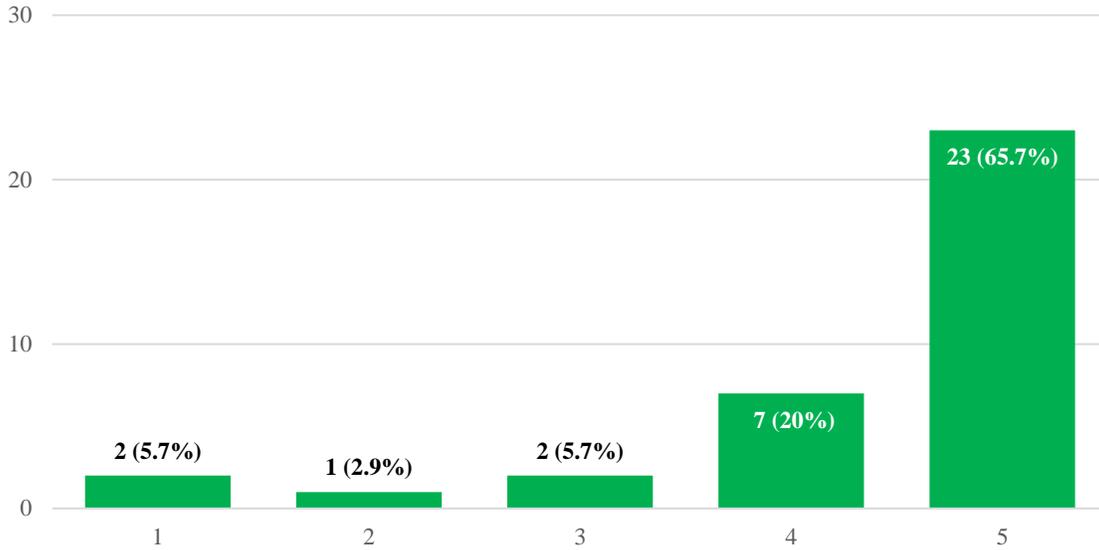
My child is receiving the type and amount of services listed in the IEP

35 responses

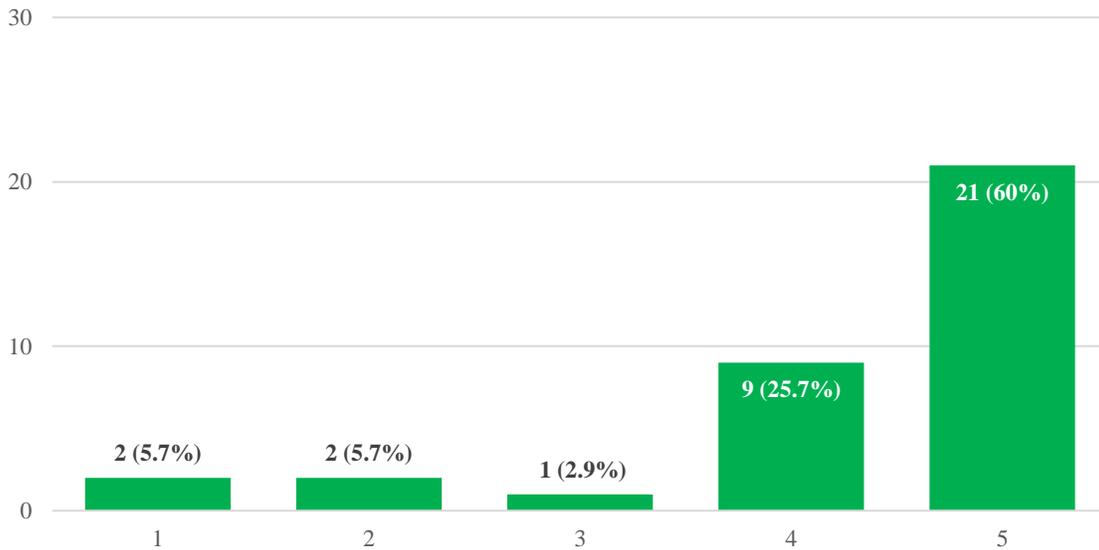


Communication: When I was invited to the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

Parent/school contacts were friendly
35 responses

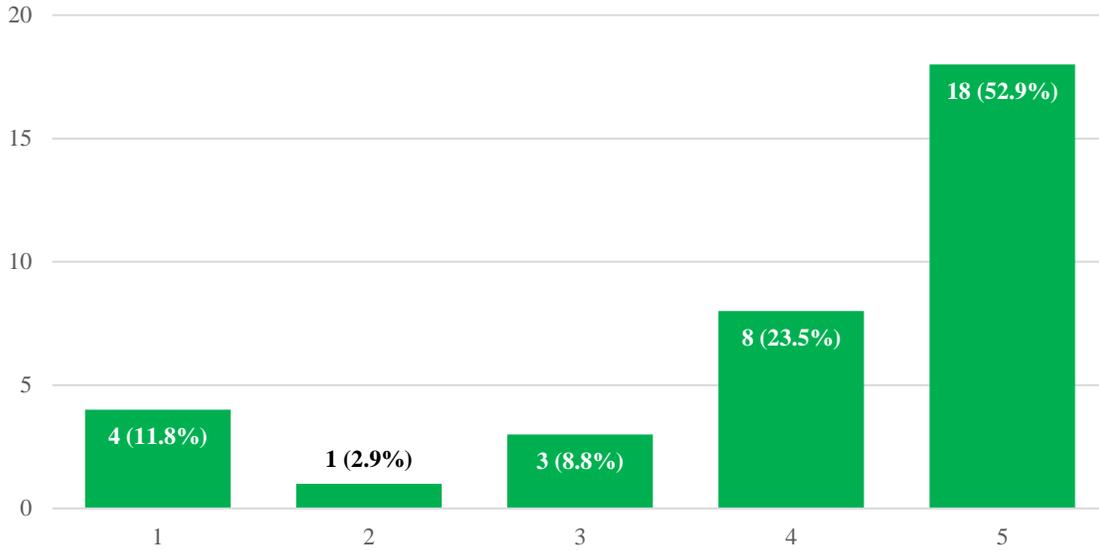


I understood the kind of meeting I was invited to attend
35 responses

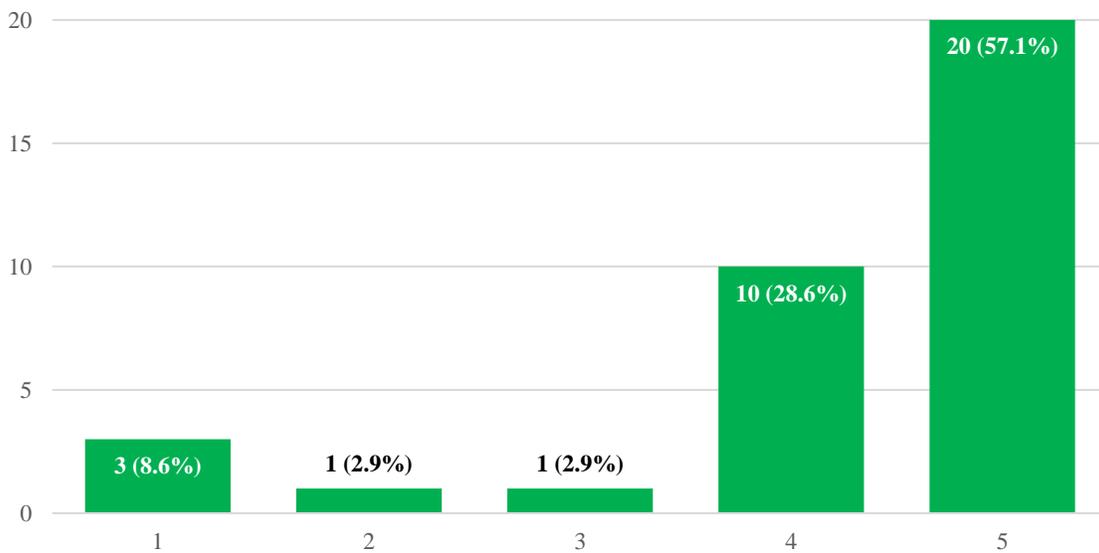


Communication: When I was invited to the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I was given the information I needed to prepare for the meeting
34 responses

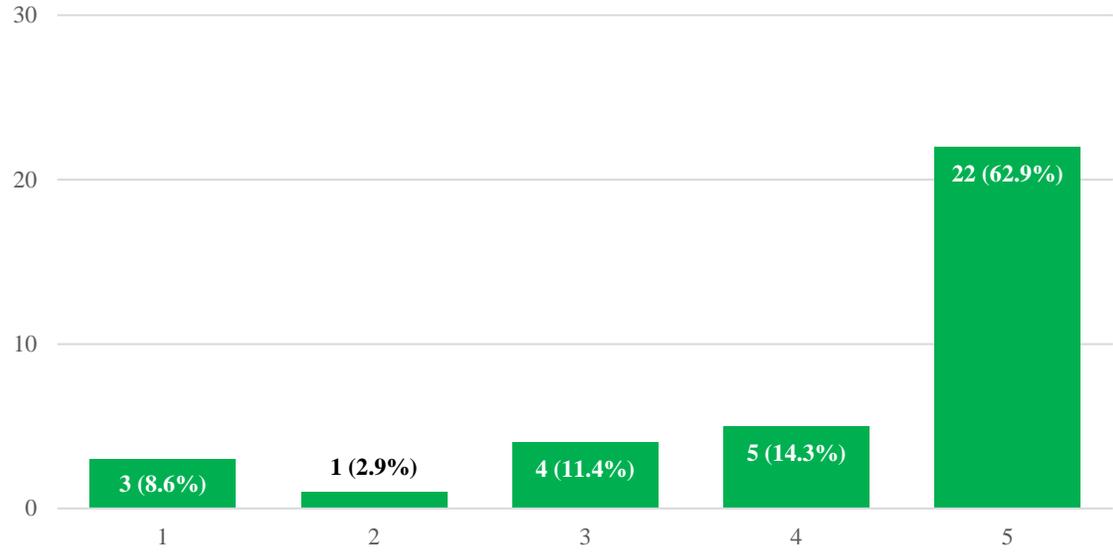


I looked forward to being involved in the decision-making process
35 responses

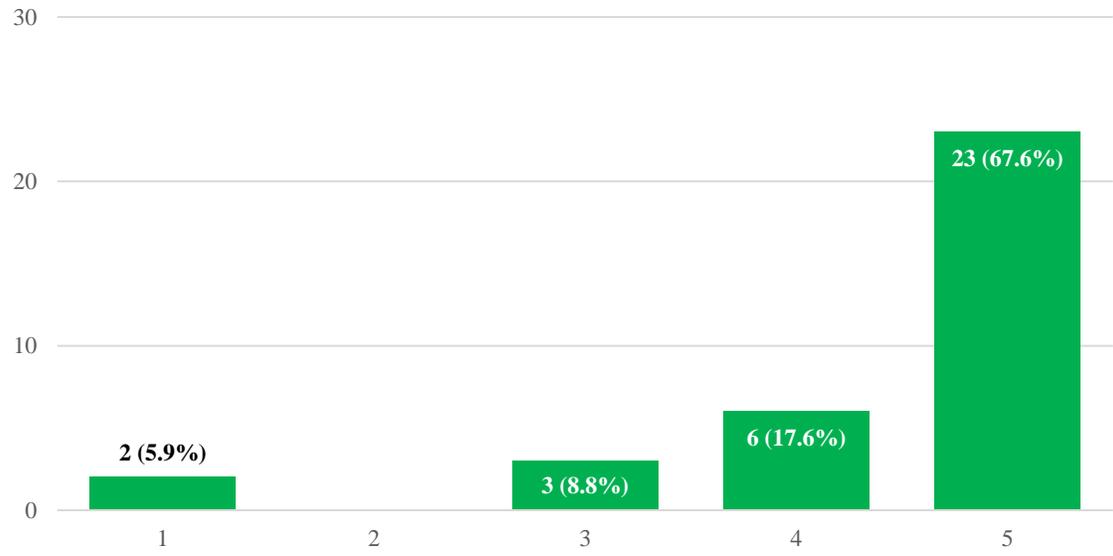


Communication: When I was invited to the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I was given a convenient meeting date and time
35 responses

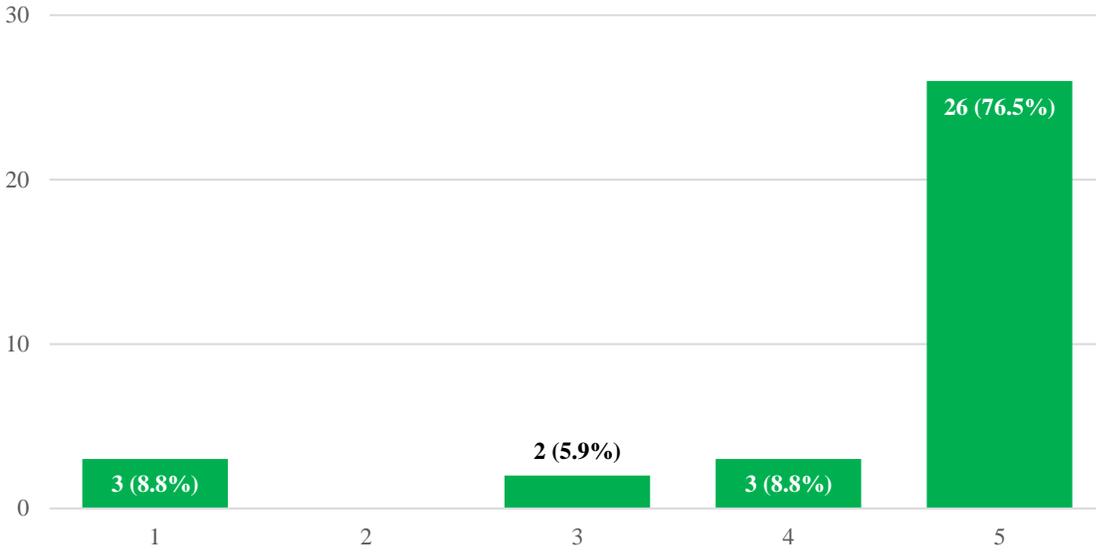


I was given a copy of my rights and I understood them
34 responses (no participants selected "2")

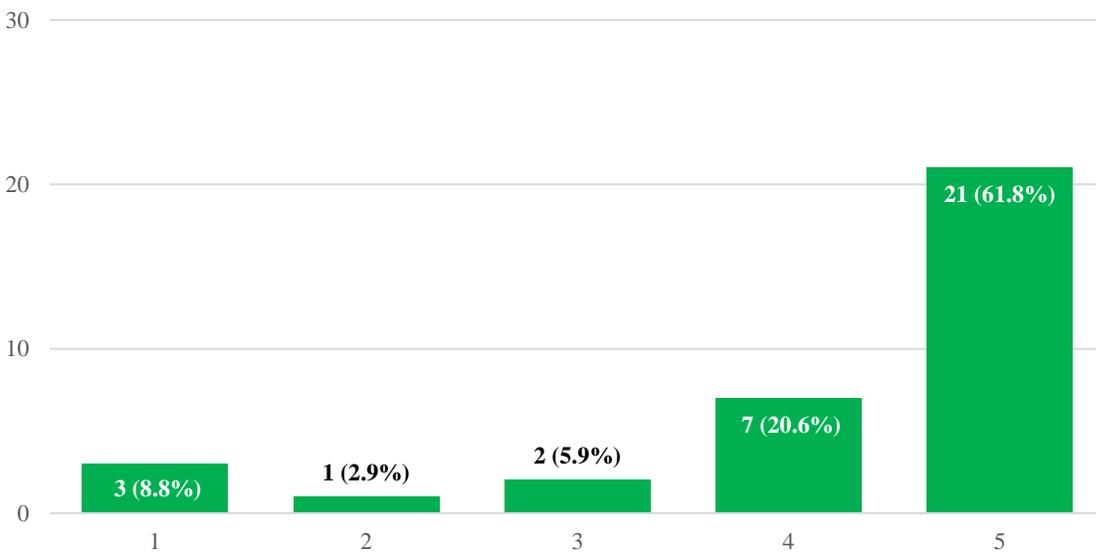


The IEP Meeting: As a participant in the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I was a welcomed member of the team
34 responses (no participants selected "2")

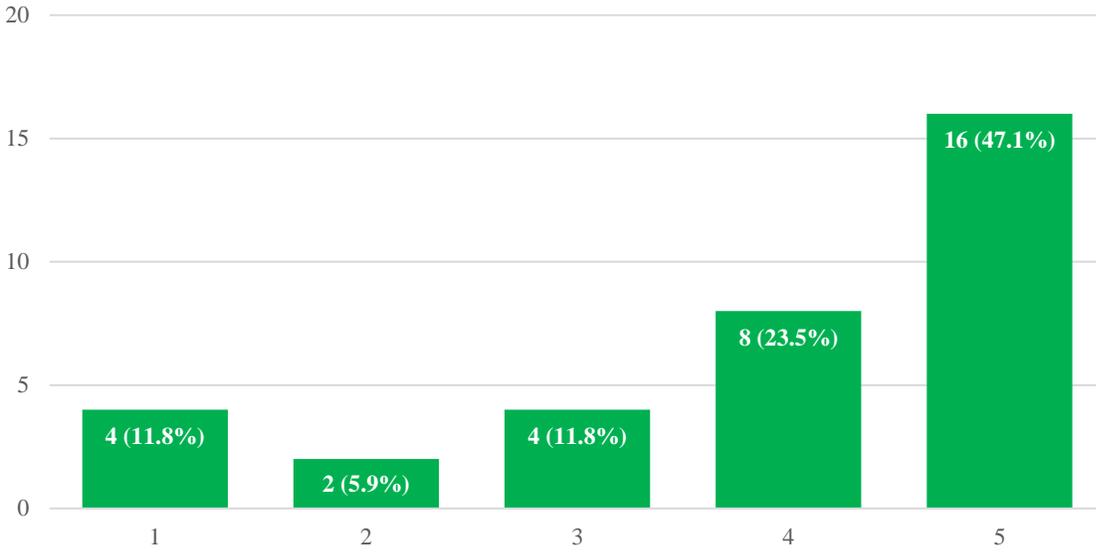


I was asked to share my views and opinions with the IEP team
34 responses

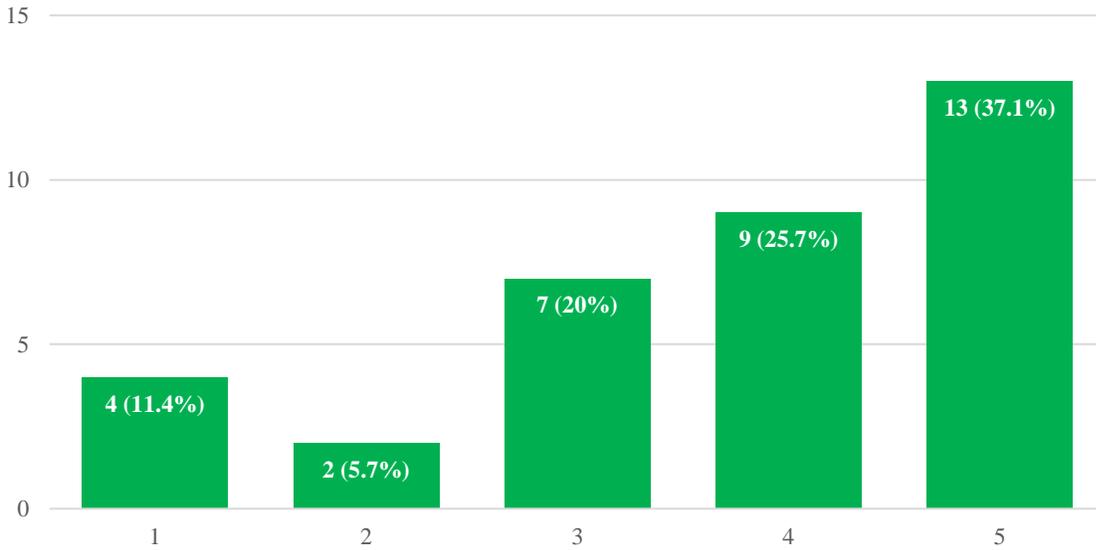


The IEP Meeting: As a participant in the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

The IEP team considered my child's strengths
34 responses

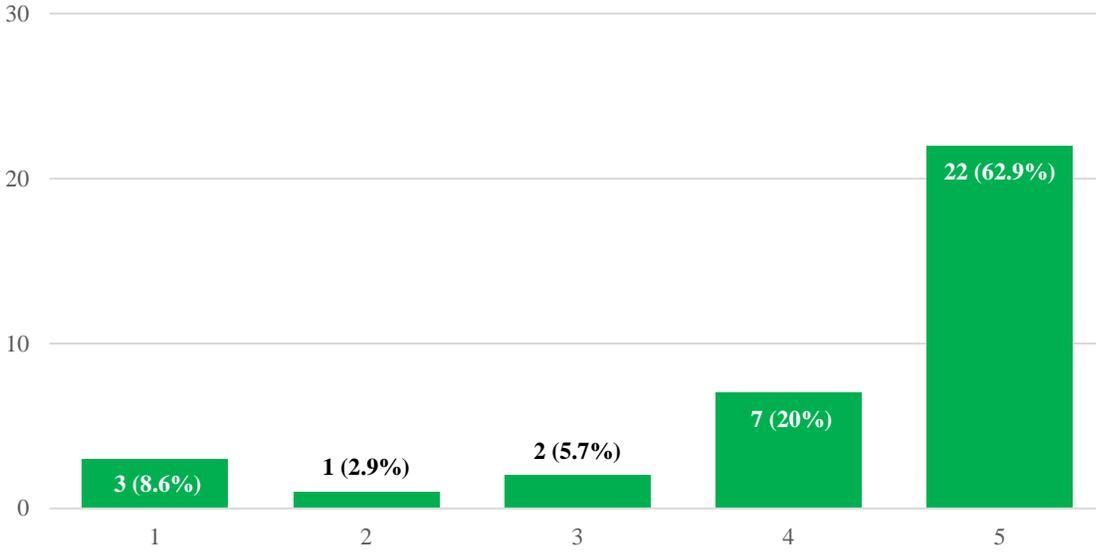


The IEP team reflected ALL the needs of my child
35 responses

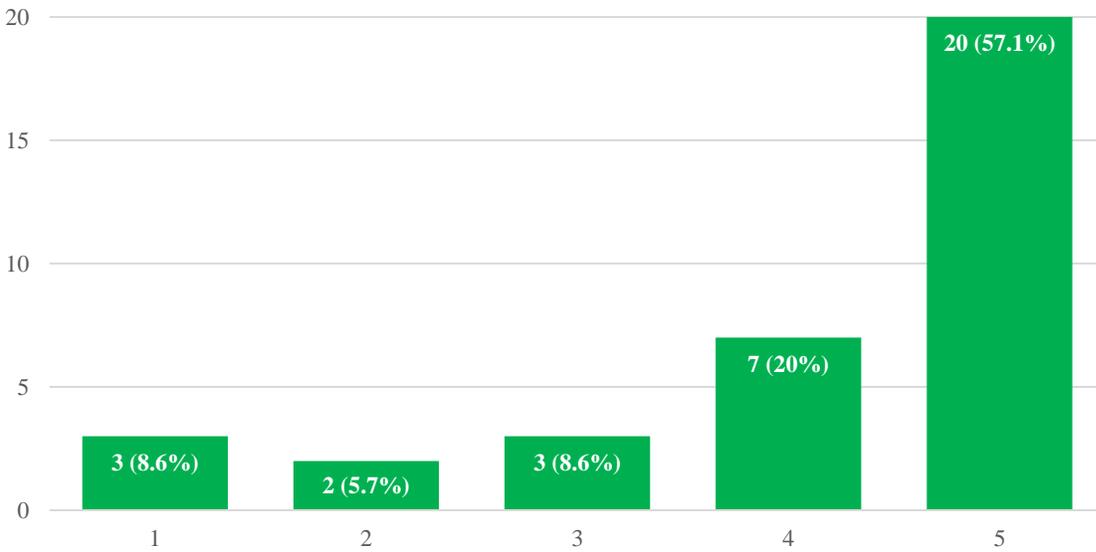


The IEP Meeting: As a participant in the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I was comfortable expressing my issues and concerns during the meeting
35 responses

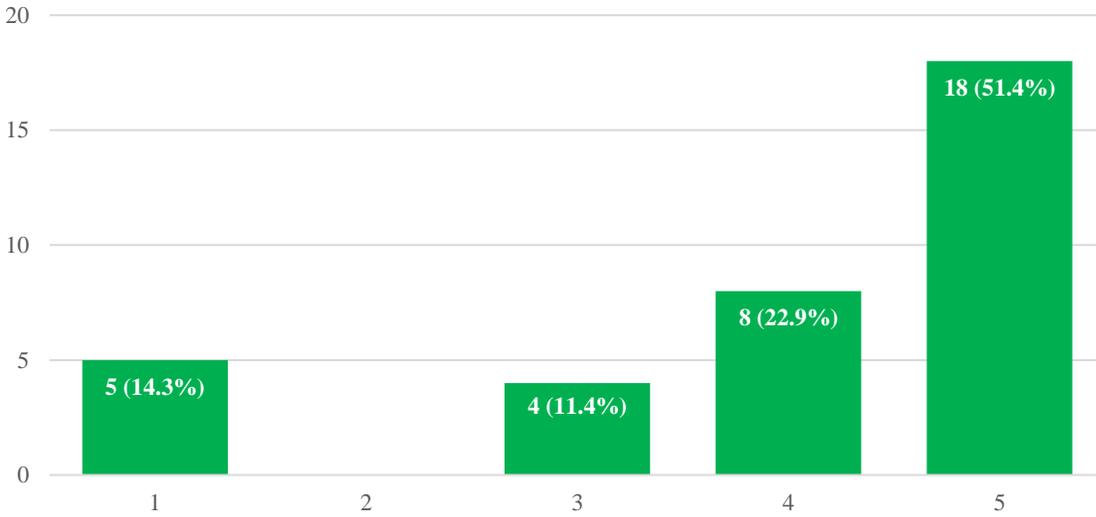


Educational terms were explained to me as needed
35 responses

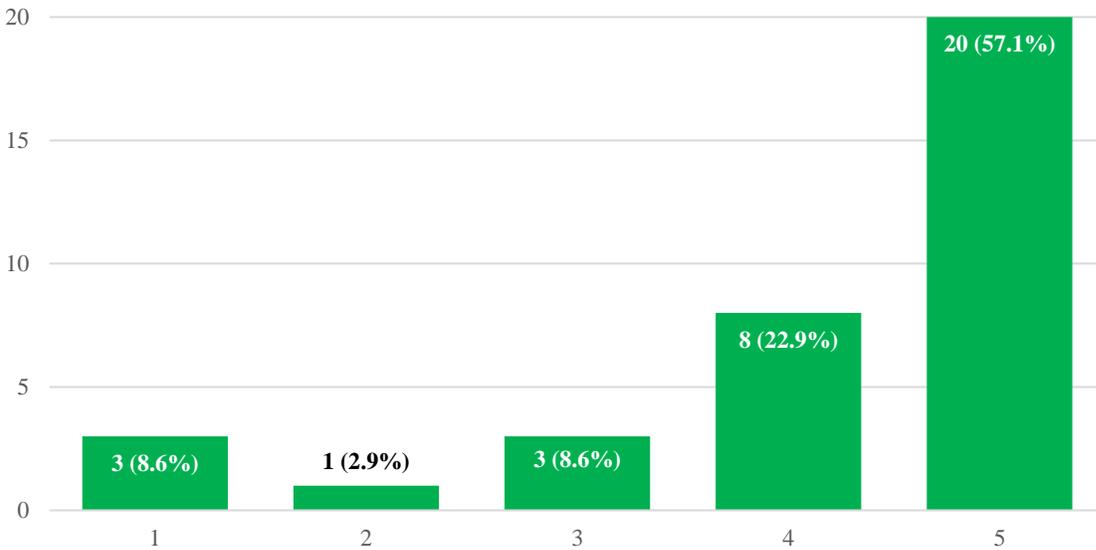


The IEP Meeting: As a participant in the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

