



Review of Special Education Programs and Services Department of Special Education

Georgetown Public Schools, Massachusetts



Conducted

March 2024-May 2024

Submitted by Seaside Educational Consultants:

Patric Barbieri, M.Ed.
Robert McArdle, M.Ed.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

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Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

I. Introduction

The Superintendent of Georgetown Public Schools has requested an evaluation of the status of special education programs and services in the district before hiring a full-time Director of Special Education. This evaluation will assist the school's administration in determining the status of special education programming and services, staffing patterns, roles and responsibilities, utilization of current staffing positions, overall strengths, and areas of need. This review will also emphasize four essential questions:

1. Is the current staffing for special education teachers adequate to provide the necessary services to students on Individual Education Plans in the least restrictive environment?
2. Does the continuum of services from preschool to age 22 provide adequate services to meet the needs of students with diverse learning styles?
3. Are the district's services and programs effective? Are there other alternatives to enhance the district's programs?
4. Are the current staffing patterns of related service providers and paraprofessionals appropriate to meet the district's needs?
5. How does the district compare to "like districts" and DESE state data for special education census, special education expenditures, and out-of-district placements?

A. Purpose

An independent evaluation of a special education program and related services provides a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strength, needs, and recommendations. It allows programs to be examined from a perspective that looks at what works well and identifies areas that need to be enhanced and strengthened. This evaluation is a barometer reading of the Georgetown district's special education programming, services, and staffing.

Through a multistep approach, the evaluation process is designed to assist the school district's leadership team in having a focused discussion to determine immediate changes (next school year) and create a long-range plan that addresses other recommendations. The leadership team's decisions must be linked to the annual budget planning process.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

B. Consultants

Patric Barbieri, M.Ed., has worked in special education for over 32 years. He recently retired as Executive Director of LABBB Collaborative, a special education collaborative of five Massachusetts communities near Boston. LABBB has consistently been a statewide leader in providing robust academic, career, and social/recreational experiences for all special needs students ages 3 to 22. Patric’s strengths include developing programs for students and young adults from preschool through high school and college. He has conducted many program evaluations and professional development training for public school districts. He frequently speaks for the Massachusetts Partnership for Youth (MPY) and other groups. Patric has been practicing and teaching mindfulness for 35 years, including offering a new perspective for those struggling with anxiety, which he calls “Positive Anxiety.”

One of his passions is helping families navigate special needs plans. He is currently the Co-Director of Forever Parent, an organization that helps parents prepare for the future care of their child when they can no longer be there. Based on his own family’s experience, he has facilitated workshops, created podcasts, and authored many articles on the importance of the planning process.

Robert McArdle, M.Ed., has over 45 years in public education as a mediator and educational specialist for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Administrator of Special Education for Woburn Public Schools, Pupil Personnel Administrator for Greater Lawrence Technical High School and the Stoneham Public Schools, Executive Director of the Greater Lawrence Education Collaborative, and Executive Director of the Gifford School. Mr. McArdle has been a visiting faculty instructor at Salem State College, Fitchburg State College, the University of Massachusetts/Boston, and Endicott College in addition to consulting for public and private schools. Mr. McArdle has served in several Interim positions and has been on many advisory boards, task forces, and special committees. He was also the Northeast Associate Manager of the Walker Partnership. He has conducted numerous program evaluations and mentored many new administrators. He has presented at conferences and conducted training sessions for professional school personnel for over 40 years. He is the co-author of *A Practical Approach to Special Education Administration*, has served in several executive board positions, including President of the Massachusetts Association of

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

Administrators of Special Education, and is a past recipient of the Massachusetts Special Education Administrator of the Year Award.

II. Methodology

The following steps were included in the program evaluation:

1. Initial Meeting

On January 31, 2024, the Seaside Consultants met with the Superintendent and the Interim Director of Special Education of Georgetown Public Schools to discuss the details and scope of the special education evaluation, which was projected to begin in March 2024.

2. Observation of Georgetown public school specialized programs and services Pre-K-High school

The consultants started the evaluation by observing the specialized programs and services for students on IEPs at the Perley Preschool, Penn Brook Elementary School, and the middle and high school before conducting interviews with staff. Observations of students on IEPs attending general education classes were also conducted.

3. Review of written documentation

The consultant typically reviews samples of Individual Education Programs (IEPs) and progress reports from the various classrooms, but for the 2024-2025 year, all IEPs will be written on the new DESE “IEP Improvement Project forms”; therefore, this information would not be pertinent to the recommendations moving forward. The consultants reviewed enrollment data, program guidelines, the website, curriculum, and data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

4. Interviews with administrators, program staff, and parents

The consultants conducted individual and group interviews. The interviews were approximately 50-60 minutes in duration.

Individual Interviews included:

- Superintendent
- Interim Director of Special Education
- Principal, Georgetown Middle/High School
- Elementary Special Education Coordinator - Penn Brook
- Elementary General Education Teachers (4)
- Elementary Special Education Teachers (3)
- Secondary Special Education Coordinator
- Secondary Special Education Teachers (3)
- Secondary General Education Teachers (4)
- Secondary Paraprofessionals and Tutors (4)
- General Education Teachers
- BCBA
- Preschool Coordinator
- Elementary Adjustment Counselor
- Secondary Adjustment Counselor
- Secondary Psychologist
- Elementary Speech Pathologist - Penn Brook

Group Interviews Included:

- Elementary Paraprofessionals (3)
- 3 Kindergarten Teachers
- Parent group from Perley Preschool and Penn Brook Elementary
- Parent groups from the middle and high school

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

5. Questions for teachers, paraprofessionals, support-related services providers, and administrators

The following bullets represent topics discussed with all staff during the interview process. Questions were expanded upon depending on the specific role of the person interviewed.

- General background
- Roles and responsibilities
- Curriculum
- Professional development
- Community engagement
- Inclusion practices
- SEL practices (Social Emotional Learning)
- Transition process
- Communication
- Team Collaboration and meeting time
- School / Building Culture

6. Questions for parents

The consultants met virtually with two groups of parents and received helpful information contributing to this report's recommendations.

- How is the communication between you and your team members?
- What are the services that your child is receiving?
- Do you feel that you are kept informed regarding your child's progress?
- Do you feel that the staff members working with your child have a good working knowledge of your child's needs?
- To the best of your knowledge are regulatory requirements met?
- Do you feel that you receive answers to your questions from special education personnel within a reasonable time frame?
- Do you feel that school personnel are receptive to your suggestions?
- Do the staff members working with your child indicate that they see effective progress?
 - How is your child's progress measured?
- Do you feel you can access the personnel working with your child?

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YouTube: Seaside Consultants

- Do you feel welcome in the school?
- Are there any issues that you feel the department or school should be aware of concerning you as the parent of a child with special needs?

7. Follow-up communication and report development

A comprehensive report was developed to include recommendations based on analyzing all collected data, interviews, and the consultants' experience evaluating Massachusetts Special Education Programs and services aligned with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

8. Exit Meeting

On May 29, Dr. Judy Ann DeLucia, Patric Barbieri, M. Ed., and Robert McArdle, M.Ed. met with Dr. Margaret Ferrick, Superintendent and Patty White, Interim Director of Special Education to review the evaluation report's preliminary findings and recommendations.

III. Commendations

This section of the report recognizes the efforts of district personnel to meet the needs of Pre-K students. Special education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet as competing interests place significant pressure and financial burdens on school districts. Georgetown Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of young children with special needs and their community peers through its preschool programs.

