

**Final Report on the Evaluation of Exceptional Students Services
in the City Schools of Decatur**

prepared for
City Schools of Decatur

by
**Urban Child Study Center and
Center for Evaluation and Research Services
at Georgia State University**



**URBAN CHILD
STUDY CENTER**
The future is ours to develop.

July 2018

Executive Summary

In 2017, the City Schools of Decatur (CSD) collaborated with the Urban Child Study Center and the Center for Evaluation and Research Services in the Georgia State University College of Education & Human Development to gather information on how the district implements processes and procedures to ensure effective instruction, student achievement, and family engagement in its Exceptional Students Services (ESS) program. Using a mixed-methods approach that included the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, researchers conducted individual and focus group interviews, administered surveys, and examined records from the district's administrative data. From the analyses emerged a complex picture of special services programming in the district.

Overall, the data in the following report suggest that CSD is a rapidly growing district with skilled, high-quality teachers and staff, abundant resources, and an engaged community. These assets help to create a culture of care, safety, good will, and high expectations. Simultaneously, this growth, coupled with shifts in the disability populations served at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, has created inconsistency in both service delivery and communication between families, teachers, and the central office. The evaluation team identified seven salient characteristics of the district's special education services program from the data collected: (1) Shared Values, (2) Organizational Structure, (3) Accountability and Transparency, (4) Data-Driven Decision Making, (5) Communal Networks, (6) Utilizations of Resources, and (7) Feedback Loops.

Shared Values. There are numerous characteristics and attributes that make CSD a desirable place for stakeholders to either live, work, or educate their students. Described as a "destination district," some of the attractive qualities identified were diversity, inclusion, excellence, community, value, and quality. Many parents stated that they chose this community when given a chance to select where they lived because of the reputation of the school district. The district is perceived as a desired community where amenities and resources tend to exceed what might be considered average in other communities.

Shared values in the school context was reflected in the way that children are treated not only by teachers but also by their peers. Parents identified initiatives that specifically support students with disabilities and that foster a sense of community and inclusion. Additionally, this characteristic reflected the level of acceptance by teachers and peers of their children's learning strengths and challenges, language difference, and family structure. However, one area of tension in shared values is around the delivery of services to students

with dyslexia. Responses from one school-based stakeholder indicated concern around when dyslexic students should receive services. Responses from parents reflected similar concern.

Organizational Structure. Organizational structures refer to the standard operating procedures for various purposes and procedures, such as requesting a meeting, referral for services and/or evaluation and resolving a dispute. For parents, the organizational structure was often unclear. The most significant issue was the lack of understanding of the process of reporting and solving concerns at the school level. Additionally, there was a reported inconsistency around operating protocol from school to school. Parents frequently acquired information about procedures through informal channels, such as social networks where parents shared how they obtained services for their child. School-based stakeholders reported knowing the appropriate contact for specific issues and needs within the school or at the district level. They reported a sense of satisfaction on the quality and quantity of support available to them from the district. However, the use of “alternative routes” to resolve issues was not uncommon. Parental circumvention of the process and use of alternative routes to obtain services was an issue for teachers and administrators in the schools. Frequently, teachers and school level administrators believed that a favorable solution could have been reached without requesting a solution at the district level. Ultimately, the perceived result of these practices is inconsistency in operating procedures across CSD.

Accountability and Transparency. The characteristic of accountability and transparency presented layered and complex issues. While many parents were able to articulate the ESS process, citing similar steps in completing the eligibility process, inconsistency came when making determinations about potential provided services. Factors that led to variation included (a) the ability to secure an attorney or advocate, (b) persistence with parent requests and/or demands for specific services, (c) involvement of perceived decision makers at meetings, and (d) the individual parent’s level of knowledge and expertise on the ESS process. Parents reported that they were more successful in achieving the desired outcome for their child in the ESS process if one or more of these factors were used to their advantage. For many parents, the amount of time spent researching options or resources both within the district and in the private sector was a factor in achieving the desired service outcome. Teachers and administrators generally cited the same process or system for completing specific processes within the ESS framework. However, a point of tension emerged in the clarity around “presence of a disability” and “eligibility to receive services for the disability.” There is a need for clarification of the inclusion and exclusion factors considered as a part of determining eligibility of students to participate in ESS programming.

Establishing a clear narrative regarding the purpose and utility of specific processes can contribute to a higher level of accountability that is desired by many stakeholders.

Data-Driven Decision Making. Parents, teachers, and administrators identified data collection as a common practice in CSD. While data is collected using different methods and in varying contexts, school and district stakeholders stated that data collection for implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) was the most common. While RTI data collection appears to be a consistent practice, communicating the ways that teachers and staff use those data to make decisions and/or inform instructional practice is not. Parents expressed concern with the ways that their students advanced through or exited from tiers with the RTI framework. There is not a clear understanding by the parents of the RTI steps and tiers, how long it should take to move through tiers, or how and when eligibility for special education services is determined within the process. Clear communication around RTI policy and procedures, as well how data is used in this framework, should be a priority.

Parental Communal Networks. Many parents reported that social networks were the most reliable and accessible resource available to them for ways to successfully navigate the ESS process. Both formal and informal communal systems are in place that provide a platform on which families can interact with each other or other stakeholders. There are varying purposes for these networks, including information sharing, decision making, resource identification, and moral support. The Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA) was the most frequently identified formal communal system from which information was shared and disseminated for parents of children with disabilities. Parents also noted that support is readily available through informal, parent-led channels. Some spoke of the challenge of learning how to plug into the informal channels in order to leverage them efficiently. From the district's perspective, all stakeholders seemed to acknowledge that resource and information sharing with parents is a challenge. Formal system communication around policies and procedures is currently a challenge for the district. A formal system of communication that is explicit, intentional, and strategic could leverage both formal and informal parental communal networks to support student needs.

Utilization of Resources. Various stakeholders reported that both human and material resources were perceived as abundant within the ESS division of CSD. In addition to acquiring materials, school and district stakeholders reported the availability of numerous professional development opportunities for teachers. The opportunities included topics such as RTI, behavior supports, mindset training, SEEKS training, expeditionary learning, two-

day speech conference, Pathways Training, Orton-Gillingham training, Assistive Technology conference, and Just Words training. Special education teachers also noted that information sharing, feedback, and training also occurred at monthly ESS program meetings.

While 75% of the teachers surveyed agreed that the professional development (PD) they received was beneficial, tensions exist as it relates to the prioritization of resources for PD. School-based stakeholders reported that the PD opportunities, in some cases, were overwhelming with teachers being out of the classroom for trainings that were not perceived as a priority. Other stakeholders expressed concern about the relevance of the trainings and PD that were required by the district. Creating opportunities for teachers to have more autonomy in selecting PD experiences or providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate with other teachers were common suggestions expressed by teachers.

Disagreement exists regarding the utilization and prioritization of material resources. Many felt that some services, such as occupational, speech, and physical therapy, are provided in a timely manner. However, others have to be fought for to obtain. In particular, concerns were expressed around the needs of students with dyslexia. Parents spoke of their concerns around special education teachers having very little training in how to teach their children with dyslexia. Another parent questioned the district practice of not using the term “dyslexic” when a parent is seeking services for his or her child. These perceptions run counter to the PD that teachers reported receiving from the district (e.g., Orton-Gillingham is a reading curriculum designed specifically to support the needs of students with dyslexia).

Human resources were addressed as well. While administrators have the autonomy to hire teachers that best meet the needs of the schools and students, placement of those hires were not always perceived as the most efficient. Balancing human resources within the schools was of concern. One identified area of disproportion of resources as perceived by parents was gifted education. CSD has a large number of gifted students and parents spoke of the need for more human resource allocation for this area.

Stakeholders also expressed the desire for allocation of resources to provide parent training around supporting the needs of students served in the ESS program. Parents with students in the ESS program are generally knowledgeable about their child’s needs but would like to know more about CSD services provided and what actually happens in the classroom. Monthly training sessions supporting the needs of students served in the ESS program would increase communication around special education program policies and procedures while increasing parent self-efficacy.

Feedback Loops. Many stakeholders noted that feedback loops were an area for improvement for CSD. Currently, feedback is offered through case managers, special education teachers, LINKS teachers, and on websites. Stakeholders at the classroom and school level questioned the consistency and degree of effectiveness of the feedback obtained from these methods. Having a case manager stay with a student for multiple grades was reported as one of the best ways to continuously support students and families. Daily written communication between teacher and parent was another way to provide continuous, consistent support for ESS students and their families. At the district level, feedback loops were also an identified challenge. While a website and brochures are available, stakeholders report that confusion remains about the ESS program process. Standardized and centralizing information, and making it accessible in multiple formats (e.g., individual schools and district websites, parent meetings, community coffees) would help to inform stakeholders, reduce confusion, and establish positive communication channels between parents, teachers, administrators, and community members.

Another area frequently cited where communication and feedback loops are challenging is transition from grade to grade and school to school. Given CSD's unique organizational structure, families who have children receiving ESS program services from early childhood through high school could experience five different transition points as they move from school building to school building, notwithstanding transitions that happen at each grade level within a school building. These transition points are a source of anxiety for many parents. According to stakeholders, incidences of inconsistent messaging was increased when transitions occurred. Within schools, another area of concern is communication between the resource room, self-contained classroom, and inclusion classroom. CSD has recently hired a Transition Specialist to address these issues.

