

**2015-16 Student Support Services Town Hall Meetings
Summary of Comments**

Office of Accountability
Washoe County School District

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Executive Summary

In the spring of 2015, the Office of Student Support Services reorganized its leadership positions to include a Chief Student Support Services Officer and two Executive Directors. An immediate priority of the newly reorganized leadership was to listen to families and practitioners about their perceptions of the state of special education in the WCSD. To accomplish this task, a series of discussion meetings were held with certified staff, classified staff, and families of students who receive special education services. This report describes a summary of the prevailing discussion topics across each of these important stakeholder groups.

Prevailing Topics among Special Education Certified Staff

General Education and Special Education

- There was a strong consensus among special education certified staff about the dedication of school staff to meet students' needs, support for inclusionary practices, and support greater access to general education classrooms and school activities.
- The perception of the level of responsibility, or "ownership," general education staff have for students within special education was mixed among special education staff.
- Lack of time for common planning, communication, and collaboration between general and special education staff was noted.
- There was concern about inconsistent implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, especially at the secondary level.
- Concern for the ability of special education teachers to provide instruction required to meet students' learning needs was noted. Teachers cited the challenge of having a wide range of needs in single classrooms, large caseloads, and the priority of case management over instruction.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

- Direction for writing IEPs was described as inconsistent among file monitors, implementation specialists (IS), and other leadership members.
- Some teachers worried that accommodations for which the school does not have resources to implement are not written into IEPs.
- Teachers felt they are often blamed for not being in compliance. Non-compliance was thought to be the result of poor communication, changing expectations, and misdirection from district-level support staff.
- Mental health was mentioned as a rapidly growing area of need among students and teachers worried that they were ill-equipped to respond.

Transition

- Teachers believed transition practices need to be improved to better support special education students' movement between school levels (ES to MS to HS) and between schools.

Organizational Support for Staff

- Certified staff described inconsistent direction and expectations from district leadership and support staff.
- Although many teachers appreciated the support provided by Implementation Specialists (IS), many commented that the IS program needs improvement. Specifically, the request was made for ISs to have strong backgrounds in special education and to be more familiar with the individual needs and practices of the schools they serve.
- There was consensus among teachers that caseload versus workload needs to be considered when determining allocations and caseload assignments.
- Many teachers stressed the importance of quality support staff, such as instructional aides, to meeting the needs of students and providing administrative support.
- Teachers asked for leaders and other support staff, including coordinators, ISs, and paraprofessionals, to have experience and training in special education.
- Many teachers requested compensation for time spent working outside of contract hours.

Professional Development

- Certified staff expressed a desire for targeted, individualized professional development targeted to their specific roles within special education.
- Special education certified staff requested training for general education teachers on special education topics, such as intervention strategies for specific disabilities.
- Teachers asked for professional development to be delivered by district staff who are leaders in the field.

Special Education Staff Morale

- Teachers repeatedly described having concern for the persistent low morale experienced by special education teachers and staff.

Celebrations

- Nearly all teachers were extremely positive when talking about students and families.
- Positive working relationships with co-teachers, general education teachers, parents, and administrators were noted.
- The special education staff's dedication and commitment to their work in supporting students was a prominent theme across all discussion groups.

Certified Staff Suggestions for Improvement

- Improve communication between district-level staff and school-based personnel.
- Provide recognition and support for special education teachers. Change evaluation process to recognize the dual roles of special education positions (i.e. instructional and case management responsibilities).
- Conduct an audit to determine severity of student needs and number of students who require services per school (one person framed the need as an equity issue).

Prevailing Topics among Classified Staff

Staffing

- Job descriptions were described as vague and sometimes misleading.
- Onboarding of new staff members was described as critical to reducing turnover.
- Classified staff believed the timing of placement contributes to uncertainty of where support employees will be housed and causes stress.
- Some staff felt that there is sometimes a lack of qualified employees in school buildings to respond to unexpected situations.

Expectations and School Culture

- Staff noted an inconsistency across schools in how support staff members are utilized.
- Culture of respect for special education was thought to contribute to a positive work experience and positive student outcomes.

Relationships between Teachers and Support Staff

- A productive relationship between classroom teachers and support staff was believed to be critical to accomplishing daily tasks and long-term goals.
- Staff described characteristics of teachers with whom they work well, which included openness to new ideas, persistence in meeting student needs and goals, ability to provide positive feedback to aides and assistants, practice of offering opportunities for leadership, is consistent in their practice, and has genuine respect for support staff.

General Education Teachers

- There was the perception among some staff that general education teachers do not understand the particular needs and behaviors associated with disability types.

Professional Development

- Staff members expressed they would appreciate more opportunities for professional development. Non-violent crisis intervention training and the Three R's courses were specifically mentioned as beneficial to the roles of support staff.

- More opportunities were requested for certified and classified staff to learn together.

Transition Process

- Staff members noted that there is often a delay in the transmission of student information from one school to another.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

- The level of involvement of support staff within the IEP process was described as varying widely across schools.

Communication

- Staff members felt they are not receiving information about policy changes, changes to protocols, and updates relevant to their roles in a timely manner.

Classified Staff Suggestions for Improvement

- More opportunities for collaboration with special and general education teachers.
- Dedicated time for teachers and support staff to discuss individual students' progress.
- Continuous professional development opportunities to expand ability to respond to changing expectations and demands.
- Professional development sessions for teachers and support staff combined.
- Increased wages and benefits for support staff in special education.
- Streamlined process for requesting transportation (i.e. busses and vans).
- Detailed information about any changes made to special education policy in the WCSD.
- Current Student Support Services organizational charts.
- Up-to-date materials for educating students.
- Avenues to provide input about the delivery of special education in the WCSD, such as periodic surveys and quarterly discussion groups.

Prevailing Topics among Family Members of Students

Staffing

- Staff turnover was a major concern among parents.
- Support staff were recognized as having a potentially strong influence on students' educational experiences; however, some expressed concern about the range of skill level across staff and the short duration of time staff have with each student.

General Education

- Parents had varying sentiments about how well general education teachers meet their child's learning needs. This sentiment was coupled with the fear that some teachers have low expectations of students who have an IEP.
- Some parents felt disconnected from the decision-making process about their children's goals and did not feel valued by the district.

Transitions and Consistency

- Parents observed inconsistent delivery of classes and programs across schools.
- Inconsistent practices among teachers coupled with having a different teacher assigned to their children each year was described as a source of frustration for parents.

Academics

- Several changes to the curriculum were requested by parents, including aligning curriculum to Nevada Academic Content Standards, incorporating engaging instructional strategies, providing high quality work appropriate for the students' skill levels, and promoting full inclusion.
- Parents questioned the emphasis on life skills within the curriculum as opposed to a greater emphasis on academics.
- The appropriateness of academic standardized testing for some students was a concern among parents.
- Some parents suspected that goals and accommodations are determined by what is doable for the school, rather than what is best for each student.

