



SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT

Sarasota County Schools

Report Date: November 21, 2023

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General Information

Exceptional Learning Solutions was engaged to provide a Special Education Program Review for the Sarasota County Schools (hereinafter “Sarasota”) in 2023. Founded in 2009, Exceptional Learning Solutions is comprised of a team of experienced education professionals focused on providing schools and school districts nationwide with analysis of organizational, pedagogical, and leadership practices affecting student academic achievement, while providing sustainable, research-established supports affecting employee performance in education. Reliable, results-driven methods are crucial to achieving and sustaining organizational effectiveness; practical, research-tested tools, strategies and protocols are pivotal; and Exceptional Learning Solutions seamlessly provides those necessities to all schools and districts it serves.

Exceptional Learning Solutions’ services began with a dedicated team of experienced professionals clinically analyzing school needs and current practices through a detailed and systematic evaluation, then ultimately building—with substantial client input and clear concurrence—specific management, education, organizational and leadership recommendations in a written report, exclusively tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the district. Exceptional Learning Solutions recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to mastering the complex issues schools, administrators, building leaders and teachers face each day. All evaluations and recommendations are based on sound research and proven methods. Systems within the district and schools are also evaluated and recommendations are suggested as needed to improve school delivery of services to special needs students. Exceptional Learning Solutions’ approach of creating partnerships with teachers and school leaders allows for meaningful reforms, based on the evaluation and analysis, that become embedded in the school culture to remain long after the Exceptional Learning Solutions team completes its onsite responsibilities.

Exceptional Learning Solutions’ evaluation and recommendations to provide superior educational opportunities to special needs students, including supporting compliance issues, have realized great success throughout the United States. States, districts, and schools confidently rely on Exceptional Learning Solutions to provide consistent, high-quality evaluative services that ultimately allow schools and districts to train teachers and building leaders, improve educational services to special education students, and deliver increased student achievement for all students.

Exceptional Learning Solutions is comprised of a diverse and skilled group of team members who bring the following (collective) qualifications to our organization and this work:

- School superintendent experience
- Director-level special education experience and district and state department of education levels
- United States Department of Education leadership experience
- Instructional and organizational performance auditing experience
- High school principalship experience
- Teaching experience at elementary, middle, high school and college
- Law firm, legal staff, state legislative policy, and student/family advocacy experience
- School transformation and academic turnaround experience
- School reconstitution and new school launch leadership experience
- Community organizing, community capacity-building facilitation and leadership experience
- Teaching quality research, training, and professional development experience
- Public school labor negotiations experience

Specifically for Sarasota’s Special Education Program Review, Exceptional Learning Solutions engaged two primary Exceptional Learning Solutions team members for this project: Dr. Bambi Lockman and Todd Zoellick. Both bring tremendous knowledge, unique experience, and a depth of background in special education at various levels in school districts and government entities. A brief summary is provided below.

Dr. Bambi Lockman—Senior Advisor for Special Education. Lockman currently serves as a nationally recognized special education consultant and works with schools and districts throughout the United States. She has served as an Educational Policy Consultant for the Office of Early Learning, Florida Department of Education. From 2011-2014 she was the Deputy Superintendent for Instructional Services for Volusia County School District in Central Florida. Within her scope of work, she was responsible for the planning and coordination of PreK-12 curriculum and school improvement programs; federal and state grant funded programs, assessment and accountability, professional development, career technical education, online learning, alternative education, athletics and safety as well as exceptional student education and student support services, as well as Volusia’s Race to the Top grant. Prior to Volusia County, Lockman served as Chief of the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services in the Florida Department of Education from 2004-2011. During this time, she was responsible for Florida’s implementation and general supervision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), initiated postsecondary programs for students with significant cognitive disabilities, coordinated Florida’s State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report, and managed the distribution of IDEA Part B and Part B Preschool grants. Lockman has been instrumental in Florida’s implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. Lockman also has extensive experience in Santa Rosa County School District, Milton, FL where she served as a classroom teacher and both a school based and district level administrator.

Todd Zoellick, Esq.—Chief Engagement Officer. Zoellick is an author, educator, and attorney. He has served in leadership roles in multiple education consulting firms and is the founder and president of an education advocacy organization for K-12 and higher education institutions that works to improve educational opportunities for students by providing support for administrators, teachers, and parents. He is also a university professor and lecturer on education, law, and public policy topics. Formerly, Zoellick served as the Deputy Regional Secretary at the United States Department of Education (2005-2009). Appointed by President George W. Bush, he served as one of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings’ top officials in the Midwest, visiting thousands of schools throughout the region and actively engaged students, teachers, parents, administrators, business and civic organizations, and government officials to explain education policy and to build bridges between practitioners and policy makers. Zoellick specializes in special education evaluations and development of support systems for schools and districts throughout the United States.

In today’s educational climate, reliable, results-driven methods are crucial to achieving and sustaining organizational effectiveness. Practical, research-tested evaluations, tools, strategies, and protocols are pivotal. And seamlessly providing them is what the Exceptional Learning Solutions’ special education team does.

Methodology and Process

For the district office and schools within Sarasota, Exceptional Learning Solutions provided a systematic, thorough, and comprehensive special education evaluation of programs, systems, and personnel; this site-specific process established baseline data upon which Exceptional Learning Solutions' analysis, determinations, and ultimate recommendations are based. Determinations were rendered solely upon the basis of validated and documented evidence and in accordance with clearly articulated criteria. Further, Exceptional Learning Solutions identified educational standards and compliance issues achieved and not achieved at the school and district levels, which are contained in this report.

Crucial to Exceptional Learning Solutions' approach is the collaborative involvement of school and district leaders and staff at the central office and each building in which our team works. Longitudinal studies by efficacy researchers nationwide establish that effective interventions and sustainable change occur only if those affected "own" and participate in implementation. Consequently, Exceptional Learning Solutions maintains a rigorous focus on collaboration, professionalism, respectfulness, and sensitivity in all its evaluative work. Issues are explored and probed *with* stakeholders—not independently or in isolation. High standards and high expectations are not compromised by collaboration; instead, opportunities for necessary change and sustained growth are data-proven to be enhanced.

The Special Education Program Review was divided into three phases: Pre-Evaluation, Program Evaluation Site Work, and Post-Evaluation.

Phase One – Pre-Evaluation: During the Pre-Evaluation phase, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team gathered information from a multiplicity of sources, including the district office and all relevant departments within it, as well as publicly accessible data. Additionally, the team analyzed a comprehensive range of statistics and information regarding special education services in Sarasota. Much of the information gathered from the district was through electronic records, district documentation, district policies, and discussions with district personnel.

Sarasota was asked to provide documents and information about special education and support services. The information request included, but was not limited to, the following:

Sarasota Information Request

- Organizational chart for the district
- Organizational chart for the special education team in the district
- Job descriptions for all special education personnel at the district level and the school level (i.e., district administrators, teachers, related services personnel, paraprofessionals, etc.)
- Copy of the special education handbook/special programs and procedures document
- Copy of the special education budget (as much as you are able to share with an external vendor)
- If applicable, copy/description of your overall special education continuum/model/framework. Does this vary by building and/or classroom?
- Copies of any current special education grants awarded or applied for
- Copies of any special education audits conducted by FLDOE or other oversight organizations
- Copies of any recent special education-related lawsuit documentation, including but not limited to resolutions, settlements, etc.
- Copies of any board policies related to special education in your district

- Description of all special education-related professional development sessions. Were they mandatory or optional? Who attended?
- Description of any training provided to special education parents/family members
- Number of special education students who receive specialized transportation services
- Description of your discipline plan for special education students
- Description of the process for providing a behavior intervention plan, if needed
- The name of your data management system for special education students
- The name of any assessment systems that are used for special education students
- Student data from any assessments that are given to special education students from 2018-2023
- Describe the district's RtI/MTSS program, including processes and procedures. What is the referral process? Is there an intervention form and who manages it? What type of progress monitoring is in place?
- Describe any summer programming, including but not limited to extended school year, for special education students in the district
- Number of students currently in special education by grade level, age, race, socio-economic status, and identification (i.e., OT, PT, behavior, etc.) district-wide and at each school
- Number of students with 504 plans district wide and at each school
- Number of overall students in the district
- Number of students in each grade level by school and classroom
- List of special education teachers by school building, including certification(s)
- List of special education paraprofessionals by school building
- List of special education support staff by school building (i.e., school psychologist, social worker, nurse, etc.)
- Current staffing allocation and the staffing allocation process
- Daily schedule for each building as it relates to special education students (i.e., who is in what classroom at what time with what teacher)
- Curriculum framework or description of academic program
- Five-year view of special education student academic progress (2018-2023)
- Most recent email addresses for parents/family members (divided by English and Spanish) for surveys
- Most recent email addresses for Sarasota County Schools staff for survey

Once onsite, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team also requested to see a random sampling of Individualized Education Programs (hereinafter, "IEPs"), as well as special education student data needed to complete the analysis. No IEP or student data was sent prior to being onsite in the district to avoid violation of FERPA guidelines.

Phase Two – Program Evaluation Site Work: The district and school site work provided the Exceptional Learning Solutions team the opportunity to learn more about the district. Key interviews were arranged and conducted with all special education personnel at the district level, as well as other district leaders. The first set of meetings with district leaders occurred on June 26-27, 2023. A second meeting with district leaders occurred due to new personnel and changing roles/responsibilities on September 6-7, 2023. Additionally, each School Board Member met individually with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team for a one-on-one discussion of the individual board members' thoughts and concerns regarding special education in Sarasota. Special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related service staff members, and other staff at a diverse sample of Sarasota schools (11 schools in total), were provided an opportunity to meet with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team during one-on-one sessions, group sessions, and/or open "office hours." Additionally, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team visited classrooms in each of the Sarasota schools selected for onsite visits to observe teachers and students in the classroom

environment. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team also met with building leadership in each of the district buildings visited.

Exceptional Learning Solutions conducted two in-person parent meetings with parent and community stakeholders, one on September 26, 2023, and one on October 2, 2023. For both meetings, Sarasota parents and/or family members with exceptional students were invited via email to attend. These meetings provided Exceptional Learning Solutions with an opportunity to explain the purpose and scope of the Special Education Program Review and for parents and/or family members to share their perceptions of the strengths and challenges of special education services within Sarasota.

Both parents and Sarasota special education staff members were also given an opportunity to provide their thoughts and feedback through a confidential survey that was emailed to them. Parents received two surveys from Exceptional Learning Solutions in English, Spanish, Russian, and Ukrainian. The first survey was sent on July 10, 2023, and focused on parent feedback regarding the 2022-2023 school year. The second survey was sent on October 3, 2023, with a focus on the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year. A staff survey for special education staff was sent on September 27, 2023, and responses were collected confidentially by Exceptional Learning Solutions and included in the analysis of the special education program.

From the site work, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team formulated hypotheses about the district that were tested during the program review, analysis, and final report write-up.

Phase Three - Post-Evaluation: The Exceptional Learning Solutions team drafted this comprehensive report for the district that includes strengths and the areas for improvement identified during the onsite visits and throughout the Special Education Program Review process. Included in this report are findings/observations, commendations, focus areas, and recommendations, together with an implementation timeline for the recommendations contained in this report. The contents of this report can be integrated with the district strategic plan, as well as school improvement plans, and can be used as a basis for continuous improvement. This report is a snapshot of the state of special education services in Sarasota at the time that the Special Education Program Review was conducted and reflects the Exceptional Learning Solutions team findings based on data reviewed, as well as interviews and observations of district leaders, building leaders, teachers, staff, and other district personnel.

Findings and Observations

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team was onsite in Sarasota twice. The first onsite session consisted of meetings at the central office with district leaders and administrators on June 26-27, 2023. The second onsite visit included Phase Two – Program Evaluation Site Work from September 6, 2023 through October 5, 2023. During that time, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team visited eleven Sarasota schools: Brentwood Elementary School, Fruitville Elementary School, Garden Elementary School, Glenallen Elementary School, Heron Creek Middle School, McIntosh Middle School, Oak Park School, Riverview High School, Southside Elementary School, Tatum Ridge Elementary School, and Venice High School, as well as the Central Office for additional meetings with new administrators and district leaders.

Sarasota staff were integral in the completion of the Special Education Program Review. Staff members at each of the Sarasota schools visited and the Central Office were invited to meet in person with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team during scheduled meetings or “office hours” to provide their thoughts and feedback on their experiences in Sarasota. Additionally, all Sarasota ESE staff received a confidential Staff Survey sent by Exceptional Learning Solutions. The Staff Surveys were sent to 3,951 special education staff email addresses provided by Sarasota district leadership. There were 245 responses to the Staff Survey.

Parents played an important role in the Special Education Program Review process. Two in-person Parent Meetings were offered to parents for participation in the Special Education Program Review process. The Parent Meetings occurred on September 26, 2023, and October 2, 2023, and invitations were sent by Sarasota in English, Spanish, Russian, and Ukrainian to 9,214 parents. Thirteen parents chose to attend the Parent Meetings.

Throughout this report, there are references to Parent Surveys. Sarasota, on behalf of Exceptional Learning Solutions, sent out the confidential Parent Surveys. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team provided two Parent Surveys, one in July 2023 and one in October 2023. The purpose of the two surveys was to gauge parent satisfaction following the 2022-2023 school year (July 2023 survey) and to gain an understanding of the transition experience into the 2023-2024 school year (October 2023 survey). The surveys were in English, Spanish, Russian, and Ukrainian. There were 10,037 emails sent to parents and/or family members of Sarasota students for the July 2023 Parent Survey, and 173 parents responded to the survey. Similarly, there were 9,214 emails sent to parents and/or family members for the October 2023 survey, and 73 surveys were returned.

Category #1: ESE Department and Organization

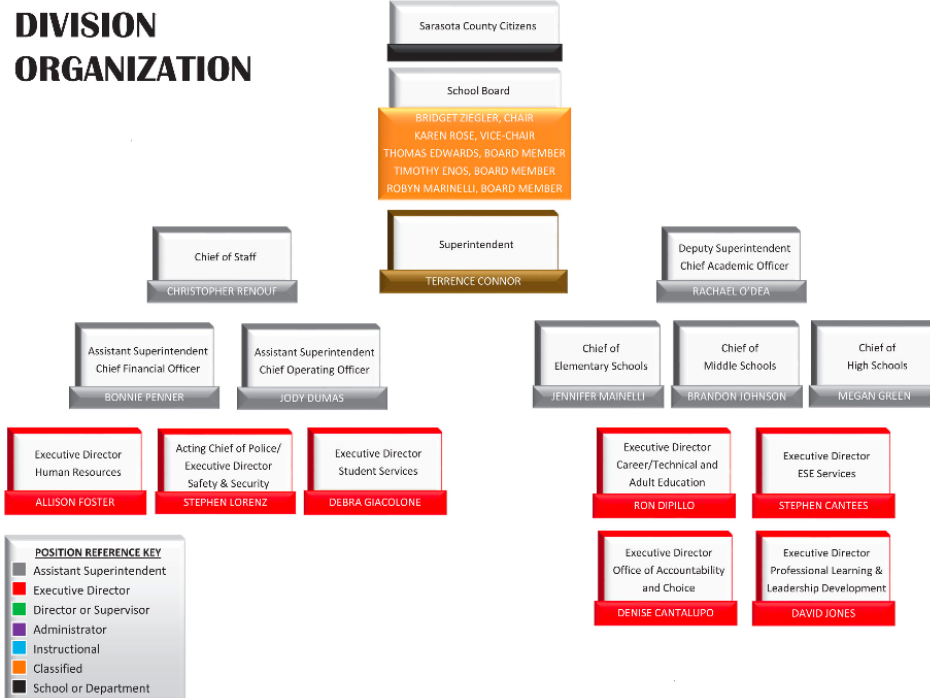
Commendations

- The Superintendent and Board of Education are committed to ensuring the success of Sarasota, as evidenced by their willingness to seek outside support and direction to lead genuine change within the district.
- The new Superintendent is reorganizing the administrative team and hiring new administrative personnel to strengthen operational efficiency and academic achievement within Sarasota.
- The current restructuring process provides the opportunity to hire new staff, to redefine the roles and responsibilities within the organizational infrastructure, and to provide leadership to enhance service delivery to students.

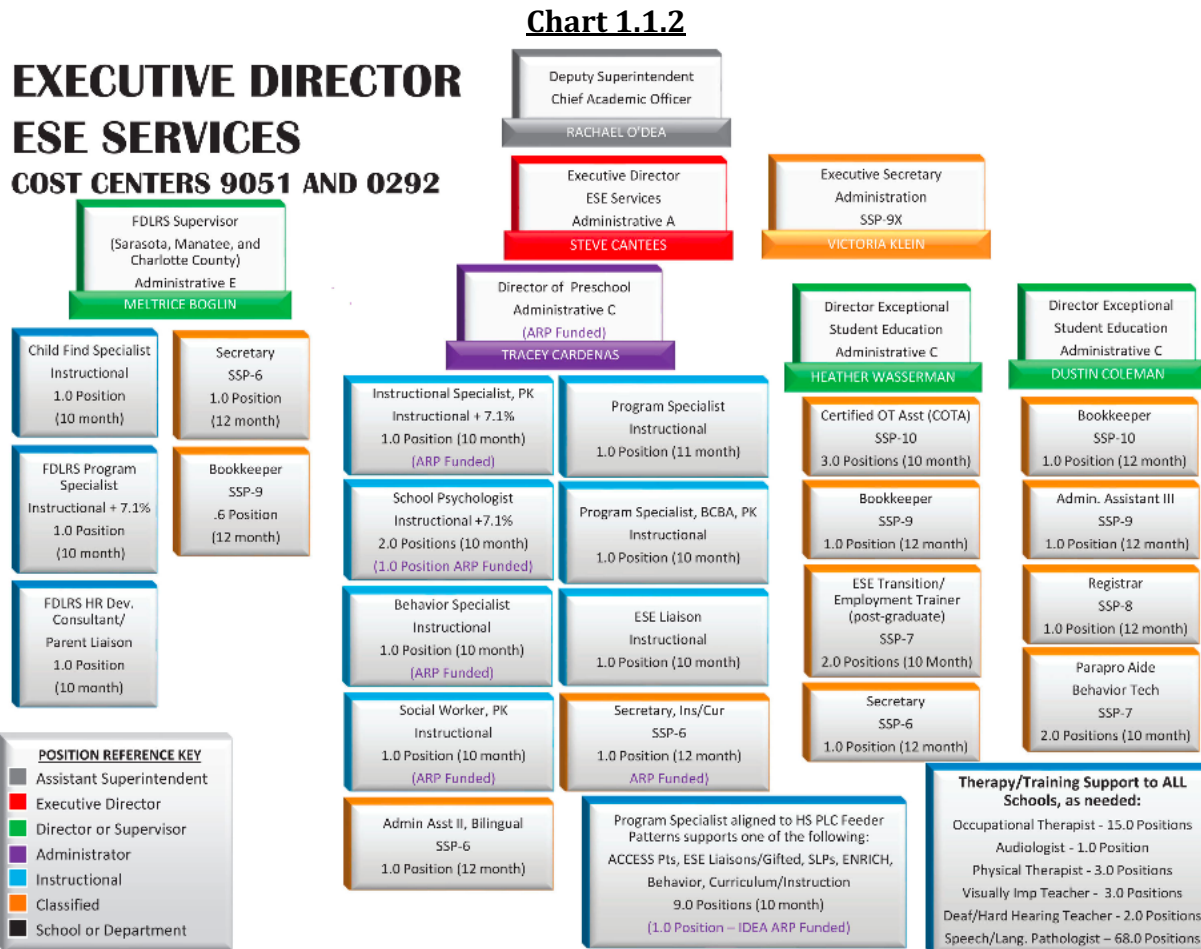
Focus Area 1.1

The organizational structure for any entity, including a school district, is very important to understanding its functionality and operations. Sarasota currently has a fairly traditional organizational structure, with the Superintendent leading the organization and assistants, deputies, and chiefs reporting directly to him. The new Superintendent and leadership team have made some adjustments and additions to the organizational chart since his arrival in Sarasota. These alterations are important and beneficial to Sarasota and will allow the new leadership team to propel Sarasota forward organizationally and academically. The Division Organizational Chart that has been developed by the Superintendent and district leadership team has two primary leadership positions reporting directly to the Superintendent and dividing the leadership responsibilities between the Chief of Staff and the Deputy Superintendent Chief Academic Officer (See Chart 1.1.1). The Chief of Staff is primarily responsible for operational elements of the district, while the Deputy Superintendent Chief Academic Officer has primary responsibility for the academic components of the district. This bifurcation is logical and will benefit Sarasota.

Chart 1.1.1



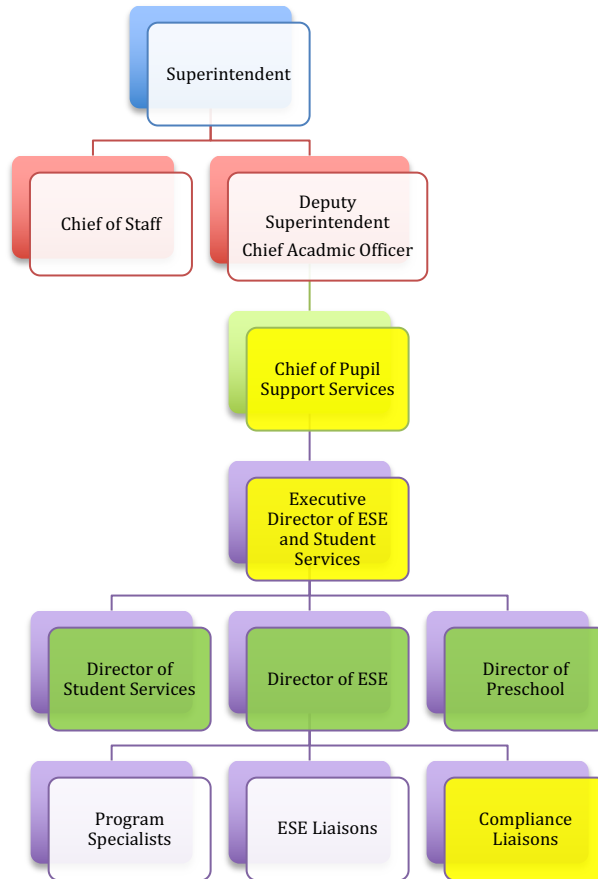
The scope of the Exceptional Learning Solutions Special Education Program Review is limited to special education, the ESE Department, and related areas of the organization. As such, the recommendations for organizational and structural changes are limited to those areas, as well. Currently, the ESE Department is housed under the Deputy Superintendent Chief Academic Officer and is led by an Executive Director of ESE Services. Under the Executive Director of ESE Services are currently three Directors, two Directors of ESE and one Director of Preschool. The majority of the current organizational structure of the ESE Department has been in place for many years (See Chart 1.1.2).



The Exceptional Learning Solutions team is recommending some structural changes to the organization chart for both the ESE Department and the Student Services Department (See Chart 1.1.3). Under the Proposed Sarasota Organization Chart, the senior leadership roles will remain unchanged, with the Chief of Staff and the Deputy Superintendent Chief Academic Officer still reporting directly to the Superintendent. However, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team is recommending a new position in the Proposed Sarasota Organization Chart, the Chief of Pupil Support Services. Additionally, there will be a new position reporting to the Chief of Pupil Support Services, which is the Executive Director of ESE and Student Services. Under this recommended change, the Student Services Department will be removed from reporting to the Chief of Staff and moved under the Deputy Superintendent Chief Academic Officer. Three Directors will report to the Executive Director of ESE and Student Services, the Director of Student Services, the Director of ESE, and the Director of Preschool. Finally, Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons will report to the Director of ESE. The rationale, roles, and responsibilities of these new and changing roles are discussed in greater detail below.

Chart 1.1.3

Proposed Sarasota Organization Chart¹



The Chief of Pupil Support Services will be a newly created position within Sarasota. It is the belief of the Exceptional Learning Solutions team that simply having an Executive Director leading the ESE Department is not sufficient for a district the size of Sarasota and the responsibilities that accompany leading a department as broad and complex as the ESE Department. Additionally, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team is recommending that the Student Services Department be moved from its current reporting position to the Chief of Staff and instead be moved under the umbrella of the Deputy Superintendent Chief Academic Officer. As a result of that, there needs to be a chief-level position that has the oversight and the responsibility for both the ESE Department and the Student Services Department, and that position is the Chief of Pupil Support Services.

There are two primary reasons for relocating the Student Services Department under the Chief of Pupil Support Services. First, there was a deliberate decision made a number of years ago in Sarasota to separate the Student Services Department and the ESE Department, and each would have an Executive Director leading the respective departments. Whatever the rationale for dividing the departments and the reporting responsibilities of the Executive Directors, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team believes that Student Services and ESE are so closely related and integrated programmatically that it would benefit both departments to be under one leadership and reporting structure. The Chief of Pupil Support Services would oversee both departments and could more appropriately facilitate direction to both departments, particularly in areas where there are interrelated services provided to students. Oversight of IEPs, Section

¹ The yellow highlighted positions represent new proposed positions under the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed Sarasota Organization Chart. The green highlighted positions represent existing positions that have a reporting change.
Exceptional Learning Solutions

504 plans, MTSS, and other related services would all be the responsibility of the Chief of Pupil Supports and the coordination of those programs and services would be more easily facilitated through one reporting structure.

Second, responsibility for the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (“MTSS”) currently resides with the Student Services Department. While MTSS is not synonymous with special education, MTSS provides interventions to general education students who require additional support. If those supports are not successful in addressing the student needs, the student may be considered for special education services. MTSS is discussed in greater detail in Focus Area 4.1. Transitioning from receiving tiered MTSS interventions into special education requires coordination between the Student Services Department and the ESE Department to ensure that data is transferred and that student placement considerations are appropriate. There is currently not the strong coordination between these two departments that it expected and needed to support students. Housing both of these departments under one reporting structure will assist in the facilitation of greater coordination between MTSS and special education.

There will be another new position within the Proposed Sarasota Organization Chart, the Executive Director of ESE and Student Services. This Executive Director role will be a combination of the responsibilities of the current Executive Director of ESE and the current Executive Director of Student Services. The new Executive Director of ESE and Students Services will report directly to the Chief of Pupil Support Services and will have the responsibility of managing the three director roles, the Director of Student Services, Director of ESE, and Director of Preschool. This position will facilitate the coordination and interconnectedness of Student Services and ESE. This role will be critical in the Proposed Sarasota Organization Structure because it will be the lynchpin between upper administration and the Directors. The person in this role will need knowledge and understanding of both ESE and Student Services and should have the knowledge and ability to support the Directors and their teams as they seek to integrate ESE and Student Services.

The three director-level positions are all important because they will lead their respective Student Services, ESE and Preschool teams. The Director of Preschool role will not change under the Proposed Sarasota Organization Chart. This Director will continue to lead the Preschool Department, as it is currently structured in Sarasota. The only change for this role is that the Director of Preschool will report to the Executive Director of ESE and Student Services rather than the current reporting to the Executive Director of ESE Services.

The Director of Student Services will have the responsibility of leading the Student Services Department. The Exceptional Learning Solution team did not review the Student Services Department as a part of the Special Education Program Review. As a result, this report does not address the structure within the Student Service Department, and a separate review would be required to make recommendations related to the structure of the Student Services Department. The significant change related to Student Services is the relocation of the department under the Chief of Pupil Support Services and closer coordination between ESE and Student Services. Additionally, MTSS is housed within the Student Services Department and is discussed in Focus Area 4.1, as it relates to special education and providing additional supports for students.

The Director of ESE will have the responsibility to oversee special education in the district. There are currently two Directors of ESE in Sarasota, one focused on the North half of the county and the other focused on the South half of the county. The new Director of ESE will rely on the newly revamped Program Specialists (discussed below) to assist with oversight of the geographic diversity of the district. The Director of ESE will have two primary areas of focus: management of special education compliance and

management of increased student achievement through Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons. Over the past several years, Sarasota has had an extreme focus on compliance in special education, related in part to some of the lawsuits and corrective action imposed by the Florida Department of Education (See Category #5 for more details). While compliance is certainly important and must be monitored, it cannot be the sole focus of the department and the Director of ESE. Student achievement for students with special needs is significantly low, and the achievement gap between general education students and special education students is wide (See Category #7 for more details). The Director of ESE must focus on student achievement first, while maintaining compliance with special education rules and regulations.

The Director of ESE will also oversee Program Specialists in Sarasota. Program Specialists are currently an important component of special education in Sarasota, but they are not currently used to their full capacity. Currently in Sarasota, Program Specialists are assigned to several schools within the district where they are supposed to be onsite regularly supporting ESE Liaisons, teachers, and staff. The Program Specialists are also assigned to specifically support groups of staff members like speech and language pathologists, for example. There are two challenges with the responsibilities currently assigned to the Program Specialists. First, they are not able to spend the time needed in school buildings because they are often focused on compliance issues or other administrative issues in the district. Program Specialists need to be in the school buildings supporting building administration on special education issues, as well as supporting ESE Liaisons in their assigned schools. The Program Specialists should be helping to drive student achievement among special education students by supporting teachers and the ESE Liaisons. Second, Program Specialists are currently assigned to support related services personnel and other special education staff, but they do not necessarily have experience or specific knowledge of the programs or team members they are supporting. Program Specialists' assignments need to be program specific and ideally based upon the background, knowledge, and experience of the Program Specialists themselves. The new district leadership team has already begun taking an inventory of the background and experience of the Program Specialists and will be using that information to make assignments of the Program Specialists that are program specific and related to the Program Specialists background and skillset.

The Program Specialists role also needs leadership. There is currently insufficient district administration leadership supporting Program Specialists. The Program Specialists themselves have created an informal hierarchy among themselves for meetings and dissemination of information, with some experienced Program Specialists taking the lead. While this informal system may have been well intended, it is not beneficial for all Program Specialists and lacks administrative oversight. The Director of ESE needs to provide stronger and more hands-on leadership for the Program Specialists by attending and leading Program Specialist meetings and providing specific direction and support for the Program Specialists who will ultimately have a greater focus on special education student achievement by spending time in school buildings and classrooms supporting building administrators, teachers, and staff.

ESE Liaisons are another important group of special education experts in Sarasota who are not currently used to their full capacity. An ESE Liaison is assigned to every school in Sarasota. It seems that the original intent for ESE Liaisons was to be in the classrooms within their assigned buildings, supporting special education teachers and general education teachers with special education students in their classrooms. Generally, ESE Liaisons are not currently providing those supports in the classroom for two primary reasons. First, ESE Liaisons have evolved into the compliance point of contact in the school buildings. For many ESE Liaisons, their entire day is consumed with compliance-related issues, leaving little to no time for meaningful support in the classrooms. It is necessary and important to ensure that schools are in compliance with rules and regulations, but that should not fall on ESE Liaisons who need to be providing classroom supports to drive student achievement. As discussed below, there must be a separate group of

Compliance Liaisons who are solely focused on compliance, thus freeing up ESE Liaisons to fulfill their original purpose of providing support in the classrooms.

The second reason that the ESE Liaisons are not providing the intended classroom support is that there are a number of ESE Liaisons who do not have the training or knowledge to be effective coaches, trainers, and models in the classroom. There appears to be very little support for ESE Liaisons from department leadership. New ESE Liaisons do not receive needed support or specific training for their unique role in the district, and there is no ongoing, targeted training and professional development specifically for ESE Liaisons. In their role of being assigned to schools to provide special education support, ESE Liaisons need to have ongoing training and professional development to have the latest information on new rules, regulations, and requirements under the federal and state education laws and also have in-depth knowledge and professional development on the most innovative ways to support classroom teachers and staff in their assigned buildings.

