Special Education Program Review

Findings and Recommendations

South Hunterdon Regional School District (SHRSD)

May 2023
Public Consulting Group

Agenda

I. Methodology and Approach

II. Findings

III. Recommendations/Next Steps

Key Vocabulary

IEP - Individualized Education Program

I&RS - Intervention and Referral Service (utilized for students before being referred for an evaluation for special education services)

MTSS - Multi-Tiered System of Supports (interventions provided to students)

CST - Child Study Team (School Psychologist, Social Worker and Learning Disabilities Teacher Consultant)

ELL - English Language Learner

LRE - Least Restrictive Environment

Out of District Placements (ODP) - for students with educational needs that can't be met by their local school district and are placed in a specialized school outside of the district.

PLAAFP - Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance.

SEPAG - Special Education Parent Advisory Group

I. Methodology and Approach

Research Questions

1. Are students being identified appropriately, referrals for evaluation to determine eligibility made in a timely manner, and progress monitoring efforts prior to the referral to determine eligibility implemented with fidelity?

2. From an equity perspective to what extent are referrals and subsequent eligibility determinations representative of the district demographics?

3. To what extent are students who are learning English as a second language being identified appropriately, and receiving necessary supports in comparison to the remainder of the student body?

4. To what extent are students receiving special education services obtaining educational benefit from the programs and continuum of services provided, and what additional programming needs exist?

5. Does the Individualized Education Program (IEP) address the individual needs of the student and appropriately detail special education and related services relevant to student needs?

Research Questions

6. To what extent are varying instructional models implemented throughout SHRSD and their impact on student outcomes?

7. Are the processes used by special education and related services effective, efficient, and adhered to with fidelity?

8. How are Individualized Education Program (IEP) team members maintaining updating and/or revising student information in the special education data system?

9. Are allocated resources utilized effectively and efficiently to meet the needs of the special education population?

10. To what extent is communication with stakeholders both within and outside the system effective in meeting the needs of students requiring special education?

11. To what extent are parents of students with disabilities engaged in the district's special education efforts and how do their perceptions influence engagement?

Methodology

Focus Groups and Interviews
15 focus groups and interviews, 50+ participants
2 virtual student file review focus groups, 6+ participants

Stakeholder Surveys
Parent survey: 43 parents completed
Staff survey: 108 staff completed

Classroom Observations
3 schools
3-5 classroom observations at each school

Data & Document Analysis
Over 35 district documents and data trend analysis

II. Findings

Intervention Support, Referral, and Identification Practices

Strengths

- **Initial Development of I&RS**. The district has begun the initial development and implementation of I&RS practices.

- **Investment in Interventions**. The district has made considerable investments in the diversity of interventions to promote student outcomes.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Inconsistency in Practice**. The district has struggled in establishing consistency in the implementation of I&RS and MTSS practices across all campuses.

- **Tracking Interventions.** There are no consistently utilized tracking mechanisms I&RS and MTSS across all campuses.

- **English Language Learner Referrals.** The perception exists in the district that ELL students are being disproportionately referred for special education and related services evaluations.

Continuum of Services and IEP Development

Strengths

- **Fostering inclusion**. The district has prioritized being inclusive and promoting a growth mindset for students with disabilities.

- **Early childhood expansion**. The district has made strides in expanding access to early childhood opportunities for students in the district.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Limited Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) Continuum**. Limited LRE options has students leaving the district to access more specialized settings.

- **Evaluation Practices.** Progress monitoring and re-evaluation assessments analyzed were not in alignment with best practices.

Special Education Leadership, Procedures, and Compliance

Strengths

- **Commitment to special education programming.** The district has expressed a commitment to establishing consistent policies and procedures for special education programming.

- **Complaints.** Over the last 2 years, no Office of Civil Rights complaints, New Jersey Department of Special Education, or Due Process complaints have been filed.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Leadership changes.** Special education leadership changes have resulted in some challenges with initiative implementation and consistency in vision.

- **Written Procedures**. The district has no formal, written special education standard operating procedures to guide practice and compliance.

Family and Stakeholder Engagement

Strengths

- **Family school community.** SHRSD is a small, close knit district allowing staff to create long-term and meaningful relationships with parents.

- **Parent engagement efforts.** The district has made considerable efforts to engage parents of students with disabilities.

