



A Review of Staffing Practices for Students with Disabilities

Austin Independent School District

Final Report and Recommendations | July 2009



Executive Summary

In the fall of 2008, Austin Independent School District determined that a comprehensive review of the staffing practices for students with disabilities should be commissioned. Several factors contributed to this decision, including a commitment to ongoing improvement of services and recognition that the current practice of determining staffing using a formula and student number approach is no longer effective. Concerns over the equitable distribution of staff and the desire to provide more in class support for students with disabilities also influenced this study. The district is in the process of decentralization of services for students with disabilities and is also concerned about how this will impact staffing needs. The district is becoming more inclusive in its approach for serving students with disabilities and is wants to ensure not only sufficient staff but also effective and efficient staffing practices support this initiative with a system wide model. The district has experienced a decrease in the numbers of students with disabilities yet the type and severity of needs seems significant. Further, accountability and funding issues require assurances that the district is making the very best use of available resources while providing services to students with disabilities that are embedded in effective practices research.

Stetson and Associates, Inc. was engaged to provide a review of current staffing practices, to gain the perspectives of various stakeholders and to gather meaningful data from a variety of sources to capture the strengths and concerns relative to this critical organizational issue. Stetson and Associates, Inc. used a comprehensive approach for the Austin ISD staffing review that considered four critical elements:

Sufficiency: Sufficiency refers to the adequate numbers of individuals required to accomplish the provision of a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE);

Efficiency: Efficient use of staff refers to the extent to which the system organizes the delivery of needed services to students with disabilities to ensure maximum use of time, talent and resources;

Effectiveness: Effectiveness refers to the extent to which the staff is achieving success in meeting the needs of learners; and,

Appropriateness: Appropriate staffing would include appropriately trained and qualified teachers and related service providers delivering the instructional and related services with support from well-trained paraprofessionals.

Five basic methodologies were used, including structured classroom observations, focus group sessions, interviews of key personnel, an examination of student enrollment and other key data elements, and a review of comparable district statistics. This report has been developed with the active participation of Austin ISD administrators, teachers, clerical staff, and support service providers and with strong participation and assistance from the special education central office staff.

The Austin ISD special education staff and participating campus administrators are to be commended for its support of the review process. In every situation Austin ISD special

education administrative staff facilitated our access to data, to classrooms, and to focus group participants. It is our hope that the findings of our study will support the district's commitment to program improvement and will ensure the most favorable use of resources to accomplish the future success of students with disabilities, both in school and after graduation.

These preliminary findings and key recommendations that emerged from this report are categorized within the four quality standards listed above.

Key Findings

Does Austin ISD have sufficient staff to provide special education services for students with disabilities?

1. With a few exceptions, Austin ISD is sufficiently staffed with teachers and paraprofessionals at the campus level to serve students with disabilities, however the district is not richly staffed.
2. The process for determining staffing needs through a formula does not capture the type and level of support needed for each student; thus, determining staff based on a formula is problematic.
3. There is a perception that the district has insufficient staff to implement inclusive educational practices, however this is more the result of efficiency, effectiveness, and appropriate staffing practices.
4. The number of paraprofessionals assigned to individual students seems excessive while the adequacy of the number of paraprofessionals assigned to the remainder of the students seems unclear.
5. The number of appraisal staff assigned to support students with disabilities seems inadequate when compared with surrounding school districts and the comparable schools.
6. AISD continues to have difficulty in supplying adequate numbers of special education staff that are bilingual and/or can provide services for students who are bilingual.

Does the district utilize the special education staff in an efficient manner?

1. Austin ISD primarily uses a categorical program-specific approach to assign teachers and paraprofessionals to campuses. This practice promotes separateness, and reinforces a belief that special education is place rather than a service.
2. There is a high use of Paraprofessionals to support the students with disabilities on each campus especially those who are in the specialized support programs.
3. There is an overuse of the 1:1 paraprofessional.
4. The informal use of peer supports is practiced in Austin ISD, however an organized, systematic program for assigning peer assistants and tutors is not evident.

5. Scheduling practices do not always support the equitable distribution of students and staff and this impacts the level of support needed by the students and the general education teachers.
6. Access to office space, locations of offices, access to equipment, and travel impacts the efficiency of itinerant and some teaching staff.
7. Content Mastery is an inefficient instructional delivery practice used in Austin ISD resulting in less individualized instruction, and loss of academic learning time for students.
8. Insufficient access to technology and redundancy in requirements are impacting the efficient use of staff in responding to the significant documentation requirements pertaining to identification, implementation of instructional and related services, and reporting progress of students.

Are services provided to students with disabilities effective?

1. The overall climate on each campus is very favorable. Visitors are welcome, students are valued, and the staff is respected.
2. Austin ISD has a common lesson-planning format and curriculum that is available for all instructional staff and instruction planning guides that are electronically accessible, however formal planning between general education and special education is significantly limited.
3. The majority of students with a disability have access to the general curriculum, however students with disabilities in special education settings were less likely to have access.
4. Schools that used the student-centered process practiced differentiated instruction in the general education classroom setting.
5. Age-appropriate and grade-level instructional materials are used to deliver instruction but vary significantly from elementary to middle school to high school and campus-to-campus and within classrooms.
6. Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies that promote student learning and achievement.
7. Austin ISD is increasing the district efforts to provide services for students in the least restrictive environment. Practices vary significantly from campus to campus and level to level.
8. Austin ISD provides in-class support for students with disabilities through support facilitation, co-teaching and the informal use of peers.
9. While it is an effective practice for special education teachers and paraprofessionals to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom, there were some inefficient and inappropriate practices regarding the level of support.
10. Scheduling practices are negatively impacting effective delivery of instruction
11. The most common means of support observed for students with disabilities at AISD was either a 1:1 assistant or pulling students to another location for tutorial type help.