Law and Advocacy

- There was a perception that teachers and staff are generally unfamiliar with law pertaining to special education.

Communication

- Parents felt communication from schools is sometimes unclear about what pertains to students who receive special education.
- There was some uncertainty about how to access district programs and resources among parents.
- The timeliness of communication by the district and school staff was described as poor.

Assistive Technology

- Parents appreciated assistive technologies, but noted several barriers to its use. Cited barriers included lack of knowledge of how to use them among parents and staff and reliance on outdated technologies.

School Size and Safety

- Overcrowding and safety were two additional concerns among some parents.

Parent Suggestions for Improvement

- Provide incentive pay to teachers and aides within special education to promote longevity and high quality applicants.
- Advocate at state level to increase funding for special education staff.
- Provide professional development for all special education staff and general education teachers to ensure they are knowledgeable of disability types, inclusive practices, and instructional practices for students with cognitive disabilities.
- Uphold high expectations for all students by teachers and staff.
- Ensure general education teachers are adhering to the IEPs for students in their classrooms.
- Assign case managers to students and ensure their consistency, particularly for high school students as they approach graduation.
- Promote consistent programming across schools.
- Hold all school staff accountable for their understanding of and responsibilities within the IEP for each student.
- Educate district administrators and trustees, school police, and school staff about appropriate responses to behavioral incidents among students with disabilities.
- Provide child-directed education to meet individual student learning needs.
- Create opportunities for parents to assist each other in navigating the educational process, share resources, and exchange experiences and insights.
- Provide training to all staff about laws that govern special education, particularly laws that emerged from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
- Assist parents in being better advocates for themselves.
- Foster positive relationships between parents and district staff.
- Allow texting as a communication tool with teachers and aides.
- Create roadmap for parents that outlines how and where to get support for disability types. Provide guidance about supports to indicate range on spectrum appropriate for diagnosis of each disability.
- Distribute information about all available programs within the WCSD, including program goals and features, and requirements for enrollment.
- Allow for more open communication between aides and families, so that aides can discuss learning progress and IEP specifics.
- Ensure staff are proficient at using assistive technology.
- Provide 1-2 trained aides on every bus.

2015-16 Student Support Services Town Hall Meetings

In the spring of 2015, the Office of Student Support Services reorganized its leadership positions to include a Chief Student Support Services Officer and two Executive Directors. The expansion of leadership is part of the larger goal to improve the continuum of services provided to students who receive special education services in the Washoe County School District (WCSD). An immediate priority of the newly reorganized leadership was to listen to families and practitioners about their perceptions of the state of special education in the WCSD. To accomplish this task, a series of discussion meetings were held with certified staff, classified staff, and families of students who receive special education services.

The Office of Accountability was charged with the task to collect and summarize prevailing discussion topics that emerged within the town hall events. Information gathered from these discussions provides district leadership with information directly from families to guide priorities for improvement and raise questions for further investigation. Summaries of the dominant discussion points from certified staff, classified staff, and families of students within special education follows.

Certified Staff Town Hall Meetings

Seven town hall meetings were held in April and May 2015. Four types of certified practitioner groups were invited to participate, including special education teachers, classroom teachers who are involved with special education, school staff whose work touches special education (e.g. counselors, psychologists), and school administrators, which totaled 662 staff from across the district. Non-certified staff was invited to participate at the Picollo/Turning Point meeting. Participation was remarkable: Over 200 people attended the meetings and provided written and verbal feedback. Attending certified staff were also invited to complete an anonymous, open-ended online questionnaire, of which 69 people responded (10% response rate).

The town hall meetings were facilitated using the World Café format. That is, certified staff gathered in groups to respond to a question on butcher paper and then rotated until everyone had an opportunity to respond to all of the questions. At the end of the last rotation, everyone came together in a single group to describe the dominant responses to each question. The discussion questions were 1) what areas do you need support or resources, 2) what barriers prevent the implementation of quality individualized education plans, and 3) what is working well within Student Support Services. A fourth place holder, or “parking lot”, was available for people to add additional information that did not apply to the three questions. Staff from the Department of Professional Learning organized and facilitated the meetings with support from the Office of Accountability.

Certified Staff Prevailing Discussion Topics

Relationship Between General Education and Special Education

There was strong consensus about the dedication of school staff to meet students' needs, support inclusionary practices, and expand access to general education classrooms and school activities. Many certified staff members conveyed their deep appreciation for general education teachers who collaborate well and, in turn, share the responsibility of meeting special education students' needs. However, it was noted that support among general education teachers for special education is not universal. Several people described a lack of collaboration and "ownership" for all students within their buildings and asked that general education teachers be held accountable for their legal obligations to support Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Others suggested that support among general education staff for special education can be improved by increasing communication about special education goals, providing professional development to all staff about disability types and special education practices, and increasing expectations for all staff to support all students.

A challenge mentioned by certified staff is lack of time for common planning, communication and collaboration between general and special education staff. Staff members also noted a need for more focused professional development for general education staff and paraprofessionals to better support students with IEPs and to more effectively collaborate with special education staff. Suggested professional development topics included disability types and characteristics, management of behavioral issues, provision of in-classroom support, curriculum accommodations and modifications, instructional delivery to students with special needs, IEP process, and expectations of general education teachers to support IEP goals.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) was described by several people as inconsistently implemented, particularly at the secondary level. Some suggested that the eligibility process is not fully understood by general education staff. Additional training for MTSS was requested, particularly pertaining to behavior and interventions for behavior. Several people requested additional training for school building administrators to become well-versed in MTSS so they can better support the framework.

Concern was expressed for the ability of special education teachers to provide instruction required to meet students' learning needs in classes or groupings where there is a wide range of ages and ability levels:

"Go visit a full 1st through 6th CLS [Comprehensive Life Skills] class and tell me that it is developmentally appropriate for the students, families OR TEACHER. It is AWFUL - especially since the majority of highly impacted students have behaviors as well..."

Certified staff members acknowledged a need for instruction to improve for students receiving special education. One person perceived there to be an influx of special education teachers who are not highly qualified (HQ) in English or math who are assigned to resource classes. The

person stated *“This is harmful to SE students who should be getting better, more individualized/small group instruction. In reality a less than HQ teacher is working with the students who need the most help.”* Several people believed they could benefit from training in core content areas and how best to incorporate the Nevada Academic Content Standards.

There was concern that special education teachers are over-burdened with non-instructional duties: *“Case management is part of the job, but it shouldn't be the main focus. At this time, case management seems to take priority over teaching.”* One person described the demand of the case management role as severely limiting their ability to provide instruction: *“What I am finding is that the job of being a case manager is far more time consuming than that of being a resource teacher. They are, in fact, both full time jobs.”* Perhaps adding to the case management role, mental health was repeatedly mentioned as a growing area of need and some recognized that the continuum of services and training to staff must be expanded to meet this challenge. One person suggested that a solution for providing mental health services to students must be found.