Finally, a common issue shared by administrators is the process by which school-based challenges are handled. Several stakeholders spoke of an identified process where concerns could be shared with administrators as a first step in solving a school-based problem. However, others spoke of negative experiences when using the identified process. In some instances, that process is not consistently used by parents or teachers. When addressing ways that concerns are resolved, many parents interviewed stated that accessing the tools available directly through the district office resulted in more favorable outcomes for their children. They believed that going to the central office was more effective course of action than going to the teacher or principal at the school.

Recommendations

In sum, CSD has many strengths and challenges associated with implementing an effective ESS program. The data lend themselves to the following priority recommendations. Importantly, some recommendations can be implemented quickly, and could result in more immediate improvements experienced by all stakeholders. Others, however, require systems-level change, and represent significant shifts that may take more time to implement successfully. Thus, a strategic approach to addressing each recommendation is warranted.

1. Standardize Communication: CSD should standardize communication protocols to ensure common language, expectations, and processes are followed for sharing information with all stakeholders, including families, teachers, administrators, and the community. Specifically, with regard to the ESS program, clarifying and communicating procedures for determining eligibility and service delivery in organizational structure, processes, procedures, and protocols is essential.

Teachers, Staff, and Administrators. Based on data collected during the evaluation, teachers and administrators were aware of and recognized the organizational structure, processes, procedures and protocols for ESS. However, teachers and administrators spoke of alternative routes used by parents to resolve concerns. The circumvention of school-level teachers and administrators around the special education process decreased communication between parents, teachers, and administrators, and denied teachers and administrators insight into perceived concerns parents are experiencing with the ESS program. Establishing a consistent mechanism by which this protocol is communicated and insisting on its use may facilitate more effective communication and implementation of the ESS program.

Parents. Based on data collected during the evaluation, organizational structure, processes, procedures, protocols, and standards that are in place within the ESS structure are unclear to parents. Ensuring this information is correct, consistent, available and accessible to all stakeholders at the school building level would be beneficial to parents in three ways. First, it would provide some assurance that teachers, staff, and administrators in the school building are all knowledgeable about the ESS program. Second, it would facilitate communication between parents and school-level personnel, giving teachers and administrators insight into parents' concerns and allowing them the opportunity to address them appropriately and expeditiously. Such transparency with parents about school-level processes and procedures should also decrease parents' need to take special education questions or requests directly to the central office. Third, it would reduce parents' reliance on

informal channels to navigate the ESS program. Though well-intentioned, information gathered through informal channels can be full of error and misguidance, increase tension between the school and family, and ultimately lead to less favorable services for the student.

Ultimately, having strong communication protocols not only increases stakeholders' knowledge about the ESS program, but also ensures that all parties have equity as they participate in various aspects of the program. It is imperative that all school personnel, including teachers, support staff, and administrators, have shared knowledge of ESS and use common language while setting expectations for special education services. It is equally imperative that parents have access to the same information, regardless of their student's academic year, school, grade level, or teacher(s). Establishing strong communication protocols can help the district achieve these conditions.

2. Reevaluate Resource Allocation: CSD should take both grade level and type of disability into consideration when allocating resources within the school district.

Grade Level and Disability Type. The administrative data analysis revealed changes in the distribution of students by both disability category and the number of students served at various grade levels in the ESS program. Comments by stakeholders also revealed a concern that there was a mismatch between the needs of students served in the ESS program and the allocated resources appropriate to address the unique needs of students. As CSD evaluates its allocation of resources within and across schools, it should consider explicitly whether the current allocation of resources aligns with shifts in the ESS student population.

Professional Learning Opportunities across P-12. Both administrators and teachers mentioned the availability of numerous and varied PD opportunities for teachers. While 75% of the teachers surveyed agreed that the PD was beneficial, tensions emerged about the prioritization of resources for PD. Teachers may benefit from increased autonomy over the selection of the PD experiences, as well as offering PD that is targeted towards specific teachers or priority issues for the district. The district should also consider surveying teachers to inquire about their own unique PD needs, which may differ by grade level and ESS student population that is being served.

3. Examine Response to Intervention (RTI) processes for Tiers 1-4 across P-12: CSD should formally evaluate the effectiveness of its RTI program, with particular focus on implementation in Tiers 2 and 3. The qualitative and quantitative data collected through this evaluation generally indicate a level of agreement (although perhaps some misperceptions or

lack of information) regarding processes, procedures, activities, and outcomes for students in Tier 1 (all CSD students) and students in Tier 4 (CSD students receiving special education services). However, perceptions varied across stakeholders regarding processes, procedures, activities, and outcomes for CSD students in Tiers 2 and 3. Formal data were not available throughout the district for evaluation within these tiers, limiting both the qualitative and quantitative findings of this evaluation significantly. Consequently, the quantitative analyses within this report were limited only to comparisons between students in Tier 1 to Tier 4. Meanwhile, data collected through interviews, focus groups, and the survey provided some insight into stakeholder perceptions about Tiers 1 through 4. In general, stakeholders held different perceptions about data collection procedures, governance of the RTI program, communication about RTI, progression of students from tier to tier, and availability of resources for students within each tier. These findings, coupled with the lack of available data, indicate a need to investigate CSD's implementation of RTI.

In addition, the differing perceptions of the process and purpose of RTI, particularly at Tiers 2 and 3, indicate a need to clarify the implementation of RTI, overall. This is especially critical in establishing a common understanding among all CSD personnel, which could lead to a more consistent message to parents and families. There are example data collection processes and procedures described on the Georgia Department of Education (2018) website that may be helpful in addressing this concern. It is recommended that CSD establish a clear organizational structure for its RTI continuum, with identifiable distinctions between services and supports provides in Tiers 2 through 4 and a formal Student Support Team (SST) process to monitor students' progress within and across tiers.

4. Improve Data Infrastructure: CSD should strengthen its data infrastructure to support data-based decision-making for student achievement and continuous program improvement. The evaluation revealed weaknesses in CSD's data infrastructure. Interview and focus group responses suggest that stakeholders perceive that data systems in place to monitor the progress of students served in ESS programs may not be utilized optimally. Some respondents felt that while progress-monitoring data were being collected, these data were not being systematically analyzed to alter program delivery for students. Importantly, these data are all held in individual schools and did not appear to be connected to or accessible by administrative data held within the central office. As noted previously, this evaluation was limited because of the unavailability of data on services and outcomes for students in Tiers 2 and 3. It is unclear whether these limitations were related to the capacity of the data system itself, the quantity of staff required to manage the data system, or the

institutional knowledge required to maintain and locate records related to these types of data. School districts face significant challenges in developing and maintaining staff and resources sufficient for the utilization of administrative data systems. The numerous reporting requirements associated with oversight and compliance activities required of districts limits their ability to utilize data for program improvement. Nevertheless, effective RTI implementation requires data that is timely, accessible, and useful for making decisions about educational programming monthly, weekly, and even daily. Therefore, attention to these aspects of the district's data systems will ultimately support positive outcomes for students in the ESS program.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Individual and Group Interviews	5
Theme 1 – Shared Values	8
Theme 2 – Organizational Structure	9
Theme 3 – Accountability and Transparency	11
Theme 4 – Data-driven Decision Making.....	12
Theme 5 – Communal Networks	13
Theme 6 – Utilization of Resources.....	14
Theme 7 – Feedback Loops	16
Online Survey Data.....	19
Administrative Data	30
General Discussion and Conclusions.....	46
Recommendations.....	48
References	52
Appendices.....	53
A. Interview Protocols	54
B. Online Survey Questions.....	61
C. Presentation to School Board	73
D. One-page Summary.....	102

LIST OF FIGURES

1	Data Collection Activity.....	5
2	Survey responses from parents whose children receive services from ESS	21
3	Survey responses from parents whose children do not receive services from ESS	22
4	Survey responses from CSD employees with no children attending CSD	23
5	Survey responses from CSD employees in general education with no children attending CSD	24
6	Survey responses from CSD employees in ESS with no children attending CSD	25
7	Survey responses from CSD employees in ESS with no children served by ESS	26
8	Survey responses from CSD employees in general education with no children served by ESS	27
9	Survey responses from CSD employees in general education with children served by ESS	28
10	Number of students—CSD.....	32
11	Behavioral incidents per student	33
12	Behavioral incidents per student (for students with at least one incident)	33
13	Absences per student 2011-2016.....	34
14	Proportion of students identified by program 2011-2017	35
15	Count of students identified by program 2011-2017	35
16	Count of students with disabilities by school level	36
17	Count of students at high school level	37
18	Count of students identified by program.....	37
19	Behavioral incidents by year (comparison).....	39
20	Behavioral incidents rate by type (comparison).....	39
21	Absences per student (comparison).....	40
22	Returning students (comparison)	41
23	Student test score performance: End of grade exams (comparison).....	42
24	Student test score performance: Georgia Milestones Assessments (comparison)	42
25	Proportion of students served by year: gender & ethnicity	44



Introduction

In 2017, the City Schools of Decatur (CSD) partnered with the Urban Child Study Center and the Center for Evaluation and Research Services in the Georgia State University College of Education and Human Development to gather information on how the district implements processes and procedures to ensure effective instruction, student achievement, and family engagement in its Exceptional Students Services (ESS) program. Over nearly a year, researchers conducted individual and group interviews, administered surveys, and examined records from administrative data. From the analyses emerged a complex picture of special services programming in the district.