The team's decision regarding placement and services for my child was appropriate
35 responses (no participants selected "2")

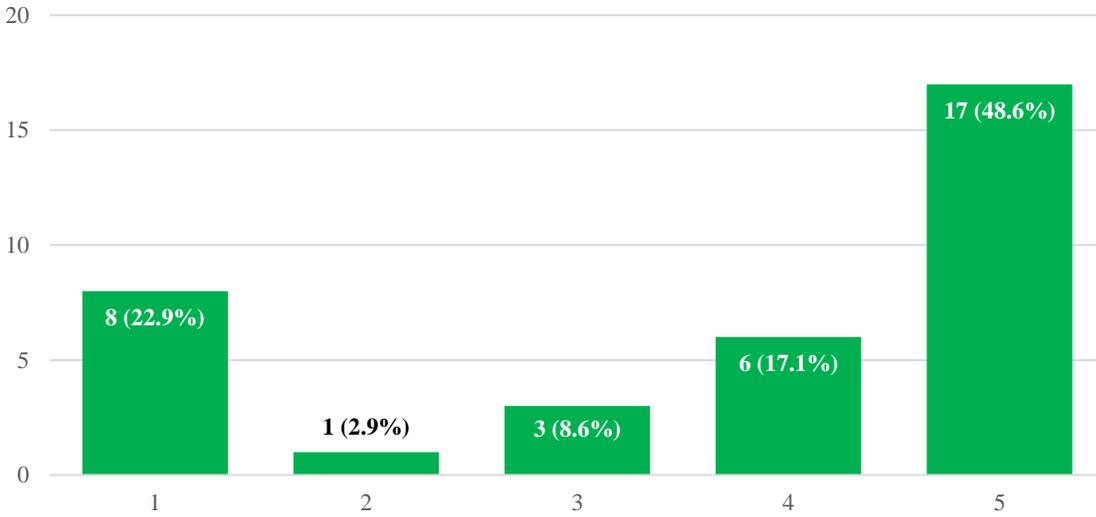


I understood the goals and objectives that were written for my child
35 responses

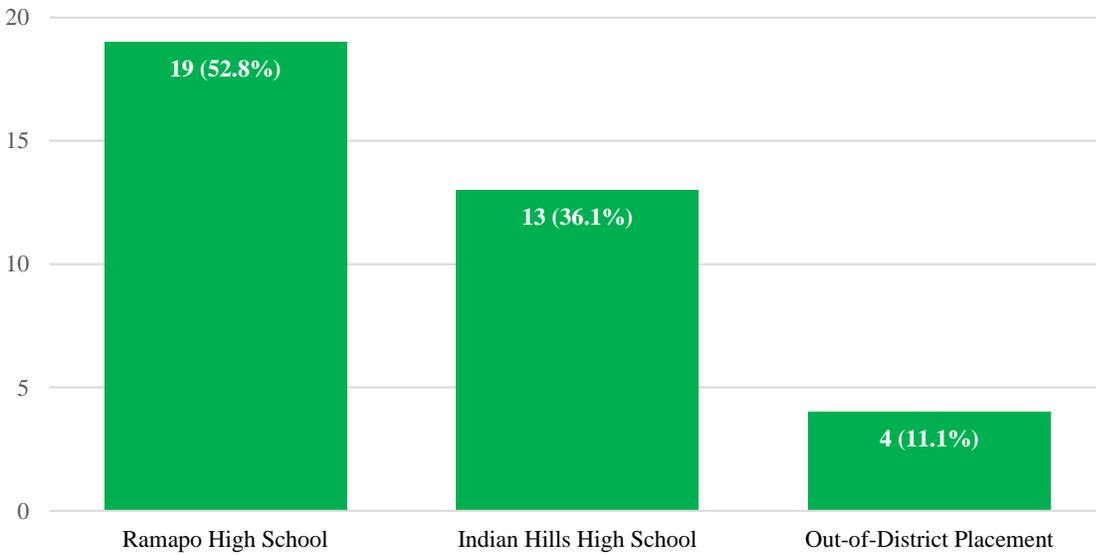


The IEP Meeting: As a participant in the Eligibility and/or IEP meeting
Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I recognized the progress report form and understand I will be receiving these as often as I receive report cards
35 responses



School my child attends
36 responses



Comments by survey participants

NOTE: The purpose of this “Special Education Program Review” is to focus on the Special Education program in the District and to identify strength, areas of improvement, and best practices. The purpose is not to evaluate specific members of the staff. Accordingly, any comment that identified a staff member has been omitted from this report.

In addition, please note that comments are presented in their raw form and have not been edited for spelling/grammar/clarity by the Consultants.

1. Have someone head the District Special Ed who has experience with special needs students and who actually cares.
2. My son needs a male counselor to relate to.
3. My son has a 504 Plan and I have not been contacted in quite a while to discuss anything to do with his plan. No one has reached out to me to see how my son has been handling everything virtually or in-person all year. He is a senior this year and is graduating. I think it is important to discuss the plan every year and see what other improvements can be made. 504 Plans need to be addressed the same way as IEP's.

Also, I do think that when developing a plan, it is important to get information freshman year from the middle school. I do not feel that was done with my son. I recall being told that my sons information does not follow him into high school which makes no sense to me. That is perhaps why my son did not have a 504 Plan until his sophomore year I believe and then maybe some of the issues that I had with him that horrific year would have been addressed earlier so that it would not have come to a head. I understand the faculty was great at trying to help my son but it would have been better if there was something in place prior to my son coming into high school so there would be a smooth transition and continuation.

Thank you for everything that you have done to help him the best you could throughout high school based on the circumstances that you were given.

4. I am more interested in hearing and meeting with core teachers not elective teachers ! I also don't think that the guidance counselor is as involved with my child as she should be.
5. I cannot fill out this survey because of Covid and I believe my personal answers would not be fair. This year was unimaginable. My daughter did poorly by the grade point measurements. I believe that the school responded as best as possible including staff and teachers. Going forward my concern for education is how grading impacts teachers and students. I believe that the school did everything it could to meet us but I don't know if this will be enough to support our child's education forward. I do believe that Covid exposed how much pressure is on everyone. What I would prefer to see in September, a different way for kids to learn. That being in the classroom all day in front of a computer is not going

to be healthy for many kids or students. I would rather see our child become part of a community work program. Working for the town, library, garden, local farms. Mental health is a priority for everyone. I want the educators to keep coming back. I can't imagine them doing another year this way. Sorry if I didn't answer the survey questions, I don't know how. I would like a healthy way for the school to function for everyone in it. Be well and thank you.

6. Better communication. More explanation of the CP classes vs CPE classes before becoming a freshman and during freshman year.
7. Virtually my child's needs were not met.
8. We had an excellent experience with the Iep team and Ramapo staff! Thank you for your time, attention and hard work.
9. It was a difficult year I understand. The children do better with a routine. Some kids do better in school with the teachers and aids helping one on one. And it was hard to do this year. So the kids suffer.
10. The IEPs are not looked at by the teachers enough to help them. We put all that work to make a good IEP but if teachers don't use them it's like they never had one.
11. The IEP staff is doing all they can to help and support my child. I am more discouraged with several of the teachers that needed to be reminded of my child's IEP and their lack of compassion for this virtual "new way of learning", and the amount of work they continue to pile on to ALL children.
12. Hiring an experienced, knowledgeable, Director of Special Education is the first steps. And then their support staff. And personnel audit of the current staff. Update training amongst all current sp. ed. teachers is the next steps. Ensuring that all sp. ed. teachers have the right training and certification are in place now. On a side note: I seriously I do not feel this survey address or provides you with the right information; asking about transition into the high school after 18; have you had any settlement agreements; how many iep meeting did you have within the year to resolve concerns; nothing on special services; extended year; curriculum modifications, the virtual environment, etc.
13. Programs to improve social skills with peers.
14. The SAGE program has been an excellent source. I cannot blame the district for the virtual classes. My child needs to be in school to get the most for education. Each child has their unique identity and overall I would give Ramapo Special Services 90%.

The reason I cannot provide a 100% is

5%: I am unaware I should be receiving a progress report form and it should be sent as often as I receive report cards.

5%: I agree with the one parent. My son is not an advocate for himself. At the beginning of each year I receive numerous emails from the teachers as my son does not complete homework. I know teachers have A LOT on their plate!!! (My two sisters are teachers). Even if the school could somehow put an asterisk next to a student's name and the teacher could either reach out to the parents OR reach out to the special education department to identify where a student may need extra support; it would be helpful for everyone.

With that being said, I truly believe once EVERYONE returns to 100% in-person attendance; it will also help improve the RIH District Team of Teachers and the Students overall

15. Have guidance counselors present during annuals meetings to discuss class/course selections. I was very displeased that during my child's annual IEP meeting no general education teacher attended which is not legal. The general education teacher had not been excused from the meeting.
16. I think the case manager/counselor should have been more proactive with my child's grades. They should of followed up with his teachers on a regular basis. They should of have a plan to prepare him in a college setting. Overall, I have not been impressed with this program.
17. I think constant changes with case managers cause a new case manager to have to start at Ground Zero and not know the child or their strengths or weaknesses or what the school and teachers need to be focusing on. I also think case managers should have more knowledge of schools, programs, resources that would help support the child with out of district placement, since for children on the spectrum with autism in district placement is not an option, and provide support for the parents in a variety of needed areas for the student. Many parents are left scrambling and trying to get their child the support they need. I also think the district should be more on top of home programming and contract with organizations that have proven track record and appropriate staffing.

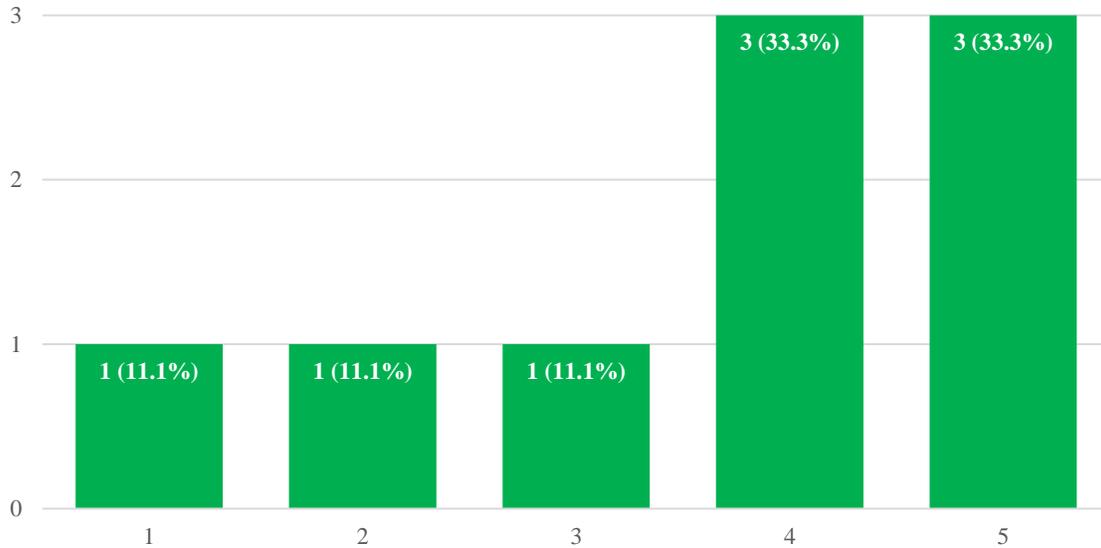
Final Ramapo – Indian Hills Regional District Curriculum and Instruction Feedback
Special Education Parent Survey Results

Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

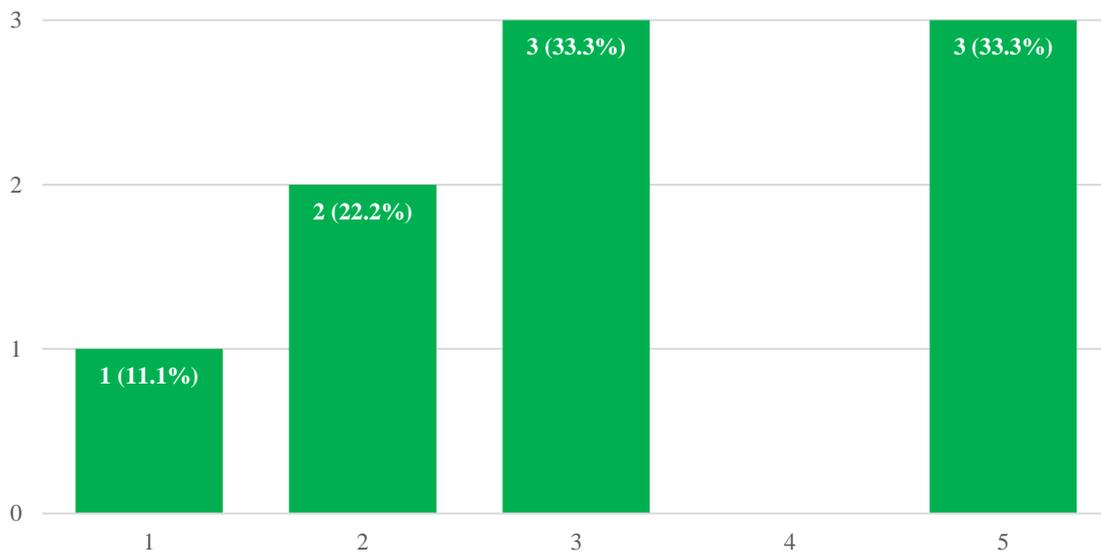
My child receives a high-quality instructional program

9 responses



Special Education services support Special Education student success

9 responses (no participants selected "4")

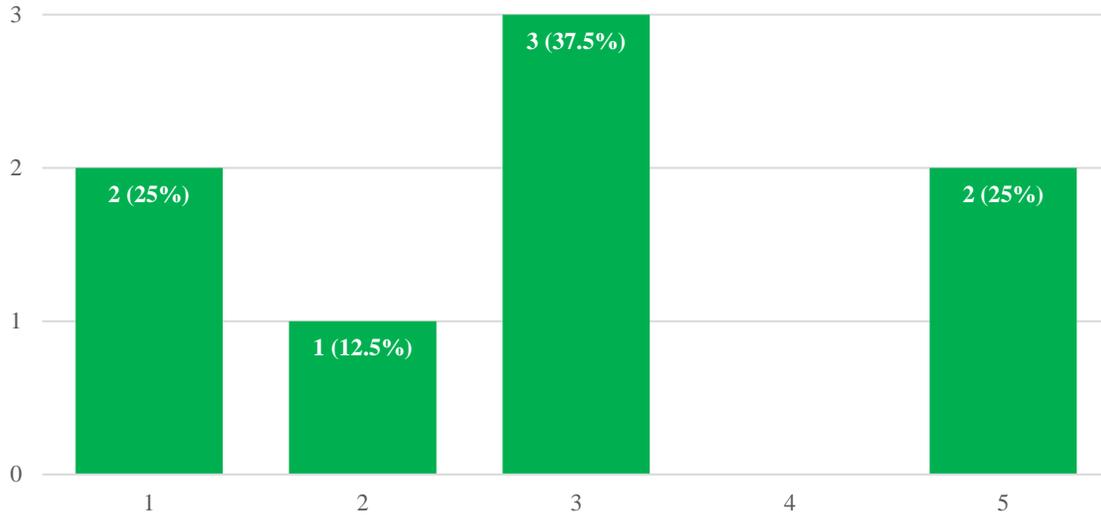


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

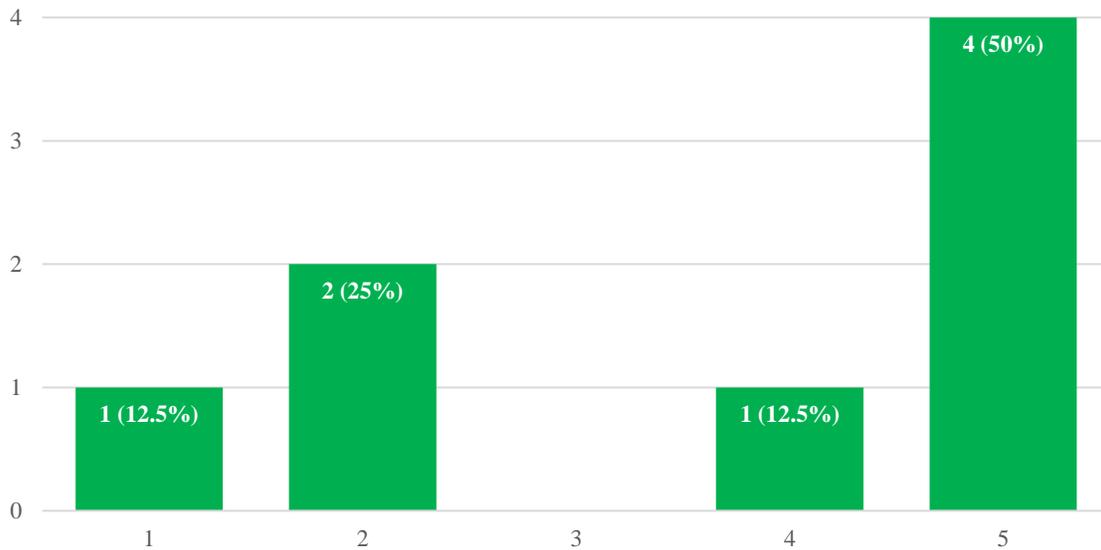
Services for Special Education students are consistent between Indian Hills and Ramapo

9 responses (no participants selected "4")



My child's school provides high quality Special Education teachers

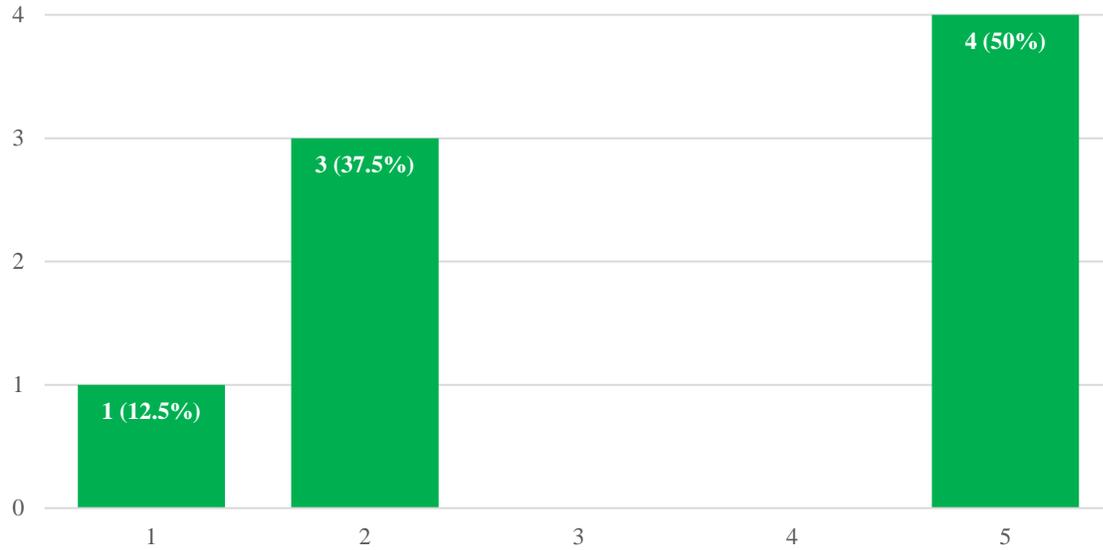
8 responses (no participants selected "3")



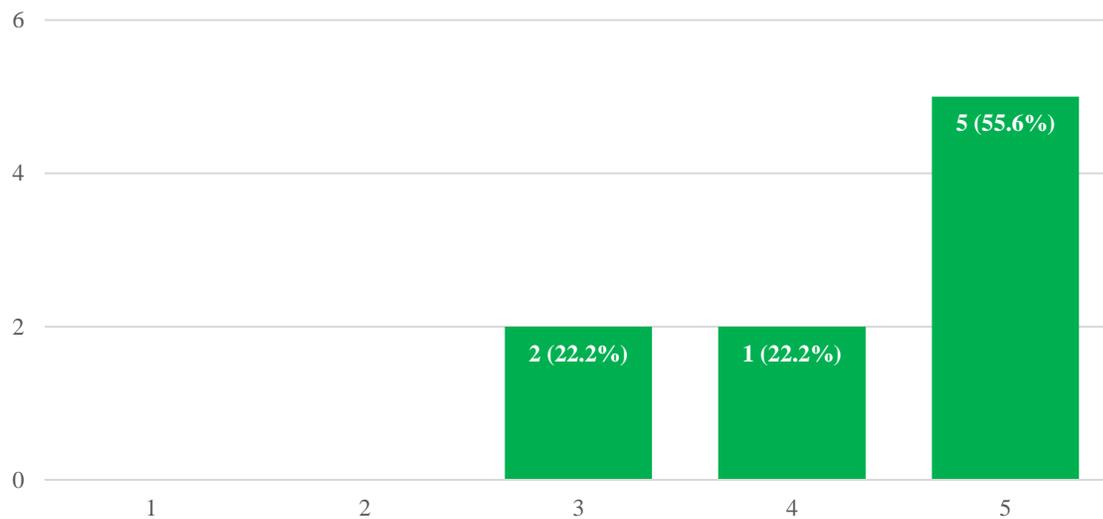
Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

My child's school provides high quality Special Education support staff
8 responses (no participants selected "3" or "4")



I think that general education and Special Education students both benefit
when taught in the same classroom
9 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")

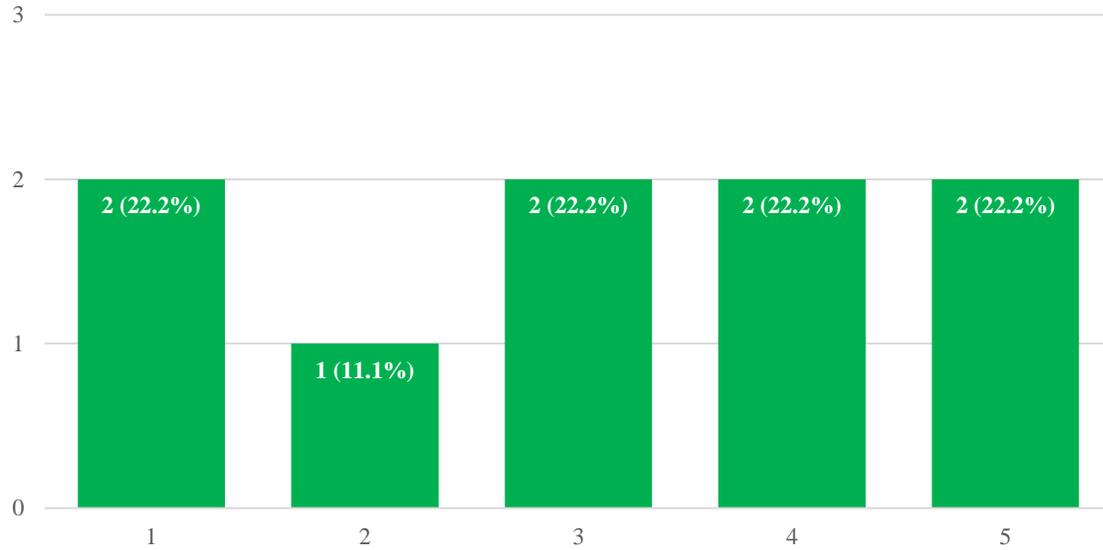


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

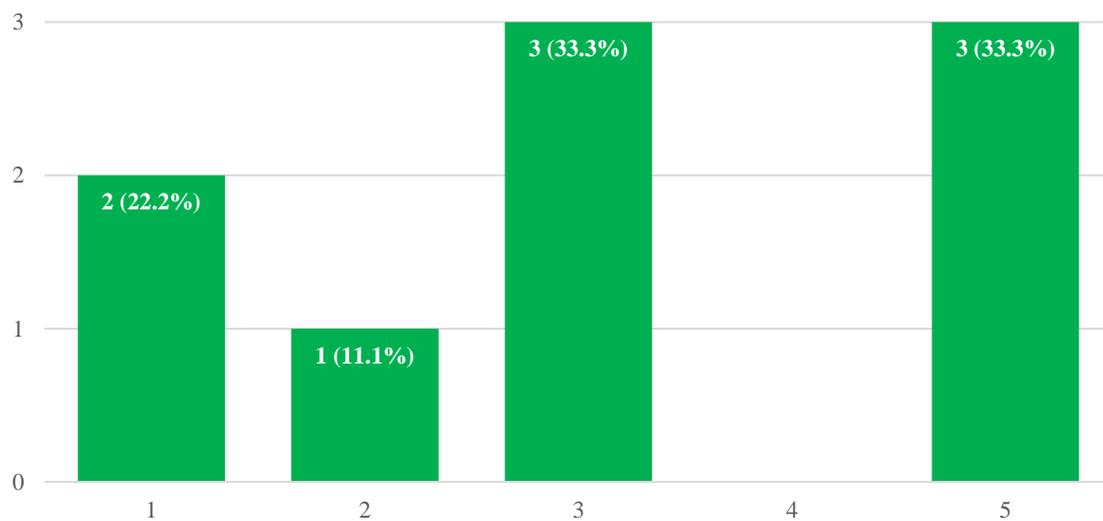
My child's teachers accommodate and modify instruction per the IEP

9 responses



My child's general and Special Education teachers work together to implement the IEP

9 responses (no participants selected "4")

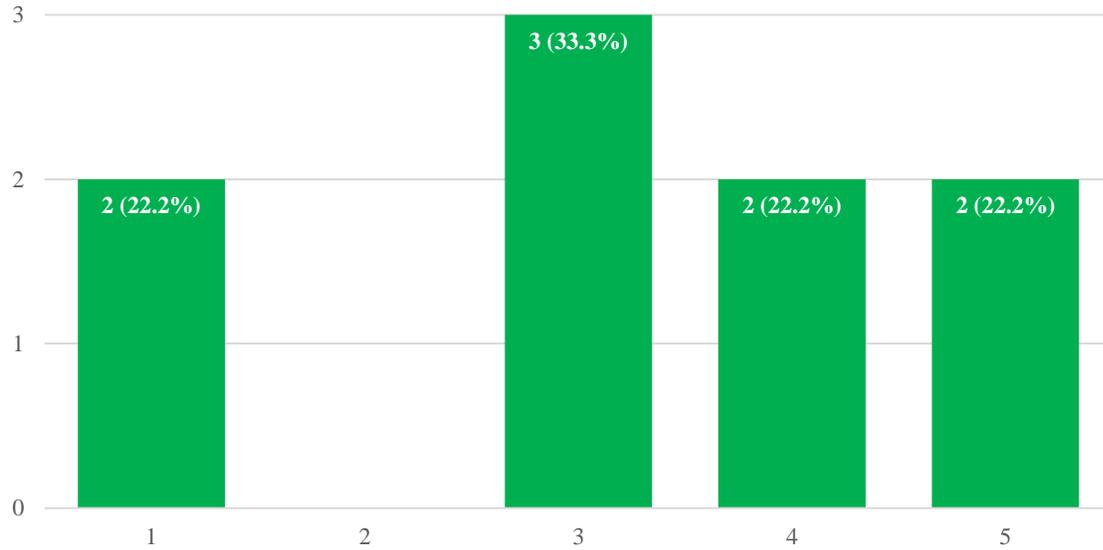


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

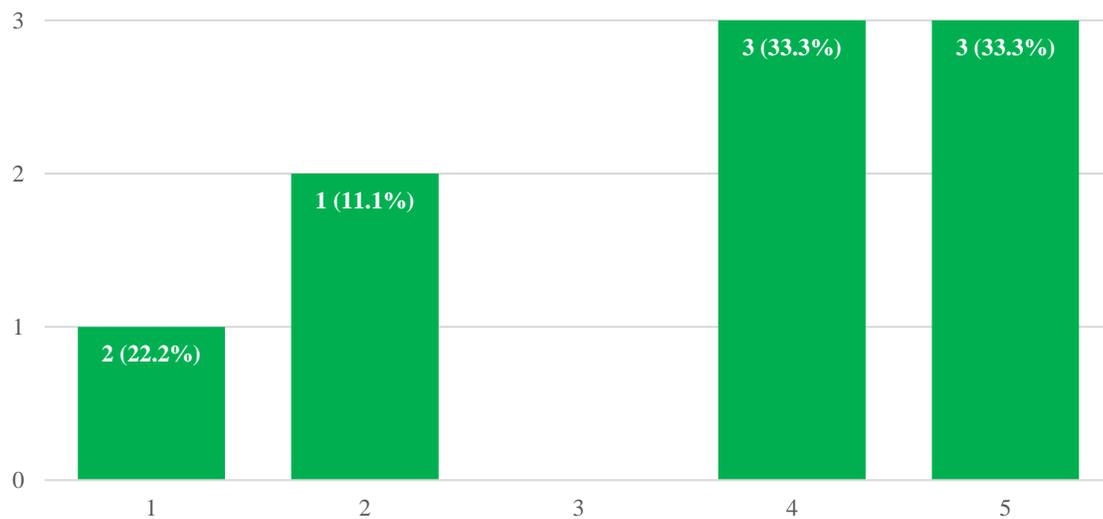
My child's teachers have the skills needed to provide what my child needs

