



***Program Review Report for Ipswich Public Schools***

*Topic of Review: Programming for Students with Autism*

**Submitted to:** Dr. Beverly Hegedus, Director of Pupil Personnel Services  
Ipswich Public Schools  
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## Executive Summary

Academic Discoveries, LLC was contracted to conduct a program review of the Ipswich Public Schools' autism programming. The town of Ipswich supports its local school system and is a member of the Whittier Regional Vocational Technical School catchment area. According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website, Ipswich Public Schools is a Title I District, offers school choice, provides inter-district school choice, and does not accept METCO students. The school system serves students from preschool to age 22, and has 1,594 students enrolled, 18% (approximately 307 students ages 6-21) receiving special education services; comparable to the Massachusetts' population of 18.7%. Approximately 34 students in the school system are diagnosed with autism. This calculation is nearly 11% of the student population of those identified as special needs within the Ipswich Public Schools.

The program review focused on the quantity of such services provided to students who have been diagnosed with autism. The program review was multidimensional, emphasized the participation of multiple stakeholders, and included data collection.

Components of the analysis included:

- A review of district documents relating to the focus of the review
- A review of statewide reporting
- Classroom observations
- Interviews from all related service providers, a sample of educators, administrators, parents, and students.
- Literature that supports the focus of the review

This review was undertaken at the request of Dr. Beverly Hegedus, Pupil Personnel Services Director, in order to provide the District with an unbiased perspective regarding the District's efforts to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students on the autism spectrum.

A critical element of this review was to determine how Ipswich Public Schools provides an educational learning environment that is conducive to the learning abilities of students who have been diagnosed with autism. Specifically, Dr. Hegedus explained her interests in exploring the special education programming provided to students identified with having the autism profile. She requested an objective exploration that included the process of outlining strengths and areas for improvement within Ipswich Public Schools' special education programming as it relates to students with autism. In addition, Dr. Hegedus requested a review to be completed within a respectable timeframe.

Dr. Hegedus provided Academic Discoveries with a rationale for this inquiry, referencing that the goal of Ipswich Public Schools was to provide students with appropriate supports in order to access curriculum while ensuring a least restrictive environment. Furthermore, she expressed a desire to ensure that programming for students with autism is challenging beyond their zone of proximal development and they are learning skills that will result in success in the community as they transition to adulthood. Her goal was to ensure Ipswich Public Schools is meeting the needs of their students.

### **Highlighted Review Findings**

According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education ( DESE), IPS has a higher percentage of students who receive full inclusion than that of the state average. This percentage reflects IPS' commitment to providing special education services in the least restrictive environment and supports the district's efforts in implementing co-taught classrooms. In addition, administration and staff recognized that IPS encourages individualized special education programming that supports the individual student strengths and needs. According to those interviewed, IPS is dedicated to ensuring students diagnosed with autism are provided with learning opportunities conducive to the least restrictive environment. Parents and students who participated in the interviews for this program review expressed their appreciation towards the district for their commitment in providing inclusive practices.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

IPS demonstrates comprehensive programming that supports students who are diagnosed with autism. In fact, administration, staff, parents, and students all shared reflections on successful situations and circumstances throughout the students' learning experiences. IPS would be considered a model public school that serves students diagnosed with autism. They have a flow chart that demonstrates a consistent approach for requesting paraprofessional support. The district has hired BCBA's, and RBT's, and other paraprofessionals to support individual students. Recommendations were provided at the conclusion of this report in the areas of communication and systemic approaches.

It is important for IPS to review their communication practices as they align with the needs of supporting parents and students through the transition beyond the K-12 environment. The district is encouraged to determine ways of recognizing the success of their special education programming, specifically as it relates to students who have autism.

Since IPS is successful in creating protocols and procedures in outlining supports needed for students, as illustrated in their flowchart for paraprofessional supports, it is recommended that IPS consider the development of a chart or list of resources to support parents and students as they age out of K-12 school setting. Additionally, if IPS has a comprehensive plan that supports students through transition, it is recommended that IPS provide more detail and explanation to parents so they can be a part of this process and better understand how to support their child through this transition.

## **Ipswich Public Schools Programming for Students with Autism: Final Review Report**

Under the leadership of Nadine G. Ekstrom, Ph.D., Academic Discoveries, LLC reviewed the Ipswich Public Schools' (IPS) special education programming as it relates to serving students diagnosed with autism. According to Dr. Beverly Hegedus, Ipswich Pupil Personnel Services Director, "At the elementary level, students with ASD are integrated into general education classrooms, some with the support of a Registered Behavior Technician ( RBT). At the middle and high school levels, students with more intense needs are part of the Students Achieving Independent Living (SAIL) program. At the HS level, SAIL is very individualized in that we have varying programs for different students, including ongoing consultation from New England Center for Children (NECC) for one student."

