

Evaluation Report Manchester-Essex Regional School District Special Education Programs

Educational Consultants

Sally Smith

Patric Barbieri

Conducted December 2022-January 2023

Commendations

Evaluation

- Superintendent and Director of Student Services for requesting this independent evaluation
- MERSD Staff for sharing their insight and feedback about their roles and responsibilities and ideas for improving special education services and best practices.
- Strong Collaboration between teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers

Commendations

INCLUSION

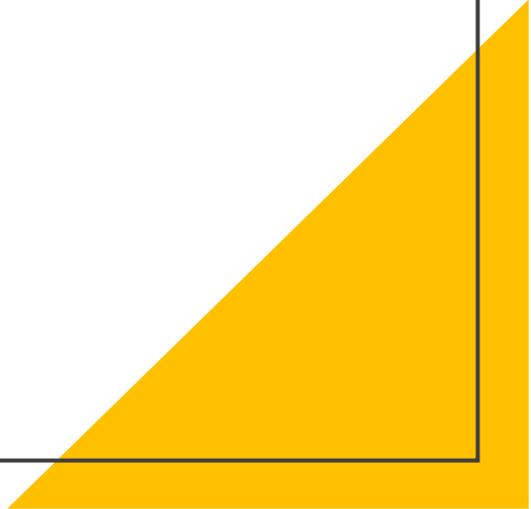
- Quality Inclusion / Co-Teaching experiences
- Related Services providers SLP's, OT, and PT were forward thinking and worked with teachers to increase co-treatments, and push in vs. pull out therapy
- High school learning strategies liaisons and the middle school moderate liaisons model are vital components of both the middle school and high school.

Commendations

High Quality In-District Programs

- **IRWL** (Intensive Reading Writing Language)
- **TRANSITIONS** Social - Emotional
- **ACE** (Academic and Communication Program)
- **PRESCHOOL PROGRAM** strong collaborative staff, excellent teacher, student ratios

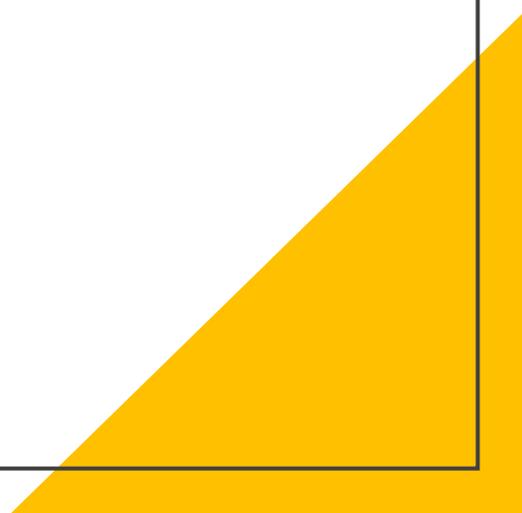
Recommendations



Preparing Pre-School for Future Growth

- Increase of Students with more intensive needs
 - Potential for Universal Pre-School
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Re-Structure ACE / SWING

- This was been implemented in the 2023-2024 School Year
 - Updated Program Descriptions
 - Criteria for Assigning 1:1's
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Chairperson's Role should be changed to an Administrative Position

- To observe and evaluate
- to have authority to make “Resource” Decisions at IEP meetings as stated by DESE regulations.

The Cost of Least Restrictive Environments (LRE)

- Percentage of Budget spent on Special Education
- Circuit Breaker
- Transportation Costs
- Cost Avoidance

The Cost of Least Restrictive Environments (LRE)

- Staffing
- Resources: Curriculum, Technology

Professional Development

- Professional Development TEAM
- General Education and Special Education Collaboration with Students with Special needs. Understanding Roles and Responsibilities.
- Relevant to Support Related Service Providers.