Both the Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons currently spend a significant amount of their time managing compliance in their individual schools and at the district level. This cannot continue if the district desires to have a focus on student achievement for special education students. Of course, compliance is important and cannot be neglected, but it should not be the primary focus of Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons who should be supporting student instruction and driving student achievement. As a result, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team recommends that the district create a new position, that of Compliance Liaisons, with the sole focus of managing compliance with special education requirements in the schools. Unlike ESE Liaisons, there does not need to be one Compliance Liaison in every school building. Compliance Liaisons can be assigned to more than one building, depending on the special education caseload of the buildings where they are assigned. These Compliance Liaisons will have the sole responsibility for compliance in their assigned buildings. They will work closely with building administrators, related services personnel, teachers, and other staff members who are a part of the IEP process to ensure that all requirements are met and that both the IEP team and the family have the information and resources necessary for a successful IEP meeting. Compliance issues for Sarasota are tremendously important because of some past rulings that the district was out of compliance with required provisions. Compliance Liaisons will need to be highly skilled compliance experts and receive ongoing support and professional development to remain current on all special education laws, rules, and regulations impacting special education.

Program Specialists, ESE Liaisons, and Compliance Liaisons all need to be supported in their individual roles by the Director of ESE. This support includes targeted and ongoing training and professional development for each group that is unique to their roles and responsibilities in the school buildings and within the district. One-size-fits-all training will not suffice for these important and diverse roles. The training and professional development from Sarasota and/or outside providers must be substantive, with a focus on current best practices in special education for all three groups, specific focus on student achievement for Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons, and compliance updates for Compliance Liaisons.

An additional support that these groups need beyond training and professional development is the ability to fulfill their responsibilities in a timely fashion for the district. Currently, most Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons are 10-month employees. It is difficult for these individuals to complete their extensive job responsibilities in a 10-month timeframe. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team recommends that Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons are transitioned into at least an 11-month employment contract, and ideally a 12-month employment contract for Program Specialists. Similarly, it will be difficult for Compliance Liaisons to receive incoming student information at the beginning of the year and transition students at the end of the year on a 10-month employment contract. Ideally, Compliance Liaisons would

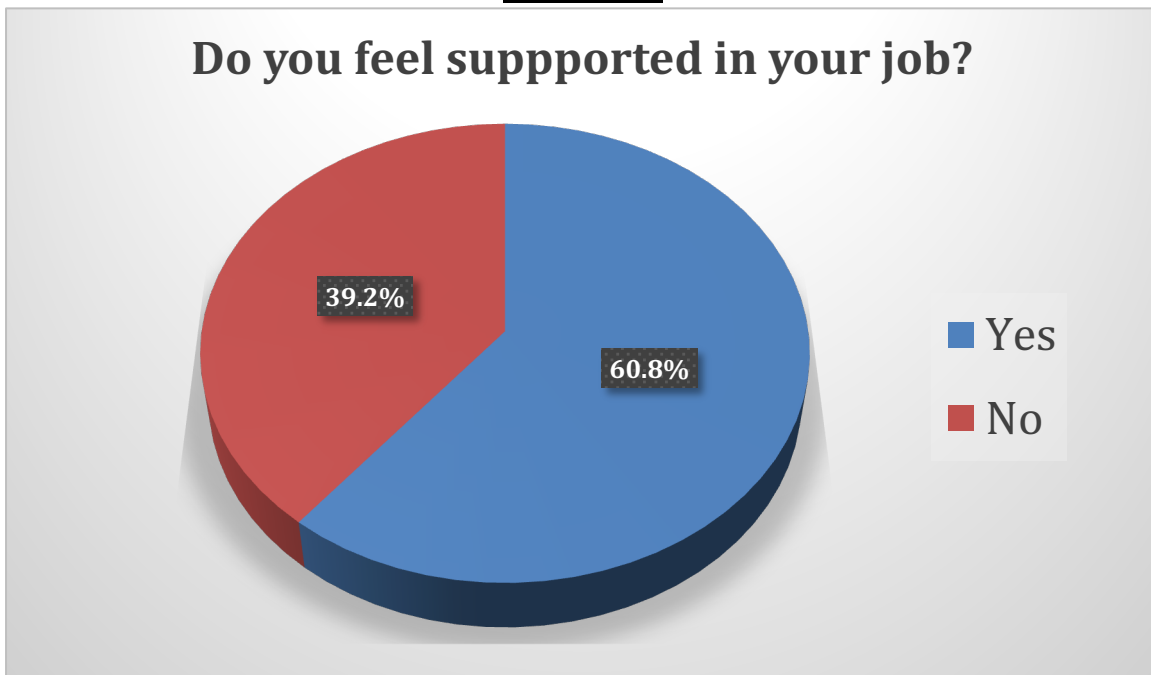
have a 12-month employment contract to address the ongoing compliance issues, as well as conduct Florida Department of Education audits and internal IEP/folder reviews; however, if the district finances do not allow for that, Compliance Liaisons could have an 11-month employment contract but it should not be less than 11 months.

Recommendation 1.1: Adopt the Proposed Sarasota Organizational Chart developed by Exceptional Learning Solutions, rename and/or restructure the existing positions under new supervisors, and hire the new positions as soon as practicable.

Focus Area 1.2

The culture and climate of every school district is vitally important to maintain positive morale among staff and an effective environment to meet students' social/emotional and educational needs. The measure of culture and climate among Sarasota special education staff is mixed based on conversations with staff members and the results from the Staff Survey. When staff were asked the broad question in the Staff Survey, "Do you feel supported in your job?", 60.8% indicated that they felt supported while 39.2% indicated that they did not feel supported. While a majority of the respondents to the survey indicated that they feel supported, it is troubling that nearly 40% of respondents do not feel supported (See Chart 1.2.1). This raises some serious questions for ESE Department leadership and the special education team more broadly about why there is a perception of a lack of support and where do respondents feel the lack of support originates.

Chart 1.2.1

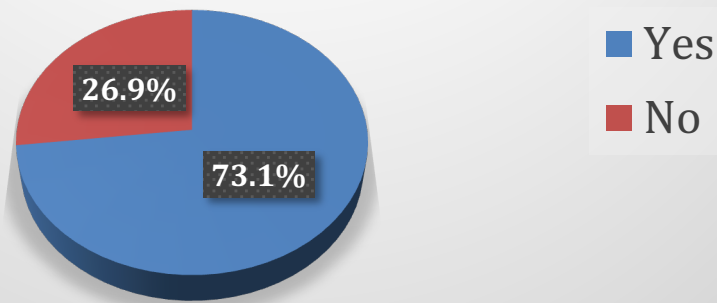


To probe a bit deeper into whether staff feel supported and by whom, the questions were expanded to specifically inquire about building administration support and district administration support. The Staff Survey was sent out on September 27, 2023, so the focus of these questions was about feeling supported at the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team through the Staff Survey asked the question, "Do you believe that you have received sufficient support and resources from your building administration to successfully begin the 2023-2024 school year?" Of those who responded

to the Staff Survey, 73.1% feel supported by building administration, while 26.9% did not feel supported (See Chart 1.2.2). This indicates that the respondents to the survey overwhelmingly feel supported by their building administration.

Chart 1.2.2

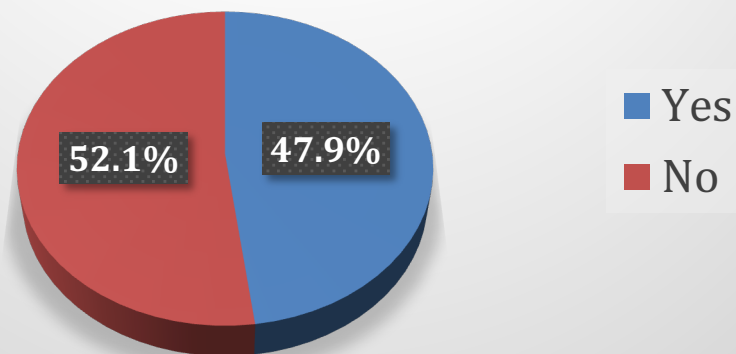
Do you believe that you have received sufficient support and resources from your building administration to successfully begin the 2023-2024 school year?



When a similar question was posed to gauge feelings of support from district administration, the positive responses dropped significantly. Respondents were asked, “Do you believe that you have received sufficient support and resources from district administration to successfully begin the 2023-2024 school year?” Of those who responded to the Staff Survey, 47.9% indicated that they feel supported by district administration, while 52.1% indicated that they do not feel supported (See Chart 1.2.3).

Chart 1.2.3

Do you believe that you have received sufficient support and resources from district administration to successfully begin the 2023-2024 school year?



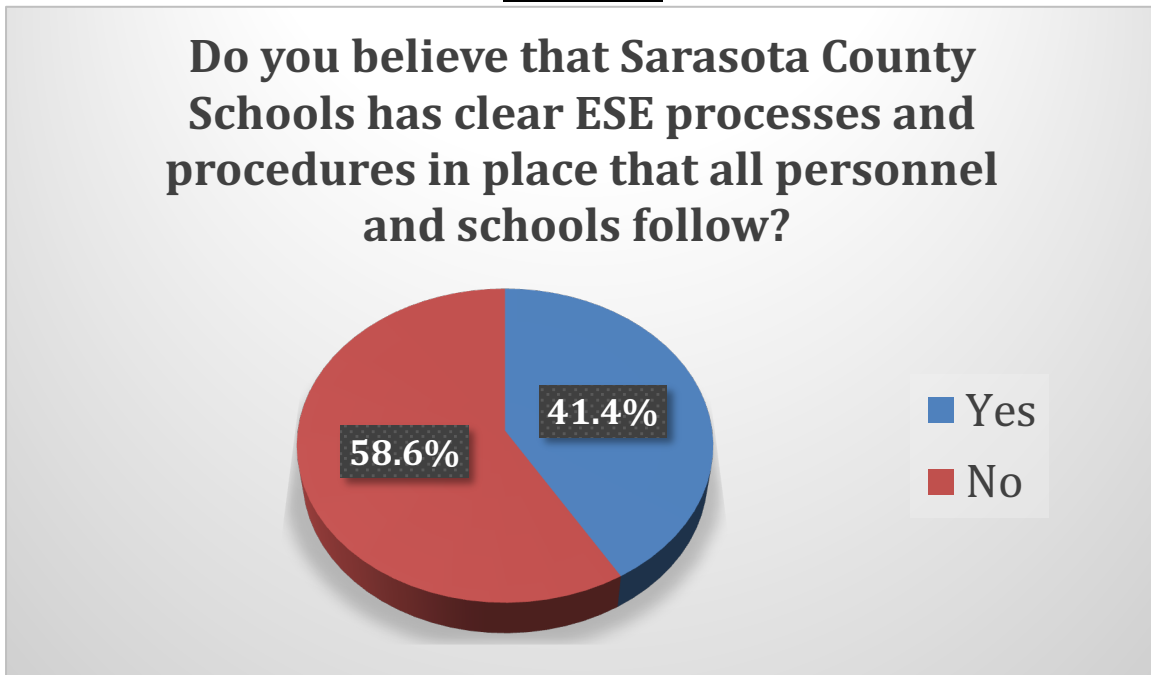
There are two important indicators from this data. First, a majority of respondents to the Staff Survey do not feel supported by district administration. This is a tremendous cause for concern for Sarasota. Staff must feel supported and have the resources that they need to be successful in their roles and support the students that they serve. Second, among the respondents of the survey, there is a feeling of greater support by building administrators versus district administrators. This is very positive for district administrators and should be celebrated by Sarasota. Of course, building administrators are a constant presence in the school buildings and staff have greater access to building administrators as compared to district administrators. It is not surprising that staff feel a greater level of support from those they see daily. However, it is important for the district administration to attempt to uncover the cause for these survey results and attempt to rectify the culture and climate among some staff within Sarasota.

Through Exceptional Learning Solutions' interviews and observations, there are two main reasons for this frustration of special education district administration impacting the culture and climate of the department: 1) there appears to be a lack of trust in the special education district administration, and 2) a lack of visibility of special education district administrators in the school buildings. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team interviews with teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and others in the school buildings, uncovered that most of those interviewed indicated that they generally had professional respect for the knowledge, experience, and credentials of the special education administrators; however, many staff members discussed a lack of trust related to the special education department. A lack of trust can be a challenging obstacle to overcome. It is not something that can be altered quickly or ignored with the hope that it will improve over time. Trust must be earned, and when there is a lack of trust, whether warranted or not, it can severely impede the progress of a department and ultimately the district. If the district leadership team chooses to adopt the Proposed Sarasota Organization Chart discussed in Focus Area 1.1, there will be a new leadership position created, the Chief of Pupil Support Services, and whomever is chosen to fill that role, whether an internal or external candidate, will have an opportunity to adjust the culture and climate by building trust and rapport with staff.

Examining why there is a lack of trust based on conversations and interviews, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team believes it is due to insufficient transparency. It is important for building administrators, teachers, and staff to understand that while they may desire to know every detail of what happens at the central office and among department administrators, they are not entitled to know everything. District leaders, the board of education, and department administrators often make decisions based on what they believe to be in the best interest of the district or department. Staff members may not always agree with those decisions. However, it is important, to the greatest extent possible, to share decisions with building administrators and staff in an open and honest way. Transparency does not necessarily mean sharing every detail of the operations of the district—some details are not able to be shared for legal and/or confidentiality purposes—but when new initiatives are announced or when decisions are made that directly impact building-level administrators and staff, they should be shared openly and honestly. Administrators and staff do not want to only hear that they need to do something, but they want to hear the “why” of new initiatives and “how” those initiatives will be rolled out. This transparency allows building-level administrators and staff to understand the broader vision of the district and the department. Building-level administrators and staff members can process what is happening, understand the rationale for the decisions, and realize why they are being asked to do something. If providing the “why” and the “how” is done consistently when new initiatives are rolled out and/or changes are made to existing protocol, over time building administrators and staff will begin to get an understanding of the direction of the district and special education specifically, which builds rapport and trust between administration and staff over time.

The Staff Survey asked staff to reflect on ESE processes and procedures in Sarasota. Respondents to the survey were asked, “Do you believe that Sarasota County Schools has clear ESE processes and procedures in place that all personnel and schools follow?” Of those who responded to the survey, 41.4% indicated that there are clear ESE processes and procedures in place, while 58.6% indicated that there were not clear ESE processes and procedures in place (See Chart 1.2.4). Having reviewed the items contained in the extensive document request made by Exceptional Learning Solutions, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team knows that there are processes and procedures established in Sarasota. However, there is a perception among a majority of respondents to the Staff Survey that there are not clear ESE processes and procedures in place. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team believes that there are two potential reasons for this perception and the survey response. First, some staff members do not know what various ESE processes and procedures are within the district. If a staff member does not know about a particular process or procedure, even if one exists, they could be more likely to respond that there are not clear processes and procedures in place. Second, some staff indicated that while there may be processes and procedures written down, those processes and procedures are not consistently followed, thereby indicating that the processes and procedures do not meaningfully exist. This goes back to the notion of a lack of trust and understanding of processes and procedures within special education administration in Sarasota.

Chart 1.2.4



The culture and climate of a department can also hinge on the perceptions of the department administration and leadership team. To be optimally successful department leaders need to hold the trust and respect of staff. In order to build a relationship with building administrators and staff alike, the department administrators must be visible in the school buildings. Visibility of ESE Department leadership in the school buildings is not as frequent or meaningful as it could and should be. ESE Department administrators are in buildings as needed for administrative meetings and significant issues involving students. However, ESE Department administrators are not regularly present in classrooms and in the halls of the school buildings. This should be a more regular occurrence. The department administrators should conduct these visits with the school building administrators, allowing the administrator to further educate the district administrators on activities occurring within the school, build relationships, and enable staff to observe unified support. Teachers and staff should regularly see department administrators in the

building and in classrooms interacting with staff and students to have a true understanding of the daily occurrences in the schools. There should be regular onsite visits to observe in special education classrooms in non-evaluative ways, simply to check in with special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related services personnel. It is important to see first-hand how initiatives are working, what challenges educators are facing in the classrooms, and provide an opportunity for personal interaction between department administrators and the special education practitioners. These visits do not need to be lengthy but should occur regularly. Being a visible presence in the school buildings so that school-based special education staff develop a relationship with department administrators is essential. Not only will this help with visibility in the building, but it will also assist in developing greater trust and collegiality. Department administrators should coordinate with the school building administrators and carve out a few hours each week for in-person, onsite visits, rotating among schools and special education programs within the district.

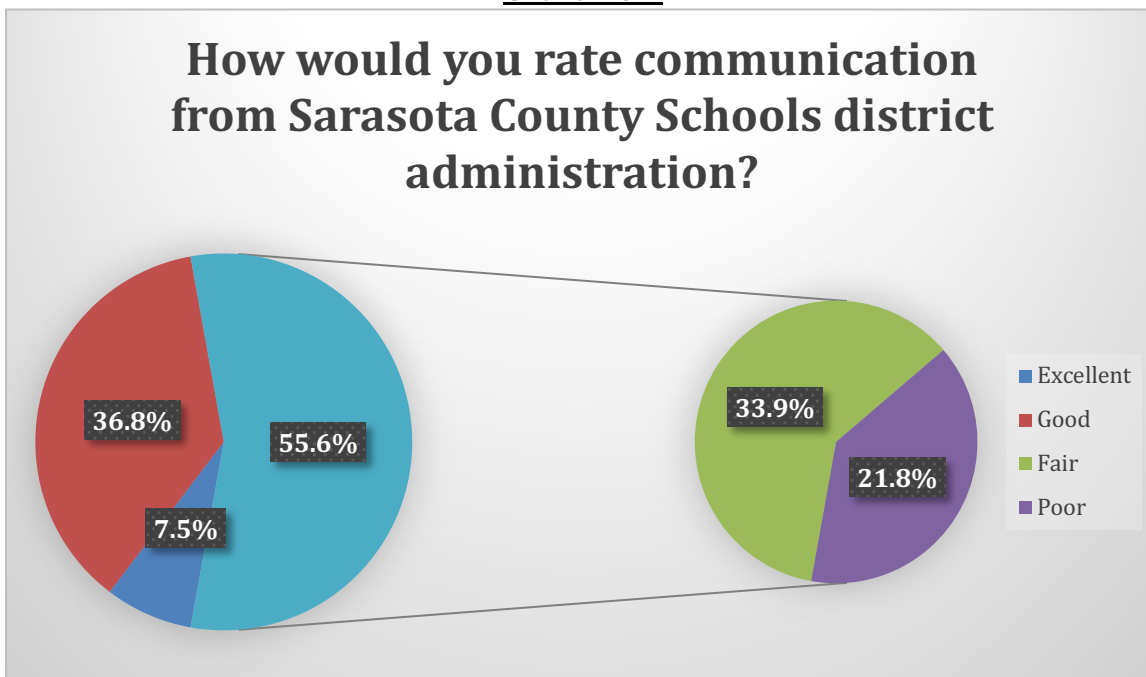
Recommendation 1.2: Address the culture and climate issues within special education in Sarasota by re-establishing trust through transparency of initiatives, discussing the “why” and “how” of changes, and increase department administrator visibility by carving out a few hours each week for in-person, onsite visits.

Focus Area 1.3

Communication is a critical component for the ESE Department and district administrators. Currently, communication is a source of frustration for some Sarasota special education staff. Not all staff feel that they receive information they need in an accurate or timely manner. Inadequate communication from leadership, whether district leadership or building leadership, can be detrimental to the balance of trust and respect within an organization. When there is not regular and reliable communication, staff lack guidance in their direction and lack confidence in their leadership.

Throughout Exceptional Learning Solutions’ school visits and conversations with staff, one of the recurring comments was the lack of adequate communication from district special education administrators. The results of the Staff Survey also reflect this. In the survey, staff were asked, “How would you rate communication from Sarasota County Schools district administration?” Of those who responded to this question, 7.5% indicated Excellent, while 36.8% indicated Good. That means less than half of the staff who responded to the survey believe that there is adequate communication from district administration. Over 55% of the respondents to the survey indicated that communication from district administration was Fair or Poor, with 33.9% stating Fair and 21.8% indicating Poor (See Chart 1.3.1). These are surprisingly low numbers for satisfaction with communication from district administration.

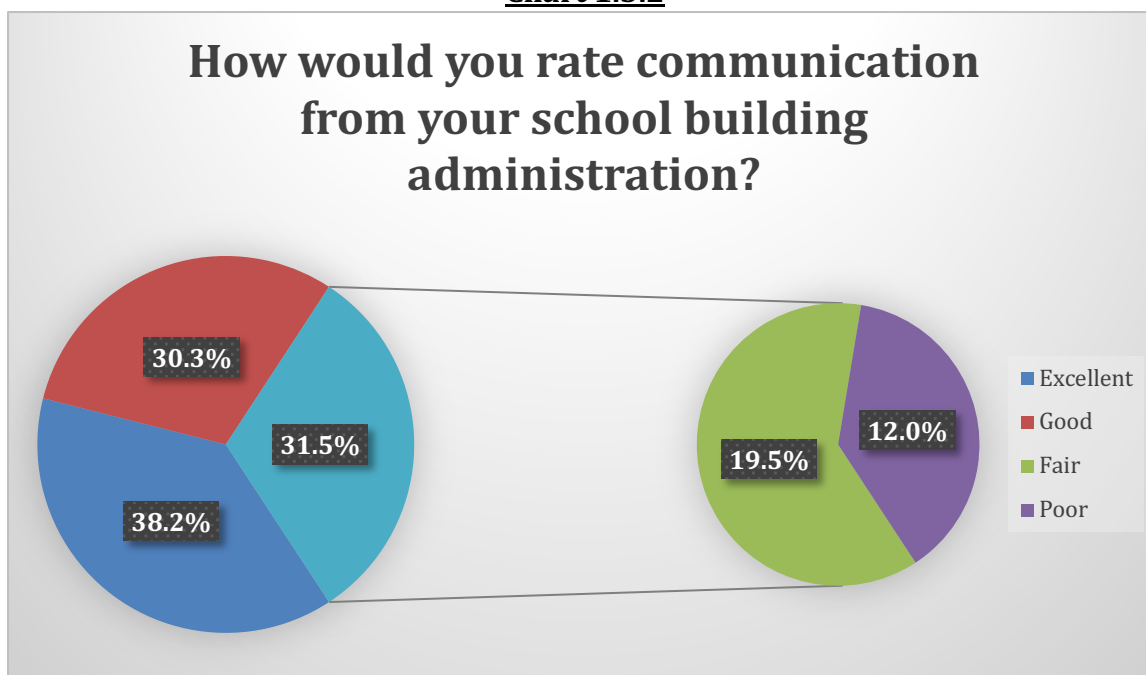
Chart 1.3.1



Communication with staff should not only occur when there are issues to report, changes in initiatives, or staffing updates. The communication from district and department administration must be regular and reliable. To be fair, there is communication from the ESE Department and district administration; however, both the quantity and the quality of the communication are insufficient for a vast majority of the staff to find useful. There should be regular and reliable communication to staff in the form of a weekly email newsletter sent to all special education staff. That newsletter should be a clear and concise document that provides updates on the department that staff would want and need to know. The information must be valuable and worth the time to read, such as updates on special education law or rules/regulations that directly impact teachers and staff. The ESE Department should be a resource of information for the special education staff. The newsletter should not be lengthy, but it should be substantive. For staff to respect district administration, the district administration must treat them like knowledgeable experts and as valued members of the ESE Department team.

Communication between school building and staff is better based on the Exceptional Learning Solutions team’s conversations with staff, which is confirmed in the Staff Survey data. The Staff Survey asked, “How would you rate communication from your school building administration?” Of those who responded to the Staff Survey, 68.5% indicated that communication from school building administration was sufficient, with 38.2% stating the communication was Excellent and 30.3% stating that communication was Good. There were 19.5% of the respondents who indicated that the communication with school building administration was Fair and 12% indicating that it was Poor, totaling 31.5% sharing that the communication is inadequate (See Chart 1.3.2). Similar to district administration, school building administration must also provide regular and reliable communication to their building staff. This communication may come in the form of a weekly newsletter and/or it may be in shared during a weekly building staff meeting. However and whenever school building administration communicates with staff, it must be substantive and productive. There needs to be regular and reliable updates and useful information about the school building from Principals to staff.

Chart 1.3.2



An important communication item for special education staff was communication surrounding the rollout of new initiatives or changing services. New initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures cause tremendous stress and change of daily routine for teachers and staff on the ground in school buildings. Rollout of change is critical for the success of new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures. Ideally, educators in the school buildings would be a part of the development of those changes to ensure buy-in and a willingness to adapt to new ideas. Whether that occurs or not, the rollout of new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures should be explicitly communicated at district-wide meetings. These rollouts should include an explanation of what changes are being made, why they are being made, and how those changes will positively impact students. There is no doubt that the ESE Department administrators have thought through the “what,” “why,” and “how” questions while developing initiatives or changes, but some special education staff reported to the Exceptional Learning Solutions team that those explanations are not being communicated effectively. As a result, new changes or initiatives are not always fully adopted, effectively administered, or completely understood. Special education administration should ensure that they collaboratively develop new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures with the school teams to the greatest extent possible. There should also be an opportunity for input and full explanation of the purpose and benefit for students and/or teachers for changes being made within special education in Sarasota.

Effective communication is a two-way street, meaning that those receiving the information must be engaged to hear it and must have an opportunity to respond to it. There needs to be rapport built with special education staff for them to hear and respond to communication from administration. One of the easiest ways to do this is to initiate district-wide special education staff meetings. There should be one large kickoff meeting at the beginning of the school year where the special education leadership team methodically lays out the vision for Sarasota special education for the coming school year. This should be done in conjunction with welcoming the staff and celebrating district successes and individual contributions, all with the goal of creating a team mentality within special education.

Additionally, department-wide, in-person meetings should occur throughout the school year, at least once per quarter. These meetings should have a twofold purpose: 1) to allow the department leadership to provide updates and rollout new initiatives and 2) to allow time and space for staff members to provide feedback, ask questions, and address challenges. Staff members want to have a voice in initiatives and directives. They want to hear the “why” of new initiatives and “how” they will happen, thus providing a vision for Sarasota special education that all staff members understand and embrace. This is the type of rapport building that needs to occur within Sarasota special education and the type of communication that staff desire and deserve.

Quarterly meetings will be particularly important for the second half of the 2023-2024 school year. The organization chart will be changing, with new leadership positions, roles, and responsibilities. Sarasota special education staff should hear directly from the Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent Chief Academic Officer, and the Chief of Pupil Support Services regarding the vision for the incoming district administrators and how these new roles will benefit staff and students. Additionally, the results of the Sarasota County Schools Special Education Program Review and the contents of this report will be final, public, and in the process of being implemented. Special education staff made considerable contributions of time and shared experiences with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team. Many of the results of the Program Review will drive Sarasota special education policy in the near term and for years to come. The staff need to know that they were heard throughout this Program Review process and that their input did not fall on deaf ears. Because of their contributions changes are being made within Sarasota special education to benefit the district and its students.

Recommendation 1.3: Develop a regular and reliable communication plan with the following components:

- **Plan for an annual, in-person school year kickoff staff meeting for special education staff where the vision for the school year will be articulated and the staff accomplishments can be celebrated;**
- **Schedule in-person, department-wide quarterly meetings throughout the school year to discuss new initiatives, explain the “why” and “how” of changes to policies and procedures, and provide an opportunity for special education staff members to ask questions and actively engage in discussion;**
- **Send out a substantive weekly email newsletter that addresses changes within Sarasota special education and includes updates and information that is relevant and useful for administrators, teachers, and staff members; and**
- **Create a process for rolling out new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures that includes in-person meetings, educator involvement in the development, and an explanation of the benefits for students and teachers.**

Category #2: Staffing

Commendations

- Sarasota has caring, dedicated staff that are committed to the safety and academic development of ESE students throughout the district.
- Sarasota has initiated incentive pay for teachers and paraprofessionals who provide ESE services to students.
- Building administrators know and understand the programs and services offered in their buildings and the staffing needs for those programs and services.

Focus Area 2.1

Staffing is a challenge in most school districts, and Sarasota has also struggled with some staffing challenges over the past few years. In large part, this is due to the nationwide shortage of education professionals, particularly special education personnel. Finding qualified special education professionals is not unique to Sarasota. It is an issue throughout the country and planning for staffing challenges is something that Sarasota must do. However, the district has not created the underlying problem of a nationwide educator shortage, yet there are decisions that have exacerbated the staffing challenges for Sarasota.

Determining staffing needs is critical for a district. The current process for determining staffing needs in Sarasota is antiquated and is not a best practice for staffing a school district. The staffing formula that was shared with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team is a series of ratios that were developed in the past to determine staff allocation and is not intuitive or user friendly. The staffing formula appears to be a combination of basing staffing needs on prior year numbers, student to staff ratios, a gut feeling about what staffing should be, and a determination of what the budget will allow. Principals at each school have had an opportunity to suggest their staffing needs to the ESE Department, but ultimately the staffing formula was primarily administered in the central office, particularly by the ESE Department. In the past, the ESE Department effectively made unilateral decisions about staffing allocations at school buildings and in programs throughout the district. These decisions were made through consideration of staff to student ratios and requests by building principals, but the decision ultimately was made by the ESE Department that informed schools how many staff they would receive and told the Human Resources Department how many staff to hire. There is a perception in the district that many of these decisions were made based upon favoritism. This is an unacceptable and inappropriate method for determining staff allocation. While this has historically been an issue in Sarasota with past leadership teams in the ESE Department, some of these staffing allocation issues persist in the current ESE Department, where the same old formulas and ratios continue to be used.

Each school building in the district is unique, with different student populations and staffing needs. Based on the formulas and/or ratios currently used, there seems to be a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing staffing requirements rather than utilizing the varying student needs and services provided in the school buildings to determine staffing decisions. Building administrators, who know the programs and services offered in their buildings and the staffing needs for those programs and services, should be driving the conversation around staffing in their buildings, while the ESE Department focuses on assisting with the identification of the appropriate units based on student population and assisting schools with programmatic design. In the current model, building administrators input, in many cases, seems to be an afterthought, following the decisions made by the ESE Department. Staffing allocations and hiring decisions should be a collaborative endeavor of building leadership, the ESE Department, the Human Resources Department, and the Chief Financial Officer, based on building and program needs. Once needs

are determined, it is the responsibility of the Human Resources Department to engage in the hiring process for new personnel to fully staff the buildings with the appropriate new hires to meet individual building and program needs.

Recommendation 2.1: Develop a new staffing formula that updates the staff-to-student ratios and accounts for the uniqueness of the student population within each school building, with ultimate staffing allocations determined collaboratively among building leadership, the ESE Department, the Human Resources Department, and the Chief Financial Officer.

Focus Area 2.2

Recruitment and retention are both significant issues within special education in Sarasota. As discussed in Focus Area 2.1 above, recruitment is currently difficult for school districts and educational organizations throughout the United States. Sarasota exacerbates this issue due to some of its recruitment processes and challenges in staff retention. Recruitment processes are currently difficult because, before initiating recruitment endeavors, appropriate staffing needs must be assessed, and positions must be filled by using more strategic methods. Utilizing appropriate staffing formulas and allowing the building administrators to determine the staffing needs at each school is an important step to correcting staffing shortfalls and will dictate targeted recruitment efforts. Retention is difficult because when individuals are hired for some special education positions in the district, there is not always a clear understanding of the job responsibilities, or some hires simply do not have the qualifications for the job.