City Schools of Decatur Team

David Dude, Superintendent

Daryl Campbell, Executive Director, Curriculum and Instruction (June 2017-present)

Frances Holt, Special Education Director (June 2017-present)

Heidi Whatley, Director, Student Supports (2012-2017), Research and Analytics Director (June 2017-present)

Bruce Roaden, Director of Secondary Education (2015-2017), Executive Director, Student Supports (June 2017-present)

Frank DeFillippo, Coordinator, Special Education

GSU College of Education & Human Development Team

Nicole Patton-Terry, Director, The Urban Child Study Center

Kevin Fortner, Assistant Professor, Educational Policy Studies

Susan Ogletree, Director, Center for Evaluation and Research Services

Robert Hendrick, Research Affiliate, Center for Evaluation and Research Services

DaShaunda Patterson, Clinical Assistant Professor, Special Education

Gwendolyn Benson, Associate Dean for School, Community, and International Partnerships

Purposes of the Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation was to support CSD in achieving its goal of building “the foundation for all children to be their best, achieve their dreams, and make the world a better place.” CSD has a long tradition of promoting academic achievement and overall well-being amongst all of its students in pre-k through 12th grades. In order to ensure that it is not only providing effective educational programming but also responding appropriately when concerns are identified, CSD has adopted a policy to continuously evaluate its educational programs. By establishing a regular schedule of program evaluation with an independent third-party entity, CSD confirms its commitment to offering one of the “top ten community school districts in the nation”. In pursuance of that goal, this evaluation focused on how well CSD implements processes and procedures around effective instruction, student achievement, and family engagement in its special education program. The evaluation focused primarily on programs and services provided to two groups of students:

1. Students served through provisions outlined in IDEA and ADA. These students have an IEP or 504 plan and participate in the Tier 4 Special Education program within the district’s Response to Intervention (RTI) continuum.
2. Students served through other support programs and services to improve achievement. These students do not have an IEP or 504 plan. Importantly, these students could have participated in any other programming offered in Tiers 1, 2, and 3 within the district’s RTI continuum (e.g., general education classroom, Early Intervention Programs; Remedial Education Programs).

Mixed Methods Approach

The evaluation team used a mixed-methods approach in an effort to improve the validity and reliability of the results. Three main sources of data—individual and group interviews, online surveys, and administrative documentation—were gathered to help triangulate the results and provide a comprehensive picture of the district’s ESS program. Data collection started in the spring of 2017 and was ongoing along with analyses and reporting through the spring of 2018.

Scope of Work Questions

The evaluation plan agreement outlined four general categories of investigation: student outcomes, processes and procedures surrounding the delivery of services for students with disabilities, the characteristics of teachers serving students with disabilities, and parent and community factors related to the success of students with disabilities. The administrative

(quantitative) data section of this document reports on the academic, social, and behavioral outcomes of students served in special education (Tier 4) programs in CSD. Although a part of the original scope of work, data and findings specifically on students in Tiers 2 and 3 could not be reported because of the unavailability of data to identify students served in these tiers. As a result, unless otherwise specified, the quantitative findings in this report reflect comparisons between children who were receiving special education services and children who were not.

Across the sources of data collected during the evaluation, the evaluation team did not encounter data indicating problems with compliance within CSD. CSD files annual reports with the Georgia Department of Education regarding the assessment of students to make determinations of eligibility for special education services. CSD is meeting its reporting obligations to the state (as shown in the Georgia Department of Education (n.d.) school profiles archive). Therefore, the qualitative data section of this document focuses not on compliance, but rather on the capacity of CSD to provide effective services for students in its ESS program, examining structures, process, procedures, and interactions between families, teachers, staff, administrators, and the central office to support students with special needs. Focus group and interviews provided data used to document how CSD serves students across the RTI continuum, including Tiers 2, 3, and 4. This data collection effort also documents professional learning in the district, communications between teachers and families, and the perceived efficacy of the services provided by CSD. In addition, the CSD online survey examines perceptions of CSD employees, parents, and community members. The survey addresses the perceived quality of services provided by the ESS program, the implementation of those services, and the timely evaluation of students within the ESS program.

Finally, the relationship of parent and community factors related to the success of students in the ESS program is addressed through the qualitative data gathered for this report. Here again, the qualitative approach allowed for some findings relevant to students across the RTI continuum, including students in Tiers 2, 3, and 4. These data address the flow of communications between community groups, teachers, school-level administrators, and central office personnel. These sections also document the variability in knowledge related to the provision, eligibility, and continuum of services offered by CSD for students with special needs.

Organization of the Report

The next three sections of the report provide a description of the data collection methods and the analyses for the interview data, the online survey data, and the administrative data. Following these sections, we combine these results to identify core issues that emerged from the

evaluation and provide recommendations based on the evaluation findings. Appendices provide copies of interview protocols, the questions from the online survey, the PowerPoint presentation presented to the school board, and a one-page summary of the evaluation's major findings.



Individual and Group Interviews

Participants

The qualitative evaluation team was made up of nine specialists in the areas of Educational Leadership, Special Education, quantitative research methodologies, and qualitative research methodologies. The evaluation team conducted 19 individual interviews, 8 of these with system administrators and 11 with principals and assistant principals of the nine schools in the system. Additionally, 31 group interviews were conducted with general educators, special educators, general education parents, and special education parents at each of the eight schools. The administration at each school site was charged by the superintendent to invite teachers and parents to participate in the group interview process. While it was the intent of the researchers to have four distinct groups at each of the school sites, this was not always possible. At two sites, no general education teachers had been invited to participate in a group interview. At one site, all of the teachers were interviewed together, both general education teachers and special education teachers. At two sites no, general education parents were interviewed, and at one site, parents of general education and special education students were interviewed together.

Date	Site	Administrators	General Education Teachers	Special Education Teachers	General Education Parents	Parents of Children with Special Needs
11-Apr	Glennwood ES	1	6	3	6	4
12-Apr	Wynnona Park ES	1		2		3
13-Apr	Oakhurst ES	2	2	2	4	5
17-Apr	Renfroe MS	1		6	4	4
20-Apr	Clairemont ES	1	3	2	1	8
24-Apr	4/5 Academy	1	40	16	6	
25-Apr	Westchester ES	1	20			10
16-May	Decatur HS	2	9	12	4	2
19-May	College Heights ECLC	1	4	4	8	2
various	System Administrators	8				
Total	221	19	84	47	33	38
	Individual Interviews	19				
	Group Interviews	31				

System administrators interviewed: Assessment & Accountability Director, McKinney-Vento Homeless Liaison, RTI Specialist, School Board Member, Special Education Coordinator, Student Support Coordinator, Superintendent, Title I Coordinator

Figure 1. Data collection activity.

Methods

The evaluation team developed interview protocols for the different groups being interviewed—system administrators, school administrators, teachers, and parents. The protocols consisted of similar sets of questions, but they were tailored to the interviewees. We chose to use semi-structured interviews because they facilitate the interviews' becoming conversations where participants can feel comfortable sharing information. Participants at the school level, including parents, were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. Sample interview protocols are included in Appendix A.

Each group and individual interview was recorded by digital recorder and the audio was transcribed. A process of content analysis was used to identify emergent themes as continuous recursive data analysis was employed by the qualitative researchers throughout the research process. The researchers sought to gain both emic and etic perspectives through comparison of the district employee's perceptions with the parental perceptions. A systematic validity check was employed as the data was being analyzed using the following guidelines: (a) watching for disagreements among participants, (b) checking for participant accuracy when possible, (c) accepting negative evidence, (d) seeking alternative explanations, and (e) including negative evidence into the results (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

The qualitative interviews were conducted at the request of the Superintendent with school employees who were involved with the implementation of the special education program in the City Schools of Decatur. Reasons for conducting the interviews were twofold: (1) to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of system administrators, principals/assistant principals, general education teachers, special education teachers, parents of general education students, and parents of special education students around the perceived quality of the special education program, the special education process, and thoughts on how to improve the program and (2) to give participants an opportunity to share their personal experiences with the special education program. These data can be used to identify program successes as well as what needs to be adjusted in the special education program in the schools. Understanding the perspectives of the participants is essential in making relevant program improvements. Additionally, when the qualitative data are triangulated with the quantitative data, data driven programmatic decisions can be made with confidence.

There were five distinct groups interviewed. The administrators and principals/assistant principals were individually interviewed while the teachers and parents participated in group interviews. The interviews were conducted between the dates of March 17, 2017, and June 15, 2017. The individual interviews took place at the City Schools of Decatur main office or in the

office of the principal at each individual school. The parent and teacher interviews took place at the schools.

