

District-Wide Special Education Program Evaluation

Department of Special Education

Amesbury Public Schools

Amesbury, Massachusetts

Conducted:  
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Submitted by:

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A Division of Walker  
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*Executive Summary*

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## Executive Summary

### District-Wide Evaluation of Special Education Programs and Services

Walker Partnerships was contracted by the Amesbury Public Schools to conduct a special education district-wide program evaluation. The overall purpose of this evaluation was to determine the current status of special education programming throughout the district in supporting positive outcomes for students receiving special education services, and to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement in the organization and delivery of services. Data was gathered from a number of sources:

- Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's student and staff census and financial reports
- A walk-through of all the schools
- One-on-one and focus group interviews conducted with 27 individuals that represented a cross section of school-based personnel and parents

The report is structured into six major sections:

- In the *Introduction*, the purpose of an independent program evaluation is explained.
- The *Methodology* section outlines how the evaluation was carried out noting that 27 individual interviews were conducted and a walk-through of each school was completed with the building principal.
- There were 17 acknowledgements identified in the *Commendations* section that recognize the efforts the district has put forth in the various areas of special education.
- In the *Factors that Affect Programs and Services*, factors such as the census, intensity of student needs, fiscal implications, number of students in out-of-district placements, advocacy, technology and the educational experience that the district is providing were reviewed.
- There were 29 areas that need to be addressed in the *Findings* section. The following is a sampling of these findings from the report:
  - ❖ The district has 19.3% of its students on IEPs compared to the statewide average of 17.0%.
  - ❖ The documented pre-referral process is not consistently practiced throughout the district.
  - ❖ Exit/entrance criteria for program placements and related services need to be established throughout the district.

- ❖ The district lacks a cohesive definition of the co-teaching model of instruction and the distinction between co-teaching and in-class support.
  - ❖ Transition practices between levels are inconsistent in procedure, and who has responsibilities for what activities is unclear.
  - ❖ In-district program development needs to be a continuing focus to assist with reducing the number of students in out-of-district placements.
- 12 proposals are provided in the *Recommendation* section that focus on:
- ❖ Pre-referral process & Response to Intervention (RtI)
  - ❖ Co-teaching model of instruction
  - ❖ Professional development
  - ❖ Paraprofessionals
  - ❖ Administrative data collection and supervision

The reviewer respects the reality that school districts are complex organizations tasked with a multitude of expectations, unfunded mandates, priorities, and responsibilities. To that end, a number of high potential, high impact, and high leverage opportunities are recommended.

The district-wide special education evaluation highlighted much strength in the district. Through the development of an action plan(s) that responds to the recommendations, many of the recommendations can be implemented within a relatively short period of time. New and expanded program development and staffing positions will be subjected to the annual budget process which may take several years to achieve.

## *I. Introduction*

The Superintendent of Schools and the Administrator of Special Education and Student Services requested that Walker Partnerships conduct a district-wide evaluation of special education programs and services. The administration wants to procure recommendations that will assist in addressing the following: the current and future status of district-wide special education, present and future program needs, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes and activities, the instructional supports that are required to ensure greater access to the general curriculum for students with special needs, current and future staffing and space needs for special education, effective utilization of existing programs, services, and staffing for special education, comparative data for the district in relation to state and like districts for census, staffing, and expenditures, cost containment initiatives, procedural practices, pre-referral procedures, and professional development offerings for all school-based personnel.

### *A. Purpose*

The purpose of an independent evaluation of district-wide programs and services is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strength, needs, and recommendations. An independent review allows for the district to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well in the district, but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened.

The evaluation process is designed, through a multi-step approach, to assist the school district's leadership team and the school-based special education personnel in having a guided and focused discussion that will enable effective short and long-range planning to occur while recognizing and addressing issues such as:

- Identifying trends and patterns in referrals to special education
- Identifying the main characteristics in the students who are referred
- Identifying similar profile characteristics in the non-referred and referred students with respect to changing demographics
- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel, and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students on Individualized Educational Programs
- Identifying trends in the program placements of students
- Determining the effectiveness of current program and service interventions
- Staffing and resource needs that reflect current and anticipated student needs

- Creating a long-range plan that addresses the agreed upon needs of the student population
- Establishing a comprehensive approach to program and service development to provide a continuum of services that is linked to the budget planning process

This evaluation process brings forth information that will enable the district administration and the school-based special and regular education personnel to develop an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective approaches for serving the special needs students of the district.

It is important to recognize that, for the information contained in this report to be beneficial to the school district and special education services, the stakeholders must come together to discuss the findings and the recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the Amesbury administration and the school-based special and regular education personnel can develop short and long-range action plan(s) that will address the agreed upon issues.

*B. Reviewer*

Mr. Robert McArdle, M. Ed., the Northeast Associate Manager for Walker Partnerships has over thirty-five years in public education as a Mediator and Educational Specialist for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Administrator of Special Education for Woburn Public Schools, Pupil Personnel Administrator for Greater Lawrence Technical High School, Stoneham Public Schools, and Executive Administrator of the Greater Lawrence Education Collaborative. Mr. McArdle has been a Visiting Faculty Member at Salem State College, Fitchburg State College, the University of Massachusetts/Boston and Endicott College in addition to consulting for public and private schools. Mr. McArdle has served on a number advisory boards, task forces, and special committees. He has presented at numerous conferences and conducted professional training sessions for professional school personnel for over thirty years. He has served in several executive board positions, including President of the Massachusetts Association of Administrators of Special Education, and he is a past recipient of the Massachusetts Special Education Administrator of the year award.

## *II. Methodology*

This program evaluation was conducted based on a four step approach.

1. The following documentation was reviewed by the evaluator: special education census for FY 12, program descriptions for all existing in-district programs, comparison data of four like districts (Carver, Danvers, North Middlesex and Triton) gathered from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education District Analysis and Review Tools (DARTs), department procedural practices, staffing patterns, pre-referral process (Instructional Support Team), professional development offerings for all school-based staff, and previous evaluation information.
2. A full-day walk-through of all schools, with the principals, to observe areas of special education instruction was conducted.
3. One-on-one interviews and discussions were conducted with 27 individuals who occupy the following positions:
  - Administrator of Special Education and Student Services
  - Team Facilitators (4)
  - Middle School Regular Education Teachers (1)
  - High School Regular Education Teachers (2)
  - Middle School Special Education Teachers (5)
  - High School Special Education Teachers (2)
  - Preschool and Elementary Special Education Teachers (8)
  - Speech and Language Pathologists (2)
  - Job Developers (1)
  - School Psychologists (1)

The individual interviews were 30 minutes in length. Questions and discussion focused on the following:

- What do you see working well for students that have a disability?
- What do you see as obstacles to student success?
- What is your role and what responsibilities do you have in the role?
- Do you have a copy of your current job description? Do you have a copy of the current procedures booklet?
- Are procedures, requirements, and practices for your position clear to you and others?

- Do you feel that there is a clear and definitive understanding of the population that you serve?
- What would you change in your role and responsibilities to be more effective?
- What role does your teaching assistant serve?
- What role does your team chairperson play?
- Do you know if there are entrance and exit criteria for substantially separate programs?
- Are all students that are placed in your program appropriately placed?
  - How are placement decisions made?
- Is inclusion provided to students in your program?
  - Please specify. (Is there any co-teaching?)
- What additional services need to be in place, if any?
- How is the decision made to place a student into your program?
- What suggestions do you have for changes you think need to occur to enhance the effectiveness of student support and success?
- How often do you meet as a department?
  - How often do you meet with all the program teachers?
  - Do you believe that you are receiving adequate supervision for your role?
- What training has the district offered you that relates to your program and students?
- Are there professional development needs that you can identify?
- Please share the transitional planning that takes place for:
  - students exiting your school;
  - students entering your school.
- How involved is your building administration in special education matters?
- What would be your biggest concern with special education in Amesbury?
- Do you have other thoughts or ideas regarding the structure or operation of special education services that you think should be addressed in this report?



These questions varied, somewhat, depending on the specific roles of the individuals who were interviewed. Discussion expanded beyond these specific questions based on the individuals' experiences within their respective role, their experience in the field of education, the length of time that they have been in their current position and any other factors that emerged from the interview process.