There must be a multi-pronged approach to recruiting quality special education staff for Sarasota, including both job postings and recruitment activities. Posting jobs for Sarasota must be done deliberately and carefully in order to attract appropriate staff members who will be assets to the district's special education program and are qualified to provide the needed services for students. Two critical components of job postings are timing and language.

Timing for postings is critical to attract the best candidates for open positions. Most highly qualified candidates are recruited long before the end of the school year. While every open position for the subsequent school year may not be known early, schools and the district should have a good idea of its projected hiring needs for the next school year. Recruiting should begin for the next school year around December of the current school year, approximately nine months before the beginning of the next school year. Building leadership, together with the ESE Department and Human Resources Department, should look at historical data and hiring needs to make realistic projections of upcoming needs, as well as take into account impending retirements and/or known staff losses. For many special education positions, Sarasota often waits to begin recruiting for the next school year in the spring. While there may be a more complete picture of the openings for the next school year, that is simply too late to recruit the most highly qualified candidates. Many have already committed to other positions, which leaves Sarasota with open positions or positions filled by individuals who are underqualified to fulfill them. The districts surrounding Sarasota are competitive in their hiring processes, so it is important for Sarasota to begin the advertisement and recruitment process early and attract the best talent for the district.

The language used in job postings, as well as during the interview process, is important to recruit and determine the most appropriate individuals to fill positions. Language matters when posting for open positions. A job posting should inform the potential applicant about the district and the job itself. There should be an explanation of special education in Sarasota, the students being served, the mission of the district and special education, and how the open position is important to advance that mission.

Additionally, there should be detailed information on the position itself, including the basic details of the position, what the position entails/employee expectations, and an accurate description of the working environment. These are standard components of job descriptions for most districts and organizations. While Sarasota generally does a good job of posting for special education positions, there is not always a firm understanding among candidates, and ultimately hires, of the depth and breadth of the position for which they applied.

Job postings that are not clear or may provide incomplete information result in candidates who may not have a full understanding of the position and choose to leave the role after a year or prior to the expiration of the contract. It is important to provide the information that a potential candidate would need to make a well-informed decision about applying for and accepting a position with the district. For example, when a non-educator applying for a paraprofessional position is told they will be working with special needs students, that person may not fully understand the extent of their responsibilities in a special education environment such as a classroom setting in Sarasota, at a Cluster Site, or at Oak Park School. They may not realize that the position may require them to work with students with extreme behavior needs or to support personal hygiene needs such as feeding and toileting. Sarasota has a variety of important programs in Cluster Sites and at Oak Park that serve students with specific needs. When recruiting for those programs, it is imperative that candidates applying for positions within those programs are qualified candidates and have a full understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

In addition to job postings, Sarasota needs to strategize a robust outreach plan to recruit qualified educators and related services personnel into the district. Particularly in a difficult job market, job postings alone have proven to be inadequate to recruit top candidates and ultimately hire qualified team members. Sarasota attends a variety of job fairs and conferences annually to recruit qualified candidates. While this is an excellent approach to hiring both special education and general education staff, the district should increase its engagements by targeting the special education community in job fairs throughout the state of Florida, as well as throughout the Southeast region. The job fairs chosen for special education recruitment should be strategic to ensure that the candidates attending have special education backgrounds and/or the credentials needed to support Sarasota special education students and programs. Similarly, the district should utilize and access colleges and universities to recruit students early in their education and develop a pipeline to employment within the district. This can include accepting student teachers and recruiting them to stay in Sarasota. In Florida alone, there are a number of colleges and universities with excellent education programs that could be a tremendous pipeline of future Sarasota special education employees. While Sarasota already has recruitment relationships with some colleges and universities, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team recommends expanding the outreach to additional colleges and universities both within and outside of Florida. Additionally, Sarasota's ESE Department should become more involved with the University of South Florida, both as a recruiting tool and also to leverage the special education expertise of staff and students at the university, as well as avail themselves of some of the outreach opportunities and support provided to school districts.

Retention of special education staff is also an issue for Sarasota. Sarasota, like many school districts, struggles with vacant special education positions during the year. Vacancies ebb and flow throughout the school year, with some positions being filled while others become vacant. As previously stated, some newly hired positions become vacant relatively quickly because the employees may not fully understand the depth and breadth of the position. Any time there are vacancies within a school or district someone needs to cover the responsibilities of the vacant position and still provide the needed services that position is responsible for performing. This can be very difficult and challenging in special education, where many of the positions require specialized knowledge, skills, and/or licensure to fulfill the demand.

The process of retaining employees begins even before the staff member is hired. There needs to be a clear job description, as described above, together with honest and complete discussion of the job roles and responsibilities during the interview process. Without this, potential candidates do not have a complete picture of the job they are taking, which may lead to frustration, burnout, and resignations. This is discussed in more detail specifically regarding paraprofessionals in Focus Area 2.4 below. Once employees are hired, they must be supported in their jobs in order to retain them. Sarasota should implement a mentoring program for all new special education staff for the first two years of their employment. Some positions and some schools have this, but it is not universal or consistently implemented for all roles and all locations throughout the school district. Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends the creation of Paraprofessional Coaches, who would be responsible for mentoring Paraprofessionals (See Focus Area 9.3). However, a robust mentoring program should be implemented for all special education roles in Sarasota. There are many experienced and knowledgeable staff members in every building who could mentor new employees and assist in the transition of new Sarasota special education staff members.

Recommendation 2.2: Create job postings that are clear, accurate, and detailed to fully describe the position being filled; strategically expand outreach by developing additional relationships with colleges and universities in the region; and develop a robust mentoring program for newly hired special education staff who have direct student contact and provide mentor support for the first two years of employment.

Focus Area 2.3

Compensation is an important area to discuss when analyzing staffing in Sarasota. In general, Sarasota pays its staff well, higher than many other districts in Florida. Teachers are compensated fairly, and other staff members make at or above what most other districts pay. There is, however, an ongoing discussion in Sarasota about compensating special education teachers and staff members. Recently, the district initiated incentive pay for special education team members. The concept behind this incentive is that staff members who serve special needs students often have greater challenges with behavior and supports than other staff members in the district. As such, the district provided a small incentive for special education personnel to reward them for their efforts and to increase retention in the district. While this brings up some issues of fairness for non-special education staff, most of the teachers and staff members who the Exceptional Learning Solutions team spoke with during onsite visits seemed to be supportive of the fact that special education staff received an incentive for addressing the needs of the most challenging students in the district.

The new administration will need to determine if the practice of incentivizing special education staff members will be continued moving forward, and that decision will need to be made in consultation with union leadership. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team certainly does not take issue with incentivizing special education staff members. However, if Sarasota intends to incentivize special education staff, the pay incentive should be applied to all special education staff at every level in the school buildings, from support staff to teachers. Excluding any groups of special education staff will invalidate the intended purpose of retention of special education staff and instead create hierarchical animosity between groups of special education providers. If the district chooses to continue to incentivize special education staff, there is one exception to the recommendation of treating all special education staff uniformly for pay incentives. That group is special education teachers and staff at Oak Park School. Oak Park School is the only comprehensive separate day school in the district and exclusively serves a broad spectrum of special needs students, including but not limited to behavior students and students with severe and profound needs. Oak Park School has a very dedicated team of staff members, many who have been there for a

significant number of years. However, generally there are challenges recruiting and retaining staff at Oak Park School due to the severity of the needs of its students. If Sarasota chooses to incentivize special education staff throughout the district, it is the recommendation of the Exceptional Learning Solutions team that staff at Oak Park School receive an increased or additional incentive as compared to other special education staff throughout the district. Based on the Exceptional Learning Solutions team's observations and conversations with staff throughout the district, the staff at Oak Park School have the most challenging roles of any special education staff in the district. They should be compensated and incentivized for providing support to the students with the greatest needs in Sarasota.

Another aspect of compensation for some special education staff members in Sarasota is the difference in classification and pay for special education staff members hired as SSP5 employees or SSP7 employees. There is a differentiation in Sarasota between aids, who are typically SSP5 employees, and paraprofessionals, who are typically SSP7 employees and a corresponding difference in compensation between the two classifications. From a human resource and hiring perspective, different titles and different job descriptions can warrant a separate classification between the two groups. However, there is little difference between the roles of an SSP5 employee and an SSP7 employee in the school buildings. Both are essentially performing similar, if not the same, job functions, and the hiring criteria between the two levels is not significantly different. While there are nuances in each school building between the roles and the responsibilities of SSP5 employees and SSP7 employees, Sarasota could consider compensating these two groups similarly by creating a new employment classification or merging the two classifications together. This would create a more equitable environment for SSP5 employees and could help with SSP5 retention in the district.

Recommendation 2.3: Consider continuing incentive pay for special education staff in the district and providing an additional compensation incentive for staff at Oak Park School, as well as consider adjusting the classifications of SSP5 and SSP7 employees for more equitable compensation, all to retain greater numbers of special education staff in Sarasota.

Focus Area 2.4

One significant staffing issue facing Sarasota and many other school districts is the shortage of paraprofessionals in the school buildings. Paraprofessionals are a necessary and important component of special education classrooms. They aid students who have that service as a component of their IEPs and also assist classroom teachers with a variety of supports, including but not limited to helping students with personal hygiene, educational needs, behavior supports, and removing students who need to de-escalate outside of the classroom. There are paraprofessional vacancies at several schools in Sarasota, particularly at Oak Park School.

When a paraprofessional position is unfilled, that does not mean that the service obligation to those students suddenly disappears. Instead, someone needs to fill those vacant positions and provide services to students. Some of these vacancies can be covered by long term or short-term substitutes, but there are simply not enough substitutes to cover all the vacancies, which include other staff absences for illness or personal emergencies. That means schools and the district are moving staff from other places to cover direct student contact positions within the district. This shuffling of staff is inadequate and unsustainable to meet the needs of students.

The paraprofessional staffing issue must be addressed in Sarasota. There needs to be a focus on quality over quantity when hiring paraprofessionals. The Human Resources Department strives to fill vacant Exceptional Learning Solutions

paraprofessional positions; however, not everyone who responds to a job posting is a good fit for a paraprofessional. Classrooms with special needs students, particularly those at Cluster Sites and at Oak Park School, serve many high-needs students who need specialized supports.

When most non-special educators think about special education students, they draw on their own experiences, possibly with mild students on the autism spectrum or students who are in wheelchairs or students whose behavior requires a trip to the principal's office from time to time. Most people applying for paraprofessional positions do not realize or understand the high level of need for many special needs students in Sarasota. Students with behavior needs may have an intermittent explosive disorder that can cause the student to explode in rage without warning, potentially harming themselves, other students, and the adults in the room.

The job descriptions for paraprofessional applicants cannot provide every detail of the paraprofessional role that will vary by school building and programs within buildings. The Human Resources Department should provide detailed information during the pre-interview process about the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. Those seeking paraprofessional applicants in the Human Resources Department and those interviewing candidates, whether at the district or school building levels, need to be clear and upfront about the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. The paraprofessional role is not a one-size-fits-all role. A paraprofessional supporting a student with extreme behavior needs at a Cluster Site has a completely different role than a paraprofessional supporting a nonverbal student on a ventilator at Oak Park School. When the Exceptional Learning Solutions team met with paraprofessionals in school buildings, many of them indicated that they had not been presented with a full and accurate description of their job responsibilities prior to accepting the position. During the interview process, there needs to be full disclosure of the parameters of the position, based on the school building and program position that the paraprofessional is being hired to fill. Prior to hiring, paraprofessionals should interview with building administration and be provided an opportunity to visit the school and see where they will be working and the student population they will be supporting prior to accepting a position. This is discussed in greater detail in Focus Area 5.1.

Sarasota needs to provide a robust onboarding process for paraprofessionals in the district. This onboarding process is discussed in greater detail in Focus Area 9.1. At its core, the paraprofessional onboarding process should include dedicated time, prior to beginning their positions, for paraprofessionals to visit their assigned school and/or classroom and receive targeted and specific training related to their role. This training should prepare paraprofessionals for their job responsibilities and how to support students and teachers in the classroom. Newly hired paraprofessionals should have at least one week of onboarding and training prior to the beginning of their start date to ensure that they are prepared to support students and teachers. Paraprofessionals must be equipped with the knowledge and understanding of their role to feel comfortable, supported, and capable of assisting students in the classroom.

Recommendation 2.4: Describe the role of the paraprofessional accurately in job descriptions and during the interview process, and provide onboarding with onsite school visits and robust training so that paraprofessionals fully understand their job responsibilities prior to their start date.

Category #3: Finance and Budgeting

Commendations

- Sarasota continues to develop and implement a strong salary schedule for the majority of positions in order to stay competitive with neighboring districts.
- Sarasota has prioritized ESE behavioral supports by budgeting for additional behavior specialists at elementary schools.
- Sarasota has a Finance Department that works diligently to maintain a systemic budget process and ensure that the district is fiscally sound.

Focus Area 3.1

The office of the Chief Financial Officer in Sarasota is a well-run department with strong leadership and a very capable staff. All indications are that the current Chief Financial Officer and her team are examining past financial practices in the district and striving to address financial gaps or areas of concern when needed. The scope of financial review by the Exceptional Learning Solutions team was limited to special education and the ESE Department. In past administrations, it was common practice for the ESE Department to inform the office of the Chief Financial Officer and Human Resources Department how much money they needed and how many positions they needed to add. The money was allocated, and the positions were granted. While there may have been a compelling reason that the resources and/or positions were needed, the reality is that the process lacked a system of checks and balances required to ensure that district resources were allocated appropriately, and the ESE Department operated within budget constraints. The current Chief Financial Officer and her team are working to reestablish a necessary system of checks and balances for special education spending.

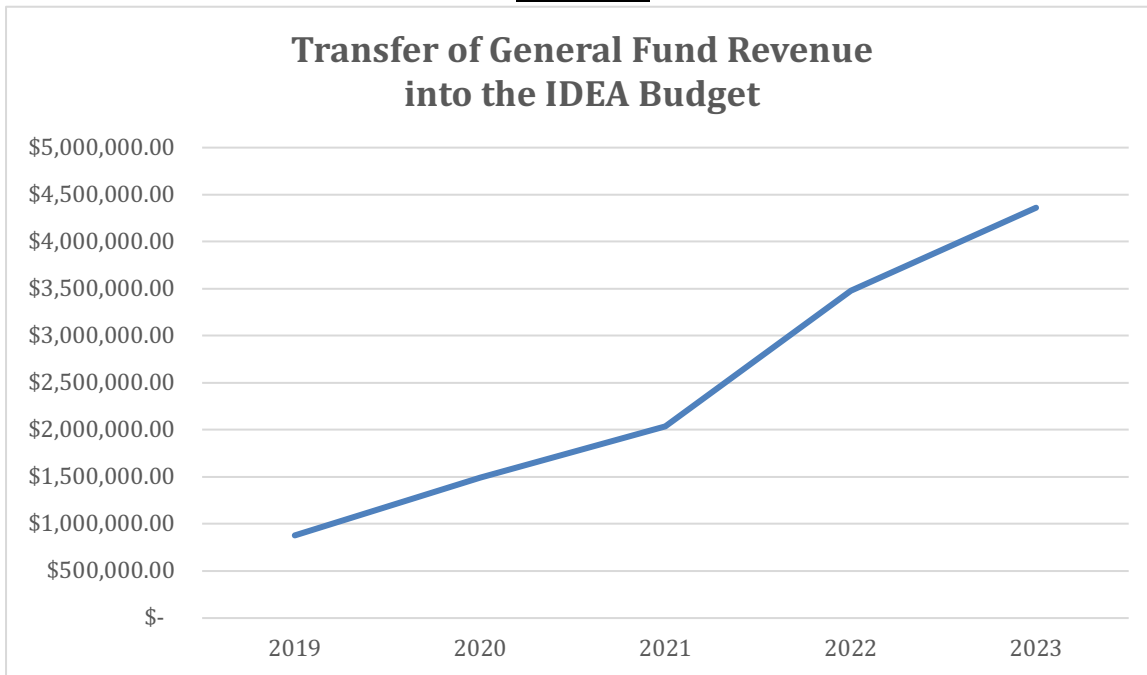
One area of concern regarding special education funding and resources is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (hereinafter, "IDEA") grant and the transfer of general fund revenue into the IDEA budget. Each year, Sarasota submits documentation to receive an IDEA federal grant to fund special education expenses in the county. The dollars received fluctuate on an annual basis, and in most years, there is increased funding due to increased costs for special education services. This is typical in most districts, and Sarasota is no exception. However, a closer examination of special education costs and IDEA expenditures reveals that there is an annual transfer of general fund revenue into the IDEA budget to cover special education expenses in Sarasota. Essentially, this means that the IDEA grant does not fully fund the district's special education expenses, and as a result, Sarasota needs to transfer money from its general fund to cover the difference between the IDEA grant and the actual expenses for special education (See Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

	2023 Pre-Closing Estimates	2022	2021	2020	2019
IDEA Federal Grant Revenue Received	10,328,137.00	9,771,431.00	9,699,514.00	9,471,912.16	9,202,140.00
Transfer of General Fund Revenue into the IDEA Budget	4,361,126.70	3,479,539.75	2,040,247.26	1,495,995.54	878,395.58

It is not entirely unusual for a district to transfer funds from the general fund to cover a shortfall in IDEA funding in a particular year. This typically occurs when a district has an unusual financial expenditure in special education. For example, classroom audiological systems, lifts, assistive technology devices, or a new initiative, intervention, or curriculum adoption. Those situations usually occur only for a year or two. What is most troubling about IDEA funding in Sarasota is that the five years of financial data that the Exceptional Learning Solutions team reviewed indicates there has been a transfer of general education revenue to the IDEA budget each year, and that practice has become the norm in the district. What is even more concerning is that the transfer of general education revenue into the IDEA budget has significantly increased year over year in each of the five years reviewed. The transfer of general education funds into the IDEA budget in 2019 was \$878,395.58, and the transfer in the 2023 pre-closing estimate was \$4,361,126.70. That is a steep upward trajectory in transferred dollars over the five-year period (See Chart 3.1).

Chart 3.1



Sarasota needs to review its funding of special education to determine why there is an annual increase of general revenue dollars to support special education. Of course, expenses increase every year, and the national trend shows that more students are qualifying for special education in recent years. The reality that costs are increasing is not surprising or troubling, but the fact that there is a steady increase in the transfer of general fund revenue into the IDEA budget each year warrants a review of special education spending and the IDEA grant funding.

Recommendation 3.1: Initiate and complete a review of the ESE Department finances, including the matrix of services, as well as special education budgeting and spending, particularly as it relates to IDEA funding and the transfer of general fund revenue into the IDEA budget.

Focus Area 3.2

Most districts throughout the United States received Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (“ESSER”) Funds through Congressional stimulus bills passed in 2020 and 2021 to address issues faced by school districts responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were many increased costs to districts as the learning models shifted from in person to remote learning (and back again), as well as an increase in the needs of students, particularly special education students, who returned to school after extensive time away from school during the pandemic. The parameters placed on the use of the ESSER Funds were broad in scope, allowing school districts to justify utilizing funds for myriad reasons if the funds were generally used to benefit students. Many school districts utilized their ESSER Funds for curriculum, interventions, or technology, as examples.

Some school districts, including Sarasota, chose to use all or a portion of their ESSER Funds to hire additional staff to support students or address the increased behavior issues with returning students. While there was nothing prohibiting Sarasota from using its ESSER Funds in this way, the past decision to do so is creating current challenges for the district. ESSER Funds are limited funds and not a permanent funding source. That means, at the end of the 2023-2024 school year, the ESSER Funds will no longer be available. The ESSER Funds are not gradually diminished but end abruptly at the end of the 2023-2024 school year, often referred to as the “ESSER Cliff,” due to the fact that the funds drop off immediately.

The 2023 Pre-Closing Estimates of ESSER Funds for Sarasota ESE totaled \$796,410.16. As a result, Sarasota will have a nearly \$800,000 shortfall beginning in the 2024-2025 school year. Previous administrations in Sarasota chose to utilize the ESSER Funds primarily for increasing staff. This means that other funding sources will need to be utilized to cover those staffing costs, or the district may lose some of the positions created using the ESSER Funds. The current administration is well aware of this predicament and is working diligently to address the funding shortfall and minimize the impact on staff and the provision of services for students. However, this predicament creates a cautionary tale moving forward for Sarasota. Anytime funding sources have limited time horizons the district should be thoughtful and cautious regarding the utilization of temporary funds for permanent staff positions. While the COVID-19 pandemic era was an unusual time that required immediate action to support students and staff, short term difficulties cannot dictate long term solutions to staffing needs by using temporary funds. Future district administrations and boards of education should be cautious of using any temporary funding for creating or expanding staff positions in Sarasota. It is paramount for the district to be responsible stewards of the resources received and to make funding decisions with a long-term vision.

Another example of the need to be good stewards of resources is reflected in the IDEA Part B, Preschool Entitlement Grant received from the federal government to provide resources for preschool-aged special needs students. Similar to the IDEA Part B, K-12 Entitlement Grant, the district applies for the Preschool Grant and requests funding needed to support special education preschool students and programs. However, in 2021, there was a Roll Forward of nearly all of the allocated IDEA Part B, Preschool Entitlement dollars, totaling \$205,651.93. That essentially means that those dollars were not spent in the year allocated but instead were pushed forward to 2022 and added to the 2022 allocation. Being responsible stewards of government funding means utilizing the funding when allocated to support the intended students and programs. While this type of roll forward does not appear to be a regular practice in Sarasota, this should not happen in a school district with funds intended to support exceptional students, and therefore, any type of significant roll forward for IDEA dollars should be eliminated moving forward.

Recommendation 3.2: Establish a procedure to ensure limited utilization of any future temporary federal or state funds to create or expand staff positions in Sarasota, and ensure the gradual elimination of the practice of rolling forward any significant IDEA funds by utilizing funds in the year of allocation.

Category #4: Programmatic Offerings and Continuum of Services

Commendations

- Under the leadership of the new Superintendent and leadership team, the district has established an Impact Review process to identify instructional areas of focus, opportunities and resources, and action planning at all schools throughout the district to increase student achievement and academic excellence.
- Sarasota has embraced Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and some schools in the district have received platinum status recognition through the PBIS program.
- Sarasota works diligently to integrate ESE students into general education classrooms and provides a variety of educational opportunities for ESE students alongside their general education peers.
- Oak Park School is a comprehensive separate day school that serves the IEP needs for students who require intensive therapeutic intervention, communication, and behavior supports, and provides a safe environment that supports a variety of academic programming for the most complex students.

Focus Area 4.1

MTSS is a district-wide continuous improvement framework that provides data-based decision-making for student supports at all grades and levels of student achievement. MTSS is a framework designed as a roadmap for districts to provide instruction, evidence-based assessments, and targeted interventions to assist students who need additional supports. It is important to note that MTSS is not the same as special education. It is a framework for student support that precedes special education and through which all students in need of support should be considered and identified for targeted, tiered interventions. It should be noted that the MTSS process and data can be utilized to support the students' eligibility determination for special education services.

MTSS is school-based and uses data-driven problem solving and incorporates instruction and interventions to address both the academic and non-academic needs of all students. There are three tiers in MTSS. Tier 1 instruction is provided to all students to receive high quality, differentiated, culturally responsive core academic and behavioral instruction through the general education program and is designed to meet the needs of and ensure positive outcomes for a minimum of 80% of all students. General education students, as well as students who advance through the MTSS tiers and ultimately are placed in special education receive this instruction. Tier 2 interventions are the supplemental programs and strategies provided to students who require supports in addition to the universal or school-wide supports of Tier 1. The purpose of Tier 2 interventions is to reduce the risk of academic or behavioral issues. Finally, Tier 3 is the highest level of support that is provided to a student without an IEP prior to referring a student for evaluation and possible placement into special education to provide more intensity, duration, or frequency of an intervention.

The framework for MTSS utilizes evidenced based instruction, intervention, and assessment practices. Interventions are strategies or techniques used to teach a new skill, build fluency in a skill, or encourage the application of existing skills to a new situation. The interventions must be student-specific and include targeted assessments, planning, data collection, and progress monitoring. All student-specific interventions must be evidence-based (i.e., have been shown to work with students over time in the school environment), monitored regularly to determine student achievement and inform instructional decision-making, and implemented during the instructional school day. There are myriad interventions available

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to schools and districts. Some are formal programs or products, while others are techniques that can be used in the classroom setting. All interventions must be student-specific, so a successful support for one student with a particular special need may not demonstrate results for a student with a similar special need.

Critically, the intervention chosen for the student must be evidence-based and student specific. As specific interventions are utilized with a student, teachers must assess whether the interventions are successful or not. If they are successful and produce positive outcomes for students, the intervention can continue to be used until the student is ready to move on to a different intervention. If an intervention is not a success with a student, the teacher must then analyze and choose an alternative intervention that may be a better fit for the student.

This analysis and determination of the success of interventions is determined by student academic data through a process called progress monitoring. Progress monitoring is a diagnostic intervention used to determine if student interventions are successful, not successful, or need to be clarified (neutral). It is a data-driven, visual representation of a student's progress on the interventions for that individual student. As a best practice, progress monitoring should be completed over a six-week period, a minimum of three times throughout the school year. Not all students will begin their interventions in Tier 1. Students will be placed, and subsequently progress monitored, in whatever tier is determined to be most fitting based on their individual needs.

The description in the paragraphs above provide an illustration and a framework of what an MTSS system should contain and how it should operate within a school district. Sarasota has sought to develop a meaningful MTSS system. While many components of an MTSS system exist in Sarasota, they are not always operating systematically or appropriately utilized by educators or staff members. The MTSS system that is currently in place in the district is housed in and implemented through the Student Services Department. However, through meetings with Student Services Department personnel, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team was told that "no one owns" MTSS in Sarasota. While this may be philosophically correct that MTSS is not the responsibility of one person, it also leaves a leadership and accountability void for the MTSS system. If no one in the district, including the Student Services Department where MTSS is structurally housed, is owning MTSS, there is not appropriate accountability to ensure that MTSS is being utilized correctly and with fidelity district wide. As a result of that mentality, MTSS is not being implemented appropriately throughout the district, and there is no one to hold building and district personnel responsible for correct utilization. The fact is that under the current district structure, MTSS is the responsibility of the Student Services Department, and staff within that department must take responsibility for MTSS within the district.

Through classroom observations in schools and classrooms and interviews with district personnel, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team discovered that there is not a true MTSS framework in place in Sarasota, and many personnel in the district do not have a true understanding of MTSS or how it is utilized to support students. In a true MTSS system, it is expected that a vast majority of students are receiving Tier 1 supports. They are in the general education classrooms, receiving instruction from the classroom teacher with individually tailored augmentations as needed and in a limited capacity. Generally, Tier 1 supports are successfully occurring in Sarasota.

Tier 2 interventions are more targeted and specialized. These are interventions that target students who need additional help, based on teacher observations and data collection through progress monitoring. In Tier 2, teachers may utilize interventions to attempt to provide some additional instruction and/or support for struggling students. In Sarasota, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team observed that there is some

evidence of Tier 2 interventions occurring in buildings and classrooms within the district. However, the Tier 2 interventions are not consistent, and there does not appear to be a cohesive definition among teachers and other personnel for what Tier 2 MTSS interventions are in Sarasota. District leadership has provided some professional development and training for teachers on MTSS, but not all teachers have a full understanding of Tier 2 or how to implement Tier 2 interventions to support students. It is important for teachers to continue to receive MTSS professional development and training to develop a full understanding of Tier 2.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team observed that Tier 3 interventions in Sarasota are not consistent and meaningful throughout the district. Tier 3 interventions should be more intense interventions providing more targeted supports for students who continue to struggle. Tier 3 is the last opportunity for interventions to support students before they are potentially referred for special education. However, through discussions of Tier 3 interventions with teachers in Sarasota, it is evident that Tier 3 is not comprised of more intense interventions. Some teachers could not even define Tier 3 interventions or explain the difference between Tier 2 interventions or Tier 3 interventions. It appears that there are some in the district that believe Tier 3 is synonymous with a referral to special education, which is not accurate and should not be the case in any district. As a result, in many classrooms throughout the district there are either no Tier 3 interventions or inadequate Tier 3 interventions for students. Without necessary Tier 3 interventions, there is not a typical progression of interventions from Tier 1 to Tier 2 to Tier 3. Instead, in many cases in Sarasota, Tier 1 interventions are followed by some Tier 2 interventions and then a referral into special education rather than more targeted Tier 3 interventions. This is not considered a comprehensive MTSS system, nor does it provide students with a full range of interventions prior to referral into special education.

Some schools in Sarasota have MTSS Coordinator positions within the building. These are tremendous resources for the schools that have them, and the MTSS Coordinators should be responsible for assisting in providing professional development and training to teachers and staff within their building, as well as broader training district wide. Ideally, Sarasota could utilize additional MTSS Coordinators for support in all school buildings throughout the district, but the role and supports need to be clearly defined and strategically used with guidance from the Student Services Department.

Recommendation 4.1: Establish a consistent district wide framework defining MTSS tiers, how the tiers are utilized to provide interventions and support students, as well as the progression of students through the tier process, while holding teachers and staff accountable for implementing MTSS with fidelity through ownership and oversight by the Student Services Department, coupled with additional training and professional development.

Focus Area 4.2

It is important for Sarasota stakeholders, educators, parents, and community members alike, to understand the nature and design of a special education system for students with special needs. Special education is a service for students with disabilities, not a static service but a service that changes and adapts to meet the individualized needs of special education students over the course of the student's educational career. As a result, special education is considered a continuum of services.

A continuum of services for students with special needs utilizes different service delivery models to provide individually designed instructional strategies to students with disabilities. Each student is unique

and has varying specialized needs. It is both the role and the obligation of Sarasota to provide services to the student in a manner and setting that meets those individualized student needs.

The continuum of services in special education is critical to the educational development and support for students with special needs. A continuum is a sequence or progression of elements, and in the context of services for students with special needs, that varies by degree depending on the severity of the disability and its impact on student learning. Every special education student in Sarasota is somewhere on the continuum. It is the duty of the school district to work collaboratively with the families, students, and staff to evaluate, determine eligibility, develop the IEP, identify where each student's needs can best be met, and determine placement within the continuum of services to meet the individual needs of the student (i.e., IEP goals, FBA/BIP, etc.).

A continuum of services, as the name implies, specifically means *services* that are provided to students. Within Sarasota, the notion of providing exceptional services has not always been clear or fully executed. Special education administrators and educators can get so focused on attempting to meet the individual needs of students that the concept of special education as a service is often ignored. While programs and interventions are critical to meeting the needs of students at various points on the educational spectrum (i.e., continuum of services), there is a danger of abandoning the concept of special education as a service and primarily focusing on fitting students into programs rather than first identifying where a student is on the educational continuum and then identifying programs and supports for that student. Special education is not a place; it is a service comprised of a continuum of educational services to support students with special needs.

Based on classroom observations and conversations with administrators and educators in the district, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team perceived that student supports within Sarasota special education are primarily program-driven rather than service-driven. This is evidenced by the volume of programs and resources available to Sarasota staff. While having an abundance of resources can be wonderful, it creates a risk of further driving support away from the provision of services and toward a particular program and/or an assignment. Instead, teachers and administrators should monitor and evaluate the student progress to determine where they are on the continuum and support those students in accordance with the IEP. Sarasota should not let the programs, supports, and interventions available dictate the needs of the student; rather, the needs of the student must drive the appropriate educational decisions for the student and ultimately how they are utilized within the student's environment.