The superintendent identified the administrators and principals who were interviewed while the teacher and parent participants were invited by the school principal to participate in group interviews. The researchers requested that they be allowed to invite parents and teachers to participate in the group interview process directly. However, after much discussion and because of FERPA concerns of the school district administrators, each principal was charged with inviting group participants. Having the principals/school administration send the invitation to the teachers and parents poses a potential limitation for the study as there is no way to know if, and any particular school, all teachers and parents were invited or only those with positive experiences.

Introduction to Findings

As described above, the purpose of this research study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of stakeholders around the perceived quality of the special education program and the special education process and to elicit their thoughts on how to improve the program delivery. The Exceptional Students Services program in the City Schools of Decatur provides a variety of special education services for those students who qualify for participation in the program primarily using an inclusive model. The inclusion model involves the general education teacher, special education teacher, and parents/guardians working collaboratively to meet the academic needs of the special education student. Because the system uses a holistic, collaborative approach to special education, we interviewed multiple groups of stakeholders.

We completed the thematic analysis of the individual and group interviews by first dividing responses into groups by type of participant: administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, general education parents, and special education parents. Based on the analysis of interviews from stakeholders within the City Schools of Decatur, the following seven consistent themes emerged:

1. Shared values,
2. Organizational Structure,
3. Accountability and Transparency,
4. Data-driven decision making,
5. Communal networks,
6. Utilization of resources, and
7. Feedback loops.

The information below provides the theme along with the operational definition derived from common ideas and statements during interviews, and sample quotations offered directly from stakeholders. Quotations were selected to represent the overall perspective of stakeholders within each theme, while protecting the confidentiality of the respondent.

Theme 1—Shared Values

“Shared Values” refers to the common ideals held and maintained by the stakeholders who are part of the CSD community. This theme emerged based on numerous and varied references to characteristics and attributes that make the CSD a desirable place for stakeholders to live, work, or educate their students. Several participants described CSD as a “destination district,” identifying positive characteristics, such as *diversity, inclusion, excellence, community, value, and quality*. Data collected from teachers, parents, and administrators consistently addressed these traits.

Many stakeholders, most frequently parents, noted that they “sought out” this community when given the choice to select their location. Similarly, one school-based stakeholder told us, “We have people who move to our school district just for the program.” In general, prevailing ideals in this category include the idea that Decatur is a desired community where amenities and resources tend to exceed what might be considered average in other communities. This is evident in the city and in the schools, specifically. One participant commented,

My expectation was for Decatur to be more inclusive than other school districts, and for the quality of just the teaching and everything to be great. I believe that as far as the quality of just teaching, the teachers, administrators, I've always had a really great experience with all of them.

Another school-based stakeholder stated “...average at a state level is not the same as average at City of Decatur level. They’re not the same average.” To this end, many stakeholders perceive that the number of students served in the ESS program has increased and that this is particularly true for students identified as “twice exceptional,” that is, having a disability and demonstrating gifted abilities.

In the school context, this theme of Shared Values was communicated in a variety of ways. For many, this was reflected simply in the way that their children were treated. Parents identified various initiatives that are offered within schools, specifically to support students with disabilities, that foster a sense of community and inclusion. For example, one parent stated about her son that he is

so cared for and it's not just the teachers and the para pros. It's the kids that are here. They're incredible. They have a helpers club. That blew me away when I realized that that was happening here.

Additionally, the theme was reflected in the level of acceptance that parents perceived was offered to their children. This included acceptance of many elements, including ability, learning style, language difference, and family structure. In an interview, one parent shared that a specific teacher “recognizes that some of these kids have different limitations but [has] such an appreciation for what strengths each kid brings to the table.”

While the general consensus among those who were interviewed is that CSD strives to foster high levels of shared values, there were some identifiable tensions across stakeholders regarding whether the demonstration of these values was done with consistency. One area is the delivery of services to students with dyslexia. One school-based stakeholder highlighted this issue by stating this example:

I think we have a well-regarded special education program.... I'm not sure we deliver on those expectations consistently. We've had a lot of discussions about students with dyslexia, for instance, and we've had a lot of discussions about where we draw the line for where students get services and where they don't...

Responses from parents reflected a similar tension.

Overall, the ability to move forward with the idea of Shared Values was summed up by this stakeholder: “I think that this community does really view all students as exceptional and I think that it would be an easier sell to say that we are providing individual services for students based on whatever they need, whether it's a little or a lot.”

Theme 2--Organizational Structure

“Organizational Structure” refers to the processes, procedures, protocols, and standards that are in place to support the ESS program. This theme was identified based on numerous and varied references to the standard operating procedures that were in place for various purposes and contexts (e.g., requesting a meeting, referral for services/evaluation, resolving a dispute). For parents, the organizational structure was often unclear. In many cases, parents were able to identify the district level contact to whom they felt could address their questions or concerns as opposed to the appropriate school-level contact. Additionally, there was inconsistency from parents regarding their understanding of the process of reporting and solving concerns at the building level. Often, according to parent report, the information about these procedures was

obtained through informal channels (i.e., another parent shared their approach). Parents frequently reported a lack of clear information on operating protocol from school to school.

For teachers and administrators, recognition of the standard organizational structure was evident, including the fact that changes to this structure were underway at the central office. One school-based stakeholder shared, “We are restructuring a little but...I know my director will now just direct special ed.” Within this reorganization, new positions or roles are being established to support professional learning and teacher leadership along with lead teachers and a transition specialist. Within the current structure, these stakeholders generally held a shared understanding about the expected components for making referrals or advancing students through the response-to-intervention (RTI) process.

“It’s very rare that we find a student packet that does not have the appropriate interventions...I can think of maybe one incident....out of 20 kids...that had to be sent back because the intervention didn’t match the need area.”

--District-level stakeholder

Additionally, school-based stakeholders knew the appropriate contact for specific issues/needs either within the school or at the district level. School-based stakeholders also reported a sense of satisfaction about the quality and quantity of support available to them from the district. For example, one school-based stakeholder stated,

We receive a fair amount of support from our central office...I feel like they’re responsive and they’re very supportive and they come and they help problem solve all the time. So they’re stretched thin but they’re supportive.

However, it was not uncommon for these stakeholders to also identify and cite the use of “alternative routes” to resolve issues. This most commonly occurred when working to address problems for parents.

One of the greatest issues was the lack of shared understanding between parents and teachers/administrators. In many cases where administrators felt that parents circumvented the process, administrators believed that they could have facilitated a favorable solution. On the other hand, parents reported that they often felt that the only way to achieve a favorable solution was to directly utilize the resources at the district level as opposed to relying on the school level resources to be mobilized. Ultimately, the perceived result of these practices is inconsistency. One parent reported with frustration, “it just depends on who I am talking to which year, which teacher, and which administrator” (regarding accommodations and services).

Theme 3--Accountability and Transparency

“Accountability and Transparency” refers to the degree to which processes and decision-making practices are clear and consistent to stakeholders. For parents, this theme presented layered and complex issues. On the one hand, parents interviewed often identified common procedures within an ESS process. For example, parents of students with disabilities who were identified by the district cited similar steps in completing the eligibility process. On the other hand, they perceived broad inconsistency when they negotiated with the school and district in making determinations about services that would be provided. Factors they cited that led to variation included (a) the ability to secure an attorney or advocate for the child, (b) persistence with which parents made requests/demands for specific services, (c) involvement of perceived “decision-makers” at meetings, and (d) the individual parent’s level of knowledge/expertise about the process and/or the school district. Parents reported that their ability to leverage one or more of these factors increased the likelihood that they would experience a desired outcome for their child in the ESS process, but this was not the desired course of action: “You shouldn’t have to afford a lawyer to look out for your interests.” Further, for many parents, the amount of time spent researching their options or resources (within the district and in the private sector) was also a factor in potentially achieving a desired outcome: Parents who had the time or flexibility to conduct independent research reported a higher likelihood of obtaining the services that they desired for their child. One parent noted, “I really worry about the students whose parents don’t have the resources or the time or the energy or the know-how, to navigate the system.”

For administrators and teachers, the issues around accountability and transparency were less complex. These stakeholders generally cited the same process or system for completing specific processes within the ESS framework (e.g., the RTI process, special education eligibility process). These stakeholders consistently identified common key contacts who facilitate these processes both within the individual schools and within the district. One school-based stakeholder shared this process:

Student is referred. The student is determined to need services. A case manager is assigned. They’re pretty much responsible for most of the feedback that occurs with the students as well as the parent. They’re [the case manager] the first line...

Within this theme, a point of tension emerged between the clarity between the distinction between “presence of a disability” and “eligibility to receive services for the disability.” One school-based stakeholder stated, “I think, in general, people just don’t understand the parameters around special education from the testing portion...there’s a lot of misunderstanding” To this end, several participants from various stakeholder groups discussed the need to clarify the

inclusion and exclusion factors considered as a part of determining if students are able to participate in any of the programs offered through the Exceptional Students Services program. From the district level, establishing a clear narrative regarding the purpose and utility of specific processes can contribute to a higher level of accountability that is currently desired by all stakeholders.