Recommendation Updates and Status

Recommendation	Steps to Implementation	Status
Provide Increased Oversight of the Manchester-Essex Early Childhood Program	Add a Preschool chair/BCBA/supervisor position as the program expands.	Position on hold due to budget
Manchester-Essex Team Chairpersons Should Have Independent Contracts	Move chairpersons into administrative contracts.	Further action on hold pending discussion with META and consideration of budget implications

Recommendation	Steps to Implementation	Status
<p>Restructure ACE/SWING Programs and Update Program Descriptions</p>	<p>Program review was completed in FY23 and 24 with staff. Program name is now ACE. Program descriptions updated.</p> <p>Complex needs classrooms for younger children consolidated at Memorial.</p>	<p>Completed</p>
<p>Re-evaluate Staff to Student Ratios and One-to-One Assistants Assigned to Specific Students</p>	<p>Student to staff ratios assessed in all programs. 1:1 criteria established.</p> <p>Teaching assistants reduced in MS ACE program and teacher added. HS is implementing similar model in FY25.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

Recommendation	Steps to Implementation	Status
Professional Development for General Education and Special Education	<p>Training for special education department and parents in new IEP this year.</p> <p>Administrative training on UDL completed this year.</p> <p>Partnering with curriculum director on PD for next year that will address UDL and students with disabilities.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>
Update District Procedures Manual	<p>District policies and procedures are under review in preparation for Tiered Focus Monitoring with DESE in FY 25</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

Evaluation Report Manchester-Essex Regional School
District
Special Education Programs

Department of Student Support Services

Manchester-Essex Regional School District

Manchester-Essex, Massachusetts

Conducted: December 2022 - January 2023

Submitted by:
Sally Smith
Patric Barbieri

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I. Introduction

The Superintendent and the Director of Student Services of the Manchester Essex Public Schools requested an independent evaluation of the Pre-K-12 special education programs and services. This evaluation was requested to improve/strengthen the specialized programs at all levels.

This program evaluation will review the curriculum at all levels, entrance and exit criteria for consideration of placement into programs, the procedural intake process, daily operational practices of each class, the overall functionality of the program in addressing student needs, a review of the instructional, therapeutic, and behavioral theoretical models of intervention, the current data collection system and the district's approach to the analysis of student progress.

In addition, the evaluation will focus on the transition activities that are in place to ensure that students appropriately transition from one level to the next level and how program staff support students in their inclusionary placements. This will include evaluating transition services for students 18-22. The consultants will also evaluate current Professional Development opportunities for the special education staff and general education teachers who support students from these programs in their general education classrooms.

A. Purpose

The purpose of an independent evaluation of a department is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strength, needs, and recommendations. The review process is designed through a multi-step approach to assist the school district's leadership team and the school-based special education personnel in having a guided and focused discussion that will enable effective short- and long-range planning to occur while recognizing and addressing issues such as

- Identifying trends and patterns in the referral process
- Identifying the profile of the students who are being referred.
- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel and their roles and responsibilities
- Determining the effectiveness of the current curriculum and service interventions.
- Staffing and resources that reflect student needs.

- Creating a long-range plan that addresses the agreed-upon changing needs of the student population.
- Establishing a comprehensive program and service development approach linked to the annual budget planning process.

This review process brings forth information that will enable the district's administration and program-based special education personnel to develop an action plan (s) that will lead to effective approaches for serving most students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment of the Manchester Essex Regional School System.

B. Evaluators

Sally Smith, M. Ed., is a Special Education and Early Childhood Consultant for Seaside Educational Consultants, LABBB Collaborative, and the North Shore Education Consortium. Before her present professional position, Ms. Smith has 39 years of educational experience that includes Early Childhood Coordinator and Northeast Regional Associate Manager of Walker Partnerships, Director of Professional Development for the Education Collaborative of Greater Boston, four years as Director of Student Services for the Belmont Public Schools following 12 years of involvement with the Early Childhood Program for the Belmont Public Schools as a Preschool special education teacher, an inclusion specialist, and Early Childhood Coordinator. Ms. Smith has also been an elementary and middle school consulting teacher for the Lynnfield Public Schools and a special education teacher at the SEEM Collaborative. Ms. Smith has conducted many professional development trainings and participated in over 40 program evaluations of special education programs and services at all grade levels for public school districts. Ms. Smith has instructed and supervised graduate students from many Boston-area colleges and universities and mentored/coached teachers and coordinators. Ms. Smith also has extensive experience developing effective programming for students on the Autism Spectrum.

Patric Barbieri, M. Ed. Patric 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 trainings 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, and he is currently the Director of ForeverParent. This organization helps parents prepare for the future care of

their son or daughter when they can no longer be there. He has run workshops, created podcasts, and written many articles on the importance of the planning process based on his own family's experience.