### **Framework of Program Review**

The program review followed an improvement-based review model in which the primary goal was for the reviewers to assist IPS outlining best practices and potential improvement in identifying answers to the following questions:

1. Are students with autism being provided with educational opportunities in the least restrictive setting?
2. Are supports provided within the autism programming effectively in place to enhance the performance results of the students who are enrolled?
3. Are appropriate interventions implemented in the autism programming to ensure students are being challenged in the least restrictive setting while developing independency skills in order to be successful citizens within their community?

### *Meetings and Interviews*

Dr. Ekstrom and Dr. Hegedus met on four different occasions, beginning in November 2020 to discuss the program review expectations, questions, next steps and process of the work to be completed. In addition, Dr. Ekstrom conducted interviews with administration, staff, parents, and students. The interview questions were vetted by Dr. Hegedus to ensure the questions would explore the areas of interest for this program review.

### *Observations*

As part of the program review, observations were completed on May 18, 2021 and May 26, 2021. The observations occurred in six settings; high school SAIL classroom, middle school SAIL classroom, two integrated classrooms, and two one-to-one sessions.

### *Records Review*

Dr. Hegedus provided the evaluator documentation, such as but not limited to; her responses to questions posed by the special education parent advisory council, copy of a previous program review completed by the Carbone Clinic, The Employee Action Form, which requires data to document the need for paraprofessional support, The Flowchart for Paraprofessional Requests, a sample student IEP, Progress Monitoring Methods, interview and observation schedules.

Additionally, Academic Discoveries reviewed the Ipswich Public School profile on the DESE website, Massachusetts census information online, notes from interview sessions, and peer-reviewed literature articles as they relate to educating students with autism in a least restrictive setting.

### *Process*

Data were analyzed to identify the strengths within the IPS special education department related to the focus of the program review and to validate effective approaches within the current special education department that best serve students, specifically those with autism. In addition, the data were analyzed to determine areas for potential improvement within this domain. In order to provide recommendations, it was important to best understand the perspective of the administration, staff, parents, and students who are educationally involved with this programming. Thus, this report first provides an overview of IPS, with a focus on the special education population. Second, we provide the trends of enrollment for special education populations over time, as measured by indicators outlined by DESE and provided by IPS staff. Third, we include an overview of staff qualifications that were interviewed, who participate in the special education identification and implementation process. Next, we provide results from the qualitative data collected from interviews and document review. In addition, the report provides a literature review that supports the topics of this report. The document concludes with an assessment of the programming for students with autism provided by IPS based on all the data outlined, followed by recommendations for potential improvements in IPS specialized programming.

### **Overview of Ipswich Public Schools**

Ipswich Public Schools District is located in the coastal town of Ipswich, Massachusetts, located in Essex County. The town is known for its clamming and fishing industry. The community's adjacent towns consist of Rowley, Boxford, Topsfield, Hamilton, Essex, and Gloucester.

According to the 2019 United States Census Bureau, the population includes 13,963 people with

an average median value of owner-occupied housing of \$485,600. Approximately 20.6% of the population includes people under 18 years of age. In addition, 92% of the community's population is recognized as white, with approximately 1% associated as having two or more races. While English is predominately the most common first language in the homes, approximately 6.1% of individuals between the ages of five and seventeen consider another language as their primary form of communication. Of residents at the age of 25 years and older 97.6% have graduated from high school.

The school district consists of four schools, with an enrollment of 1,594. The four schools include: Winthrop Elementary (354 students), grades preschool to grade five; Paul F. Doyon Memorial (332 students), grades kindergarten to grade five; Ipswich Middle School (371 students), grades six through eight; and Ipswich High School (537 students), grades nine through twelve. According to the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) website, 86.5% of the student population is white, while 7.1% Hispanic, 1.3% Asian, 3.9% Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic, 1.1% African American, 0.1% Native-American, and 0% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander. In addition, 79.2% of students with IEPs met the graduation target rate as compared to the State's rate of 74.7%. According to the 2019-2020 reporting, IPS had 286 students on IEPs from ages 6-21. According to Table 1, Ipswich's programs have a higher percentage of students on IEPs attending full inclusion programs and separate schools than that of the state's average rate.

*Table 1: Ages 6 – 21 Students on IEPs*

	Enrollment	District Rate	State Rate
Full Inclusion (Inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the day)	227	79.4%	66.2%
Partial Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 40%-79% of the day)	27	9.4%	13.9%

Substantially Separate (inside the general education classroom less than 40% of the day)	8	2.8%	13.4%
Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital placements (does not include parentally placed private school students with disabilities)	24	8.4%	6.5%

In addition, according to the FY2020 to FY2021 report on DESE's website, Ipswich is below the State's average in all selected population categories, listed in Table 2.