“At City Schools of Decatur, if it’s decided that they [student] need speech services after they already have an IEP, they have to go through the whole RTI process again to then determine if it... I guess I don’t understand why, if we already have an IEP, can we not just say, sit for evaluation, and evaluate, and determine if it’s needed. I feel like sometimes the RTI process can be dragged out for a long time....”
--CSD parent

Theme 4—Data-driven Decision Making

“Data-driven Decision Making” refers to the consistent use of evidence to support decisions regarding instruction and service eligibility and delivery. Parents, school-based stakeholders, and district-based stakeholders addressed various methods and contexts in which data collection occurs. For school-based and district-based stakeholders, this most commonly pertained to RTI. One teacher shared,

If we see a child that is needing extra support, that’s one of [the] things we do is collect data. We talk to an instructional coach, then collect data. And then this child is put into the RTI process. And so, we’re very much a part of it with collecting the data and sharing our findings in the classroom.

Overall, this process was identified by many teachers, particularly when they were asked about their role within RTI.

While data collection seems to be a consistent practice, communicating the ways that those data are used to make decisions and/or inform instructional practice occurred less frequently. An administrator noted

what needs to be improved is more of that progress monitoring piece where you’re putting an intervention in place, you’re setting a goal based on that intervention, and then you’re monitoring it. Our teachers are doing interventions so when they come to these meetings, they’re just sort of talking about the improvement...not necessarily with hard data they’ve taken to show that they’re making enough progress...

This idea was further illustrated by another school-based stakeholder who shared,

I know sometimes it seems when we transition from third grade to fourth grade it seems like we’re starting over again and there’s no continuity. So a child who had

been receiving two or three services in third grade gets bumped back to early tier two, and then, we have to start it all over again. That, I think, adds to some of the frustration.”

This point was especially highlighted when speaking with parents. Several expressed concern with the ways that their students were advanced through or exited from tiers within the RTI framework. One stakeholder shared “there’s not a clear understanding of why it takes so long, what the steps are. It’s a confusing process, even for people that are involved in it, much less parents.”

Theme 5--Communal Networks

“Communal Networks” refers to the structures that stakeholders use to engage other stakeholders in information and resource sharing. The communal nature of parents and families in the CSD community was consistently addressed by stakeholders across groups during interview sessions. Many parents reported that these communal networks were the most reliable and accessible resource available to them regarding the ways to navigate through the ESS process. Both formal and informal communal systems are in place that allow families to interact with each other or other stakeholders. Responses from parents suggest that these communal networks serve at least four purposes: information sharing, decision making, resource identification, and moral support. The most prevalent resource that was consistently identified as a part of this network was the newly formed Special Education Parent Teacher Association (SEPTA). At least one individual from each stakeholder group interviewed identified this entity as an influential and effective entity within the CSD community.

Although SEPTA was frequently identified as a mechanism by which information was shared and disseminated for parents of children with disabilities in CSD, several parents noted that support is also readily available through informal channels. One parent noted,

There are so many people in our community that have knowledge and expertise with legal background, educators, money, volunteer hours, stay-at-home moms. There are so many people who would gladly do so much more to give the hands-on time and support...

The challenge that some parents described was learning how to “plug into” these “parent-led” channels in order to leverage them effectively.

From a district perspective, all stakeholders seemed to acknowledge that resource- and information-sharing with parents is a challenge for the CSD community. One administrator told

us, “I think we do fall short a little bit about when it comes to reaching out to parents to know what they think is missing...” A similar sentiment is captured in this parent’s comment: There are a lot of things I love about this school. But I do feel like that there's a real communication disconnect throughout the system...” This perspective was held by parents with children served in special education program as well as the gifted program (Links). One parent noted,

a lot of the parents who have kids in the Links program, maybe we don't quite understand what our kids are getting from it. It's hard for me to wrap my mind around...I appreciate that the children are put in classrooms with teachers who are certified to teach but it's hard for me to understand how a 20-minute segment here and a 20-minute segment there with the actual Links teacher combined with whatever they're getting in the classroom from their certified teacher while they're trying to manage everyone else. I don't really know what the kids get out of it.

The existing communal network may be an effective mechanism to engage stakeholders in more explicit and intentional ways.

Theme 6--Utilization of Resources

“Utilization of Resources” refers to processes used to allocate, obtain, and/or implement resources consistently and equitably. In general, various stakeholders told us that they believed the district’s Exceptional Students Services office had abundant resources, both human and material. In terms of material resources, one teacher summed up numerous sentiments by stating, “...we can, every year, write a list of what we want and pretty much get it.” Another school-based stakeholder reported, “In my experience here..., really in the city schools in general, I think I have more resources than I’ve typically had” (compared to other schools).

In addition to acquiring materials, school and district based stakeholders reported the availability of numerous and varied professional development opportunities for teachers. These robust opportunities include topics such as RTI, behavior supports, mindset training, SEEKS training, expeditionary learning, two-day speech conference, Pathways Training, Orton-Gillingham training, Assistive Technology conference, and Just Words training. These experiences have been provided and/or facilitated by leaders within the district and by outside experts retained by the district. In addition to the PD that was identified, special education teachers frequently noted the monthly ESS meetings as a source of information, feedback and information gathering.

"CSD is very heavy in professional development. And so it ends up being, oftentimes, that there are many days of training where we are taken out away from the students to receive trainings that we may or may not perceive as a priority."

--CSD teacher

While these opportunities were generally perceived as beneficial, some tension existed among many teachers related to the prioritization of resources for professional development. Many school-based stakeholders reported that the opportunities for professional development were plentiful, but, in some cases, overwhelming. Other school-based stakeholders addressed the relevance of the trainings and professional

development opportunities that were required by the district: "If we are going to have the required professional development, I would like to see some geared more towards what our kids [in special education] really need." Creating opportunities for teachers to have more autonomy in selecting their PD experiences or opportunities to collaborate with other teachers was a commonly identified note of consideration provided by teachers.

While agreement was strong that resources are abundant within the district, it is clear that disagreement exists regarding the utilization and prioritization of those material resources. One parent stakeholder shared,

My honest opinion about that is when it comes to generic services such as OT, speech, physical therapy, I think they do well in terms of providing those services. Anything outside of that, either they sit on the information, don't tell you about it.

Another parent agreed:

If it's not a generic basic service, we have to fight for it. Now, why should we have to fight so hard? I mean, I pay taxes. I work... We say it's about the child. It really isn't, not in my book. It's about funding, it's about the constraints. It's about all this other stuff and then the child, and it should be reversed.

Further, concerns were shared by parent stakeholders surrounding the prioritization of resources around the needs of students with dyslexia. One parent offered, "So far, what I've seen in the system is special ed teachers have very little training in how to teach the dyslexic child." Another parent shared, "I wish we could just speak more freely. Like, I say 'dyslexia' every... chance I get because that is not said in the school system."

The utilization and prioritization of human resources was addressed through this theme. While the overall perception among stakeholders is that resources within the CSD are abundant, statements were offered that addressed questions about use of human resources. Many administrators shared that they have the autonomy to hire teachers in ways that they felt best met

the needs of the school and students. However, the placement of those hires is not always perceived as most efficient. One school-based stakeholder suggested, "...as far as human resources, again, I feel like they're spread a little thin...Maybe something they could do is hire one more teacher ... halftime. There's gotta be a way to balance it." From the perspective of parents, one stakeholder offered the following, "We need more human resources for gifted education ... this is a huge population with gifted, I feel like it's a disproportion of where the services and people are used within the gifted program itself."

An interesting component of this theme was the desire of many stakeholders to allocate resources to provide parent training around supporting the needs of students served in the ESS program. While many parents involved in the ESS program have general knowledge about their child's needs, that knowledge needs to be situated within the CSD context. This perspective was offered by parents and district-based stakeholders. One parent shared, "I wish the school system did more...to let you know what services...what specific things they are actually doing in the classroom." After attending one information session that was offered, parents hoped to have more, similar experiences. Further, a school-based stakeholder shared,

If I could wave a magic wand, I would like for us to have monthly parent activities that involve more parental training to assist their children. That's actually designed to meet the needs of the parent because as the parent gains self-efficacy it will help their student.

Theme 7--Feedback Loops

"Feedback Loops" refers to the various means in place to communicate and/or disseminate information to relevant stakeholders. Most stakeholders noted that feedback loops were an area for improvement for the CSD. Currently, feedback is offered through a variety of mechanisms (e.g., case managers, special education teachers, Links teachers, website). While these methods have been identified, stakeholders questioned the consistency with which they are leveraged and the degree to which these feedback loops are considered effective. One model for supporting families and communicating information was shared by an administrator:

Once you are assigned a case manager..., that person stays with you for all four grades, unless there's a problem or some need to change. Parents have spoken highly of that, having that point person that they can always reach out to when they need.

Another example was offered by a parent:

Our teacher in the classroom has a composition book and we can write comments back and forth to each other, it comes home every day. And we just write little notes to each other and it's really awesome. That's been the best communication I've had in years from a teacher.

While these examples are favorable and ideal, this model may not reflect the standard practice of case management or communication at all schools and/or grade levels based on data collected from stakeholders.