Specific Commendations:

1. The Superintendent and Interim Director of Special Education Services for commissioning this district-wide review.
2. The thoughtful insight and openness of all interviewees and school-based staff to this review.
3. Penn Brook Elementary School's special education and general education teachers, support-related service providers, and paraprofessionals are committed to student learning and eager to collaborate in the best interest of all students.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

4. Models of co-teaching between the special educator and general education classroom teacher were observed.
5. Efforts by school-based staff to serve special needs students in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).
6. The district’s efforts to maintain inclusion as a focus for special education students.

COMPARISON OF MOST RECENT DESE DART DATA 10-24

	Full inclusion	Partial inclusion	Substantially Separate	Out of District
State Data	67.8%	12.6%	12.9%	6.2%
Georgetown	74.3%	13.3%	2.7%	7.5%

7. For the 2023-2024 school year, the superintendent has contracted with an agency to provide robust training for paraprofessional staff, which has received a positive response.
8. The observed dedication and concern that special education staff exhibited for their students.
9. The district’s efforts to gradually introduce the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model of instruction.
10. The efforts of special education teachers in substantially separate programs are to align the instruction with the Curriculum Frameworks.
11. There is mutual respect among educators for the services and effort they provide to students with special needs.

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YouTube: Seaside Consultants

12. The preschool has implemented a strong communication protocol for the staff and parents to build visibility and identity of its programs and services in the district.
13. The district believes in mentoring administration. The new preschool coordinator has recently been given a mentor to guide and support the staff and students.

IV. Factors Affecting Programming and Services

This report section addressed factors that apply to the Georgetown preschool-high school special education programs and services.

The varying complexity of students' needs significantly influences programming and a district's ability to deliver instructional and related services to students with special needs at any level. We have identified the following topics that impact the implementation of special education programming and services. Many Massachusetts districts are reporting an increase in the severity of students' disabilities' needs.

The district must consider the least restrictive environment for all students from general education settings to substantially separate programs in the district and then out-of-district placements.

- **Severity of need**

The needs of the students on IEPs influence programming and determine the number and type of potential classrooms each year. The number of classrooms is based on assessment data including observations. Students' needs also impact the number of aides required and the workload vs. caseload of the related service providers.

Appendix A, located on the last page of this report, shows Georgetown Public Schools' specific disability categories and the number of students in each category. This can help determine a plan to build in-district programs. The recommendations will also give the district options to build specialized programs regionally.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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YouTube: Seaside Consultants

(See Appendix A for Georgetown students identified with disabilities and disability categories.)

Direct Special Education Expenditures of Similar Districts (DESE FY23)

District	% of budget for special education	Tuition MA Public/ Collaboratives	MA Private Out-of-District Schools	In-district Transportation	Out-of-District Transportation
Dover-Sherborn	16%	\$6,095	\$1,234,258	0	0
Silver Lake	16%	\$97,145	0	\$243,566	0
Berlin-Boylston	21%	\$319,638	\$804,197	0	\$192,002
Georgetown	22%	\$509,615	\$1,224,981	\$432,083	0
Millis	22%	\$357,846	\$1,380,772	\$164,700	\$284,483
Lynnfield	23%	\$414,554	\$1,222,714	\$161,102	\$296,821
Littleton	23%	\$1,199,251	\$1,204,983	\$77,099	\$701,023
Wilmington	25%	\$1,876,481	\$4,334,652	\$275,732	\$676,552
Manchester-Essex	26%	\$638,777	\$1,288,102	\$163,663	\$513,662
Sutton	27%	\$433,848	\$1,212,754	\$253,788	\$103,101
King Philip	30%	\$1,118,175	\$4,523,189	\$224,881	\$761,302

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

V. Data for Improving Special Education Programming

1. The website has limited information about special education programs and services from preschool to high school.
2. There is not sufficient behavioral (BCBA) support for Pre-K through high school.
3. There is no documented practice for students transitioning from Pre-K to K.
4. The preschool has limited time to collaborate and engage in relevant professional development.
5. Staff feel undervalued as they are moved around and feel they need to be adequately compensated.
6. Staff at Penn Brook are confused about the philosophy of inclusion as the practices were dramatically different from the past to the current principal.
7. The Sprouts program at Penn Brook does not have a structured curriculum that aligns with the elementary school.
8. The Student Assistance Team – SAT process must be followed consistently.
9. Staff perceive the SAT process as a step or hurdle they must go through to make a referral for a special education evaluation.
10. Many view the SAT as taking a long time to address students' needs. This then leads to parents making referrals and necessitating a special education review.
11. Few Tier 1 and Tier 2 interventions are available for elementary, middle, and high school students.
12. Most interviewees indicated that The District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) needs to be understood or utilized as part of the SAT.
13. There needs to be more social skills development and curriculum.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasidecdc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

14. The district does not have a written transition process for preschool to elementary school, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school.
15. Many of the staff interviewed were unaware of their current written job description.
16. General education personnel need a clearer understanding of the various special education roles and responsibilities.
17. School-based staff need clarification on inclusion, in-class support, and co-teaching definitions. Many staff members need clarification on one term for the other. This applies whether a special education teacher or a paraprofessional comes into a general education class.
18. There is a lack of training for general education staff and paraprofessionals to assist them in effectively working together to meet students' needs in the general education classroom.
19. Special education program personnel do not have an opportunity to meet periodically throughout the school year to discuss their programs, share information, discuss issues related to their specific programs, and plan for future needs.
20. Improvements in professional development that address how general education staff assume ownership of students' IEPs with the support of special education teachers and paraprofessionals are needed.
21. General education school-based personnel would like more training in special education procedures, requirements, and practices.
22. Training on how to instruct students with disabilities and what interventions and strategies could be used to manage students with challenging behaviors is needed.
23. There appears to be overlapping with some disability categories in various programs. All programs need to be reviewed annually to determine the disability category each program is servicing.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2209 · Seaside, OR 97138
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

24. The following are not clear to all staff:

- . How paraprofessionals are assigned
- . How decisions are made to add a paraprofessional
- . When paraprofessionals are utilized for coverage and how the decision is made (Also, does it cause noncompliance with IEPs?)

25. Special education personnel expressed a “feeling of disconnect” with the special education office and conveyed the impression that greater department unity is needed.

26. There is a need to develop a defined communication system for department leadership and special education personnel.

27. Interviewees expressed concern that some students are receiving more services than they need due to outside evaluations and/or parents viewing students as more disabled than they really are.

28. Interviewees expressed the desire to participate in training on how to work with stressed or demanding parents.

29. Discipline decisions at the secondary level are not consistently applied.

30. Paraprofessionals’ roles and responsibilities need to be reviewed and updated.

31. The expectation of what paraprofessionals do consistently need to be defined for both general and special education personnel in the various instructional settings.

32. It needs to be clear whether the district is moving toward the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) model of tiered intervention.

33. The co-teaching model of instruction is limited at the secondary level.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasidecdc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

34. Clear entrance/exit criteria must be established for related services, including speech/language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and some more restrictive programs.
35. Special education personnel cannot meet as a department, as a program, and with paraprofessionals.
36. There needs to be written transition practices from one level to the next.
37. Common planning time is lacking for teachers at the middle and high schools.
38. There is not a structured format in place for special education teachers to meet with their assigned paraprofessionals for supervision purposes and planning activities.
39. Academic Support classes at the secondary level lack skill development, curriculum, and consistent instructional practices across the district.
40. A review of instructional practices by special education personnel indicates that there are no consistent instructional practices in place that all special education personnel can draw from at all levels.
41. Principals have yet to receive specialized training in evaluating special education personnel who work with students in their schools.
42. Interviewees indicated that accessing the curriculum for the pullout/specialize program classes is difficult (“have asked not received”). The obvious concern is ensuring that all students have access to the curriculum for MCAS purposes and that any modifications can be made based on student needs.
43. Data is not consistently taken, analyzed, and integrated into best practices.