II. Methodology

The program evaluation recommendations are based on a five-step process.

1. Document Review

Review of written documentation about this review, such as program descriptions, class schedules, staff patterns, contracted services, role descriptions, procedural guidelines, budget data, student progress data collection systems, the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP), professional development offerings for the program staff and general education teachers and Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of students attending these programs were reviewed.

2. Observations: Observations of classrooms were 30 -45 minutes and included:

- **Essex Elementary:** ACE classroom, moderate grade 1 reading, SWING small group math.
- **Memorial Elementary:** 2 preschool classes, 2nd and 3rd-grade IRWL, SAIL math inclusion, walk-through of severe preschool classroom.
- **Middle School:** ACE, IRWL science, moderate inclusion math, SAIL, learning strategies
- **High School:** Learning strategies class, math inclusion, SWING/ACE

3. Interviews: The interviews with administrators, teachers, support-related service providers, paraprofessionals, and parents were approximately 45 minutes in duration. Most of the interviews were one-on-one, but in some cases, interviews were in small groups no larger than four people.

- **Memorial Elementary:** school adjustment counselor, elementary team chair for Memorial/Essex, five general education teachers, three moderate teachers, 3 IRWL $\frac{1}{2}$ teachers, two $\frac{3}{4}$ IRWL teachers, SAIL teacher with two assistants, 4th-grade math inclusion moderate, two preschool teachers, speech and language and occupational therapist, principal, pre-k teacher (severe), pre-k paraprofessionals.
- **Essex Elementary:** interim principal, 2nd-grade teacher, SWING teaching assistants, SWING teacher, speech and language pathologist, SWING small group math, three moderate teaching assistants, teacher (moderate), ACE teacher

- **Middle School:** SAIL teacher, school adjustment counselor, ACE teacher, principal and dean of students, the two moderate liaisons, the 3 IRWL teachers, team chair, psychologist.
- **High School:** transition staff, three teaching assistants for moderate/transitions, principal, SWING/ACE teacher, transition learning strategies, psychologist

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

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

- General background
- Curriculum
- Professional development
- Community engagement
- Inclusion practices
- SEL practices (Social Emotional Learning)
- Transition process
- Communication
- Referral Process
- Team meeting process and IEP development

Questions for Parents

The evaluators met with a few parents and received some helpful information which contributed to the recommendations in this report. We encourage the director to establish a time in the fall to reach out to more parents to hear and listen to feedback regarding the following topics:

- Curriculum
- Community engagement
- Transition from Early intervention to Preschool to Kindergarten
- Inclusion opportunities
- Communication

4. Exit Interview

The two consultants conducted a 2.0-hour exit interview on March 3, 2023, with the director of special education. This discussion reviewed general findings and recommendations.

5. Analysis of Data and Report Development

A comprehensive report was written to include recommendations based on the analysis of all collected data and the evaluators' experience evaluating public school special education programs. It included suggestions on how the district might choose to implement accepted recommendations.

III. Commendations

This section of the report recognizes the efforts put forth by the district to meet the needs of the students. Special education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. The Manchester Essex Public Schools has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of students with disabilities with a continuum of services and programs.

Specific Commendations:

1. The staff and support-related service providers of the Manchester-Essex Department of Student Services responded enthusiastically to the evaluators' visits to their classrooms, displaying an accommodating style for observing classrooms and related service providers.
2. The staff appeared open and comfortable in the interview process and could share the positive elements of the program and the struggles they were facing. They also communicated their honest evaluation and feedback on what they thought could improve their programs.
3. The teacher and a clinical staff person or paraprofessional were interviewed simultaneously in many evaluations. It was evident that there was a strong collaboration and mutual respect among colleagues.
4. The preschool program at Memorial Elementary School has excellent staffing ratios and outstanding related service providers.
5. The IRWL program was outstanding and a model program for dyslexic students. The evaluators were extremely impressed with the interviewees, observations, and staff knowledge. This program has a clear mission, and all staff are highly trained.
6. The SAIL program was an inclusive service for assisting students in general education classes. The staff passionately worked to make the experience successful for students. They also shared many ideas on improving and working towards the least restrictive environment.