At a district level, feedback loops are also an identified challenge. One stakeholder shared, “I think we do fall short a little bit about when it comes to reaching out to parents to know what they think is missing...” Another shared, “Probably communication would be the big thing that we need to do more of, communication and education... We have RTI brochures and... we have a website.” In spite of the availability of these resources, stakeholders report that confusion remains about the process. To this point, one parent shared “They revamped the website, so now it's like a maze to get to information.... how do parents keep themselves informed?” Streamlining and centralizing the information that is already available may be a way to make the existing resources and processes more accessible.

Another frequently cited area where communication/feedback loops have been addressed is with transitions. For families who have children receiving ESS services from early childhood special education services through high school, they could experience five different transitions from school to school along with the transitions from grade to grade within each school. These changes are often a source of anxiety for many parents. Regarding the transition approaching in the next year, one parent stated

My biggest disappointment is the communication between the self-contained classroom and the inclusion classroom. There are lots of things where my child just falls through the cracks within inclusion.

--CSD parent

I'm dreading leaving [the child's current school]. Dreading it. Dreading it. Dreading it. We'll see. I'm going to be that pushy parent next year, and I'm going to expect that they know he's coming so that they have some sort of plan for him and not that they're going to just put him over here in this room with a bunch of people and they all have different needs but they only have one or two people to address them.

Across stakeholders there was agreement that the potential for inconsistent messaging was increased as a result of the transitions. To this point, several stakeholder addressed efforts to improve and standardize the transition experience within CSD, including the recent implementation of a Transition Specialist.

A common concern shared by administrators is the process by which school-based challenges are handled or routed. Several school-based stakeholders identified a process where any issues, whether with teachers or parents, could be shared with administrators as a first step in a problem-solving process. For some parents who were able to navigate the ESS process according to the established process, they felt it necessary to be firm and persistent but ultimately found that their concerns were addressed to their satisfaction. One parent shared, “I think they [administrators] definitely listen and are willing to immediately be responsive or as immediately as they can be.” Considerable variation existed from stakeholders at various schools related to this issue. Some parents reported extremely positive experiences with resolving concerns using the established protocol, as demonstrated above. While, other parents reported negative experiences when using the process.

In some instances, parents brought concerns about their child’s education directly to the central office rather than contacting the school administration. One school leader stated,

I don’t get a lot of parents coming to me with concerns. They go right over both of our heads and go right to central office. A lot of times, if they would have talked to the school, there may be an opportunity for us to help alleviate their concerns.

When addressing ways that feedback is provided or issues are resolved, many parents interviewed stated that accessing the tools available directly through the central office resulted in more favorable outcomes. Thus, they found it to be a more effective course of action.



Online Survey Data

Instrumentation

The main sections of the survey were informed and slightly modified from the Family-Professional Partnership Scale (Summer et al., 2005) developed by the Beach Center on Disability at the University of Kansas. The scale had 18 items with each item rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. We retained the majority of the items but adjusted the scale to a forced-choice agreement scale with a “don’t know” option. This adjustment is to recognize that some parents and community members surveyed would legitimately not know from direct experience how to rate the items regarding the ESS program. It is preferable to have a don’t know response than to attribute the response to a neither agree or disagree response when there is clearly a situation in which the respondent does not know how to rate the item.

The reliability of the Family-Professional Partnership Scale was 0.96 for the 18-item scale. Also, the initial framework resulted from extensive literature reviews, focus groups, and interviews with family members with and without disabilities. After analyzing and coding the data, 60 items were initially developed and field-tested in a national pilot study ($n = 291$). Data from that study was analyzed using an exploratory factor analysis and 2 factors were produced. Items whose eigenvalue loading was 0.4 or lower were removed. Some items were reworded for clarity. These 18 items were pilot tested yet again ($n = 205$) and a confirmatory factor analysis was used to refine the items. Given the process and construction of the survey, the 18 items were deemed to have construct validity for child-focused and family-focused domains in serving students with disabilities (Summers et al., 2005).

Methods

We constructed the survey to be sent to all CSD employees, and a link would be sent to community members by the parent liaison for each school. That dissemination process would produce the most equitable responses regarding the program. However, the plan was modified because of the administration’s interpretation of the FERPA regulations and the decision not to make email addresses of employees available to the researcher. The CSD administration elected to disseminate the survey; therefore, the tracking of responses by school was not possible. However, the original survey was modified slightly to track the responses of different groups. The research plan primarily tracked the responses of community members with and without

children in CSD and employees of CSD with and without children in CSD. The number of responses made it possible to create some subgroups for analysis. The subgroups were comprised of parents whose children were served by the ESS program and those not served by the program. A weblink and QR code for access to the survey was sent to CSD in mid-April 2017 and responses to the online survey were gathered.

Data Collection

The survey was active online from April 20, 2017, to June 5, 2017, and we received 285 completed responses. The total responses were categorized into 4 categories: (1) Decatur community members with no children attending CSD ($n = 2$); (2) Decatur community members with children attending CSD ($n = 109$); (3) CSD employees with children attending CSD ($n = 104$), and (4) CSD employees with no children attending CSD ($n = 70$). Because there were only 2 responses from Decatur community members with no children attending CSD, that portion of the data analysis has been omitted, and the other three areas are analyzed. We expected that the category set aside for community members with no children attending CSD would have few responses; however, we wanted to allow participation from community members with no children for equity reasons.

Parents/Guardians Results

There were 109 survey responses from non-CSD-employee Decatur community members with children attending CSD, with 84 (77%) of those having students referred to or served by the program during the school year. Twenty-five (23%) of the respondent's children were in general education classes and were not referred to or did not participate in the ESS program. Of the 84 responses with students referred to or served by the ESS program in CSD, 73 (87%) indicated the student's status regarding ESS: 53 (73%) were eligible for ESS, 10 (14%) were not eligible for ESS, and 10 (14%) were in progress. Of these responses the majority of the survey items indicating safety, dignity, privacy, trust, honesty, availability, and respect are endorsed by the community members with children in the ESS (from 100% to 70% agreement; see Figure 2). In contrast, two survey items – [Helps you gain skills or information to get what your child needs] and [Provides services that meet the individual needs of your child] were rated at 44% and 53% agreement, respectively. This may indicate that, although parents and family members view ESS as meeting requirements, the ESS functions that support a parent's getting information about the child and providing individual services for the child are not perceived by some parents as adequate. This is concerning because the parents of children within ESS are the parents with arguably the closest relationships within the ESS program. When dealing with exceptional children, one may expect a few parents to have

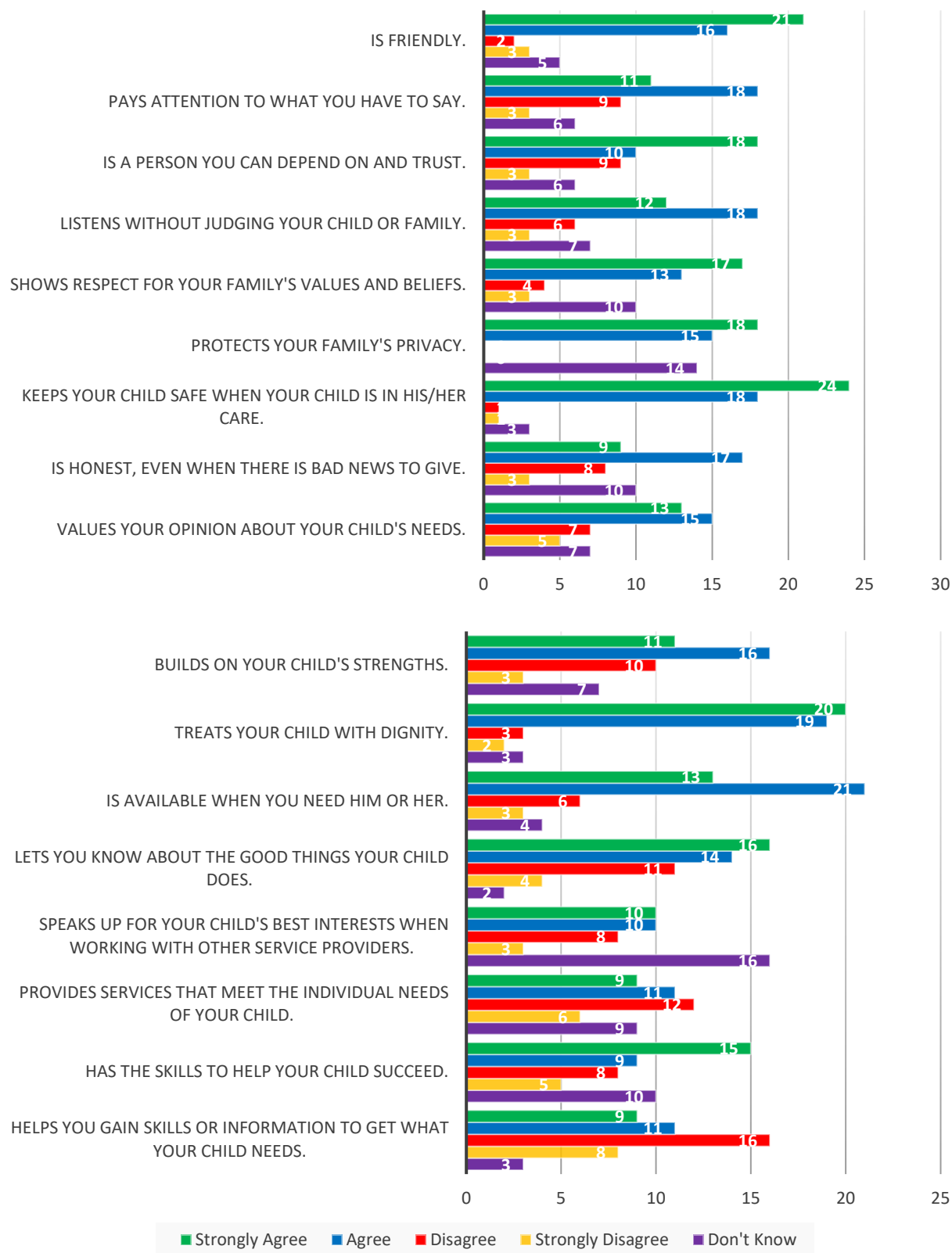


Figure 2. Survey responses from parents whose children receive services from ESS. Items began with the prompt: “The Exceptional Students Services provider ...”

negative perceptions of even the best programs; however, the perceptions of parents indicated from the survey show that the services provided fall short of the expectations of many parents. Also troubling is the perception from more than half of the parent respondents that ESS is not helpful in providing information or helping parents gain skills to address their children's needs.