9 responses (no participants selected "2")



My child's supervisors and administrators have the skills needed to provide what my child needs

9 responses (no participants selected "3")

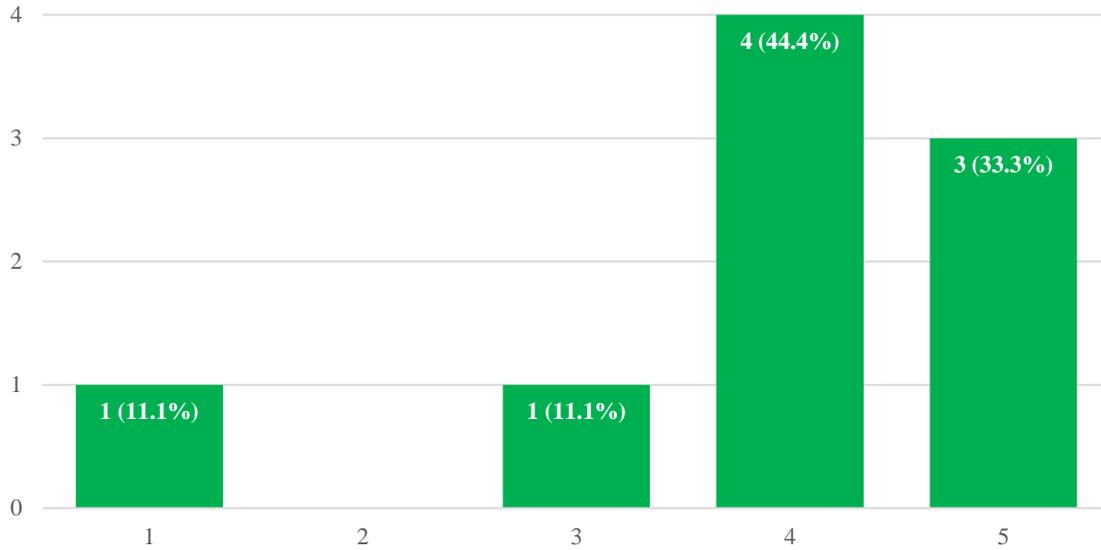


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I have a positive relationship with my child's school

9 responses (no participants selected "2")



My child is treated in the same way that general education students are treated in disciplinary issues

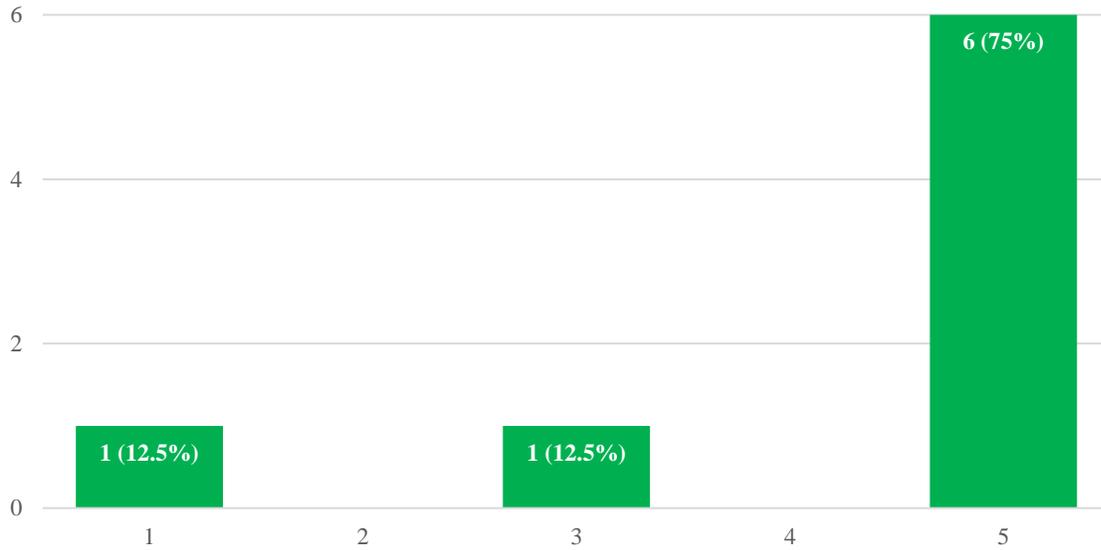
9 responses (no participants selected "2" or "3")



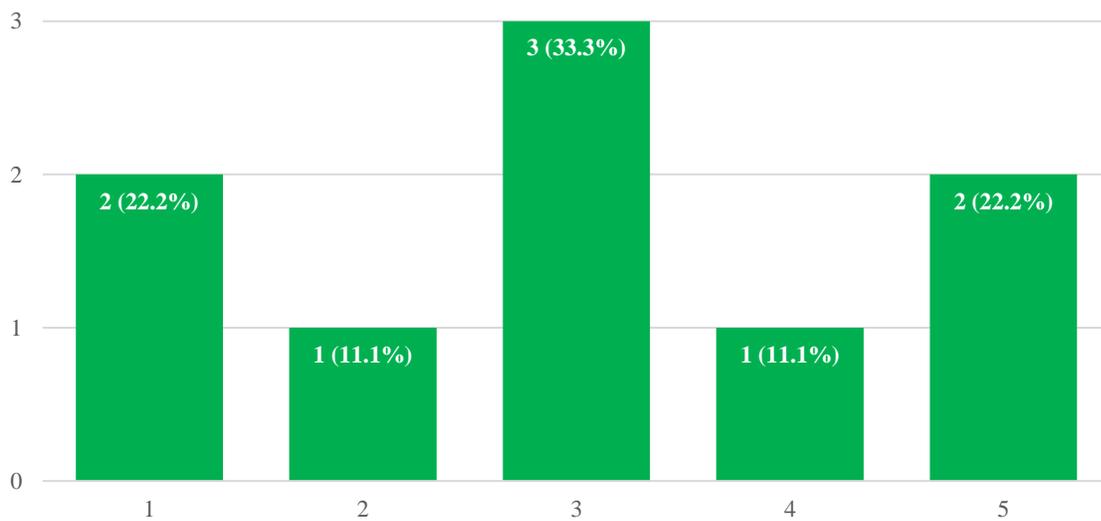
Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

My child is considered a full member of the student body
8 responses (no participants selected "2" or "4")



The entire faculty demonstrates a responsibility for Special Education students
9 responses

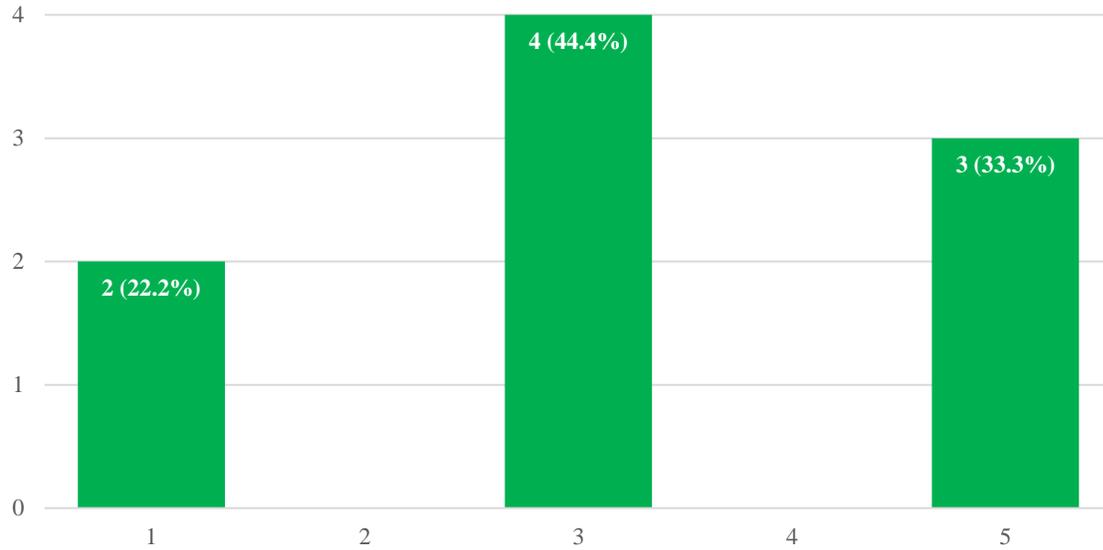


Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

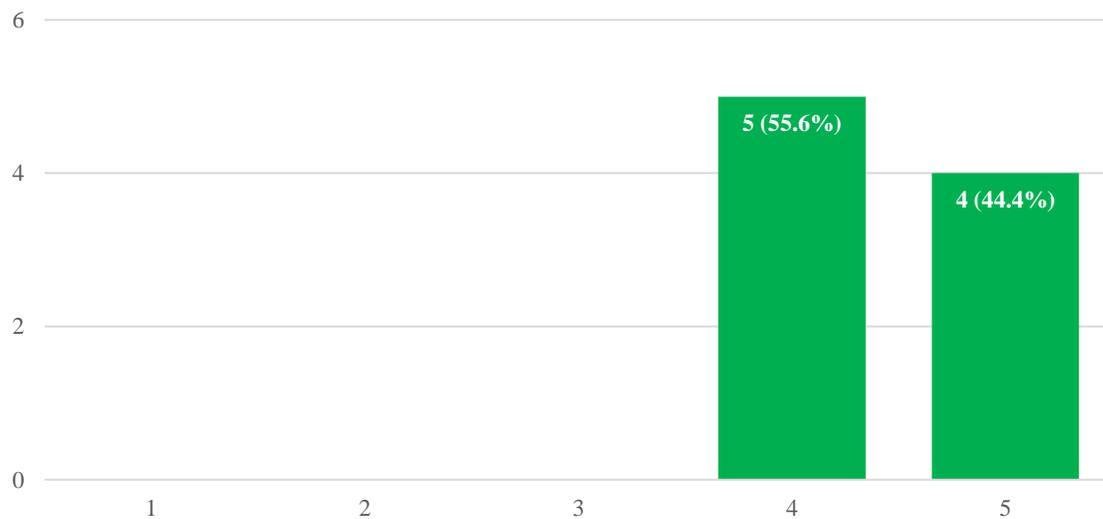
Both general and Special Education teachers collaborate to support my child

9 responses (no participants selected "2" or "4")



My child benefits academically when he/she is with general education students

9 responses (no participants selected "1", "2" or "3")

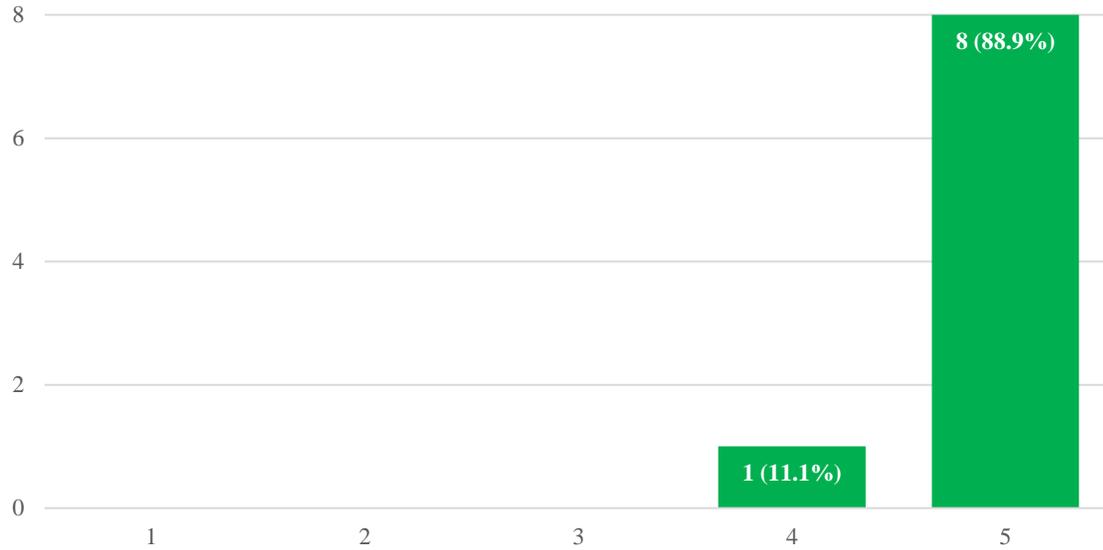


Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

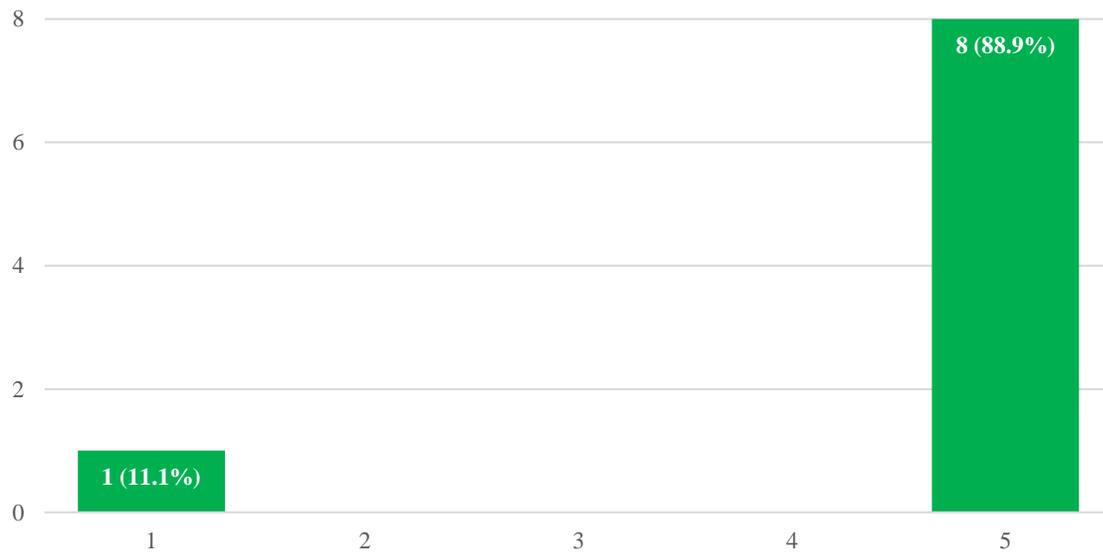
My child benefits socially when he/she is with general education students

9 responses (no participants selected "1", "2" or "3")



My child could participate in any sport

9 responses (no participants selected "2", "3" or "4")

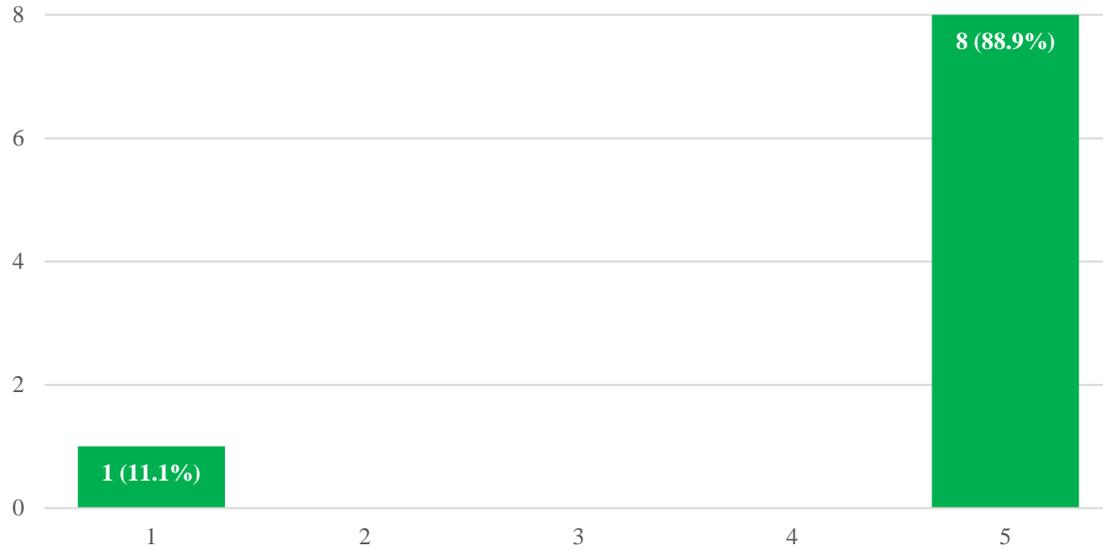


Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

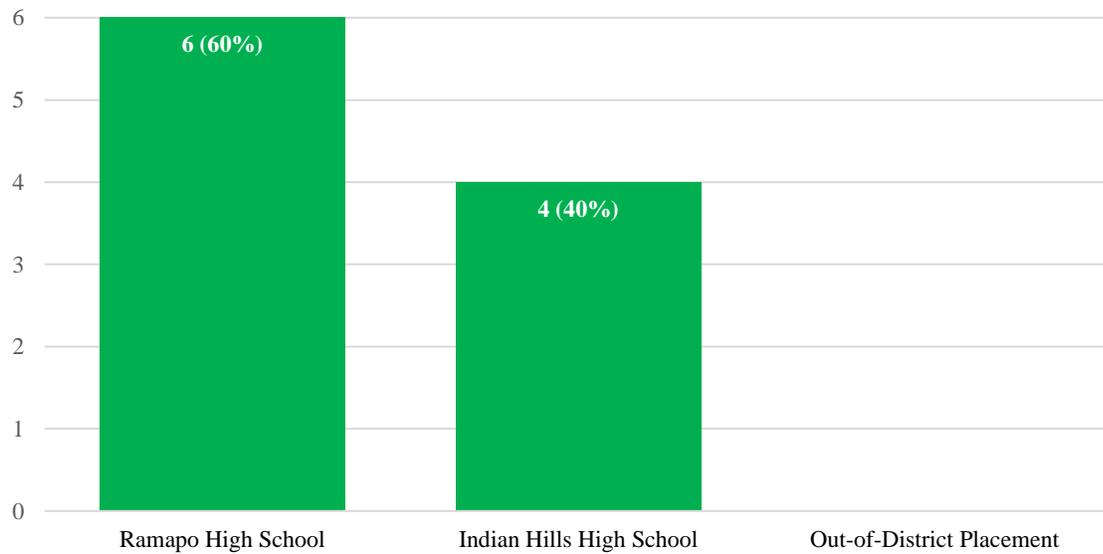
My child could participate in any club or activity

9 responses (no participants selected "2", "3" or "4")



School my child attends

10 responses (no participants selected "Out-of-District Placement")



Comments by survey participants

NOTE: The purpose of this “Special Education Program Review” is to focus on the Special Education program in the District and to identify strength, areas of improvement, and best practices. The purpose is not to evaluate specific members of the staff. Accordingly, any comment that identified a staff member has been omitted from this report.

In addition, please note that comments are presented in their raw form and have not been edited for spelling/grammar/clarity by the Consultants.

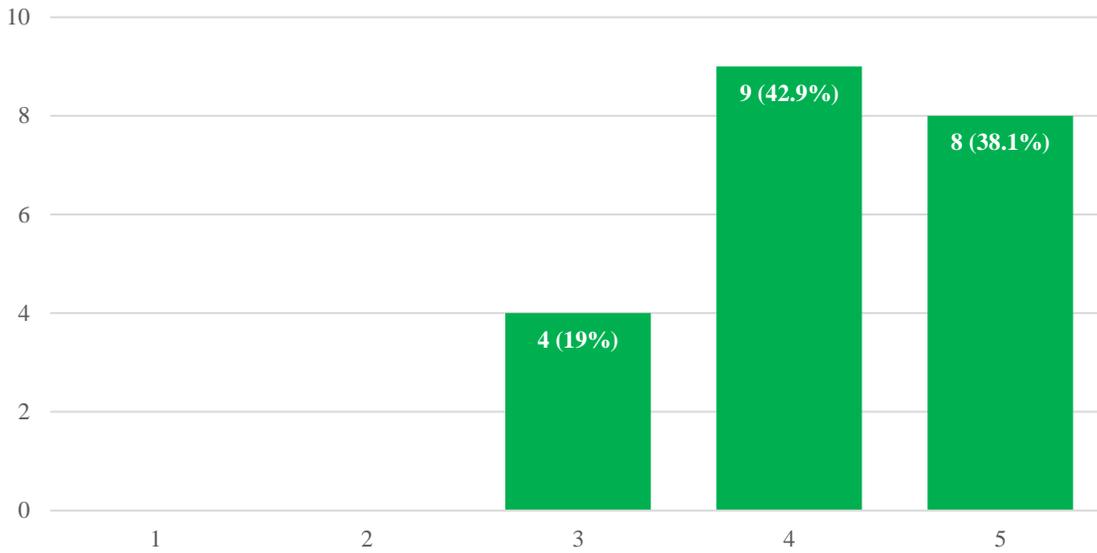
1. I think that the teachers and educators are excellent I just have lost the balance with school. Everything is Everything now. School is all consuming, it is like too much sugar. Covid didn't help. I am grateful for the survey if only to share that I wish the school was a little less important. That the future education system didn't create anxiety and that the reminder of learning something new can be fun. Whoever gets this please know that you are doing an extremely excellent job. I unfortunately cannot answer these questions because it could be reflected poorly. I hope that our child has the desire and motivation to enjoy school again but her unhappiness started before Covid. I would love for teachers and students to find a way to help plan the path forward. Thank You.
2. The guidance department were NOT helpful with my child's special education needs.
3. There should be inclusion classes in high school. Students with an IEP should be in a regular classroom with an inclusion teacher. My son is in classes with all students that have IEP's labeled CP. This seems like segregation based on student disabilities. There should be inclusion teachers for all contents and a mix of general education and students with IEP's.
4. Help and support Gen Ed teachers become aware of students in his/her class having special/different needs.

Final Ramapo – Indian Hills Regional District Staff Feedback
Special Education Survey Results

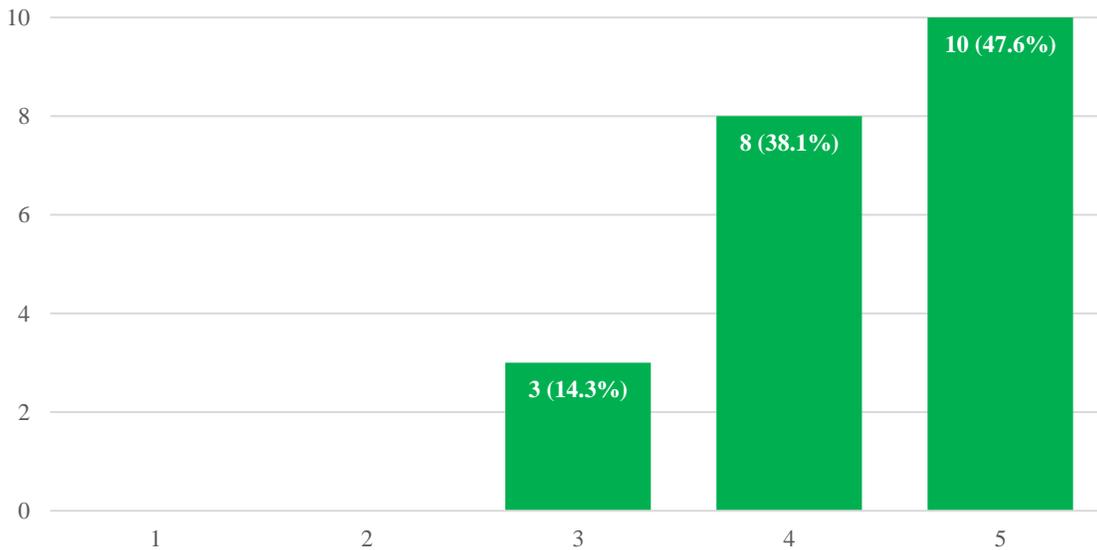
Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

My school provides a high-quality Special Education program
21 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")



Special Education services support Special Education student access
21 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")

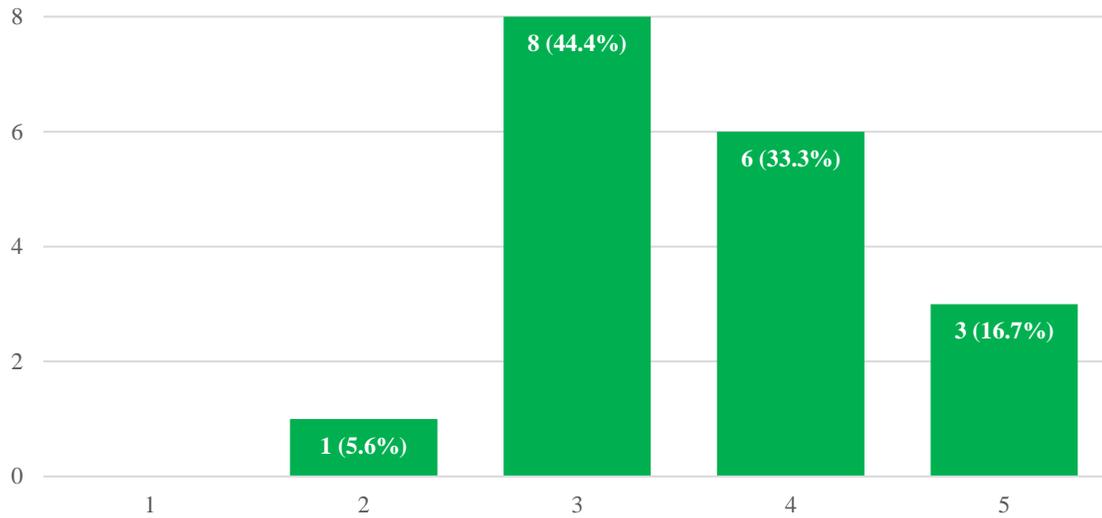


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

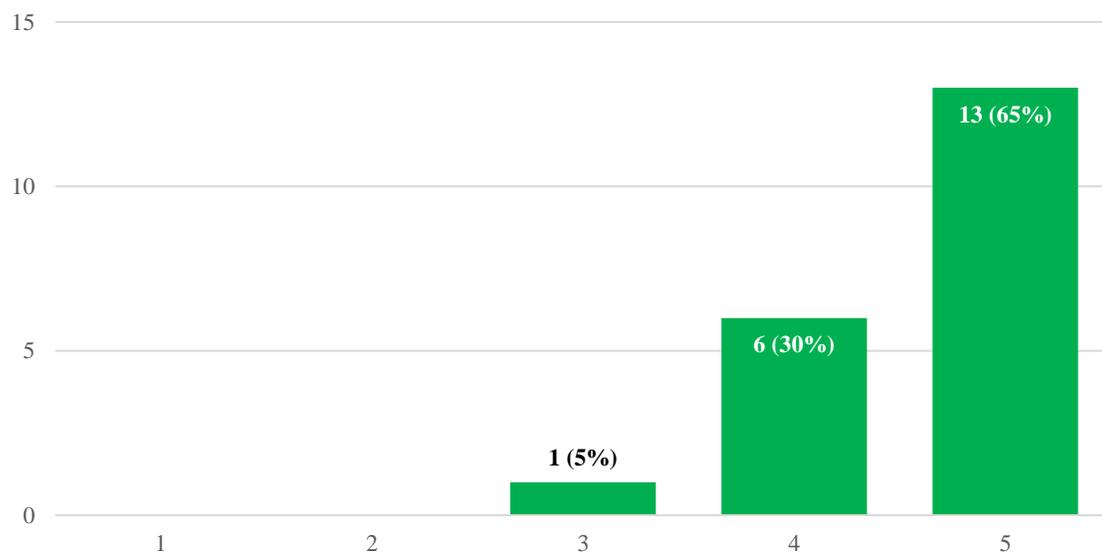
Services for Special Education students are consistent between Indian Hills and Ramapo