Title	% of District	% of State
First Language not English	5.5	23.4
English Language Learner	2.3	10.5
Students With Disabilities	18.0	18.7
High Needs	30.0	51.0
Economically Disadvantaged	16.5	36.6

### Overview of Interviewees

Over the course of the program review, Academic Discoveries, LLC interviewed administrators, educators, parents, and students. All individuals interviewed were respectful and thoughtful when providing responses to the questions asked. The initial interviews began with the District's Administrative Leadership Team on March 31, 2021. This included the superintendent, principals, assistant principals, director of teaching and learning, and the technology head' as well as Dr. Hegedus. Next, a focus group of stakeholders was interviewed on April 1, 2021. This focus group included program managers, BCBAs, secondary and elementary special education teachers, secondary and elementary general education teachers, secondary and elementary RBT's, and the PPS Director. The staff participants in this program review were highly qualified within their respective roles. These individuals included licensed educators,

related service providers, and administrators. There was a separate interview on April 6, 2021 with the SEPAC representative, as well as an interview with an ASD student and his family. According to the evaluator, everyone provided fair responses that supported the questions asked in the spirit of supporting the needs of the students in the district.

## Results Supporting Program Review Questions

IPS was interested in learning answers to three questions as they referenced the programming for students with autism within the school system. In addition to these questions, the program review explored systemic approaches that could potentially enhance the special education services provided to students attending IPS. Below are the responses to the three questions, as a result of data collection, interviews, and classroom observations.

1. *Are students with autism being provided with educational opportunities in the least restrictive setting?*

As part of data collection for this review, the evaluator utilized Dr. Hegedus' response to questions raised by the IPS SEPAC in earlier communications with her. Below is the question in reference and the response provided:

SEPAC Question:

Indicator 5. SEPAC interpretation *“Surrounding districts have a substantially lower rate of full inclusion IEP students and higher partial and substantially separate rates. This suggests that surrounding towns dedicate more Special Ed direct support to students.”*

Portion of Dr. Hegedus' Response:

The nature of this question seems to imply a perception that “substantially separate” service delivery is more desirable or “better” than services received within the classroom. To the contrary, inclusion support requires a significant amount of direct support to students. Although some students may be unable to receive their specialized instruction in the classroom because of distractions or because the student experiences difficulty in self-regulation, in Ipswich, particular care is taken for inclusion support to be a priority. The support provided in the classroom setting is both direct, as well as time intensive. There are several reasons for this.

First, “full inclusion” does not mean that the special education student is receiving no specialized instruction outside the classroom. As explained in the *Ipswich Public Schools Special Education Program Description* on the Pupil Personnel Services homepage, inclusion support may **actually require a larger investment** of professional time than stand-alone tutorial support. The use of the term, “full inclusion,” in a student's IEP simply means that the student is receiving services outside the classroom less than 21% of the time. Students in the full inclusion category may be

receiving services both within and outside the general education classroom. Service delivery is not “either or,” but often “both and.”

A second factor affecting inclusion support is the district’s concerted investment in co-teaching. Co-teaching allows students to receive specialized instruction within the classroom setting, rather than being pulled away for services outside the classroom. Not all school districts have been successful with co-teaching because co-teaching **requires a dedicated commitment** at both the administrative and classroom levels. The pairing of a special educator and general educator calls for additional planning time, scheduling, and determination of how instruction can be most effectively offered in multiple ways.

The third advantage of inclusion support involves the generalization of skills. Providing specialized instruction in the milieu allows students to **more immediately generalize** learned skills into the educational environment. It is of limited value for a student to be able, for example, to learn phonics rules in an isolated setting, but then be unable to apply them in content reading.

A fourth advantage is that inclusion support honors the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) mandate that students should learn in the least restrictive setting. Students who can successfully navigate a standards-based curriculum with the support of scaffolding and specialized instruction have an **advantage** over those pulled out of the classroom who may lose out on access to such instruction.”

Participants were asked what “inclusion” meant to them at the elementary, middle, and high school. Staff suggested that inclusion “isn’t just being in a class all day doing separate work from everybody else, not interacting with anybody. Inclusion needs to be meaningful for that student and then I also think we do consider the other students too.” Some participants commented that inclusion is an approach in schools that provides students with disabilities opportunities to attend the same level of instruction as general education students. A parent representative commented that the inclusive classrooms provide opportunities for students with autism to learn from typical peers and vice versa. It creates a learning environment of acceptance and understanding. At IPS, inclusion is not simply among the students, but is also extended between students and staff. For instance, the custodians and administrative assistants have been trained on communication devices to converse with students who are non-verbal. Additionally, field trips require significant planning and the staff stated they work as a team to

ensure all students are included in these opportunities and that the experiences outside of classrooms are meaningful.

At the elementary level, staff complimented one another stating that as a whole district, staff try to make sure inclusion is meaningful. However, students who require more specialized instruction are given opportunities of working with students from the general education classes when special assignments for that grade level are offered. They work on building peer relationships between general education and special education student populations. At the elementary level, specifically at the preschool, educators believe that inclusion occurs naturally among the students.