### *III. Commendations*

This section of the report is for the purpose of recognizing the efforts put forth by the district and the administration in their plan to meet the needs of the students. Special education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. There are competing interests that continue to place a significant pressure and financial burden on the school district. The Amesbury Public School Department has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of special education students.

#### *Specific Commendations:*

- The Superintendent of Schools and the Administrator of Special Education and Student Services for commissioning this district-wide evaluation
- The thoughtful insight and openness of all interviewees and school-based staff with respect to their deep appreciation for this evaluation
- The observed dedication and concern that special education staff exhibited for their students
- The support by building principals for specialized programming and services to accommodate the needs of special education students in their schools
- The integration of programs and students into each building
- The provision of ample instructional supplies and materials in the observed programs
- The assigning of middle school special education teachers to teach specific content curriculum areas at each grade level
- The monthly focus meetings with the Administrator of Special Education
- The ongoing CPI training provided by the district
- The efforts put forth to develop program descriptions for all district programs
- The implementation of a transitional class that will be starting at the high school in the second semester
- The effort put forth by the district to develop a continuum of programs and services for the various disability groups of students across the district at all levels

(This approach to program development has allowed the district to maintain students within the district and lessen the need to service students in programs outside of the district.)

- The district’s support for responding to unanticipated expenditures related to special education during the fiscal year
- The district for having a high percentage of special education students included in general education classes that is higher than the statewide average (88.1% vs. 78%)

**Table I. Comparison of Students Fully and Partially Included-2011-2012**

	FULL INCLUSION	PARTIAL INCLUSION	TOTAL FULL & PARTIAL INCLUSION
STATE DATA	58.1%	19.9%	78.0%
Amesbury	68.2%	19.9%	88.1%

Source: Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) October 2011 Census Report

Table I illustrates that Amesbury was higher than the state average in the percentage of students on IEPs for *Total Full Inclusion and Partial Inclusion* during the 2011-2012 school year.

- Efforts put forth by school-based staff to have special needs students served in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
- The opportunity for high school students with intellectual disabilities to have social connections within the school and throughout the community, and to have a job developer to assist with transition planning
- The availability of program options in the Early Childhood Center for special needs students (integrated as well as sub-separate programming options)

*IV. Factors Affecting the Implementation of Programming and Services*

There are numerous factors that impact the district’s ability to deliver instructional and related services to students within the Amesbury Public Schools. None of these factors are more pressing than the census and the needs of the students. These two factors drive program development and service initiatives.

*Census and Student Needs*

The district has 19.3% of the school aged population identified as students with special needs on IEPs. This percentage is slightly higher than the statewide average of 17.0%.

**Table II. Comparison of Special Education Census to Like Districts**

Districts	% of Students on IEPs
<b>Carver</b>	<b>17.1%</b>
<b>North Middlesex</b>	<b>17.6%</b>
<b>Triton</b>	<b>15.8%</b>
<b>Amesbury</b>	<b>19.3%</b>
<b>Danvers</b>	<b>16.8%</b>
<b>State</b>	<b>17.0%</b>

Source: Department of Elementary & Secondary Education (DESE) October 2011 Census Report

Table II illustrates that Amesbury was higher than all like districts in the percentage of students on IEPs for the 2011-2012 school year. The number of students on IEPs does impact a district.

Table III illustrates the various disability categories and how Amesbury compares with the statewide averages.

**Table III. Comparison of Disability Categories**

<b>Disability</b>	<b>State (% Students by Disability) FY12</b>	<b>Amesbury FY12</b>
<b>Autism</b>	8.1%	10.0%
<b>Communication</b>	18.0%	18.3%
<b>Developmental Delay</b>	10.7%	19.7%
<b>Emotional</b>	8.5%	8.7%
<b>Health</b>	9.4%	9.8%
<b>Intellectual</b>	6.2%	5.5%
<b>Multiple Disabilities</b>	2.9%	0.2%
<b>Neurological</b>	4.9%	9.0%
<b>Physical</b>	0.8%	-0-%
<b>Sensory/Deaf/Blind</b>	0.1%	-0-%
<b>Sensory/Hard of Hearing</b>	0.7%	1.0%
<b>Sensory/Vision Impairment</b>	0.4%	0.2%
<b>Specific Learning Disabilities</b>	29.40%	16.4%

Source: DESE October 2011 Census Report

Table III illustrates that Amesbury had a higher percentage than the state in two significant disability categories, *Developmental Delay* and *Neurological Disabilities* for the 2011-2012 school year. Both of these categories of students require programming that is staff intensive and requires extended school year programming. These factors lead to inherently higher program expenditures for serving these populations. This is illustrated in the comparison for these two disability categories with like districts in the following table (Table IV). Table III also indicates that Amesbury is well below the state average for students identified in the *Specific Learning Disability* category.

**Table IV. Comparison of Like Districts for Disability Category Percentages**

Districts	Dev. Delay	Neurological	Specific Learning
<b>Carver</b>	5.1%	2.0%	<b>27.5%</b>
<b>North Middlesex</b>	9.7%	1.8%	<b>45.3%</b>
<b>Triton</b>	5.1%	5.9%	<b>22.0%</b>
<b>Amesbury</b>	19.7%	9.0%	<b>16.2%</b>
<b>Danvers</b>	5.3%	2.2%	<b>28.9%</b>
<b>State</b>	<b>10.7%</b>	<b>4.9%</b>	<b>29.4%</b>

Source: DESE October 2011 Census Report

Table IV illustrates the variances among the like districts for the three disability categories mentioned from Table III above for the 2011-2012 school year. Amesbury is higher than all like districts and the statewide percentage for students diagnosed as having a *Development Delay* and for students identified in the *Neurological* disability category. Amesbury is also well below the state average and all like districts in identifying students in the *Specific Learning* disability category. These enrollments and identifications clearly require review.

Walker Partnerships has found, in previous evaluations, that when a district has a rather high or low percentage in a given category, it may be due to a classification error based on how staff members define the disability.

*Inclusion of Special Need Students*

When Walker Partnerships evaluates special education programs in a school district, there are various program options and choices available for servicing a range of needs of the special education population. While many districts have a high number of varied programs to serve students, others have limited program options or choices and rely more on out-of-district day and collaborative programs. There are districts with appropriately staffed programs that are being effectively utilized to maximize services to students. Other districts claim to be inclusive, but they have not developed the capacity to service their most involved students. This often results in sending students to in-district substantially separate programs or to costly out-of-district programs. Amesbury has made considerable progress in program development over the years, making program options available in an attempt to reduce the need to place students in out-of-district placements. Initially, this program development is costly for a district. However, in the long term, in-district programming does lead to a containment of the growth in special education expenditures while building the district’s capacity to maintain students within the district.

Prior to 2000, Massachusetts Special Education Regulations, under Chapter 766, mandated districts to develop IEPs that would “maximize a student’s potential.” At that time, the Massachusetts standard was the most demanding and comprehensive in the

country. Other states adopted the federal standard under IDEA (Individuals with Disability Education Act) that ensured students make "...effective progress through a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)."

In 2000, Massachusetts adopted the federal standard of "effective progress." There has been ongoing debate as to whether districts need to provide the comprehensive level of services to special education students or a minimum level of services. This question of which level to provide, versus the spiraling cost of special education, is often a continuous and heated controversy in many school districts. The issue becomes even more of a concern in a challenging economic environment.

In 2001, Congress again passed the landmark act, No Child Left behind (NCLB). The stated goal of NCLB is "to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind."

All of these acts have focused attention on students with increasingly diverse learning needs achieving high academic performance in general education.

**Table V. Percentage Comparison of Students Fully/Partially Included with Like Districts**

Districts	Full Inclusion	Partial Inclusion	Total Inclusion
<b>Carver</b>	60.9%	22.7%	<b>83.6%</b>
<b>North Middlesex</b>	61.8%	22.4%	<b>84.2%</b>
<b>Triton</b>	77.8%	9.0%	<b>86.8%</b>
<b>Amesbury</b>	68.2%	19.9%	<b>88.1%</b>
<b>Danvers</b>	57.0%	24.7%	<b>81.7%</b>
<b>State</b>	<b>58.1%</b>	<b>19.9%</b>	<b>78.0%</b>

Source: DESE October 2011 Census Report

Table V illustrates that Amesbury’s percentage of student included was above all like districts and also above the statewide percentage for the 2011-2012 school year.