Simply having programs, supports, and interventions is not sufficient to provide teachers with the necessary information that they need to make informed decisions for their students. There must be a genuine understanding of the utility of a particular resource and how it is most effectively used to meet the identified needs of the student on the educational continuum. Based on the Exceptional Learning Solutions team's conversations with Sarasota teachers, not all teachers have a strong understanding of the programs and/or interventions available to them or how to appropriately implement those programs and/or interventions. Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends that Sarasota provide teachers with the resources and training to understand how to appropriately use programs, supports, and interventions to individualize services for students with special needs, evaluate teacher's understanding following the training, and provide additional training as needed for optimal implementation.

Recommendation 4.2: Develop a student instructional model that provides a clear framework for establishing special education as a continuum of services, jointly developed by district administration, building leaders, special education teachers, and related services personnel, as well as outside expertise as needed.

Focus Area 4.3

As stated previously, at the time of the Special Education Program Review, the concept of special education throughout Sarasota being recognized as a continuum of services has not yet been fully established. There are significant gaps within the existing continuum of services. At one end of the continuum, there is the most restrictive environment (e.g., self-contained classrooms), and at the other end of the continuum is the least restrictive environment (e.g., full inclusion classrooms). While education laws have changed and education philosophy has evolved, it is commonly best practice to place students with disabilities into the least restrictive environment. In many schools and districts throughout the country that means creating full inclusion classrooms where students with disabilities are educated alongside their general education peers. This is the ideal scenario for all students. Sarasota has adopted this practice of creating inclusionary classrooms, and the district should be commended for its efforts.

There are inclusion classrooms in school buildings throughout Sarasota, a practice that has become both the goal and the norm in the district. However, simply because our current education philosophy is to move students into a least restrictive environment does not mean that we can discount the entire continuum of services. There are special needs students who can and should fully integrate into inclusionary classrooms, but there are also students who struggle in a full inclusion classroom and cannot learn or meaningfully participate in that type of a classroom setting. In its effort to move to full inclusion, Sarasota has neglected the opposite end of the continuum. Not every special education student in Sarasota can be integrated into a full inclusion classroom. There are students who still need self-contained classrooms. While Sarasota's goal of full inclusion is appropriate, the district cannot simply eliminate self-contained classrooms to accomplish that goal. Forcing students into a classroom setting or educational environment that is not conducive to their needs does not honor the best practice of full inclusion. Instead, it removes an important segment of the continuum of services that many students need to be successful. By eliminating self-contained classrooms, the district has allowed the educational philosophy of full inclusion to dictate services provided to meet the needs of its students. To be clear, this is not a recommendation to regress back to a self-contained environment for all special needs students. Rather, it is a call for Sarasota to continue its practice of finding the least restrictive environment for students, with the goal of full inclusion, while still recognizing that not all special needs students can be appropriately served in a full inclusion setting. Sarasota needs to provide a limited number of self-contained classrooms and/or educational settings for students with more intense academic needs who would be best served in that environment to ensure the district provides a full continuum of services to all students.

Recommendation 4.3: Re-establish limited, self-contained classrooms in strategically targeted locations throughout the district to serve students who need a self-contained environment to most appropriately meet their individual needs.

Focus Area 4.4

A continuum of services addresses not only the needs of a student and the progression of a student on the continuum, but it also represents the services that are provided as students progress through their educational careers. As a Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade district, Sarasota's student population spends all or a significant portion of their educational careers progressing from grade to grade within the district. For special needs students specifically, there are supports in place for students in nearly every grade level and every stage of their education. However, there is one notable exception in Sarasota, and that is middle school.

Transition to middle school for special education students in Sarasota is at best difficult and at worst detrimental to the students' development. There is currently no continuum of services for middle school students in Sarasota. When special needs students are in elementary school, there are a variety of supports in place to assist the student academically, behaviorally, and developmentally. Elementary students are placed in classrooms that have the structure and supports that special needs students require to be appropriately served and provide the educational opportunity for students to develop and thrive. Students become used to and comfortable with the support provided to them in a nurturing environment in elementary schools. However, those supports disappear when special needs students move into middle school.

While most special needs students should and can receive their education and supports in a traditional middle school setting, having only one choice for integration into middle schools, mainstreaming into full inclusion classrooms, is not acceptable. An appropriate and a positive transition is important for all students with disabilities. Many low functioning students and students with behavioral needs are not able to be successful with only the supports and accommodations provided in a full inclusion/mainstreamed setting. Currently, the only option for middle school students to receive more intense behavioral support, if needed, is to transition to Oak Park School or an out of district comprehensive day school, which is not appropriate for a majority of students. Additionally, while all students should be provided inclusionary opportunities, some students need more individualized, intense academic support in a more restrictive setting, and if not provided, suffer due to a lack of appropriate placement options in the middle school settings.

Individualized supports resume when students enter high school, so this lack of adequate support services for students is a unique middle school phenomenon in Sarasota. The lack of adequate support for middle school students has existed in Sarasota for many years and is not an appropriate structure to meet the needs of all special education students. Sarasota needs to address the missing middle school program support framework for special education students, and provide all students with a continuum of services that includes the middle school years.

Recommendation 4.4: Reconfigure special education in Sarasota middle schools to include a continuum of services that provides an appropriate classroom setting for all students with special needs and delivers the supports needed for students to transition and thrive during their middle school years.

Category #5: Policies and Procedures

Commendations

- Sarasota County has a strong School Board that supports programs for students with special needs and ensures the district policies are comprehensive and address the uniqueness of the district.
- Sarasota has developed a comprehensive Exceptional Student Education Manual (6/12/2023) that is available online and updated regularly to ensure processes, procedures, and state mandates are reflected within current practices.
- Sarasota is transitioning from their current IEP system ENRICH to the state IEP system PEER to align with the majority of Florida school districts and ultimately save the district significant financial resources.

Focus Area 5.1

The IDEA guides the special education process. Under this law, eligible students with disabilities are ensured access to a free and appropriate public education (hereinafter, “FAPE”) in the least restrictive environment (hereinafter, “LRE”). It is important to remember that every decision a district makes related to special education students must be aligned with IDEA to be in compliance with the federal education law and ensure that funding under IDEA will not be disrupted. Compliance with IDEA is mandatory, as it serves as a gateway for the provision of supports and services to students with disabilities.

Under IDEA, when a request to consider placement of a student in special education comes either from a parent, a teacher, or other personnel within the school, there is an evaluation process that must occur. Data is collected on that student, which can include but is not limited to academic data, behavior data, social/emotional data, and observational data from teachers and other personnel, and reports from non-school-based providers, among other data points. An IEP meeting should be held with all relevant parties, classroom teachers, related services personnel, and administrators to examine all the data, review and adhere to the eligibility criteria while determining if there is an educationally sound reason for determining eligibility, placing a student into special education, and/or ultimately providing them with an IEP for considering a more restrictive change of placement. The critical point is that all data is reviewed and analyzed by the educational experts, not just a third-party provider, the medical community or a parent, to make these determinations. One of the reasons that IDEA was initially created was to limit or avoid the knee-jerk reaction of simply placing a challenging student in special education to get them out of the general education classroom. IDEA provides a process for making such determinations in educationally appropriate ways. It was intended to create a partnership among schools, districts, and parents to determine if a student needs special education services by examining a plethora of data.

The fundamental goals of any district’s special education system must be to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their families and to improve student outcomes through the delivery of special education and related services, with a focus on having high expectations for students with disabilities and meaningfully including them alongside their nondisabled peers as appropriate. Without defined roles, responsibilities, and procedures, an assurance of compliance is nearly impossible. It should be noted that procedural compliance without a focus on outcomes is not compliance with the IDEA. Focus on compliance over achievement has never been the focal point of IDEA. Districts must have definitive processes and procedures and develop and implement plans that use the IDEA’s procedures to ensure delivery of effective

instructional practices, supports, and services that most impact results and protects the rights of students and their parents.

Sarasota, like many school districts throughout the nation has had their share of audits, due process hearings, resolutions, and settlements. Most recently, CASE No. 19-6338E involved multiple violations that impeded a child's right to FAPE. Issues addressed include but are not limited to student placement, modified/alternative curricula and specialized needs, participation in and appropriateness of IEP, mental health counseling, as well as compensatory education and extended school year. On March 27, 2020, the Administrative Law Judge from the Division of Administrative Hearings issued a Final Order directing Sarasota to convene an IEP meeting and rectify the issues. Subsequently, on December 8, 2020, the Commissioner of Education, Richard Cocoran, sent correspondence to Dr. Brennan Asplen, former Superintendent and former Board Chair, Shirley Brown noting that the Inspector General had concluded their investigation stating,

...the investigation found insufficient evidence to conclude that the District placed students on the alternate assessment to avoid state testing or accountability in order to benefit financially, the investigation's findings and the continued public actions of the District demonstrate all necessary changes in practice and culture have not occurred within Sarasota County School District. Pursuant to the investigation, the District made inconsistent decisions for several years that directly impacted numerous students with special needs. The investigation found that 27 of 66 sampled student files either showed the students were improperly placed or contained insufficient documentation to demonstrate that the student was placed incorrectly. As such, I am ordering my staff to commence regular on-site monitoring of Sarasota County School District's Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Services until such time that we are either satisfied that the District has implemented a system of appropriate services and placements or financial consequences become necessary due to persisting failures by the District.

Other Florida Department of Education ("FDOE") requirements include but are not limited to: financial conditions on the district IDEA and Title 2 awards to ensure funds went to training and support activities to create sustainable changes in serving the District's at-risk students, requested submission of District's Specific Policies and Procedures, and District's policies and procedures for students with disabilities detailing parent training and professional development specific to students with significant cognitive disabilities.

On May 11, 2022, Dr. Asplen received updated correspondence from the Interim Commissioner of Education, Jacob Olivia stating,

Florida Department of Education (FDOE) staff has reviewed the documentation from SCSD, which included assurances that necessary portions of the funding were going to training and support activities that will create sustainable changes in serving SCDS's at-risk students (i.e., students with the most significant cognitive disabilities). Based on this documentation review, on-site monitoring visits, self-assessment/desk monitoring, and monthly collaboration with the Florida Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project and FDOE staff, FDOE staff has found evidence of positive progress with SCSD's implementation of a comprehensive system that provides appropriate services and placements for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

Subsequently, Sarasota has recently been released from all fiscal conditions.

Situations like the one described above are taxing for all parties involved. Sarasota should be proud of the work they have done to correct these issues, yet the fact remains that the district ESE Department cannot become complacent and must stay focused. The documentation included below further supports the need for ongoing improvement and higher expectations.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team gathered information from the district through electronic records, district documentation, district policies, and discussions with district personnel. Additionally, documents and information about special education and support services, as well as systems, processes, and procedures were provided. It was apparent during the Exceptional Learning Solutions Special Education Program Review that the processes and procedures for Sarasota are a concern for administrators and staff.

The district has trained ESE Liaisons, Program Specialists, and ESE Assistant Principals, yet it is evident that there is a lack of consistency not only with the documented processes and procedures but also in the development of the IEP. Inconsistency frustrates all participants, especially parents, impacts knowledge and understanding, and causes unnecessary tension. Parent communication is core and essential to the IEP development process. Parents are customers and should be treated as such in IEP meetings. While the Exceptional Learning Solutions team acknowledges that the IEP can be cumbersome, it is imperative that parents understand the various aspects of the process and fully participate as a member of the IEP team. Staff should be trained on de-escalation techniques to ensure the meetings are conducted in a professional manner and to make certain parents are viewed as equal partners in the decision-making process for their child. Additional information about parent satisfaction is contained throughout this report, with specific examples contained in Category #10.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions Team conducted interviews to obtain input regarding the IEP processes and procedures utilized within the district, as well as completed an on-site review of a random sampling of IEPs and student data within the ENRICH system to preview content, IEP goals and objectives, and appropriateness of data. First and foremost, there is evidence that in some cases ESE Liaisons are instructed to reflect the school program, not the child's needs. In other situations, student's IEPs are developed without all the appropriate diagnostic information. Additionally, there are IEPs that have improperly identified specific programs, some that are not drafted correctly or accurately, and some that have sections cut and pasted from one IEP to another. Some IEPs even have different student names used in various places throughout the document. The IEP is an individualized education plan, a legal document, that should be accurate, comprehensive, and developed in accordance with the IDEA. Simply cutting and pasting information from one IEP to another is not individualized, nor does it satisfy the requirements of the IDEA. It is evident that teachers and staff members who draft student IEPs or complete a portion of them should be trained on proper IEP development. (See Category 9: Training and Professional Development.)

Several years ago, the FDOE identified Sarasota as a district with a disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups in special education and related services which can be attributed to inappropriate identification. To resolve this issue, Sarasota chose to utilize an unwritten procedure that discourages staff from identifying students with an Emotional Behavioral Disability ("EBD") and encouraged staff to pursue other alternative eligibilities such as Other Health Impairment ("OHI") or Autism Spectrum Disorder ("ASD"). As a result, when students are misidentified, the IEP describes individualized needs that differ from the disability categories contained in the IEP, and therefore, the continuum of services for the student is impacted and, in many cases, inappropriate. For example, the curriculum for an autistic student is very different than that of a behavior disordered student, and in some situations learned behaviors increase and communication skills are impacted. While well meaning, this practice is not appropriate, and Sarasota

should review and reevaluate, as necessary, the IEP's and placement of OHI and ASD students currently being served in EBD settings.

Sarasota's uncharacteristically high number of identified OHI students (i.e., Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder ("ADHD")) may be due to the lack of consideration for a Section 504 plan and the provision of behavioral supports in the least restrictive environment. In circumstances where a student presents with more severe or persistent behaviors, an EBD eligibility and placement may better meet their needs. Ultimately, it is incumbent upon the district to ensure the students' social/emotional and academic progress.

Chart 5.1.1 below focuses on the Percentage of Students by Exceptionality in Sarasota. This chart highlights three significant growth patterns regarding the concern around misidentification. There is currently an uncharacteristically high number of identified OHI students (13.5%), a growing ASD population (13.8%), comparable to OHI, and an uncharacteristically low number of identified EBD students (1.9%) in Sarasota County Schools.

Chart 5.1.1

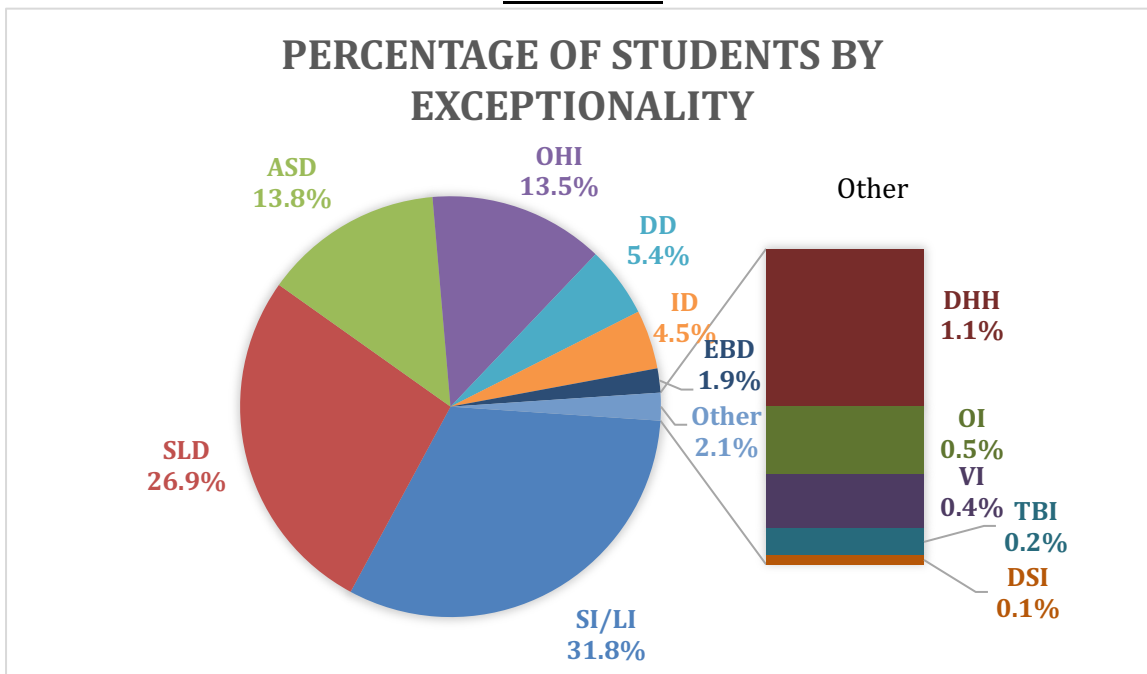
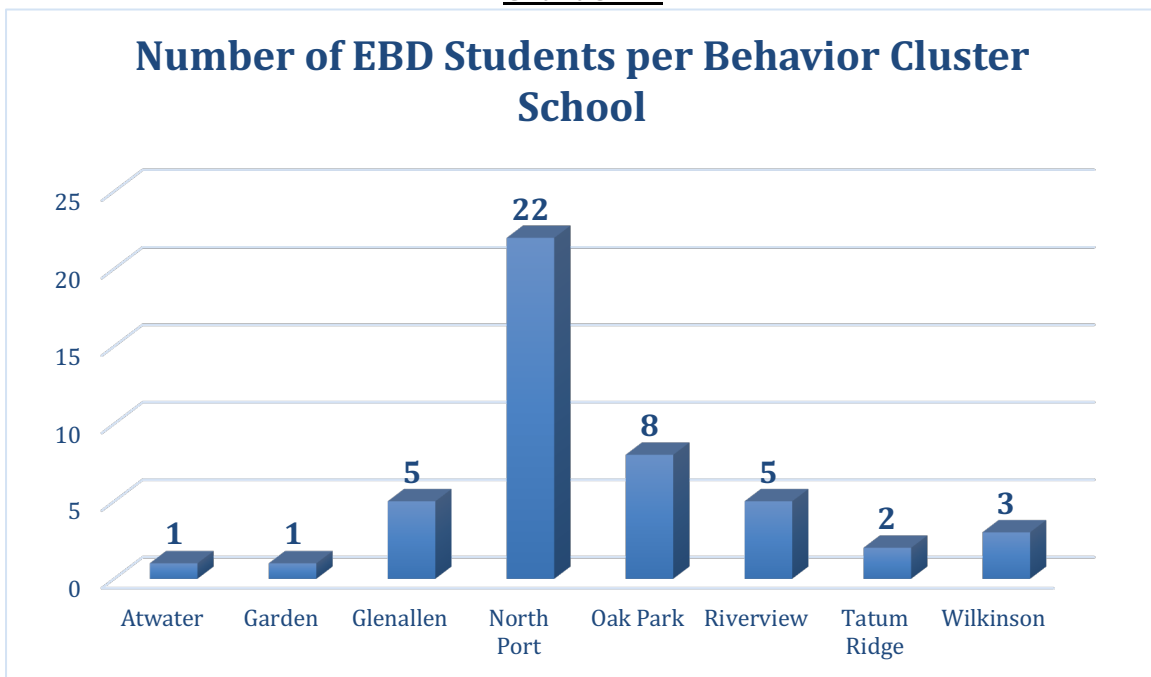


Chart 5.1.2 illustrates the Number of EBD Students per Behavior Cluster. The evidence presented below substantiates that most of Sarasota's eight Behavior Cluster sites do not contain many EBD students at all, with most sites being primarily composed of OHI students and a few ASD students.

Chart 5.1.2



To facilitate compliance, not only should processes and procedures be defined and implemented, but they should also be followed. It is important to understand that the role of a designated Local Education Agency (hereinafter, “LEA”) has specific criteria, and as the appointed representative of the public agency should be:

- Qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities;
- Knowledgeable about the education curriculum; and
- Knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency.

One factor to consider in determining the individual designated to represent the LEA in IEP meetings is to ensure the individual is someone with either a special education background or special education knowledge. Administrators or others holding an administrative license and designated as the LEA for IEP meeting purposes should receive additional training. Whomever Sarasota determines will be the LEA for IEP meeting purposes, should be determined annually and must receive current special education and IEP training to ensure that they can adequately represent the district as the LEA representative. This also means that the LEA representative will be the person who effectively runs the meeting and should have a knowledge of the legal aspects of IDEA and the authority to allocate resources. The LEA representative needs to be empowered by the district and supported by district leadership and the school board. This includes ending or postponing a meeting if parents, advocates, and/or attorneys are disrespectful to district personnel or act in an inappropriate way.

The U.S. Supreme Court has referred to the IEP as the “centerpiece” and the “modus operandi” for ensuring the provision of FAPE to students with disabilities. Two landmark court cases, Board of Educ. of the Hendrick Hudson Central Sch. Dist. V. Rowley² and Andrew F. v. Douglas Co. Sch. District³ are the driving force behind what is referred to as the two-fold “process/content” standard for determining FAPE and the appropriateness of an IEP. The two-fold analysis is as follows:

² 458 U.S. 176 (1982)

³ 66 IDELR 31, 798 F.3d 1329 910th Cir. 2015

- First, in the development of an IEP, has the school agency complied with the procedures set forth in the IDEA? (the “process” piece).
- Second, if so, is the IEP developed through the IDEA’s procedures reasonably calculated to enable the child to make progress in light of the child’s circumstances? (the “content” piece)

IEP team meetings should include parents, administrators, classroom teachers, related services personnel, psychologists, and any others who were involved in the evaluation of a student for placement into special education. The purpose of the IEP meeting is to meet as an educational team to establish goals for the student to become academically and behaviorally successful, determine the supports, accommodations and strategies that student needs to meet those goals, and develop a document that identifies those supports and interventions. During this process it is important to note that all relevant student records, data, and anecdotal records should be available to the team for consideration.

Evaluations/re-evaluations must be up-to-date, thorough, and adequate before appropriate IEPs can be developed and goals written. It is important to obtain all records, updated achievement and/or evaluative data (formal and informal) to determine student progress and to identify what needs may have changed. The student’s present level of functioning is a significant piece of the IEP and should be developed and revised to accurately reflect current strengths and challenges the student faces so baselines can be established and progress can be measured and demonstrated. Observations within Sarasota indicate that often student records and/or medical information are not available/transferred in a timely manner, which impacts the efficacy of the decision-making process and ultimately the IEP. In some cases, IEPs developed within Sarasota contain old or recycled data. Not only is this procedure unacceptable, it is not in the best interest of the student or parent that the district serves.

Predetermination of placement is of concern within Sarasota. A predetermination of placement or making placement decisions without parental input or outside of the IEP/placement meeting will not only cause a parent to lose trust in district/school staff, but it may also lead to a finding of a denial of FAPE. This is specifically an area of concern for students transferring within the district to a separate day school (i.e., Oak Park School) or Cluster Sites. In some cases, the decision is made at the sending site and/or with district personnel without the input from the receiving site, conducting a site visit, or preliminary discussion with the receiving school and/or parent. Ultimately the IEP is developed, yet in many cases the placement is not appropriate nor in the student’s best interest.

It is essential that Sarasota avoids predetermination of placement. The only appropriate place to make a placement decision is at the IEP meeting with the IEP team. Prior to the IEP team determining placement, administrators of the potential sending schools need to understand the program, student population, and services provided at the cluster sites or separate day schools. In some cases, a more restrictive environment may not be appropriate. IEP team members should come to the IEP meeting with an open mind and be receptive and responsive to constituents. If the IEP team determines a more restrictive environment is in the student’s best interest, it is incumbent upon the home school to view the student as a member of their schools’ community and continue monitoring the students’ progress and plan for the students return to their home zoned school in the future.

Secondly, recommendations for special education services are sometimes made based upon the availability of programs or services, rather than upon students’ needs. Services or the amount of services should not be a one size fits all determination. Instead, the decision should be based upon the individual needs of the student as set forth in the IEP so that parents have a clear understanding of the level of commitment of services on the part of the school district. Decisions to change any service or the amount of service must

occur within the framework of an IEP team review, otherwise the IEP would not be compliant in accordance with the IDEA.

Under the IDEA, availability of services cannot be a deterrent to making service recommendations and ultimately could be perceived as a form of predetermination of placement. Despite the fact that Sarasota, like most districts throughout the United States, has experienced staff shortages, it is evident the district demonstrates a pattern of shifting personnel to assist in other areas and/or staff utilization in non-licensed areas, thus interfering with the service provisions determined by the IEP team (i.e., 1:1 support, interpreters, speech/language, BCBA's, related service, social/mental health support, etc.). These situations make it difficult and ultimately impossible for personnel to reschedule missed sessions. This potential violation of IDEA is viewed as non-compliant and could ultimately be detrimental to Sarasota's reputation as a district and service provider, if not corrected. If Sarasota is unable to implement the provision of services, then the district should convene an IEP meeting to discuss their inability to provide the agreed-upon services and seek out alternative accommodations.

Annual goals and objectives must be measurable to demonstrate progress toward achieving the goal, otherwise it is impossible to demonstrate student progress on the goals and educational benefit. Goals should be built with the end in mind to determine what data collection and annual assessment tool will be utilized when measuring student progress on the goal. During the school site observations conducted by the Exceptional Learning Solutions team, it was observed that while there is a systemic process for collecting data, the collection of data is cumbersome and inconsistent throughout the district. Subsequently, the data utilized on the IEPs is often inaccurate and, in many cases, the IEP goals do not address the whole student (i.e., academic, behavioral, social emotional, etc.). Goals are not measurable and/or the measurement is not always appropriate for the individual student. Overall, it is evident that the Sarasota ESE Department must hold their IEP processes and IEP implementation to a higher standard.

Sarasota, like most districts, has a population of students with emotional and behavioral issues that impede the student's education or that of others. The IEP team is required to address the whole child which includes but is not limited to the curriculum, behavioral strategies/interventions and mental health concerns for that student either through the provision of services, a goal, or a functional behavioral assessment (hereinafter, "FBA"), and/or development of a behavioral intervention plan (hereinafter, "BIP").

School-based FBAs are understood to be an "evaluation" under the IDEA to assist in determining the nature and extent of the special education and related services that the student needs, including the need for a BIP. Generally, schools often conduct FBAs because the information provided by an FBA provides educators the fundamental content to develop a BIP that is individualized, relevant, and more likely supports the student's success towards achieving positive behavior.

Since Sarasota has schools/programs that specifically serve students with behavioral issues, the roles of the Behavior Specialist and BCBA are important. Currently, there is an insufficient number of BCBA's within Sarasota as well as service delivery concerns. It has been reported that there are issues regarding questionable service delivery minutes, accurate documentation, methodologies, and lack of attendance at meetings. It is evident that insufficient staffing and lack of personnel supervision are impacting the provision of FAPE. It is incumbent upon the ESE administration to rectify these issues. As Sarasota continues to grow, it would be beneficial for the district to support existing staff to become BCBA's and maintain their certification and/or investigate outsourcing additional BCBA's to meet the growing demands of the district.

Recommendation 5.1-A: Provide a regiment of ongoing comprehensive professional development for Program Specialists, ESE Liaisons, district and school-based staff to address the inconsistent implementation of processes and procedures and quality of IEP development in conjunction with leadership training on customer service and de-escalation techniques.

Recommendation 5.1-B: Eliminate the practice of predetermination of placement to alleviate potential violation of FAPE and discontinue the practice of misidentifying students to avoid EBD designations; review and reevaluate, as necessary, the IEP's and placement of OHI and ASD students currently being served in EBD settings.

Recommendation 5.1-C: Provide appropriate oversight and supervision for behavioral personnel (i.e., BCBA's), support and encourage existing staff to become BCBA's and maintain their certification, and outsource additional BCBA's to meet the growing demands of the district.

Recommendation 5.1-D: School-based, and district administrators should visit Oak Park School and the Cluster Sites within their zone to enhance their knowledge and understanding of the programs, student population, and services provided.

Focus Area 5.2

Sarasota County has Children at Risk in Education (CARE) teams at school sites and central office consisting of ESE Pre-Kindergarten personnel that function as a conduit to ensure child find procedures are followed if a child is suspected of having a disability, which includes case reviews and conducting full comprehensive evaluations prior to considering special education services. A quality audiological testing facility is currently located at the Central Office and serviced by one district audiologist. The district also has a Pre-Kindergarten Diagnostic Team composed of two district school psychologists and five speech and language pathologists who conduct evaluations three days per week and service schools two days a week. Other program specific evaluators are utilized as warranted.

While the Diagnostic Team is a valuable resource to the district, it primarily only serves Pre-Kindergarten. Due to the growth of the student population in Sarasota, the district should consider expanding the role of the diagnostic team to also focus on assessing out-of-state and out-of-county transfers, private school students, and difficult to test students. The team could evaluate students four days per week, and on the fifth day, finalize their comprehensive evaluations. This process would eliminate the schools receiving partial evaluations and reduce school-based evaluation caseloads, essentially making schools only responsible for in-house referrals. The Diagnostic Team would ultimately be providing complete, comprehensive evaluations representing all team members' conclusions then return the final report to the point of contact at the district/school to schedule an eligibility meeting. Implementation of these changes would require minor adjustments to the existing ESE procedures and ESE Transfer Student Checklist. By enhancing the role of the central office CARE Team and Diagnostic Team, the schools and ESE Liaisons will be able to manage eligibility and placement in a more timely manner for many of Sarasota's neediest students.

Recommendation 5.2: Based on available funding, the district should consider expanding the role of the diagnostic team to assess out-of-state and out-of-county transfers, private school students, and difficult to test students; eliminate schools receiving partial evaluations, reduce school-based evaluation caseloads, and realign the existing ESE procedures and ESE Transfer Student Checklist.

Category #6: Curriculum and Instruction

Commendations

- Sarasota provides career exploration opportunities for ESE and general education students in areas such as culinary arts, horticulture, and technology.
- There are a variety of life skills training opportunities for Sarasota ESE students, such as laundry services, money management, stocking shelves, school store management, and independent living skills to prepare students for their individualized needs.
- Many Sarasota schools offer Unique Skills courses for students to provide additional academic support, with some schools, like Venice High School, structuring the Unique Skills courses to provide enhanced targeted instruction for individual students.

Focus Area 6.1

Strong curriculum and sound instruction are at the heart of any successful district. The educational opportunities for students are built upon this foundation. In many cases, Sarasota has struggled with the utilization of a cohesive curriculum for special education, and there are special education classrooms in the district where instruction is lacking. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team heard from some administrators and teachers during interviews and onsite visits that Sarasota has a special education curriculum framework in place. Sarasota also provided evidence to the Exceptional Learning Solutions team through a document entitled “Special Education Curriculum Framework.” This document appears to be broad in scope, though loosely organized. It includes sections such as “Sarasota’s Comprehensive Evidence Based Reading Plan to Support Tier3/ESE Students,” “Curriculum Framework for Students on Access Points Elementary,” and “Curriculum Framework for Students on Access Points Secondary,” as well as general elementary and secondary curriculum support samples. While this collection of various curriculum-related documents and frameworks provides some curricular structure for Sarasota special education, it is limited and, in practice, there does not appear to be a consistent curriculum framework in place throughout special education in Sarasota. In some cases, it appears that there is even a fundamental misunderstanding of curricula among many special educators in Sarasota.

There are myriad definitions of curricula circulating in education, but its most basic definition is what schools are attempting to teach students academically and behaviorally. It is simply a map for what the district and schools want teachers to teach and students to learn. Without a solid and consistent curriculum in place, classrooms operate like a rudderless ship traveling with no direction or guidance. When there is no consistent curriculum in place, teachers and staff are left on their own to develop some curricular structure for their classrooms. While some Sarasota teachers have successfully accomplished this, others lack the direction that a curriculum provides. Therefore, what is being taught to special education students, even students within the same program, can vary dramatically from classroom to classroom. Sarasota needs to develop a uniform curriculum framework for each of its special education programs and hold teachers and staff accountable for utilizing the prescribed framework.