Participants who are familiar with the middle school stated that every student has their own individualistic type of inclusion. Some require RBT support and are fully included in academic classes with adapted work. Others may require more individual supports, such as when working on improving their social-emotional well-being. Furthermore, participants suggested that while some students may receive equivalent assignments as typically developed peers, others may require social groups that support their experiences in the inclusion classroom.

The high school reported that inclusion varies from student to student. For instance, some students may be in college prep history classes with 10 to 18 students in the same classroom but require a small group English class. The high school offers peer mentoring for their students who are enrolled in significantly separate classrooms and for those who spend most of their day placed in smaller classes. This gives general education peers an opportunity to join those with

more significant needs and to teach them about the content they learned in their general classroom setting. One of the special education teachers offers a course to train general education students in reverse inclusion skills.

A student who has been diagnosed with autism commented that COVID has increased his anxiety and has felt there were many transitions regarding his programming, and he was not prepared for these changes. Follow up indicated that in one specific instance, the psychologist had been out for medical treatment. Although substitute support was provided, he experienced a hard time adjusting to a different schedule with the substitute counselor. This type of need for structure and predictability was noted to be typical for an ASD student. Prior to the pandemic, however, he has always felt supported by his teachers and the school. Parents have expressed their gratitude toward the school district for all the wonderful opportunities it has provided for their child through the years. However, as their child is transitioning from a school setting, they are concerned for the next steps.

When asked how IPS ensures inclusion/integration throughout the school community, participants stated that everyone gets to know the students and one another. In fact, they enhanced this response by stating that IPS is a community where everyone works on making sure individuals are included and integrated. Furthermore, when saying hello, they acknowledge the individual by name, say hello, and further asks how their day is going. Staff reported this approach is valuable within a small community such as IPS. Additionally, students with autism have been offered jobs within the school community such as, but not limited to; delivering supplies, sorting mail, running the recycling down to the cafeteria, compost recycling trash. The

schools have also created opportunities for students to participate in the greater community after they learn prevocational and vocational tasks. The staff specifically focus on ensuring students with the diagnosis of autism have opportunities to experience life skills in the public settings such as purchasing items at Market Basket or Family Dollar, get a haircut at the local salon, and are placed at job sites and internships. Some students have participated in courses at North Shore Community College.

A great part of the community are the parents of students with autism. Parents expressed that they would like to see IPS create more transparency with students and to include the parents when thinking of plans around programming for their students. They would like to have a clearer understanding of what is available for their children as they transition to the upper grades and beyond the high school setting.

Participants were asked about the challenges and pushback experiences in providing students with autism an inclusive learning environment. Some suggested that a common pushback occurs when students are diagnosed by doctors and recommendations are provided by medical professionals regarding educational strategies, when in fact, the medical professionals do not know what is occurring within a classroom setting. When this occurs, the partnership between parents and staff is challenged from the beginning of the IEP process. Additionally, teachers are challenged by the expectation of implementing a significant amount of curriculum within a short period of time. Therefore, it was reported by some participants that creating and differentiated instruction and ensuring all curriculum is presented to students may be challenging and overwhelming for staff at times.

As part of the interview process, parents and students were interviewed. One participant reported that IPS currently has two elementary schools that support students with autism. A low incident population has created opportunities in creating programming consistent for students who have this profile in both elementary schools. In fact, IPS has cross-building coordination of services with the BCBA who works in both programs.

2. *Are supports provided within the autism programming effectively in place to enhance the performance results of the students who are enrolled?*

During the interview process, the participants were asked to describe the program of services the IPS provides to its students on the autism spectrum. The individuals reported that at the elementary school they view every student differently and individually. They don't say, "oh that student has a diagnosis of autism, so they need to belong to this program" nor are they automatically provided with pull-out services. Therefore, many students have a combination of inclusion and pull-out services with the idea of the least restrictive environment as the focus of pedagogical implementation. Another participant reported this to be the same process at the middle school and high school, with the philosophy of inclusion as the first option and if student requires additional supports in a pull-out setting, then it would be offered. Principals of IPS advocated that their district maintains high expectations for all students while individualizing educational opportunities for students based upon their level of abilities. Furthermore, they reported that IPS has created substantially separate programs such as the learning center and have supported a full inclusion approach with co-teaching models. Some mentioned that students with this profile may transition from the elementary or middle school on an IEP,

demonstrate successful learned coping strategies and have been placed on a 504 by the time they are at the high school level. This was seen as evidence of programmatic success.

To provide supports for students, the district has trained and hired registered behavior technicians (RBTs) and teacher assistants (TAs). Additionally, staff recognized the expertise of other professional team members, specifically Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBAs). The teachers and administrators rely on the knowledge of these professionals for guidance, resources, and supports within their classrooms.