**Table VI. Percentage Comparison of Students on IEPs in Substantially Separate Settings**

Districts	% of Students on IEPs in Substantially Separate Settings
<b>Carver</b>	<b>8.6%</b>
<b>North Middlesex</b>	<b>7.9%</b>
<b>Triton</b>	<b>5.5%</b>
<b>Amesbury</b>	<b>3.8%</b>
<b>Danvers</b>	<b>7.6%</b>
<b>State</b>	<b>15.0%</b>

Source: DESE October 2011 Census Report

Table VI illustrates that Amesbury was lower than the statewide percentage of students placed in *Substantially Separate Settings* for the 2011-2012 school year. The district is also below all like districts. Students in substantially separate classes require smaller staff-to-student ratios and more related services. These factors lead to more expensive programming options for programs that are located within districts. This information highlights Amesbury’s commitment to providing services within the Least Restrictive Environment.

*Fiscal Factor of Special Education*

Special Education is an expensive educational operation for all school districts. The percentage of the school budget across the state that is dedicated to special education has grown over the years.

**Table VII. % of Statewide Special Education Budget to the Whole Budget & Census**

Fiscal Year	% Statewide Budget	% Statewide on IEPs
<b>FY 2003</b>	17.1%	<b>15.0%</b>
<b>FY 2012</b>	<b>20.6%</b>	<b>17.0%</b>

Source: DESE October 2011 Census Reports & End of Year Financial Reports

Table VII illustrates the statewide growth in the percentage of the special education budget from FY 2003 to FY 2012 and the increase in the percentage of students on IEPs for this same time period.



**Table VIII. Percentage of Special Education Budget to Total Amesbury School Budget**

TOTAL SCHOOL BUDGET AND SPED BUDGET			
FISCAL YEAR	TOTAL SCHOOL BUDGET	TOTAL SPED BUDGET	Special Education Budget as a % of Total School Budget
2012	\$28,288,074	\$6,873,819	24.3%
2011	\$26,959,217	\$6,625,868	24.6%
2010	\$26,309,163	\$7,056,363	26.8%
2009	\$24,971,475	\$5,077,310	20.3%
2008	\$25,680,061	\$5,695,466	22.2%
2007	\$23,920,258	\$4,695,850	19.6%
2006	\$23,143,921	\$4,264,512	18.4%
2005	\$23,236,293	\$4,496,849	19.4%
2004	\$21,445,280	\$3,329,015	15.5%
2003	\$21,082,694	\$3,463,367	16.4%

Source: DESE End of the Year Financial Reports

Table VIII illustrates that the percentage of the school budget that is devoted to special education remained fairly consistent from FY 2003 to FY 2010. In FY 2010, the percentage of the special education budget to the whole school budget increased by 6.5%; decreased by 2.2% for FY 2011, and decreased by .3% for FY 2012.

**Table IX. FY 2012 Comparison of Special Education Expenditures for Like Districts**

Districts	Teaching	Other Instruction	Mass Public & Collab.	Mass Private	Total SPED Expenditure	% of Whole Budget	State Average For FY 12
<b>Carver</b>	\$1,533,562	\$320,233	\$6,99,238	\$831,497	\$3,384,530	16.5%	<b>20.6%</b>
<b>Amesbury</b>	\$3,691,911	\$336,041	\$888,636	\$1,957,231	\$6,873,819	24.3%	<b>20.6%</b>
<b>North Middlesex</b>	\$4,368,694	\$590,021	\$1,658,701	\$2,034,646	\$8,652,062	22.3%	<b>20.6%</b>
<b>Triton</b>	\$3,540,857	\$517,749	\$1,284,384	\$1,086,398	\$6,429,388	19.6%	<b>20.6%</b>
<b>Danvers</b>	<b>\$3,694,795</b>	<b>\$534,501</b>	<b>\$1,741,539</b>	<b>\$2,731,162</b>	<b>\$8,701,997</b>	<b>19.9%</b>	<b>20.6%</b>

Source: DESE End of the Year Financial Reports

Table IX illustrates that Amesbury, for the 2011-2012 school year, was the highest of the like districts for the percentage of the special education budget to the whole budget. There are numerous variables that impact why other expenditures are what they are; however, Amesbury is at the high end for *Teaching* and for students enrolled in *Mass Private Placements*.

**Table X. FY 2012 Amesbury’s Percentage of Special Education Budget to the Whole Budget & Census**

% of the Budget		% on IEPs	
Amesbury	24.3%	Amesbury	19.3%
State	20.6%	State	17.0%

Source: DESE FY 12 October Census and End of the Year Financial Report

Table X is a comparison of Amesbury’s percentage of the special education budget to the whole budget compared to the state for FY 2012. It also shows the comparison of the percentage of Amesbury students on IEPs compared to the state for the same year.

Special education costs have increased across the state to an average of 20.6% in FY 2012 while the statewide special education census has risen to 17.0%, on average. For Amesbury, in FY 2012, the special education budget was 24.3% of the whole school budget and the special education census was 19.3%. Some of this differential can be attributed to the number of special education personnel in the district and the number of students for FY 2012. As the district has experienced growth in the Early Childhood Program, it is also experiencing growth for students identified as developmentally delayed and students having neurological disabilities. These populations require intensive staffing with an array of related services to appropriately support the students. There are no easy answers, but districts must decide that they will continue, in the long term, to develop in-district programs when there are sufficient cohorts to sustain programming, thus reducing the number of students that are placed outside the district. Over a period of time, the growth in special education expenditures for out-of-district tuitions and transportation costs will be contained.

The reality is that “good programming” is costly. It is labor intensive and requires a substantial commitment from the administration and the district’s teaching staff. It can, however, also be cost effective. When districts develop a full continuum of services, they are able to provide quality programs for special needs students. The benefits of having an appropriate continuum of programming across the district, for all disabilities, at all levels, will lead to the prevention of students exiting the district, containment in the growth of the cost for special education, and the means to provide for students within the district’s building capacity. Out-of-district placements, next to personnel expenditures, are the single largest impact on a special education budget. Amesbury needs to continue to monitor student needs and trends in placements to assure that internal program options are available to meet student needs.

*Out-of-District Placements*

School districts are continually confronted with how to contain the growth in special education expenditures. The three major expenses that affect the special education budget are personnel, out-of-district tuitions, and transportation. Currently, Amesbury has 22 students (as of 2/14) in *Private Day* school placements and 17 students in *Collaborative or Public Day* school placements that service students with disabilities.

**Table XI. FY 2013 Comparison of Percentage of Students in Out-of-District Placements**

<b>FY 2013</b>	<b>Public Day</b>	<b>Private Day</b>	<b>Residential</b>
<b>Amesbury</b>	4.0%	3.0%	<b>0.4%</b>
<b>State</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>2.9%</b>	<b>0.7%</b>

Source: DESE FY 13 October Census and End of the Year Financial Report

Table XI illustrates that Amesbury is above the state average for students placed in *Public Day* and *Private Day* placements, and below the statewide average for *Residential* placements. In reviewing these higher percentages, they can probably be explained due to influences such as case settlements, the lack of or limited internal programming options, insufficient cohort(s) of students to operate an in-district program, scattered age ranges in the groupings of students, or students with significant multiple disabilities.

The district will need to respond to the cost benefits of further in-district program development for specific groups of students. With the increased pressure of the special education budget on the whole school budget, and the significant growth seen at the preschool level, the district should formulate a strategy to expand and, if indicated, develop further in-district programming over the next five years. The cost of one out-of-district placement and transportation for that placement can support, on the average, one experienced professional position. Reducing the number of students in out-of-district placements and building program capacity needs to be a continued priority for the district. Reviewing recent expenditures, on average, the return of one student provides approximately \$80,000. Factoring in transportation costs, the district would be able to start up a program that is fully staffed. Each student that cannot be serviced within the district would cost the district the same \$80,000 plus the cost of transportation.