- **Dedicated staff**. SHRSD is comprised of dedicated staff and has fostered the ability to form long-standing relationships with students and their families.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **Special Education Parent Advisory Group (SEPAG).** Increased awareness of and participation in the Special Education Parent Advisory Group is necessary.

- **Parent training.** There is no structure for parent training to ensure parents are informed of their rights and how best to advocate for their students.

- **Distrustful relationships.** Some distrustful relationships have existed in the past between parents of students with IEPs and district leadership/staff.

Human Resource Investment and Resource Allocation

Strengths

- **Staffing**. The district is not experiencing a staffing crisis comparable to most other districts throughout the country.

- **Strong Sense of Community.** A strong sense of community exists amongst SHRSD staff fostering tenure and long-standing positive relationships between students and staff

- **Professional Development Offerings.** There are extensive professional development offerings in the district addressing differentiation for diverse learners.

Opportunities for Improvement

- **The role of IEP Team Members.** There is inconsistency in the implementation in the role of IEP team members throughout the district. Specifically, IEP development processes and responsibility of each role in executing the larger, district vision for special education.

- **Staffing allocations.** The district implements an inconsistent model for staffing allocation or caseload balancing.

III. Recommendations

Recommendations Roadmap

- Serve as a roadmap to address areas of improvement, leading to the future growth of the special education program.

- Interrelated and will require a significant investment on the part of SHRSD. Implementation will set the foundation for all other action steps that emerge from this report.

- Full-scale implementation of the recommendations may take three-to-five years.

- Intended to provide SHRSD with constructive ideas and guidance on improving practices. PCG expects SHRSD may adapt some of these action steps to align with other District initiatives designed to accelerate student achievement and within available resources. Some steps may change based on these circumstances, but PCG believes the spirit of the recommendations should remain the same.

1. Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS)

- ***Building from I&RS***: *Build on SHRSD current I&RS processes to develop a unified and clear structure of MTSS for academic achievement, positive behavior, and social/emotional growth (including enrichment) for all students.*

- ***Data Monitoring***: *Develop a district-wide system of monitoring data and student progress.*

- ***User Manual***: *Create a user-friendly MTSS manual for school teams and parents to understand the MTSS process and to document procedures/practices relevant to the management/operation of MTSS in SHRSD.*

1. Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- Creation of an MTSS Manual in the summer of 2023.

- Utilization of our new Student Information System (OnCourse) to monitor data and student progress (2024-2025).

- Develop master schedules that incorporate intervention time (flex period) into the school day.

  - 7-12: 2023-2024

  - PreK-4: 2024-2025

  - 5-8: 2024-2025
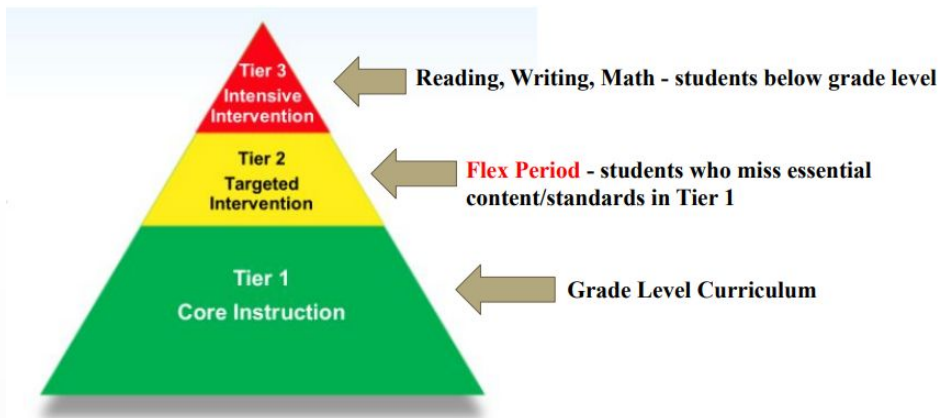
We will be working on this process for the next 3-5 years

2. Redesign and Rebrand of Supplemental Study

- *Redesign*: Redesign and rebrand Supplemental Study by providing written protocols and consistent expectations for students and staff.

- *Instruction*: Course should be taught by special education teachers.

- *Focus*: Course should be focused on targeted areas of instruction specific to IEP goals.

- *Professional Development*: Provide professional development for special education teachers.

2. Redesign and Rebrand of Supplemental Study – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- A new curriculum will be written in the summer 2023 and the course will be renamed (name TBD during curriculum writing process).