18 responses (no participants selected "1")



My school provides high quality Special Education teachers

20 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")

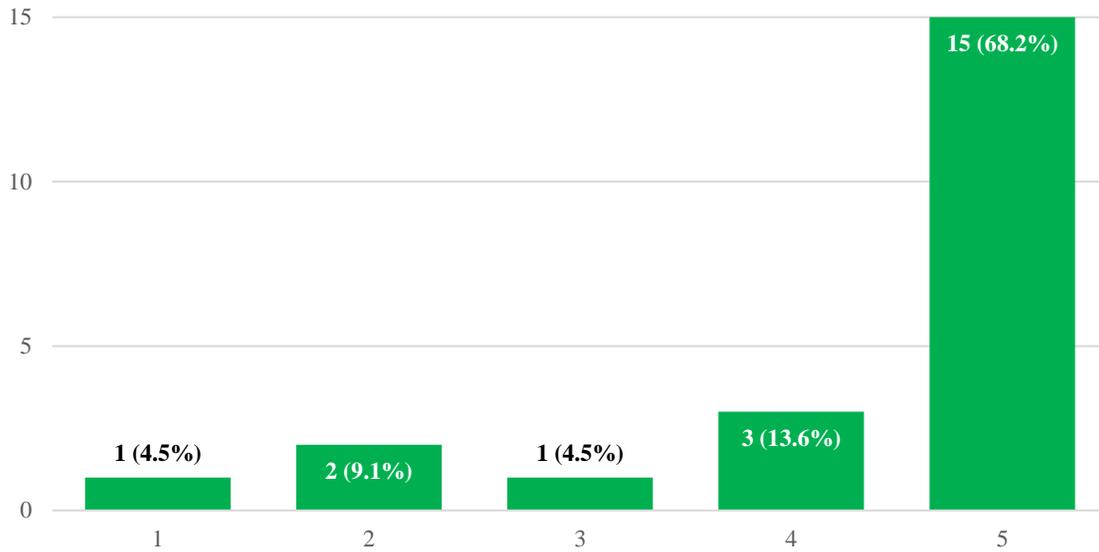


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

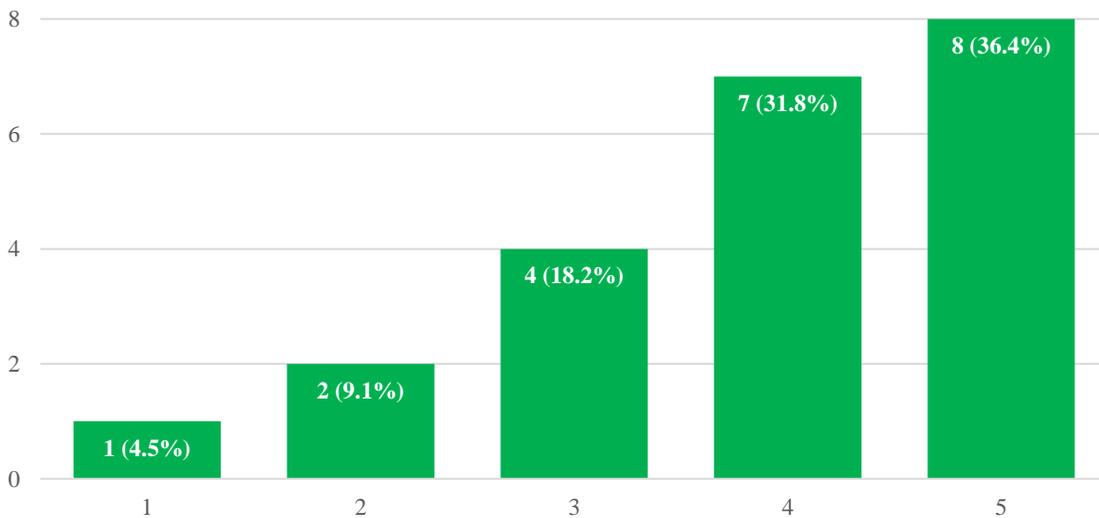
My school provides high quality Special Education support staff

22 responses



I think that general education and Special Education students both benefit when taught in the same classroom

22 responses

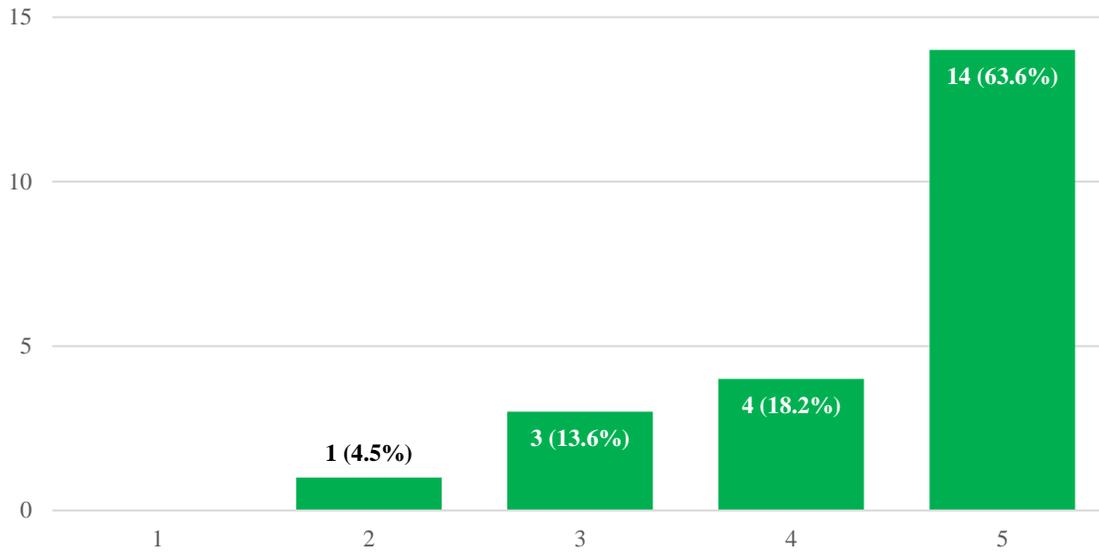


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

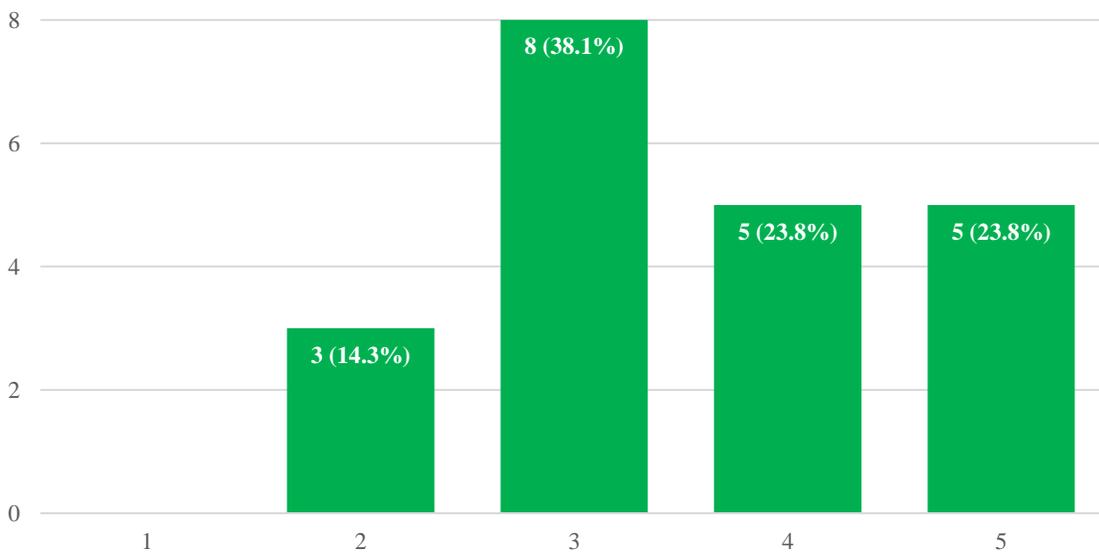
Teachers at my school accommodate and modify instruction per the IEP

22 responses (no participants selected "1")



Special and general education teachers work together to implement the IEP

21 responses (no participants selected "1")

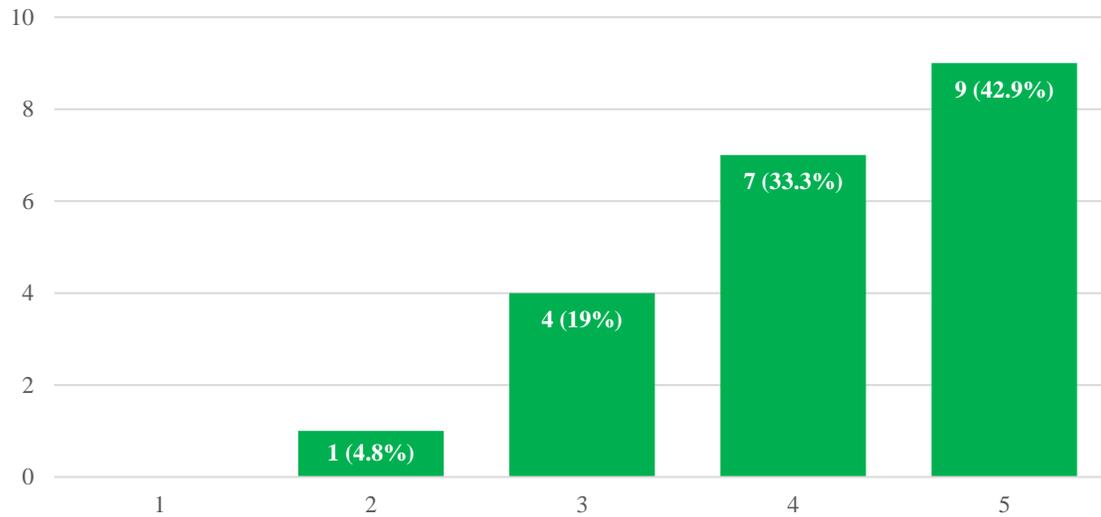


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

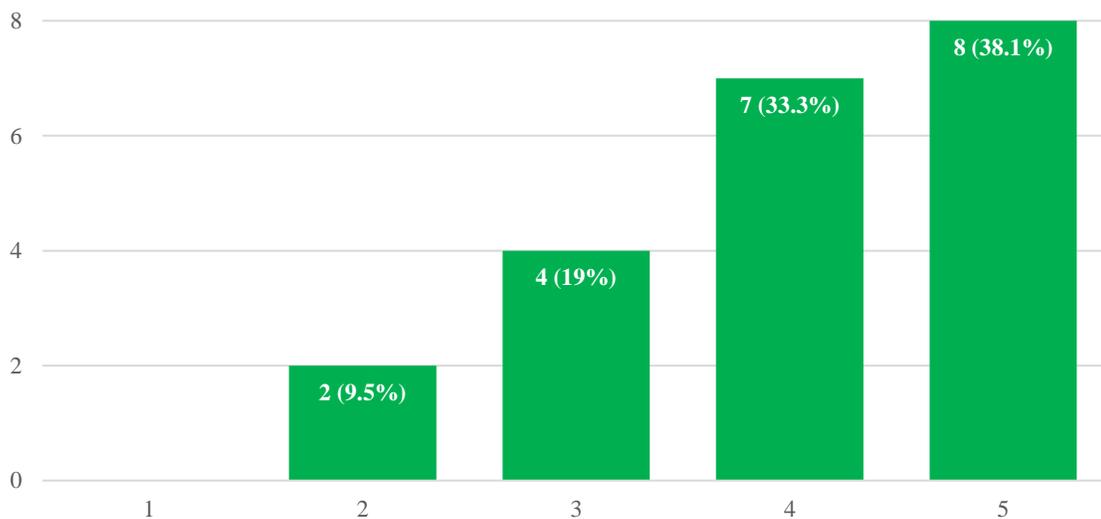
Staff at my school have the skills needed to provide what Special Education students need

21 responses (no participants selected "1")



Supervisors and administrators have the skills needed to provide what my Special Education students need

21 responses (no participants selected "1")

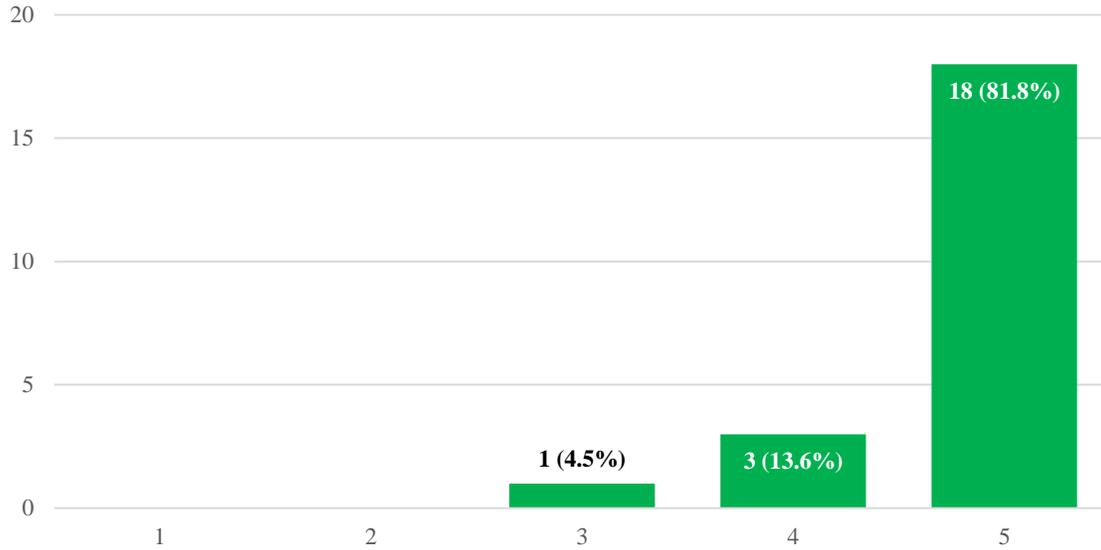


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

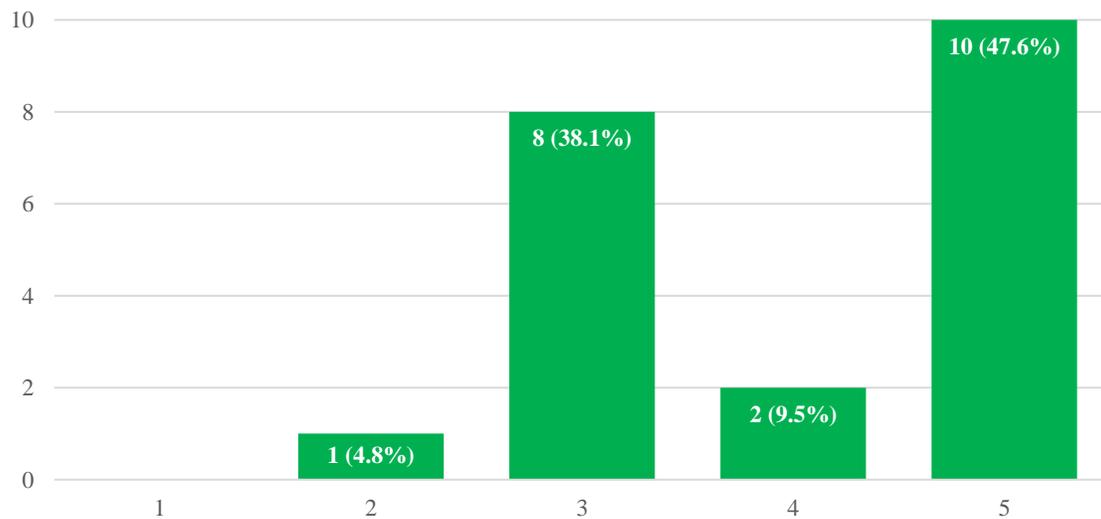
I have a positive relationship with Special Education students

22 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")



Special Education students are treated in the same way that general education students are treated in disciplinary issues

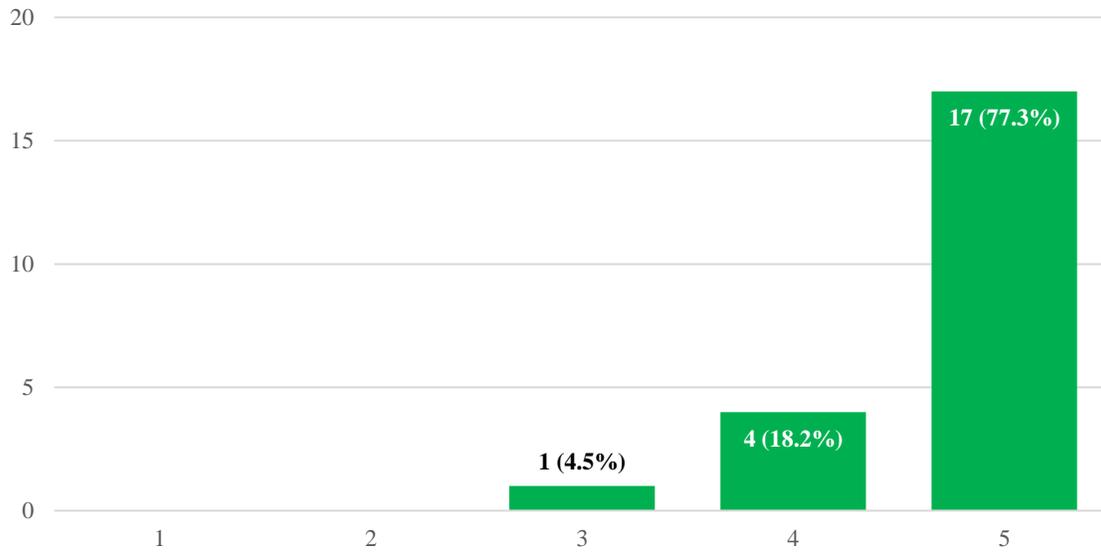
21 responses (no participants selected "1")



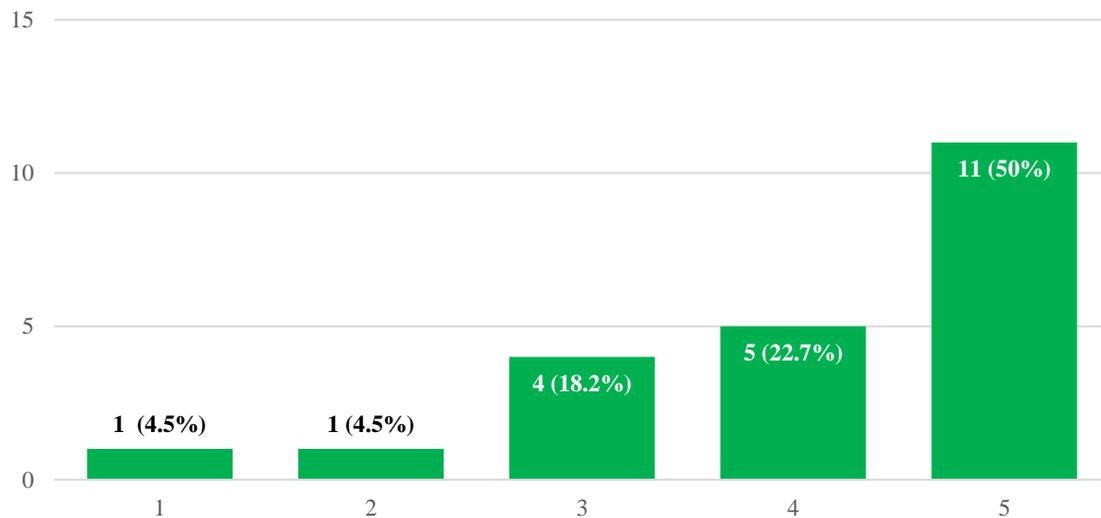
Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I accommodate and modify instruction per the IEP
22 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")



I work with my colleagues in order to design lesson plans that meet the needs of Special Education students
22 responses

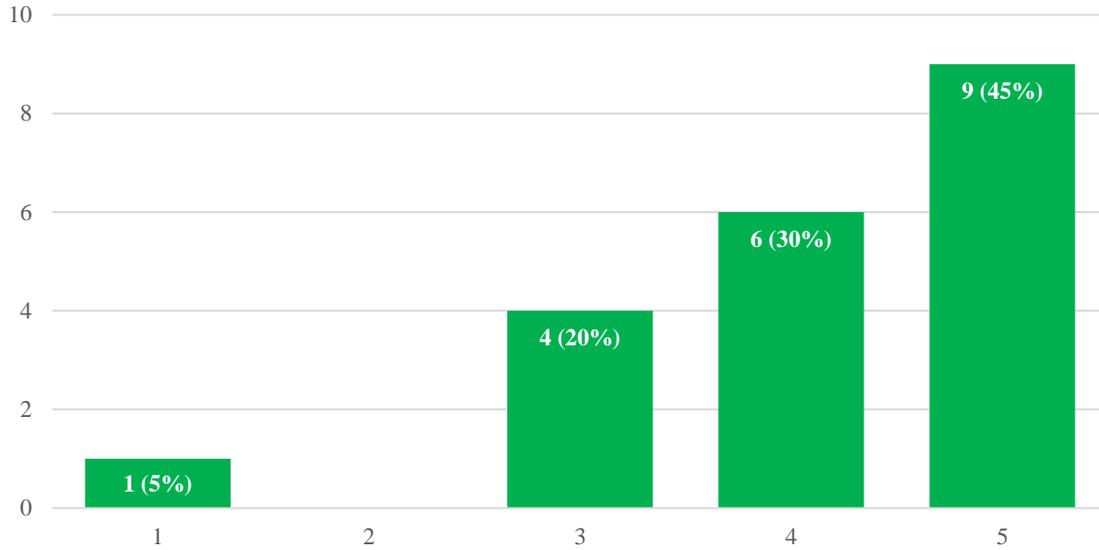


Curriculum and Instruction

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

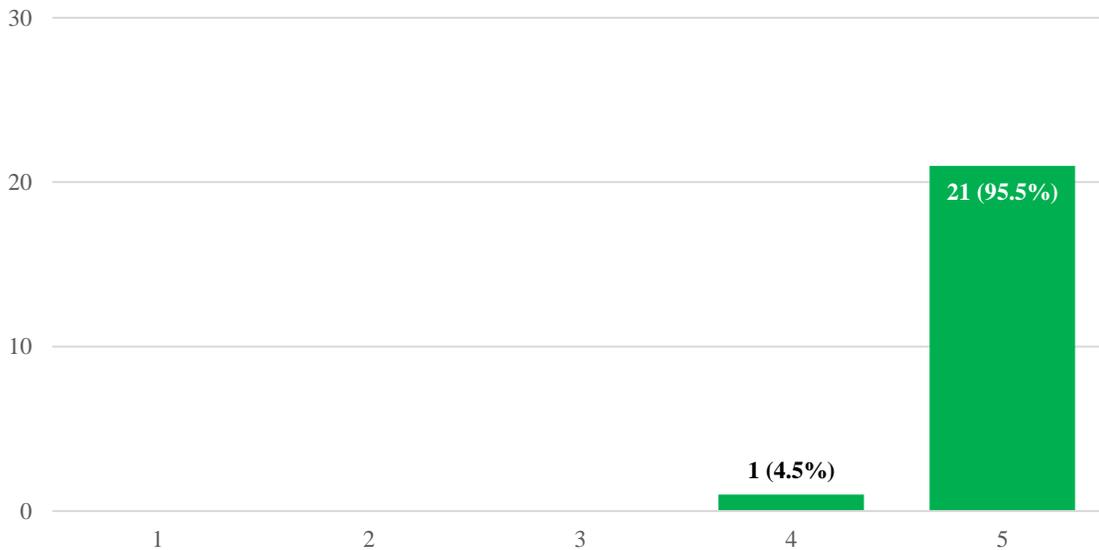
I modify grades for Special Education students per the IEP

20 responses (no participants selected "2")



I have reviewed the IEP of every Special Education student in my class

22 responses (no participants selected "1", "2" or "3")

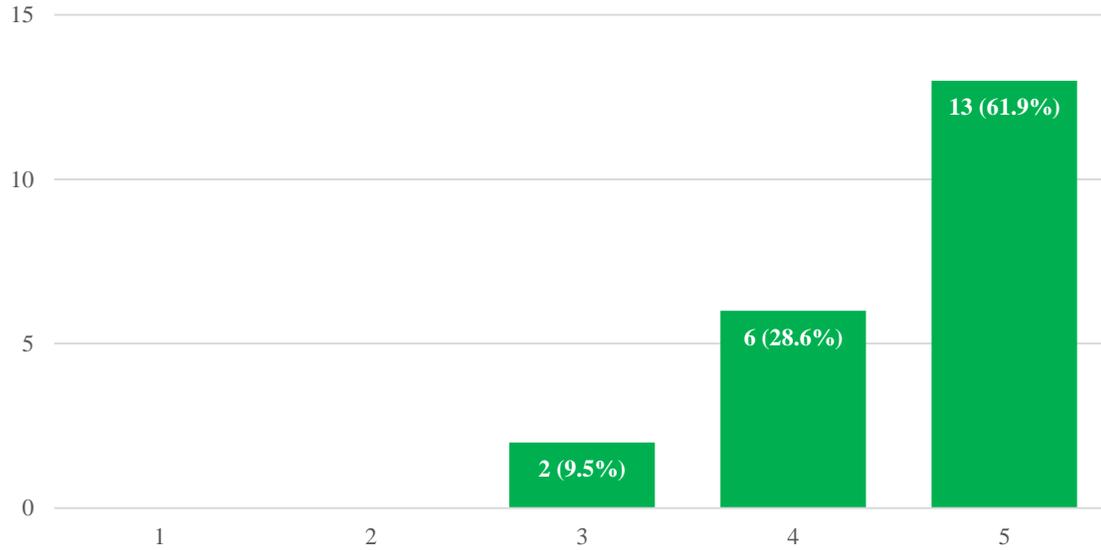


Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

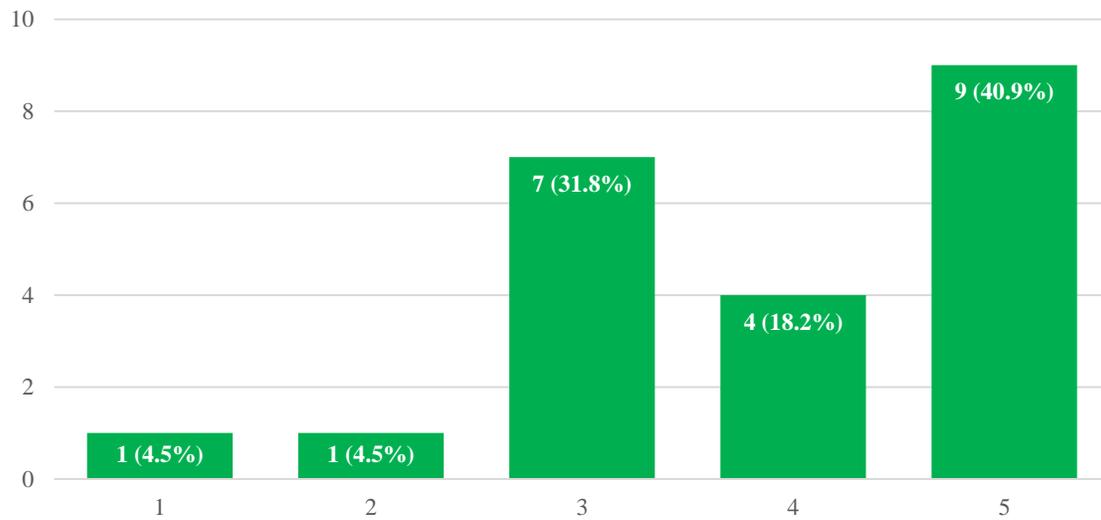
Special Education students are considered full members of the student body