To date, it is apparent that Amesbury has effectively constructed appropriate in-district programs based on student population cohorts. For continued program development, appropriate space, staffing, materials, and supplies must be built into the equation. Many times, a district needs to set the priority of program development on a specific

disability population and begin the implementation on a small scale. These efforts will continue to produce results because the district will have a program in place to accept students. This effort to build capacity will reduce the reliance on out-of-district placements, reduce the exiting of students from the district, and may enable a student(s) to return to the district. An area for Amesbury to begin to focus on would be the number of students placed out-of-district that are identified as autistic. A review of the current year's placements indicates that 12 of the 27 students placed in private out-of-district placements are identified as being autistic, representing nearly 45% of all students in out-of-district placements. All of these steps will continue to assist Amesbury in containing and possibly reducing the growth in tuition expenditures.

**Table XII. FY 2004-2013 Out-of-District Tuition Expenditures for Amesbury and a Percentage of the Special Education Budget**

Fiscal Year	Mass Public Schools & Collaboratives	Mass Private & Out-of-State Schools	Total Special Education Expenditure	% of Special Education Budget
<b>2003</b>	\$1,065,321	\$0	\$3,463,367	<b>31.0%</b>
<b>2004</b>	\$408,383	\$452,316	\$3,329,015	<b>25.8%</b>
<b>2005</b>	\$455,390	\$779,796	\$4,496,849	<b>27.5%</b>
<b>2006</b>	\$846,133	\$467,836	\$4,264,512	<b>30.8%</b>
<b>2007</b>	\$522,058	\$943,563	\$4,695,466	<b>31.2%</b>
<b>2008</b>	\$260,630	\$2,031,966	\$5,694,466	<b>40.3%</b>
<b>2009</b>	\$148,016	\$1,714,049	\$5,077,310	<b>36.7%</b>
<b>2010</b>	\$857,496	\$1,679,347	\$7,056,363	<b>36.0%</b>
<b>2011</b>	\$1,010,225	\$1,758,098	\$6,625,868	<b>41.7%</b>
<b>2012</b>	<b>\$888,636</b>	<b>\$1,957,231</b>	<b>\$6,873,819</b>	<b>41.4%</b>

Source: DESE End of the Year Financial Reports

Table XII illustrates the pattern of expenditures, over a ten year period, for out-of-district placements. The table also illustrates the variances from year to year in the expenditures for the different types of placements and what percentage of the special education budget was spent on tuitions. The percentage of the special education budget spent on tuitions has varied from a low of 25.8% in 2004 to a high of 41.7% in 2011.

*Advocacy and Legal Perspective*

Prior to Chapter 766 being enacted, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, through various DESE administered legislative acts, funded the placement of special needs students into privately operated day and residential school programs. This practice created a network of private schools within the state to service various disability

populations. Because these programs were established for serving the specific disabilities of students, over time they became very specialized prior to the enactment of Chapter 766. Most of these programs continue to operate today, even though public schools have created a continuum of services and programs at both the district level and through their educational collaborative affiliations.

Massachusetts has a long history of advocacy by special interest groups on how special education operates at the state and local level. The influence by advocates, their associations, and the interests of other parties can greatly influence what actions a district may have to undertake to maintain and develop quality programs and services. These influences can also create an environment at the local level where cost benefit decisions are not necessarily made in the best interest of a student, but rather they are determined by what the parents believe is in the best interest of their student. A conflict may arise which can only be resolved through mediation, a hearing, or in some cases, a settlement.

As a whole, the public may have little or no knowledge of what a district has to do in order to serve a student with special needs. When a dispute occurs between the parents and the school district with regards to the services recommended for a student, the parents have the right to resolution of the dispute through a third party. Although this action is sanctioned in special education law and regulations, it does place the burden of evidence on a school district to prove that their recommendations meet the standard of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) under the federal statute for meeting the needs of the student. This action can lead to an expensive out-of-district placement if parents prevail through the Bureau of Special Education Appeals hearing. The expense for the school district can be considerable, not only for the placement, but should the parents prevail in a hearing, they are entitled to recoup their legal costs from the school district. Therefore, school districts are continually confronted with the issue of cost benefit when a dispute arises over a placement within the district or a placement in an out-of-district tuition-based program. This aspect of special education is an area of which few are aware or fully understand. Like Amesbury, Walker Partnerships has found that school districts are often confronted with the fact that many parents have the means to retain legal counsel and “dispute resolutions.” This can be an expensive line item in the special education budget. The expense is not only a direct cost, but also an indirect one because it requires the staff to spend its time meeting and preparing the work that will assist the district in deciding what course of action it will pursue if a dispute arises.

This history of educational advocacy greatly impacts the evaluation and placement process for students determined eligible for specialized instruction through special education, and this can lead to a great deal of uncertainty during the school year. This advocacy role plays an important part in the issue of expenditures for special education, not only in staff time at all levels within a school district, but in respect to independent evaluations, mediations, and due process hearings. The results of a due process hearing, or the settlement of a case prior to this hearing before the Bureau of Special Education Appeals, can lead to unanticipated expenditures during a school year. These expenditures significantly add to a special education budget at any given time. There is no guaranteed approach that will ensure an avoidance of these legal encounters, but quality and

defensible internal programs and services certainly will reduce the potential for greater unanticipated legal and placement expenditures. The district's exposure can only be measured by the recent history of legal involvement for the district. This factor cannot be ignored when formulating a special education budget and when developing long range programming and service initiatives.

#### *Technology/Assistive Technology*

Children with multiple disabilities have unique needs and challenges. Many of these young children struggle to communicate their wants and needs, engage in their world, and learn abstract concepts and ideas. Professionals and families working together must identify the individual supports that each child needs so that they can ensure that the child with multiple or very specific disabilities can be an active participant in all aspects of their educational life and can make meaningful progress toward valued life outcomes. The tremendous advancements in technology have greatly impacted the educators' abilities to provide students with disabilities a better access to their environment. Through comprehensive assessment, appropriate technology can be provided to students that will enhance their education and daily lives. Amesbury needs to continue their efforts in providing disabled students with current assistive technology and programs. Kurzweil is one program that is available; however, not all schools are able to utilize it as the current system is too slow for the program to be accessed.

#### *Educational Experience*

The final factor that has to be constantly considered when addressing the needs of students with disabilities is: *To what extent can the district provide an appropriate comprehensive educational experience for students?* There is little question or doubt that Amesbury is willing to meet the academic needs of its students with special needs. Rather, the concern is whether or not the district, through the current special education program and support models, can provide social and interpersonal development with appropriate peer experiences to enhance the overall development of the students, particularly those with severe needs. Amesbury, like many school districts, is facing new expectations as to what the district should provide for students with significant disabilities. These new expectations need to be continually assessed for each student with respect to program and service options, especially as the population of students with more severe needs moves from one level to the next. It is a factor that all evaluation team members must seriously consider when developing and designing placement recommendations. The overall culture of the school community will need to gain a greater understanding of these new expectations, and, over a period of time, the issue of expectations will need to be continuously reviewed on a case-by-case basis to assure the district has developed the capacity to service students with more severe needs.

#### *V. Findings*

Through this evaluation process, it was apparent that the school district administration is very aware of the needs of the district, the individual buildings, and the students. The following findings are provided to assist the district with the work that needs to be completed. These findings are presented in no particular order of priority.