3. *Are appropriate interventions implemented in the autism programming to ensure students are being challenged in the least restrictive setting while developing independency skills in order to be successful citizens within their community?*

To answer this program review question, participants were asked what was working well regarding the students who are diagnosed with autism. Responses included components of a student's school day such as, but not limited to; curriculum, staffing supports, communication between parents and school. For instance, a staff member at the elementary school provided an example of a student who began attending IPS at the preschool level with significant special needs, requiring one-to-one supports. Staff were concerned that as this student advanced into the next grade level, the student might require higher levels of support and possibly an out-of-district placement. However, this student is now in the third grade, no longer requiring a specific ABA program, and is attending a co-taught inclusion classroom. One participant expanded on this example by stating that IPS can provide continuity of programming to students by having the same BCBA over the years working with the same student. Specifically at the elementary level,

the academic supports, speech-language pathology, and behavioral specialist working together provide triangular interventions resulting in student success. In fact, one principal commented that this team approach encourages a supervision between one another which helps with growth and consistency across the grade levels. There is a close tie among the various service providers. Additionally, the staff reported that they work as a team at IPS, and there is great communication to help students succeed in their classrooms. The culture at the middle school has encouraged inclusivity, which the participants reported as beneficial to student learning. Students and staff take ownership of the learning experiences. High school staff reported they have reaped the benefits of inclusiveness at the middle school as students transition to their building. In fact, the high school staff stated they have recently had situations arise where students were previously on an IEP, and they are surprised to learn of that since the students do not stand out in the classroom.

To review challenges around student success, participants were asked what the barriers within their school system were. Staff reported there is often a lack of space in their aged buildings, specifically for those who may require a few minutes of privacy. Another barrier recognized at the high school is the age span from grade nine to age twenty-two and having to support the low incidence population within the same space. To address the age span range, Ipswich High School hosts Young Addult Community/career Home management Training Academy (YACHT) when there are a sufficient number of PG students. When there are not sufficient numbers for a cohort, the District may utilize North Shore Educational Consortium's SOAR or EMBARK programs at Salem State University, or another individualized alternative for the student.

Given that IPS has a culture of inclusiveness, sometimes when new staff are hired, they may not view all the students as “our” students. Participants recognized the middle school and high school schedule as potential barriers for student success, because of the additional supports the students may require. This is especially challenging given students with autism may struggle in transitioning to many classes over one day. Additionally, if students require small class instruction and there are no other students with similar needs, staff work collaboratively in creating unique learning opportunities to meet the needs of students.

### **Observations**

Classroom observations were conducted on May 18, 2021 and May 26, 2021. During this time, the evaluator observed substantially separate classroom instruction that supported ABA pedagogical practices and integrated classrooms.

#### *May 18, 2021:*

The observer began by noting the environment within the Life Skills classroom. The class offered a sensory space in the middle of the room with cubicles at each end of the room for ABA. A 12-year-old, 7<sup>th</sup> grade, male student was observed at this time. Upon the observer’s arrival the student and educator were sharing thoughts about the clamming field trip from the day before. This conversation occurred between activities. The RBT then provided the student a sensory break. When the timer went off, the RBT informed the student that sensory time was done, and he needed to work on his tasks. With a little hesitancy, the student came back to his seat. The instructor then provided the student with a visual that illustrated his schedule for the

lesson. He was able to select what he wanted to do for his “leisure” activities. Each leisure activity lasts five minutes in duration. After leisure time expired, the student was cued to begin the lesson. He threw the timer onto the floor and was asked to retrieve it and properly place it on the desk, of which the student complied. During the lesson, the RBT and student created a list to go shopping at Shaws.

The RBT presented the observer with the student’s data collection sheet on student work which illustrated the functional living and related skills the student is improving upon through structured lessons. In addition, each chart provides data on seven tasks, daily communication logs, ABC data, coping skills sheet. There are typically two students in this lesson, but the other student was transitioning into the high school and was attending classes at his new program.

The next observation occurred at the high school Life Skills classroom. There were three students in the class and one student was learning remotely. One student’s lesson focused on vocational goals, work on dishwashing, daily personal care routines such as washing face, brushing teeth, and combing hair. Another student was listening to his headphones because he had finished with the personal hygiene lesson and was given a “leisure” activity with a two-minute timer. The third student was asked to bring some items to the office, as a learning activity. During this observation, the classroom had cubicles and learning spaces for students. Each student had an individual educator providing individualized instruction. The speech/language pathologist arrived during the observation and began working with one student in the corner of the room, so as not to distract the other students. During this session, books were

read aloud, questions were generated about the picture books. In addition, the student was given a manipulative (play dough) as a strategy to remain focused on the lesson.