21 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")



The entire faculty demonstrates a responsibility for Special Education students

22 responses

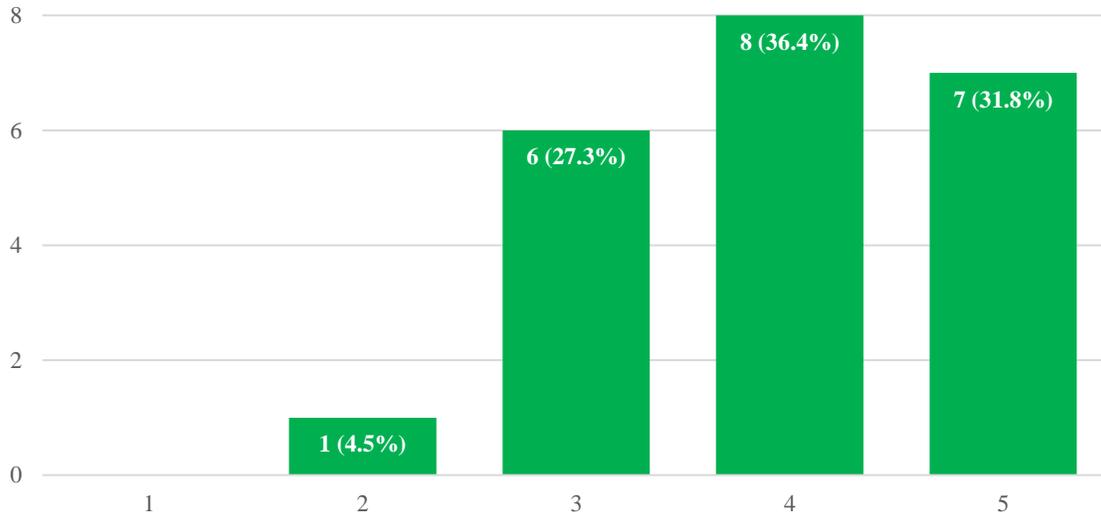


Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

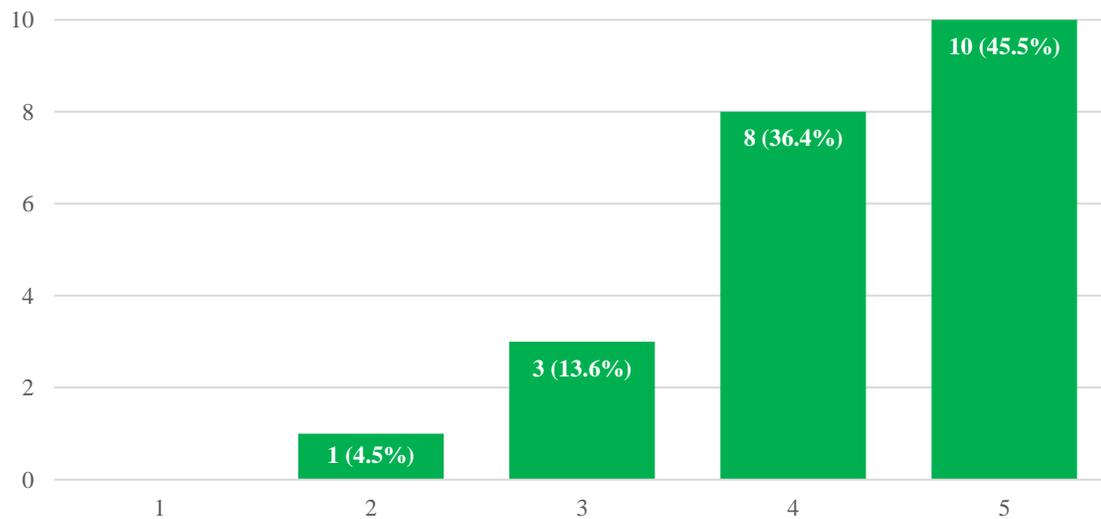
Both general and Special Education teachers collaborate to support Special Education children

22 responses (no participants selected "1")



Special Education students benefit academically when they are with general education students

22 responses (no participants selected "1")

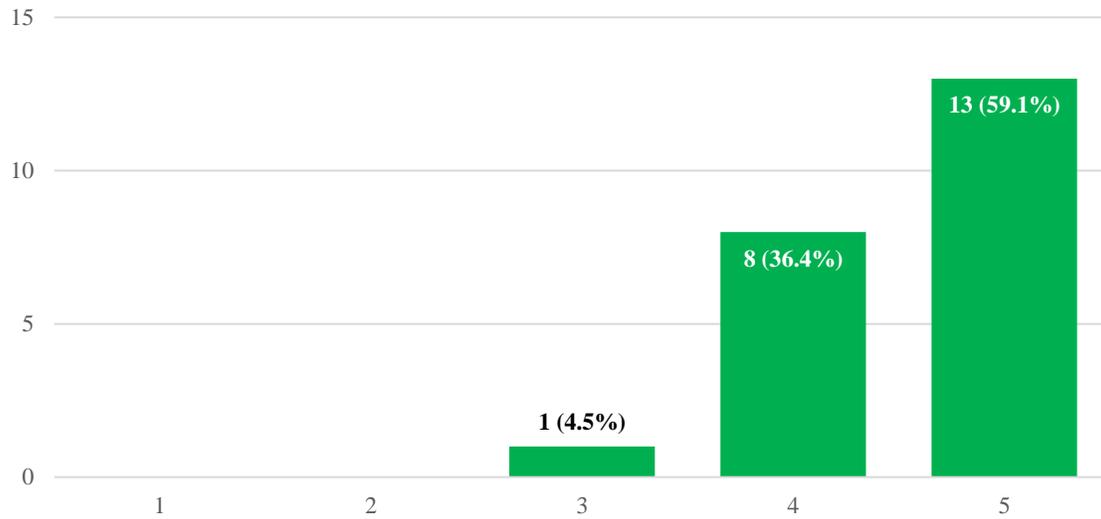


Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

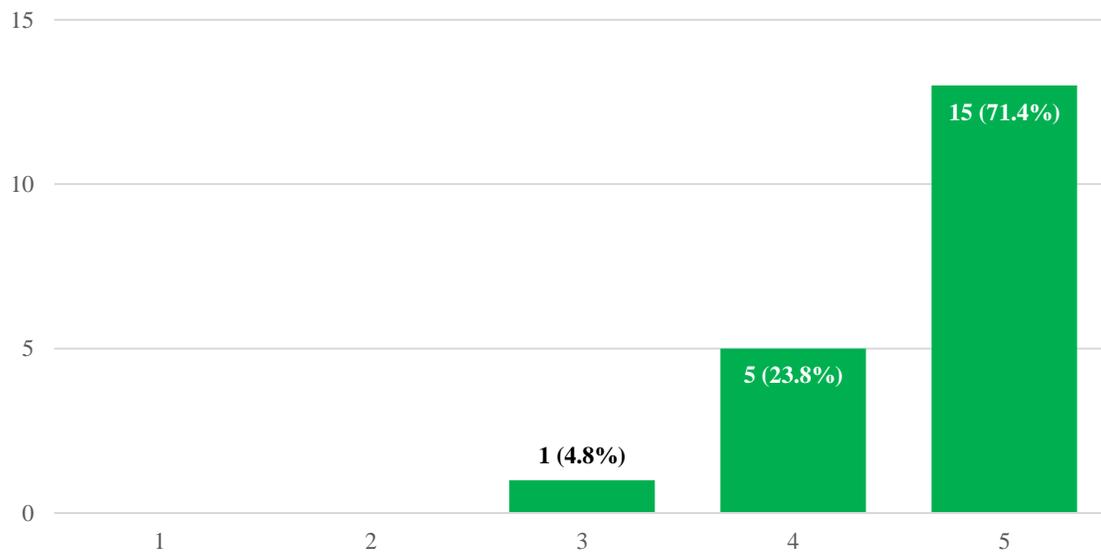
Special Education students benefit socially when they are with general education students

22 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")



Special Education students can participate in any sport

21 responses (no participants selected "1" or "2")

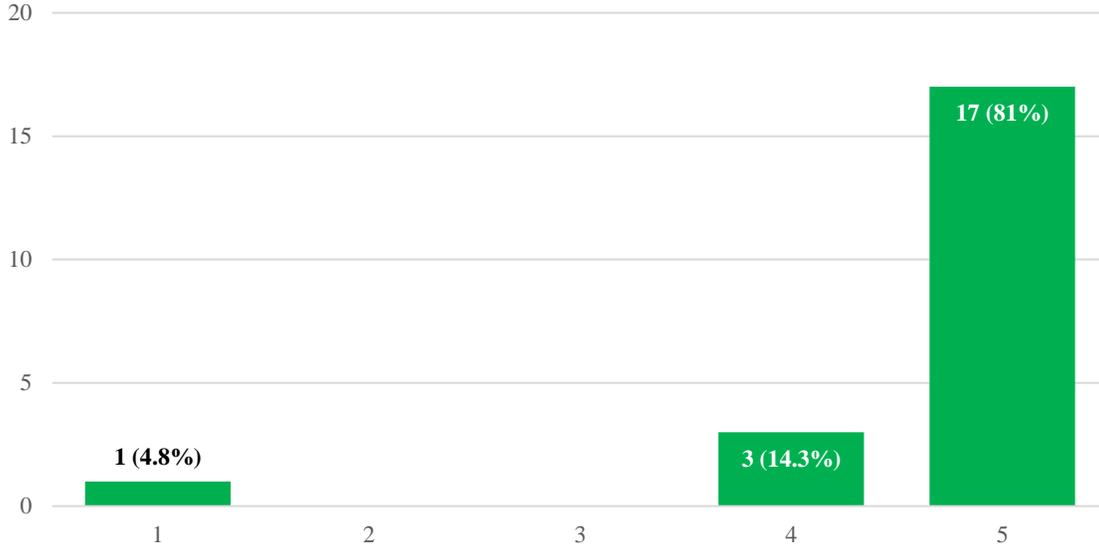


Inclusion in the School and Activities

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

Special Education students can participate in any club or activity

21 responses (no participants selected "2" or "3")

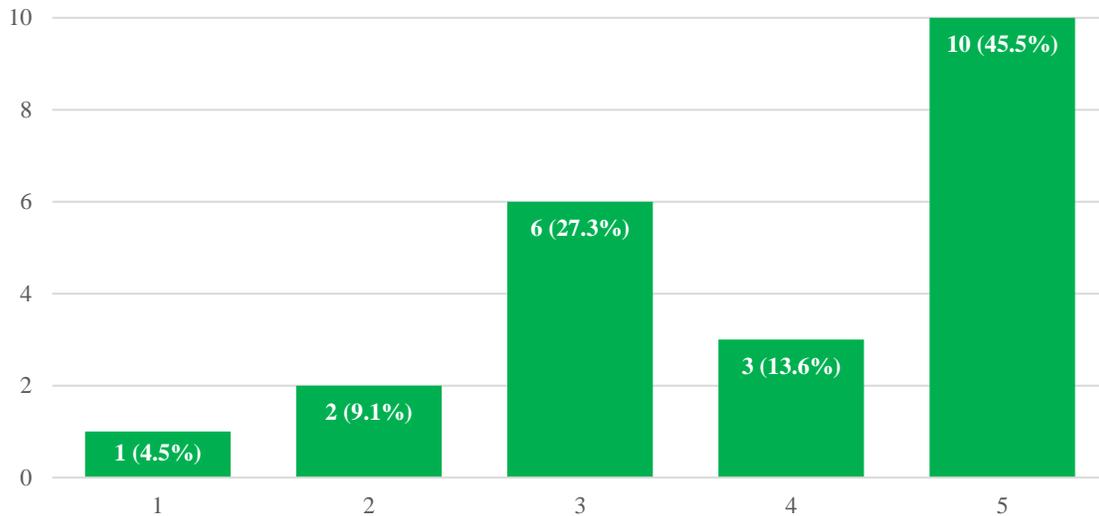


Support for Professional Staff

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

I feel supported by District level administration in my efforts to serve students with disabilities

22 responses

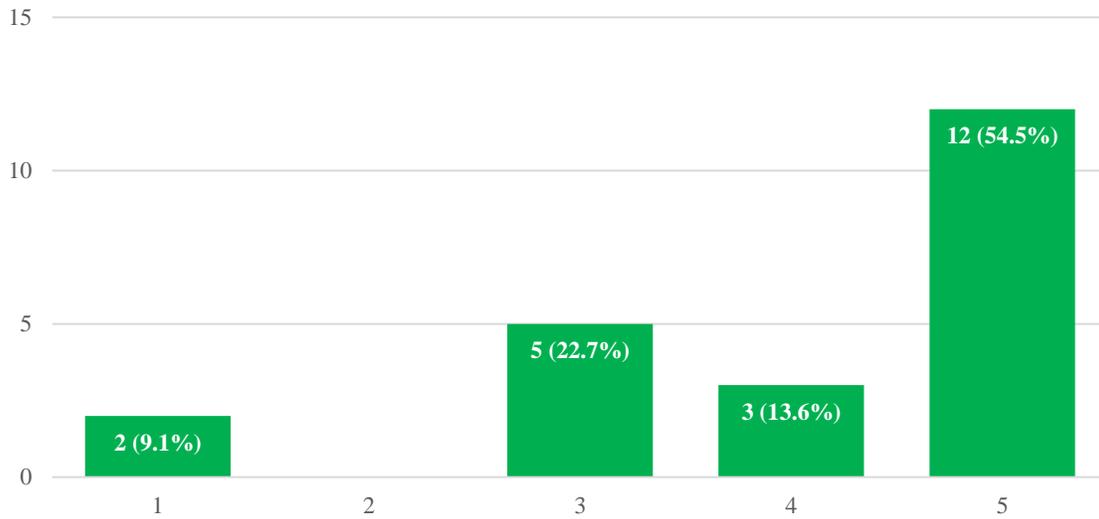


Support for Professional Staff

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

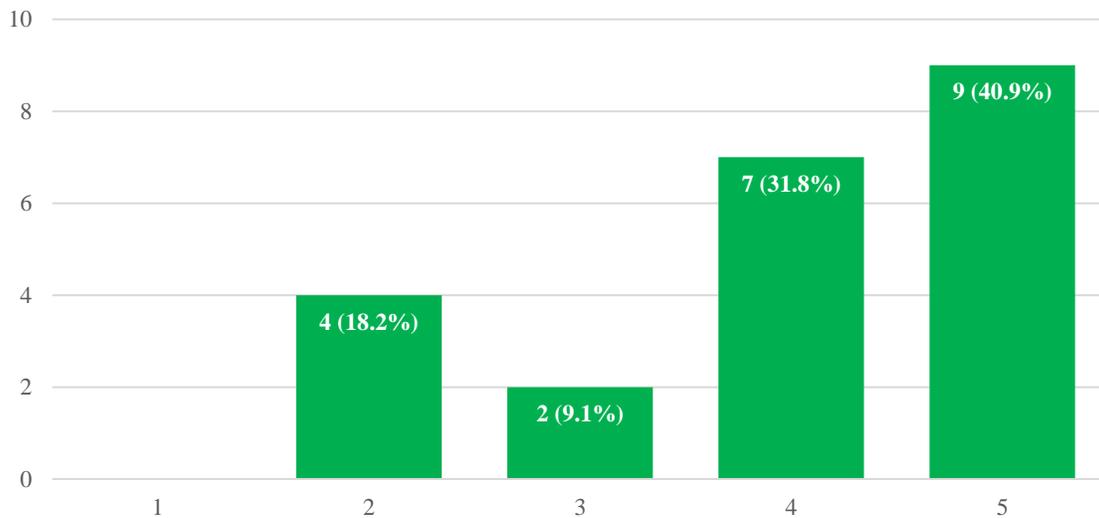
I feel supported by building level administration in my efforts to serve students with disabilities

22 responses (no participants selected "2")



My school provides adequate resources so I can support students with disabilities

22 responses (no participants selected "1")

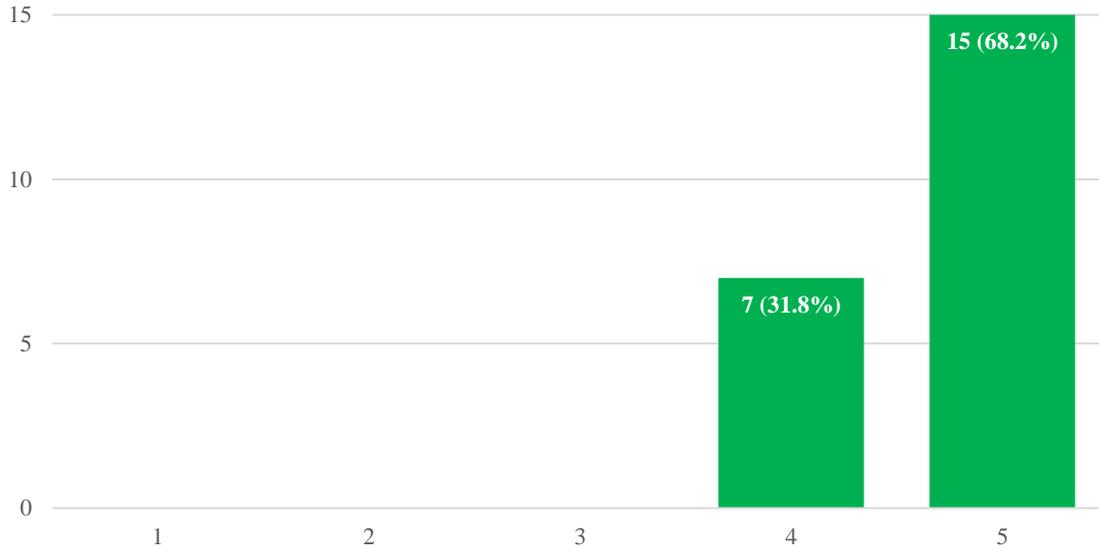


Support for Professional Staff

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

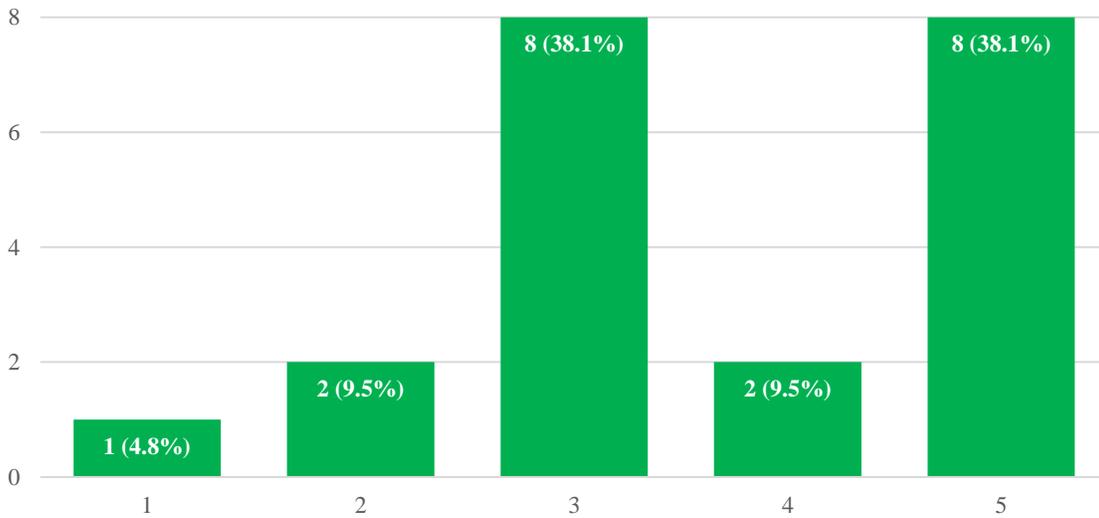
I treat the parents of Special Education students as full partners

22 responses (no participants selected "1", "2" or "3")



My school has provided me with the professional development that I need to support students with disabilities

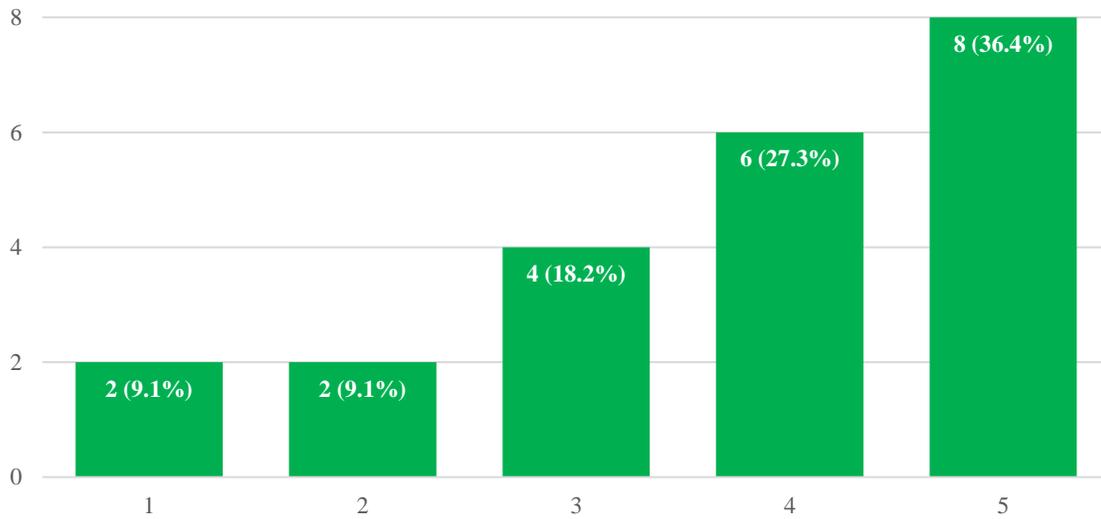
21 responses



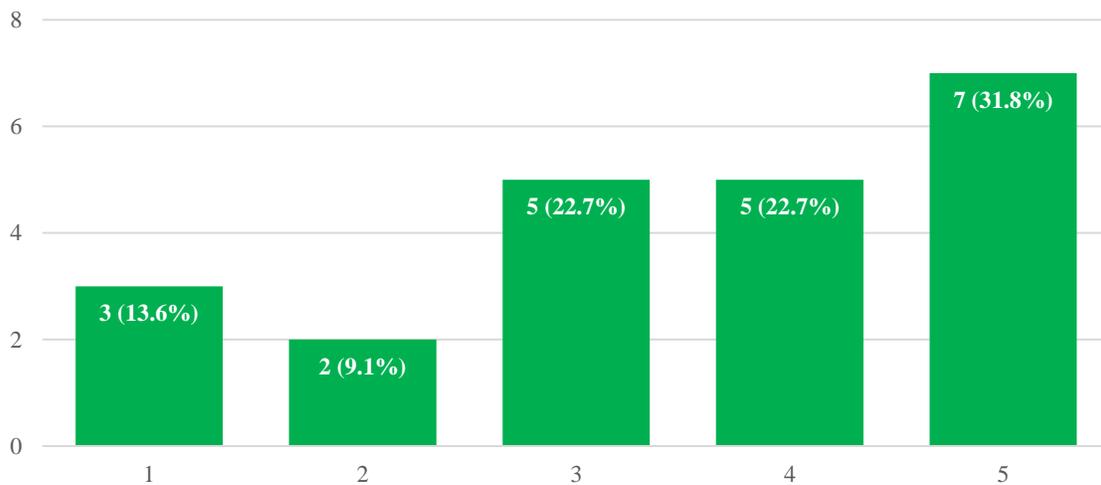
Support for Professional Staff

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

The Child Study Team provided me with strategies that I can use to support individual Special Education students
22 responses



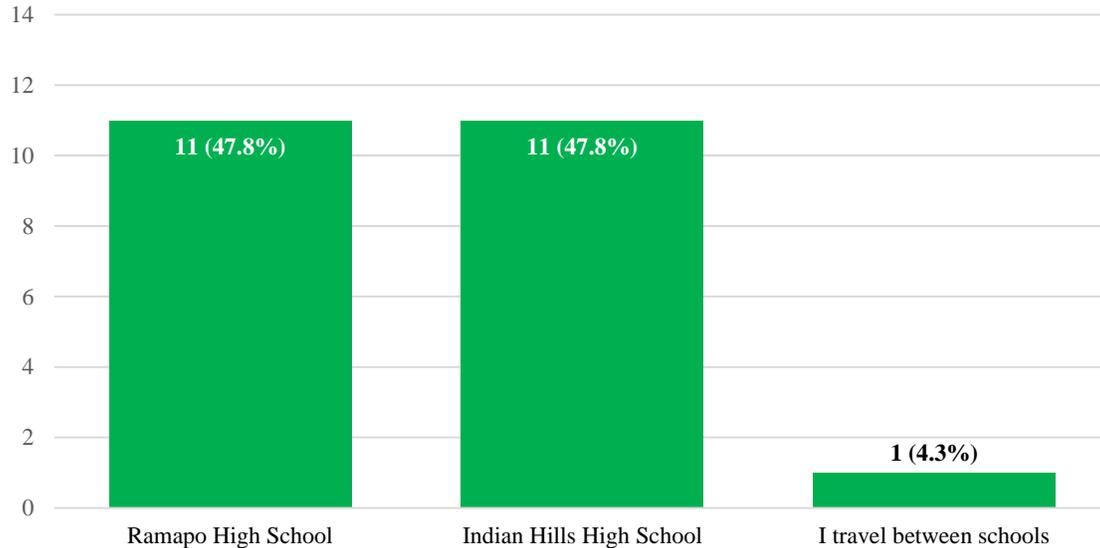
Building level administration has provided me with strategies that I can use to support individual Special Education students who experience classroom management issues
22 responses



Support for Professional Staff

Rated on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = least satisfied and 5 = most satisfied)

School I work at
23 responses



Comments by survey participants

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In addition, please note that comments are presented in their raw form and have not been edited for spelling/grammar/clarity by the Consultants.