*Specific Findings:*

- The pre-referral process is not consistently followed across the district. Staff members perceive the process as a step or hurdle that you must go through to make a referral for a special education evaluation. It is not perceived as a forum to discuss students' needs. The pre-referral process is not consistent with some viewing the "RtI team" as the first step and the "intervention team" as the second step. There does not appear to be a consistent approach to Response to Intervention (RtI) across the district.
- The RtI process is not embedded across the district. There are pockets of this tiered instruction occurring, but not in a unified approach.
- The process for placing students in district-wide programs is not clear to all involved personnel.
- Policies and procedures for special education have not been updated.
- Many of the interviewed staff members were not aware of their current, specific, written job descriptions.
- Social skills development and curriculum for the therapeutic programs are in place; however, a review is required to ensure that the district is consistent in the delivery and approach.
- Staff members who are involved with the transition process from one level to the next are not following consistent practice throughout the district. This is occurring at each level, from the preschool to the elementary school, from the elementary school to the middle school, and from the middle school to the high school.
- General education personnel do not have a clear understanding of the various special education roles and responsibilities. Over time, roles and responsibilities can be shaped differently by the individual who occupies the position. A review of all role/responsibility descriptions needs to take place to ensure that they are all current with regards to the various functions of each position.

- There are not entrance criteria for all programs and services. For those that do exist, they are not known by all staff, and in many instances they are not consistently followed.
- There is confusion among the school-based staff over the definitions of pull-out, pull-in, inclusion, in-class support, and co-teaching. Many staff members are interchanging one term for the other. This applies to whether a special education teacher comes into a general education class or a paraprofessional.
- General education staff members and paraprofessionals have not had ongoing training on how to effectively utilize the paraprofessional in the general education classroom.
- Special education program personnel do not have an opportunity to meet periodically throughout the school year to discuss their programs, share information, discuss issues that relate to their specific program, and plan for future needs.
- There is not a structured format in place for special education teachers to meet with their assigned paraprofessionals for supervision purposes and planning activities. Additionally, there is not a structured format available for the teachers servicing students in similar programs across the district to come together.
- The district is lacking in a professional development program that addresses how general education staff members assume ownership of students on IEPs with the support of the special education staff and paraprofessionals. Additional professional development activities are not in place that will enable school-based personnel to gain a greater awareness and understanding of special education requirements, practices, and procedures.
- General education teachers will benefit from professional development on “how to” teach and instruct the various disability categories of special needs students in their classes.



**Table XIII. FY 2012 Comparison of the Number and Percentage of Special Education Paraprofessionals with Like Districts**

Districts	SPED Paras
<b>Carver</b>	<b>26.5</b>
<b>Danvers</b>	<b>0 reported</b>
<b>Triton</b>	<b>84.8</b>
<b>Amesbury</b>	<b>56.3</b>
<b>No. Middlesex</b>	<b>29.7</b>
<b>Average of like districts</b>	<b>49.3</b>

Source: DESE District Analysis and Review Tool Report

Table XIII illustrates that in the 2011-2012 school year Amesbury was above the average for the number of special education paraprofessionals when compared to like districts. **(Note: Danvers was not factored into the calculation.)**

- Parents would benefit from an increased awareness of the special education process and programs that exist throughout the district.
- Parent outreach/communication is inconsistent and needs to be reviewed for consistency.
- Various special education programs need to be reviewed to determine what category of disability each program is serving. There appears to be overlapping with some disability categories in various programs. Clarification is needed with respect to what category of disability each program is designed to serve and what the entrance and exit criteria are for each of the programs.
- The needs of students in the PDD classes require more interventions than the current staffing allows. Behavioral supports for these classes may need to be enhanced.
- Many of the interviewed staff members did not know how the new behavioral class was accessed and how it differed from the other behavioral program that has been in existence for several years.
- Some staff members have a concern regarding who provides their direction/supervision. Is it the through their building or the special education office? Comments like the following were made: “We feel like ping pong balls.” “If the principal says you do it, you do it.”
- The chain of command is not clear as illustrated through a comment: “Can I call the Special Education Administrator? I could in the past.”

- The role of the team facilitator in decision making is inconsistent across the district.
- Currently, the high school does not have a feeder program for middle school students moving up from the GOLD program.
- The district does not have a BCBA to cover the autistic programs.
- Professional development related to special education is lacking.
- Communication needs to be enhanced. “We need to focus on process/procedures/consistency/clarity and shared knowledge and information” was consistently expressed.
- Oversight of preschool and the process requires clarification.
- There are no written criteria for determining when and how paraprofessional time is accessed.

## *VI. Recommendations*

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the evaluation process that was recently completed of the special education program for the Amesbury Public Schools. The findings listed in the previous section are the foundation for the following recommendations. Each recommendation is followed by an explanation that is intended to further expand on the rationale for the recommendation. These recommendations are intended to provide insight and direction for the administration and school personnel in making decisions regarding the direction that they determine to follow with respect to the existing programs and services. These recommendations should be viewed as a starting point for involved personnel to engage in discussions that will lead to the development of programs and services that truly meet the needs of the student population.

There will be a need for the stakeholders to come together and develop an action plan(s) that is comprised of short and long-term steps. Budget implications, as well as structural and organizational issues, need to be well understood so that appropriate program development can be instituted. Through an inclusive process of discussion, a plan will emerge that is comprehensive, meaningful, and purposeful. These recommendations are presented in no particular order of priority.

### *Pre-Referral Process and Response to Intervention (RtI)*

#### **1) The pre-referral process needs to be more uniformly practiced throughout the district and aligned with the Response to Intervention (RtI) process.**

##### **Explanation:**

- There are varying degrees of implementation of the pre-referral process throughout the district. For the process to be more effective at each school, a more deliberate structure is required. Once the process is more uniform and is consistently practiced, the district may see a reduction in referrals for special education.
- If utilized properly, the pre-referral process is an effective tool. When a student has been referred to special education for an evaluation after going through the pre-referral process, the referral is considered to be a legitimate referral. There is currently a sense that the pre-referral process can be an obstacle to making a referral suggesting that it is “just another step to go through.” There are reported examples where parents will circumvent the process by writing a letter to the school administration and requesting an evaluation under special education. While this cannot be completely prevented, further education for parents and a more effective usage of the pre-referral process can lead to fewer parental and staff referrals.

- There needs to be a data review of those students who were processed through the pre-referral team so that it can be determined which ones were found ineligible for special education. This type of analysis can provide the district with information that will indicate the kind of training that the pre-referral team members should undertake so that only legitimate referrals are processed.
- The pre-referral process is a general education process and members should be general educators. Based on their given expertise, special educators should be brought in to provide insight on students.
- On a consistent basis, building administrators need to participate as members of the pre-referral process. Research clearly demonstrates that more effective change occurs in teaching practices when building administrators engage in the pre-referral process.
- On a scheduled basis, pre-referral team members need to rotate through team memberships so that all building staff members eventually participate in the process. This participation by all staff increases staff ownership to the process.
- A building-based pre-referral team should have limited funds available to use, at their discretion, when developing interventions for students. These funds can be used for specific materials, supplies, or for activities like short-term tutoring, counseling, specific staff training, consultation, related service treatment, or for any other services that the pre-referral team deems necessary. These funds should be part of each building's budget rather than part of the special education budget. The budget amount will need to be piloted for a year or two to determine the appropriate amount. Common practice would suggest \$3,000.00 to \$6,000.00 per building, with the high school and intermediate school receiving a smaller portion than the elementary schools. This financial support for the pre-referral process can reduce the need for referring a student for a special education evaluation.
- In order to gain a greater awareness and insight into effective strategies of intervention, professional development needs to be made available to the pre-referral teams. Coaching of team members should also be part of the training experience so that their strategies of intervention can be assessed, revised, and expanded.
- An updated manual that specifically outlines the purpose and function of the pre-referral team should be developed. The roles and responsibilities of team members, uniformed applications that are consistently used, and a suggested list of intervention strategies based on the presenting student's central issue(s) should be included.