There is not a one-size-fits-all curriculum that will be appropriate for special education in Sarasota. Sarasota has many varying programs that differ from school to school, including cluster sites. The variances within Sarasota require curriculum frameworks that are tailored to meet the needs of the individual programs and provide teachers within those programs the direction they need to instruct students. Curriculum frameworks should be developed collaboratively with teachers and administrators

through curriculum committees to ensure that frameworks meet the needs of students and are workable in the classroom.

Recommendation 6.1: Form curriculum committees to formally develop curriculum frameworks for each Sarasota special education program and/or subject area, and provide training to teachers on the use of the curriculum frameworks in their classrooms.

Focus Area 6.2

Sarasota has a clearinghouse of information to inform special education teachers of the curriculum, materials, and interventions available to support students. However, simply having a clearinghouse or a list alone is not sufficient to provide teachers with the necessary information that they need to make informed decisions for their students regarding appropriate curricula, materials, or interventions. In some cases, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team encountered a misunderstanding among teachers as to the difference between curriculum and resources or interventions. Those cases provide evidence of a fundamental lack of understanding of what curriculum and a curriculum framework is and is not. Programs like i-Ready and Orton-Gillingham are effective if utilized consistently, yet they are simply interventions, not curricula. A curriculum is what we want and/or are required to teach students and is supported by resources and interventions that can help students who need additional reinforcement to understand the concepts. Some teachers have cobbled together various forms of curricula that they utilize in their classroom, but many teachers simply resort to a series of interventions rather than true curricula.

Sarasota has a plethora of curricula, resources, and interventions housed in schools and the central office. It is essential for the Sarasota special education department to take the initiative to cull through the resources currently available to determine which curricula, materials, and interventions the district will continue to utilize to support students. Outdated or inappropriate materials and interventions should be evaluated, and a determination should be made to their ongoing utility as an adopted intervention within the district. If it is determined that the materials are no longer viable, then they should be eliminated, even if some teachers currently use them. The Sarasota special education department, along with special education teachers and administrators, must establish standards and parameters for what is used in the classroom as appropriate curricula, resources, and interventions.

The Sarasota special education department provides a variety of training and professional development to special education teachers in the district regarding materials and interventions, but there appears to be a broader need for additional training on the implementation and use of curriculum for special education students. To implement and utilize curriculum successfully, there will need to be upfront and ongoing professional development regarding the adopted curriculum for each individual program. Providing formal and informal professional development sessions for school building leaders, teachers, and paraprofessionals will allow them to effectively implement changes to curricula and/or utilize existing curricula to inform instruction and increase student academic achievement. While instruction is different and customized to meet the needs of individual students in each classroom and program, there should be evidence of established curriculum in every classroom. Teachers will adapt instructional practices and differentiate instruction for their students, but the curriculum framework provided by the district should have continuity across the district in grade levels and programs. Implementation of the curriculum framework should be monitored by administrators and central office to ensure academic growth for students with special needs. Training and professional development will assist teachers in their instructional practices and the use of curriculum in the classroom. Sarasota special education students are

entitled to a high-quality education, complete with appropriate instruction that is informed by the curriculum and delivered with confidence and fidelity.

Recommendation 6.2: Establish standards and parameters for appropriate curriculum, materials, and interventions, and provide training to special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff on curricula that has been adopted by the district to be used in classrooms and programs.

Focus Area 6.3

Classroom instruction throughout special education classrooms in Sarasota varies widely depending on classrooms, programs, and the experience of the classroom teacher. There are classrooms in Sarasota visited by the Exceptional Learning Solutions team with experienced and well-trained teachers, and in those classrooms, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team observed the implementation of strong instructional practices. There are examples of instructional excellence occurring throughout Sarasota special education every day. Instructionally strong and experienced teachers should be celebrated and used as models for special education instructional excellence within the district.

There are, however, Sarasota special education teachers who do not have the experience or the training to provide strong instruction in their classrooms. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team observed more special education teachers who were instructionally weak than instructionally strong. This is a significant problem in special education in Sarasota. Good instructional practices are not an option when teaching students, and those strong instructional practices can be even more important for students with special needs. For example, there are many classrooms within Sarasota that have students with significant behavior issues. One of the ways to combat some of the behavior issues is to engage the students in what is being taught in the classroom through creative instructional practices. If students who have behavior issues are bored in the classroom, inappropriate behaviors continue to manifest because of a lack of engagement in the material being presented. Strong, engaging instructional practices can and will draw students into the lesson.

Some special education teachers in Sarasota do not have the experience or the knowledge to adapt their instructional practices without assistance. Therefore, it is vitally important to provide teachers with professional development around strong instruction. As curriculum frameworks are developed and teachers receive professional development regarding how to integrate the curriculum frameworks into their classrooms, there also needs to be simultaneous professional development focused on improving instructional practices in the classroom. The new Executive Director of Professional Learning and Leadership Development, in conjunction with the Chief of Pupil Support Services, building principals, teachers, and the Chief Academic Officer, should determine the instructional needs of special education classroom teachers in each building and/or program and develop a specific professional development curriculum that addresses their instructional needs. The instructional professional development needs to be ongoing in Sarasota throughout each school year. There are too many special education teachers in Sarasota lacking the foundational knowledge of basic instructional strategies for one professional development session at the beginning of the year to be sufficient to address this deficiency and ensure student success. There should be ongoing, coordinated professional development and coaching from the Executive Director of Professional Learning and Leadership Development's team, Program Specialists, and ESE Liaisons. As discussed in Focus Area 1.1, ESE Liaisons, with the guidance of Program Specialists, need to provide instructional support to special education teachers and paraprofessionals in the classroom on an ongoing basis. While these supports may not be in the form of formal trainings, regular coaching and mentoring by the ESE Liaisons will be a crucial component for increasing the instructional rigor and

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teaching techniques of special education teachers throughout the district. As a school district and a special education department, Sarasota has an obligation to ensure all students make progress toward achieving their IEP goals. That cannot be done in a meaningful way without curricular frameworks in place and without strong and consistent instructional leadership occurring in every classroom.

Recommendation 6.3: Conduct an Impact Review of Instructional Practices throughout Sarasota’s school-based special education programs to assess the fidelity of curriculum framework implementation and the appropriateness of interventions/utilization of resources, determine programs and classrooms where instructional improvement is warranted, and provide targeted professional development, customized to each school building and/or program, to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need for instructional excellence.

Category #7: Data

Commendations

- Sarasota has adopted the Total Progress System (TPS) to collect behavioral data and monitor student incidents, which provides teachers and parents with a visual representation of timely student behavior progress.
- Schools throughout Sarasota have implemented the School-Wide Support Team (SWST) methodology to support struggling students by reviewing student behavior incidents, analyzing academic data, and determining interventions and resources to address student needs.
- Heron Creek Middle School has created an inhouse Behavior Academic Team (BAT) to assist teachers with collecting student behavior data through progress monitoring and meeting regularly to discuss appropriate individualized student interventions and supports.

Focus Area 7.1

Data are very important to determine individual student growth and progress, as well as to determine the efficacy of instruction for special education students in Sarasota. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team explored the data being collected and utilized for special education in Sarasota. Based on observations in classrooms and conversations with district administrators, school building leaders, and teachers, it appears that data utilization is inconsistent at the school level and at the district level. It is apparent that there are some teachers and staff members who are not entirely familiar with methods of progress monitoring and data collection. It is important to note that this does not suggest that data is not being collected. Progress monitoring seems to be occurring in many classrooms; however, teachers and administrators are generally not actively utilizing the data collected. Data does not always appear to be driving IEP decision-making for goals, student placement, and/or progression within programs. There is no evidence that indicates there is a deliberate intent to ignore or underutilize student data. Rather, there appears to be a lack of training, understanding, and confidence among staff on the process of data collection, data analysis, and data utilization.

The Sarasota ESE Department needs to ensure that all special education personnel are sufficiently trained in the collection, analysis, usage, and storage of student data. While some data training has occurred for special education staff, not all teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff are following the training. As a result, there are inconsistencies in the understanding of data collection and usage. There should be consistent expectations for data collection and usage among all staff in every school building and in every program in the district. The new Professional Learning and Leadership Development Department should work closely with the ESE Department in the development and delivery of training for all special education staff regarding progress monitoring and data. A consistent policy from the ESE Department to all staff regarding data is necessary so that staff obtain and treat data similarly for every student. Training should inform educators on the proper methods of data collection, but more importantly, what to do with the data once it is collected. Data must be used to determine student placement, inform classroom instruction, and drive interventions and supports.

Recommendation 7.1: Provide special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and staff with consistent professional development on how to accurately collect data, how to analyze data, how to utilize data in the classroom, and how to preserve data as a vital component of the student's records for IEPs, placement, and future decision-making.

Focus Area 7.2

All students in Sarasota and districts throughout Florida are assessed utilizing the Florida Standards Assessments (“FSA”) to measure student’s academic gains and learning progress. This is true for both general education students and special education students striving for a regular diploma. The results of the FSA categorize students into five levels based on their performance on the assessment for both English Language Arts (“ELA”) and mathematics. Level 1 is the lowest level of achievement, while Level 5 is the highest level of achievement. Examining performance data for each assessment year provides a snapshot of student achievement in that year, and examining data over time reveals data trends for assessed students. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team examined five years of data from the 2017-2018 school year to the 2021-2022 school year and compared Sarasota special education student performance to average special education student performance throughout Florida, as well as a comparison of Sarasota special education student performance will all student performance in the district. Note that comparison data for school year 2022-2023 has not yet been released by the Florida Department of Education, and data for 2020 is not available because there is not assessment data for that school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The data is presented in this Focus Area in two formats, first in table form for both ELA and mathematics and second graphically for each of the years analyzed that have student achievement data (See Table 7.2.1 for ELA and Table 7.2.2 for mathematics).

Table 7.2.1
FSA ELA State and District Results for ESE Students
By Achievement Level for SY2018-2022⁴

	YEAR	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
DISTRICT ESE	2023	COMPARISON DATA NOT AVAILABLE				
STATE ESE	2023	NOT RELEASED FROM FLDOE AT THIS TIME				
DISTRICT ALL	2022	16.7%	20.6%	24.2%	23.3%	15.2%
DISTRICT ESE	2022	46.5%	28.8%	16.1%	7.0%	1.6%
STATE ESE	2022	53.3%	22.9%	15.0%	7.2%	1.5%
DISTRICT ALL	2021	15.6%	20.8%	24.8%	24.2%	14.6%
DISTRICT ESE	2021	45.7%	29.1%	16.4%	6.8%	2.0%
STATE ESE	2021	52.9%	23.8%	15.1%	7.0%	1.3%
DISTRICT	2020	COVID				
STATE	2020					
DISTRICT ALL	2019	12.4%	20.5%	25.5%	26.1%	15.5%

⁴ Data pulled from Florida Department of Education Report Cards for SY2018-2022 (edudata.fldoe.org).

DISTRICT ESE	2019	40.3%	31.7%	17.7%	8.5%	1.8%
STATE ESE	2019	47.9%	25.8%	16.7%	8.0%	1.6%
DISTRICT ALL	2018	12.6%	20.5%	25.5%	25.3%	16.1%
DISTRICT ESE	2018	41.9%	29.6%	18.6%	7.8%	2.2%
STATE ESE	2018	50.1%	25.0%	15.8%	7.5%	1.5%

Table 7.2.2
FSA Mathematics State and District Results for ESE Students
By Achievement Level for SY2018-2022⁵

	YEAR	LEVEL 1	LEVEL 2	LEVEL 3	LEVEL 4	LEVEL 5
DISTRICT ESE	2023	COMPARISON DATA NOT AVAILABLE				
STATE ESE	2023	NOT RELEASED FROM FLDOE AT THIS TIME				
DISTRICT ALL	2022	18.6%	16.2%	26.5%	21.2%	17.4%
DISTRICT ESE	2022	44.3%	22.5%	20.4%	9.8%	3.1%
STATE ESE	2022	53.0%	19.1%	17.3%	8.2%	2.5%
DISTRICT ALL	2021	19.5%	16.4%	27.4%	20.4%	16.4%
DISTRICT ESE	2021	46.0%	21.4%	20.8%	8.6%	3.2%
STATE ESE	2021	55.7%	18.6%	16.1%	7.5%	2.0%
DISTRICT	2020	COVID				
STATE	2020					
DISTRICT ALL	2019	13.8%	14.2%	26.5%	23.9%	21.6%
DISTRICT ESE	2019	37.7%	22.9%	23.5%	12.0%	3.8%
STATE ESE	2019	46.9%	20.7%	19.5%	9.9%	3.0%
DISTRICT ALL	2018	12.4%	14.7%	28.2%	24.0%	20.6%
DISTRICT ESE	2018	36.6%	24.3%	23.8%	11.7%	3.5%
STATE ESE	2018	48.7%	20.6%	18.8%	9.1%	2.7%

⁵ Data pulled from Florida Department of Education Report Cards for SY2018-2022 (edudata.fldoe.org).

Examining data over a five-year period reveals a number of important points for Sarasota special education student achievement, growth, and progress. Both ELA and mathematics data were examined by Exceptional Learning Solutions as a part of the Special Education Program Review. One of the first items to note is the similarity between ELA and mathematics for Sarasota special education students in each of the five years examined. The levels of student achievement in both ELA and mathematics are very similar when compared year over year. However, Sarasota special education students generally performed slightly better in mathematics than ELA in nearly every achievement level throughout each of the five years analyzed. These trends can be best seen graphically for each of the years. For example, the FSA ELA data for 2018 and the FSA mathematics data for 2018 demonstrate this comparison and similarity (See Chart 7.2.1 for 2018 ELA and Chart 7.2.2 for 2018 mathematics).

Chart 7.2.1

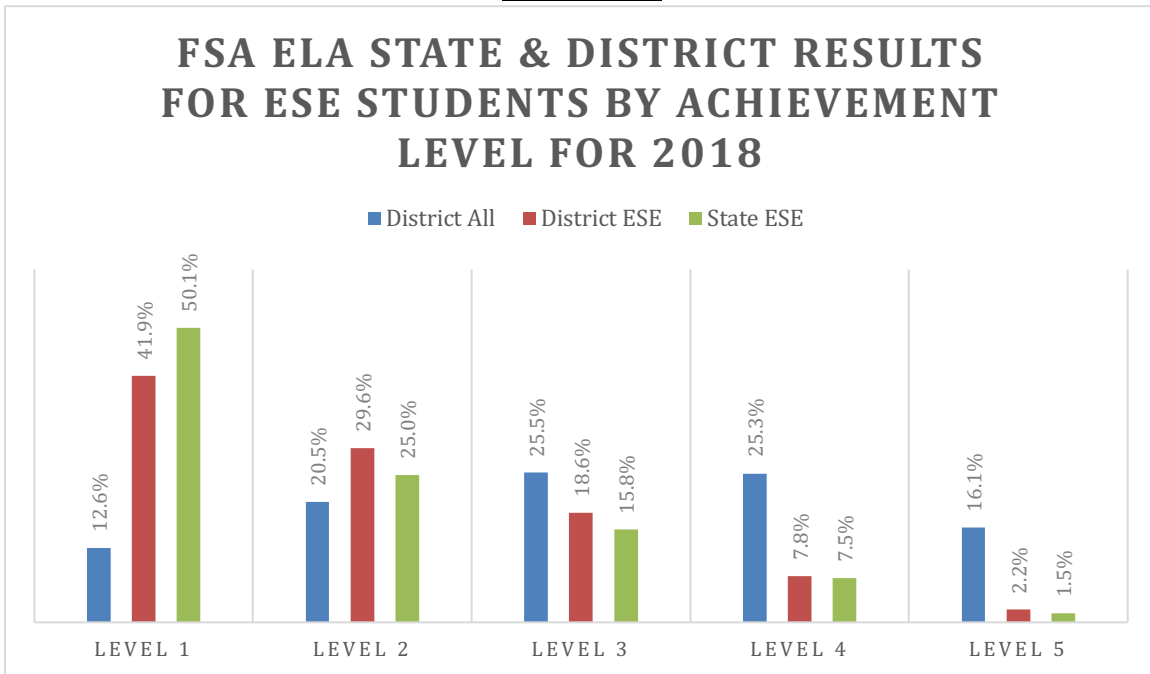
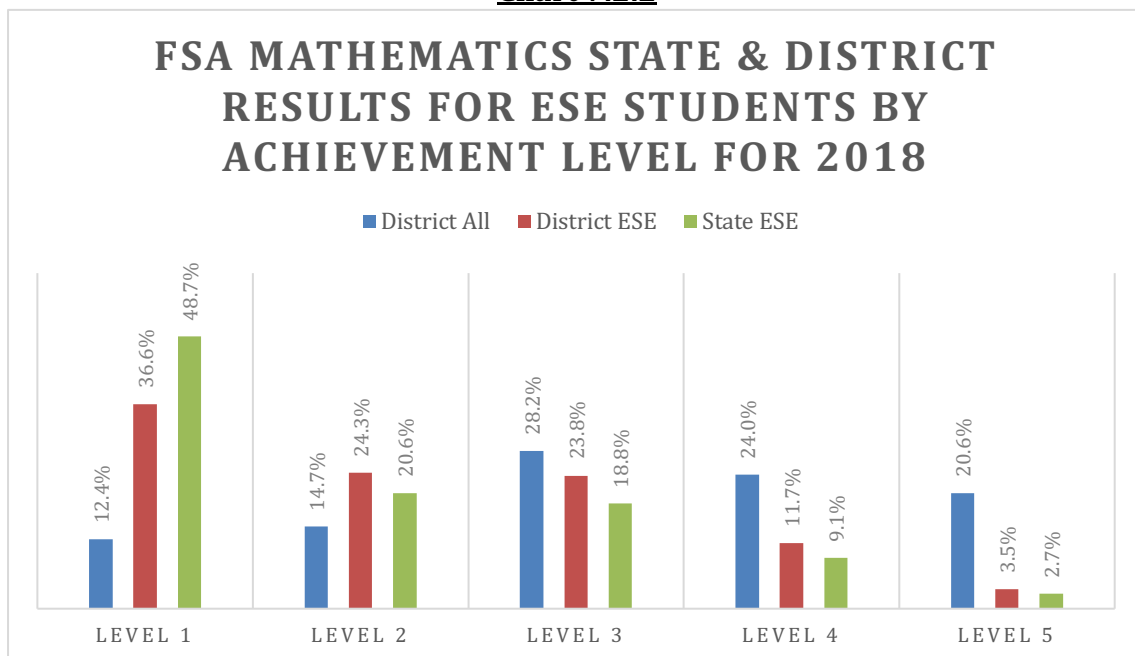


Chart 7.2.2



A second important indicator for Sarasota is the FSA ELA and mathematics data as compared to the state average for special education students throughout Florida. There is a lower percentage of Sarasota special education students in Level 1 in each of the years examined when compared to the state average. This is a positive indicator and demonstrates that Sarasota has less students in Level 1, the lowest achievement level, than the state average. This is true each year for both ELA and mathematics, which suggests that it is not an anomaly but a consistent and positive trend for Sarasota. Examining Level 2 data compared to the state average yields different results. In each of the years analyzed in both ELA and mathematics, there were a higher percentage of Sarasota special education students in Level 2 than the state average. This is not positive data, as the desired results would be to see a lower percentage of Sarasota students in Level 2 compared to the state average. For example, see Chart 7.2.3 for 2019 ELA and Chart 7.2.4 for 2019 mathematics.

Chart 7.2.3

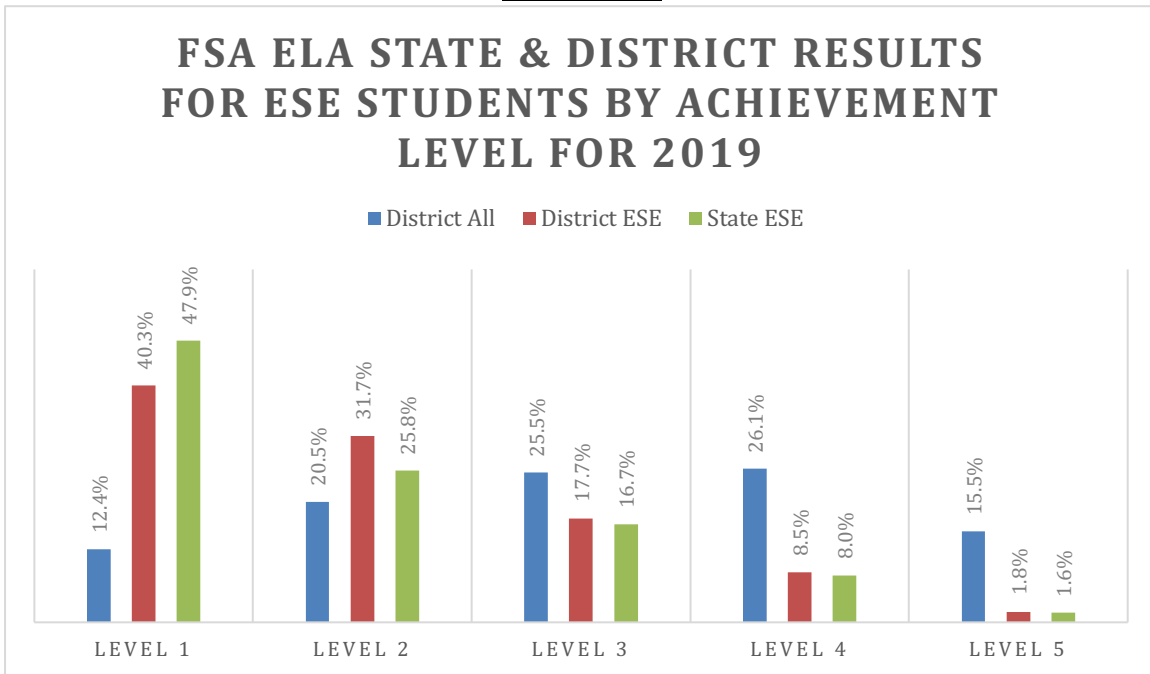
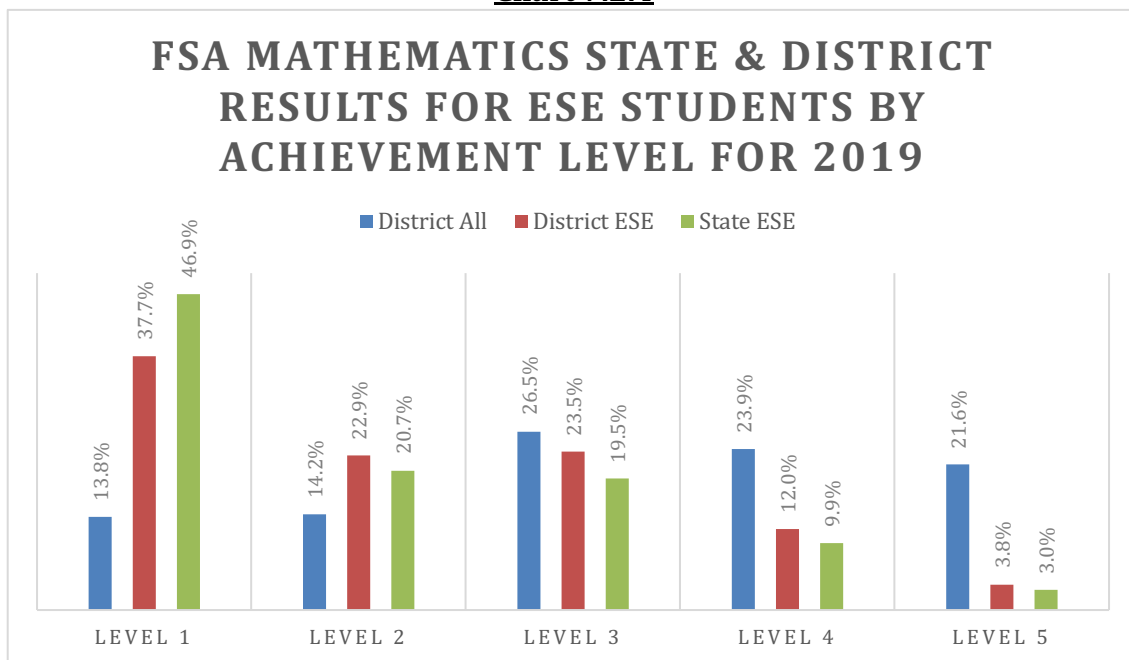


Chart 7.2.4



Continuing to compare Sarasota special education achievement data against the state average indicates that the Level 3, Level 4, and Level 5 data are relatively similar, with some minor variances. The highest three achievement levels are on track with the state average for FSA student achievement data in both ELA and mathematics. A good example of this relative consistency is 2021 FSA data for both ELA and mathematics, which shows the consistency with state averages while demonstrating minor variances in each achievement level (See Chart 7.2.5 for 2021 ELA and Chart 7.2.6 for 2020 mathematics).

Chart 7.2.5

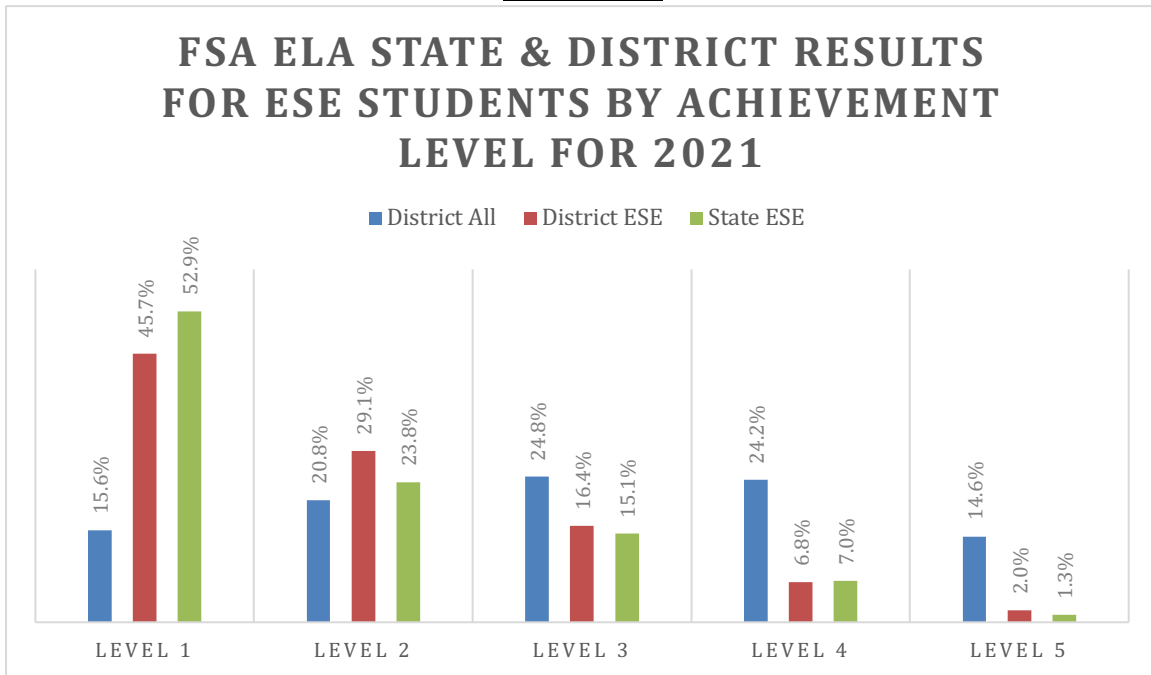
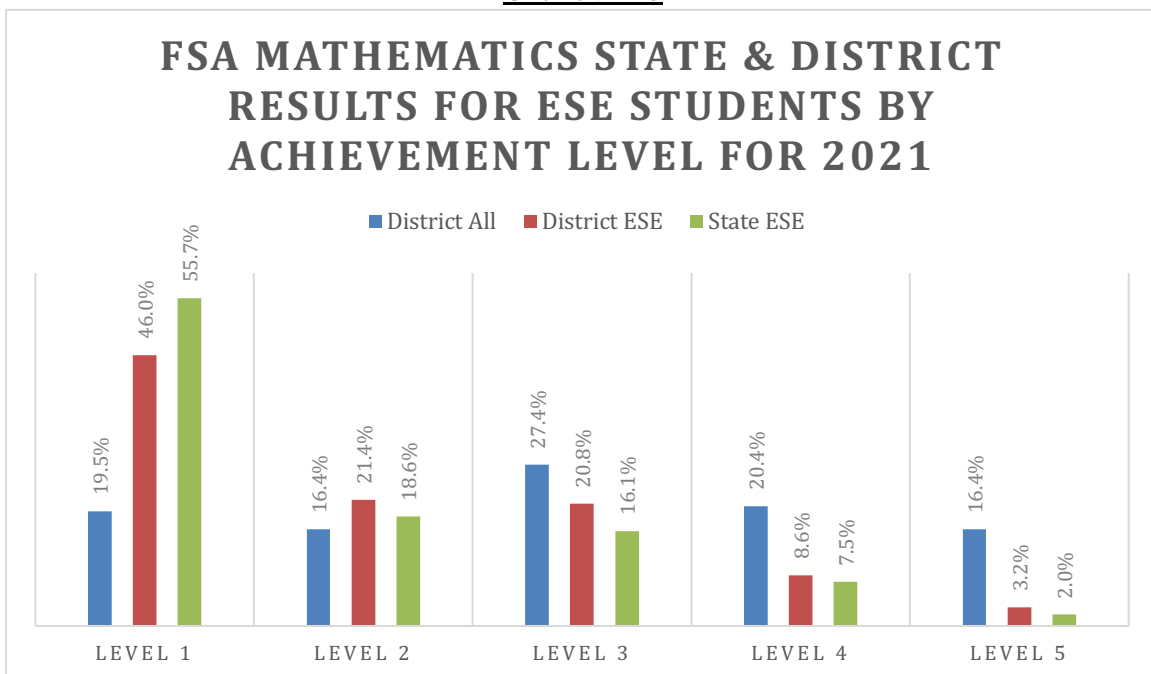


Chart 7.2.6



One of the significant challenges faced by Sarasota is the achievement gap between general education and special education students. This has been an ongoing issue in Sarasota for many years and has not been

rectified. Throughout this report, Exceptional Learning Solutions discusses student achievement and some of the factors that have impacted student achievement in Sarasota. Additionally, some recommendations in the report address potential impacts on special education student achievement in the district. Examining FSA data for both ELA and mathematics for each of the years analyzed, reveals just how wide and static the achievement gap is in Sarasota special education. The most recent year that state report card data is available for Sarasota, 2022, displays this significant achievement gap between general education students and special education students (See Chart 7.2.7 for 2022 ELA and Chart 7.2.8 for 2022 mathematics).