Individualized Education Plans

Direction for writing IEPs was described as inconsistent between file monitors, implementation specialists (IS), and other leadership members. One person provided an example of his/her experience that corresponded to accounts shared by others:

“Files have been monitored multiple times this year and the information received is always different. Our SpEd teachers are learning one thing at defensible IEP trainings and then information is contradicted when files are monitored. One file monitor comes in October and gives directives that are then different than the directives given in December by another file monitor. We even had a SpEd Area Admin help with the development of an IEP and then a month later, that file was reviewed and found to be not in compliance. Who do you listen to? What directives do you follow?”

The same person continued to describe the effects of inconsistent directives, suggesting that it contributes to low morale and a lack of confidence in the Student Support Services leaders:

“There is a punitive feeling to special education when file monitors come to school sites demanding that IEP's be revised because, "If you don't, we will lose funding"... When a sped teacher is told to revise an IEP, the directive is coming from people who don't seem to understand the amount of time and energy it takes to revise an IEP (parent contact, prior notice, time to revise the document, scheduling the meeting...)”

There is a perception that sometimes there are not systemic resources to implement and test a full variety of accommodations in specific IEPs. Several people expressed concern that potential accommodations may not be implemented in an IEP because the school does not have

resources to fully enact them. One person described the influence of staff insecurity to written accommodations at their school this way: *“The case managers are hesitant to write in specially designed instruction, co-teaching support, or behavior modification programs when there is not the guarantee of staff to provide the services.”* Described as “demoralizing,” this practice contributes to the sense that staff members are not always doing what is best for students.

Certified staff members requested district leadership to recognize that compliance to IEPs is a systems issue, rather than placing blame on teachers for non-compliance. One person asked the question:

“When the people who are supposed to be supporting me as a resource teacher are unavailable to answer questions, get my students what they need, or give me the updated information on paperwork then how am I supposed to be expected to do everything as perfectly as it needs to be done?”

Other barriers to effective IEP implementation included inconsistent and infrequent progress monitoring and lack of time to dedicate toward thoughtfully writing the IEP. Time devoted to compliance issues and processes was described as a distraction from providing quality support to students. Several people described needing more time to be creative and to think deeply about how to best support students. Additionally, the challenges to implementing quality IEPs affect many other areas of work for special education staff. Several people stated that these challenges negatively impact their time management, morale, confidence in district leadership to provide accurate information, ability to adequately meet student needs, and transition of students.

Transition

Transition occurs when students experience a change in status or programming, including movement from one school to another, from educational levels, and from program type to another. **Several certified staff members commented that transition practices need to be improved to better support special education students’ movement from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school.** Some did not know if written procedures are in place for transition from one level to the next. It was suggested that the “when, who, and how” for the transition process is not well known or consistently practiced across schools. Concern was also expressed about a lack of continuity of special education services across elementary, middle, and high schools. One person described the challenge of supporting IEP goals across schools:

“You can have an IEP at one school that is totally different when at a new school, no fluidity, they would mention one program and we wouldn’t have it when that student came by, our school had Aimsweb with goal around Aimsweb, but if other schools don’t have it, we have to develop a new goal to replace that one.”

Transition challenges are related to the IEP process and inconsistent messages and practices across schools regarding special education. Staff members asked for more consistency in these areas across schools suggesting consistency could be fostered by improving leadership and support for staff in schools.

Organizational Support for Certified Staff

Strong leadership is important at the district and school levels. Certified staff were appreciative of school administrators who had backgrounds in special education and felt their backgrounds allowed them to be stronger leaders for all students in the school building. One person described their administrator this way: *“We have a wonderful administrator knowledgeable in behavior management and sped laws! I feel supported and appreciated at my school site.”* Supportive school administrators were also described by certified staff members as being (a) protective of staff time for Intervention Assistance Team participation and collaboration with general education teachers, (b) willing to release special education staff to participate in professional development and other out-of-school special education related functions (e.g. town hall meetings, conferences, training events), and (c) committed to upholding inclusionary practices.

Certified staff would like administrators and district leadership to educate the public about offered programs and to couch reasonable expectations. Although parents and guardians were valued by staff, some felt that parents often do not understand the special education process and can complicate the delivery of services to students. Others requested that district leadership advocate for special education in the district. One person requested that district leadership *“Continue to listen to us and lobby for hard changes.”* Many expressed a sense of hopefulness regarding the reorganization of special education in the WCSD, but cautioned that they need to see positive changes before heralding the reorganization as a success.

Inconsistent direction and expectations from district leadership and support staff was described as a significant barrier to effectively performing job functions. Although several district individuals were identified as effective communicators, a resounding complaint was there is not an effective process of information dissemination regarding special education. Many people described instances of having received different answers to the same question from district-level staff: *“We get different answers to big questions from different people, the right never knows what the left is doing.”* The importance of consistent messaging was expressed by one person this way: *“Mixed messages need to be eliminated as to prevent ongoing violations and difficulties involving related services, specially designed instruction, [and] accommodations/modifications.”* Additionally, several people noted how school-based personnel do not have confidence in district leadership with respect to their knowledge of special education practices, protocols, and compliance.

Although many certified staff members appreciated the support provided by ISs, some commented that the IS program needs improvement. Staff would like for ISs to have strong backgrounds in special education, to respond to questions in a timely manner, and to be

physically present more often at their school sites. Several people asked for ISs to spend more time at their assigned schools in order to become more knowledgeable about school specific issues. One person mentioned they would like to have an avenue to provide feedback regarding how the IS program is serving their school. Several people suggested replacing the IS model altogether with site-based facilitators because they would be able to develop deep knowledge of the schools they serve and have relationships with students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This valuable knowledge was thought to better position site facilitators to review IEPs, proactively, before execution, to ensure they meet compliance, and to monitor timelines. Although there are challenges within the current IS model, many staff members recognized the positive role the IS has within their schools' work: *"When the IS for our site is able to come for a monthly training, it is a helpful and productive time with our team."*

The importance of quality support staff, such as instructional aides, to meeting the needs of students and providing administrative supports was emphasized: *"Without our support staff we are often unable to teach important content."* Several instances of schools losing highly desired staff, as a result of organizational shifts and low pay, were recounted. Certified staff demanded additional pay for support staff to incentivize these positions and requested that aides have stability in their placements and *"not be switched around."* A need for substitutes for teachers, aides and other staff was also expressed. Substitutes are needed for short and long-term absences, for staff to attend training events, and allow time for staff to complete necessary job functions outside of the classroom (e.g. paperwork, IEP meetings). Finally, access to translators was described as limited and staff members asked for increased availability of translators to assist in IEP meetings and in communicating with families.

Certified staff members asked for leaders and other support staff, including coordinators, ISs, and paraprofessionals, to have experience and training in special education, specifically. Many people noted that knowledge of special education should be an essential requirement for anyone who enters the field. To further ensure staff has a necessary level of knowledge about special education, some suggested that all new hires be provided intensive training in special education prior to starting their position.