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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YouTube: Seaside Consultants

44. There is no vertical alignment from elementary to high school for some programming strands.
45. While staff engage with parents, no clear or consistent process/protocol is being used across the district to engage parents. Currently, staff are left to their own relative to the information they share with parents and how often contact is made.
46. While the district has invested in developing specialized programs to meet the more comprehensive needs of students, these programs have not had the necessary consultation and monitoring needed for effective programming.
47. Although staff are working to meet students' needs, there needs to be more specificity regarding the roles and responsibilities of various special education personnel.
48. There needs to be more of a focus on skill development at the secondary level as opposed to content.
49. Teachers are unclear on how the paraprofessionals should implement effective strategies and approaches.
50. There is limited, if any, time to train paraprofessionals.
51. There is limited awareness regarding special education services for parents, their rights to eligibility for special education, and the process for testing for services.
52. Parents across the district have been experiencing inconsistent communication or responses to their questions. Parents have significant concerns that behavior interventions, including restraints or removal from the classroom, are not being reported to them.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

VI. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the evaluation process that was recently completed for Georgetown Public Schools. An explanation intended to further expand on the rationale for the recommendation follows each recommendation. These recommendations are intended to provide insight and direction for the administration and staff in making decisions regarding the direction they determine to go regarding the existing program and services.

1. The update of a Procedural Handbook will require all constituents' attention and focus.

Explanation: It will be essential that all principals, central administrators, and the special education directors remain consistent in interpreting the information contained within the special education procedural handbook that is currently being developed, as well as referring staff when questions arise. Many of the concerns that were raised throughout the interview process need to be addressed within the updated Procedural Handbook, which include:

- Roles and responsibilities of the special education staff and related service providers concerning the evaluation process
- What assessments are required for a Full Team Evaluation
- Assessments required for a change of student placement
- An indication of who is responsible for what type of assessment
- A description of how the assessment reports should be developed
- Entrance and exit criteria for all programs and services to include Speech, Occupational, and Physical Therapy
- Procedures and recordkeeping for student restraints

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

2. The district should consider more options for students with special needs which may consider partnering with other school districts

Explanation: The district has a strong inclusion philosophy, but staff must be adequately trained and have enough support to meet the students' needs. There are limited district programs that can teach the skills students need to work towards the least restrictive environment, most specifically for behavioral and social-emotional needs.

- **Utilize Member Educational Collaboratives for Services and Programs:** The district is currently a member of two collaboratives, NEC, and CREST. Many collaboratives in the Commonwealth build specialized programs in public school settings, hire staff, train, and supervise them to deliver high-quality special needs services that one district cannot do effectively or efficiently on its own. The district should inquire about the possibility of one of the member collaboratives building and managing specialized programs.
- **K-2 Learning Center:** Students transitioning from preschool to Penn Brook have limited options for services other than the SPROUTS program. The district should consider a K-2 “Learning Center” type classroom that supports students who need a less restrictive program, but still need other skills to be successful in general education classrooms.
- **Social-emotional Programs:** If the member collaborative is going to build programs for their member districts, they should start by building programs for students with social-emotional needs.
- **Language-based Programs:** Many students with language-based disabilities, including those who have difficulty with social, self-regulation, sensory, executive functioning, listening, memory, and writing, cannot be supported in the district and are going to out-of-district placements.
- **Vertical Alignment:** The next step is to build programs at each school level so students can stay in the district from Pre-K through high school. Currently, Georgetown needs continuity of programs or services for students who remain in the district.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

- **District School Behavioral Interventions:** Clearly define and embrace a philosophy and consistent strategy for behavioral interventions in the school environment.
- **Curriculum Team:** Build a team that identifies curriculum for district-specialized programs.

3. Update the website to enhance preschool awareness and visibility in the community and develop program descriptions and criteria for placement in a preschool classroom.

Explanation: The district should include Pre-K in all communications and recognize that they are part of its educational institution. The Georgetown Perley Preschool is reflected on the district website, and efforts to increase awareness of the preschool community should continue.

- The website needs to be updated to include more specific content detailing the preschool philosophy, integrated classrooms, and services for students on IEPs.
- Program descriptions for the preschool classrooms need to be added.

4. Improve the Georgetown preschool application and screening process.

Explanation: The current application for the community has limited information to help balance preschool classrooms. There is no information about the child’s pre-academic, receptive and expressive language, fine and gross motor skills, and social-emotional development. There should be an emphasis on in-person screening for the placement of students and that could balance the classes better to improve student learning.

- The screening process should begin by the end of January and be completed before winter break as parents need to know by March 1 if their child has been accepted.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasidecdc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

- The district should highly consider group arena screenings, which are more comfortable for young children’s parents. These screenings offer more information than individual screenings, particularly how the student may function in a group situation. One method is to have 6-8 students with their parents come to a preschool classroom for 45-60 minutes. During this time, the coordinator, and other individuals (counselors, social workers, or psychologists familiar with the preschool program and development) meet with parents to review the application and answer parents’ questions. While this happens, the preschool teachers will lead three activities (circle time, tabletop, and goodbye circle). The activities selected will look at all areas of development. Related service providers from OT, PT, Speech, and Language, as well as teachers, will observe students. The staff will then discuss each child’s language, learning, and social skills.
- If needs are observed at the group screening, the child can come back for an individual screening to rule out the need for a special education disability.
- When developing the new application, related service providers and teachers should develop a section of questions to assess all areas. Open-ended questions like “Tell me about your child’s communication” should be avoided. The district may want to look at other districts’ applications.

5. Develop and document the transition process from preschool to kindergarten.

Explanation: Written procedures that designate timelines for the transition process are essential. All staff engaged in the transition process at each level should understand their role.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
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YouTube: Seaside Consultants

- It is recommended that the district develop/document specific steps for special needs students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten. Sharing student information to determine the most appropriate programming and support services should not be left to a “move-up day” or one meeting held in the spring.
- Planning needs to begin in January. Communication should be structured throughout the spring based on a set timeline for the various activities that ensure the student’s actual transition is completed to ensure a successful transition to kindergarten.
- A flowchart with staff and timelines would be highly beneficial as would a guide for holding staff accountable.
- Transition needs to be uniform in practice and consistently followed. In developing the IEP for students transitioning from preschool to kindergarten, the preschool team should develop the goals, and the receiving team (kindergarten) should develop the service grid to meet the goals in the IEP.
- The preschool and kindergarten teachers would benefit from reciprocal visits to each other’s classrooms and a time to meet a few times a year before formal transition meetings are conducted in the spring. This would ensure that all participants in the transition process are fully aware of the student’s needs, understand the transitioning students’ collective issues, and can plan effective kindergarten class placements at each elementary school. Preschool teachers should become familiar with kindergarten in terms of the daily schedule, the curricula, and the terminology/vocabulary used throughout the kindergarten day.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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YouTube: Seaside Consultants

6. Implementing effective classroom behavioral management strategies should be a high-priority professional development topic for all staff.

Explanation:

- There needs to be a clear delineation between implementing effective classroom management strategies to minimize student behaviors and more intensive behavioral support or consultation that may be needed. The objective is to move from “Crisis” or reactive situations.
- Each classroom teacher should undergo professional development to learn the basic skills of social-emotional learning (SEL) activities. These activities can include implementing consistent rules, interventions, classroom meetings, sensory skills, and self-regulation throughout the school day. The Responsive Classroom is one example of a system that teachers can employ.
- The first step is for teachers to implement classroom management strategies consistently and record data before seeking behavioral consultation.
- If student behavior persists in the classroom, the staff should share this data that supports a need for consultation.

SPROUTS Program (Penn Brook). The SPROUTS program is a non-specifically designed class.