For parents whose children do not receive services from ESS (Figure 3), the majority of parents indicated “don’t know” for many of the items. This is the anticipated response from a parent with no children in ESS. However, a substantial number (10) of parents indicated that their child had been found ineligible for ESS. These parents had some contact with the administrators of ESS but not continued contact within the program. A majority of these parents disagreed or strongly disagreed with many of the survey items. Also, a few of the parents with no children referred to ESS voiced disagreement. One may question the reason of their negative

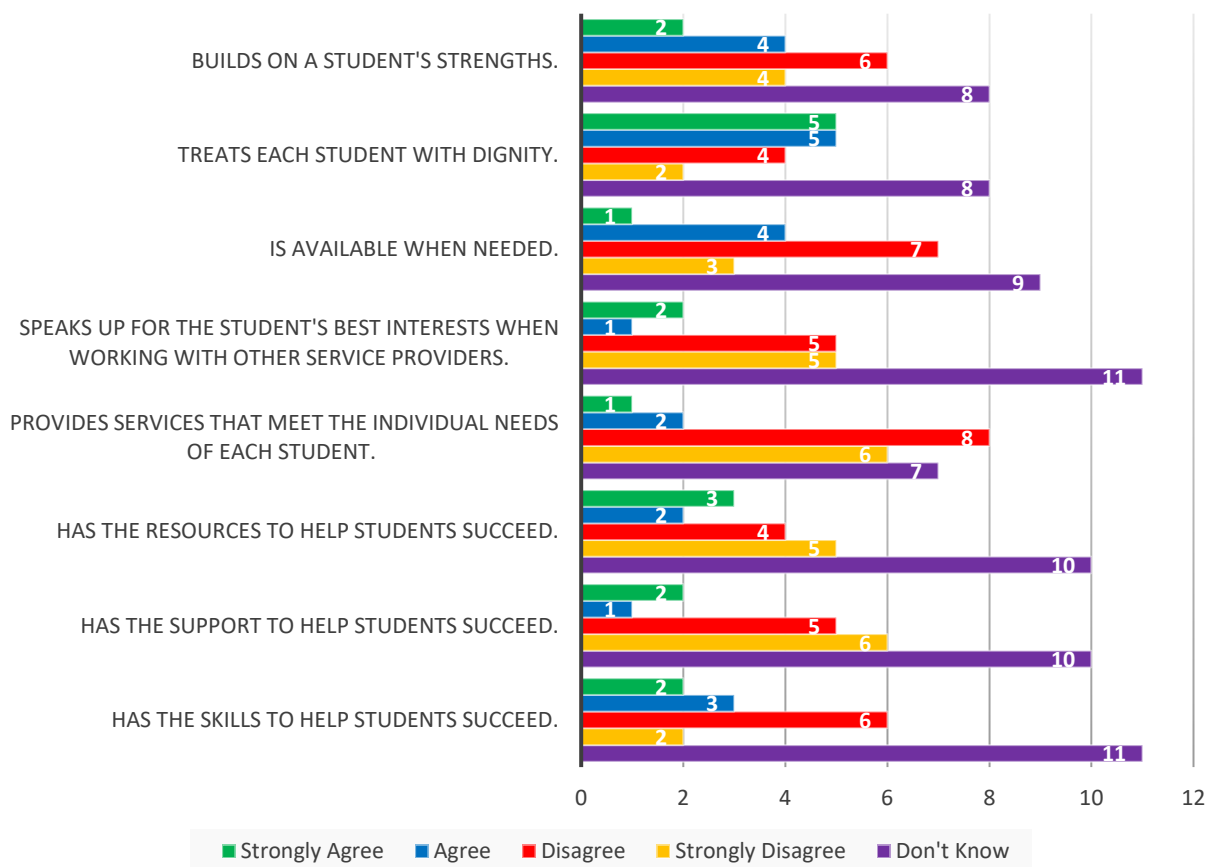


Figure 3. Survey responses from parents whose children do not receive services from ESS. Items began with the prompt: “The Exceptional Students Services provider ...”

perception of ESS when their children have not been evaluated. This is likely because of negative perceptions of parents whose children have been evaluated and found ineligible or parents of children served by ESS that are not satisfied with the service. Although this is not a large number of parents, they seem to be influential regarding the perception of ESS.

CSD Employees Results

To be equitable in recognizing perceptions from internal and external sources, CSD employees were also asked to participate. First, the CSD employees with no children attending CSD were presented similar items regarding the ESS (Figure 4). The responses ranged from 96% of participants' agreeing or strongly agreeing that the ESS program treats each student with dignity to 78% agreeing or strongly agreeing that ESS has the support to help students succeed. All other responses were positive regarding ESS.

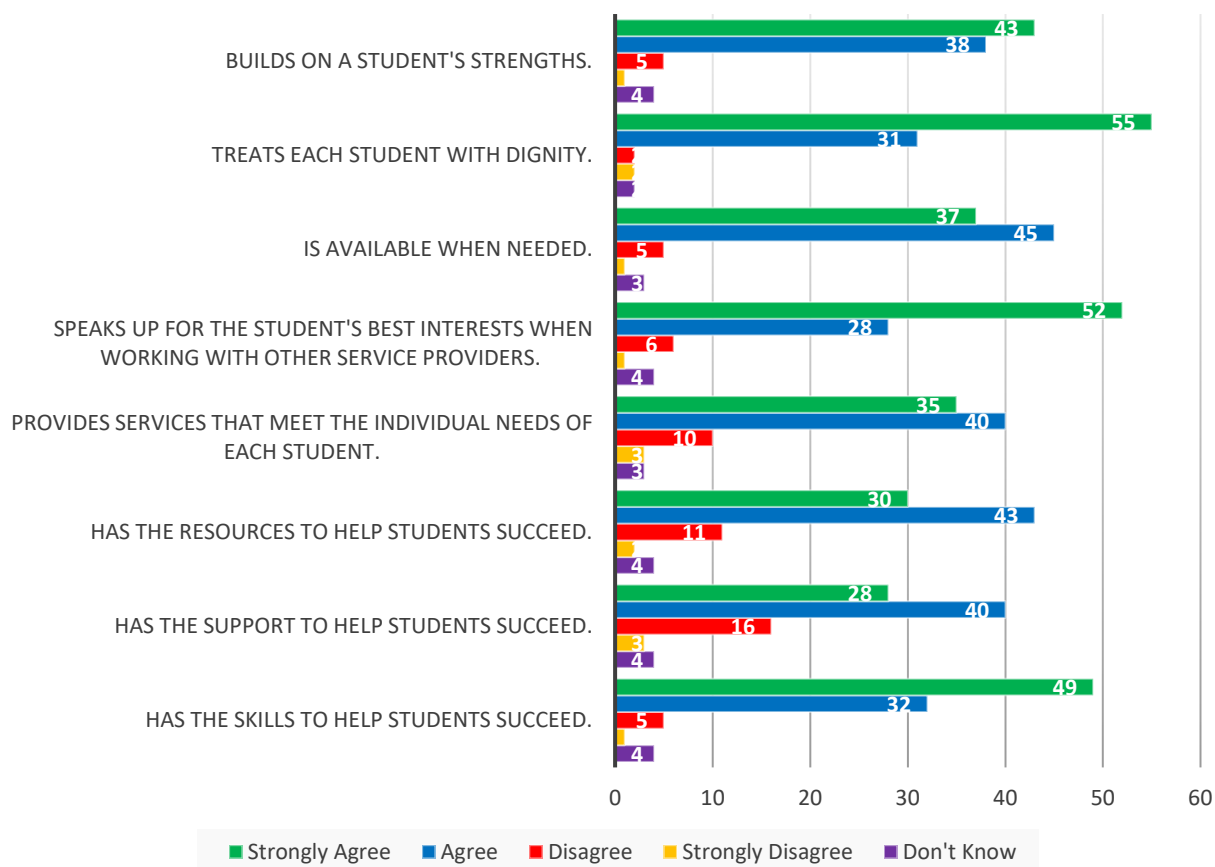


Figure 4. Survey responses from CSD employees with no children attending CSD. Items began with the prompt: "The Exceptional Students Services provider ..." $n = 70$.