Time and Compensation

There was consensus among certified staff that caseload versus workload needs to be examined and addressed by district leadership. Workload is dictated by the severity of needs and intensity of supports, and caseload is the number of students with disabilities in a school. Together, workload and caseload determine the amount of time required to appropriately serve students. Staff explained that workload and caseload are often unevenly distributed across schools and among staff, resulting in an inability to provide quality support to all students. One person described the issue: *"Allocations should be based on student need/severity instead of just numbers. A full class of 12 in a first through 6th CLS is NOT THE SAME as 12 students with a learning disability!"* Several people requested that workload and caseload be considered within the formula for allocations to more fairly distribute positions across schools.

Many certified staff members said the time they have in the day is insufficient to effectively perform their duties: *“Special Ed teachers seldom have enough time to properly manage their cases let alone adequately support the students.”* Demands on staff time mentioned included data collection/documentation of accommodations, paperwork, unexpected requests from Student Support Services without lead time to respond, revision of IEPs, unnecessary meetings, meetings to fight for allocations, responding to email, responding to behavior needs, certain approaches to progress monitoring (i.e. AimsWeb probes), testing, writing student learning objectives (referred to as SLOs), lack of timely responses from district support (requires time to search for answers on own), progress reports, and providing information to Student Support Services Records Department each time a file changes school sites.

Certified staff asked for compensation for the time they dedicate to performing work duties outside of contract hours. Many described the numerous hours they dedicate to their work outside of contract hours, often at great sacrifice to their personal lives. Fair compensation was mentioned as a necessary component of support for teachers; however, it is only one element of support that will aid in teachers’ ability to do their jobs well. One person noted: *“A consistent, significant pay bonus for SpEd would at least help with recognition and be some incentive but realistically, money doesn't buy more time in the day.”*

Professional Development for Special Education Staff

Overall, certified staff members appreciated the professional development opportunities offered to them and wanted more. One person’s comment provides an example of the other comments made:

“The CLS trainings that have been coming fast and furious this year as well as attending the HOT TOPICS classes, has really helped with consistency with how to write and what to include in the IEP's. I have a great team I work with and they answer any of my questions quickly or find someone who knows the answer(s) for me.”

Additional access to instruction on specific special education topics is welcomed. Certified staff asked for targeted, individualized professional development to meet learning needs of specific, special education roles. There were many professional development topics referenced as being valuable to their work. Staff expressed an interest in having more frequent and in-depth training opportunities that focus on the following:

- Defensible IEP writing
- Easy IEP
- Co-teaching model
- Strategies of intervention for classroom teachers
- How to plan and use time wisely
- Strategies for monitoring files
- HOT TOPICS
- CLS trainings
- Collaborative writing of IEPs
- Writing measurable goals

- Avoiding pitfalls, conflicts, and litigation
- How to work with various disabilities
- How to incorporate the Nevada Academic Content Standards into IEP and instruction
- Writing behavioral plans
- Recognizing and responding to mental health issues
- Direct instruction resources for students with severe reading and math disabilities
- Working with students on the autism spectrum
- Inclusion model, in-class support, and the co-teaching model of instruction and how they should operate
- Eligibility determination
- Distinguishing between typical struggling students and students eligible for specialized instruction
- Conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments
- Instructional interventions and strategies
- Managing classroom behavior
- Characteristics of disability types
- Special education law

Several suggestions were provided to improve the professional development offered to special education practitioners. Certified staff members asked for professional development to be delivered by district staff who are leaders in the special education field. Training delivered by WCSD staff will celebrate the talent of WCSD staff and information will likely be more well-received by others who seek first-hand knowledge of WCSD programs. Certified staff requested there be more examples of exemplary practices and properly completed documents so that special education staff can learn from those examples. Some people appreciated opportunities to participate in nationally organized conferences. Finally, several others requested training at the beginning of the school year to better equip staff to respond to expectations for the upcoming year. Some suggested that utilizing district training days to provide targeted professional development to special education staff would be an efficient way to deliver special education-specific content.

Although there is a mentor program in place for new teachers, several certified staff members asked for greater support for new teachers. The first year of teaching was described as confusing and isolated and several people requested increased support for new teachers. One person appreciated their mentor, but recounted that access was limited and suggested implementing an on-site mentor program to improve access. Additionally, staff requested that teachers with deep understanding of special education and of school issues serve as mentors.

Special Education Staff Morale

Certified staff repeatedly described their concern for low morale among special education teachers and staff:

“I have never seen morale so low. Teachers feel disrespected and deprofessionalized. They do not have the materials they need to do their jobs. They do not have adequate support staff or, in some cases, [have] support staff that is incompetent. They have no prep or lunch and work many hours at home. They are expected to stay after school for long hours and are not compensated.”

Certified staff members noted several factors that influence morale:

“The expectations on special education teachers in our district seem to be increasing at an exponential rate as allocations decrease and the IEP process becomes more confusing and cumbersome.”

“I have done this job for many years and my heart breaks when my students do not get what they need because I am so overstretched that I cannot provide it for them.”

Certified staff described increasing number of expectations, lack of time to do their jobs appropriately, changing established expectations, and general sense of low respect for special education within the WCSD as sources of frustration. Another person described the problem of low morale by starting with a poignant question:

“You realize that in order to “burn out” you were once on fire? Stress, deadlines, lack of direction and time, unrealistic expectations, scheduling meetings, filling out lengthy and not helpful progress reports, and many more things are quenching the fires of educators who really just want to teach.”

It is clear from certified staff discussions that low morale and “burn out” are significant challenges to WCSD special education. Despite these challenges, special education staff determinedly continue serving the students they care about. In describing why they persist within their positions, staff members said that recalling the passion they have for their students drives them to continue their work and advocate for positive change in WCSD.

Celebrations

Overwhelmingly, certified staff were extremely positive when talking about their students and the families they serve. One person stated, *“Students and families make the job worth it.”* Others explained, *“We have great rapport with families”* and noted *“strong teacher-student relationships”* as highlights of their work. Certified staff were passionate about students and many described how they are inspired by their students to do their best each day. Other positive reactions included:

- Use of team-based practices that encompass the whole student based on student needs

- Strong inclusion practices at some schools attributed to the openness and dedication of general education and special education teachers working in partnership to strengthen learning for students
- Positive working relationships with co-teachers, general education teachers, parents, and administrators

Unique Educational Settings

Several programs are substantially different from other schools sites and require separate consideration, including Picollo and Turning Point, Incline High School, and Early Childhood Development. Additional topics relevant to each of these sites are briefly summarized are briefly described; however, additional attention from district leadership needs to be given to these schools in order to fully uncover the unique strengths and constraints each negotiates.