The majority of students currently in the classroom are on the autism spectrum with sensory and behavioral challenges.

7. Develop a comprehensive curriculum for the SPROUTS program to align with the elementary program at Penn Brook Elementary School.

Explanation: The SPROUTS program should be a specialty-designed program that requires research to identify and implement an appropriate curriculum that meets the unique needs of its intensive students. No one

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

specific program exists, but there needs to be a budget and a thoughtful process for purchasing resources to build a robust curriculum.

- A program description that defines the placement criteria for students, methodology, and curriculum should be written.
- Specify the budget to purchase curriculum materials before the school year.
- One approach to building this unique curriculum is to contract with a consultant specializing in developing curriculum and methodology for similar students, both academically and behaviorally. This is a specialty, and it is important to have these supports and build a schedule where students are engaged in a defined curriculum. The program coordinator should lead this initiative and provide relevant professional development.

8. The referral process SAT (Student Support Team) needs to be more uniformly practiced throughout the district and aligned with the MTSS Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) process.

Explanation:

- The referral process (SAT/MTSS) is a general education process, and members should be general educators. Special educators should be brought in to provide insight into students based on their expertise.
- The referral process (SAT/MTSS) is an effective tool if utilized properly. When a student is referred to special education for an evaluation after going through the SAT/MTSS process, the referral is legitimate.
- Staff need to focus on understanding what District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) accommodations are and how they can be used throughout the general education classrooms.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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- A comprehensive DCAP that teachers can access and incorporate into their daily teaching practices and classroom management is not currently utilized. Communication between general and special educators regarding strategies for all students and the special strategies that special educators provide is strained.
- There continues to be a need for enhanced and encouraged dialogue regarding what should occur in general education classes to address the development of organizational and executive functioning skills. As the district develops a tiered level of support, consideration for referral to special education will be more informed and data-based.
- The Student Support Team should also be focused on how they view and determine effective progress. IEP teams must consider whether a student is making effective progress in determining eligibility for special education and developing an IEP. A clear understanding of effective progress will assist the SAT in their deliberations.
- There is currently a sense that the SAT/MTSS process can be an obstacle to making a referral, suggesting that it is “just another step to go through.” There are reported examples where parents will circumvent the process by writing a letter to the school administration and requesting an evaluation under special education. While this cannot be completely prevented, further education for parents on the Tiered Level of Support and a more effective usage of the SAT/MTSS process can lead to fewer referrals.
- A data review of students processed through the SAT/MTSS team needs to be conducted to determine which ones were found ineligible for special education. This type of analysis can provide the district with information that will indicate the kind of training that the SAT/MTSS team members should undertake so that only legitimate referrals are processed.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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- Professional development must be made available to the SAT teams to help them gain greater awareness and insight into effective intervention strategies. Team members should also be coached as part of the training experience so that their intervention strategies can be assessed, revised, and expanded.
- Building administrators need to participate in the SAT/MTSS process consistently. Research demonstrates that more effective changes occur in teaching practices when building administrators engage in these processes.
- The SAT/MTSS team members need to rotate on a scheduled basis so that all building staff members eventually participate in the process. This participation by all staff increases staff ownership of the process.

9. The current Student Support Team (SAT) needs to be more uniformly practiced throughout the district and aligned with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) process.

Explanation:

- There is confusion on the part of school-based personnel as to whether the district is going to use the problem-solving strategy of MTSS. Staff need to be informed that the district is moving forward with it, and how it will be implemented.
- The MTSS problem-solving model is a systematic approach that reviews student strengths and needs, identifies scientifically based interventions, frequently collects data to monitor student progress, and evaluates the effectiveness of the interventions implemented with the student. Problem-solving is a model that is used, as the first means, to solve student difficulties within the general education classrooms. If problem-solving or

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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tiered levels of intervention are not successful in general education classrooms, the cycle of selecting interventions and collecting data is repeated with the assistance of the Student Assistance Team.

- The purpose of the problem-solving process is to assist the classroom teacher and parent(s)/guardian(s) in designing and selecting strategies for improving student academic and/or behavioral performance. The intent is to develop academic and behavioral intervention strategies that have a high probability of success. A structure is provided for addressing the academic and/or behavioral concerns identified by teachers or parents. A problem-solving process requires full collaboration among a team of professionals, along with parents, to identify a specific measurable outcome, and to design research-based interventions that address the concerns. The system must integrate the use of data, both to guide the development of effective interventions and to provide frequent monitoring of a student’s progress. The process includes an assurance that interventions are implemented with fidelity. Family engagement in the process is vital to guarantee that all information which might impact success is considered.
- Many consider the MTSS process to be more comprehensive in scope and more grounded in evidence-based “best practices.” These two approaches could be wedded so that school-based personnel have the “best of the two” to assist them in formulating instructional and behavioral interventions for assisting students who exhibit difficulties in learning and self-regulation.
- The MTSS process has proven to be an effective preventive intervention for students who are experiencing learning, social, and behavioral difficulties while merging special education and general education. The district’s efforts with the Bay State Reading Institute have provided interventions regarding reading and literacy; however, the areas of math and social-emotional interventions require detailed definitive interventions.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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- The members of the (SAT) team need to periodically review their roles and responsibilities. District-wide personnel are at “different places” with respect to their knowledge of the practice, whether the district is moving forward with it, and how it will be implemented if it is used.

10. Inclusive practices need to be a priority for the district, engaging in ongoing review and strengthening of opportunities within general education programs and classrooms to meet the needs of students.

Explanation:

- Interviewees at the secondary level were not clear on the co-teaching model of instruction, the intent of the district regarding this model, and whether it is a viable model of instruction for the district.
- While the district does provide inclusion and co-teaching opportunities for students to learn within the general education classroom setting, the district does not have an articulated philosophy of inclusion and co-teaching and what role each plays in the education of all students and meeting the needs of students with special education learning profiles.
- Based on the expectations of the district’s Department of Special Education, the district’s belief system, its culture, and its mission, co-teaching and inclusion descriptors need to be framed. The four models commonly referred to are Supportive Teaching, Parallel Teaching, Complementary Teaching, and Team Teaching. A resource reference is *A Guide to Co-Teaching: Practical Tips for Facilitating Student Learning* by R. Villa, J. Townsend & A. Nevin. Crown Press, California. Another resource is *Co-Teach! A Handbook for Creating and Sustaining Effective Classroom Partnerships in Inclusive Schools* by Marilyn Friend, Greensboro, NC 27455-2590, www.coteach.com

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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- The descriptors need to indicate which model or models of instruction will be utilized and how decisions are made to determine which model will be utilized. The descriptors also need to incorporate evidence-based “best practice” and reflect the positive components of current practices at the individual schools.
- The descriptors need to be developed in collaboration with all current participants of the co-teaching and in-class models, and these descriptors should be subject to periodic reviews and updates. The descriptors need to include a clear outline of the role each person involved plays in providing instruction within the classroom.

11. Current co-teaching and in-classroom support practices need to continue, and a clear and consistent approach to these models across the district is needed.

Explanation:

- To properly operate the co-teaching and in-classroom instructional support models, there need to be clear, concise, and agreed-upon statements that stress the purpose and intent of these two separate models of instruction.
- Training efforts will need to be expanded as the district looks to expand its co-teaching efforts. To eliminate any confusion, the training should include information on exactly what the co-teaching and in-classroom models are, how they are to function, and the role of teachers and paraprofessionals in these settings.
- The distinction of the two models is that in-class support is provided by paraprofessionals under the direction of special education and classroom

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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teachers while co-teaching is conducted by special and general education teachers jointly providing instruction in the same class.