Chart 7.2.7

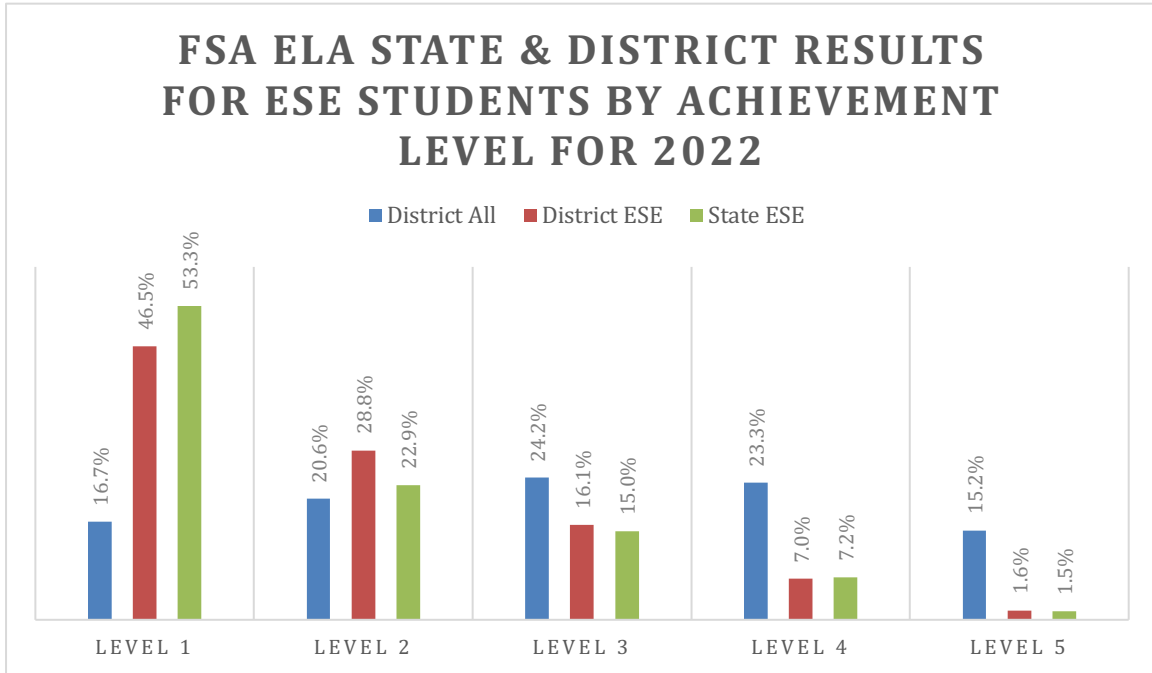
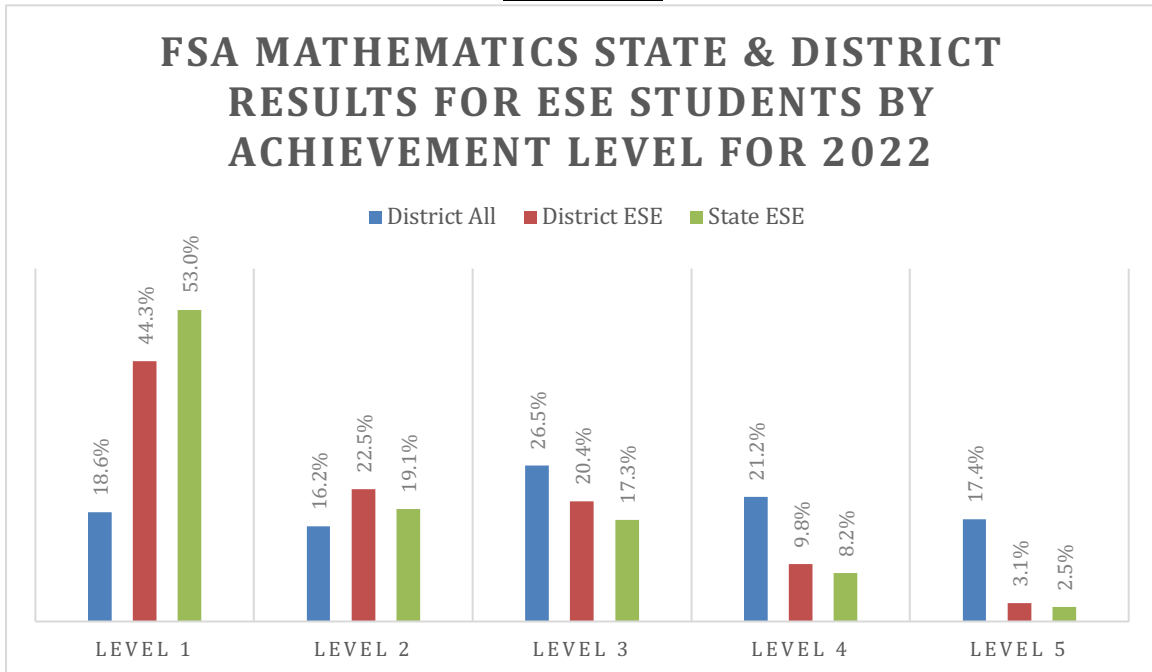


Chart 7.2.8



For Level 4 2022 FSA ELA data for Sarasota, there is a 16.3% gap between general education and special education students and a 13.6% gap between general education and special education students in 2022 FSA ELA data for Level 5. Similarly, in mathematics, there is an 11.4% gap between general education students and special education students in Level 4 and a 14.3% gap between general education students and special education students in Level 5. While this example of the achievement gap focuses on 2022 data, a similar gap exists in each of the years examined in this review. Likewise, there is an achievement gap at every achievement level, not just Levels 4 and 5 in each year for both ELA and mathematics.

This significant achievement gap in Sarasota is a tremendous cause for concern. What is most remarkable in Sarasota special education is not even the significant achievement gaps between general education students and special education students, but the fact that these significant gaps occur year over year with no evidence of meaningful progress at narrowing the achievement gap. The district continues to engage in the same activities, using programs and interventions that are not effective, despite the fact that the achievement data demonstrates that there is little to no impact on student achievement or narrowing of the achievement gap. The achievement gap remains static, and special education students are being left behind academically. One reason for this has been the years of focus, almost exclusively, on compliance by the ESE Department. Of course, compliance is important and necessary to be in alignment with federal and state laws; however, student achievement cannot be ignored for compliance. The focus of special education staff, the ESE Department, and all district leadership in Sarasota must be on student achievement for all students, and only then will the achievement gap between general education students and special education students be impacted.

Recommendation 7.2: Conduct a thorough analysis of the achievement gap in Sarasota special education to determine the underlying causes of the gap, and develop a detailed five-year plan to narrow the achievement gap, with a focus on increasing student achievement for special education students in Sarasota.

Focus Area 7.3

Sarasota recognizes the importance of student behavior data in addition to assessment data. Behavior incidents are on the rise in classrooms and programs throughout Sarasota, specifically in Cluster Sites and at Oak Park School. This is a national trend, seen in nearly every state. Not only are behavior incidents on the rise across the country, but significant behavior issues are on the rise. Behavior incidents include actions that put others (adults and students) in danger, students putting themselves in danger by eloping from school buildings, students engaging in activities that could cause themselves harm, and physical attacks on teachers and/or other students, just to name a few. To combat these increased behavior incidents, school districts need to monitor and measure behavior incidents through a data collection process.

As referenced previously, Sarasota has adopted the Total Progress System (“TPS”) developed by BCBA’s at Behavior Care, Inc. TPS is a very detailed and advanced system for monitoring and collecting data on student behavior incidents in the classroom. It is utilized throughout the district, and it generates regular reports on student behavior that can be shared with parents on a weekly or monthly basis. While the process for data collection varies in every classroom, typically, behavior incident data are collected on students in blocks during the day. These data are entered into the computer either by the classroom teacher, paraprofessional, or behavior specialist. The collection of this level of detailed data can be onerous for teachers and staff in the classroom while attempting to address behavior issues and educate students.

The data provided by TPS is voluminous and extremely detailed. While the data analysis is impressive, one of the challenges is that the data reports are not always intuitive or easily understood for those without behavior training or credentials. Many teachers and staff who collect the classroom-level data do not review it or even have a full understanding of the behavior reports that are generated from the data collection. If teachers and staff are required to collect and report TPS behavior data, the data should be used at the classroom level to address student behavior issues. Every classroom teacher collecting TPS data should be trained to fully understand the relevant data reports and how that data can be utilized in the classroom to predict and address behavior incidents. Similarly, not all parents who receive the weekly or monthly TPS reports understand the complex charts, graphs and reported data. There should be a general overview and easily understood explanation of the charts, graphs, and data developed by Behavior Care, Inc. that can accompany all reports sent to parents. This should be something that teachers can easily plug into the student-specific data sent to parents without having to provide a lengthy discussion of what the data means and how it is being used. It is important for there to be standardization in the delivery of TPS data to parents so that teachers do not spend hours writing explanations of the data provided.

Recommendation 7.3: Continue utilizing the TPS system for collection and analysis of student behavior data, with a standard data explanation provided by Behavior Care, Inc., for parental reporting and ease of understanding, and provide additional training for teachers and staff on the analysis of TPS data and how it can be utilized to predict and address student behavior incidents.

Focus Area 7.4

Data collection and usage is a vital component in special education and for Sarasota. It is critical that data drives every decision that is made for special education students in Sarasota. There is evidence of data usage throughout the district. District leadership and ESE Department leadership utilizes data in their decision-making, and some teachers utilize observational and assessment data to monitor student progress and assess student achievement. Sarasota special education utilizes data in some classrooms, but full data usage and understanding is still emerging within many special education classrooms in the district. There is not a well implemented, district-wide standard for data utilization in special education.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team uncovered, through conversations with administrators and teachers, that there does not appear to be universal adoption of the data directives from district administration in all classrooms within the district. Interviews with many teachers during the Special Education Program Review revealed that there is not a strong understanding of the current data policies. Most have an understanding that data should be collected and maintained for a student file, but there is not a universal standard being utilized district-wide of what data is collected, how that data is utilized, and where data is stored for future use. Data collection, use, and storage for special education varies from building to building and from classroom to classroom. There should be a standard data collection, utilization, and storage policy for special education followed by every teacher, paraprofessional, related services team member, staff member, and administrator in every building in the district. The policy should be a standard that is used for every student who receives services.

Data-driven decision-making should be at the core of the development and/or implementation of a special education data policy. Three conditions are necessary to support data informed actions: 1) usefulness of data, 2) capacity to use data effectively, and 3) a culture that values the regular collection and use of data. Data should dictate the formulation of policy, support the placement of students, determine the evaluation and design of programs, and guide practice by informing the use of appropriate instruction and intervention strategies.

Recommendation 7.4: Develop and implement a special education data policy that creates a standard for student data collection, usage, and storage that is focused on student achievement, placement, interventions, and supports.

Category #8: Transitions

Commendations

- As students academically advance, Sarasota conducts annual grade level articulation meetings to facilitate transitions for ESE students.
- Sarasota has a collaborative partnership with Project 10 (Transition Education Network) and has transition specialists and job coaches that support various programs within the schools.
- Sarasota high schools have a variety of life skill and career education programs to support students with disabilities.

Focus Area 8.1

There are several points of transition for all students in Sarasota, and some can be more difficult and more frequent for students with developmental delays. While transitions occur in every building in the district for all students, they are especially challenging for students with special needs. Change is difficult for nondisabled and disabled students, especially when it comes to disrupting their normal school routines, changing schools, and/or making new friends. Transitions for special needs students can not only be taxing for the child but also for the parents and staff involved. Whether a student transitions within the district or transfers from another district in-state or from out-of-state, moving to a new building with new adults and different peers can be traumatic and create increased academic challenges, as well as behavior challenges for special needs students.

Sarasota has a number of transfers annually. The district has developed an ESE Transfer Checklist that primarily focuses on in-state and out-of-state transfers and contains minimal information on transfers to/from a school within the district which oftentimes impacts the transition processes. The Checklist has been reported to be underutilized by personnel, has multiple missing procedural components, and does not address the importance of ensuring the identification of the right school/program for students upon transfer to the district. In fact, in certain situations, students are initially placed in programs that do not meet their needs and can stay in inappropriate settings for months despite input from receiving schools, thereby impacting student progress.

Exceptional Learning Solutions recognizes that all transitions whether school based, grade level articulations, or in-state and/or out-of-state transfers are extremely significant for students with disabilities and should be handled strategically and with the knowledge and understanding of the individual student's specific needs. Effective transitions are a vital part of the continuum of services. Based upon the information gathered there are three significant transitions/articulations for all students with special needs that rise to the forefront and need to be focused on within the district: Prekindergarten ("PreK") to kindergarten, fifth grade to middle school, eighth grade into high school/secondary transition.

For many students with disabilities, transition begins very early (i.e., early intervention, PreK and Part C to B). Sarasota has approximately 70 Early Learning and PreK classrooms which serve both general education and special education students, as well as provide early learning instruction. According to the *Sarasota County Schools Exceptional Education Manual*, a PreK child with disabilities is a child who is below five years of age on or before September 1 and has a sensory, physical, mental, or emotional condition that significantly affects the attainment of normal developmental milestones. Many developmentally delayed students coming to the district participate in the Early Steps (B-2) program prior to participating in the PreK classroom. These classrooms are critical to the growth of the developmentally delayed student. While

there is a strong commitment to PreK in Sarasota, Exceptional Learning Solutions found that the PreK transition process is not occurring effectively, and in some cases, required eligibility information is lacking when staffing students into PreK. For students transitioning from PreK to kindergarten, it is evident that planning is ineffective and updated assessment evaluations are not timely, thus, unintended consequences occur, impacting a smooth transition and student success. Additionally, IEPs of students transitioning into kindergarten from PreK do not reflect what is needed in kindergarten; instead, they address PreK information which is not helpful for the receiving school staff and does not provide appropriate goals and objectives to guide the student's education. Another issue of concern is that many PreK classrooms do not look the same nor are they equipped with quality curricula that are consistently utilized across district programs. PreK and kindergarten are foundational programs that not only impact the child's future but the future of Sarasota's academic excellence.

In some situations, PreK students, disabled and non-disabled alike, may not be developmentally, socially, or academically ready to transition to kindergarten. For this population, it would be incumbent upon Sarasota to institute transition kindergarten classes. This type of setting would continue the focus on developmental readiness, integrate kindergarten standards, and provide inclusionary opportunities for gradual release into a full time kindergarten program. The benefit of this additional time and support would be a reduction of behavioral and educational learning gaps, potential reduction in referrals, and enhancement of students' academic success.

Recommendation 8.1-A: Readdress the ESE transfer process, revise the ESE Transfer Checklist, and focus on working closer with school-based administrators to prevent transfer students being initially placed in programs that do not meet their needs and often staying in inappropriate settings for months despite input from receiving schools.

Recommendation 8.1-B: Redesign the PreK transition process to ensure effective transition planning, timely evaluations, and development of a student IEP for kindergarten reflects what is needed in kindergarten; provide equitable resources for PreK classrooms, equip programs with appropriate developmental curriculum, and pilot kindergarten transition classes.

Focus Area 8.2

While special education staff and building leaders all recognize that grade level transitions are important and can be traumatic for special needs students, there appears to be very little planning time allocated to the process to ease those transitions. School-to-school transitions can be difficult in a district, and that is no different in Sarasota. An expansion of opportunities and/or interventions within the existing school site should always be a consideration prior to a change in placement/transition. In some cases, the process is lengthy, while in others there is no opportunity to observe or visit another site. If the student transitions, the identified supports and services should go with the student. At Cluster Sites and Oak Park School, supports such as communication devices or paraprofessionals are often not transferred with the student. Quality relationships and mutual respect are important during transitions between schools, and well-defined school-to-school processes should be adhered to across the district.

Throughout a student's elementary experience, there are a significant number of articulations at multiple grade levels. The most noteworthy being from fifth grade to middle school. No later than age 11, students should start participating in their IEP meetings and provide input into their transition plans. Articulation meetings for fifth grade students should begin during the students fourth grade year to start considering gradual release of existing classroom supports and independent growth opportunities. Additionally, a

review of fourth/fifth grade assessment data needs to be conducted to determine if a re-evaluation should be completed for a special education student or a referral processed for a struggling unidentified student.

Currently, most transition/articulation meetings in Sarasota occur via Zoom. Most users of this process reported through interviews that meetings are held too late in the school year, preparation is lacking, and detailed data, interventions, and support information are not always provided. Additionally, the overall process is ineffective as there are too many cases presented at one time, thus eliminating time for student centered service delivery and programmatic discussions. It is in the best interest of Sarasota students for this process to be readdressed with all district stakeholders so the appropriate decisions can be made and student schedules can be determined prior to the new school year.

Transition into middle school is different depending on the receiving school. In most situations, elementary students have an opportunity to tour their receiving middle school. While this is helpful, it is not enough to calm the anxiety of change and support students. It is important to consider multiple visits, opportunities to sit in the classroom, meet the teacher/support personnel, and observe potential electives. This strategy enables the student to become comfortable in the new environment, potentially reducing behavior incidents at the beginning of the year and possibly increasing the ability to focus. A similar strategy would also be beneficial for eighth graders transitioning into the high school setting.

As discussed in Focus Area 4.3, the lack of adequate support for middle school students has existed in Sarasota for many years. Sarasota needs to address the missing middle school program support framework for special education students with offerings like Unique Skills or Learning Strategies and provide all students with a strong continuum of services that includes participation in district life skills programs.

Recommendation 8.2-A: Restructure the annual transition and articulation process with all stakeholders to ensure information is shared, appropriate discussions and decisions occur, and student schedules can be determined prior to the new year; make certain students participate in their transition IEP meetings to identify their personal goals and objectives.

Recommendation 8.2-B: Structure and provide effective transitions for special education students that include visits to the receiving schools, opportunities to sit in the classroom, meet the teacher/support personnel, and observe potential electives; ensure that appropriate supports and services transfer with the student upon transition.

Focus Area 8.3

There are multiple facets to the transition process from middle school to high school. Prior to high school, the middle school student needs to fully participate in the writing of the transition plans and identify personal goals/outcomes. Additionally, the sending school's IEP team should address and establish goals to provide a focus on the gradual release of existing classroom supports. Transition preparation must be intentional to prepare the student for the high school setting and increase independence. Early articulation planning is essential for all students with special needs, particularly high school students. Schools should begin the transition process in early February to ensure quality program planning, early access to scheduling of courses, and supports and personnel are in place to meet the students' academic and secondary transition needs.

Exceptional Learning Solutions visited two of the five traditional high schools in Sarasota. It is apparent that schools serve the majority of their special education population in inclusionary settings and are providing a sound continuum of services. For students with more significant needs like intellectual disabilities and/or behavioral concerns, Cluster Sites provide enhanced services with the support of paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and behavior specialists, as needed. High schools have a variety of life skill and career education programs. Among those are structured work programs, such as horticulture, culinary, childcare, community-based instruction, as well as Career Technical Education programs, including but not limited to business management and entrepreneurship. Many of these programs are supported by Job Coaches and provide transportation for effective implementation, yet the current support is not enough to run effective, vibrant programs. Financial resources and staffing should be increased to sustain, expand, and meet the demand of programs such as these.

Secondary transition for students with disabilities is a purposeful decision-making process which includes high school to postsecondary education, integrated employment, and independent living. The focus is on improving the student's academic and functional achievement. Post-school activities include, but are not limited to, continuing and adult education, adult services, and community participation. Based upon observational data of programmatic supports, services, curricula, and instructional transition programs at the secondary level, it is apparent that Sarasota is striving to ensure students are prepared for life's transitions.

Recommendation 8.3: Increase financial resources and staffing to sustain, expand and meet the demands of high school to postsecondary education, integrated employment, and independent living opportunities for students with disabilities.

Category #9: Training and Professional Development

Commendations

- Under the direction of the new Superintendent, Sarasota will have a Professional Learning and Leadership Development department that will work collaboratively with curriculum and instruction to drive training and professional learning for teachers and staff.
- Sarasota offers a plethora of online professional development and training courses to support teacher certification requirements and provide professional growth opportunities for ESE personnel.
- Sarasota hosts an annual ESE and Student Services Summer Institute to provide learning experiences for teachers of students with disabilities, support personnel, and administrators.

Focus Area 9.1

A variety of training and professional development opportunities are offered within Sarasota, some of which are required for certain positions while other training opportunities are offered on a voluntary basis. However, there are many additional training and professional development opportunities that Sarasota should be offering to a select population of staff members. First, there should be targeted professional development for all special education teachers on instruction. As was discussed in Focus Area 6.3, strong instructional practices are not evident in every special education classroom in Sarasota. In fact, the majority of special education classrooms observed by the Exceptional Learning Solutions team lacked instructional excellence. Special education teachers throughout Sarasota need to be trained on the implementation of quality instructional practices, strategies, and interventions for effective classrooms. These training sessions cannot be optional. There are some trainings offered by the district and by building administrators that are voluntary in nature. Instruction is critical for special education students in Sarasota, and as a result, teachers need to be trained appropriately on instructional practices so they can provide educational excellence to their students.

There is an important educational aspect that impacts every special education student in Sarasota: the IEP. Each special education student has an IEP that indicates goals, interventions, and supports for that student. Exceptional Learning Solutions reviewed a sample of the IEPs drafted for special education students in Sarasota. As discussed in Category #5 in more detail, there are multiple IEP issues related to IEP content and structure. The core of every IEP is the individualized student education plan, which is why teachers and staff members who draft student IEPs or complete a portion of them should be trained on proper IEP development. Timely training is critical in order for Sarasota to ensure it complies with the IDEA requirements of the IEP so that students have their goals, interventions, and supports, as well as their disability categories, clearly articulated in the document that outlines the services to be received as determined by the IEP team.

Currently, the paraprofessionals do not have specialized training, nor do they have sufficient mandatory onboarding. Many paraprofessionals hired by Sarasota are new to education and/or new to working with special needs students. Every paraprofessional in the district, both new and returning, should have paraprofessional training at the beginning of the school year and throughout the year during institute days. This training needs to be specific for paraprofessionals, targeted to the supports that paraprofessionals are providing, and should be separate from classroom teacher training. For paraprofessionals who are new to the district, there should be a week-long onboarding and training regimen prior to starting their support in the classroom. The first day of onboarding should have the paraprofessional in the potentially assigned

classroom observing the classroom teacher and students to get a true understanding of the paraprofessional roles and responsibilities. At the end of the observation day, paraprofessionals should decide if this is a good role for them and if they want to continue with the training. If so, then the remainder of the week will be targeted training for the paraprofessional on how to support students' academic and behavior needs in the classroom and how to ensure students/staff safety. Many paraprofessionals in Sarasota indicated that they are frustrated with the lack of training and professional development support that they receive. The onboarding and training should be a district requirement for them to work with the students in the classroom.

Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons in Sarasota also need to receive and provide training and professional development. First, Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons need to receive technical and support training targeted to their areas of expertise and responsibility. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team discovered during conversations and observations with Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons that there is a broad difference in the skills, background, and knowledge among Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons. These individuals need to be fully equipped to support teachers and staff members in their various roles, as discussed in Focus Area 1.1. There should be one training curriculum for Program Specialists and a separate training curriculum for ESE Liaisons so that each role can be properly trained on the specialized supports they should provide in the school buildings. Second, Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons in turn need to provide training and professional development to teachers and staff members in the school buildings. The training that they provide should be aligned to the training that they received, coupled with ongoing, customized coaching and support as needed. See Focus Area 1.1 for additional information on the recommended training and professional development responsibilities of Program Specialists and ESE Liaisons.

Recommendation 9.1: Design and implement a professional development curriculum that contains topics and training dates, including but not limited to:

- **Quality Instructional Practices**
- **IEP Development and Compliance**
- **Paraprofessional Training**
- **Program Specialist and ESE Liaison Training**

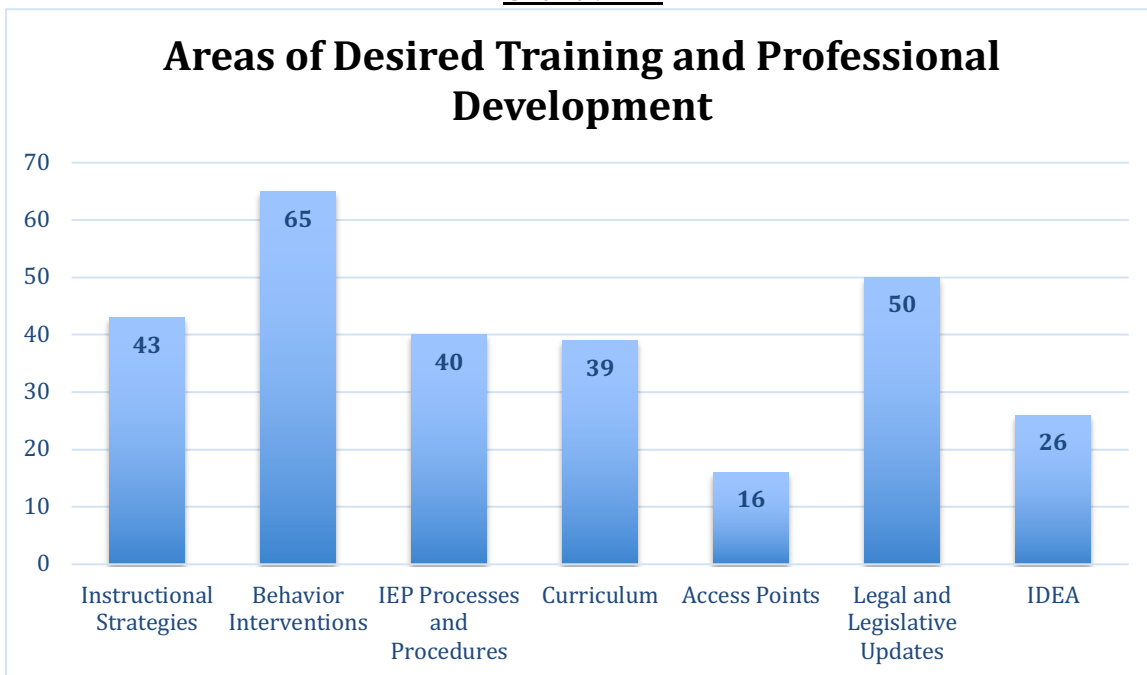
Focus Area 9.2

Training and professional development are very important and must have a leader to spearhead it within Sarasota. The Superintendent and administration have created a new Professional Learning and Leadership Development Department to oversee training and professional development for the entire district. This is a tremendous addition to Sarasota, and the Exceptional Learning Solutions team fully supports and endorses this new department with one caveat. Sarasota currently has extensive training and professional development in place for general education teachers, and the ESE department offers a wide array of training for special education teachers and staff. Feedback received from special education teachers and staff indicated that they are often required to attend district-wide training or professional development on designated days, which is focused more specifically on general education. While the content of these required trainings may be of benefit to ESE personnel, as appropriate, consideration should be given to incorporating an inclusive approach that also enhances the general educator's knowledge of instructional strategies for special education students, due to the fact that the majority of the ESE population are served in general education classrooms. It is important to provide targeted training and professional development specifically tailored to special education teachers and staff, just as it is for

general education, so the time that they spend in training is valuable and directly applicable to their role within the district. Additionally, it is important to collaborate and share knowledge to ensure all students are successful. The Professional Learning and Leadership Development Department should work closely with the ESE Department when developing and delivering training and professional development.

The Staff Survey conducted by Exceptional Learning Solutions posed one question regarding training and professional development. Specifically, the question stated, “Would you like more professional development and/or training, and if so, in what areas (choose all that apply)?” Respondents were able to choose as many areas for training or professional development that they desired. Chart 9.2.1 below provides data on the number of individuals who chose each area of desired training and professional development from a provided list. Respondents were also able to enter their own suggestions for training and professional development; however, no entered responses were provided more than once.

Chart 9.2.1



The data contained in Chart 9.2.1 can be used by the ESE Department and by the Professional Learning and Leadership Development Department to provide insight and guidance on the general areas of training and professional development that staff who responded to the survey would like to see provided. This data is from one survey completed by 245 staff members, so it is certainly not definitive. However, this survey data provides a snapshot of the types of training that the ESE Department and the Professional Learning and Leadership Development Department could consider when developing training and professional development curricula for special education teachers and staff.

Recommendation 9.2: Direct the Professional Learning and Leadership Development department, in conjunction with the ESE department, to develop training and professional development curricula specifically designed for special education teachers and staff based on need and deliver training that is timely and beneficial for special education teachers and staff.

Focus Area 9.3

Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends the creation of a more formal and consistent role within Sarasota special education: Paraprofessional Coaches. In addition to the paraprofessional training that is recommended in Focus Area 9.1, ongoing paraprofessional coaching is also needed. Paraprofessionals are in nearly every special education classroom in Sarasota yet they are in many ways the most underserved role within the district. As previously stated, there is relatively high paraprofessional turnover, due in part to the fact that paraprofessionals do not always understand the role they are accepting and do not have adequate support once they are in the role. Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends providing a Paraprofessional Coach in each school building that has special education paraprofessionals. For the school buildings with lower numbers of paraprofessionals, Paraprofessional Coaches could potentially provide coaching to paraprofessionals in more than one building.

The responsibilities of the Paraprofessional Coaches are to support the paraprofessionals and assist them in fulfilling their job responsibilities. Ideally, this should begin with shadowing the Paraprofessional Coaches and then arranging shadowing opportunities with experienced paraprofessionals for new paraprofessionals in Sarasota. This would allow the new paraprofessionals to observe the roles and responsibilities of experienced paraprofessionals firsthand, as well as provide an opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification. The Paraprofessional Coaches could then provide additional support by mentoring, modeling, and/or training the new paraprofessionals as needed. There should be regular check-ins and meaningful interaction with each new paraprofessional throughout each week. The check-ins do not necessarily need to be lengthy but should be as long as needed to properly support the paraprofessionals.

Even experienced paraprofessionals reported that they need support from time-to-time, and there is little opportunity to request real time support from a busy classroom teacher or other paraprofessionals. The Paraprofessional Coaches could also be available to support experienced paraprofessionals throughout the year. The check-ins with experienced paraprofessionals could be less frequent, depending on the level of support needed. Whether new or experienced paraprofessionals are being supported, the Paraprofessional Coaches should individualize supports for each of their paraprofessionals. This would delineate the supports requested from paraprofessionals and allow the Paraprofessional Coaches to chart growth and development among the paraprofessionals, as well as identify additional areas for growth and support. The primary responsibility of the Paraprofessional Coaches is to provide direct, real-time support for paraprofessionals, with the additional benefit of creating an environment where paraprofessionals feel supported, prepared to assist students, and work as a collaborative team member with the classroom teachers.

Recommendation 9.3: Based on available funding, consider designating Paraprofessional Coaches within each Sarasota school building to work with special education paraprofessionals and to provide coaching, mentoring, modeling, and training for both new and experienced paraprofessionals throughout the school year.

Category #10: Parent and Community Relations

Commendations

- Sarasota schools and staff work to build relationships with parents and communicate student progress, challenges, and health-related issues.
- Sarasota provides a variety of parent and family learning opportunities through a developed curriculum that is offered annually to engage and train parents and family members.
- Sarasota continues to seek opportunities to assist parents with their understanding of the IDEA.