1. I feel it might be a good idea to modify all subject areas, allow students to learn with project based learning, problem based learning, and with more hands-on activities.
2. At this point I do not know enough about the current program to give honest feedback about what they can change within (hence some of the blank responses above). However I think the program could benefit from having better trained in-class support teachers and with providing resources/training for general classroom teachers. General classroom teachers don't have the training that the administration and Child Study Team think they have. Providing us with the training and resources we need would be ideal, as well as being more vocal about the resources they currently offer.

3. Teachers with classes that have multiple IEP students need more help dealing with Accommodations and keeping track of Special Education student's needs. I have seen teachers with class sizes of 24 students (22 with IEPs in the foreign language department) and the district does not supply an in-class support teacher. In order to meet students needs, a teacher would need help in a situation like that. Smaller class sizes overall should be the norm. Our CP level classes should have no more than 15 students, but often have 20-24 students.
4. I can only speak to the CP level classes, but the in-class support/supplemental teachers should be special education teachers, not simply gen-ed teachers. It's a system that is not serving the students well enough.
5. Support staff need to get clearer guidelines as to their duties.
6. There can be minimal opportunities for collaboration between general and special education teachers. We lack a common planning period, or any allocated time for this common goal.

Our coteaching model (subject certified head teacher + subject certified supplemental teacher OR instructional aide) does not allow for collaboration in a way which is significantly impactful to our students. Aides are often given little guidance, and some struggle to find a helpful role in the classroom at times due to that lack of guidance, especially when paired with teachers who have never had an aide and are unused to working with another professional in the classroom.

Many of our general education teachers who teach inclusion are not trained in special education, and would benefit from professional development or provided collaboration time with special education teachers.

IEPs from the sending districts vary widely, as do expectations coming into the district.

7. More department level training on strategies to help special needs students
8. First there is a disconnect between Ramapo and Indian Hills. Not all programs are the same and the expectations are different at each school. This in part due to the fact that the former supervisors at each school did not get along and therefore no collaboration was encouraged between the schools. There is also a disconnect from the CST to the special education teachers. Sometimes members of CST make decisions for the students in regards to the IEP without discussion with the classroom teacher first. For example this school year there have been several students who academically belong in CPE or honors level courses that have been dropped directly into a resource class since the student refused to complete work. The general education teacher in all cases stated they would not have recommended the change and once in resource the student still completed no work, but resource teachers are expected to make up a grade to get the student to pass even though the student is physically submitting No work. CST also on occasions will make promises of what a teacher will do in a classroom without speaking with a teacher first. For example an IEP states Modified pacing of instruction for a resource room for a student in a course that is tied to the NJSLA.

How can the teacher modify the pacing of a course tied to the state exam for one student when the rest of the class will suffer. That student should be in self-contained but it is difficult to say that when Ramapo does not offer any self-contained courses. It is frustrating the CST makes promises and accommodations for students without fully discussing the situation with teachers who can give better insight to the dynamic that is occurring in the classroom. Overall the teaching staff collaborate well and check in with each other about students and everything, but communication with CST or administration is not always on the same page.

9. Indian Hills needs a social worker in order to have a full Child Study Team, provide counseling and case management, as well as serve as a resource for community referrals. 2) In-class support for science, and all subjects, should be a certified teacher. 3) Monthly joint CST meetings between the two schools.
10. Hiring and retaining supplemental teachers has proven to be a challenge as the position does not come with benefits. It is costly and time consuming to recruit, hire, and train supplemental teachers, and it is difficult to develop co-teaching practices under the current model. Currently, supplemental teachers do not have any planning or grading responsibilities as per the CBA, and any common planning is done on the supplemental teacher's own time.

I recommend that we move to an in-class support model rather than supplemental. An in-class support model would foster greater consistency, and better program delivery. ICS/resource teachers should have six teaching periods, be paid on the teachers' contract with benefits, be exempt from duty assignments, and teach both resource and supplemental classes. They should be certified in a content area in addition to special education.

Review of Best Practices

U.S. Department of Education funded research indicates that there are several critical factors that must be in place in order to ensure a high-quality Special Education program. These should be considered the “big ideas.” Without *each* of these factors in effect, it will be very difficult to build a high-quality program. These “must haves” include:

1. ***Highly qualified staff*** – Staff holds full credentials/licensure and advanced degrees in content area; staff are experts in working with children and adolescents with and without disabilities; staff collaborates with specialized instructional support personnel as needed.
2. ***Expert knowledge of policies and regulations*** – Special and general education staff and administration demonstrate high level of knowledge about implementing effective programs for students with disabilities; program reflects understanding of how state and local policies and regulations support quality programs for students with disabilities.
3. ***Staff-wide expertise in social-emotional and behavioral needs*** – Staff and administration receive specialized training in how to respond to mental health issues, including how to respond in non-academic settings and/or during time when students are out school;

specialized instructional support personnel are present to facilitate delivery of instruction and supports.

4. ***High quality professional learning*** – Administration prioritizes professional learning through effective scheduling; professional learning activities meet the needs of staff in their roles; professional learning activities are embedded and include classroom observations, peer observations, and self-check inventories; training is provided on working in partnership with families; professional learning is aligned with evidence based and promising practices and with state mandates.
5. ***Student access to the general curriculum*** – All students have access to rigorous curriculum with full continuum of services in general education setting; all students have access to co-curricular activities with support as needed.
6. ***Positive learning environment*** – Evidence-based practices implemented; positive behavior supports in place; schools implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) with high level of fidelity; school leadership and all school staff are invested in success for all students; families are partners in schoolwide programs.
7. ***Student engagement*** – All students are included in all school activities; all students are held to high expectations for regular attendance; all students, with or without disabilities, have embedded opportunities to interact in academic and non-academic settings; professional learning and training about student engagement should be available for staff, families, and community aimed at reducing likelihood of students dropping out of school.
8. ***Family support and engagement*** – Staff communicates and works effectively with parents; staff support families through child’s transition between grade levels; families are included in development of school materials, paying particular attention to language and culture; high percentage of families of students with disabilities are active in parent-teacher organizations; parent input and needs are collected through a variety of data-collection tools.
9. ***Data*** – Driven decision making; evidence of data-based decision making is apparent to all stakeholders; programs and practices reflect data driven decisions; data comes from multiple sources, including comparative data generated through use of universal screening tools; IEP meeting notes reflect data driven decisions.
10. ***Effective secondary transitions*** – Transition planning and exploration of post-secondary opportunities beginning when students enter high school, if not earlier; multiple providers involved in transition planning; evidence of enrollment in post-secondary education or training, employment, and independent living; families are provided with the information they need to connect their children to appropriate transition services.
11. ***Culturally competent practice*** – Translation and interpretation services available to all non-English speakers; all families should feel welcome at school; staff are representative of the community’s cultural diversity; administration and staff actively support LGBTIA

students and families; all staff should receive professional development training for meeting special culture-based needs of students and families; staff proactively tracks data and monitors for disproportionality in disciplinary actions.

12. ***Authentic team approach*** – Students, parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff all have input into how IEPs will ensure that students receive support; administrators are an integral part of the team; families and students are respected as essential team members; team members include those in non-mandated roles, such as employer of student who may assist in activities designed to assist in transition to the workplace.
13. ***Creativity*** – Programs are developed to meet the needs of individual students; students receive academic and non-academic support in the least intrusive ways; Special Education services are integrated into general learning activities; an effective problem-solving process is in place.
14. ***Community partnerships*** – All students have access to opportunities for volunteer work, internships, employment, and recreation programs; students with disabilities are engaged in service learning/community-based instruction that is linked to both general curriculum and classroom instruction; community agencies are partners in planning and implementing community-based programs for students.
15. ***Adequate funding of Special Education programs*** – Administrators take proactive steps to coordinate funding of Special Education services within the larger school program; community outreach and activities to educate the public on school programs and student activities; staff have necessary resources for effective instruction.

The following represents additional best practices in the field of Special Education:

- Community Based Instruction (CBI) is considered essential for high school students under the guidance of a certified teacher.
- Positive Behavioral Supports are incorporated into the building.
- A tiered model of support is incorporated into the building (i.e. Response to Intervention or New Jersey Tiered System of Supports).
- Special Education teachers use a modified general education curriculum.
- Special Education teachers use modified activities and technology to meet the needs of individual students.
- Orton-Gillingham is used to support students who need multisensory linguistic instruction.
- Placing students in the LRE drives Child Study Team placement decisions.

- Professional Development is comprehensive, sustained, and directly connected to student needs.
- Social and emotional skills are incorporated into the curriculum.
- Placement decisions are determined by the information gathered including, but not limited to, report cards, evaluations, performance reports, state testing results, outside reports, teacher input, and parent input.
- New Jersey State Learning Standards drives curriculum development.
- Special Education students push into general education classrooms.
- Paraprofessionals are available when students push into the mainstream for physical education, health, science, social studies, art and music.
- Special Education teachers attend team meetings with content area teachers for professional development and co-planning.
- In district “safety nets” are available for students in crisis.
- Students use technology daily and are provided with individual laptops.
- College and career readiness programs are provided for students and parents.
- Co-teaching is the foundation and guiding philosophy of the Special Education curriculum.
- SMART Board or similar technology is available in every classroom.
- In-district options enable students to be educated in their local school.
- Special Education and general education teachers and administrators work together to align curriculum and co-teach, thus providing the benefits of the rigorous general education curriculum to more students with disabilities, as appropriate.
- Child Study Team files are reviewed by Special Education administration in order to ensure compliance.
- A rigorous study skills program is in effect.

REVIEW OF SPECIAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Class Size and Courses

Special Education Courses Ramapo Indian Hills Regional High School 2019-2020

Course	# of Sections Indian Hills	Total Students Indian Hills	# of Sections Ramapo	Total Students Ramapo
English 1 – ICS	2	13	3	27
English 2- ICS	2	17	2	16
English 3- ICS	3	23	2	17
Algebra 1- ICS	2	11	2	18
Algebra 2- ICS	4	12	1	9
Geometry- ICS	3	16	3	19
Biology- ICS	3	27	4	24
Chemistry- ICS	2	13	3	16
Conceptual Physics- ICS	3	9	4	16
US History 1- ICS	2	16	2	16
US History 2- ICS	4	24	2	17
World Civilization- ICS	2	17	3	24
Algebra 1 – Resource	3	24	2	17
Biology – Resource	3	34	2	18
Chemistry – Resource	3	28	1	13
Conceptual Physics- Resource	1	5	1	8
English 1- Resource	2	17	2	14
English 2- Resource	2	13	2	16
English 3- Resource	2	19	1	8
English 4- Resource	1	11	1	6
Algebra 2- Resource	2	15	1	11
Geometry- Resource	3	24	3	25
Integrated Algebra & Geometry	1	10	1	5
US History	2	15	2	12
US History 2	2	23	1	6
World Civilization	1	12	2	15

Self - Contained Classes

	Number of Students
New Horizons- Ramapo	7
Transitions Class – Indian Hills	17

Staffing

The District provides for Special Education staffing on the District level, as well as the school level.

On the District level, there are two District Directors, comprised by the Director of Curriculum, Instruction and Articulation and the Director of Student Personnel Services.

The Director of Student Personnel Services has primary responsibility for Special Education as well as guidance. Additional duties include Homeless Liaison; Affirmative Action Officer; District HIB Coordinator; District 504 Coordinator; District I&RS Coordinator; creation of District schedule; Special Education litigation; residency issues; home instruction; articulation with middle schools.

Each high school has a Child Study Team as well as Special Education staff, including a building supervisor, teachers, and aides. Related services such as speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy are provided through contracted service providers.

School staffing for 2019 – 2020 includes:

Indian Hills High School		Ramapo High School	
Child Study Team Supervisor	1	Child Study Team Supervisor	1
LDT-C	1	LDT-C	1
Psychologist	2	Psychologist	2
		Social Worker (OoD students)	1
<hr/>		<hr/>	
FT Special Education Teachers	13	FT Special Education Teachers	7
Shared with Ramapo	.5	Shared with Indian Hills	.5
<hr/>		<hr/>	
Supplemental (IC Support. 549)	6	Supplemental (IC Support. 549)	6
<hr/>		<hr/>	
Full Time Aides	9	Full Time Aides	10
.79 Aides	4	.79 Aides	0

When this program review commenced, Indian Hills had a significantly higher number of Special Education teachers and a higher number of aides than Ramapo High School, however, the number of Special Education students at Ramapo has increased during the current school year.

Although historic enrollment information based upon the ASSA and the current demographic report indicates that Indian Hills has a larger Special Education population, than Ramapo, recent information indicates that *this trend is changing*.

As of April 1, 2021, actual enrollment of Special Education students is as follows:

- Indian Hills – 186
- Ramapo – 208
- Out of district - 44

It will be important for the District to review Special Education staffing and enrollment moving forward. It is possible that the District choice program has impacted Special Education enrollment trends. The most recent (but not official) ASSA data indicates that Special Education enrollment is growing at a faster rate than projected in the District demographic report. Clearly, the District **must** complete a new demographic report.

An important best practice in any regional high school district is to review enrollment, class size, and staff availability so that staff is assigned to each school in an equitable manner. By way of example, Indian Hills had more Special Education students and more Special Education staff than Ramapo. It may be possible to accommodate the growth in Special Education students at Ramapo by transferring staff from Indian Hills.

Program of Studies

The District's Special Education program is an integral part of the academic high school program and provides services to students with disabilities under New Jersey Administrative Code Title 6A, Chapter 14. Each high school has a Child Study Team and a building Special Education supervisor to ensure that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. The Director of Student Personnel Services is located in the central office and facilitates the implementation of NJAC 6A:14 in both buildings and coordinates the Special Education programs and services for the District.

Child Study Team Programs and Services

The Child Study Team participates in the identification and determination of students eligible for Special Education and related services. This includes psychological assessments, educational assessments, and social work services. In addition, the Child Study Team provides case management services to students who are classified and are placed in Special Education programs or require special accommodations to access the general education curriculum. In addition, the Child Study Team provides transition services for students, including coordinating with community agencies to ensure linkages to post-secondary adult services upon graduation.

The placement of students in appropriate settings within the LRE is an integral part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The District offers a full continuum of educational services in the LRE to students who have been identified as "Eligible" for Special Education and related services. These program options include in-class supplemental instruction, resource center pull-out subject replacement, in-class assistance, and self-contained transition programs. Resource classes reflect the curriculum of the general education classes. In addition, the following Special Education classes are offered:

Special Education Course Offerings

Foundations of Study Skills Study and Organization Bergen Co. Technical Education

Applied Study Skills Reading 1 and 2 Eastwick Education

SAGE Day Program

New Horizons Course Offerings

Daily Living Skills Personal and Social Skills Career Exploration

Careers and Adult Living Career Exploration Internship

In the case of students who cannot be educated in their home school, the school district refers the student to State approved placement which is outside of the District and can meet the student's needs. The District has a self-contained program in each high school. This program is for students who have mild to moderately cognitive impairment.

Staff Development

The District utilizes Safe Schools, an online program, in order to provide staff development. There is a significant need to provide face to face staff development as well. This should include staff development for the Child Study Team, Special Education staff, and general education teachers who teach Special Education students.

All staff should be provided staff development in the field of social-emotional learning and behavior needs as these topics impact all students. Special Education students would certainly benefit if their teachers and administrators received professional development in these vital topics. The social-emotional needs of all students in all schools are profound.

Transition Services

The Indian Hills Transition program is a self-contained program for students with mild to moderate cognitive impairment and is located at Indian Hills High School. This program is for students in grades 9 through 12 who require a Life-Skills/Pre-Vocational curriculum in addition to the daily living and academic requirements for high school graduation. Students who complete this 4 year program may graduate or receive a certificate of attendance and move into the District's New Horizon Program, which is located at Ramapo High School.

The Ramapo New Horizons Program offers young adults, ages 18-21 with disabilities, a transition-to-adulthood program that includes community-based instruction, life coaching, and a structured learning experience. This program has a Structured Learning Experience Coordinator and is for students who have attended the District's Transition Program, or a similar program, and require further adult living and employment readiness skills prior to graduation. The program provides Community Based Instruction in functional academics and life skills. Students attend Ramapo High School in the morning. After receiving a modified academic day, students receive supported employment through job coaching in the afternoon. The goal of this program is to develop independent adult living skills and employment readiness to prepare them for a post-secondary life.

Regional High School District Issues

The District does not have control of the curriculum and IEP development process in the K-8 constituent districts, however, there is influence provided through the combined efforts of the FLOW districts (Franklin Lakes, Oakland, Wyckoff). In this format, superintendents from the K-8 districts and regional high school meet monthly in order to discuss mutual interests. Special Education directors meet periodically. In addition, Special Education supervisors from Ramapo and Indian Hills meet with the K-8 IEP teams.

The FLOW district concept presents an opportunity to coordinate and articulate curriculum on a K-12 basis. The same opportunity exists in regard to a coordinated and uniform process to develop IEPs. At the current time, for example, the IEP software used by the various districts is not uniform.

Coordination of IEP software would present obvious opportunities to the FLOW districts. Transition to high school could be improved. There may be efficiencies experienced because of the combined purchasing power of four districts. Equally important, is the opportunity for all four Child Study Teams to meet together for professional development. This is an opportunity to further coordinate and articulate in a way that improves the educational of Special Education students.

REVIEW OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE INDICATORS – DISTRICT / RAMAPO HS / INDIAN HILLS HS

What Are District Factor Groups?

The New Jersey Department of Education District Factor Groups (DFGs) were first developed in 1975 for the purpose of comparing students' performance on statewide assessments across demographically similar school districts. The categories are updated every ten years when the Census Bureau releases the latest Decennial Census data.

The DFGs represent an approximate measure of a community's relative socioeconomic status (SES). The classification system provides a useful tool for examining student achievement and comparing similarly-situated school districts in other analyses.

DFGs were calculated using the following six variables that are closely related to SES:

- 1) Percent of adults with no high school diploma
- 2) Percent of adults with some college education
- 3) Occupational status
- 4) Unemployment rate
- 5) Percent of individuals in poverty
- 6) Median family income

Why Use District Factor Groups in the Ramapo Indian Hills Study?

The use of DFGs in Bergen County helps to compare and contrast the District's Special Education performance with similar regional districts in Bergen County. Although state averages can be

somewhat helpful, these averages represent the performance of students throughout the entire state, including all school districts. By focusing the research on Bergen County, the Consultants are able to compare and contrast student performance within the county. By narrowing the focus to regional high school districts, the research is further refined. Finally, by comparing and contrasting the District’s data with other Bergen County regional high school districts in the identical DFG, an “apples to apples” comparison can be obtained.

District Factor Groups for Bergen County Regional High School Districts

Carlstadt-East Rutherford	CD
Northern Highlands Regional.	J
Northern Valley Regional	I
Pascack Valley Regional	I
Ramapo Indian Hills Regional	I
River Dell Regionals	I

Note: District Factor Group “J” represents the highest socio-economic status; District Factor Group “I” is the next lowest socio-economic status and so on. All three K-8 districts that are members of the District are also “I” District Factor Groups.

Thus, for the purpose of this study, The District will be compared to other “I” District Factor Groups in Bergen County. (See Appendix I for detailed report)

Enrollment Trends

Trends in Special Education enrollment for DFG “I” regional high schools can be compared by utilizing the New Jersey School Performance Report. Enrollment trends are important since the trends will impact staffing, and the overall budget.

During a three-year period, Special Education enrollment has varied in most Bergen County DFG “I” districts. Within the District, Indian Hills Special Education enrollment has increased while Special Education enrollment at Ramapo has been stable. During the most recent documented school year (2017-2018), the percentage of Special Education students at Indian Hills (18.6%) is significantly higher than those enrolled at Ramapo (12.5%), however, this trend has changed and Ramapo now has more Special Education students than Indian Hills.

When enrollment data at regional high schools is considered, it is important to review trends in the elementary districts that send students to the regional high schools. Within the District’s constituent districts, enrollment in Franklin Lakes and Oakland has increased over a three-year period, whereas Special Education enrollment in Wyckoff has remained stable.

Finally, it is important to note that the state average for Special Education enrollment is currently 16%.

Language Arts

The New Jersey State Performance Report documents student performance on the Language Arts Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) from 2017-2018. There is no more recent state data available and New Jersey has transitioned to a new assessment known as New Jersey Student Learning Assessment (NJSLA). It should be noted that the NJSLA was not administered due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

PARCC established a methodology in which “expectations” were set and then data was generated based upon student attainment of those expectations. For purposes of this study, the Consultants focused on the percentage of Special Education students who “met expectations.”

PARCC measured “English/Language Arts Literacy Assessment” in grades 9, 10, and 11.

It is important to remember that ninth grade students were enrolled in the high school for only seven or eight months before they took the PARCC. Ninth grade results indicate that the performance of Indian Hills students slightly exceed that of Ramapo students. When compared to other DFG “I” high schools in Bergen County, Indian Hills and Ramapo are in the middle.

There is no significant difference between the performance of Indian Hills and Ramapo students on the tenth grade English/Language Arts PARCC. On a county DFG “I” basis, scores somewhat lag behind those of other similar high schools.

For the eleventh grade assessment, the performance of Indian Hills students on the eleventh grade English/Language Arts Literacy Assessment exceeded the performance of Ramapo students on the same assessment. In addition, the performance of Ramapo students was below that of all Bergen County DFG “I” high schools. (*See Appendix I for detailed report*)

English / Language Arts Overall Comments

The Consultants remind readers of this report that the PARCC was very controversial in New Jersey. There were many questions raised by parents and school staff about the assessment. Furthermore, an “opt out” movement in New Jersey may have impacted data. Therefore, strong conclusions and recommendations cannot be made based upon PARCC data alone.

When the NJSLA data becomes available, the Consultants urge District officials to use the new assessment as a baseline to measure growth as compared to the same group of Bergen County DFG “I” schools. Please note that if the 2020 Census results in changes in District Factor Groups, adjustments in the Bergen County group members should be made.

Study groups consisting of Special Education and English/Language Arts teachers and administration should be formed to measure data and apply the data to program enhancement. It is imperative that the entire faculty becomes engaged in data analysis. This data should then be used to drive building and District goals.

Mathematics

The 2017-2018 PARCC was the only state data available at the time this report was written. PARCC measured performance of students with two assessments: Algebra I and Geometry.

On the Algebra I assessment, the performance of Indian Hills and Ramapo students was almost identical. As compared to Bergen County DFG “I” regional high schools, Ramapo and Indian Hills scores were in the middle.

On the Geometry assessment, fewer than 20 students were assessed at each high school, thus no data was calculated by PARCC.

The Consultants express the same reservations about the use of PARCC mathematics assessment. The use of data analysis in the field of math is strongly recommended. (*See Appendix I for detailed report*)

Graduation Rate

Graduation rates are an important measure of the success of a high school. The New Jersey School Performance Report graduation rates are not impacted by PARCC and therefore constitute more reliable data.

Indian Hills High School and Ramapo High School graduation rates are similar, with Indian Hills having a slightly higher rate. When compared to Bergen County DFG “I” regional high schools, Indian Hills and Ramapo are “in the middle.” (*See Appendix I for detailed report*)

Post - Secondary Enrollment

Another important measure of the effectiveness of a high school is post-secondary enrollment trends. In other words, how many Special Education graduates attend college? It appears that slightly more Ramapo Special Education graduates attend college than their cohorts at Indian Hills.

The post-secondary enrollment rates at Indian Hills and Ramapo are in the middle range of Bergen County DFG “I” high schools. (*See Appendix I for detailed report*)

Chronic Absenteeism

A final measure of performance that is documented by the New Jersey Department of Education is chronic absenteeism. Research shows that absences impact a student's ability to succeed in school. Chronic absenteeism is defined as being absent for ten percent (10%) or more of the days enrolled during the school year. A student who is not present for any reason, whether excused, unexcused, or for disciplinary action, is considered absent unless permitted by state statute or regulations.

Chronic absenteeism of Special Education students at Ramapo does not seem to be an area of concern, however, the chronic absenteeism rate at Indian Hills is significantly above the Ramapo rate and somewhat high within Bergen County DFG “I” high schools.

It is recommended that a District wide study team be established in order to review chronic absenteeism. (*See Appendix I for detailed report*)

Current Status of Testing in New Jersey

On April 6, 2021, the U.S. Department of Education provided New Jersey with permission to move forward with a change in the state’s assessment plan. This change was based upon the testing issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, most of the usual spring assessments were cancelled. The NJSLA has been cancelled for 2020-2021 school year and will be replaced by the Start Strong Assessment to be administered in the Fall of 2021. The Dynamic Learning Map (DLM) for students with the most significant disabilities and the ACCESS for English Language Learners are still scheduled, although parents may opt out of either.

IEP REVIEW

In reviewing this section, it should be noted that while significant deficiencies have been identified, the Consultants believe that these issues can be resolved through appropriate professional development. The Consultants were impressed by the Child Study Team members and staffs’ dedication and genuine concern for their Special Education students. In fact, the most common request of both the Child Study Team and the staff was to have professional development in this area. Essentially, the IEPs in the District need to improve and professional development will accomplish that. The advantage that the District has is that the staff are highly qualified and desirous of having additional training to improve their skills. Suggestions for professional development are detailed in our recommendations.

In order to understand the analysis of the IEPs, it is first necessary to understand the components and purpose of an IEP. An IEP is a written plan that is a “road map” for a classified student’s school year. It begins by setting forth the student’s Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP). The PLAAFP clarifies that while academic achievement is naturally an important part of a student’s education, the IEP team must also consider the student’s functional performance, which is broader than academics. Essentially, academics and education are not synonymous, interchangeable terms and that is an important distinction to consider in developing an IEP.

It is also an important distinction for District staff to understand. Often, particularly at the high school level, teachers view themselves as content area teachers and do not understand that they have responsibilities beyond the subject content with Special Education students. From a practical perspective, in the PLAAFP, the IEP team members must describe, in narrative form, the student’s academic achievement, functional performance, including the student’s specific strengths and weaknesses. Objective information such as recent test scores and other evaluation data should be included. Finally, the PLAAFP should note the parent concerns, utilizing to the maximum extent possible, the parents’ exact words. All of this taken together establishes a starting point or baseline.

The PLAAFP then drives the type of program and placement a student requires. The programs can range from providing accommodations and modifications in the general education classroom, to in-class support by a Special Education teacher, to resource room (pull out instruction for a small group of students who are functioning at a lower level) to self-contained classes to placement out-of-district and in extreme cases residential programs. The IEP must also include information on how the child's disability affects involvement and progress in the general education curriculum.

Once the program and placement have been determined, the IEP then sets forth measurable goals and objectives and short-term benchmarks, which describe an integrated, sequential program of individually designed instructional activities and related services necessary to achieve the stated goals and objectives for the upcoming year. This serves as the basis for program implementation and must comply with state and federal mandates.

In plain terms, when developing the IEP, the IEP team must answer the following questions:

- What are the child's unique needs?
- What services will the school employ to address each need?
- What will the child be able to accomplish as a result of the services?

This three-fold inquiry translates directly into the critical elements of the IEP: the PLAAFP, the program and placement, and the goals and objectives.

The IEP team must also consider how the above will enable the student to:

- Advance toward reaching annual goals.
- Be involved in and make progress toward the general education curriculum, extra-curricular activities and non-academic activities.
- Be educated with students who do not have disabilities.

A comprehensive review of IEPs from both high schools was conducted. In order to protect the privacy of students, the District removed any information that might identify an individual student, however, the name of the school was included.

A total of 100 District IEPs were reviewed: 50 from Indian Hills and 50 from Ramapo. These included 10 IEPs for each of the grade levels, plus 10 each from the graduating eighth grade. All IEPs were randomly chosen to provide a representative sample of all IEPs.

The IEPs were reviewed with a focus on legal considerations, procedural compliance, overall strengths of the documents; and areas that need improvement.