Picollo and Turning Point

All students at Picollo and Turning Point have IEPs, which requires all staff to have deep knowledge of special education practices, disability types and needs, and strategies for delivering instruction and services to students with a wide range of abilities. Teacher and staff retention was mentioned as critical to providing high quality support by retaining institutional knowledge and maintaining long-term relationships with students and staff. Additionally, universal appreciation for non-certified support staff was expressed. Certified staff members viewed non-certified staff as crucial to providing quality student support and thus advocated for better support staff compensation to reduce turnover and encourage strong applicants. Other areas of immediate concern noted by Picollo and Turning Point staff included:

- Technical infrastructure required for reporting and assistive technology is limited
- Need for highly specialized, targeted training and professional development
- Need for more qualified staff to support students with severe behavior challenges

Incline High School

Incline High School (IHS) is a small school, relative to other WCSD high schools, and is geographically isolated, and thus faces unique service delivery challenges. As a small school, IHS staff cited how having to wear multiple hats has both advantages and disadvantages. Staff members work closely together to support inclusionary practices. Yet taking on multiple roles can lead to an imbalance of time available to accomplish all tasks.

Geographic isolation is a challenge to IHS service delivery. Staff explained that the school's distance from Reno limits the number of site visits it receives from district personnel and support staff, reduces opportunities for professional development, and curtails collaboration with non-IHS special education staff. Furthermore, its location makes recruiting highly qualified special education staff problematic.

Caseload versus workload was described as a critical issue at IHS. Although teachers may serve fewer students, as compared to other schools' caseloads, often there is a wider range

of student needs within classrooms. Furthermore, the spectrum of student need and the number of students who require support services changes yearly. According to some the variability in student need contributes to instability of allocations from year to year.

Requests made by IHS certified staff included:

- Increased number of allocations to meet the range of student needs represented at IHS. Also, the number and assignment of allocations need to be stable from year to year to limit disruption to staffing, maintain consistent support to students, and to preserve relationships between staff with students and families.
- Increased site visits from district staff to participate in student support service delivery. Certified staff welcome visits by district leadership to best understand the challenges and strengths at IHS.

Early Childhood, Pre-K and Multi Age Services

Special education services for young students, ages 9 and younger, is a complex system that requires separate consideration. Although staff members who serve young students participated in the town hall meetings, their responses were mostly indistinguishable from others who participated. Despite this limitation, several comments about early childhood services were identified. Positive comments noted the value of the monthly department meetings to help with information dissemination and collaboration with other early childhood personnel and success in collaborating with outside agencies. Certified staff also commented on the value of early childhood education to vulnerable student populations: *“Children who are victims of trauma (foster, abuse, attachment, SEL issues) get services with ECSE! We serve a significant portion of this demographic. We make a difference.”*

Several concerns also emerged. One person suggested that changes to the program during the previous school year harmed the program: *“The shuffling of programs/overages of teachers in EC Pre-K/Multiage has had a HUGE negative impact on the program as a whole.”* Another person questioned the appropriateness of the Nevada Administrative Code that limits the use of the developmentally delayed (DD) eligibility category to age 6; whereas federal guidelines within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allow for the DD category to be used until age 9. Another person described the need for full-day developmental kindergarten and framed the argument as an equity issue:

“It is unfair to not offer a full day program to these students if typical peers are having access to it. This could be considered discrimination and many parents have noted this. The district must come up with a full day DK program for these students or there is bound to be a due process lawsuit and the parent would win according to IDEA.”

Outside the scope of the town hall meeting, services provided to young students ought to be examined to more fully uncover the challenges of service delivery within this age group.

Certified Staff Discussion Conclusion

Valuing Input

The special education staff's dedication and commitment to their work in supporting students was a prominent theme across all certified staff discussion groups. This strength can be a valuable resource for district leadership when developing improvement plans. Certified staff want to contribute to strengthening Student Support Services and appreciated the opportunity to provide honest feedback. One person expressed the sentiment this way:

"I love this district, my coworkers and my students. I often get emotional when talking about my students and feel very impassioned about the change that needs to occur in our district. I have many thoughts and ideas as do the experienced SPED staff at my school. I welcome any of you to come and sit with us and we will share all of our wonderful ideas with you. Thank you!"

Many people would like ongoing opportunities to contribute in meaningful ways towards continuous improvement of Student Support Services; however, some expressed concern that the desire for their feedback may not be genuine. One person wrote, *"If you are truly listening, thank you."* It is extremely important that requests for input are genuine and valued - not just an exercise for appearances.

Suggestions for Improvement

Certified staff described many complex and often interrelated challenges to the delivery of student support services. Two common threads of concern ran through all discussion groups and topics: (a) insufficient time to adequately perform all position responsibilities and (b) inconsistency of support, communication, and practices across schools. Although challenges were described as requiring immediate attention, many noted that they are not insurmountable and provided several actionable solutions for consideration. Four predominant suggestions to improve delivery of services within Student Support Services included:

1. **Improve communication between district-level staff and school-based personnel.** Provide timely and accurate responses to requests for support, and offer immediate access to information and resources.
2. **Provide recognition of and support for special education teachers.** Consider the dual roles of special education positions (instructional and case management), when evaluating teacher performance. One person suggested that special education staff need to be evaluated within a system that accounts for the unique demands and expectations of staff within special education.
3. **Conduct an audit to determine severity of student needs and number of students who require services per school.** Use this information to determine allocation distribution across WCSD schools.

4. **Directly observe and participate in special education delivery at school sites.** A repeated request made by certified staff was for district leadership and ISs to become familiar with the unique strengths and challenges of each school through increased site visits and classroom observations.

Additional suggestions offered by certified staff included:

- Provide greater access to translators for IEP meetings
- Provide meaningful examples of goal writing at the high school level
- Hire experienced teachers as mentors for new teachers and hire more mentors
- Provide substitutes for aides and other support staff
- Provide assistance with paperwork and scheduling
- Provide more access to assistive technologies
- Provide different classrooms for Strategies and CLS students in circumstances where they are currently sharing classroom space
- Provide more support for self-contained classrooms
- Provide longer and consecutive preparation time (as opposed small chunks of dispersed prep time throughout the day)
- Remove requirement for SLOs because they seem redundant to IEP
- Human resource program “Changing Lanes” program is beneficial
- Ensure school will not face reductions in allocations each year
- Consolidate some services with general education to combine resources, money, time, and effort where appropriate

Classified Staff Town Hall Meetings

Information was elicited from classified staff at a town hall meeting on October 14, 2015 and four in-depth interviews with classified staff members throughout October 2015. Two types of classified groups were invited to participate, including special education aides and assistants. Nine people attended the town hall meeting and five people participated in the interviews. Two people provided additional comments anonymously through an online questionnaire that was available to all participants. During the town hall meeting people sat in a large circle and engaged in a facilitated discussion about their perception of how well special education is delivered in the WCSD. The discussion was facilitated using a combination of a structured question protocol and an open discussion format. In addition to classified staff members, three Student Support Services administrators attended the discussion to listen and answered questions that arose from the about Student Support Services. The discussion and interviews centered on three overarching questions, which included: 1) what areas do you need support or resources, 2) what barriers prevent the implementation of quality individualized education plans, and 3) what is working well within Student Support Services.