Focus Area 10.1

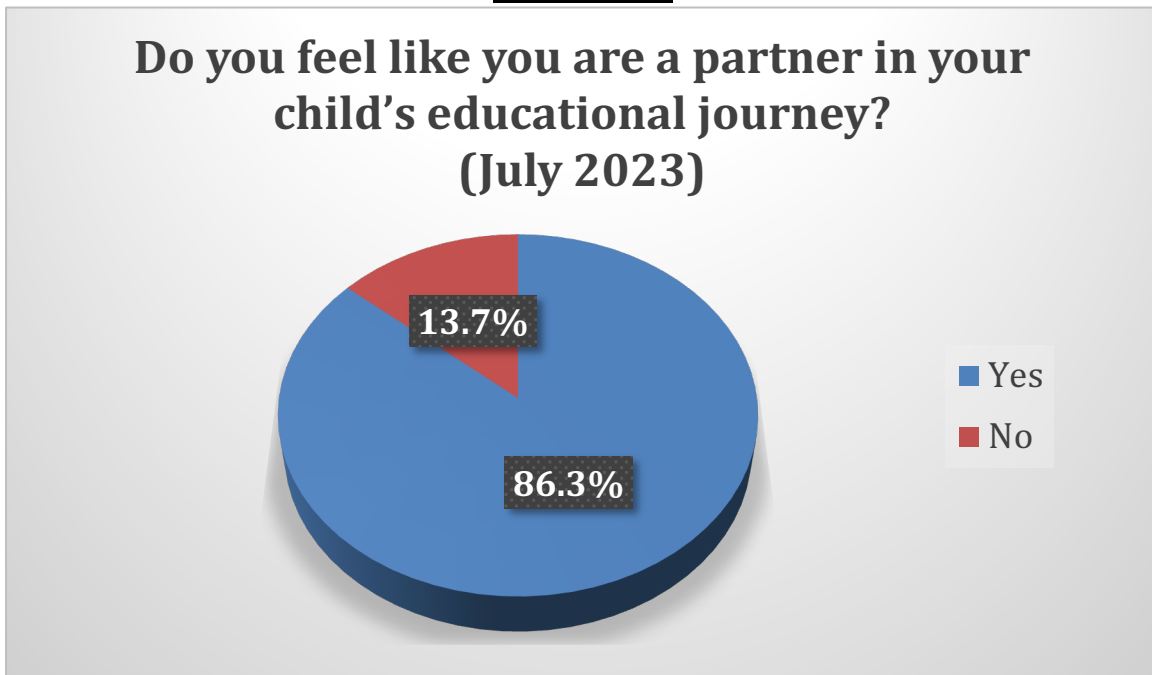
Parents are typically fierce advocates for their special needs students. In many cases, they have had to fight for their student to ensure the receipt of medical supports, educational supports, and therapeutic supports at each developmental stage of life. This is admirable and often necessary to ensure that their student has the benefits needed to survive and succeed. Collectively, families have a wealth of knowledge and experience related to the special needs of their individual student(s), as well as a broad special education perspective. Sarasota has a tremendous opportunity to engage all parents in the life of the district and the school(s) attended by their student(s).

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team provided two Parent Surveys, one in July 2023 and one in October 2023. The purpose of the two surveys was to gauge parent satisfaction following the 2022-2023 school year (July 2023 survey) and to gain an understanding of the transition experience into the 2023-2024 school year (October 2023 survey).

Sarasota leadership and staff work hard to build relationships with parents and family members. In both Parent Surveys, parents were asked, “Do you feel like you are a partner in your child’s educational journey?” Of the survey respondents to the July 2023 survey, 86.3% indicated in the affirmative that they felt like a partner in their student’s education in Sarasota, with 13.7% indicating that they did not feel like a partner in their student’s education (See Chart 10.1.1).⁶

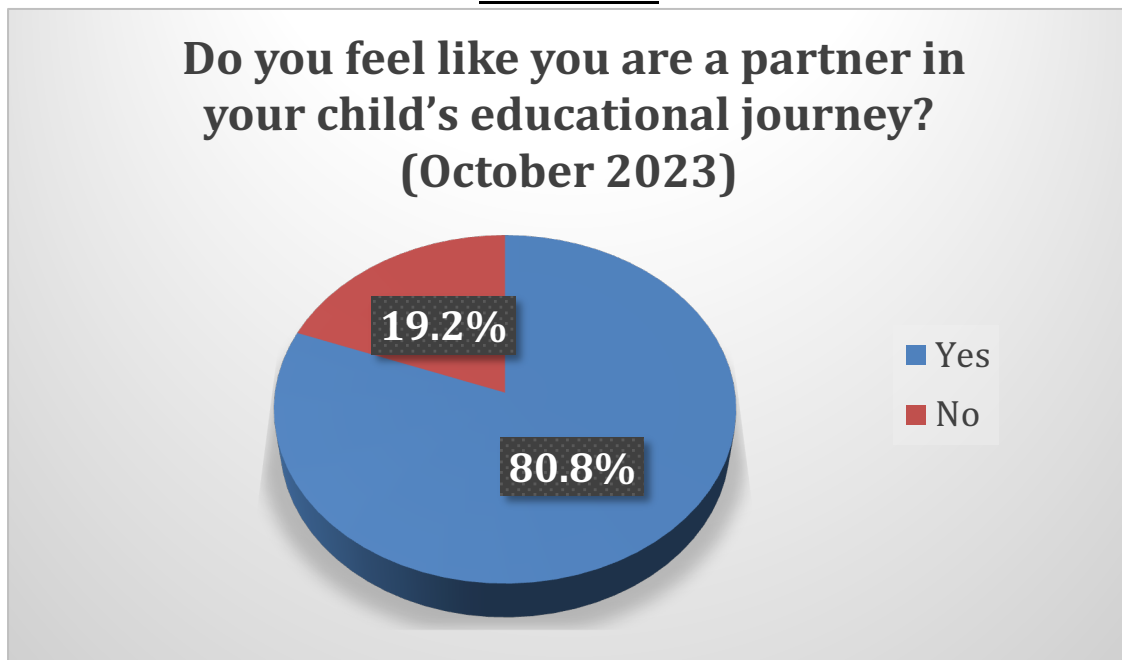
⁶ For those respondents who answered “No” to the July 2023 Parent Survey question “Do you feel like you are a partner in your child’s educational journey?”, they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: “Need more communication from school.”; “The entire process by the school, school representative was extremely nontransparent, forceful and was not in best interest of the child.”; “We feel that the determination of ASD eligibility is premature and only takes into consideration the opinion of the school-based staff and not the information reported or presented by his family.”; “Collaboration is lacking due to ‘policy’, ‘lack of programs or skilled providers’”.

Chart 10.1.1



Similarly, of the respondents to the October 2023 Parent Survey, 80.8% indicated that they feel like a partner in their child's education journey, while 19.2% indicated that they did not feel like a partner (See Chart 10.1.2).⁷

Chart 10.1.2



⁷ For those respondents who answered "No" to the October 2023 Parent Survey question "Do you feel like you are a partner in your child's educational journey?", they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: "I feel I'm a partner because I call and check up on his progress, if I didn't they wouldn't inform me."; "I had many discussions on how my grandson learns he is a very tactile learner and throwing a bunch of boring worksheets in front of him doesn't get it done. They don't engage him at all."; "We don't know really what my son does at school. We do not receive the homework or assignments that he does at school, so we are concerned about knowing how they are trying to help him learn to read and write, since the idea that a child can reach middle school without knowing how to read and write scares us."

This is overwhelmingly strong and positive feedback and speaks to the work done in Sarasota to create a relationship with the parents and family members. Also in the survey, parents were asked a similar question: “On a scale of one (1) to five (5), how involved are you with your child’s education?” In the July 2023 Parent Survey, 95.3% of respondents indicated that their involvement in their student’s education was either a “five” or a “four”, and the remaining 4.7% indicated their involvement was either a “three”, “two”, or “one”. Similarly, in the October 2023 Parent Survey, 91.8% of respondents indicated that their involvement in their student’s education was either a “five” or a “four”, with 8.2% of respondents stating that their involvement was either a “three”, “two”, or “one”. While not surprising, what this demonstrates is that parents who are more involved in their student’s education also feel like they are a partner with Sarasota on their student’s educational journey.

A vast majority of the parents who participated in the Parent Surveys indicated that they were engaged and felt a partnership with Sarasota in their student’s education, but the survey participation rate was very low. Of the 10,037 emails that were sent to parents and/or family members of Sarasota students for the July 2023 Parent Survey, only 173 parents responded to the survey. Similarly, of the 9,214 emails that were sent to parents and/or family members for the October 2023 survey, only 73 surveys were returned. Statisticians may argue that such a low survey rate invalidates the survey data. However, for those who chose to respond to the surveys, their experiences were shared, their voices were heard, and their feelings were recorded. Yet a survey response rate of below 2% for the July 2023 survey and a response rate of less than 1% for the October 2023 survey raises the question of why the response rate is so low. There are many explanations, such as busy parents of special needs students may not have time to respond while caring for their student, or the survey email was overlooked/labeled as “junk” by their email provider. While there are myriad reasons why parents may not have responded, at least one important reason must be considered as a possibility: some parents do not feel engaged with Sarasota in the education of their student(s) and chose not to engage with the survey.

A further example of limited parent engagement is from the two Parent Meetings that the Exceptional Learning Solutions team made available to parents in September and October 2023. Both were in person, in different weeks and on different days of the week, with one on the North side of the county and one on the South side of the county. Participation invitations were sent to the same parents and/or family member emails used for the surveys, yet for both Parent Meetings a combined 13 people chose to attend. Again, there could be many reasons why there was such low attendance. However, prior to the Parent Meetings the Exceptional Learning Solutions team was informed by a number of people at all levels within Sarasota that parent participation is generally low and that we should not expect high turnouts. While that demonstrates a knowledge and understanding of Sarasota parents, that cannot be the expectation in a school district that has a need and an obligation to engage parents.

Parents of special needs students need to be engaged in creative ways. Caring for a student with special needs outside of the school day can be challenging, overwhelming, and exhausting for many parents and family members. Those feelings can be exacerbated when there is a single parent family or a family with limited outside support. As a result, parents may feel like they do not have the time or capacity to engage with Sarasota outside required IEP meetings or check-ins with teachers. That means that parents need to be engaged in ways that will benefit them and their student(s), making participation worth their time and effort.

Sarasota has done a fantastic job of providing a variety of learning opportunities for parents and family members. There are learning catalogs provided by the district, entitled *Parent/Family Learning Opportunities*, that list the title and type of learning opportunity, the target audience, and the dates/times offered. These learning opportunities focus on many targeted audiences and diverse subject matter that

applies to an array of parents with exceptional students. For example, there are courses that focus on early learning/PreK, Access Points, and outside agency fairs. These are all wonderful opportunities for parents and family members to learn and benefit from the knowledge and experience of Sarasota staff. While positive and beneficial, all these learning opportunities are provided and sponsored by the central office. Strong engagement opportunities are also needed at every school to enhance and increase parent participation. Parent “open houses” that invite parents to come to the school for a social event will most likely not be effective in engaging parents. Identifying parents’ needs and then providing programming and supports to address those needs is paramount. For example, many Sarasota schools have students with significant behavior needs. Those behavior needs most likely do not only manifest at school but also are present at home outside of the school day. Engage parents by helping to address the behavior needs at home. Create a parent boot camp for behavior where parents can come to the school, in person or virtually, and learn specific techniques for de-escalation and how to address extreme behavior. Develop a multipart curriculum that will bring in behavior experts to instruct parents first, then demonstrate the techniques, and finally give parents an opportunity to use their knowledge at home and report back to gain support from their fellow parents and the experts. This is only one of many options that schools could consider for parent engagement. Ask parents what they need to better assist their student(s), and use those needs to drive the supports, engage parents, and ultimately create a community of partners for student support.

Recommendation 10.1: Continue to provide parent training at the district level through Parent/Family Learning Opportunities, and develop a parent engagement plan for each school, complete with topics, dates for delivery, and expert facilitators, to address parent needs and drive parent engagement; execute the plan consistently throughout each school year.

Focus Area 10.2

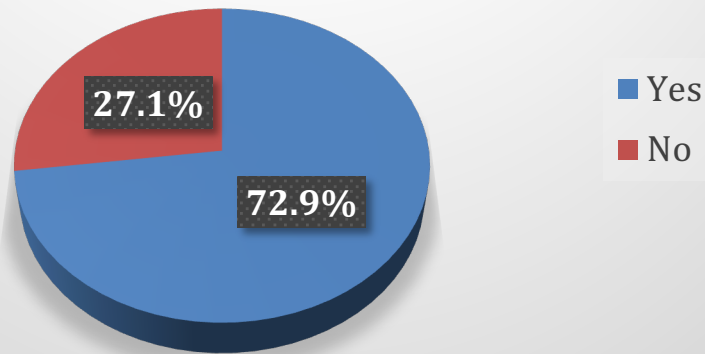
Parent engagement is an important component in Sarasota. As described above, parent engagement is most effective when Sarasota meets parents’ needs to engage parents and family members in the life of the schools and/or district. Parents and family members are often left on their own to research what is best for their students or pay outside providers to give them vital information. Sarasota has a broad base of experts in every facet of special education who can serve as a resource of information for parents, specifically regarding special needs and the special education law.

For parents to understand Sarasota and the decisions that are made in the district to benefit students, parents must first understand the current special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), how it functions, and why it functions in that way. For example, IDEA is designed to have parental involvement throughout the process of identifying a student for special education, developing and planning IEP goals, and requiring regular check-ins to assess and report on student progress. Parents may come to Sarasota in a mode to fight for what they want rather than collaboratively determining, along with professional educators and experts, what is in the best interest of their student from an educational standpoint. An adversarial mentality from parents or Sarasota staff is not constructive for identifying and implementing the supports needed for special education students. Simply understanding the “why” and “how” of IDEA and the provision of special education services in Sarasota can tremendously help parents through the IEP process and in interactions with staff.

In the both the July 2023 and October 2023 Parent Survey, parents were asked the question “Do you feel you are well-informed regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?” Of those who responded to the July 2023 survey, 72.9% answered in the affirmative that they feel well informed regarding IDEA, and only 27.1% indicated that they did not feel well-informed (See Chart 10.2.1).

Chart 10.2.1

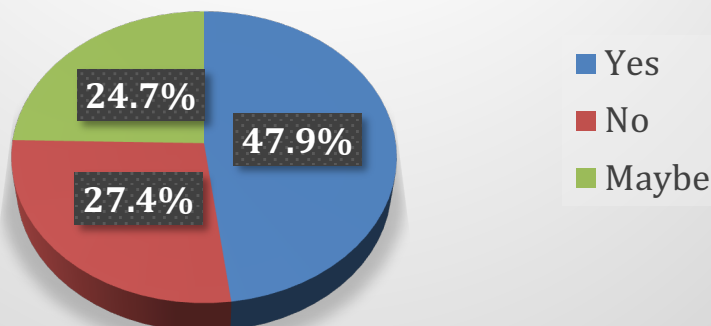
**Do you feel you are well-informed regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?
(July 2023)**



Based on interactions with parents and comments received in the July 2023 survey, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team slightly altered the response options for the October 2023 survey by adding the response of “Maybe” to the answer selections. This was due to the notion that many parents who indicated they were well-informed on IDEA, when questioned further, demonstrated that they had some knowledge of IDEA but not a full understanding. Of the respondents to the October 2023 Parent Survey, 47.9% indicated they are well-informed regarding IDEA, while 27.4% responded they did not feel well-informed and 24.7% indicated that they are maybe well-informed (See Chart 10.2.2). The percentage of “No” responses are consistent between the two surveys. By offering the “Maybe” option as a response, it appears that there are a significant number of respondents who feel somewhat knowledgeable about IDEA but may not be as fully confident as the response rate indicated in the July 2023 Parent Survey.

Chart 10.2.2

**Do you feel you are well-informed regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?
(October 2023)**



While a majority of respondents claim to be well-informed in the July 2023 survey and nearly half indicated the same in the October 2023 survey, a significant number indicated that they were not well-informed or were “Maybe” well-informed. Additionally, of the respondents who indicated they feel well-informed on IDEA, we do not know their knowledge base or how well they understand the law. This provides a tremendous opportunity for Sarasota to provide parents with knowledge and information about a law that governs district special education decisions and is intimately related to the services received by their student(s).

Sarasota should consider expanding their *Parent/Family Learning Opportunities* topics to include more technical knowledge about the IDEA law and the IEP process. For many parents, interpreting complex laws and understanding regulations regarding services and processes can be a daunting undertaking. Parents are not necessarily experts on special education rules, but Sarasota special education administrators and staff members are. This is an opportunity to impart knowledge to parents about the law, but also to provide them with an understanding of how special education in the district operates and why some decisions are made. Sarasota is bound by IDEA, but parents do not always understand what that means or the legal limitations placed upon the district. Giving parents the “why” and the “how” of special education can provide understanding and begin to bridge a gap between parents and the district. This approach builds trust that decisions are not made arbitrarily or in a vacuum. Instead, parents can begin to understand that the district must apply the factual information regarding their student needs to the law in order to determine necessary and available support.

Recommendation 10.2: Expand Parent/Family Learning Opportunities to include training on IDEA and the IEP process to provide knowledge and information, build trust, and create a partnership where parents understand the “why” and “how” of decision-making and implementation of student supports.

Focus Area 10.3

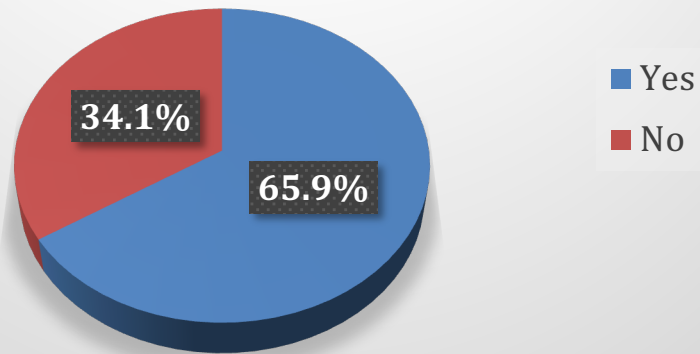
Communication with parents, family members, and the broader community is vital to the success and efficacy of Sarasota. There are two types of effective communication with these target audiences. The first is communication specifically related to Sarasota students. This can come in the form of official communication regarding IEP meetings or conversation with staff members related to a student’s academics, health/safety, and/or behavior. It is the regular communication that occurs between a school district and parents that is expected to ensure student stability and success, especially for students with special needs. Data from the July 2023 Parent Survey indicate that approximately two-thirds of parents believe that school and teacher communication was appropriate for them. Of the survey respondents asked the question, “Do you feel the school and/or teacher communication with you as a parent was appropriate?”, 65.9% indicated that the communication with the school and/or teacher was appropriate (See Chart 10.3.1). The remaining 34.1% indicated that they did not believe the communication was appropriate.⁸ This survey data indicates that for the July 2023 Parent Survey respondents, there is some concern regarding communication between schools/teachers and parents.

⁸ For those respondents who answered “No” to the July 2023 Parent Survey question “Do you feel the school and/or teacher communication with you as a parent is appropriate?”, they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: “No weekly progress, no communication about schedules, not much teacher communication.”; “In one zoom IEP meeting, the special education teacher refused to turn her video on and muted herself. She refused to take part in that meeting in any way.”; “Very little communication from teachers. They don't update grades often. It also takes way to

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Chart 10.3.1

**Do you feel the school and/or teacher communication with you as a parent was appropriate?
(July 2023)**



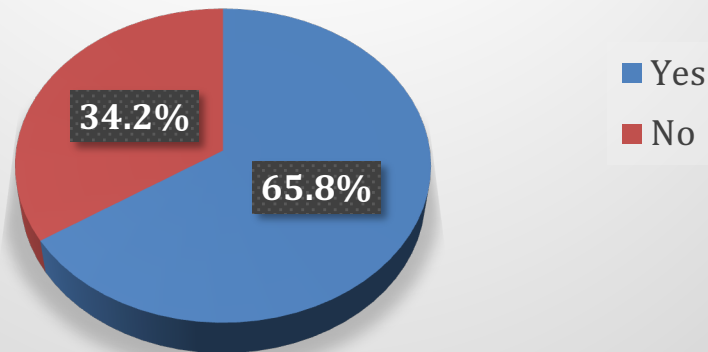
The Exceptional Learning Solutions team altered the question slightly for the October 2023 survey. Some survey comments in July 2023 seemed to indicate that there was a difference between school/teacher communication and district communication. As a result, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team asked two separate questions regarding communication in the October 2023 survey, one regarding school/teacher communication and one regarding district communication, to explore whether there was a perceived difference in communication based on its source. In the survey results from the October 2023 Parent Survey, when asked the question, “Do you feel communication from school personnel is clear and timely for you as a parent?”, 65.8% of respondents reported that they felt communication was clear and timely from school personnel. The survey results showed that 34.2% of respondents felt that communication from school personnel was not clear and timely (See Chart 10.3.2).⁹

[sic] long to receive reports cards.”; “I get a lot of promises and not enough follow through.”; “Only communication is initiated by me.”

⁹ Respondents were offered the opportunity to provide any additional details to the October 2023 Parent Survey question “Do you feel communication from school personnel is clear and timely for you as a parent?”. Here are samples of the responses received: “Emails go over a week without a response.”; “Often there is miscommunication with the different members of his team and I am often having to speak with different people to get the full story.”; “Her teacher has excellent communication. I have not received any communication from the speech therapist at all this year.”; “I believe they are busy so I will get a call when her IEP is about the expire and have to take time off from work last minute. It feels rushed and I believe the teachers don’t have time to read it or do what is on it.”

Chart 10.3.2

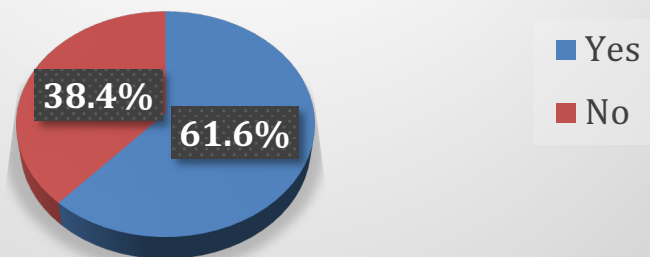
**Do you feel communication from school personnel is clear and timely for you as a parent?
(October 2023)**



The October 2023 Parent Survey also posed a second question about communication specifically related to Sarasota County Schools ESE Department. In this question, respondents were asked, “Do you feel communication from the Sarasota County Schools Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Department is clear and timely for you as a parent?”. Of those responding to the survey, 61.6% responded in the affirmative, while 38.4% indicated that communication was not either clear or timely (See Chart 10.3.3).¹⁰

Chart 10.3.3

Do you feel communication from the Sarasota County Schools Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Department is clear and timely for you as a...



¹⁰ Respondents were offered the opportunity to provide any additional details to the October 2023 Parent Survey question “Do you feel communication from the Sarasota County Schools Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Department is clear and timely for you as a parent?”. Here are samples of the responses received: “I haven’t received any communication. No updates or anything. I have not reached out to them yet. I usually speak to her teacher.”; “This year it’s up and above my expectations.”; “My ESE Liaison often misunderstands me & seems somewhat scattered - follow-up is usually (almost always) initiated by me.”; “Not sure what [*sic*] who they are or what they do.”; “Lack of communication about IEP rescheduling.”

The survey results between the July 2023 Parent Survey and the October 2023 Parent Survey remain relatively consistent. Even when the questions in the October 2023 survey differentiated between school/teacher communication and district communication, the survey results still indicated that between 60% and 66% of respondents thought that communication was good while between 34% and 38% believed it was not good. One positive takeaway from these survey results is that a solid majority of respondents believe that communication is good between schools/teachers/district and parents. However, when there are 34% to 38% of respondents who feel that the communication is not good between schools/teachers/district and parents, that indicates a communication problem for a significant number of families represented by the survey. Throughout the survey responses and in conversations with parents, poor communication was consistently the primary issue brought up and discussed. It is always difficult for a district the size of Sarasota to communicate effectively to meet the broad and diverse needs of all families. But that should not deter the district and individual schools and teachers from striving for effective communication with all families. The ESE Department in Sarasota should review its communication policies and methods to determine what will be most effective for families and consistently communicate in that matter. Likewise, the district must hold schools and teachers accountable for regular, reliable, and informative communication with parents. Parents and family members must remain informed of their student's progress and challenges in order to partner with the district to provide the most beneficial support for the student.

The second type of communication is communication with parents, family members, and the broader community that is not student specific but relates to special education in Sarasota. While much of the communication coming from the district related to special education students is acceptable, Sarasota has a perception problem in the community, specifically related to its comprehensive separate day school, Oak Park, as well as Cluster Sites. While there is great support provided by teachers and staff every day both at Oak Park and the various Cluster Sites, there is still a negative perception of these locations in the community. This is evidenced by the fact that many parents are reluctant to entertain a proposal to send a student to Oak Park or even to transfer a student to a Cluster Site for more targeted support. Historically, there have been issues that garnered significant negative media attention, and those media stories and perceptions linger years later. While Sarasota has done a tremendous amount of hard work to improve Oak Park and its Cluster Sites, that positive story of the great work being done by teachers and staff at those locations needs to be shared with the broader community. Sarasota needs to develop marketing materials and a marketing plan that consistently tells the story of special education and the diverse services offered by Sarasota. From students receiving additional supports in a traditional classroom setting, to students receiving targeted supports based on their needs in Cluster Sites, to services provided to students with the most severe and profound needs at Oak Park, Sarasota needs to demonstrate the array of services offered to families and consistently deliver those services to improve the perception of special education in Sarasota.

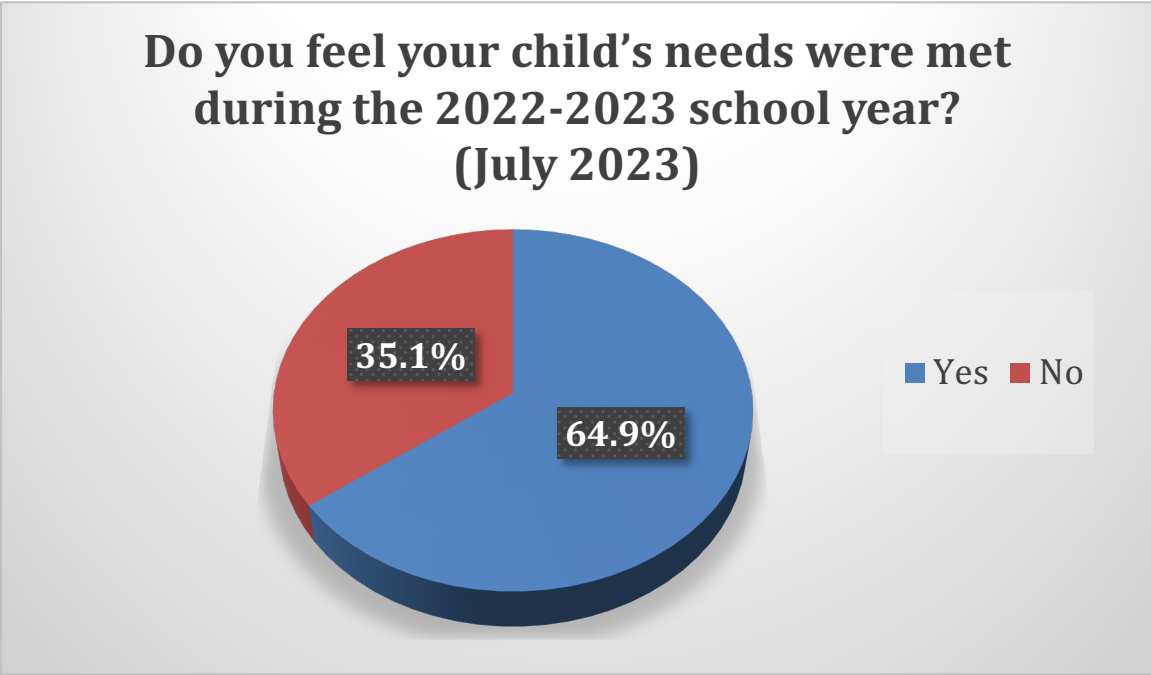
Recommendation 10.3: Review district communication policies to determine consistent and established communication methods with families, establish communication protocols for schools and special education staff regarding the manner and regularity of communication with special education parents, and create a long-term communication plan to disseminate information on the diverse programs offered to service students with special needs in Sarasota.

Focus Area 10.4

The two Parent Surveys produced both quantifiable data and anecdotal data from the survey respondents. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team utilized the anecdotal data to create a complete picture and full understanding of the parent experience in Sarasota. That information is contained throughout the report, along with some specific examples of Parent Survey respondent statements contained within Category #10. Some of the quantifiable data is contained in the Focus Areas above; however, the remainder of the quantifiable data is summarized within Focus Area 10.4.

Parents were asked in the July 2023 Parent Survey, “Do you feel your child's needs were met during the 2022-2023 school year?” Of those who responded to the survey, 64.9% of parents indicated that they believe their student’s needs are being met, while 35.1% of respondents did not think that Sarasota was meeting their student’s needs (See Chart 10.4.1). A significant majority of the respondents indicate a favorable view of how Sarasota is addressing the needs of their student(s), but the approximately 35% of the parents who responded negatively is a significant number and should be seriously contemplated by Sarasota leadership. Focus Areas throughout this report indicate challenges with Sarasota structure, system, processes, procedures, and academic rigor. Implementation of recommendations contained within this report will rectify parents saying “No” to this question.¹¹

Chart 10.4.1

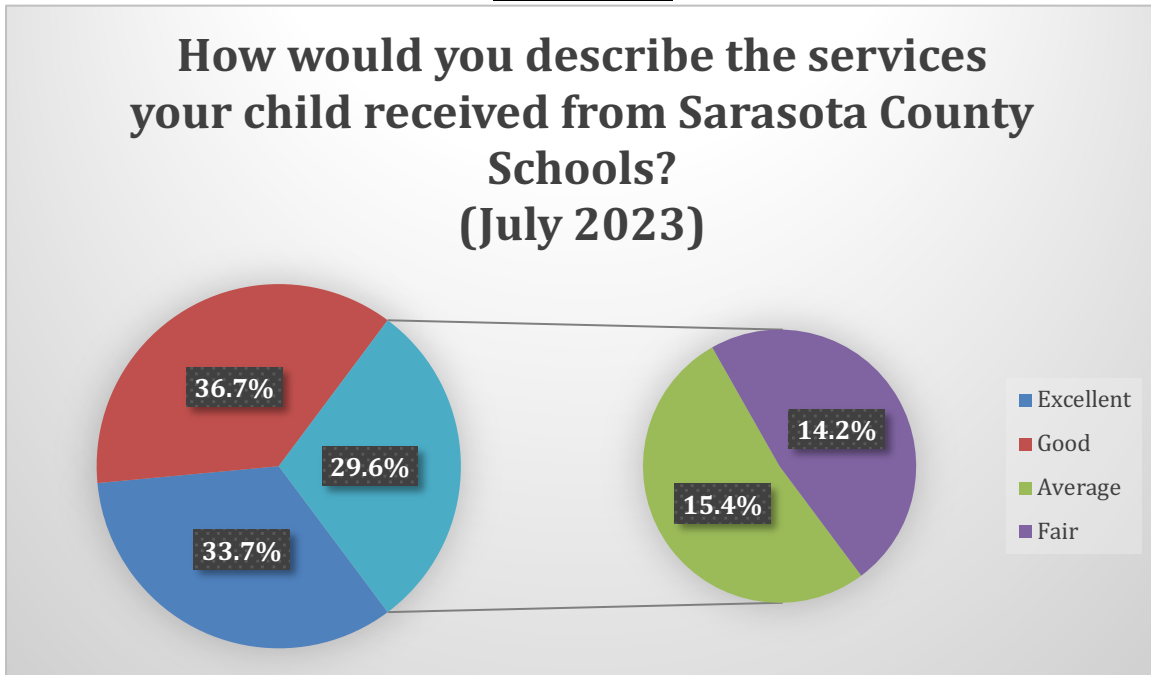


A related question posed to respondents in the July 2023 Parent Survey was “How would you describe the services your child received from Sarasota County Schools?”, with four options: Excellent, Good, Average,

¹¹ For those respondents who answered “No” to the question “Do you feel your child's needs are being met during the 2022-2023 school year?”, they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: “Not enough individual help.”; “My child has not demonstrated any progress and was mostly allowed to sleep or use a laptop consistently during times he should have been learning.”; “Services he is receiving are in no way commensurate to the services he received prior to attending Sarasota County Schools. Student is not being academically challenged and is in class with students who are much lower functioning.”; “Due to staffing shortages, many things fell through the cracks this year. My son is transitioning to high school and we don’t feel we were helped with the changes and therefore are unprepared for what is to come.”