7. The high school learning strategies liaisons and the middle school moderate liaisons model are vital components of both the middle school and high school. The staff was highly skilled at co-teaching, and during the observations, it was evident that it was a co-teaching/collaborative model.
8. The transition process from elementary to middle school to high school is essential. The consultants felt there was strong communication among the staff in preparing for a successful transition for each student.
9. Staff recognized the resources available in the district and felt that this was a positive part of working in Manchester-Essex. Student needs are being met.
10. The paraprofessionals were very knowledgeable about their role in the classroom and had a positive relationship with their lead teachers.
11. Specialists were forward-thinking and had many ideas, suggestions, and discussions with colleagues about push-in vs. pull-out services, co-treats, and co-teaching with other specialists.
12. There was a strong collaboration between the two preschool teachers. The preschool staff feel supported by the director of special education and the team chairperson.
13. The preschool speech and language pathologist and occupational therapist spend considerable time in classrooms, allowing them to see how skills are generalized and demonstrating strategies for classroom staff to carry over throughout the day.
14. The teacher and staff of the ESSEX Swing Program do an outstanding job of supporting students in the SWING classroom and general education. The paraprofessionals tend to share kids, one with a student in the morning and another in the afternoon. This decreases student dependence on one para and prevents paras from burning out, particularly when a student is having a difficult day.
15. Data was recorded in the ACE classroom with an efficient online tool to inform instruction and evaluate student progress.

IV. Factors Affecting Programming and Services

This section of the report will address factors as they apply to the Manchester-Essex specialized programs. The authors of this report intend to provide the district administrators with current data that will assist in the planning and implementation of program and service enhancements that will build on the existing programs and services.

Many factors impact a district's ability to deliver instructional and related services to students with special needs. Through the evaluation process, we have identified the

following topics as impacting the implementation of special education programming and services:

- Special education census
- Severity of need
- Administrative leadership
- Space and location requirements

1. Special Education Census

The number of students appropriate for special education specialized programs can change yearly. The chart in Appendix A displays data on student disability categories that the district can potentially serve by creating in-district specialized programs or sending them to out-of-district placements. This data changes year to year and helps the district determine whether they have the capacity to create a specialized program.

***See Appendix A**

2. Severity of Need

The varying complexity of the students' needs significantly influences programming. The school-based staff have to differentiate the instruction in many forms daily.

Accommodations and modifications to the various curriculums must occur continuously, from one-on-one and small-group instruction to whole-class instruction. Many Massachusetts districts are reporting an increase in the severity of the needs of students with disabilities.

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.

Table I: Percentage of students with disabilities included

District	Fully Included	State	Partially Included	State
MERSD	65.9%	65.5%	13.6%	13.3%
Dover Sherborn	72.4%		13.8%	
Berlin Boylston	72.6%		16.5%	
Masconomet	69.8%		10.9%	
North Reading	71.8%		16.4%	
Old Rochester	90.0%		3.8%	
Georgetown	73.7%		20.1%	
Sutton	67.8%		22.1%	
Hamilton Wenham	64.7%		14.9%	
Douglas	67.8%		22.6%	
King Philip	54.2%		15.3%	

FY21 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Table II. Students with IEPs receiving a Diploma

	Students with IEP's who left HS in 2021	Students with IEP's who graduated with a Diploma	District Rate	State Rate
MERSD	13	12	92.3	82.1
Dover Sherborn	32	30	93.8	
Berlin Boylston	11	10	90.9	
Masconomet	49	44	89.8	
North Reading	26	19	73.1	
Old Rochester	18	14	77.8	
Georgetown	10	9	90.0	
Sutton	9	6	66.7	
Hamilton Wenham	10	8	80.0	
Douglas	14	11	78.6	
King Philip	46	33	71.7	

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3. Administrative Leadership

The director of special education has earned respect and fosters open communication with the staff. Staff feel they can communicate the challenges they are experiencing and are listened to and respected.

All central office administrators and principals must collaborate to promote meaningful inclusion in the least restrictive placement for all students. The district's priority must be keeping students in their community with appropriate support to accomplish their IEP goals and become as independent as possible in school and the community. All principals

must oversee and promote an inclusion philosophy by closely monitoring the daily implementation and overall operation of programs/services that promote inclusion as a philosophy, not just a placement.

4. Space and Location Requirements

The final factor impacting the specialized programs is the location, the number of designated classrooms, and appropriate space for related service providers. At the time of this writing, space did not seem to be a factor for student programming or staff.