- For co-teaching to be successful, the teachers will need to have common planning time to assure cohesive instruction takes place for the students. The lack of time to plan together leads to fragmentation as opposed to a joint ownership of students and their learning experience and skills development.
- For the in-class support model to be successful, paraprofessionals must have dedicated time to provide proper feedback to special education teachers on student progress in the general education classroom.
- The in-class model relies upon the paraprofessional to gain understanding of both the students' IEP services and the curriculum for the class they are working in. The district must always be conscious of assuring that the paraprofessional is in their assigned class(s) and assuring the students are receiving their required interventions.
- When addressing the grid on a student's IEPs at the secondary level, the team needs to determine in what subject areas a student requires services. A blanket policy of not providing services in certain subject areas or level of instruction cannot apply. Teams must determine services upon the students' needs, not on the student's class placement.
- The provision of reading services at the secondary level needs to be considered when addressing inclusive services. Students that may require specialized reading (Orton Gillingham/Wilson) need to be reviewed to assure that the service is being provided either in the general education class or another location.
- Many districts are considering a move to more co-taught classes and gradually eliminating the in-class model of support. These districts have looked toward hiring more special education teachers and moving away

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

from relying upon paraprofessionals. This change will enable the district to expand the roles of the two collaborating teachers in a classroom and their impact on instruction.

- The reviewers have observed that co-teaching classes tend to become special education self-contained classes. Principals, along with the other stakeholders involved in scheduling, have done commendable work in maintaining balanced co-teaching classes. Current research indicates that student ratios in co-teaching classes should be approximately two-thirds general education students to one-third special education students. However, the ratio certainly can vary slightly based on the type of needs (intensity) of the clustered group of students within a section. Interviewees reported that some middle school co-taught classes had 50% special education students and in one class nine (9) of the (12) students were on IEPs.
- Should the number of co-teaching classes be expanded throughout the district, greater consideration must be given to matching students with “like” needs as they are clustered together into co-teaching sections? These groupings should have similar needs so that the instructional methodology presented by the collaborating teachers is relevant to the students’ needs. One model that has been observed is the designation of one class at each grade level at the elementary level and at least one content class at each grade level at the secondary level. Expansion of this example can occur as more staff members become interested in participating in the model. As more special education instructors decide to participate in the co-teaching model, the practice of “pullout” time for special needs students will be reduced.
- Consideration must be given to the learning styles of the students and the teaching styles of the co-teachers. Along with clustering students by needs, pairing teachers with the students is essential to make the model more effective with regards to student progress. Many districts have sought

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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volunteers willing to co-teach together, thus eliminating the possibility of having a staff member that might be less than willing to collaborate.

12. The Compass program is the Life Skills Program at the secondary level servicing students up to age twenty-two (22). Currently, the program does not have a program curriculum. The program will need to develop a more vocational and life skills curriculum to address several components to advance the development of students as they move towards a practical world of work. This skill-based curriculum needs to focus on work attitudes, work behaviors, attending to tasks, following directions, work production, quality performance, and responding to supervision.

Explanation:

- The Compass program at the high school is lacking vocational and life skills curriculum and opportunities. There are many elements of a vocational program and curriculum that need to be implemented for students to transition from a functionally academic program to a community-based training/employment program. Some skills that the students need to be exposed to and master are:
 - Punctuality
 - Appearance
 - Willingness to work
 - Task initiation
 - Acceptance of others
 - Cooperative worker
 - Pride in accomplishment

- Students will need to be exposed to work supervision and evaluation of their performance. They will need to understand what an evaluation of performance means in the workplace.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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- Each tier or stage of the vocational program must enable the students to explore various careers so that they become more aware of what they are able to do and what interests them. This provides them with an opportunity to branch out into more challenging training and employment opportunities.

- Suggested Resources:
 - Able Data, abledata@macroninternational.com
 - www.tautism.net/docs/guide/evaluation/transitional.pdf
 - Preparing Students with Disabilities for School to Work Transition www.nasponline.org/resource/./transition
 - National Center on Access for Students with Low-Incidence Disabilities.
 - LABBB Collaborative, www.labbb.com/highschool.htwl

- Parents need to have the opportunity to receive assistance, training, and experiences that will increase their awareness and appreciation for their child's level of development.

- As noted in this review, the student population should be reviewed each year to assure the program is addressing students' needs.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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13. The THRIVE program functions at the high school servicing students with social-emotional needs. The program currently has a full-time paraprofessional and a tutor and is overseen by the school psychologist.

Explanation:

- Currently, the middle school has a behavioral coach. The position is not focused upon working with individual students, but rather the coach works closely with teachers providing advice to be utilized within the classroom.
- A review of student needs at the middle school is needed to determine if the THRIVE program should be added at that level to assure that the district is consistent in addressing student needs.
- As noted above, a program continuum for the THRIVE program needs to be assessed to include the middle school. The THRIVE program, like the Compass program, will need to include a vocational focus to address and advance the development of the students as they move towards a practical world of work.
- The district may want to consider developing an overlapping vocational and work component that is available to students in the Compass and Thrive programs as well as individual students that could benefit from the teaching and experiences available.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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LINKS Program

- The Links Program is a general education program. The program provides services to students returning from hospitalizations or are in concussion protocols.
- Interviewees were not aware of any criteria for the Links Program nor were they clear on how the program functioned.
- The district needs to consider developing a criterion of how students enter Links and the services available. Some interviewees thought the program was for special education students. The clearer all staff are on the intent of the program, the better prepared they will be to service the returning student in class.

14. The district needs to develop a more comprehensive approach to professional development experiences for all school personnel by focusing on regular and special education topics.

Explanation:

- Professional development activities are not in place that will enable school-based personnel to gain a greater awareness and understanding of special education requirements, practices, and procedures.
- Interviewed staff expressed an interest in having more frequent and in-depth training opportunities that focus on understanding the difference between a typical student who is struggling and a student who is eligible for specialized instruction. Other topics of interest included the following:

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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- . SAT practices, the MTSS model
 - . Specific disabilities
 - . Learning styles
 - . Characteristics of a disability
 - . How to instruct students with various disabilities
 - . The role of paraprofessionals in the classroom
 - . Understanding the IEP for paraprofessionals
 - . Managing challenging classroom behaviors
 - . Eligibility determination
 - . Clarification on exactly what specialized instruction is.
 - . Servicing the various needs of the student population particularly with mental health needs
 - . The co-teaching model of instruction
 - . How to work as a team
 - . The writing of measurable goals
 - . Using the IEP as a learning tool
 - . The referral process
 - . Training for principals on supervising special education staff
 - . How to deal with difficult team meetings and difficult parents
 - . How to effectively communicate and collaborate with parents
 - . How to avoid litigation
 - . Curriculum and instructional accommodations
 - . Differentiated instruction
 - . Universal design
 - . More types of interventions and strategies
 - . Positive behavioral interventions
 - . Section 504
- Principals are the primary supervisor of the special education staff in their schools which includes teachers, psychologists, school adjustment counselors, specialists, and paraprofessionals. Training to assist them with their role should be provided. As supervisors, they need to be aware of

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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resources available within the district and the community and be able to share these with staff as indicated. If they are responsible for evaluating, they would need to know the differing roles staff play and how to evaluate performance in relation to IEPs and compliance.