**2) The district needs to continue the efforts that have been put forth in the implementation of the Response to Intervention (RtI) tiered instruction model.**

**Explanation:**

- The district has conducted professional development on the RtI model and progress had been made with the implementation of this regular education initiative. District-wide personnel, however, are at “different places” with respect to their implementation of the practice, their skill level, and their knowledge base.
- There is confusion, on the part of school-based personnel, as to whether or not the district is going to use the problem solving strategy of RtI. The staff needs to be informed that the district is moving forward with it and know how it will be implemented.
- The RtI problem-solving model is a systematic approach that reviews student strengths and needs, identifies scientifically based interventions, frequently collects data to monitor student progress, and evaluates the effectiveness of the interventions implemented with the student. Problem-solving is a model that is used, as the first means, to solve student difficulties within the general education classrooms. If problem-solving interventions are not successful in general education classrooms, the cycle of selecting interventions and collecting data is repeated with the assistance of the Problem Solving Team.
- The purpose of the problem-solving process is to assist the classroom teacher and parent(s)/guardian(s) in designing and selecting strategies for improving student academic and/or behavioral performance. The intent is to develop academic and behavioral intervention strategies that have a high probability of success. A structure is provided for addressing the academic and/or behavioral concerns identified by teachers or parents. A problem-solving process requires full collaboration among a team of professionals, along with parents, to identify a specific measurable outcome and design research-based interventions that address the concerns. The system must integrate the use of data, both to guide the development of effective interventions, and to provide frequent monitoring of a student’s progress. The process includes an assurance that interventions are implemented with fidelity. Family engagement in the process is vital to guarantee that all information which might impact success is considered.
- The RtI process is similar to the pre-referral process. Many consider the RtI process to be more comprehensive in scope and more grounded in evidence-based best practice. These two approaches could be wedded so that school-based personnel have the “best of the two” to assist them in formulating instructional and behavioral interventions for assisting students who exhibit difficulties in learning and self-regulation.

- The RtI process has proven to be an effective, preventive intervention for students who experience learning, social, and behavioral difficulties while merging special education and general education.

### *Program Development*

### **3) The district needs to further develop and expand program options for the special education population.**

#### **Explanation:**

- As noted in the Commendation section of this report, the district has invested significant resources in program development at all levels. The school committee and administration are concerned with the increasing cost of special education, especially the out-of-district expenditures. This is a difficult issue for all school districts. As illustrated in section IV (Factors Affecting the Implementation of Services and Programming) and section V (Findings), Amesbury has a higher percentage of students in out-of-district placements when compared to the state. There are variations in each district's percentages and numbers, and in their innate characteristics that will impact on the district's capacity and responsibility to meet the mandates of special education. Until appropriate state and federal resources are provided to assist in off-setting the financial demand of special education, the district will continue to be burdened with costs that may seem unreasonable.
- The immediate reaction is to push back, but in reality the district has responded to the needs of the students by building its capacity to serve students within the district. It is going to have to further that capacity should it want to reduce the expenditures of out-of-district placements and the accompanying transportation costs.
- Many of the accompanying recommendations will assist to reduce some of the impact on special education. A more purposeful pre-referral process, district-wide implementation of the RtI process, an increase in the co-teaching model, more constructive professional development experiences for all staff members, further program development and expansion of existing programs are all proactive strategies. These endeavors will all assist in reducing out-of-district placements and reduce those costs attributed to the placements. Initially, in-district costs will increase, but the district will have the capacity to serve students in the district while creating options that will continue to serve the diverse special education population that is currently present.
- Through the implementation of many of the recommendations, the number of students in special education can be reduced; therefore, some costs may be reduced over the next three to five years. The district has to determine to be proactive because the issue of costs and special education that has been an issue

since 1974 will continue to be an issue for cities and towns. A proactive approach will go further in reducing the budgetary impact to the district.

- To assist with being proactive, the role of the facilitator overseeing the preschool program should be clarified and shared with all appropriate constituents. This approach will enable the preschool to address the significant program growth and the needs that have been realized. Criteria need to be developed for the different program options at the preschool level. Services and staffing need to be assessed to ensure that student needs are being met given the recent growth. Outreach to parents and community based collaterals such as early intervention and human services agencies has become a significant need given the population of the students being enrolled in the preschool. The ongoing oversight of these elements is certainly required and needs clarity.
- Given the programs that Amesbury has put in place to service the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities, clinical supervision needs to be in place, on a consistent basis, for the school adjustment counselors and school psychologists. Again, as with the specific program staff, this group of professionals needs to have access to clinical supervision to assist with treatment plans and goal setting, provide guidance to school administrators about the level of risk a particular student may represent, and assist with constructing capacity building with staff targeting improved understanding and management of complex students and families with mental health needs.
- The district currently provides a consultant from the Melmark School to work with teachers servicing students on the autism spectrum. However, given the explosive behavior that students can exhibit in these programs, behavioral supports are required on an ongoing basis. The district is clearly at a point in their program development with this population of students where a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) is required to provide oversight and direction.
- As internal programs have been developed, the need to address staff utilization becomes a more significant requirement. The district needs to develop a process to maintain continued access to staff schedules. This will assist in decision making relative to staff assignments and show where overloads may be as well as available time for various staff. Some of the staff members have considerable difficulty meeting the requirements of their position due to servicing a large number of students.

## *Service Models*

### *Co-Teaching Model of Instruction*

#### **4) The district needs to review the current co-teaching and in-classroom support practices and establish a clear and consistent approach to these models across the district.**

##### **Explanation:**

- To properly operate the in-classroom instructional support model, there needs to be clear, concise, and agreed upon statements that stress the purpose and intent of this model of instruction. There is confusion among the school staff as to exactly what the in-classroom model is and how it is to function. Additionally, throughout the district, there are varying perceptions of the role and function of special education teachers and paraprofessionals assigned to general education classrooms.
- Inclusion descriptors need to be framed based on the district's belief system, its culture, and its mission as well as the requirements of the district's Department of Special Education.
- The descriptors need to incorporate evidence-based best practice and reflect the positive components of current practices at the individual schools.
- The descriptors need to indicate which model or models of instruction will be utilized and when they will be utilized. The four models commonly referred to are Supportive Teaching, Parallel Teaching, Complementary Teaching and Team Teaching. A resource reference is [A Guide to Co-Teaching: Practical Tips for Facilitating Student Learning](#). R. Villa, J. Townsend & A. Nevin. Crown Press, California. Another resource is [Co-Teaching, a handbook for creating and sustaining effective classroom partnerships in inclusive schools](#). Marilyn Friend, Greensboro, NC 27455-2590, [www.coteach.com](http://www.coteach.com)
- The descriptors need to be developed in collaboration with all current participants of the co-teaching and in-class models, and these descriptors should be subject to periodic reviews and updates. The descriptors need to include a clear outline of the role each involved person plays in providing instruction within the classroom.
- A newly implemented instructional model is occurring at the middle school where special education teachers are co-teaching in content area classes. At the high school, co-teaching is taking place in English only, at grades nine and ten. At the elementary level, in-class support provided by paraprofessionals is assigned by special education teachers, and special education teachers are covering more than one grade level. Additionally, the high school currently has a block schedule. The district may want to investigate the possibility of a modified block for certain



student populations, and consider the benefit of co-teaching options within a modified block.

**5) The district should develop an operating manual that addresses all aspects and elements of the co-teaching model.**

**Explanation:**

- Current, participating staff members strongly articulated that there is a lack of guidelines to address the issues of roles and responsibilities of the two teachers or a teacher and a paraprofessional within the model.
- An operating manual needs to provide guidelines with respect to grading, homework assignments, examples of curriculum and instructional accommodations, sample behavioral intervention strategies, types of shared teaching activities that can be conducted, effective usage of common planning time, suggested strategies for problem solving, professional development trainings, etc.
- So that confusion between and among teachers is minimized or eliminated, the following need to be developed: sample test forms, progress reporting forms, suggested systems of communication, and the “how,” “when,” “where,” and “who” statements.
- The teachers, with administrative assistance and oversight, should develop this operating manual. This can be accomplished through a study group or a summer workshop activity.
- The reference guides that were listed in the previous recommendation can be of assistance with the development of a manual for co-teaching.