Classified Staff Prevailing Discussion Topics

Hiring Practices

Special education support position expectations as outlined in job descriptions were described as vague and sometimes misleading. Classified staff asked for job descriptions to provide more specific details about required tasks and to also specify which type of classroom the position will be housed (i.e. Comprehensive Life Skills, Social Intervention Program). Staff members also requested this same information be offered during the interview. This information was thought to be critical to matching staff abilities to classroom need and avoiding placement of staff in unsuitable roles, which can be damaging to students and staff (i.e. promotes staff turnover).

Onboarding of new aides and assistants at schools was thought to be critical to ensure the success of new employees. Negative experiences with school staff when first entering a new position at a school was described as harmful and likely to contribute to an employee's decision to resign early. Nearly all of the staff members recounted undesirable experiences when they first entered a school, and many of them acknowledged they currently work at a school different from the one at which they started. Examples of negative experiences included unfriendly front office staff, poor communication about start dates, uncertainty of where to go and whom to meet, and no preparation or training ahead of their start date. Additionally, several staff members recounted that they were never told they were not selected for previous positions for which they had applied for, which may have contributed to a sense they were not respected by the district even before beginning their current position.

The timing of position placement of special education support staff was described as a persistent challenge in the district. The practice known as "right sizing," which is the process of assessing how allocations are distributed across schools, occurs in the summer months after student enrollments have been determined for the upcoming school year. Support staff members described how the timing of right sizing leads to the assignment of staff to schools only one week before school begins. The uncertainty of where staff will be working from year to year was described as stressful by some who wish to remain at schools where they have developed professional relationships with staff and students or who depend on working in proximity to their homes or children's schools. Staff members requested more lead time for assignments and suggested that right sizing occur in the late spring or early summer to allow for more time.

Classified staff requested more qualified personnel in the school building to respond to unexpected situations with students that require immediate attention. In moments where students need immediate individualized attention, assistants explained that additional support is necessary to ensure all students remain adequately supervised. One staff member explained how support staff are left to manage groups of students by themselves, which can be a challenge when situations arise. Lead teachers are often pulled out of the classroom for meetings or professional development, leaving support staff alone with the class. In classes with only one or two aides, staffing is thin when a staff member is called away or out on vacation or sick leave.

Expectations and School Culture

Two classified staff members who serve in multiple schools explained that schools are inconsistent in how support staff members are utilized. Staff who serve multiple schools depending on school need are referred to as “Rovers” and are in the unique position to experience different school approaches to special education. These staff members described the differences they observe in schools, such as differences in inclusion and transition practices. Specific challenges that Rovers encounter included being told they are not needed when they arrive at an assigned school and school staff not knowing what the roles of Rovers are. The staff members explained that they overcome this challenge by explaining their roles to classroom teachers and staff, after which they are typically welcomed.

Classified staff noted their appreciation for working in schools where there is a culture of respect for special education. Staff described schools that have strong appreciation for special education as valuing aides and assistants as contributing staff members. In these schools, administrators and other staff members know the names of the aides and assistants. Conversely, in schools where special education is not appreciated, aides and assistants are sometimes treated as though “*they are in the way*” and they are not afforded the same level of respect as other staff members in the building.

Relationships between Teachers and Support Staff

The relationship between classroom teachers, aides, and assistants was recognized as a critical element within a positive classroom environment. All of the people who interact throughout the day to support students, sometimes within a single classroom rely heavily on each other to complete daily activities and take breaks. One person explained: “*It is important to find the groove with each other... One person can tap out and switch.*”

Several characteristics of classroom teachers with whom assistants and aides work well with were identified by classified staff members. Noted characteristics included: openness to new ideas and feedback - not defensive when an idea is suggested; persistence in trying different approaches to meet student needs; offers positive feedback to aides and assistants; offers opportunities for leadership in the classroom; is consistent in their practice; and genuinely respects aides and assistants. One person described an ideal special education teacher as a “*very calm and think outside of the box teacher.*” General education staff were also recognized as influential to the ability of staff to support students. As with special education teachers, staff believed they are most able to support students in classrooms when teachers include them in class activities and value their input. One person described having a “*seamless relationship*” with general education staff at her school and noted how this positively affects how she is able to support students.

General Education Teachers

There is a perception that some general education teachers do not understand the particular needs and behaviors associated with specific disability types. One classified staff

member described a situation in which this lack of understanding led to the teacher label a student as a “*problem child*.” Another person noted how general education teachers “...*can do a better job with inclusion*” and that it is “...*hard to bring them [general education teachers] in,*” referring to the apprehension of some teachers to understand and practice specific approaches in response to student behaviors. When asked why they thought some teachers were resistant to a more inclusive approach within their classrooms, one person speculated that teachers may be fearful of getting into trouble if they were to approach students incorrectly or they may be fearful of the disability itself.

Professional Development

Opportunities for professional development were appreciated by all classified staff.

Assistants and aides are often asked to take on new roles and adapt to changing classroom needs. Professional development was recognized by many as essential to growing the abilities required to meet new demands. In describing why professional development is important, one person explained: “*Because we want to be good at what we do... because we come up against these walls [such as behavior situations] and we want to know what to do.*” CPI (non-violent crisis intervention training) and the Three R’s courses were specifically mentioned as beneficial to the roles of support staff and it was suggested by several staff members that, because of their great value, these courses be made mandatory for all support staff to complete.

“Managing Para Professionals” was another course mentioned by staff as having strong relevance to the roles of support staff. The course currently is targeted to teachers and how they utilize support staff; however, one person suggested that the course be amended to accommodate a combined audience of teachers, aides, and assistants and place stronger emphasis on the interpersonal dynamics required to reach their shared goals of supporting student learning.

Transition Process

Several classified staff members described challenges with the transition process, particularly when students move from one school to another. Challenges recounted by staff included “*scrambling*” to get information about incoming students (i.e. IEP goals and accommodations), and not receiving information in time to adequately plan for new students. Several people requested more information about the transition process and were generally not aware of a consistent protocol for transition at their school sites.

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

The level of involvement in the IEP process among special education support staff was described as ranging from “very involved” to “not involved at all.” One person recounted how she was an active member of the problem-solving team who oversees the IEP development and monitoring. She described this high level of involvement as extremely beneficial to her ability to support individual students. Others described having little or no involvement in the IEP. One person recalled having experienced resistance from teachers when she asked to see a

student's IEP. Most of the staff members were aware of the IEP for the students they supported and were involved, at least partially, in the monitoring of specific accommodations for the students they interact with.

Communication

Assistants and aides described themselves as often being “the last to know” about policy changes, changes to protocols, and updates on information relevant to their roles.