*May 26, 2021*

While the observations on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May occurred in substantially separate classrooms, the focus of observations on the 26<sup>th</sup> was that of inclusive and integrated classrooms. Below is an example of one observation. The RBT in this classroom worked closely with two students who were on the autism spectrum. This observation was in an elementary classroom (15 students), where all students were participating in a word study activity. They recited letters, then blended them into a word, and finally recited the words (I,N,K.... pink.... Ink) (NOTHING... N,O,T,H,I,N,G... NOTHING). The teacher stated the word, “includes” and asked what this word meant, what students knew about the word, and what did they hear? The students with autism responded, “it’s a suffix”. They then stated, “it has ‘in’ and ‘cludes’ and you can put them together.” After more responses from the class and larger discussion, the teacher asked the students to take out their student notebook to put the word down as a vocabulary word. She asked them to not only write the word into their notebooks, but to also syllabize the word, while modeling on the board for the class to see. The RBTs assisted the two students to ensure they were following along with the classroom expectations.

## Ipswich Public Schools Literature Review

In an effort to connect the review recommendations to recent research, the evaluators examined relevant literature regarding best practices in programming for students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, this section provides IPS with a peer-reviewed literature review that supports the concerns, challenges, and strengths embedded within the school system. The purpose of this section of the report is not to assume IPS is not effectively implementing these approaches, but rather, to support the current best practices IPS does provide to meet the needs of its students.

Transitions from primary to secondary schools mark a large milestone in a student's life that can have a lasting impact on social and academic performance, and potentially, their success or failure at secondary school (Stack, Symonds & Kinsella, 2020). Children with ASD are more at risk for difficulties and a negative school experience during this period because managing transitions is a characteristic of their diagnosis (Mackin et al., 2017; Hannah and Topping, 2013). There is a plethora of research that identifies the areas of challenge for ASD students such as new physical environment, changes in curriculum, different schedule, homework demands, new peers and various teachers (Hoy, Parsons, & Kovshoff, 2018; Deacy, Jennings, & O'Halloran, 2015). The following literature review provides insight, strategies and resources to aid the Ipswich School District in continuing to operate an effective, supportive and beneficial inclusive program for students with ASD.

### **Transition from Primary to Secondary**

Nuske et al., (2019) conducted a systematic review to adequately address the transition difficulties and needs of students with autism spectrum disorder, as well as offer available strategies to support this student population. Although the IPS district has had much success

with their ASD programs due to their attention to and work with much of the author's proposals, it is helpful to explore the major themes that are highlighted in this study as a reference for school personnel. Four student strategy themes emerged. First, planning was identified as a helpful tool for students and to help decrease parent anxiety by establishing parent/teacher relationships early on. Strategies such as allowing students to visit their new school and meet teachers prior to transition had shown mitigation of anxiety through environmental exposure.

Visual supports emerged as a major student strategy and suggestions such as school maps, photos/pictures of the school and/or teachers, checklists, and schedules/calendars are considered useful tools that make routines more predictable. The third theme that surfaced for student strategies was the importance of social support strategies like peer buddies, staff relationships, safe spaces/people, and structured lunch periods. These tactics are found to provide the needed support for students with ASD to navigate a new space and reassure students they have a place to go or a person to go see where they can feel safe. Self-regulation was the final student strategy theme discussed by Nuske et al., (2019) and the authors suggested utilization of coping strategies and "emotional thermometers" to empower students to calm themselves when dysregulated as well as teach how to manage their emotions effectively.

An area that may prove helpful for IPS's continued success with their ASD programming is the strategies that Nuske et al., (2019) offer for parental relationships during this transition time. Information, communication, support, and advocacy were the four areas the authors presented as helpful to building and maintaining positive relationships with parents. Transition workshops, meetings with principals, key school personnel, and a transition binder were three strategies

found successful for providing information to parents of students with ASD. Support can be developed and sustained through community organizations, groups, and networks, while advocacy, should be a focal point of parents and teachers to ensure a child's needs are met and necessary resources are provided.

Nuske et al., (2019) also proposed five major strategies to support school personnel before and during these transition periods. While interviews and surveys revealed strong communication between all IPS district stakeholders, it was also identified as an area that can benefit from more attention. Nuske et al., (2019) provide insight into in-depth communication between the sending and receiving school staff as well as between the school and home. Strategies including team transition planning meetings prior to the new school year, frequent parent communication with everyday language, and student key information pages. Planning and the use of an “identify-observe-explore” methods along with home visits, student-centered planning, and digital reports can also be used to aid teachers at this time. ASD-centered training and methodical placement can bolster communication among stakeholders. The authors proposed schools focus on sensory adaptations and make these adaptations wherever necessary to accommodate the ASD student to promote individualization by identifying and supporting student needs.