- There needs to be a discussion on the issues of “What is right?” or “What is fair?” There was some expressed concern, frustration, and a lack of understanding concerning matters such as appropriate grading, student workload, assignments for students with disabilities, and acceptance of disabled students. Interviewed staff expressed interest in these as they relate to the cultural expectations of the schools and the district.
- Training needs to be designed by groups of professionals and support staff so that it is meaningful to them. The training experience should be designed with respect to the professional experience of the audience. Not all staff should be presented with the same information. Training needs to be designed with respect to the current knowledge and experience of the various groups and audiences. Specialists such as school adjustment counselors, speech and language therapists, psychologists, guidance counselors, etc. should have the opportunity to attend training that is specific to their field of expertise. In some cases, this may require off-site attendance at conferences and/or workshops. Another option would be to approach neighboring districts, through a collaborative, to see if they were interested in participating in the development of training for “low incident” professionals.
- Coordinators are often the initial contact with parents through the referral process, and they also play a role with parents throughout the student’s educational experience. Training should be put in place to assist the coordinators with techniques for working with parents in a collaborative manner and encouraging parents to be significant members of their child’s team. The goal for the entire Special Education Department is to assure

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

parents develop TRUST and maintain that trust throughout the student's educational experience.

- There is misunderstanding of the various terms that are used in special education. School-based personnel do not have a clear understanding of the distinctions among in-class support, inclusion, the co-teaching model, accommodation, adaptation, and modification. Staff may interchange these terms, one for the other, despite the fact that there are clear distinctions among them.
- The distinction among the disabilities is another area of training that is needed. Staff members need to have a greater understanding of the various disabilities, what they mean in terms of an impact on learning, and what are the “best practices” that they should be utilizing as interventions.
- Eligibility for specialized instruction is not clear to all staff. There seems to be a pattern developing where one student becomes eligible, so if another student appears to have similar needs, then that student should become eligible as well. This misunderstanding creates confusion among staff and could lead to an increase in referrals for special education evaluations.
- During the interviews, when discussing the inclusion of students with disabilities and the reason for doing so, it was not mentioned with any consistency that access to the general education curriculum was the reason to include students with disabilities into general education classes. This is not a major error on the part of any one individual, but it is an indicator of the thinking of school-based personnel with respect to why students are being included and that all school-based staff are responsible for the education of all students.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

- The role of the coordinator needs to be clear to all as the job requirements can be very demanding. Consistency in what the expectations are must be clear to the program leader, principal, special education director and all staff.
- Curriculum and instructional accommodations, differentiated instruction, universal design, how to instruct students with various disabilities, learning styles of students, more types of interventions and strategies, addressing challenging classroom behaviors, and positive behavioral interventions are many of the topics for training that need to be considered.
- All staff would benefit from training on how to effectively utilize a paraprofessional in their classroom. There is confusion on the part of teachers on exactly what the role, purpose, and intent of this is in classroom support. Teachers are not fully clear on what effective strategies and approaches should be implemented by the paraprofessionals.
- Paraprofessionals would benefit from greater access to training on the Curriculum Frameworks, managing challenging behaviors in the classroom, various instructional strategies, understanding the IEP, and how they should function within a general education classroom.

Transition Practices

15. Transition practices need to be structured in a more sequential and consistent manner between the various school levels.

Explanation:

- Transition activities are conducted each year for students moving from one level to the next. However, the transition process appears to be viewed differently by school-based personnel involved from preschool to

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

elementary schools, from elementary schools to middle school and from middle school to high school. The steps that are in place for transition need to be structured and in written form.

- Transition from one level to the next, to assure consistent practice throughout the district, is very important. The district currently does not have a written transition process, preschool to elementary and elementary to middle school. Often staff at the receiving school do not believe they are well informed about the incoming students. The transition of students with social-emotional/behavioral concerns needs particular attention.
- Staff members are performing the steps for transition that need to occur, but there is a tendency for each school to shape the process somewhat differently. It would be beneficial to review the steps with all involved staff to ensure that practices and procedures are being consistently followed.
- It is essential to have written procedures in place that designate timelines for various activities. Definitions of the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in the transition activities/protocols at each level should also be included. It is recommended that the district develop very specific steps for the transition process from one level to the next. The sharing of information to determine the most appropriate programming and support services for students should not be left to a “move up day” or one meeting held in the spring. Planning needs to begin in the winter months of January or February, and communication should be structured throughout the spring months based on a set timeline for the various activities, thus ensuring that the actual transition of the student is completed in a manner that enables success.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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16. The district needs to establish criteria by which paraprofessionals are assigned to a student, a group of students, a program, or a classroom.

Explanation:

- As students with disabilities are increasingly being placed in general education classrooms, the use of paraprofessionals has expanded. Recent national figures estimate that over 500,000 paraprofessionals are employed in public schools and increases are anticipated in the coming years. The proliferation of paraprofessionals in public schools often has outpaced the conceptualization of team roles and responsibilities, as well as the training and supervision needs of paraprofessionals.
- Paraprofessionals spend considerable time working directly with individual students and small groups of students. If the district is going to continue to rely on these positions to support special needs students in general education classes and in substantially separate programs, then training opportunities need to be made available so that they have a more extensive knowledge of the various disabilities, Curriculum Frameworks, strategies of instruction and intervention, management of behavioral issues, provision of in-classroom support, and the making of curriculum accommodations and modifications. Paraprofessionals need to have a greater understanding of how instruction is provided to students with varying disabilities.
- Paraprofessionals need to know how they are to be utilized in the various instructional settings. Reviewers heard that often when paraprofessionals are assigned to general education classes, they do not know how to function in that setting. Additionally, in many instances, the general education teachers do not know how to effectively use paraprofessionals. It is essential that training is provided to the paraprofessionals that will give them the strategies that they need to use in all settings.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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- It would be beneficial for the district to maintain a clear criterion indicating why these positions are being assigned to a student, a program, or a class. When utilized for “coverage” attention to IEP compliance is needed. It is understood that health and safety reasons are foremost in administrators’ minds, as well as the provision of assistance in substantially separate programs, but beyond that it becomes less clear as to “how” or “when” a paraprofessional should be utilized. Practices and procedures should be spelled out on how they are to function in various instructional settings such as working with groups, working one-on-one, monitoring test taking, providing MCAS support, providing in-class support, etc.
- The decision-making process needs to be clear and understood by all those who have input in the process. The research on the decision-making process is scant (Freshi, 1999; Giangreco, Broer & Edelman, 1999). The idea that a paraprofessional is utilized to implement the goals of an IEP should be due to the district’s current inability to implement those goals without the use of this additional support.
- Given the number of paraprofessionals in Georgetown the district should give strong consideration to trading paraprofessionals’ positions for special education teacher positions. Other strategies that are commonly practiced assisting with the utilization of paraprofessionals include increasing ownership by general education staff, time limited assignments, and the usage of assistants to free up special education personnel from burdensome paperwork so that the special education staff can spend more time with students.
- General education teachers also need to be trained in how to effectively utilize a paraprofessional in their classroom. Too often, both the teacher and the paraprofessional do not have a clear understanding of how the paraprofessional is expected to function in the general education class. A

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

valuable resource can be underutilized when the function and purpose of the position are not understood.

Administrative Data Collection and Scheduling Oversight

17. There needs to be a thorough review of what data the district is collecting to improve decision-making and internal practices.

Explanation:

- The district offers an array of various programs and support services that are designed based on the designated needs of the special education population. As discussed above, Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) efforts need to be reviewed and enhanced. Consideration needs to be given to what data will be collected and how the data should be viewed. General and special education staff would benefit from training on user-friendly data collection systems.
- Referral trends should be reviewed relative to how many referrals were made to the SAT and what the outcomes were. This data should be reviewed to determine and assess in relation to SAT and MTSS efforts. The data will assist in developing future professional development initiatives at the school and district level.
- The district should also review the findings of no eligibility throughout the district. This information will assist administration in identifying referral trends and focusing upon needed interventions. It will also lend itself to monitoring SAT and MTSS efforts.
- District leadership needs to begin to develop a review process with all special education staff to determine what evidence-based practices are

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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currently being utilized throughout the district and how data is utilized to determine student outcomes and to meet the identified needs of students.