Information was described as coming to classified staff primarily from the teacher whom they work directly with, and they rely on those teachers to deliver to them information obtained from the weekly Wednesday Professional Learning Community meetings. Reliance on teachers for information was described as unreliable and delayed. Assistants and aides would like more information on an ongoing basis about policy and procedural changes, courses offered, and general updates about district practices. They requested information to be delivered to them through multiple communication vehicles to ensure all staff have access to the information. Suggested formats included direct email, webpage dedicated to updates, and quarterly informational meetings. Staff members were informed of the newly created newsletter, “The Bright Idea”, that will be sent to all staff within special education. Staff were positive about the newsletter and were hopeful it will provide greater access to information.

Classified Staff Discussion Conclusion

Celebrations

Overwhelmingly assistants and aides agreed that dedicated and caring staff members is at the heart of what makes special education successful in the WCSD. Staff members described themselves as having a wide range of attributes and diverse backgrounds that allow them to connect to students. They noted their skills at being observant and responding to immediate situations - skills are particularly valuable when working with non-verbal students. They were proud to acknowledge that most special education staff members are persistent and creative when finding the best approaches to meet the learning needs of students who have a wide-range of disabilities.

Valuing Input

Classified staff appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback about the successes and challenges of the delivery of special education services in the WCSD. Many asked for continued opportunities to contribute to the success of Student Support Services. Support staff recognize that they are integral to the success of students and they share in the continued growth of how the WCSD supports students.

Suggestions for Improvement

Classified staff made several requests for district leaders to further support their work. They asked for:

- More opportunities for collaboration with special and general education teachers.
- Dedicated time for teachers and support staff to discuss individual students' progress.
- Continuous professional development opportunities to expand ability to respond to changing expectations and demands.
- Professional development sessions for teachers and support staff combined.
- Increased wages and benefits for support staff in special education.
- Streamlined process for requesting transportation (i.e. busses and vans).
- Detailed information about any changes made to special education policy in the WCSD.
- Current Student Support Services organizational charts.
- Up-to-date materials for educating students.
- Avenues to provide input about the delivery of special education in the WCSD, such as periodic surveys and quarterly discussion groups.

Family Community Listening Meeting

Information was elicited from families of students receiving special education services at a community listening event that was held at Sparks High School on the evening of November 4, 2015. The Department of Family-School Partnerships coordinated the event. Thirty-six parents attended the 90 minute-long town hall meeting. Attending parents were assigned to groups of 5-10 and each group had 1-2 facilitators. Facilitators were WCSD central office employees who are skilled in the practice of small group facilitation and whose positions are outside of special education. Enlisting facilitators who work in areas other than special education was purposeful to ensure unrestricted discussion and unbiased collection of discussion points. Several facilitators were fluent in Spanish and English.

After a brief overview of expectations of the event, each group engaged in conversation about their experiences with and perceptions of special education services within the WCSD. Discussions were held in English and Spanish by table facilitators and were guided by three questions, which included: 1) what services or programs are positively supporting your child's educational needs, 2) what are the biggest concerns you have regarding your child's educational needs, and 3) what ideas do you have to improve services in the WCSD for children with special needs and their families.

Family Prevailing Discussion Topics

Staffing

Staff turnover within special education was identified as a substantial challenge at the WCSD. Many parents believe that under-qualified staff are filling teacher vacancies within special education. Additionally, some parents recounted instances where valuable instructional time is wasted by the necessity of using substitutes to fill vacancies. There is a sense among parents that low pay contributes to the decision of teachers to leave their positions.

Assistants and aides were recognized as playing a key role in the education of children with disabilities. Despite their important function, parents identified challenges pertaining to aides. One person described how it is like playing “*Russian roulette*,” when waiting to see how qualified the assigned aide will be, acknowledging that aides work short hours and are often assigned to their student for only a short duration before they leave their positions. One person noted how aides are underpaid and not receive adequate benefits, yet they are required to have a certificate. These factors often lead aides to leave their positions. Because aides are connected with individual students for relatively brief time periods, they are not able to adequately influence student needs.

General Education

Sentiments about how well general education teachers support their students’ needs was mixed. One person acknowledged the responsiveness, intelligence, and professionalism of general education teachers whose classrooms her child attends. Several parents also commented that general education teachers take ownership of their children’s IEPs and contribute to decisions about modifications. Other parents were not as satisfied with general education teachers. Some commented that general education teachers do not know how to support their children’s needs and requested that all teachers be given professional development about disability types. Other observations described by parents about teachers in general education classrooms included: teachers do not adhere to specified accommodations in IEPs, show interest in modifications to IEPs, know how to adapt curriculum to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities, and understand or use inclusive practices.

Several parents expressed fear that teachers, primarily general education teachers, have low expectations of their children and do not push students to do their best. Low expectations were described as appearing in different forms. One person suggested that general education teachers expect aides to teach the children with disabilities in their classrooms. Some parents worried that students whose physical or developmental disabilities are not obvious may be at risk of being treated inappropriately by teachers unfamiliar with the students’ IEPs. One person recounted an incident when a teacher mistook her child’s disability for laziness and unwillingness to complete course work. This misperception, the parent feared, may have impacted the student’s ability to fully engage in the curriculum while under the direction of that teacher.

Some parents described feeling disconnected from district staff and not respected as equals in the decision-making process about their child's goals. One person described IEP meetings as intimidating and senses a level of judgment by the educators at the table who give the message of “*your child this and your child that.*” Parents welcomed the notion of school staff and parents working together to create solutions to meeting the needs of all students while rejecting an “*us vs. them*” culture that is perceived in some schools. One person requested sensitivity training for school staff to grow their understanding of the unique struggles parents and children with disabilities contend with.

Transitions and Consistency

Parents commented on inconsistent delivery of classes and programs across schools, particularly at the high school level. Parents speculated that the philosophical approach to special education by school administrators dictates how (and how well) special education is delivered at each school. One person noted that case managers are often tasked with negotiating the needs of the family with the requests of administrators. School administrators were also described as being responsible for ensuring communication is made to parents about their children's progress and ensuring family needs are met. Additionally, programs were described as substantively different from school to school, such as in differences in program delivery.

Consistency from year to year and across teachers was also described as a source of frustration for parents. In reference to interacting with new teachers each year about their child's progress and goals, one person commented that “*I feel like every year I start over.*” Some of the frustration parents experience stem from transitioning to new schools where it has been observed by some that receiving school staff members do not read the existing IEP, or attend the transition meeting, and are not informed about how to best support the transitioning student. Parents also perceived that the level at which inclusive practices are adhered to, and the resulting level in which students are included varies greatly across general education teachers.

Academics

Several parents requested changes to the curriculum to improve the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. Requested changes to the curriculum made by parents included aligning the curriculum to the Nevada Academic Content Standards, incorporating engaging instructional strategies, providing low level and high quality work appropriate to students' learning abilities, and promoting full inclusion for all students. Several parents stressed the importance of using instructional time to educate students, as opposed to simply “babysitting” them. Parents felt strongly that individualized approaches to learning are needed to meet their children's learning needs. One parent suggested that school staff build on the strengths of students, rather than solely acknowledging deficiencies in knowledge and skill sets.