V. Data for Improving/Aligning Pre-School-12 Specialized Programs

This report provides the following findings to assist the district with the work needed to improve and enhance the current Pre-K-12 programming for students with disabilities.

1. There is limited building leadership and administrative oversight of the preschool program at Memorial Elementary School to advocate for their needs, include them in the school culture, and manage the growing number of students and families with complex needs that are enrolling.
2. The preschool options are currently for 2, 3, 5, and half days, and 2, 3, and 5 full days. Most public school preschools have eliminated the two half-day option because it does not allow sufficient time to introduce and practice pre-academic and social skills.
3. Preschool students are grouped by age (one class for 3-year-olds and one for four-year-olds). Teachers move with students each year (looping). Most Massachusetts school districts have mixed age groups in preschool, which helps to balance classes and provide a continuum.
4. The Memorial School has limited adaptive playground equipment. Students with mobility/physical issues should be able to participate with their community peers on various equipment.
5. Moderate liaisons need a designated time to collaborate with general education teachers to modify the curriculum so that included students are successful in the general education classroom.
6. The process for requesting additional adult assistance must be documented and include data.
7. The Speech and language pathologist and occupational therapist indicated that the general education teachers would benefit from professional development using visual supports and a better understanding of executive skill deficits.

8. Related service providers indicated that many parents would benefit from a workshop on the difference between the medical and educational therapy models. They suggested this could be a topic at a SEPAC meeting in the fall.
9. Interviews at Memorial indicated that general education teachers need training and coaching in best practices to include students with moderate to severe special needs. Their philosophy of inclusion appeared to be one of providing access to the classroom but not one of joint ownership of the student's learning.
10. The district currently has two team chairpersons (one Team chair for the two elementary schools and one for middle and high school). Each team chairperson reports that 80 percent of their time is spent in meetings and 20 percent on special education department coordination. The Team chairpersons report that their responsibilities in running meetings and ensuring that timelines and paperwork are in compliance leave them minimal time for instructional coaching, behavior management, out-of-district placements, and overseeing referrals and placement at the preschool.
11. The middle/high school Team chairperson needs a separate weekly meeting with special education staff at the middle and high school, as the needs are often very different.
12. The psychologist's role at the middle school is primarily for testing. The psychologist's role at this level should be reviewed to include some time for counseling for complex middle school IEP students and working with middle-school regular education staff on behavior management strategies that replace undesirable behavior and are not short-term punitive measures.
13. The related service providers that service students of the SWING program mostly pull out and do not use the curriculum from the classroom.
14. Data in many programs observed tended to be paper/pencil. Staff indicated they want a more efficient electronic system.
15. Interviews indicated a district BCBA should be added for 2023-2024. The SWING teacher is reportedly called to do an FBA in general education. Moderate liaisons would benefit from professional development for managing behavior. The preschool teacher is away from her classroom to provide BCBA support.
16. Interviews indicated that teaching assistants for moderate liaisons need built-in consultation time with the special education teacher.

VI. Financial and Special Education-Related Data

Special education costs for students enrolled in in-district programs include teachers, support-related staff, administration, and transportation. For out-of-district placements, costs include tuition and transportation. Transportation costs of out-of-district placements

are considerably high. To manage costs for transportation, being part of a collaborative network of districts acquiring competitive prices for transportation can yield significant savings. As of FY21, out-of-district Transportation costs can also be reimbursed through circuit breaker.

High-quality in-district programs support MERSD-associated special education costs. These funds are considered “cost avoidance.” If MERSD had to rely on sending more students to out-of-district placements rather than building quality programs and keeping students in the least restrictive placement, the costs would be higher. Sending students out of the district will yield the highest costs for tuition and transportation combined.

For example, The Landmark School tuition in FY24 is \$68,809. Out-of-district transportation can be \$18,000 or higher, depending on the distance. An M5 Special Education Teacher in MERSD is \$68,996. If the district has eight students in the classroom, the cost savings can be significant, offering high-quality programs and allowing students to be in the least restrictive placement, which is best practice.

The following three tables show how MERSD is impacted by students placed in districts vs. out of district.