12. Classroom assessment practices vary but are rely heavily on pencil/paper responses. The primary form of formal assessment was the “test” that required written responses.
13. An array of technology is available for teacher and student use in classrooms, yet it does not appear to be utilized to the fullest extent.
14. There is some evidence of flexible grouping of students especially at the elementary level. Most secondary instruction tended to be whole group.
15. Classroom climates are generally positive with sensitive teachers who demonstrate “well to excellent” rapport with students.
16. Most classrooms are effectively organized with procedures, routines and schedules that promoted learning and student participation.
17. Many classrooms have rules and norms posted yet classroom and school-wide practices that support student-appropriate behavior are inconsistent.
18. Although there is a high interest in including students with disabilities in the general education setting, the evaluators saw little evidence of true collaborative teaching.

Are staffing practices for students with disabilities appropriate?

1. The central special education administrative support team is highly qualified and knowledgeable and highly committed to ensuring that services for students with disabilities are of the highest quality.
2. The process of assigning a 1:1 Teacher Assistant is confusing and there is a lack of understanding of the inadvertent detrimental effects of this practice. The practice is restrictive and in many cases inappropriate.
3. There is a significant request for training for all stakeholders including administrators, appraisal staff, general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff relative to appropriately serving students with disabilities within the context of today’s best practices. Training is cited as a factor that impacts the quality and competence of staff.
4. AISD is dependent upon paraprofessionals to assist in the provision of special education services. Services from these individuals are viewed as productive, essential, and valuable. The increased focus on instructional quality requires additional clarification of the roles, responsibilities and training needs.
5. The workload of team leaders, department chairs, and some teachers is impacting their ability to provide services to students and resulting in some inappropriate practices.
6. The written policies, procedures, and administrative guidelines pertaining to special education are not consistently understood. Some stakeholders seem confused about various aspects of special education requirements.

Key Recommendations

1. Adopt a new model for determining staffing needs that offers an objective, student-centered approach for determining staffing from an individual student basis and concludes with a broad, school by school design for effective staffing within the context of the LRE. Provide training to instructional, administrative and support staff in this decision-making approach to assure this model is implemented consistently across the district.
2. Realign and increase the central administrative support staff to include an Executive Director, Area Directors, and Coordinators/Supervisors within the four designated areas of the school district (Refer to the Organizational Study in Appendix A of this report).
3. Review the adequacy of appraisal staff. While there is a significant difference when compared to other districts, the roles and responsibilities and numbers of assessments for students may be possible.
4. Address the issues regarding the 1:1 paraprofessional. Develop written procedures that will address the beliefs surrounding this practice, the detrimental effects and the process for assigning a high level of support for students when necessary without assigning an individual to the student.
5. Strengthen the role of the Executive Director by aligning this position with the administrative officer who supervises campus-based administration.
6. Provide training to instructional, administrative and support staff in this decision making approach to assure this model is implemented consistently across the district.
7. Provide staff development and training in Inclusive Education that includes training in models of in-class support for students with disabilities. Training topics should include co-teaching roles, support facilitation roles and strategies for meeting the responsibilities of a collaborative partnership. Focus on the over-arching concern of equity among general and special educators regarding responsibilities in the classroom for all learners.
8. Provide training for general and special education teachers in the areas of differentiated instruction and methods for accommodating and modifying the general education curriculum to meet the needs of all diverse learners.
9. Carefully review teacher schedules to ensure the efficient use of time and resources. Clarify the roles and responsibilities of the team leaders, especially at the secondary level to ensure the efficient use of time.
10. Provide training and technical assistance to appropriate staff in the area of scheduling of students with disabilities within the general education classroom and in specialized support settings.
11. Alter the Content Mastery Center (CMC) process. Identify ways in which a transitional change might utilize some of the CMC staff to support students with disabilities directly within the general education classroom. Stop the practice of dual service in resource classes and CMC services at the same time.

12. Provide training for instructional paraprofessionals that include content overviews of academic areas in which they may be involved as well as the use of differentiated strategies in providing instruction to diverse learners.
13. Review special education teacher schedules to ensure time for planning and collaboration with general education teachers and create extended time in the schedule for professionals to collaborate with paraprofessionals.
14. Review the practice of assigning a team leader(s) for special education services at each campus. Create a common job description for the team leader position from level to level to ensure consistency of responsibilities.
15. Provide additional training in designing and applying instructional accommodations and modifications for both the general education and special education teachers.
16. Provide training for instructional paraprofessionals that include content overviews of academic areas in which they are involved, as well as the use of differentiated strategies in providing instruction to diverse learners.
17. Review special education teacher schedules to ensure time for planning and collaboration with general education teachers and create extended time in the schedule for professionals to collaborate with paraprofessionals.
18. Review the practice for assigning a team leader(s) and instructional support teachers for special education services at each campus. Create a common job description for these positions from level to level to ensure consistency of responsibilities.
19. Provide specific instruction and information regarding the requirement to assure access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities.
20. Ensure that all special education teachers attend general curriculum training jointly with general education teachers.
21. Ensure that special education teachers participate on campus planning teams and are involved in general education issues.

The recommendations contained in this summary call for changes that are attainable and compatible with the philosophy of Austin ISD. Many positive forces within the district exist that will support the changes that are necessary to bring practice fully in line with philosophy and assure the best use of resources for the benefit of students, faculty and the Austin community.