Legal Considerations

One of the most important issues when reviewing the IEP is to determine whether the IEP is procedurally compliant. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) is a procedurally laden Act. There are timelines for conducting evaluations, for having meetings, and for filing for mediation and/or due process. There is specific information that must be included in the IEP. There is a detailed list of who must be present at the IEP meeting. These procedures are intended to ensure that a student receives a free and appropriate education (FAPE) and that parents are provided with sufficient information to enable them to make decisions regarding their child's education.

In addition to the procedural requirements, the school district is required to implement the IEP as written. Essentially, there are a number of ways a district could be found to have denied FAPE to a student. The first, as set forth above, is failure to follow the procedures in the IDEIA to the extent that the parents' ability to be involved in and knowledgeable about their child's education is impacted. The second is to fail substantively to set forth a program and measurable goals and objectives. The third is to fail to follow the IEP with fidelity.

The following are examples of deficiencies in both high schools identified by the Consultants:

- Students with very different classifications (i.e. autistic, emotionally disturbed, other health impaired) do not have individualized goals and objectives. Rather, they all have the same directive: "The student will utilize in-class support appropriately in order to develop skills to facilitate successful completion of the general education class".
- IEPs from the middle schools, which will be in place at the beginning of the high school year, have no summary of the Special Education program and related services.
- The PLAAFPs of many IEPs do not include sufficient information to determine the student's level of academic achievement or functional performance. Many IEPs include vague and meaningless statements such as, "The student is a delight to have in class".
- A number of ninth grade IEPs do not include ANY information in the PLAAFP. Rather they state, "See IEP written by the Middle School"
- The use of the term Supplemental Instruction, which is allegedly provided in the general education classroom and In-Class Supplementary Instruction, which obviously occurs in class is extremely confusing. The Consultants are unable to determine, based on the IEP review alone, what the difference between the terms means.
- A number of IEPs identify specific difficulties the student has without any goals or objectives to address them. Specifically, some students classified as emotionally disturbed, with clear examples of their difficulties in the classroom, have no goals to assist the student to do better.
- IEPs which indicate that the student is not on grade level in reading (sufficient to have the student placed in the Resource Center for English) have the same student in the

general education classroom, with Supplemental Instruction but no Special Education teacher, for all other subjects. In other words, a student who cannot read grade level text is expected to keep up with grade level material without the assistance of a Special Education teacher.

- IEPs for students in the Pull-Out Resource program have vague goals and objectives. As Pull-Out Resource is a program for students who cannot be educated in the general education classroom, their goals and objectives should be detailed and specific.
- Transition to post-secondary education/life is not individualized or specific.

Overall Strengths

- The majority of IEPs were conducted within proper timeframes. It appears that the Child Study Team is knowledgeable about the specific timeframes and adhered to the procedural safeguards regarding timeframes.
- The majority of IEPs included sufficient information to support the specific classification for the student.

Areas That Need Improvement

Based upon the review of IEPs conducted, there are substantial differences in the IEPs that the District received from the three middle schools. It is suggested that transition procedures from eighth grade to high school should be included in a Child Study Team Procedures Manual. Child Study Team participation in the creation of this manual is a best practice. Ideally, all FLOW districts should be invited to participate.

The development of this manual is listed as a goal in the relevant section of this Special Education program review. Understanding that this document should be created by District staff, the following suggestions are offered as a starting point. The Consultants are aware that some form of transition is currently in place. It is the belief of the Consultants that this list represents best practices that will expand and enhance the current practice:

- During October, January and April, the supervisors of the middle schools and high schools should initiate transition to high school meetings in which needs of students transitioning from the three middle schools to the District should be discussed. The persons present at the transition to high school meetings should be sending and receiving school Child Study Team members.
- Prior to the transition to high school meetings, the various middle school Child Study Teams should gather information from teachers and related services staff to guide discussion at the transition to high school meetings. These meetings should be held with the supervisors to plan for any student need or overall program need well in advance for planning purposes.

- The high school supervisors should meet with high school building principals to advise of program of program needs such as staffing, special class program development, rosters of students for scheduling and other Special Education program and student needs. High school principals should be involved and informed about this process.
- Upon completion of annual review meetings, the case manager should advise the high school Child Study Team, supervisors and high school principal of placement and program recommendations.
- Case managers should compile a list of students and their Special Education programs and then share with the building supervisors and the high school Child Study Team.
- Case managers should consult with administrators, Child Study Team members and guidance counselors about program and schedule recommendations. It is important to include discussions regarding the statement of transition for all students who will be 14 on or before entrance into high school. Meetings for this purpose should be held periodically throughout the spring.
- Child Study Team members and guidance counselors should meet with eighth grade students and their parents to draft schedules based on recommendations made at the above-mentioned meetings.
- Case managers should compile a list of all eighth grade students with final program recommendations that will be shared with the high school child study team, supervisors and appropriate building administration.

Additionally, the PLAAFP components of the IEPs omitted important information. As noted above, the PLAAFP should drive the rest of the IEP. When reading the IEP, one should be able to determine exactly where the student is academically and functionally. Many IEPs were so vague that it was impossible to determine the academic and functional level of the student. It is critical to know where the student is starting to determine what the student should be expected to accomplish over the course of the year. For that reason, extensive staff development regarding how to write a PLAAFP is recommended.

The goals and objectives in the IEPs were not individualized or measurable. As indicated at the beginning of this section, the IEP is a road map. The goals and objectives are the directions, and they must be specific enough to clearly indicate what we expect the student to accomplish in the upcoming year. The majority of IEPs did not have sufficient directions. Unfortunately, as is often the case with computer generated programs (that almost every school district in New Jersey uses), the goals and objectives are chosen from a pull-down menu. This results in “cookie cutter” goals and objectives. While that may, in some instances, be appropriate, it is more often not individualized enough.

One example is students with emotional issues, which is an area where many computer-based programs fall short. As we look forward to opening school again after a pandemic year, we must

be ready for students who will exhibit social and emotional issues. A cookie cutter approach will not be sufficient. Once again, staff development on how to write goals and objectives is needed.

Lastly, the transition to post-secondary life is another area that requires additional training. When the IDEA was re-authorized into the IDEIA, one of the major focuses was on preparing students for post-secondary life. Many of the classified students who remain in-district anticipate attending college after graduation, however, the road to get there must begin earlier in the student's high school career. The IDEIA clarifies that there must be a very specific plan with measurable goals and objectives that are individualized to meet the student's needs. Many of the transition plans that involved students who would be attending college were identical, while it is clear that their needs are not identical. For students who would not be attending college but might attend a trade school or go directly into employment, the IEPs did not contain sufficient detail to explain exactly how the student was to achieve that goal.

Financial Considerations

Introduction

In order to review financial considerations of the District's Special Education program a number of key District documents were reviewed including:

- Auditors Management Report on Administrative Findings-Financial, Compliance and Performance June 30, 2019
- Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for The Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2019
- District Website Budget PowerPoint Presentation for 2019-2020
- 2019-2020 User Friendly Budget

Based upon data contained in the documents referenced above, it can be concluded that the Special Education component of the budget has been developed with a high level of expertise. At a time when most districts in New Jersey are experiencing a decrease in Special Education state funding, state Special Education aide to the District actually increased. The 2019 audit and CAFR document a reduction in tuition and related services costs. At the same time, tuition revenue has increased.

This extraordinary outcome is a tribute to strong leadership and management of the Special Education budget by District administration.

CAFR Highlights

- IDEA funds are used only for tuition costs.
- Tuition revenue grew significantly beginning in the 2017-2018 school year.
- Tuition revenue in 2018-2019 increased over prior year by \$8,429 or 5% due to changes in enrollment.

Budget Power Point presentation for 2019-2020 Highlights

- Banked cap is over \$1 million dollars.
- District requested a tax levy increases below the statutory allowable maximum of 2%.
- Reduction of \$884,000 in tuition and related services in 2019-2020 budget over prior year.

2019-2020 User Friendly Budget Highlights

- Advertised enrollments reflect projected decreases in regular on roll students from 2017 to 2019 while they project growth, 16%, in the Special Education category.
- Advertised revenues reflect \$336,467 in actual extraordinary aid in 2017-2018. When compared to Exhibit C-1 in the June 2019 CAFR, the District's actual extraordinary aid in 2018-2019 was \$405,962 which is a 20.6% increase. Many districts received a lesser amount of aid in 2018-2019.
- Advertised appropriations reflect the private school for the handicapped tuition reductions in 2019 - 2020 of \$559,743.
- Advertised appropriations for out of district tuition reflect actual expenditures of \$3,909,250 in 2017-2018. When compared to Exhibit C-1 in the June 2019 CAFRA, the District's actual in 2018-2019 was \$3,688,987, which is \$220,263 or 5.6% less. The 2019-2020 budget of \$4,209,828 represents an increase of \$520,841 or 14.12% over last year's actual.

Out-of-District Costs

The District utilizes various strategies to support the individual needs of Special Education students. Options that are available include special services school districts, educational service commissions, jointure commissions and approved private schools for students eligible for Special Education and related services. Additional options include the establishment of cost-effective partnerships with neighboring school districts. Some of the benefits of these partnerships include: reduced transportation costs, shared services and increased collaboration between professionals and related services providers, and sharing of administrative resources and operational overhead. Neighborhood schools also benefit by receiving additional revenue from the usage of their facilities, which can be used to offset program costs. These partnerships can enable students with disabilities to interact, while remaining close to home in their neighborhood school, with their non-disabled peers where appropriate.

All school districts are under pressure to reduce Special Education costs and the District is no exception. Special Education costs are rising in New Jersey but the number of students with complex needs is rising too. New Jersey school districts are under immense pressure to comply with the 2% budget cap. The challenge within the District is that the Special Education population is increasing rapidly.

The Consultants suggest that when Special Education costs are discussed, the conversation should not be about cost cutting. *Rather, it should focus on cost effectiveness.* This is a significant issue in all school districts. Cost cutting implies that a school district is taking something away from Special Education students, whereas cost effectiveness implies that the District will maintain or improve student services for less money or for the same money.

In the District, students with significant disabilities constitute a small portion of the total Special Education population, but account for a significant component of special population spending. A significant contributor to this cost is Special Education out-of-district placements.

The Consultants believe that the District can serve more Special Education students within the high schools by offering programs that out-of-district placements currently offer. For example, the District could further focus on class size, student teacher ratios, and high-quality support services. Examples of high-quality support services could include specialists in high school autism services and ABA behavior specialists. While this approach will not meet the needs of all of the students who need extensive services, it has the potential to meet some of the needs of students who are currently in-district, thus, avoiding the need for out-of-district programs. In other words, a specific additional high quality Special Education program (i.e. autism) has the potential to keep District students in-district and attract out-of-district tuition paying students.

The District has already proven that it can meet the needs of specific students by offering high quality in-district programs such as the Ramapo New Horizons program and the Indian Hills Transition program. Both programs are held in high regards, based upon focus group feedback. The partnership with Eastwick College is also held in high regard.

Finally, the District should be commended for the use of a wide variety of out-of-district placements. A review of out-of-district placements for the 2019-2020 school year indicates that public school districts and jointure commissions were utilized in order to meet the needs of Special Education students who require specialized services. As compared to private Special Education school placements, other public high school and jointure commission programs are almost always more cost efficient. This is also true of Bergen County Special Services programs.

Thus, it can be concluded that the District provides students with a variety of out of district program options. Public and private options include:

- Academy 360
- Bancroft
- Banyon
- Barnstable Academy
- Bergen County Special Services New Bridges
- Chancellor Academy
- Chapel Hill Academy
- Community High School
- Craig School
- CTC Academy
- ECLC

- Fair Lawn Public Schools
- Forum School
- Franklin Academy
- Garden Academy
- Holmstead
- Morris Union Jointure Commission
- New Bridges
- Paradigm
- Paramus High School
- Phoenix
- Ramsey High School
- SAGE Day
- The Learning Clinic
- Windsor Learning Center

Out of District Transportation

School districts should maximize the use of coordinated transportation including routes across county and district lines. This will help to ensure the use of the minimum number of vehicles, with the first priority being the needs of the student, and where a cost benefit exists. Length of ride, student age, and classification must remain a priority when considering the use of coordinated transportation. Consideration should be given to transportation routes based on student enrollment at the nonpublic/private schools, rather than based solely on what district the student resides in. Routing with the destination in mind will ensure the minimal number of vehicles needed.

The District utilizes a shared services agreement with Bergen County Region 1. Shared services help to reduce costs. Additionally, the District, when possible, places several students who attend the same out-of-district placement on the same bus routes. Routes may be shared with other nearby high schools that have students in attendance at the same out-of-district school in an effort to increase transportation efficiency.

The State of New Jersey provides data that can be used to measure transportation efficiency. The state sets a standard level of efficiency which all school districts are encouraged to achieve. That state standard is set at 120% of vehicle capacity. The District Report of Transported Resident Students provides the data used for this calculation.

The District's transportation efficiency rating was 1.26 in the 2019 report. Thus, the District transportation process is rated as very efficient. In fact, it is the most efficient of Bergen County "I" districts.

NOTE: Vehicles used exclusively for the transportation of Special Education students are not included in the State calculation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based upon the research conducted by the Consultants, clear recommendations can be made. These recommendations are presented in priority order.

Action Steps That Should be Taken Within One Year (2021 – 2022)

- A District wide-approach to Special Education, rather than a building-based approach, is desperately needed.
- The Board must establish a position in which one District level Special Education administrator has sole leadership responsibility for both high schools. This would modify the current management plan, in which one supervisor serves at each school. Given the level of responsibility in this role, the individual who serves in this new position must be certified as a School Administrator by the State of New Jersey. In addition, this individual must possess experience as a Child Study Team member and/or teacher of Special Education.

This new position would supervise the current building - based supervisors. An appropriate title that would be consistent with the current central office management structure would be District Director of Special Education or Assistant Superintendent of Schools for Special Education. The title of Assistant Superintendent would draw a wider and more highly qualified group of candidates. In addition, the title of Assistant Superintendent would provide the clout that will be needed to address the changes that are required in the District.

Primary responsibilities of the new District position would include: development of a uniform IEP development process, development of a uniform Special Education procedures manual, development of uniform staffing practices, professional development, participation in Professional Learning Communities. In addition, this new central office administrator would lead professional development for Special Education related topics, including social and emotional learning.

In addition to Child Study Team and/or Special Education classroom teaching experience, this new central office administrator should be skilled at scheduling, financial analysis, forecasting, and purchasing. These are the very skills that a district needs in order to make Special Education more cost effective. By creating a team with diverse talents and partnering with general education, districts can have a positive impact on Special Education costs and improve educational outcomes.

- It is further recommended that the District maintain two supervisory positions, with major modifications in organizational structure and responsibility. Currently one supervisor serves at each school and supervises that school only.

The recommended reorganization would modify the structure of the supervisory positions so that one individual supervises grades 9 and 10 while the other supervises grades 11 and 12 on a District wide basis. This will help to ensure a District wide approach in Special Education.

The individual who is assigned to grades 9 and 10 should have a significant level of experience in transitioning eighth grade students into the high school setting. Key responsibilities include articulation with the middle school Special Education departments and communication with the high school teachers and parents of Special Education students.

The individual who is assigned to grades 11 and 12 should have a significant level of experience in transitioning juniors and seniors to post-secondary options, transition plans, and college admission. Key responsibilities include articulation with colleges, job coaches, and work sites of the high school, and communication with high school teachers and the parents of Special Education students.

Thus, the reorganized position of supervisor(s) would address the transition and articulation issues that were identified during focus group discussions. The two positions would further solidify the “one district” approach.

- A multi-year process should commence in which the current supplemental instruction program is replaced by true in class support. As indicated by numerous focus group participants, the supplemental instruction program model is confusing, inconsistent, costly, and difficult to staff.

The Consultants understand that the supplemental instruction model places a certified subject matter teacher in academic classrooms (except science). The support of a second teacher is welcomed by many parents, however, the best way to support a Special Education student is with a Special Education teacher.

This strategy provides Special Education students with need support from a general education teacher and a Special Education teacher.

Furthermore, Special Education teachers and general education teachers who serve in the in-class support model must be provided with scheduled common planning time.

The Consultants know of no other high performing suburban district in Bergen County that follows the supplemental instruction format. In-class support is considered a best practice.

The Consultants ask this rhetorical question: If supplemental instruction is a research based best practice that works well to support Special Education students; why are other schools not using this model?

It is recommended that this transition take place over a period of several years, beginning with the incoming ninth graders. In other words, an intensive effort to provide in-class

support that includes a subject matter specialist and a certified Special Education teacher should begin immediately.

The transition to in-class support during a four-year span would also permit current supplemental teachers to seek Special Education certification.

- A District wide Special Education Professional Learning Community (PLC) should be established immediately. The District does not currently have a Special Education or Child Study Team PLC. This is very unusual. This PLC should include all professional stakeholders so that teachers, child study team members, paraprofessionals and administrators can work side by side in the development of the District wide approach. PLCs can also be used to help staff transition to the in-class support model.
- The PLC concept should be further expanded so that small groups of staff work together on various Study Teams. Study Teams are an excellent way to have volunteers work together to develop strategies that will solve some of the issues that have been identified in this Special Education Program Review.
- Expand the current District wide Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG) so that it can assist in disseminating information to parents. It is also recommended that SEPAG meet more than two times per year. Monthly meetings led by the new Director of Special Education/Assistant Superintendent should be considered.

Working closely with Special Education staff and administrators, SEPAG could:

- Schedule parent information nights in order to review and answer questions about the “one district” approach. Parent information nights should be used to present, discuss, and answer questions about the Special Education curriculum, assessment process, transition to college and workplace, the IEP development process, and other questions that parents may have.
- Commence targeted email blasts to Special Education parents regarding the Special Education curriculum and other general Special Education issues.
- Provide parents with input into the agenda and the topics that parents want to hear.
- Develop a written, District wide and *Board approved* Standard Operating Procedures Manual (SOP) that includes protocol in determining the need for paraprofessionals and related services. Key topics should include
 - Eligibility
 - Classification Definitions
 - Constructing the IEP
 - Student Transition Procedures
 - Extended School Year
 - Paraprofessional Support
 - Notice Requirements
 - Procedural Path for Reevaluation

- Eligibility for Speech and Language Services
- Related Services
- Modifications and Accommodations
- Supplementary Aides and Services
- Transfer Students
- Definition of Key Terms
- Acronyms

All Child Study Teams, guidance, and building level administrators should receive professional development on the need to follow the SOP when making recommendations that could impact the Special Education program and/or an individual student.

- Child Study Teams and other Special Education staffing levels should reflect the number of Special Education students and individual student needs enrolled at each school. It is important to assign staff based upon the current student enrollment rather than former enrollment. In other words, as Ramapo Special Education student enrollment increases and Indian Hills remains the same, it will be necessary to transfer staff. There is no need to reduce the number of certified Special Education staff members. It is important to remember that Special Education enrollment is growing in the sending school districts. Special Education staffing needs should be based upon the recommendations of the newly established District Director/Assistant Superintendent position.
- An expansion of district wide professional development should include:
 - Co-teaching strategies
 - Orton-Gillingham strategies
 - District wide approach for the development of IEP's
 - District wide approach for Special Education progress monitoring
 - District wide training in the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports
 - District wide training for all teachers in differentiated instruction and assessment
 - All staff should be provided staff development in the field of social – emotional learning and behavior needs.
 - All staff should be provided with training in parental outreach strategies
- The District *must* update the demographic projections, perhaps in conjunction with the K-8 districts.
- There should be mandatory “staffings” held on a weekly basis in which the Special Education administration meets with the Child Study Team to discuss new referrals, evaluations, recommendations, etc. By holding weekly “staffings” there will be opportunities to bounce ideas off each other and discuss the continuum of appropriate services. The “staffings” would be facilitated by the new District Director/Assistant Superintendent and the grade level Special Education supervisors.

- Finally, there is no overall philosophy that guides the Special Education program within the District. What is the central belief system? Is this a District that believes in inclusion? Does the District embrace co-teaching? What does the District value?

This conversation should take place!

Action Steps That Should be Taken in Year Two (2022 – 2023)

- Review the year one (2021-2022) recommendations provided by the Consultants and provide a status report at a public Board of Education meeting.
- Although this Special Education Program Review was not charged with reviewing the District Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS), this topic should be considered as a year two goal. Preliminary work can begin in 2021-2022.

In the preliminary year, topics should include:

- What is the current process?
 - Is the current process consistent in both high schools?
 - How is end of the year end I&RS data used?
 - How many referrals to the child study teams come out of the I&RS process?
 - How many referrals came from parents?
 - How is I&RS connected to the NJQSAC process (State monitoring of the entire district)
 - How does I&RS impact the Special Education classification rate which will then impact the Special Education budget?
- The expansion of professional development should continue and include:
 - Assistive Technology training for staff on the MacBook Air accessibility features
 - Differences between an IEP and a 504 plan
 - Review of SOP.
 - Review current Study Skills program and examine a District wide program that might also include general education 504 students.
 - Implement the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports.
 - The newly created “one district” certified school administrator must be responsible for reviewing a random sample of IEPs each school year in order to ensure compliance with the SOP that was adopted in 2021-2022. Based upon the findings of this review, additional targeted professional development must be scheduled.
 - Students who need behavior management plans should receive them and all staff who interact with the students should be trained in the proper implementation of the individual plans. Working with the new SOP, a behavior referral form should be completed if a staff member has a concern about a student who is experiencing behavioral difficulties. This step should take place prior to recommending a behaviorist, a Behavior Intervention Plan

(BIP), an aide, or an out-of-district placement. Prior to assigning a paraprofessional or considering an out-of-district placement, the IEP should reflect first a referral to a behaviorist or school psychologist for a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) or BIP.

- Parent training and collaboration should become a part of the culture of the District. Ongoing parent teacher contacts are important in establishing trust and commitment to goals. Drafts of IEP goals and objectives should be sent to parents one week advance of an IEP meeting as a way to promote parent involvement and further develop trust.
- Continue the transition from supplemental instruction to in-class support. The focus this year should be tenth grade students.

Action Steps That Should Become Long Term Goals

- Review the status of the year one and year two goals at a public Board of Education meeting. In addition, establish an annual “Special Education Board Report” as an annual tradition.
- Co-teaching should emerge into a priority of the Board of Education. This will require further staff development.
- The use of additional options for Special Education students should be explored, including:
 - Virtual High School
 - Credit Recovery
- Ensure that Special Education students have access to all courses.
- Explore opening successful in-district programs to out-of-district students on a tuition paying bases, thus providing a source of revenue.
- K-12 articulation of curricula in Special Education should be a priority.
- The impact of the New Jersey Tiered System of Supports should be evaluated.
- Explore working with the K-8 constituent districts to incorporate a uniform Special Education software package. (i.e. the District, Wyckoff, and Franklin Lakes use IEP Direct; Oakland uses Real Time). This type of consistency is a good way to support both parents and staff, and help to avoid confusion when a student moves transitions from grade eight to the high school.
- Explore working with the K-8 constituent districts to provide Special Education and child study team professional development.
- In year two of the I&RS review, a District wide goal to address I&RS should be created since I&RS directly impacts Special Education. In addition, this an area of focus when the District next goes through the QSAC process. I&RS directly impacts the classification rate,

which in turn directly impacts the Special Education budget. It is essential that both schools are consistent in their I&RS procedures, forms, practices, etc.

A sample goal could be the District will reassess and revise its current I&RS procedures to ensure best practices, procedures, and forms are consistent in both schools.

- Continue the transition from supplemental instruction to in-class support. The focus in year three should be eleventh grade students.

Executive Summary

The purpose of this Special Education program review was to: (i) examine the Special Education program within the District; (ii) determine strengths and weaknesses; and (iii) make recommendations for program improvement.

The Consultants developed a strategy that utilized multiple measures to evaluate the Special Education program. The use of multiple measures is important because this strategy helps to “paint a full picture” of the program. Strategies included the use of internal District data, data from the State of New Jersey, focus groups, surveys and numerous District documents.

Best practices in the field of Special Education were also provided. Thus, best practices can be used as a baseline. How does the District compare when measured against the best practices that exist in the field of education?

Finally, a multiple year action plan has been proposed by the Consultants.

In addition to the development of a multi-year action plan, the Consultants feel a need to provide some “takeaways” that help to explain the current status of the district. These “takeaways” are in the fields of organization, curriculum, instructional strategies, use of data, and environment.

Organization

As indicated in the complete Special Education program review, this document is not to be interpreted as a personnel evaluation instrument. It is the view of the Consultants that without a Special Education Procedures Manual, and full time Special Education Director, each school will make independent decisions. As each school Child Study Team made these independent decisions under the current format, they appear to have drifted apart.

Full child study teams are needed in each building. One building does not have a full - time social worker.

Curriculum

This program review has documented the need to phase out the current “supplemental instruction” model and replace it with true in-class support. In the “supplemental instruction” model, a second content area teacher or an aide is placed in the class, rather than a true in-class model, which has a Special Education teacher in the class to assist the general education teacher.

There is no support at all by a second certified teacher in the supplemental science instruction program, as there is in most other content areas. This is an issue of educational equity. It is also important to remember that science is a state required tested field.

There is no self-contained resource center at one of the high schools. This creates issues for parents and students because a transfer from the “home” school may be required in order to provide a service that is needed. It is inevitable that conflict with parents will take place. While it is understandable that a specialized self-contained class, such as the current life-skills program, will be offered at only one school, the Consultants believe that resource classes should be offered at both schools. The District must have a curriculum that is *equitable*. Students should not be forced to change schools in order to take a course that they need.

There is no clearly identified area of the curriculum that addresses the social and emotional needs of high school students. The District SAGE program works well, but a more broad-based program that *all* students can benefit from is needed. There are schools that build social and emotional learning into the curriculum and across various disciplines.

Instructional Strategies

Based upon focus group meetings and survey results, the teaching staff in the District has expressed a clear desire for focused professional development in Special Education. The staff appears to be very professional and wants to learn addition strategies that will support the students. Based upon a review of IEPs, professional development for Child Study Team members is also warranted.

Focus group and survey results also indicate that the staff wants common planning time. This is particularly important for Special Education and general education teachers who work together with the same group of students. Teachers must collaborate to plan lessons, modify assessments, and provide planned strategies to support students. Common planning time must be built into the District master schedule.

Use of Data Based Decision Making

There does not appear to be a specific focus on Special Education data analysis in the District in a way that drives planning, inquiry, and decision making. In high performing schools, teams of teachers and administrators conduct a complete analysis of state and local data. This is how schools improve.

For example, on the most recent PARCC data, Special Education students at one District high school out performed their cohorts at the other District high school on *every* language arts literacy assessment. This is important data because state of the art teaching requires that the staff ask why? Is this data a trend? Is the curriculum in one school different? Are teaching strategies different? Asking questions is the key.

A review of the most recent state data indicates that the chronic absenteeism rate for Special Education students at one District high school is almost double the chronic absenteeism rate at the other high school. Once again, this is important data that should cause discussion and analysis

within the District. Small teams of teachers and administrators can accomplish a great deal, and help students, when data is used to identify potential issues.

State of the art teaching also requires that the District review the performance of District Special Education students as compared to students in other district factor group high schools in the county and state. By using data as the basis for decision making, a school can improve each year if the findings of the data are interpreted correctly.

Data analysis does not apply only to tests. Data analysis should also be used as a strategy to insert “quality control” into the IEP development process. Based upon the review of IEPs by the Consultants, there is a need to review all IEPs internally to ensure that they contain every component required by law. Although each Child Study Team should review each IEP, Special Education supervisors and the new District Director of Special Education should conduct final reviews of IEPs.

Environment

The District must use this Special Education Program Review as a starting point to reset the relationship between the District and parents. This should be done on several levels, however, the key recommendation of the Consultants is that staff “walk in the shoes” of each Special Education parent and each student.