- The district should continually review options that might better preserve student service delivery and teacher consultation time. A procedure needs to be developed to assure that all staff schedules are submitted routinely at various times of the school year for review. Schedules should be collected at a minimum of three times and should be submitted in a format that is consistent across the district. Having this data on file and readily available will assist with addressing staffing needs that arise throughout the year and identifying options that might better preserve student service delivery and teacher consultation time.
- Additional training in performance data collection in all forms is an area that all staff would benefit from. There is a concern for the “in between(er)” students that performance data is not being collected in a manner that will drive the instruction for these students who are demonstrating slow or limited progress.
- There is effective work being accomplished by the various special education instructional programs throughout the district. This effort needs to be quantified in data collection with respect to the effective progress students are making with their individual needs.
- This data collection will greatly assist interested parties in gaining a fuller understanding of the positive impact that the allocated resources are having on student growth and development. Reviewing student performance data during the school year will enable staff to make determinations as to what adjustments/changes can or should be recommended for students’ IEPs. When concentrated instruction is provided to students over a short or long period of time, this effort needs to be evaluated as to its effectiveness.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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- It appears in isolated cases and instructional situations that data regarding student progress is not being utilized to inform instruction. There were several situations, during the interviews, where staff elaborated on the implementation of the same methodology or practice for student(s), even though no progress was recorded for the student(s) while using this practice or methodology. The current approach was not reviewed for effectiveness nor, if necessary, changed. This does not mean that the practices cannot be explained, but it certainly raises the question of effectiveness. This is a very good example of why special education administrative oversight is so important to the operation and function of special education.

- Consider using an online data recording platform.
 - When all staff use the same tools to collect data, there will be more consistency from classroom to classroom in the district.

 - Creating a system where staff input data into an iPad, tablet, or computer which will build better habits, accountability, and credibility for team meetings when staff present goals, objectives, benchmarks, and behavior concerns.

- The reviewers recommend a few online programs. Both companies offer staff training.
 - Catalyst by DataFinch
 - ACE by NECC

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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18. There needs to be a thorough review of evidence-based “best practices” that are applicable to the various special education instruction and support programs that are currently operating within the district.

Explanation:

- Currently, the district offers an array of various programs and support services that are designed because of the designated needs of the special education population. This is an effective approach for servicing the diverse special education populations within the district. However, the needs of the population are continuously changing, and these changes in students’ needs may warrant a change in the approaches that special education instructors utilize to service the students.
- At the secondary level it appears that considerable time is spent by staff and students on “getting the work done” on home assignments, term projects, and test preparation. Academic support periods need to spend the bulk of student time on learning “how to” get the home assignments completed at home, “how to” prepare for a test, and “how to” complete a term project. Students need to learn skills that will help them become independent and successful learners. Certainly, they may require some assistance with various assignments, with reviewing new concepts, or with getting their work organized, but the ratio of this type of support to learning “how to do it independently” should be no more than two out of five periods.
- Changes in strategies of instructional and behavioral intervention practices should be aligned with the true definition of the various programs, along with the intent, purpose, function, and outcome for the students within the programs.

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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- Staff members need to design strategies which will allow students to be shared among programs and services. Students should have access to program options and choices. They do not always fit nicely into one model or service. The sharing of a student among special education staff and programs can enable the student to benefit from the expertise of other special education staff and other program designs.
- The above recommendation applies to all the identified programs: the co-teaching model, the in-classroom support model (inclusion), and the academic support periods at all levels.
- The district will have to ensure that adequate support, additional time for concentrated small group instruction, and follow-up monitoring is provided. This support may need to come through the elimination of current school-based instruction and specials, or it may come through the creation of a longer school day so that the attention these students require is ensured.
- Special education instruction and service delivery must take into consideration the delivery of instruction in the least restrictive setting and include research-based curriculum and evidence-based practices in instruction.
- The middle school and high school schedule often dictates where students receive services. This often results in special education academic support having multiple grades of students with their special education teacher. Interviews indicated that teachers may not be able to meet the specialized instruction indicated in individual students' IEPs. The district needs to consider minimizing having multiple grades together and looking to students being serviced by grade level or by the area of specialized instruction.

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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- Inclusive practices, expectations, and co-teaching need to be formalized. The district needs to be clear about its commitment to co-teaching at all school levels.
- To assist with being proactive, the district needs to assure that the continuum of services offered is consistent building to building and level to level — preschool to kindergarten, elementary to middle school, and middle school to high school. The continuity of services needs to be in place as students transition through the district.
- A review of how specialized instruction is provided in these classes should occur to enhance opportunities for students to receive services in the inclusive environment.
- Strong consideration should also be given to revisiting differentiated instruction and universal design for learning across the district and providing push-in support for students. Interviewees indicated that it is difficult to meet student needs when servicing multigrades in classes that are not scheduled with students requiring similar instruction.
- The development of “power standards” in each subject area along with primary goals to focus upon would be valuable to special education teachers as they work to ensure they are covering required curriculum information and MCAS areas.

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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Instagram: seasideedc

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19. Administrative oversight of special education programming, services, and special education personnel needs to be redefined as to its structure within the Special Education Department.

Explanation:

- The district has made substantial investment in program development, and it is not in the best interest of the personnel of these programs and the programs themselves not to receive the ongoing oversight that they deserve. It is not in the best interest of effective program sustainability. To accomplish this, Georgetown needs to determine who and how all programs are overseen, evaluated, and monitored.
- District leadership needs to begin a review process with all special education staff to determine the following:
 - What evidence-based practices are currently being utilized?
 - How effective are these practices on student outcomes?
 - Do they meet the identified needs of the students?
 - How data is utilized to determine student outcomes and to meet the identified needs of students.
 - When and why a student is either pulled out for services and when they remain in an inclusion setting to receive services.
 - Determine how to review results and the impact of the disability on the student's ability to perform in the classroom and that the goals and benchmarks reflect the assessment results and impact on ability.
 - How students on IEPs are disciplined and what role teachers and administration play to assure consistency.
- There needs to be a discussion of the issues of “What is right?” or “What is fair?” There was some expressed concern, frustration, and a lack of understanding concerning appropriate grading, student workload, modification of curriculum and assignments for students with disabilities. Interviewed staff members expressed interest in these issues and suggested that a study group format would be useful.

508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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- The Director of Special Education will need to coordinate with the central office and building principals to establish scheduled times for the special education staff to meet as a department throughout the school year. Additionally, there should be an opportunity for the various disciplines within the department to meet periodically during the school year. These subgroups would meet to address specific needs for the population of students that they serve.
- Procedures and policies also can become unclear over time. Assuring that staff are assessing disability categories and ensuring proper decision-making needs to be clear to all. The reviewers have found discrepancies between assessment data and proper decision-making. A procedure for identification can resolve any confusion on the part of staff as to how the district identifies/defines a given disability category. There may also be other areas that require clarity on the part of staff. A formal review of procedures and policies needs to take place. The most productive practice is to develop a committee with representation from all levels (preschool through high school) composed of general education, special education, and administrative personnel.
- A review of the roles and responsibilities of various special education personnel to assure that there is clarity is required. As new special education positions evolve over time and staff changes at the building level, administrator's requests, expectations, and building needs change. Understanding what responsibilities each has and areas that are unclear must be identified and assigned to the appropriate position.
- The role and responsibilities of the building principals and the Director of Special Education in relation to programs and special education staff also requires clarification. Upon completion of this important task, it is essential that it be shared with all constituents.
- Principals need to be prepared to supervise the special educators in their buildings. The district needs to provide training and assistance to allow them to perform this task. Joint meetings with the Director of Special Education and Student Support Services to review and discuss the needs should be scheduled.