Table III: Total Amount of the District's budget spent on special education costs

DISTRICT	Percent of budget for special education	Tuition MA Public / Collaboratives	MA Private and Out Of State Schools	In District Transportation	Out of District Transportation
Old Rochester	14%	\$21,533	0	\$38,628	0
Dover Sherborn	15%	\$78,947	\$1,218,799	\$6,805	0
Berlin Boylston	21%	\$463,694	\$596,849	\$14,684	\$210,006
Masconomet	21%	\$655,745	\$3,744,263	\$19,375	\$89,608
North Reading	22%	\$727,095	\$2,261,568	\$110,859	0
Georgetown	22%	\$532,433	\$1,235,681	\$52,481	\$300,543
Sutton	25%	\$387,381	\$609,655	\$300,477	\$100,159
Manchester Essex	25%	\$550,329	\$931,802	\$166,381	\$434,455
Hamilton Wenham	27%	\$462,839	\$3,110,472	\$164,567	\$517,726
Douglas	27%	\$163,353	\$1,462,708	\$300,978	\$100,326
King Philip	31%	\$3,013,425	\$2,819,766	\$174,510	\$580,558

FY22 Fiscal Data from Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Table IV. Students identified as having a disability

These percentages only show the percentages of students that have a disability in the district and could be eligible for special education services. This does not mean these students are on an IEP or a 504.

District	Students with Disabilities
Old Rochester	15.3%
King Philip	16.8%
Berlin Boylston	17.0%
Georgetown	17.3%
Dover Sherborn	17.5%
MERSD	18.5%
Douglas	18.9%
North Reading	19.1%
Sutton	19.2%
Hamilton Wenham	19.8%
Masconomet	20.1%

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Table V. Students enrolled in substantially separate in-district programs

District	Enrollment	District Rate	State Rate
MERSD	30	13.6%	13.6%
Dover Sherborn	1	0.5%	
Berlin Boylston	7	4.3%	
Masconomet	13	4.0%	
North Reading	25	5.9%	
Old Rochester	10	6.3%	
Georgetown	7	3.1%	
Sutton	12	5.8%	
Hamilton Wenham	24	7.4%	
Douglas	no data	no data	
King Philip	72	21.6%	

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Table VI. Students enrolled in Out-of-District Placements with comparative districts

District	Enrollment	District Rate	State Rate
MERSD	15	6.8%	6.2%
Dover Sherborn	28	13.3%	
Berlin Boylston	11	6.7%	
Masconomet	49	15.3%	
North Reading	25	5.9%	
Old Rochester	no data	no data	
Georgetown	7	3.1%	
Sutton	9	4.3%	
Hamilton Wenham	42	13%	
Douglas	no data	no data	
King Philip	30	9.0%	

VII. Recommendations

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the evaluation process that was recently completed for the Manchester-Essex Special Education Department. These recommendations should provide insight for the district to build upon their existing quality programs and services for students with disabilities.

The Manchester-Essex specialized programs are robust and well-developed. We did not have specific recommendations for many of the programs, such as the IRWL programs, as they were cutting-edge practices being offered to students. We were impressed with the staff as they were well trained and understood their role and responsibilities in meeting students' needs. The changing populations of students, complexities, and increasing enrollment within the district programs are challenging. The evaluator's recommendations are meant to help support and assist the district in implementing best practices.

1. Provide Increased Oversight of the Manchester-Essex Early Childhood Program

Explanation: Currently, the director of student services oversees the preschool program and the other K-12 specialized programs in the district. With the myriad of responsibilities that the director has, it is challenging to provide the daily oversight that this program requires. The preschool program has been expanding significantly in the last two years and

as this trend continues, the preschool needs more supervision to support students with complex needs entering the program.

To work with the staff to creatively and collaboratively implement the changes necessary to improve the existing program, the consultants feel that this recommendation is a priority.

- The district might want to consider a current team chairperson with the skills to supervise and support the preschool at Memorial Elementary School.
 - One option is for a 1.0 FTE team chairperson to oversee preschool and K-4 at Memorial.
 - The district could consider a half-time team chairperson specifically for the preschool.
- The Team chairperson should build an identity for the preschool staff in the elementary school. The team chairperson must collaborate with the Memorial principal so all staff, students, and parents feel part of the elementary school community. Preschool should be included in all correspondence and activities for students and staff.
- Other responsibilities would include:
 - building a continuum of programming so that students with disabilities that may require some substantially separate programming can be educated at Manchester Elementary.
 - elect a curriculum for ELA, Math, and SEL that aligns with the kindergarten curriculum.
 - determine preschool professional development needs
 - conduct staff observations and participate in evaluations
 - create a parent group to educate parents about the preschool and address general needs
 - lead a weekly team time with all staff, including teachers, support-related staff, and paraprofessionals.
 - document the transition from Pre-K to kindergarten.
 - attend early intervention transition meetings.