### **Peer Relationships**

A systematic review performed by Cresswell, Hinch & Cage (2019) explored the rewards and challenges adolescents with ASD face with peer relationships due to their social communication difficulties. This review revealed an emergence of four major themes (understanding friendship, having and wanting friends, challenges of peer relationships and overcoming challenges) that should be addressed to best support students with ASD in an educational setting. The authors

found that students with ASD understood and experienced friendship differently than typically developing (TD) peers. Participants identified help, support, trust, and shared interests as the four areas important in maintaining relationships. Making friends was identified as the most difficult challenge for ASD students and data revealed it became more difficult to make friends as participants got older. Group interaction was identified as a large area of difficulty for students with ASD and participants were found to have difficulty with group communication, social interaction and managing conflict in groups leading to the feeling of social exclusion. Parents and school staff revealed initiating friendships, offering advice to aid in friendship success and the facilitation of social interactions provided opportunities for a child to experience positive social relationships. Additional support such as social skill training groups helps individuals with autism understand social rules, build and maintain friendships, and manage bullying.

### **Managing Expectations**

Saggers et al., (2019) surveyed and interviewed parents, educators, and specialists to examine stakeholders' perceptions of educational needs of students with autism. Interestingly, IPS data correlated closely with this study's findings and although there is an overall positive sense regarding shared visions and expectations, this data can be used to provide next steps for faculty and staff to continue development of stakeholder communication and relationships regarding ASD programming.

First, data suggested all stakeholders viewed nonacademic needs as requiring greater support than academic needs. An interesting author proposal suggested that while educators perceived there were more education and allied health supports available to students at their schools,

specialists reported more of their time was spent consulting with parents, outside agencies, administration, teachers, and report writing rather than supporting the students with needs. Qualitative data revealed three key themes: school staff understanding of the autism spectrum, recognition, and support for the unique and diverse educational needs of students on the spectrum and building school capacity.

Educational needs of students on the autism spectrum were identified as a theme due to the abundance of discussion surrounding going beyond a traditional focus on academic learning and recognizing social-emotional needs as a priority to provide best outcomes for learning. Awareness of the way anxiety impacts students on the spectrum and a “whole-of-school” approach can create more inclusive settings with better access to academic achievement. A multi-tiered approach for social-emotional learning can employ school-wide, small group and individually focused responses to the “needs” of all students and allows educators an opportunity to go beyond the focus of traditional academic and learning needs. Sagers et al., (2019) advise that building capacity helps maximize success and confidence and develop a unified approach to support ASD students. First, knowledge translation and awareness through professional development and training of all staff, as well as support from colleagues with expert knowledge can enhance programming. Improving awareness of a student’s individual strengths and interests, and effectively supporting the unique needs of students while maintaining a focus on the social-emotional factors contributes to capacity building. The authors note that appropriate levels of funding to support the various resources is essential to properly provide for students on the spectrum. Finally, the authors placed a large emphasis on collaboration and developing transparent processes among all stakeholders. Trust, three-way

relationships, and communication were seen as essential in facilitating a collaborative approach. Communication between educators and students was also identified as integral to “getting the most out of” students and motivating them as well as truly understanding the students and gaining the ability to effectively respond to their needs. Saggars et al., (2019) identified the “collected voice” as the understanding and input of all stakeholders to reflect the needs of students on the spectrum to ensure educational success and academic outcomes.

### **Inclusion in “Specials” Classes Such as Physical Education**

Beamer and Yun (2014) analyzed 142 teacher surveys taken by certified Physical Education (P.E.) teachers to provide information on best practice for teaching students with ASD. The Ipswich interviews revealed concern for ASD students during classes such as P.E., Art, Music, etc., and this study provides insight into strategies and suggestions for effective inclusion. Beamer and Yun (2014) proposed that their results showed possible collaborative efforts are being made in school settings and state the importance of training future physical educators to work collaboratively with other professionals such as special education teachers. Due to the high number of participants that reported teaching students with ASD, they believed the need for training in inclusive practices is warranted. There is evidence that GPE teachers receive at least one adapted physical education (APE) class in their schooling, but participants displayed a desire for more classes in this area. Participants also self-reported that their undergraduate APE class was not helpful. Data indicated teachers’ attitude toward inclusion was related to the number of in-service trainings they had attended and if they were supported by the special education teacher. The authors affirmed teacher education and continued professional development stood

out in this study as crucial to the successful inclusion of students with needs in specialist classes such as PE.

The following section provides IPS with an assessment of programming provided for students with autism and suggested recommendations.

## Assessment of Programming for Students with Autism

IPS contacted Academic Discoveries, LLC to conduct a program review of the programming the District offers for students who are diagnosed with autism to ensure students are receiving an educational learning experience in the least restrictive environment that is grounded in best practices for the individual needs of the students. The program review focused on three main questions that were outlined in the findings section of the report. These questions were researched using a multi-dimensional program review model utilizing data collected by the District and evaluator, peer-reviewed research, observations, and interviews. This section of the report explains some of the findings from the review.