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Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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- The district needs to update job descriptions for each special education position in the district and ensure that all staff understand their role and the responsibilities they have.
- The district needs to develop a process to maintain continued access and review of staff schedules. This will assist in decision-making relative to staff assignments and show where overloads may be as well as making available time for various staff.
- As noted, protocols need to be developed and implemented specifically in the areas of:
 - Transitions
 - Program Entrance/Exit Criteria
 - Inclusion
 - Co-teaching
 - In-class services
 - Assignment of paraprofessionals
 - Parent communication
- An annual review of students placed in each program should be considered to assure that the programs continue to meet the specific population they were developed for. Teachers and building administrators should be consulted to assess their input. Too much effort has been committed to the programs and efforts. Assessing their continued effectiveness will be of benefit to all: students, teachers, parents, and administration. Such a review will also allow the special education department to remain proactive to the needs of students.

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

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Entrance/Exit Criteria

20. Entrance and exit criteria in place for all special education programs and services need to be understood and followed.

Explanation:

- There is a lack of understanding by school-based personnel as to what the entrance/exit criteria are for the numerous special education programs and services. It appears that the staff's assumption of entrance criteria is based on whether a student's needs are such that they are unable to access or require significant modification to the general education curriculum. In addition to uncertainty of the process and criteria by which students enter a program, exit criteria from a program are not defined throughout the various programs.
- The establishment of entrance and exit criteria based on evidence-based practice will assist the district in reducing the possible length of time a student is assigned to a specific program or service and determine the duration of time that a student receives a specific service. Practices like these may also lead to increased time for students from these programs to have access to general education.
- Criteria need to be developed for programs and services to assure that entrance is clear and understood by all special and general education personnel as well as parents. These criteria should be completed at the same time as program descriptions and personnel roles and responsibilities are being updated.
- All criteria developed must be shared with all constituents.

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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- The related service providers of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and school adjustment counseling need to have written entrance and exit criteria in place. There are established professional standards for these services that outline the criteria that need to be in place. This would ensure that caseloads are appropriate, and that students are recommended for a change in service at the appropriate time, not just at annual reviews and re-reviews. Too often, students continue to receive a related service for an undetermined time such as a full year or year after year. With established entrance and exit criteria, students will be able to have a service reduced, when necessary, or be discharged from that service at the appropriate time after a re-review is conducted.
- For all the programs and related services, stated entrance and exit criteria that are based on evidenced-based practice, current research, and reflect the mission and goals of each program need to be in place. For the programs and services that provide a continuum of programming and services, it is essential that entrance criteria, exit criteria, and referral protocols are adhered to as stated. They must be structured in a sequential manner for each district-wide program.
- Placements in an in-district program should not be determined on accessibility to general education curriculum. Rather the emphasis should be placed on how students can access the curriculum in the least restrictive setting. The establishment of these criteria can be completed in collaboration when program descriptions and personnel roles and responsibilities are being updated.
- The establishment of entrance and exit criteria based on evidence-based practice will assist the district in reducing the number of students on IEPs, the possible length of time a student is assigned to a specific program and determine the duration of time that a student receives a specific service.

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Instagram: seasideedc

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Parent Awareness and Support

21. The district needs to develop effective strategies to improve parent awareness, consistent communication, eligibility for special education and understanding of their child's IEP, disability, and progress.

Explanation:

- Parents would benefit significantly from increased awareness of the district's special education process and in-district programs. This training should include a discussion on how the district communicates with parents, which appears inconsistent. Communication within the school and out of the school is vital to partnering with parents in all areas.
- It would be advantageous for the district to develop a parent engagement process/protocol for use across the district to engage parents more consistently. Currently, staff are left to their own relative to the information they share with parents and how often contact is made. A systemic approach to what information is shared and how often it is shared would assist staff in working with parents.
- Professional development for special education staff, especially coordinators, regarding conflict resolution, how to conduct a team meeting, and strategies for effective communication will assist staff efforts with the team meeting process.
- There needs to be a focus on assuring parents that they are part of the team process and that their questions/concerns will be addressed promptly.
- Parents are essential to the IEP process and their child's education. The district needs to be open to their input and have reasonable, respectful, and

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

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mindful discussions of their concerns. Although there may be disagreement, there should always be open dialogue to discuss the issues.

- The district needs to make efforts to ensure they are working with and supporting the Special Education Parent Advisory Council. Training should be sponsored for both staff and parents that will raise the level of awareness and appreciation of parents' concerns and needs as well as focus upon topics of mutual concern such as data collection, student progress, and utilization of the IEP along with effort the districts have implemented on MTSS. These opportunities should be conducted jointly.
- Topics such as the district's philosophy of inclusion, discipline policies, bullying, and notification of interventions such as reporting restraints or removal from the classroom should be addressed annually and clearly documented.
- Team members should refrain from using special education jargon and discussing potential costs, thus assuring parents are part of the team process. They should be able to ask and have their questions and concerns addressed.
- Parents reported that they are not notified when a professional service provider position is vacated or unfilled. Notifying parents when various situations occur or when a position needs to be filled is critical to assuring trust between the district and families. As noted in this report, a protocol for staff to assist with parent communication is indicated.
- The protocol should include various topics such as how often communication is expected, when to notify parents of various situations (when a position is not filled for a period of time, etc.) and refraining from any financial questions. Open communication will often assure parents the district is providing what is best for their student.

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

Summary

This evaluation focused on determining the status of special education programming and services from Pre-K to high school. Findings and recommendations were developed from this process with full explanations for each recommendation. This report provides the district with the necessary information to build and enhance programs and services.

The recommendations section is a guide for implementing these initiatives over five years. Administration and school-based special and regular education personnel can develop short- and long-range action plan(s) that will address agreed-upon issues. It is important to include all stakeholders in discussing the findings and recommendations to benefit the school district and special education services.

The Office of Student Services support staff and the school-based staff are appreciated for their assistance in scheduling school visits, class observations, and interviews.

Seaside Educational Consultants · P.O. Box 2269 · Seabrook, NH 03874
508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

Facebook: Seaside EDC

Instagram: seasideedc

YouTube: Seaside Consultants

Appendix A

DESE Special Education FY23 Disability Categories

	SWD Total	Intellectual	Sensory Hard of Hearing	Communication	Sensory Vision Impairment	Emotional	Physical
Dover-Sherborn	207	3	0	21	0	37	1
Silver Lake	261	5	2	10	1	16	1
Berlin-Boylston	184	5	2	14	0	23	1
Georgetown	223	4	2	30	1	28	3
Millis	191	6	1	15	3	21	1
Lynnfield	388	4	2	54	2	27	1
Littleton	290	5	0	44	2	18	0
Wilmington	500	8	3	104	1	37	5
Manchester-Essex	230	5	3	13	0	18	0
Sutton	252	6	1	26	0	3	5
King-Philip	340	15	1	23	0	47	0

	SWD Total	Health	Specific Learning Disabilities	Sensory Deafblind	Multiple Disabilities	Autism	Neurological	Development Delay
Dover-Sherborn	207	44	53	0	0	26	22	0
Silver Lake	261	93	80	1	5	29	18	0
Berlin-Boylston	184	26	28	0	2	28	18	37
Georgetown	223	46	46	0	3	24	6	30
Millis	191	21	44	0	0	36	10	33
Lynnfield	388	71	146	0	3	47	9	22
Littleton	290	50	83	0	3	53	8	24
Wilmington	500	56	130	1	4	75	21	55
Manchester-Essex	230	39	60	0	4	28	21	39
Sutton	252	33	66	2	5	42	21	42
King-Philip	340	79	109	0	6	44	16	0

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508.523.7466

Seasideconsultants@gmail.com · www.seasideedu.com

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YouTube: Seaside Consultants