Parents of children with cognitive disabilities questioned the emphasis on life skills within the curriculum. One person suggested that critical life skills (CLS) teachers do not believe that their students need academics. Referring to dissatisfaction with the emphasis placed

on life skills, one person noted “*I don’t send my child to school to learn to brush her teeth. I do that at home.*” Another person expanded on the implications of focus on “simple tasks” within the life skills curriculum:

“CLS students are expected to wipe down tables, you do not see athletic teams or typical students doing that. The rest of the school population sees CLS kids cleaning tables... Typical kids are labeling them [disabled students] as just table wipers... Possibly those students become district employees [and] CLS kids are relegated to chores.”

All parents expressed a desire for quality instruction and dedicated teachers so their children could achieve their highest learning and academic potentials.

Testing was a topic of concern among several parents. Parents described how standardized testing is burdensome, and often inappropriate and unnecessary. It was noted by these parents that the process brings frustration among students and consumes valuable time that could be used for learning. One parent posed the question about her son: “*If he has an IEP, why does he have to take the same tests as every other kid?*” One person requested more information about the purpose of specific tests, how tests are administered to children with complex needs, and requested opportunities to give or deny permission for tests to be administered. Concerns about end of course exams (EOC) were also mentioned, particularly with respect to the graduation requirement of passing EOCs. One person asked the question: “*How are students with an IEP going to be able to obtain a standard diploma with the new requirements?*”

Challenges with IEPs were noted by several parents. One person expressed concern that placement decisions based on what is “doable” for teachers, rather than what is best for students. Others suggested that the IEP is frequently unobserved by teachers and general education teachers are completely unaware of specific goals or accommodations within the IEP. Parents complained about the excessive time required to schedule transition and IEP meetings, often weeks or months out to accommodate all required attendees schedules. One parent expressed appreciation for IEP meetings and recommended that they be held more frequently with a narrow focus on specific goals.

Law and Advocacy

Some parents sensed that teachers and other staff are not familiar with laws that pertain to special education. One person went as far as to say he believes staff just “*make stuff up*” when responding to questions about law. Additionally, several parents expressed concern that district level administrators and trustees do not take complaints seriously and deflect such concerns onto the state. One person remarked on their perception of how parents are treated by the WCSD: “*The more you advocate for your child, the more they label you as a ‘problem parent’.*” Additionally, some parents have an impression of district level staff as lacking backgrounds in special education. These notions suggest that parents do not have full confidence in the district’s ability to adhere to special education laws or respond to complaints in a fair manner.

Communication

Communication from the school is sometimes unclear about what pertains to students within special education and what does not. One person described her experience this way: *“I am constantly having to guess what applies to my child with regard to general education correspondence... For example, sometimes [special education] students are included in field trip and sometimes not, but a permission slip is always sent home.”*

Parents were unclear about how to access district programs and resources. Several parents described a paucity of information about where to get support for their child’s particular needs and programs available within the WCSD. Others commented that access to specialized programs is hindered by the limited number of locations where such programs are housed. One person believed that resources in the WCSD are available only to families who have insurance. Another person asked how to access assistive technology, such as note recording pens, and questioned if such requests need to be written into the IEP. These perceptions suggest information about available options and supports is not reaching parents and is limiting access to resources for some students.

Parents expressed some concern for the timeliness of communication. Specifically, parents commented on the need for more timely communication to parents by district and school staff. Several parents noted that communication from district-level staff is often less timely and less responsive than the communication with staff at school sites. Parents asked for an improved response system to address parent concerns and questions and to avoid negative interactions between school staff and families. One person asked for more face to face meetings as a way to improve communication and grow relationships between families and staff.

Assistive Technology

Parents appreciated assistive technology and recognized its value to supporting students’ learning, but noted barriers to its effective use. Cited barriers included lack of training for parents to facilitate use of assistive technology at home, lack of knowledge of how to use assistive technology among teachers and staff, and reliance on outdated technologies.

School Size and Safety Concerns

Parents expressed concerns about school size and safety. One parent felt it is important to address overcrowding at schools to allow for smaller class sizes and increased ability to provide individualized instruction. Other parents mentioned safety concerns on campus and during transportation. Campus safety concerns included dimly lit area within and around the school building and inability of school staff to adequately protect students from bullying. One parent described noted concern about the safety of bus transportation, particularly with respect to the lack of supervision and reports of sexual behavior occurring during transport.

Family Discussion Conclusion

Celebrations

Case Managers were mentioned by parents as having special knowledge about their children and being “*on it*” when additional supports are requested or when questions emerge. Similarly, ABA Specialists from the University of Nevada Reno were recognized as being “*wonderful*”, and Speech and Occupational Therapists who work within the district were also appreciated by parents and were noted as personable and understanding of the needs of students.

Valuing Input

Many parents noted their appreciation for the opportunity to contribute their ideas and experiences for the purpose of improving the delivery of special education services within the WCSD. Parents asked for more opportunities to connect with district staff and other parents to share ideas, experiences, and contribute solutions to educational challenges.

Suggestions for Improvement

Parents provided many suggestions for improving the delivery of special education with the WCSD. Each suggestion is grouped by topic area.

Staffing

- Provide incentive pay to teachers and aides within special education to promote longevity and high quality applicants.
- Advocate at state level to increase funding for special education staff.
- Provide professional development for all special education staff and general education teachers to ensure they are knowledgeable of disability types, inclusive practices, and instructional practices for students with cognitive disabilities.

General Education

- Uphold high expectations for all students by teachers and staff.
- Ensure general education teachers are adhering to the IEPs for students in their classrooms.

Transitions and Consistency

- Assign case managers to students and ensure their consistency, particularly for high school students as they approach graduation.
- Promote consistent programming across schools.

Academics

- Hold all school staff accountable for their understanding of and responsibilities within the IEP for each student.

- Educate district administrators and trustees, school police, and school staff about appropriate responses to behavioral incidents among students with disabilities.
- Provide child-directed education to meet individual student learning needs.
- Create opportunities for parents to assist each other in navigating the educational process, share resources, and exchange experiences and insights.

Law and Advocacy

- Provide training to all staff about laws that govern special education, particularly laws that emerged from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.
- Assist parents in being better advocates for themselves.
- Foster positive relationships between parents and the district.

Communication

- Allow texting as a communication tool with teachers and aides.
- Create roadmap for parents that outlines how and where to get support for disability types. Provide guidance about supports to indicate range on spectrum appropriate for diagnosis of each disability.
- Distribute information about all available programs within the WCSD, including program goals and features, and requirements for enrollment.
- Allow for more open communication between aides and families, so that aides can discuss learning progress and IEP specifics.

Assistive Technology

- Ensure staff are proficient at using assistive technology.

School Size and Safety Concerns

- Provide 1-2 trained aides on every bus.