Most parents want “what is best” for the child, even though the standard for provision of services in New Jersey is “what is appropriate.” Many parents do not understand this concept. The SEPAG mechanism could serve as a dynamic mechanism for educating parents about the IEP process, LRE, and other general legal issues. Collegial conversations, are needed. There should be a clear understanding that the new administrative positions to be established in the near future are *responsible* for parent outreach.

In regional high school districts, the community seems to compare and contrast the schools. The District is no exception to this concept. Although friendly rivalries between schools can be fun, outright competition can be counterproductive. This is why a one district approach in Special Education is needed.

The Consultants heard in focus group after focus group that the two Child Study Teams do not communicate with each other. This must stop and, frankly, it is nonsense.

The Consultants are confident that when the teachers and specialists are provided with much needed professional development and then actually work together, the students will ultimately benefit. **This is a talented staff that will learn from each other!**

Final Thoughts

There is much work to do within the District in the field of Special Education. At the same time, there are reasons for optimism.

The current program serves as a solid foundation for the change that is needed. The staff seeks positive change and professional development. The program itself is well funded by the District. The parents seem like they will support positive change and the Board of Education seems willing to pursue positive change too.

The Consultants are optimistic that, when the action steps provided in this study are fully implemented, the Special Education program will move from an average program to an exemplary program based upon recognized best practices.

Changes in the chain of command and organizational structure, as recommended, will be helpful. It is anticipated that the 2021-2022 school year will begin with a director of Special Education, and new supervisory structure.

A one district rather than an individual school approach must be followed.

Appendix 1

New Jersey School Performance Report
Special Education Data Analysis
Bergen County Regional High Schools
District Factor Group I
2017 – 2018 Results

Special Education Enrollment Trends

Research Methodology

The source for all data is the New Jersey School Performance Report. In order to compare the performance of Ramapo and Indian Hills Special Education students, the New Jersey School Performance Report was used to review District Factor Group “I” regional high schools in Bergen County. When available, state averages were also provided.

	Percent of Special Education Students 2017-2018		
Regional High School	2015 -16	2016-17	2017-18
Indian Hills	16.7%	16.8%	18.6%
Ramapo	12.0%	12.4%	12.5%
<hr/>			
Pascack Hills	17.6%	16.7%	16.6%
Pascack Valley	17.7%	18.1%	15.1%
River Dell	15.8%	15.1%	15.6%
<hr/>			

Note: Middle School Data for the schools that feed Indian Hills and Ramapo is included as a data source that impacts high school Special Education enrollment trends.

Franklin Lakes	16.9%	17.4%	20.5%
Oakland	15.4%	17.7%	17.0%
Wyckoff	14.0%	14.4%	13.9%

Special Education English / Language Arts Literacy Assessment
 Participation and Performance
 PARCC
 2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Percent Taking Test	Percent Met Expectations
Indian Hills	93	99	36.6
Ramapo	76	100	32.9
State			21.6

Pascack Hills	42	97.7	45.3
Pascack Valley	119	97.6	28.6
River Dell	83	96.6	33.7

Special Education English / Language Arts Literacy Assessment
 Grade 9
 PARCC
 2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Mean Scale Score	Met Expectations
Indian Hills	54	741	41%
Ramapo	38	747	37%
State		716	15%

Pascack Hills	21	746	43%
Pascack Valley	67	737	31%
River Dell	45	732	31%

Special Education English / Language Arts Literacy Assessment
Grade 10
PARCC
2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Mean Scale Score	Met Expectations
Indian Hills	37	724	30%
Ramapo	39	733	28%
State		707	15%
<hr/>			
Pascack Hills	20	736	45%
Pascack Valley	52	723	27%
River Dell	36	725	39%

Special Education English / Language Arts Literacy Assessment
Grade 11
PARCC
2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Mean Scale Score	Met Expectations
Indian Hills	25	728	28%
Ramapo	13	720	15%
State		708	13%
<hr/>			
Pascack Hills	27	726	26%
Pascack Valley	58	725	29%
River Dell	30	710	*

Special Education English / Language Arts Literacy Assessment
Grade 11
PARCC
2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Mean Scale Score	Met Expectations
Indian Hills	25	728	28%
Ramapo	13	720	15%
State		708	13%
<hr/>			
Pascack Hills	27	726	26%
Pascack Valley	58	725	29%
River Dell	30	710	*

Special Education Mathematics Assessment
Participation and Performance
PARCC
2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Percent Taking Test	Percent Met Expectations
Indian Hills	73	98.7	20.5
Ramapo	64	100	14.1
State			17.1
<hr/>			
Pascack Hills	42	97.7	33.4
Pascack Valley	115	95.9	15.7
River Dell	82	96.5	21.9

Special Education Mathematics Assessment
Algebra I
PARCC
2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Mean Scale Score	Percent Met Expectations
Indian Hills	46	727	24%
Ramapo	31	734	26%
State			13%

Pascack Hills	22	739	41%
Pascack Valley	63	728	17%
River Dell	46	732	22%

Special Education Mathematics Assessment
Geometry
PARCC
2017 – 2018

School	Valid Scores	Mean Scale Score	Percent Met Expectations
Indian Hills	31	717	*
Ramapo	36	717	*
State		713	

Pascack Hills	16	722	13%
Pascack Valley	51	721	14%
River Dell	35	724	17%

Special Education Graduation Rates
Bergen County DFG "I" High Schools

School	Class of 2018 Graduation Rate
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Indian Hills	90.4
Ramapo	86.4
State	80.1

Pascack Hills	85.0
Pascack Valley	92.6
River Dell	82.5

Special Education Post-Secondary Enrollment Rates
Bergen County DFG "I" High Schools

School	Class of 2018 Post-Secondary Enrollment Rate
--------	---

Indian Hills	82.5
Ramapo	86.6
State	77.9

Pascack Hills	78.6
Pascack Valley	83.3
River Dell	90.0

Special Education Chronic Absenteeism Rates
Bergen County DFG "I" High Schools

School	Class of 2018 Chronic Absenteeism Rate
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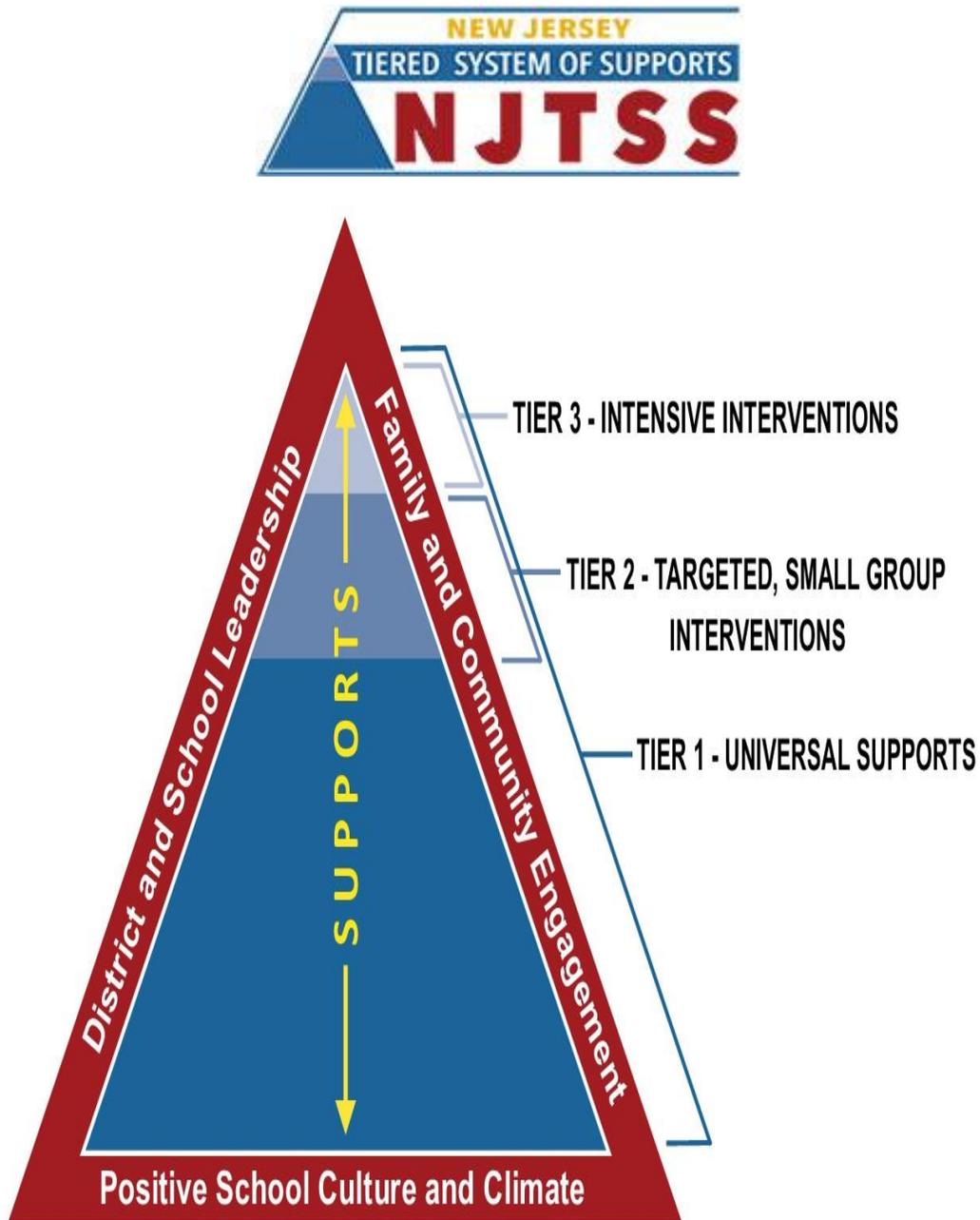
Indian Hills	13.5
Ramapo	7.1
State	14.9

Pascack Hills	11.5
Pascack Valley	10.7
River Dell	11.1

Appendix 2

New Jersey Tiered System of Supports

NJTSS is a framework of supports and interventions to improve student achievement, based on the core components of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support and the three - tier prevention logic of Response to Intervention (RTI). With a foundation of strong district and school leadership, a positive school culture and climate and family and community engagement, NJTSS builds on Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) and gives schools structure to meet the academic, behavioral, health, enrichment and social/emotional needs of all students.



Appendix 3

What Is Response to Intervention?

This Special Education Program Review has discussed RTI and recommended that the district explore this approach for both general education and Special Education students. The Consultants are providing further information about RTI as our way of better informing the readers of this program review.

The New Jersey Special Education Task Force strongly recommends that each district develop a Response to Intervention (RTI) system or a multi-tiered system of support RTI is a program for all students, not just Special Education students. This strategy includes:

- A district-wide, multi-level instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure, universal screening in the area of the identified weaknesses, specifically behavior to be used in school districts.
- Scientific, evidence-based instruction.
- Progress monitoring.
- Interventions.
- Data-based decision making for instruction and movement within this comprehensive system, and for referral to determine Special Education eligibility, when appropriate.
- Monitoring of the above
- The District should establish and implement a rigorous, consistent, effective, coordinated system for the planning and delivery of an RTI system or a multi-tiered system of support that is designed to assist all students who are experiencing academic and behavior difficulties.

The system, which encompasses the current District intervention and referral services (I&RS) system, should include:

- Training of all staff members on this process
- Scientific, evidence-based practices, supports and strategies
- Use of multiple sources of data during the pre-referral period
- Measurable goals and objectives to ensure student growth
- Information provided to the School Improvement Panel (ScIP) to identify trends and needs to drive professional development plans and decisions
- A team that includes the student, parent, and experienced staff members, who are flexible and responsive to student needs.

- To promote a positive school climate and to increase the performance of students academically, behaviorally, socially and emotionally, school districts such as Ramapo Indian Hills should ensure that all students have access to:
 - Increased availability of coordinated social and mental health services
 - Positive behavioral interventions and supports
 - Differentiated instruction
 - Functional behavioral assessments (FBAs) and approved behavior intervention plans (BIPs)
 - Instruction in social and emotional standards; and Trauma-informed care.

Appendix 4

Focus Group Discussion Prompts Palestis Educational Consultants

Please list three strengths of the Ramapo Indian Hills Special Education program that you are proud of:

1.

2.

3.

Please list three areas that need improvement;

1.

2.

3.

Please feel free to elaborate and explain. This is your opportunity to have input into our Special Education Program Review. No names of individuals please!

Appendix 5

Glossary

(Source: New Jersey Special Education Task Force)

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP): A plan that targets one to three of a student's undesirable behaviors with interventions that are linked to the functions of the behavior; each intervention specifically addresses a measurable, clearly-stated targeted behavior. A BIP can include prevention strategies, which stop the behavior before it begins, as well as replacement behaviors, which achieve the same function as the disruptive behavior without causing disruption. For students without disabilities, the BIP can be adjusted as the student improves without another meeting; however, frequent monitoring is still required. For students with disabilities, the BIP is a legal document that is a part of an individualized education program (IEP).

Community-based Instruction (CBI) : Sustained and repeated instruction that takes place in the community rather than in a school building.

Coordinated Transportation Services Agencies (CTSA): The shared responsibility between two or more agencies working together to improve output by combining existing resources. Effective coordination of transportation results in both agencies increasing ridership, increasing revenue and/or decreasing costs, providing better service, or some combination of these benefits. Coordination has shared objectives, such as eliminating redundant route services or optimizing under-utilized vehicles, and each agency participating in the coordination must share the responsibility of reaching those objectives. When implemented effectively, coordination can result in better or equivalent services, lower costs and/or increased revenue for transportation providers who are constantly under pressure by management, officials and tax-paying residents to cut costs and produce revenues.

Differentiated Instruction: A framework or philosophy for effective teaching that involves providing different students with different avenues to learning (often in the same classroom) in terms of: acquiring content; processing, constructing, or making sense of ideas; and developing teaching materials and assessment measures so that all students within a classroom can learn effectively, regardless of differences in ability. *(Source: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development)*

Dispute Resolution: The process under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, and its implementing federal regulations, that require each state to have regulations designed to protect the rights of children and their parents. These provisions define actions that parents may take when they disagree with the local school regarding the identification, evaluation, educational placement and services of their child, or the provision of a free appropriate public education to their child. These actions include parents and school entering into mediation to resolve the dispute; the parent filing a complaint that the school has erred procedurally in meeting its Special Education obligations; and/or the parent or local school filing a request for a due process hearing to have a hearing officer determine the appropriate outcome for the child.

Early Intervention: A system of coordinated services that promotes the child's age-appropriate growth and development and supports families during the critical early years.

Educational Service Commissions (New Jersey 18A:6-52): Created by the State Board of Education upon petition of five or more boards of education in one or more counties. These commissions conduct programs of education research and provide educational and administrative services. The establishing districts contribute to the support of educational services commissions.

Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBAs): A method to determine why individuals exhibit specific behavior and how the environment interacts with the individual and those behaviors. Any Functional Behavioral Assessment must include these steps - identify and define the specific problem behavior; collect information about the occurrence of the behavior through observation, systematic data collection, and interviews of the child, parents, and staff; identification of the antecedent events and consequences surrounding the behavior; identification of the function or purpose of the behavior; and development of a hypothesis about the behavior. Once the assessment is complete, interventions can be created based on the hypothesis and other relevant information.

Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE): As defined in federal regulations is “an evaluation conducted by a qualified examiner who is not employed by the public agency responsible for the education of the child in question.” *34 CFR §300.502(a)(3)(i)*.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): The legal document that defines a child's Special Education program. An IEP includes the disability under which the child qualifies for Special Education and Related Services, the services the team has determined the school will provide, the yearly goals and objectives and any accommodations that must be made to assist learning.

Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS): A system of services that identify learning, behavior and health difficulties of students; collect thorough information on the identified learning, behavior and health difficulties; develop and implement action plans which provide for appropriate school or community interventions or referrals to school and community resources, based on the collected data and desired outcomes for the identified learning, behavior and health difficulties; provide support, guidance, and professional development to school staff who identify learning, behavior and health difficulties; provide support, guidance, and professional development to school staff who participate in each building's system for planning and providing intervention and referral services. (*Source: N.J.A.C. 6A:16-8.2*)

Jointure Commission: Established by two or more school districts to provide for education of the handicapped. These commissions consist of representatives from the constituent school district boards. Their fiscal needs are apportioned to the establishing districts.

Local Education Agency (LEA): A public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a state for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a state, or for a combination of school districts or counties that is recognized in a state as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools.

Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS): A set of strategies for preventing problem behavior that utilizes evidence-based research in applied behavior analysis and the field of systems change.

New Jersey Student Learning Standards (NJSLS): The standards that provide local school districts with clear and specific benchmarks for student achievement in content areas. Developed by panels of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and representatives from higher education, business, and the community, the standards are influenced by national standards, research-based practice, and student need.

New Jersey Quality Single Accountability Continuum (NJQSAC): The Department of Education's monitoring and evaluation system for public school districts. The system shifts the monitoring and evaluation focus from compliance to assistance, capacity-building and improvement. It is a single comprehensive accountability system that consolidates and incorporates the monitoring requirements of applicable state laws and programs and complements federally required improvements. The system focuses on monitoring and evaluating school districts in five key components that, based on research, have been identified to be key factors in effective school districts.

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC): A group of states working together to develop a set of assessments that measure whether students are on track to be successful in college and their careers. They are high quality, computer-based K–12 assessments in Mathematics and English Language Arts/Literacy that give teachers, schools, students, and parents better information about whether students are on track in their learning and for success after high school, and tools to help teachers customize learning to meet student needs. PARCC was replaced by the New Jersey Student Learning Standards.

Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFP): The first written statement in the IEP documentation of the child's ability and current achievement at the time the IEP is written. The PLAAFP includes information on all areas that are affected by the child's disability and how the disability impacts the child's progress within the general education curriculum. Information for the PLAAFP is gathered from the evaluation, classroom assessments, and formal standards-based testing along with the comments and observations of teachers, parents and other knowledgeable individuals.

Response to Intervention (RtI): A multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. The process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning. These services may be provided by a variety of personnel, including general education teachers, special educators, and specialists. Progress is closely monitored to assess both the learning rate and level of performance of individual students. Educational decisions about the intensity and duration of interventions are based on individual student response to instruction.

School Funding Reform Act (SFRA) (also known as Senate Bill S4000): An act providing for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of free public schools and revising parts of the statutory law.

School Improvement Panels (ScIP): Established based upon provisions in the TEACHNJ Act and AchieveNJ where every school must establish a School Improvement Panel whose role is to ensure, oversee, and support the implementation of the district's evaluation, professional development (PD), and mentoring policies at the school level. The ScIP also ensures that teachers have a strong voice and significant opportunity to help shape evaluation procedures within each school. The ScIP must include the school principal, an assistant/vice principal or a designee if the school does not have one, and a teacher.

Special Education Parent Advisory Groups (SEPAG): Established in a provision in New Jersey Administrative Code 6A:14-1.2(h) that states: "Each board of education shall ensure that a Special Education parent advisory group is in place in the district to provide input to the district on issues concerning students with disabilities." The purpose of these groups is to provide opportunities for parents and community members to offer input to their districts on critical issues relating to students with disabilities.

Special Services School Districts: Established by resolution of the county board of chosen freeholders for the education and treatment of handicapped children. Each district is governed by a board of education consisting of the county superintendent of schools plus six members appointed by the director of the board of chosen freeholders with the consent of the board. Fiscal requirements are determined by a board of school estimate and are provided by the county and state governments.

Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN): An independent 501(c)3 organization committed to empowering families as advocates and partners in improving education and health outcomes for infants, toddlers, children and youth. SPAN is New Jersey's Parent Training and Information Center; Family to Family Health Information Center; Family Voices State Affiliate Organization; Parent to Parent USA affiliate; and a chapter of the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health.

Appendix 6

How to Avoid Costly Litigation in Special Education Matters



How to Avoid Costly Litigation in Special Education Matters

AS AN ATTORNEY I HAVE HAD the unique opportunity to defend both districts and parents in special education matters. Regardless of the party I defend, my job is to ensure that school districts comply with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which guarantees the right of children with disabilities to be provided with a “free and appropriate public education.”

By **Monica D. Palestis, Esq.**

There are steps districts can take to avoid going to court.

This basic tenet has remained constant for me. Since my experience has given me a dual perspective, my observations may be helpful to board members in their efforts to avoid costly special education litigation.

Focus on the Child Special education litigation is analogous to divorce litigation where children are involved. In both types of law suits, the very nature of the process will require the parties to take adversarial positions that may anger the other side and may cause them

Creating a cooperative relationship is enhanced when child study team members put themselves in the shoes of the parent.

to hold a grudge far into the future. In both types of litigation the end of the process does not usually mean the end of the relationship. After all is said and done, the parties will still share a child for whom they must make decisions collaboratively. In addition, after the process is over, the parties will be faced with the challenge of continuing to work together for the good of the child.

For all of these reasons, I always caution clients on either side of the fence to weigh carefully the costs of the litigation (and not just the financial costs) against the benefits of litigation. Obviously, there will always be some disputes that cannot, despite best intentions, be resolved without judicial intervention. In those instances, having an administrative law judge issue an order is necessary. However, in the vast majority of cases, resolution of disputes through mediation or a settlement agreement is in the best interest of all involved for several reasons.

The first reason is that it allows both sides to maintain a cooperative and collaborative relationship. This is critically important because the child's education will remain the responsibility of both parents and the district

for years to come.

Second, it keeps costs down since litigation in this area can be expensive, particularly when a hearing lasts more than a week. Districts not only pay for the board attorney during the trial, but they must also pay to have their child study team members and teachers present during that time. When these people are involved in litigation, they are not providing educational services to other children in the district.

The third reason is that when parents prevail in the litigation, under the fee-shifting provision of the IDEA, the district will be required to pay for the parents' attorney plus any consultants the parents brought in. Furthermore, special education attorneys, like many private sector attorneys, typically have hourly rates much higher than board of education attorneys. Attorneys often offer much lower hourly rates to their "public entity" clients, such as boards of education.

Lastly, board members should always be mindful that if either party appeals the decision of the administrative law judge to the Federal District Court of the Superior Court of New Jersey, litigation costs can increase dramatically beyond those which were initially anticipated.

With all this in mind, here are some tips for school board members and their district staff on how to avoid litigation and what to do in the event that litigation occurs.

How does a board of education avoid litigation? The most critical step to avoiding litigation is establishing and fostering a good working relationship between district staff and parents of students with disabilities. In order to do this you must "walk a mile in their shoes." This may sound simplistic, but it is not that easy. This is because we all carry our own strongly held personal and professional opinions. These opinions often prevent us from appreciating another point of view. Seeing things from the other

person's perspective is the first step in avoiding litigation.

For board of education members, it depends on their child study team members. For child study team members to see things from the parents' perspective, they must begin by temporarily setting aside their own professional opinions in order to explore why a parent may be making a particular request or taking a position regarding their child's education. One way to initially approach this is to ask the question, "What would I do if this were my child?" Often, this exercise will cause the child study team member to have a completely different response to the parent. Having a better understanding of the parent and the parents' position will help the team member in searching for possible compromises.

If child study team members can remember to put themselves in the shoes of the parent and do all they can to acknowledge and respect the parents' position, and if they communicate that understanding and respect to the parent, this sensitivity and understanding will go a long way in creating a cooperative relationship and hopefully avoid litigation. Understanding the other side is a prerequisite to avoiding litigation.

I have never had a parent say to me, "I really felt that the child study team listened to what I had to say and respected my position, but, we just can't seem to reach an agreement and we need a judge to resolve this." What, I regularly hear is, "The child study team refuses to listen to me, even though the law says that I'm a member of the individualized education program team.¹ They have absolutely no respect for any of my concerns about my child." Team members should remember that a dispute may appear to be about a particular program, placement or service, but more often it is about something much more fundamental—a lack of trust. Once that breach has been created, it is almost impossible to go back and bridge the divide.

Limiting Litigation Costs If a parent has filed a due process petition, the board of education may believe that it is required to proceed through the hearing process to defend the district's position in court. This belief may or may not be accurate, since settlement of special education matters may occur at any point up to the first day of trial—and sometimes beyond the first day.

Since litigation can significantly impact the school budget through unanticipated

It is important for board members to be involved in the decision-making process on whether or not to proceed to trial or to settle.

legal costs, it is important for board members to be involved in the decision-making process on whether or not to proceed to trial or to settle. Prior to the filing of a due process petition, the decision-making authority regarding a child's program and placement rests solely with the child study team. Under existing law, the team cannot consider cost of the program, placement and related service in its educational decision-making process. However, after a due process petition has been filed, it is appropriate and necessary for board members to consider the costs of litigation in deciding whether or not to proceed to trial. This is referred to as a cost/benefit analysis and it is an integral part of any settlement process.

Cost/Benefit Analysis To engage in a cost/benefit analysis, the board of education must receive all relevant information related to the case. The administrator or the board attorney should provide the board with detailed information, including:

- The factual basis of the case. Who is bringing the suit and what are they seeking?
- The specific provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act involved

¹ The Reauthorization of the IDEA in 1997 created an "Individualized Education Plan Team" (IEP Team), which includes the parents as an integral part of the decision making. Prior to the 1997 amendments, the child study team was charged with decision-making authority. The inclusion of parents in the newly created IEP team indicates that Congress views parents as critical partners in this process.

in this particular litigation. Does this case involve a particular program, placement or related service?

- The financial costs of proceeding with the litigation. How much legal research will be required? Approximately how long is the trial likely to last? How much will each day of trial cost? How many staff members need to attend the trial?
- The difference in cost between what the parents are requesting and what the child study team is proposing. Is the cost of the program, placement or related service being requested in the due process petition more than, less than, or equal to the district's proposed program, placement or related service?
- The likelihood of success if the litigation proceeds. Does the district have a strong case or a weak case?

These questions may best be answered by inquiring whether the district has complied with the law throughout the process of evaluation, classification and development of an IEP.

After all this information has been provided, the board is ready to do a cost/benefit analysis to decide whether it is in the district's best interest to settle or to proceed to litigation. If the cost of the program, placement or service the parent is requesting in its due process petition is less than the cost of proceeding with litigation, serious consideration should be given to attempting to settle the case. This will not only save the district money in the long run, it will also preserve a good working relationship between the parents and the district—and a good working relationship is worth its weight in gold in the public relations arena.

Further, a guaranteed settlement or well-constructed compromise is good because litigation is always a speculative venture. There are no guarantees on either side that you will prevail even if the law and the facts

are on your side. Settlement, on the other hand, guarantees that the parties themselves have complete control over the parameters of the settlement. It provides much more flexibility for a creative and compromising solution than a court-ordered decision would allow.

Stay Informed Controlling the parameters of the settlement brings up another important factor in the litigation/settlement process: making sure the board is informed of any and all offers of settlement that have been made by the other side. It is imperative that the board tells its attorney that it wants to be informed about any settlement offers. Unless this is clearly communicated to your attorney, he/she may only inform the director of special services or superintendent of any settlement proposals. This has the potential of removing the board from this very important decision-making process. Only by knowing exactly what the other side is offering, will the board be able to proceed through a cost/benefit analysis and make an informed decision as to whether to proceed or settle.

If the board follows these steps and still determines that it is necessary to continue with the litigation, at least it will be with the knowledge that it has exercised thoughtful and well-reasoned judgement. With detailed information as a foundation, the board will not only be more comfortable with an ultimate decision to proceed, it will also maximize the potential of being successful in the ensuing litigation.

Always keep in mind that the ultimate key to avoiding costly litigation in special education matters is developing a solid relationship with parents—one based on cooperation, collaboration, and above all, trust. **SL**

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If the cost of the program, placement or service the parent is requesting in its due process petition is less than the cost of proceeding with litigation, serious consideration should be given to attempting to settle the case.