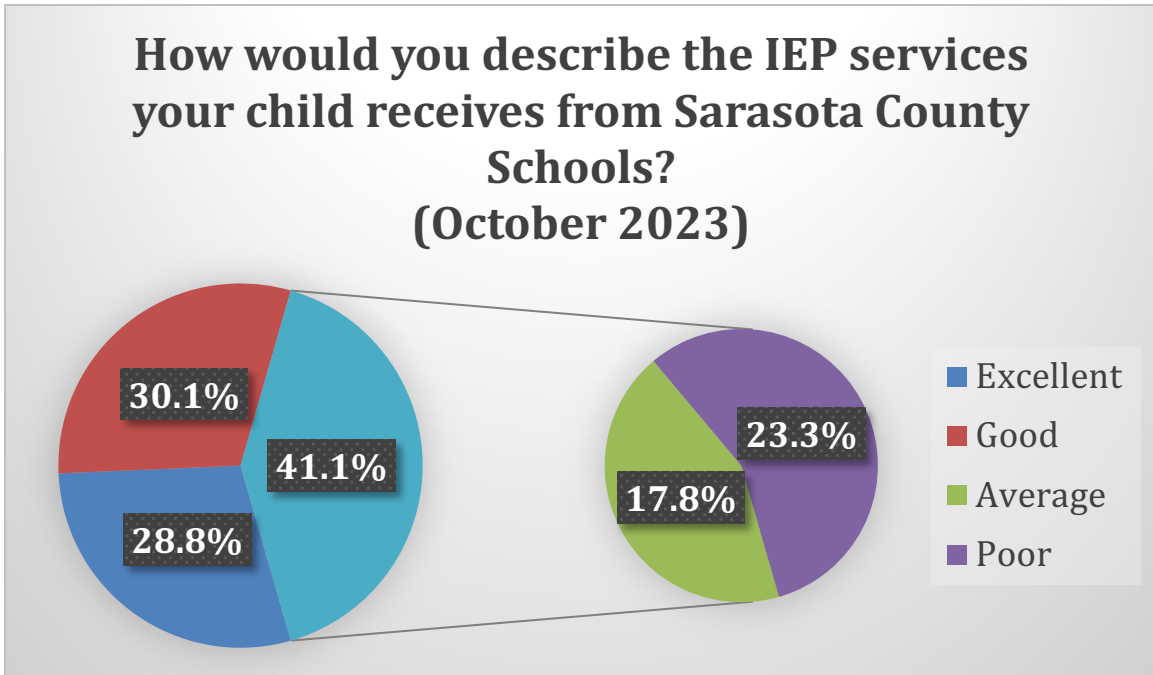
and Poor. Of those who responded, 33.7% indicated Excellent, 36.7% indicated Good, 14.2% indicated Average, and 15.4% indicated Poor (See Chart 10.4.2). These results are similar to those contained in Chart 10.4.1 above, with almost 30% indicating Average or Poor and approximately 35% reporting student needs are not being met. Similarly, a comparable percentage of parents indicating Excellent or Good also responded that Sarasota is meeting their student’s needs. Parent comments again indicate that those who are generally dissatisfied with the services students receive from Sarasota, by answering Average or Poor to the question, seek more structure and educational focus in special education within Sarasota.

Chart 10.4.2



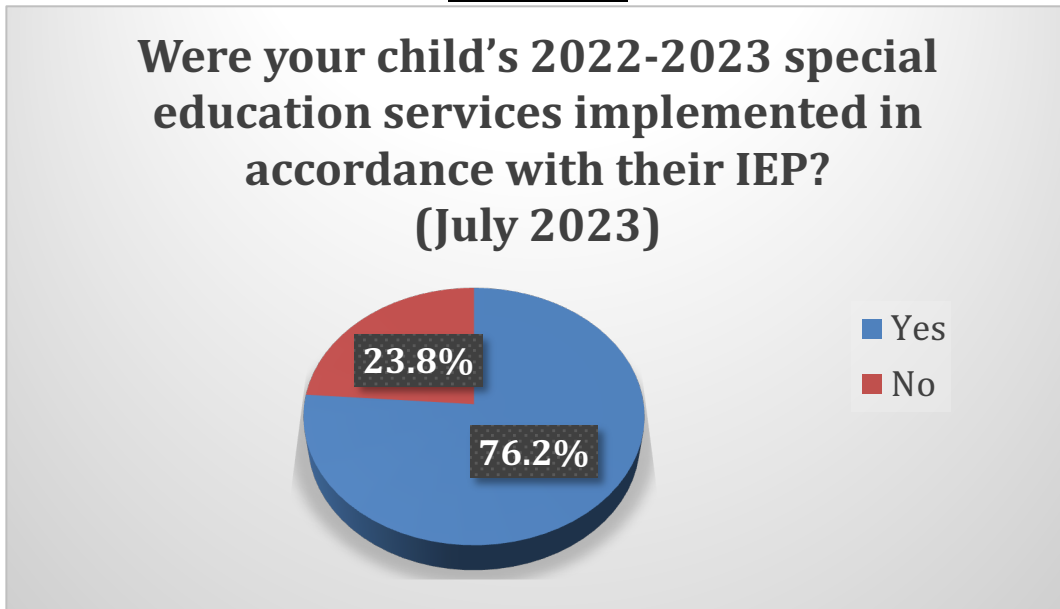
Respondents to the October 2023 Parent Survey were asked a similar question, “How would you describe the IEP services your child receives from Sarasota County Schools?”, again with four options: Excellent, Good, Average, and Poor. Of those who responded to the survey, 28.8% indicated Excellent, 30.1% indicated Good, 17.8% indicated Average, and 23.3% indicated Poor (See Chart 10.4.3). The respondents in the October 2023 Parent Survey indicated Average or Poor services more than in the July 2023 Parent Survey by over 11 percentage points. While this does not necessarily indicate that the services declined between July 2023 and October 2023, it demonstrates that when specifically asked about the IEP services that a child receives versus general services received, there was a decline in satisfaction among survey respondents. This corresponds with what the Exceptional Learning Solutions team has observed and uncovered regarding IEPs in Sarasota. Throughout this report, and specifically in Category #5, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team reports the concerns about IEPs and offers recommendations to address IEP issues.

Chart 10.4.3



The Parent Survey also specifically asked parents about the services and support students received from the IEP. In the July 2023 Parent Survey, participants were asked, “Were your child’s 2022-2023 special education services implemented in accordance with their IEP?”. Of those who responded to the survey, 76.2% indicated “Yes,” while 23.8% indicated “No” (See Chart 10.4.4).¹²

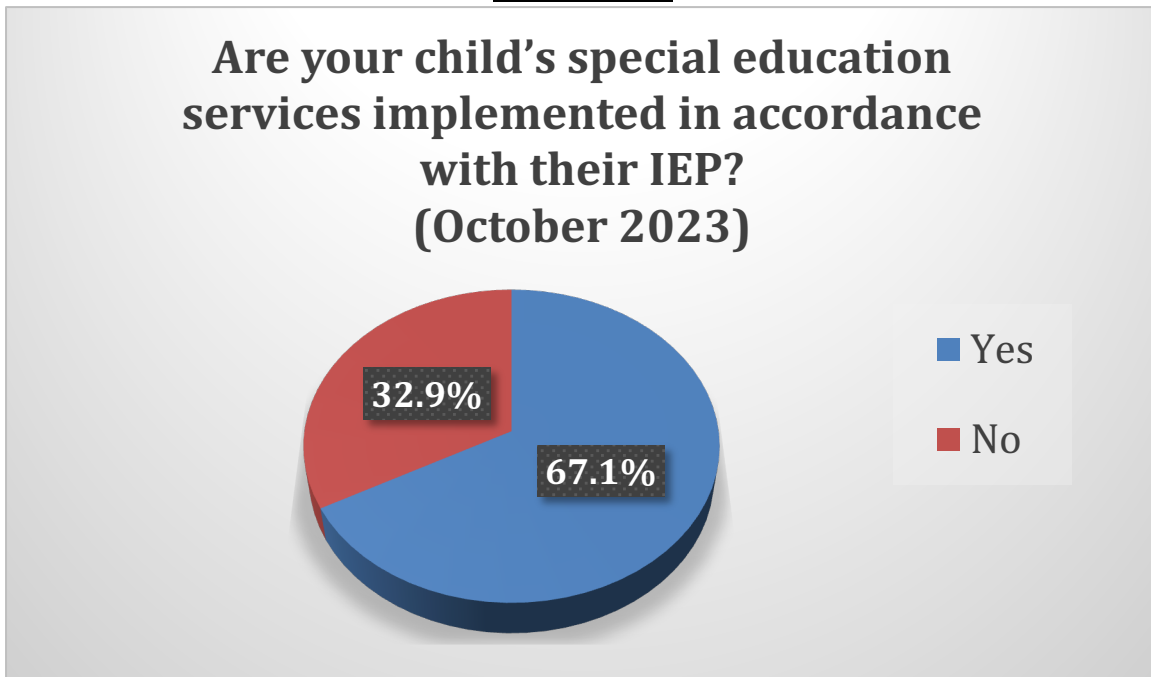
Chart 10.4.4



¹² For those respondents who answered “No” to the question “Were your child’s 2022-2023 special education services implemented in accordance with their IEP?”, they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: “Goals were not worked on and regression was clear.”; “Having a new teacher every quarter made it difficult for my child to receive his accommodations.”; “They waited until the end of the year to try to get OT therapy in school for my daughter which she should have had from day one.”; “The IEP was clear on her abilities and strengths but completely disregarded when it came time to put her in classes.”

A similar question was asked in the October 2023 Parent Survey: “Are your child’s special education services implemented in accordance with their IEP?”. Respondents indicated “Yes” at 67.1% and “No” at 32.9% (See Chart 10.4.5).¹³

Chart 10.4.5



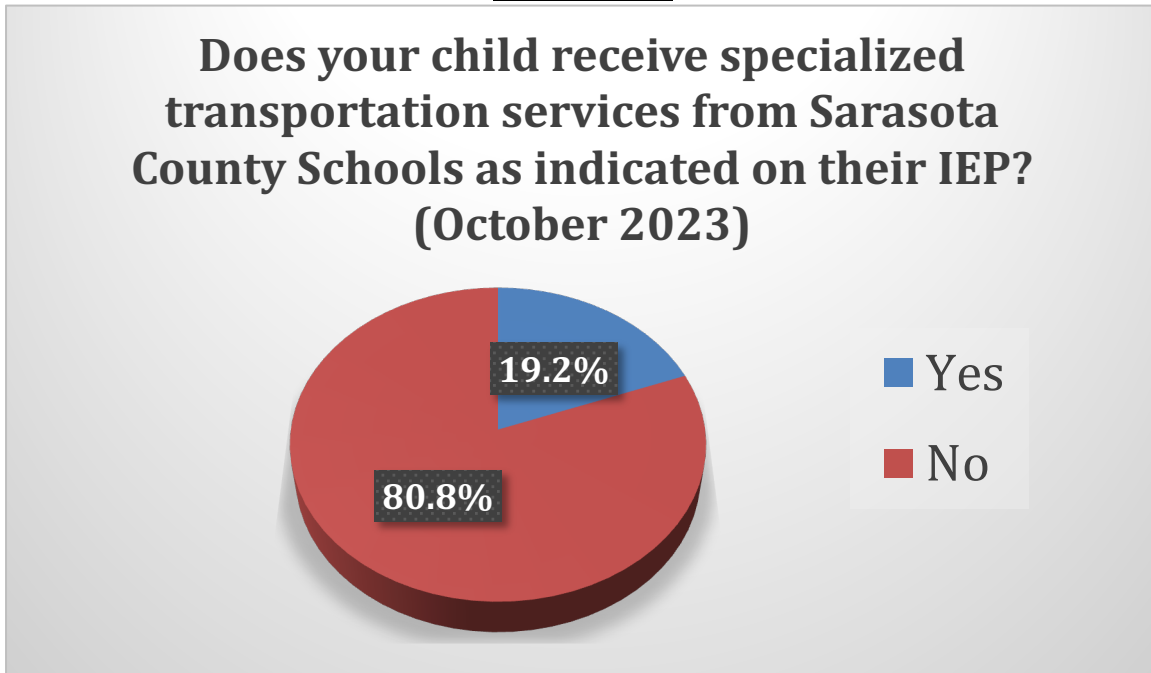
In both the July 2023 and the October 2023 Parent Surveys, a significant majority of respondents indicated that their child’s services and supports were being implemented in accordance with their IEP. While this is very positive data and should be celebrated by Sarasota, there is a high percentage of respondents who do not believe their student is receiving the services required by the IEP. The July 2023 results of nearly 24% and the October 2023 results of nearly one third (33%) of respondents indicating that their students have not received the services included in their IEP is troubling. Unfortunately, these survey responses correspond with the IEP reviews that the Exceptional Learning Solutions team conducted. While the Exceptional Learning Solutions team reviewed IEPs that appeared to be accurate and correct, there were a significant number of IEPs that either contained incorrect information, improperly identified and placed students, and/or prescribed inappropriate services and supports. Additional information about IEPs is contained throughout this report, with specific examples contained in Category #5.

The October 2023 Parent Survey specifically asked respondents about specialized transportation services in Sarasota at the request of the district. A relatively small number of respondents indicated that their students received specialized transportation services. Of those who responded to the October 2023 Parent

¹³ Respondents were offered the opportunity to provide any additional details to the October 2023 Parent Survey question “Are your child’s special education services implemented in accordance with their IEP?”. Here are samples of the responses received: “Only a few teachers have provided IEP services to my children. Most teachers hand them a packet and tell them to complete it.”; “My child says she often gets to the speech room to find the door closed and lights off. This happens frequently and she returns to her classroom. She’s missing speech because there is no one in the room.”; “Her general ed teachers are not implementing her accommodations in the classroom.”; “I hate to say Yes or No because the answer is really “usually” - there has never been a year where it is implemented perfectly, but most teachers follow accommodations. My son is in HS, though, so there seems to always be one that doesn’t. And I don’t always find out about what isn’t happening until sometimes it is too late to fix the issue.”

Survey question “Does your child receive specialized transportation services from Sarasota County Schools as indicated on their IEP?”, 19.2% responded that their student received specialized transportation services while 80.8% did not (See Chart 10.4.6).

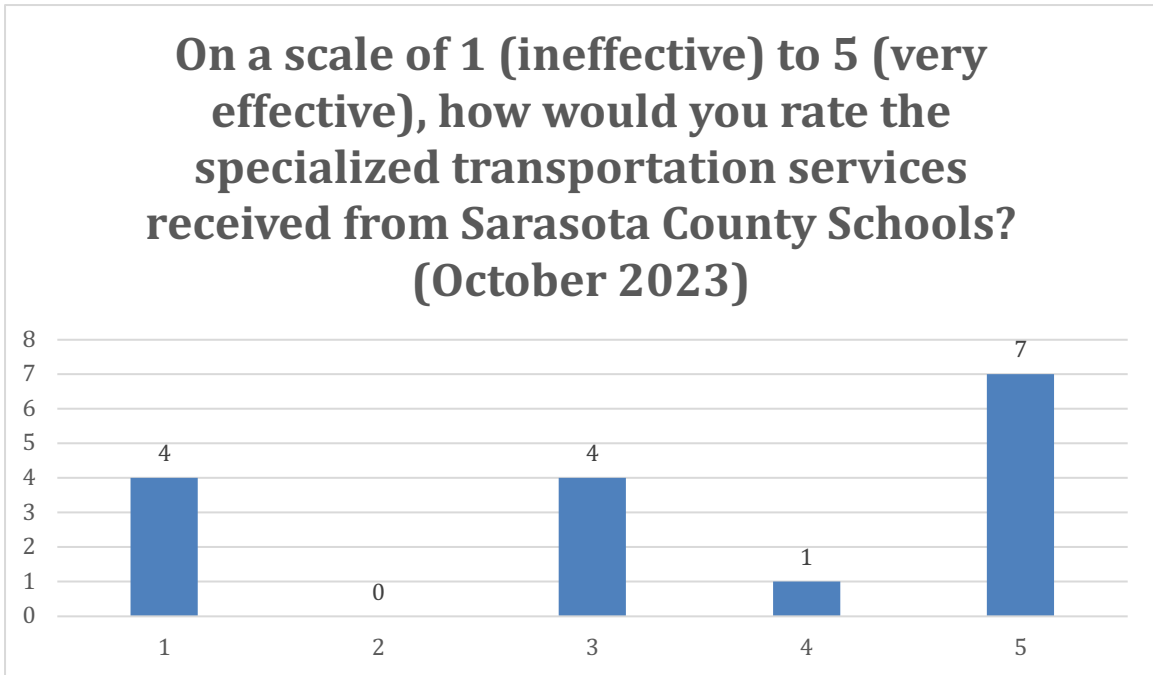
Chart 10.4.6



For those respondents who answered that their child received specialized transportation services as indicated on their IEP, the following question was posed: “On a scale of 1 (ineffective) to 5 (very effective), how would you rate the specialized transportation services received from Sarasota County Schools?”. Of those who responded, seven indicated “5”, one indicated “4”, four indicated “3”, zero indicated “2”, and four indicated “1” (See Chart 10.4.7).¹⁴ This is a small number of respondents for a meaningful analysis, but it appears that those who responded to the October 2023 Parent Survey had mixed experiences with specialized transportation services. One common concern among parents who attended the Parent Meetings was that students receiving specialized transportation services in Sarasota are spending a significant amount of time on buses being transported from home to school and back. This is a legitimate concern, and while the scope of the Exceptional Learning Solutions Special Education Program Review did not include an analysis of the Transportation Department, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team suggests that the district and the ESE Department examine the amount of time special needs students spend in transit to and from school and determine if scheduling and/or route changes should be implemented for student well-being.

¹⁴ Respondents were offered the opportunity to provide any additional details to the October 2023 Parent Survey question “On a scale of 1 (ineffective) to 5 (very effective), how would you rate the specialized transportation services received from Sarasota County Schools?”. Here are samples of the responses received: “Needs improvement communicating route updates and changes to parents in timely manner.”; “At start of year, drivers and aides should be trained for individual student needs/behaviors.”; “While not using transportation this year, we have always been pleased with their services in the past.”

Chart 10.4.7



Recommendation 10.4: There are no specific recommendations for this Focus Area; however, the survey data indicate that there are a significant number of respondents to both the July 2023 Parent Survey and the October 2023 Parent Survey who are dissatisfied with the services their students receive in Sarasota. This is further evidence that the district should heed the recommendations contained throughout this report and take action to address the deficiencies in a timely manner.

Prioritization of Recommendations

6-Month Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
ESE Department and Organization	Recommendation 1.1; Page 16	Adopt the Proposed Sarasota Organizational Chart developed by Exceptional Learning Solutions, rename and/or restructure the existing positions under new supervisors, and hire the new positions as soon as practicable.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Staffing	Recommendation 2.1; Page 25	Develop a new staffing formula that updates the staff-to-student ratios and accounts for the uniqueness of the student population within each school building, with ultimate staffing allocations determined collaboratively among building leadership, the ESE Department, the Human Resources Department, and the Chief Financial Officer.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Staffing	Recommendation 2.2; Page 27	Create job postings that are clear, accurate, and detailed to fully describe the position being filled; strategically expand outreach by developing additional relationships with colleges and universities in the region; and develop a robust mentoring	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation

		program for newly hired special education staff who have direct student contact and provide mentor support for the first two years of employment.	
Staffing	Recommendation 2.3; Page 28	Consider continuing incentive pay for special education staff in the district and providing an additional compensation incentive for staff at Oak Park School, as well as consider adjusting the classifications of SSP5 and SSP7 employees for more equitable compensation, all to retain greater numbers of special education staff in Sarasota.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Staffing	Recommendation 2.4; Page 29	Describe the role of the paraprofessional accurately in job descriptions and during the interview process, and provide onboarding with onsite school visits and robust training so that paraprofessionals fully understand their job responsibilities prior to their start date.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Finance and Budgeting	Recommendation 3.1; Page 31	Initiate and complete a review of the ESE Department finances, including the matrix of services, as well as special education budgeting and spending, particularly as it relates to IDEA funding and the transfer of general	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation

		fund revenue into the IDEA budget.	
Finance and Budgeting	Recommendation 3.2; Page 33	Establish a procedure to ensure limited utilization of any future temporary federal or state funds to create or expand staff positions in Sarasota, and ensure the gradual elimination of the practice of rolling forward any significant IDEA funds by utilizing funds in the year of allocation.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Programmatic Offerings and Continuum of Services	Recommendation 4.4; Page 39	Reconfigure special education in Sarasota middle schools to include a continuum of services that provides an appropriate classroom setting for all students with special needs and delivers the supports needed for students to transition and thrive during their middle school years.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 5.1-C; Page 47	Provide appropriate oversight and supervision for behavioral personnel (i.e., BCBA's), support and encourage existing staff to become BCBA's and maintain their certification, and outsource additional BCBA's to meet the growing demands of the district.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 5.1-D; Page 47	School-based, and district administrators should visit Oak Park School and the Cluster Sites within their zone to enhance their	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation

		knowledge and understanding of the programs, student population, and services provided.	
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 5.2; Page 47	Based on available funding, the district should consider expanding the role of the diagnostic team to assess out-of-state and out-of-county transfers, private school students, and difficult to test students; eliminate schools receiving partial evaluations, reduce school-based evaluation caseloads, and realign the existing ESE procedures and ESE Transfer Student Checklist.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Data	Recommendation 7.2; Page 59	Conduct a thorough analysis of the achievement gap in Sarasota special education to determine the underlying causes of the gap, and develop a detailed five-year plan to narrow the achievement gap, with a focus on increasing student achievement for special education students in Sarasota.	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation
Parent and Community Relations	Recommendation 10.2; Page 75	Expand Parent/Family Learning Opportunities to include training on IDEA and the IEP process to provide knowledge and information, build trust, and create a partnership where parents understand the “why” and “how” of	Within 6 months of School Board Presentation

		decision-making and implementation of student supports.	
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9-Month Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
Transitions	Recommendation 8.2-A; Page 64	Restructure the annual transition and articulation process with all stakeholders to ensure information is shared, appropriate discussions and decisions occur, and student schedules can be determined prior to the new year; make certain students participate in their transition IEP meetings to identify their personal goals and objectives.	Within 9 months of School Board Presentation
Transitions	Recommendation 8.2-B; Page 64	Structure and provide effective transitions for special education students that include visits to the receiving schools, opportunities to sit in the classroom, meet the teacher/support personnel, and observe potential electives; ensure that appropriate supports and services transfer with the student upon transition.	Within 9 months of School Board Presentation

1-Year Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
ESE Department and Organization	Recommendation 1.2; Page 20	Address the culture and climate issues within special education in Sarasota by re-establishing trust through transparency of initiatives, discussing the “why” and “how” of changes, and increase department administrator visibility by carving out a few hours each week for in-person, onsite visits.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
ESE Department and Organization	Recommendation 1.3; Page 23	Develop a regular and reliable communication plan with the following components:	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
		~ Plan for an annual, in-person school year kickoff staff meeting for special education staff where the vision for the school year will be articulated and the staff accomplishments can be celebrated;	
		~ Schedule in-person, department-wide quarterly meetings throughout the school year to discuss new initiatives, explain the “why” and “how” of changes to policies and procedures, and provide an opportunity for special education staff members to ask questions and actively engage in discussion;	
		~ Send out a substantive weekly email newsletter that addresses changes within Sarasota special education and includes updates and information	

		that is relevant and useful for administrators, teachers, and staff members; and	
		~ Create a process for rolling out new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures that includes in-person meetings, educator involvement in the development, and an explanation of the benefits for students and teachers.	
Programmatic Offerings and Continuum of Services	Recommendation 4.1; Page 36	Establish a consistent district wide framework defining MTSS tiers, how the tiers are utilized to provide interventions and support students, as well as the progression of students through the tier process, while holding teachers and staff accountable for implementing MTSS with fidelity through ownership and oversight by the Student Services Department, coupled with additional training and professional development.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
Programmatic Offerings and Continuum of Services	Recommendation 4.3; Page 38	Re-establish limited, self-contained classrooms in strategically targeted locations throughout the district to serve students who need a self-contained environment to most appropriately meet their individual needs.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 5.1-A; Page 47	Provide a regiment of ongoing comprehensive professional development for Program Specialists, ESE Liaisons, district and school-based staff to address the inconsistent implementation of processes and procedures	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation

		and quality of IEP development in conjunction with leadership training on customer service and de-escalation techniques.	
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 5.1-B; Page 47	Eliminate the practice of predetermination of placement to alleviate potential violation of FAPE and discontinue the practice of misidentifying students to avoid EBD designations; review and reevaluate, as necessary, the IEP's and placement of OHI and ASD students currently being served in EBD settings.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
Data	Recommendation 7.1; Page 52	Provide special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and staff with consistent professional development on how to accurately collect data, how to analyze data, how to utilize data in the classroom, and how to preserve data as a vital component of the student's records for IEPs, placement, and future decision-making.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
Data	Recommendation 7.3; Page 60	Continue utilizing the TPS system for collection and analysis of student behavior data, with a standard data explanation provided by Behavior Care, Inc., for parental reporting and ease of understanding, and provide additional training for teachers and staff on the analysis of TPS data and how it can be utilized to predict and	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation

		address student behavior incidents.	
Transitions	Recommendation 8.1-A; Page 63	Readdress the ESE transfer process, revise the ESE Transfer Checklist, and focus on working closer with school-based administrators to prevent transfer students being initially placed in programs that do not meet their needs and often staying in inappropriate settings for months despite input from receiving schools.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
Transitions	Recommendation 8.1-B; Page 63	Redesign the PreK transition process to ensure effective transition planning, timely evaluations, and development of a student IEP for kindergarten reflects what is needed in kindergarten; provide equitable resources for PreK classrooms, equip programs with appropriate developmental curriculum, and pilot kindergarten transition classes.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
Training and Professional Development	Recommendation 9.2; Page 68	Direct the Professional Learning and Leadership Development department, in conjunction with the ESE department, to develop training and professional development curricula specifically designed for special education teachers and staff based on need and deliver training that is timely and beneficial for special education teachers and staff.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation

Parent and Community Relations	Recommendation 10.1; Page 73	Continue to provide parent training at the district level through Parent/Family Learning Opportunities, and develop a parent engagement plan for each school, complete with topics, dates for delivery, and expert facilitators, to address parent needs and drive parent engagement; execute the plan consistently throughout each school year.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation
Parent and Community Relations	Recommendation 10.3; Page 78	Review district communication policies to determine consistent and established communication methods with families, establish communication protocols for schools and special education staff regarding the manner and regularity of communication with special education parents, and create a long-term communication plan to disseminate information on the diverse programs offered to service students with special needs in Sarasota.	Within 1 year of School Board Presentation

2-Year Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
Programmatic Offerings and Continuum of Services	Recommendation 4.2; Page 37	Develop a student instructional model that provides a clear framework for establishing special education as a continuum of services, jointly developed by district administration,	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation

		building leaders, special education teachers, and related services personnel, as well as outside expertise as needed.	
Curriculum and Instruction	Recommendation 6.1; Page 49	Form curriculum committees to formally develop curriculum frameworks for each Sarasota special education program and/or subject area, and provide training to teachers on the use of the curriculum frameworks in their classrooms.	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation
Curriculum and Instruction	Recommendation 6.2; Page 50	Establish standards and parameters for appropriate curriculum, materials, and interventions, and provide training to special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff on curricula that has been adopted by the district to be used in classrooms and programs.	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation
Curriculum and Instruction	Recommendation 6.3; Page 51	Conduct an Impact Review of Instructional Practices throughout Sarasota's school-based special education programs to assess the fidelity of curriculum framework implementation and the appropriateness of interventions/utilization of resources, determine programs and classrooms where instructional improvement is warranted, and provide targeted professional development, customized to each school building and/or program, to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need for instructional excellence.	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation

Data	Recommendation 7.4; Page 61	Develop and implement a special education data policy that creates a standard for student data collection, usage, and storage that is focused on student achievement, placement, interventions, and supports.	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation
Transitions	Recommendation 8.3; Page 65	Increase financial resources and staffing to sustain, expand and meet the demands of high school to postsecondary education, integrated employment, and independent living opportunities for students with disabilities.	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation
Training and Professional Development	Recommendation 9.1; Page 67	Design and implement a professional development curriculum that contains topics and training dates, including but not limited to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality Instructional Practices • IEP Development and Compliance • Paraprofessional Training • Program Specialist and ESE Liaison Training 	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation
Training and Professional Development	Recommendation 9.3; Page 69	Based on available funding, consider designating Paraprofessional Coaches within each Sarasota school building to work with special education paraprofessionals and to provide coaching, mentoring, modeling, and training for both new and experienced paraprofessionals throughout the school year.	Within 2 years of School Board Presentation

Implementation and Monitoring

There are many Focus Areas and Recommendations contained within this Special Education Program Review report. The Prioritization of Recommendations contains a timeline and a roadmap for addressing the recommendations and estimated period of time it will take to make the recommendations realities. There are many skilled administrators and staff members within Sarasota who will collectively need to work together to address the recommendations. Some recommendations may be relatively easy to accomplish and can happen quickly, while others will require more systemic change and have a longer implementation timeframe. Overall, the expectation for completely addressing and implementing all recommendations is typically between three and five years for most districts.

To fully address the recommendations contained in this report, Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends that Sarasota engage an external partner to assist with implementation of the recommendations and provide monitoring for the district. This implementation and monitoring support should last for two complete school years to ensure Sarasota has a firm foundation to address the areas of need and the support required to complete the heavy lifting that comes with a Special Education Program Review such as this. Exceptional Learning Solutions always recommends that our clients engage an external partner for implementation and monitoring support services. Some clients choose to engage Exceptional Learning Solutions to provide those supports; others choose to engage a different organization. Either way Exceptional Learning Solutions firmly believes that external implementation and monitoring support are vital components for districts to successfully implement recommendations. This partnership of accountability with an external partner will assure the district stakeholders—board members, employees, parents, students, and the community—that Sarasota is committed to meaningful district reforms that will strengthen its system and provide greater support for all students.

Conclusion

Sarasota provides a wealth of opportunities for students with special needs. The district is comprised of a knowledgeable district leadership team, dedicated teachers and staff members, and a broad spectrum of students who rely on Sarasota to provide them with educational opportunities in a safe and structured environment. The teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and staff support students in a nurturing way to achieve their educational goals. While there are opportunities for change, growth, and development within Sarasota, the support provided for special needs students should be celebrated.

Within Sarasota there are processes, procedures, and systems that need to be altered, adjusted, rethought, or reordered, but the components of a great district are all readily available, waiting for the educational professionals within Sarasota to collaboratively shape them into an exemplary special education district for students. With some time, effort, and support along the way, Sarasota can become an even stronger district serving special education students, where every child can learn, grow, and flourish.

It has been an honor to partner with Sarasota in this important Special Education Program Review. Exceptional Learning Solutions would like to thank the district administration, building administration, teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, staff, and parents for their candor, open communication, and support throughout this review to strengthen special education services in Sarasota.