- process inquiries from parents or preschools when there are student concerns

2. Manchester-Essex Team Chairpersons Should Have Independent Contracts

Explanation: Team chairpersons should have decision-making authority during all team and IEP meetings they facilitate. This role and supervisory responsibility should be seen as an administrative position. The team chairpersons should not be in the same bargaining unit as the teachers and should participate in staff supervision.

- The consultants can provide job descriptions of a team chairperson and typical job responsibilities if needed.
- The director of special education should delegate some of the current responsibilities to team chairpersons.
- This will allow more flexibility for the director of special education, who is currently the only administrative authority in special education decisions.

3. Restructure ACE/SWING Programs and Update Program Descriptions

Explanation: During observations of the students of ACE and SWING, there was some confusion regarding the continuum of the SWING program. During observations, some students were getting 1:1 assistance, and there were also mixed groupings of students. One classroom at the middle school was formerly a SWING program that switched to an ACE program. There are always changing cohorts, and the district should be flexible to change and restructure its program.

- At the time of this review, the District was offering ACE K-8 and SWING K-12.
- The district needs to communicate better the differences in profiles of students serviced by ACE versus moderate. The interviews indicated that staff were confused about why some students were placed in ACE instead of receiving services from a moderate liaison or learning strategies liaisons.
- One option for the district to consider is to rebrand these programs. Instead of two programs, the district could have one specialized program with a continuum of services. The district can use ACE or SWING or a new name, but the purpose would be to have a specialized program that groups cohorts of students based on social and academic needs without the confusion of program names.

4. Re-evaluate Staff to Student Ratios and One-to-One Assistants Assigned to Specific Students.

Explanation: Manchester-Essex provides specialized classrooms with sufficient staffing and high-quality programming and services. There should be an understanding of how sub-separate classes provide appropriate staffing. There should be a rationale and a clear understanding of staff-to-student ratios, which should be consistent.

- The consultants recommend establishing specific criteria for assigning 1:1 assistants to students, especially at the high school level. The district outcomes for students (transition) they establish should align with 1:1 programming. The goal for all students is to become as independent as possible. The team must set specific student goals that lead to independence and phasing out 1:1 support.

5. Professional Development for General Education and Special Education

A. General Education

Explanation: We believe all students should have access (LRE) to general education classrooms and that inclusion must be implemented as a philosophy, not a placement. During interviews, we could see that both special education and general education staff were frustrated with the current way students with disabilities are being included in general education classrooms. This concern was expressed more by the staff at Memorial Elementary School than Essex Elementary School.

Interviews, observations, and staff statements were more positive about inclusion at middle and high schools. To promote inclusion and improve outcomes for students with disabilities and for all staff to feel comfortable working together, the district needs to:

- Define the communication method and necessary training for general education teachers when students from specialized programs are participating in general education classrooms.
- Create a clear understanding of the roles of the general education teacher, the special educator, related service providers, and the paraprofessional when working in the general education classroom. This understanding must include school specialists: gym, music, and art.
- Expectations in general education should be rigorous, but general education teachers must share responsibility for modifying the curriculum and including students with disabilities in their classrooms.

B. Special Education

Explanation: Interviews indicated that professional development topics are not typically relevant to the role of special education staff and support-related service providers in the

classroom. Many good ideas by staff were shared with the consultants during interviews on topics they would find valuable. The district should consider putting together a professional development team that discusses and plans relevant professional development for staff that works in the district's specialized programs.

- The special education professional development team should have representatives that include teachers, paraprofessionals, support-related services providers, and an administrator.
- This team should discuss district goals, curriculum goals, and best practices in special education.
- This team should identify professional development topics to be covered before the start of the new school year.
- Presenters and facilitators of these workshops should be identified to provide the training.
- Some topics that should be supported were co-teaching, co-treating, creating a push-in vs. pull-out, specialists running co-led groups, trauma-informed classrooms, and social-emotional learning.