IPS employs highly qualified professional educators in the general education and special education staff. Their staff, overall, have proven longevity and commitment to the district, community, and students at large. In addition, administration, staff, parents, and students expressed their appreciation for the dedication and commitment IPS demonstrates in supporting all students. IPS hires highly qualified staff to support the specialized needs of students with autism. The staff licensure aligns with DESE's requirements. In addition, IPS provides significant professional development to ensure staff training is up-to-date and aligns with the most recent trends. Additionally, IPS provides professional development to parents of children with autism. One example includes the Autism Insurance training, which was facilitated in September of 2018. IPS plans to provide another training similar in the upcoming months.

Educational programming for students who are diagnosed with autism was viewed among staff, students, and parents as requiring and receiving individualized services based on student ability

and needs. When considering whether IPS provides services for students with disabilities in the least restrictive setting, evidence supported the District philosophy of inclusion, as iterated on the Pupil Personnel Services homepage. Overwhelmingly, IPS is committed to providing students a learning experience in an inclusive setting whenever possible. For those students who were in a pull-out lesson, it was reported to the evaluator that those individuals would return to their inclusion/integrated classroom when the lesson was completed. IPS provides individual one-to-one supports when needed for their students and uses a paraprofessional flow chart to assist with determining the students' needs for this support. This strategy not only provides consistency across the district, but also encourages clarity to parents and staff members simultaneously.

To determine the impact of the supports provided to students and their outcomes, interview questions were provided with this focus. The parents and students reported their appreciation for this support throughout their educational experience at IPS. The staff and administration provided examples of student success stories, specifically on providing the supports early in a child's school experience resulting in personal growth and independence.

Additionally, IPS expressed concern as to whether they are providing enough supports to students with autism to ensure they are successful in the community. Although this strategy was not observed in the community, staff, parents, and students did detail the transitional components provided to students. As part of this evaluation, it would be recommended that a more thorough assessment be implemented to ensure the strengths and weaknesses specifically in how the school system is measuring success within the community. This comment is not to infer those measurable outcomes are not in place. Rather, that the staff, parents, and students are unclear as

to how the system recognizes the success of the transition planning within the community.

Therefore, it may be a consideration to provide professional development, discussions, or clarity around these efforts. Due to COVID, the evaluator was not able to observe the community sites and the success of the individual students. The participants of this evaluation, however, did report that there are many pre-vocational opportunities provided within the school setting.

Furthermore, students are also given lessons on shopping at the grocery store, getting hair done at a salon, as well as daily living skills.

## Recommendations

The program review for the IPS consisted of interviewing administration, teaching staff, special educators, parents, and students. The evaluators also reviewed statewide and districtwide data, IEPs, and classroom observations. This program review was completed over a span of approximately three months. As a result of this program review, it is important to recognize the quantity of highly qualified staff throughout the district, and their dedication and commitment to the students of whom they serve. Furthermore, the review identified many positive attributes of the district's programming for students with autism. The review included a select literature review which supports many practices provided by the district currently. As a result of this review, Academic Discoveries, LLC is including the following recommendations for consideration. The recommendations have been broken down into two categories; communication and systemic approaches.

### **Communication**

Although parents expressed an appreciation for the work, dedication, and commitment of IPS as it relates to supporting students who have been diagnosed with autism, some recommendations are a result of this review.

#### *Transition Planning:*

We would recommend that when IPS provides parents with transition plans, that the IEP Team ensures parents understand the recommendations for students as they transition beyond high school. This recommendation is not to infer that IPS does not currently provide some supports currently. In fact, IPS provided the evaluators with detailed transition plans, outlining significant detail. To clarify, parents were concerned that they did not truly understand the plan in place. Therefore, the recommendation is to provide additional training to parents as it relates to transition planning.

#### *Explanation of Programming:*

IPS currently has an incredibly supportive and highly qualified staff and support staff that serves students on the autism spectrum. The evaluator was extremely impressed with the ABA models provided at the elementary, middle school, and high school buildings. It is our recommendation

that IPS publicly highlights the success of these offerings whether it be at a school committee meeting, on the website, or other social media opportunities. IPS could be recognized as a model district in supporting students with autism in a public-school setting.

### **Systemic Approaches**

#### *Transition Planning:*

IPS provided the evaluator with well-developed forms and protocols used in the special education program, but little was presented around the planning for transition. This is not to suggest that IPS does not already have these in place. However, it would be our recommendation that IPS create a flow chart, protocol, or at least a list of resources for parents of children with autism to provide opportunities for community connections when the students transition beyond the K-12 public school system.

In conclusion, it has been a pleasure working with Ipswich Public Schools. We thank you for the opportunity and respect all the work your District does each day to provide the best education for your students.

Respectfully Submitted,



Dr. Nadine G. Ekstrom



Dr. Leah Ferullo

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