- Curriculum will be written in two-grade level bands (7-8, 9-10, 11-12).

- Starting in the 2023-2024 school year, this course will focus on executive functioning skills, test taking, reading and studying strategies.

- Criteria will be utilized when recommending students with an IEP for this new course.

- Special education teachers will be trained on the new curriculum during one of the August 2023 in-service days.

- This course will only be taught by special education teachers.

- Student placements will be evaluated at the semester break to determine if they are utilizing this course, need it and if not provided the opportunity to enroll in an elective for the second semester. This would be determined after conversations with the teacher, student, parent and case manager.

- This course will be a 5 credit course (2.5 credits for each semester) and it will be graded with a Pass/Fail.

3. Equity and Access to Advanced Placement for Students with Disabilities

- *Planning: Develop a coherent plan across grade levels and schools to enable a higher proportion of potentially qualified students with disabilities to benefit from advanced academic studies/courses.*

- *Guidance: Provide written guidance and other information to CST teams, school-based staff, and parents about how students with disabilities can access advanced placement courses, with appropriate supports and accommodations.*

- *Goals and Targets: Establish a goal and target to increase current enrollment of students with disabilities in advanced placement and other enrichment/advanced learning courses and monitor enrollment data on a quarterly basis*

3. Equity and Access to Advanced Placement for Students with Disabilities – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

• Examine past barriers to students with an IEP being able to take an honors or AP class (summer 2023).

• Develop a master schedule that will be able to provide an inclusion teacher or paraprofessional if needed in advanced level classes.

• Collect data on how the use of the flex period may be able to support students with IEPs taking honors or AP level courses.

• Work with the Child Study Team to identify students with an IEP who can be successful in honors or AP level courses with the right support.

• Examine annually (each summer) the demographics of our AP and honors classes with the use of our new student information system (OnCourse).

4. Out of District Placements

- *Communication*: Talk with parents and CST teams who sought or obtained an out of district placement to better understand their motivations and SHRSD program gaps.

- *Further Study*: Visit or obtain other information about the most common out of district placements to ascertain how these resources are different from any currently available for any student in SHRSD schools.

- *Costs*: Consider the cost of out of district placements, including costs associated with transportation and complaint/due process resolutions, and how this money can be used instead to provide these and other resources within SHRSD schools

4. Out of District Placements – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- Meet with staff to review the current student profile of Out of District students.

- Develop a needs assessment survey to determine the resources needed to expand in district programs.

- Develop a plan including a time frame for implementation of program expansion.

- This will be an ongoing evaluation in the next 2-3 years.

5. IEP Development

- **Written Protocols**: *Include in SHRSD's written special education guidance standards and examples for IEP development processes that are appropriate and consistent across the district.*

- **IEP Goals**: *Ensure IEP goals are based on student needs identified within the PLAAFP ensuring that goals are not being created or influenced by district limitations within SHRSD's current continuum of services.*

- **Monitoring IEPs**: *Establish and implement a process for periodically reviewing student IEPs for their consistency with expected standards.*

- **Electronic Data Repository**: *Study electronic data repositories to improve data collection ease and subsequent reporting of student data for quarterly IEP progress reporting to choose one that would meet SHRSD needs.*

- **Collaboration**: *Foster positive collaboration by creating more planning time between general education and special education teachers.*

5. IEP Development – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- Provide professional development for staff regarding goal writing (2023-2024 school year)

- Provide professional development for staff and stakeholders regarding the roles of the IEP team.

- New master schedules that provide common planning time for general and special education teachers working together (2023-2025).

6. Expanding the Least Restrictive Environment Continuum

- *General Education Classrooms*: Establish a maximum student classroom ratio for students with and without disabilities for general education and monitor the ratio to ensure these configurations are not "inclusion in name only."

- *Collaborative Teaching Model*: Draft guidance for collaborative teaching to support students with disabilities.

- *Co-Taught Instruction*: Draft guidance for the delivery of co-taught instruction based on the most effective model for instruction purposes and use of the special educator.

- *Professional Development*: Provide professional development on collaborative teaching, co-teach to ensure teachers engage in a true instructional partnership.