*Professional Development*

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

**Explanation:**

- Interviewed staff members expressed an interest in having more frequent and in-depth training opportunities that focus on the following:
  1. Characteristics of specific disabilities
  2. Learning styles

3. Pre-referral and RtI
  4. The “how to” with respect to instruction
  5. Managing challenging classroom behaviors
  6. Servicing the various needs of the student population, particularly
    - students on the autism spectrum
    - students with mental health needs
  7. The co-teaching model of instruction
  8. How to work as a team
  9. The writing of measurable goals
  10. Using the IEP as a learning tool
  11. How to deal with difficult team meetings
  12. How to effectively communicate and collaborate with parents
  13. How to avoid litigation
  14. Curriculum and instructional accommodations
  15. How and when to make modifications
  16. Differentiated instruction
  17. Universal design
  18. How to instruct students with various disabilities
  19. Conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments
  20. Writing Behavioral Plans
  21. Learning styles of students
  22. Grading special education students
  23. More types of interventions and strategies
  24. Positive behavioral interventions
  25. Section 504
- Interest was expressed for a training program in the area of eligibility determination. Staff members want a greater understanding of the difference between a typical student who is struggling and a student who is eligible for specialized instruction. They also want clarification on exactly what the district considers specialized instruction to be.
  - There needs to be a discussion of the issues of “What is right?” or “What is fair?” There was some expressed concern, frustration, and a lack of understanding concerning appropriate grading, student work load, and assignments for students with disabilities. Interviewed staff members expressed interest in these issues and suggested that a study group format would be useful.
  - Paraprofessionals spend considerable time working directly with individual students and small groups of students. These individuals have varying backgrounds and experiences. If the district is going to continue to rely on these positions to support special needs students in general education classes and in substantially separate programs, it must provide greater exposure to training opportunities so that they have a more extensive knowledge of the various disabilities, curriculum frameworks, strategies of instruction and intervention, management of behavioral issues, provision of in-classroom support, and the

making of curriculum accommodations and modifications. These paraprofessionals need to have a greater understanding of how instruction is provided to students with special needs.

- Paraprofessionals need to know how they are to be utilized in the various instructional settings. Walker Partnerships finds, all too often, that when paraprofessionals are assigned to general education classes, they do not know how to function in that setting. Additionally, in many instances, the general education teachers do not know how to effectively use paraprofessionals. It is essential that training is provided to the paraprofessionals that will give them the strategies that they need to use in all settings.
- Paraprofessionals who have mastered certain skills and strategies could be used to assist in conducting some of the training experiences.
- Training needs to be designed by groups of professionals and support staff so that it is meaningful to them. The training experience should be designed with respect to the professional experience of the audience. Not all staff should be presented with the same information. Training needs to be designed with respect to the current knowledge and experience of the various groups and audiences. Specialists such as school adjustment counselors, speech and language therapists, psychologists, guidance counselors, etc. should have the opportunity to attend training that is specific to their field of expertise. In some cases, this may require off-site attendance at conferences and/or workshops. Another option would be to approach neighboring districts through a collaborative to see if they were interested in participating in the development of training for “low incident” professionals.
- Team facilitators are often the initial contact with parents through the referral process. They also play a role with parents throughout the student’s educational experience. Training should be put in place to assist facilitators with techniques for working with parents in a collaborative manner and encouraging them to be significant members of their child’s team.

**7) The district needs to design a district-wide training program that will increase the general awareness level of all staff with regards to special education terminology, practices, procedures, regulations, and available services within the district.**

**Explanation:**

- There is considerable misunderstanding of the various terms that are used in special education. School-based personnel do not have a clear understanding of the distinctions among in-class support, inclusion, the co-teaching model, accommodation, adaptation, and modification. The staff may interchange these

terms, one for another, despite the fact that there are clear distinctions among them.

- The distinction among the disabilities is another area of training that is needed. Staff members need to have a greater understanding of the various disabilities, what they mean in terms of an impact on learning, and what are the best practices that they should be utilizing as interventions.
- Some confusion remains as to what constitutes a student's eligibility for specialized instruction. There seems to be a pattern developing where one student becomes eligible, so if another student appears to have similar needs, then that student should become eligible as well. This misunderstanding creates confusion among the staff and could lead to an increase of referrals for special education evaluations.
- There are some exceptional programs for students with disabilities that begin at the preschool level and continue to the high school level. However, general education personnel, and some special education personnel, are not aware of the various programs and services that are available. There is a need to ensure that all staff members have an understanding of the varied programs and services that are offered through special education. This may need to be addressed annually, during teacher orientation, or when other department or building meeting forums are held. However it occurs, it is necessary to ensure that all staff members have a greater appreciation of the programs offered by the district.
- Given that these varied programs exist, the roles and responsibilities of the various special education personnel need to be periodically reviewed and updated when necessary. There is confusion and a lack of understanding of the various special education positions within the district. Over time, positions become defined by the individuals who fill them. In one school a special education instructor may function in a particular capacity; yet, in another school an individual in the same position may function differently. Obviously, the clearer all staff members are with what role a person is assigned to carry out, the less room there is for confusion and speculation.
- The role of the team facilitator in decision making needs to be consistent. The district may want to consider elevating the position and allowing broader decision making authority and oversight to programs and staff.

**8) The district needs to establish criteria by which teaching assistants are assigned to a student, a group of students, a program, or a classroom.**

**Explanation:**

- The district has a number of teaching assistants who provide beneficial services to students with disabilities, but it is not clear to all staff members how the final recommendation is made for their assignment to a special needs student, a group of students, a program, or a classroom. A formal written protocol needs to be developed indicating how teaching assistants are accessed and assigned. The protocol needs to be disseminated to all relevant personnel so that all involved know the process.
- As students with disabilities are increasingly being placed in general education classrooms, the use of teaching assistants has expanded. Recent national figures estimate that over 500,000 paraprofessionals are employed in public schools and increases are anticipated in the coming years. The proliferation of paraprofessionals in public schools often has outpaced the conceptualization of team roles and responsibilities, as well as the training and supervision needs of paraprofessionals. Nowhere is this more evident than in schools where students with severe or multiple disabilities are included in general education classrooms.
- Given the number of teaching assistants within special education, it would be beneficial for the district to maintain clear criteria indicating why the individuals in these positions are being assigned to a student, a program, or a class. Health and safety reasons are foremost in administrators' minds, as well as the provision of assistance in substantially separate programs, but beyond that it becomes less clear as to "how" or "when" a teaching assistant should be utilized.
- The decision making process needs to be clear and understood by all those who have input in the process. The research on the decision making process is scant (Freshi, 1999; Giangreco, Broer & Edleman, 1999). The idea that a paraprofessional is utilized to implement the goals of an IEP should be due to the district's current inability to implement those goals without the use of this additional support.
- The district should study the following various strategies that are commonly practiced: trading teaching assistant positions for special education positions, increasing ownership by general education staff, time limited assignments, and the usage of assistants to free-up special education personnel from burdensome paperwork so that the special education staff can spend more time with students. ("Alternatives to Overreliance on Paraprofessionals in Inclusive Schools." Giangreco, M., Halvorsen, A., Doyle, M., Broer, S. Journal of Special Education Leadership, October 2004.)

- The role and responsibilities of the teaching assistants should be reviewed and updated. The specific function of the teaching assistant needs to be documented so that school-based personnel have a full understanding of the position's responsibilities. Practices and procedures should also be spelled out on how the assistants are to function in various instructional settings such as working with groups, working one-on-one, monitoring test taking, providing MCAS support, providing in-class support, etc. General education staff members raised the concern that when teaching assistants are working with students outside of the classroom, what is the accountability of the position, and to whom? Walker Partnerships has found that the accountability issue of paraprofessionals' instruction is an ongoing concern, especially at the secondary level.
- General education teachers also need to be trained in how to effectively utilize a paraprofessional in their classroom. Too often, both the teacher and the paraprofessional do not have a clear understanding of how the paraprofessional is expected to function in the general education class. A valuable resource can be underutilized when the function and purpose of the position are not understood.

### *Transition Practices*

#### **9) Transition practices need to be structured in a more sequential and consistent manner between the various school levels.**

##### **Explanation:**

- Transition activities are conducted each year for students moving from one level to the next. The steps that are in place for transition appear to be structured. However, transition appears to be viewed differently by school-based personnel involved from the preschool to the elementary school, from the elementary school to the middle school, and from the middle school to the high school.
- Staff members are performing the steps for transition that need to occur, but there is a tendency for each school to shape the process somewhat differently. It would be beneficial to review the steps with all involved staff members and develop a transition protocol to ensure that practices and procedures are being consistently followed. This would include the transitional needs of students moving on to the Whittier Vocational School.
- It is not only essential to have written procedures in place that designate timelines for various activities, but definitions of the roles and responsibilities of those engaged in the transition activities at each level should also be included. It is recommended that the district develop very specific steps for the transition process from one level to the next. The sharing of information to determine the most appropriate programming and support services for students should not be left to a "move up day" or one meeting held in the spring. Planning needs to

begin in the winter months of January or February, and communication should be structured throughout the spring months based on a set timeline for the various activities to ensure that the actual transition of the student is completed in a manner that defines success.