6. Update and Expand the Current District Manual with Important Forms and Processes

Explanation: The consultants were impressed with how well staff communicate and collaborate. Communication was of high priority, and processes, for example, student transitions from level to level, were carefully planned. The consultants noticed many “tacit” processes that were carried out, and we recommend that these be put in writing.

- The consultants were impressed with how well the teachers discussed the transition process of students from one level to the next. The communication of this transition was strong as staff took the time to ensure they acquired all the information they needed to make this transition happen as smoothly as possible. These steps should be documented for all staff to reference.
 - Student transitions should include specific steps taken, the personnel's roles that execute them, and a timeline of when each part of the transition process occurs. This process should begin by February.
 - The forms and processes manual should include the referral form and packet of information that must be completed when referring a student to one of the specialized programs.

- The preschool has a detailed observation form for area preschools to complete when students transition to kindergarten. The district should consider eliminating the open-ended questions, which are time-consuming, and creating a checklist with developmental milestones.

VIII. Summary

The evaluators want to note that the district completed and implemented recommendation #3, Restructuring of ACE and SWING Programs, at the beginning of the 2023/2024 school year.

It is essential to recognize that for the information in this report to benefit the school district and the Department of Student Services, the stakeholders must come together to discuss the findings and the recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the program special education personnel can develop a short- and long-range action plan (s) that will address the agreed-upon issues.

The evaluators want to thank all participating in this program evaluation. As the district considers implementing the recommendations, evaluators can consult if needed.

Appendix A is located on pages 21 and 22

Appendix A: Students with Disabilities Categories

	MERSD	Berlin-Boylston	Douglas	Dover-Sherborn	Georgetown	State
SWD Total	230	184	227	207	223	
Intellectual	2.2%	2.7%	2.2%	1.4%	1.8%	4.0%
Sensory Hard of Hearing	0.4%	1.1%	0.4%	0.0%	0.9%	0.1%
Communication	5.7%	7.6%	9.3%	10.1%	13.5%	13.0%
Sensory Vision Impairment	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%
Emotional	7.8%	12.5%	6.6%	17.9%	12.6%	9.5%
Physical	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.5%	1.3%	0.0%
Health	17.0%	14.1%	22.0%	21.3%	20.6%	15.0%
Specific Learning Disabilities	26.1%	15.2%	18.9%	25.6%	20.6%	24.0%
Sensory Deaf blind	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Multiple Disabilities	1.7%	1.1%	0.9%	0.0%	1.3%	1.0%
Autism	12.2%	15.2%	17.2%	12.6%	10.8%	16.0%
Neurological	9.1%	9.8%	7.5%	10.6%	2.7%	5.0%
Developmental Delay	17.0%	20.1%	14.5%	0.0%	13.5%	11.0%

	Hamilton-Wenham	King-Philip	Massconnet	North Reading	Old Rochester	Sutton	State
SWD Total	336	349	323	454	161	252	
Intellectual	1.5%	4.3%	4.0%	1.1%	4.3%	2.4%	4.0%
Sensory Hard of Hearing	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.7%	0.0%	0.4%	0.1%
Communication	16.1%	6.6%	2.8%	13.9%	3.7%	10.3%	13.0%
Sensory Vision Impairment	0.3%	0.0%	0.6%	0.2%	0.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Emotional	4.8%	13.5%	17.0%	6.2%	11.8%	1.2%	9.5%
Physical	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.4%	0.0%	2.0%	0.0%
Health	23.8%	22.6%	19.5%	24.9%	25.5%	13.1%	15.0%
Specific Learning Disabilities	25.9%	31.2%	35.0%	22.0%	34.8%	26.2%	24.0%
Sensory Deaf blind	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%
Multiple Disabilities	0.9%	1.7%	0.3%	0.7%	0.6%	2.0%	1.0%
Autism	15.5%	12.6%	12.7%	13.4%	15.5%	16.7%	16.0%
Neurological	8.3%	4.6%	7.4%	7.9%	3.1%	8.3%	5.0%
Developmental Delay	2.7%	0.0%	0.0%	8.6%	0.0%	16.7%	11.0%

*Enrollment data as of October 21, 2022 (FY23)
Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education*