6. Expanding the Least Restrictive Environment Continuum – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- District will clearly define the model of instruction for an inclusion classroom (summer 2023).
    - This will be in line with the district model of instruction with the only difference being two teachers in the room (General Education and Special Education Teacher)
- Professional development will be provided to all staff working in an inclusion classroom (August 2023).
- Ongoing support and professional development will be provided to inclusion teachers (2023-2024 school year).
- Focus on providing collaborative planning time for inclusion partners.
- Focus on keeping the same teams together for multiple years.
- Part of our professional development on an annual basis will be the district expectations in an inclusion classroom.
    - New teacher partners
    - New teachers to the district

7. Supporting Dually Identified Students (ELL and Special Education)

- ***Track Trends and Identification Rates***: *At least quarterly, use the risk ratio to measure the identification rates of students with IEPs by race/ethnicity and other important indicator.*

- ***Data Review and Hypothesis***: *With a cross-departmental group of leaders and staff, use this data to develop hypotheses for identified disproportionate risk ratios for any group of students.*

- ***Follow up action***: *Based on these hypotheses, develop any additional written guidance needed to clarify procedures and practices, consider any additional resources and strategies needed.*

- ***Monitoring***: *Identify data to be collected and monitored, along with any practices to be monitored, to support consistent implementation across SHRSD and to identify schools needing additional support or intervention.*

- ***Guidance, Training, and Support***: *Provide schools with the guidance, training, and support necessary to better understand how to implement viable programming and strategies for dually identified students.*

7. Supporting Dually Identified Students (ELL and Special Education) – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- ESL and Special Education Teachers to collaborate in IEP development and goal setting for dually identified students to determine areas of need and a plan for supporting those areas of need.

- Utilize flex period for assisting dually identified students.

- Continue to provide the Child Study Team best practice resources to utilize when evaluating ELL students for special education services.

- Annually examine the identification rates of ELL students receiving special education services.

8. Establish District Wide Vision for Special Education, 9. Special Education Policy and Procedure Manual

- *Collaborative Vision: With representatives of district leadership, SHRSD staff as well as SHRSD parents of students with disabilities, create a collaborative, districtwide vision for special education.*

- *Policy and Procedures Manual: Develop an interactive, web based SHRSD special education manual to support user-friendly and transparent access to procedures/practices relevant to the management and operations of special education and to which school staff can be held accountable for implementing.*

8. Establish District Wide Vision for Special Education, 9. Special Education Policy and Procedure Manual – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- Collaborate with stakeholders to develop a Vision statement (2023-2024 school year).

- Collaborate with stakeholders to create a Special Education Policy and Procedures Manual during the 2023-2024 .

10. Elevate Rigor

- **Professional Development:** *Ensure that all professional development designed and delivered elevates instructional rigor that is inclusive of students with disabilities.*

- **Resources:** *Include how this information will be supported with necessary material and human resources.*

10. Elevate Rigor – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

• This has been an area of focus for the entire district during the 2023-2024 school year working with our consultant, Maureen Sigler, focusing on our district goal of blended/personalized learning (small group instruction/station rotation).

• This will continue to be an area of focus in the next three years.

    • Ensuring that curriculum in each content area is being followed with fidelity.

    • Performing analysis on [Supplemental Materials](#) to ensure rigor.

    • Ensuring that students in out of class replacement class are being exposed to grade-level curriculum.

•Continue to focus on implementation of the core practices through PDPs.

•Identify and un-pack essential standards in order to develop high level objectives that guide learning experiences.

•Revise standards-based report cards K-6 and develop standards-based report cards 7-8.

11. Parent Trainings, 12. Parent Special Education Advisory Group (SEPAG)

- ***Parent Training Plan****: In consultation with representatives of parent support groups, develop a training plan for families in the areas of IEP process, role of the child study team, helpful hints for parents at home, and how families can take an active and collaborative role at IEP meetings.*

- ***Increase Participation in SEPAG****: Increase participation of parents of students receiving special education services within SHRSD, campus-based staff, and members of the community to create a shared vision for family engagement surrounding special education.*

11. Parent Trainings, 12. Parent Special Education Advisory Group (SEPAG) – SHRSD Plan Moving Forward

- Review PCG Special Education Review findings and recommendations.

- Review and revise the mission statement and goals.

- Explore additional forms of communication, particularly for our ELL parents.

- Develop an interest survey to garner presentation topics.

- Identify parent Lead Liaisons to collaborate with administration.

- Creation of SEPAG Material/Information (pamphlets, flyers, website update).

- Development of SEPAG calendar/presentations.