*Administrative Data Collection and Scheduling Oversight*

**10) A thorough review of what data the district is collecting to improve decision making and internal practices needs to be conducted.**

**Explanation:**

- The district offers an array of various programs and support services that are designed on the basis of the designated needs of the special education population. As discussed above, the pre-referral efforts need to be reviewed, and RtI efforts need to be enhanced. As the district addresses these two initiatives, consideration needs to be given to what data will be collected and how the data should be viewed.
- Referral trends should be reviewed relative to how many referrals were made to the pre-referral team and what the outcomes were. This data should be reviewed and assessed in relation to pre-referral and RtI efforts. The data will assist in developing future professional development initiatives at the school and district level.
- The district should also review the findings of no eligibility throughout the district. This information will assist the administration in identifying referral trends and focusing on needed interventions.
- District leadership needs to begin to develop a review process with all special education staff to determine what evidence-based practices are currently being utilized throughout the district, and how data is utilized to determine student outcomes and to meet the identified needs of students.
- A procedure needs to be developed to ensure that all staff member schedules are submitted routinely at various times of the school year for review. Schedules should be collected at a minimum of three times and should be submitted on a format that is consistent across the district. Having this data on file and readily available will assist with addressing staffing needs that arise throughout the year, and identify options that might better preserve student service delivery and teacher consultation time.
- The district should be collecting data on the number of initials and what schools they are initiating from. The district should also be collecting the number of findings of no eligibility by school. This information will lend itself to

monitoring IST and RtI efforts and assist with assessing future professional development efforts.

- Procedures for utilizing the new IEP program recently put in place (moved from Esped to X2 ) need to be clear to all service providers and facilitators. Currently, teachers can only access certain portions of X2. A review should be conducted of the staff to determine if they are able to access what they require. Also, the internal IEP process from the school to the central office and back to the school needs clarification. There appear to be instances where there are time delays. Any procedure developed must indicate all required timelines.

### *Entrance/Exit Criteria*

**11) There needs to be clear and concise entrance and exit criteria in place that are well-established and followed for all of the special education programs and services.**

#### **Explanation:**

- The district has put forth effort in developing programs and services to accommodate moderate to severe special needs programs. This investment has been beneficial to the district as quality programming and related services for students have been provided. Although personnel from each program were able to articulate what they perceive as the entrance criteria for their specific program, they were less specific regarding exit criteria.
- For all of the programs and related services, stated entrance and exit criteria need to be in place that are based on evidenced-based practice, current research, and reflect the mission and goals of each program. For the programs and services that provide a continuum of programming and services, it is essential that entrance criteria, exit criteria, and referral protocols are adhered to as stated, and they must be structured in a sequential manner for each district-wide program.
- Several of the identified substantially separate programs have entrance and exit criteria in place, but they are not clearly understood by some special and general education personnel. The establishment of these criteria can be completed, in collaboration, when program descriptions and personnel roles and responsibilities are being updated.
- The same needs to be done for the related services of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and counseling services. There are established professional standards for these services that outline the criteria that need to be in place. Regarding these related services, Walker Partnerships has observed, in many program evaluations, that discharge from these services is infrequent even when stated goals have been mastered. It is essential that exit



criteria be formulated and followed so that when students succeed, they can either move to less service time or be discharged.

- If the related service providers of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and physical therapy have written entrance and exit criteria in place, this would ensure that caseloads are appropriate and that students are recommended for a change in services at the appropriate time, not just at annual reviews and re-evaluations. Too often, students continue to receive a related service for an undetermined time such as a full year, or year after year. With established entrance and exit criteria, students will be able to have a service reduced, when necessary, or be discharged from that service at the appropriate time.
- The establishment of entrance and exit criteria based on evidence-based practice will assist the district in reducing the number of students on IEPs, the possible length of time a student is assigned to a specific program, and determine the duration of time that a student receives a specific service. Practices like these can also lead to the potential increase of time for students from these programs to have access to general education.

### *Program and Staffing Oversight*

**12) The district has developed and invested in some very successful programs for disabled students within the district. Efforts need to be made to ensure that the services continue to meet the needs of the students for whom they were developed and that the staff receives the supervision required to remain effective.**

#### **Explanation:**

- *Establishing a mechanism of program oversight*  
Amesbury has developed many in-district programs to meet the needs of given disabilities including autism, specific learning, emotional, and developmental. It is critical that the programs continue to service the students for which they were intended. The decision making process for placing students in programs within the district, as previously indicated, is unclear. A formal procedure needs to be developed and disseminated to all appropriate stakeholders. The Learning Center at the high school needs to be reviewed. Consideration should be given to possibly expanding co-teaching opportunities and modifying the 90 minute block as well as looking at the makeup of the Learning Center classes which currently includes cohort students. At the current time, the high school does not have a feeder program for students entering from the middle school GOLD team. Also, students from the middle school have two skills classes and the high school has only one. It is possible that scheduling has an impact on the high school offerings. Looking at how the schedule is developed and giving consideration to the possibility of scheduling special education students first may prove to be a

benefit. Walker Partnership has witnessed many quality programs that have been compromised by having students that do not meet the criteria.

- *Establishment of an annual review of program populations*  
An annual review of students placed in each program should be considered to ensure that the programs continue to meet the specific population for which they were developed. Teachers and building administrators should be consulted to assess their input. Because so much effort has been committed to the programs, assessing their continued effectiveness will be of benefit to students, teachers, parents, and administrators.
- This review will also allow the special education department to remain proactive to the needs of students such as identifying reasons for increased reading instruction demands at the middle and high schools and addressing programs and services to address these factors. It will also ensure that special education classes remain in compliance with the existing regulations governing student-to-teacher ratios.
- *Assistance to building administrators in supervising special education personnel*  
Principals need to be prepared to supervise the special educators in their buildings. The district needs to provide training and assistance to allow them to perform this task. Joint meetings with the Administrator of Special Education and Student Services should be scheduled for the review and discussion of needs.
- *Clarification of building and central office responsibilities*  
A clear delineation of which office (school or special education) is responsible for reacting to the staff needs to be developed to allow staff members, at the school level, to get answers to concerns in the timeliest fashion. Communication networks need to be developed, allowing staff members to know where to go and who to go to for various needs and questions. Issues as simple as who arranges interpreters and how the costs are covered should be made clear.

### *VII. Summary*

The Superintendent of Schools and the Administrator of Special Education and Student Services requested that Walker Partnerships conduct a district-wide evaluation of special education. This evaluation was focused on determining the current status of special education within the district and comparing special education programming to like districts. Attention was given to specific programs and services, census, expenditures, what is working well in the district, and concerns that staff and parents have over programming needs. The administration wanted to secure recommendations that will assist in short and long-range planning.

The evaluation process consisted of reviewing descriptions of programs and services, roles and responsibilities, census and budgetary data, procedures and practices, and out-of-district placements. A walk-through of all the schools, with the principals, was also conducted. Thirty minute one-on-one interviews were conducted that involved 27 individuals.

From this process, findings and recommendations were developed with the inclusion of full explanations for each recommendation. This report provides the district with the necessary information to move forward with enhancing existing programs and services, and with the continuation of expanding some of the work that is currently in place.

The district has developed a number of special education programs and services that address the special education needs of the student population. There are many positive aspects and components to the services and programs available within the Amesbury Public Schools. The Recommendation section addresses issues that can be addressed within a reasonable timeframe to enhance what the district is attempting to accomplish for students with disabilities.

Appreciation is expressed to the support staff of the Office of Special Education and the school-based staff for their assistance with scheduling school visits, class observations, and interviews.