We wanted to see if there were differences between the perceptions of general education teachers and ESS teachers, so we posed specific questions to each group. On many of the items, the general education teachers (Figure 5) and ESS teachers (Figure 6) were in agreement, and there were similar responses. However, on two items, the groups' average responses indicated a difference. When asked if the teachers agreed with the statement, "In my experience, exceptional student services program referrals result in a timely follow-up," no ESS teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed. However, 11 (19%) general education teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same statement. This may indicate that ESS teachers understand the referral process or are tolerable of waiting to be diagnosed. It also is an indication of negative perceptions of the ESS program from outside the program where assumptions are made by people not directly involved in the functioning within the program. Also, the statement, "I regard Response-to-Intervention practices as an expansion of Exceptional Students Services program," had more agreement with general education teachers (72%) than ESS teachers (50%). This may be a result of the organization of ESS and RTI within CSD.

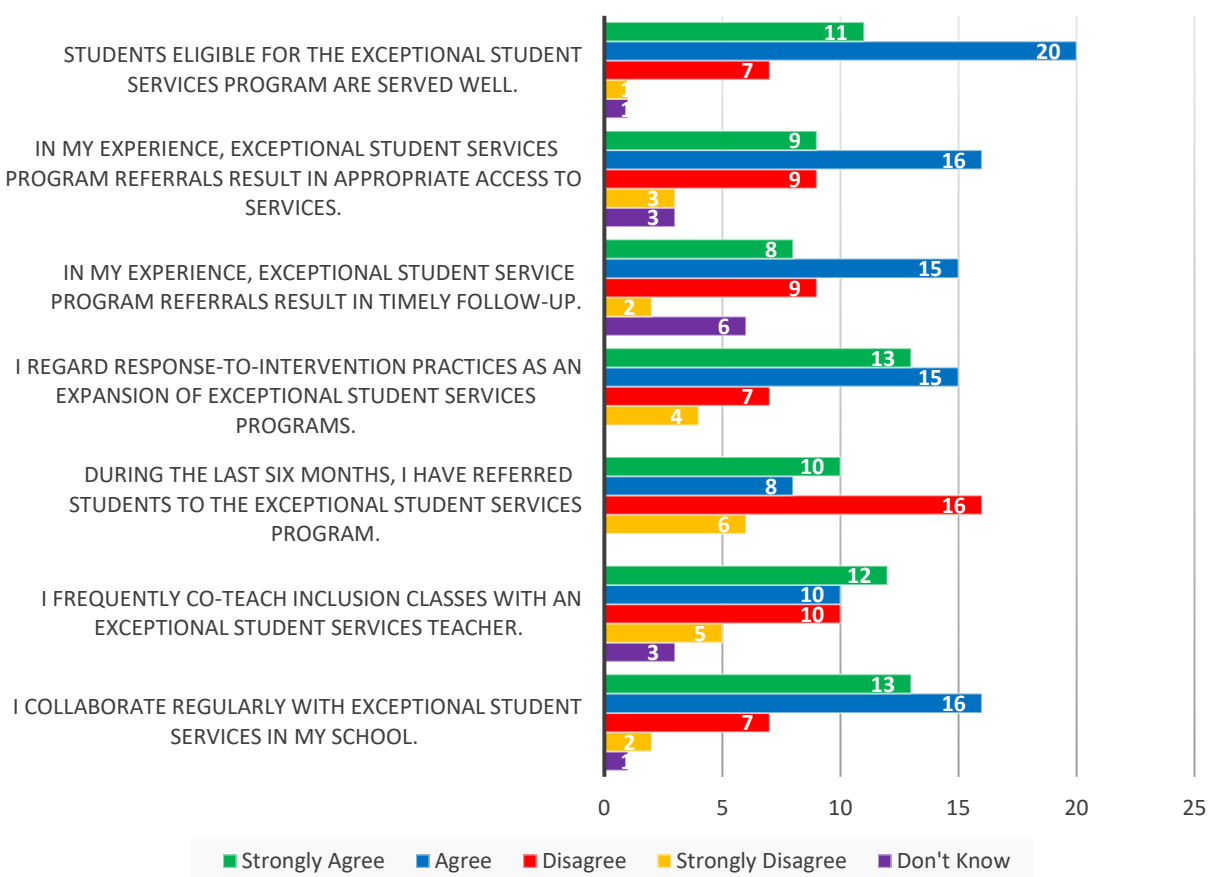


Figure 5. Survey responses from CSD employees in general education with no children attending CSD.

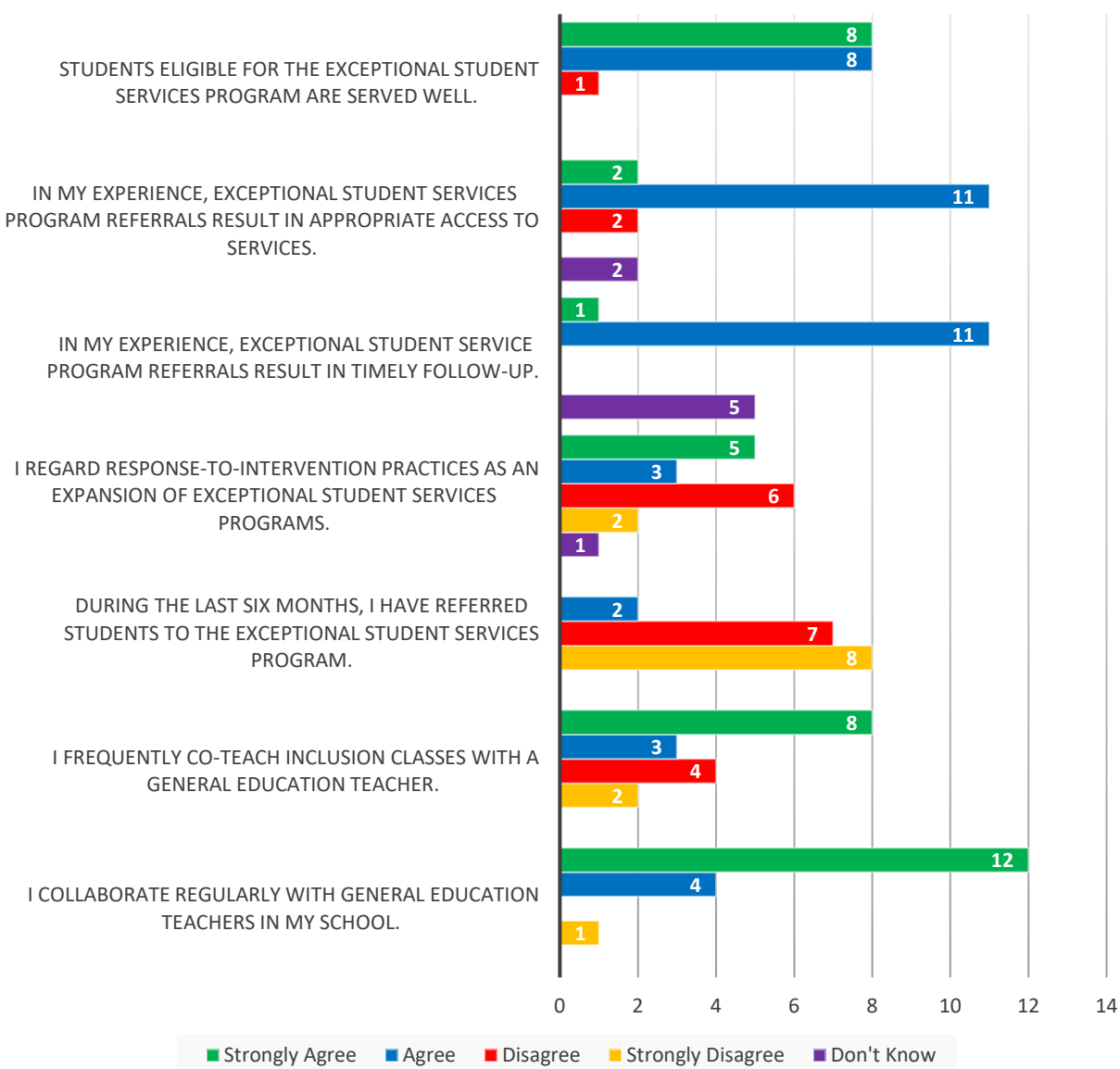


Figure 6. Survey responses from CSD employees in ESS with no children attending CSD.

The responses indicate that there needs to be more attention in this area of responsibility to provide a clear mission for general education and ESS teachers regarding RTI. Overall, the survey responses by CSD employees were positive regarding ESS. Only a small percentage (22%) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed that “[ESS] has the support to help students succeed.” That was the general item that CSD employees rated lowest in agreement. Therefore, typically CSD employees who responded indicated they agreed or strongly agreed regarding the capacity of the ESS program to build on a student’s strengths, treat students with dignity, support the students’ best interests, and generally help the child to succeed.

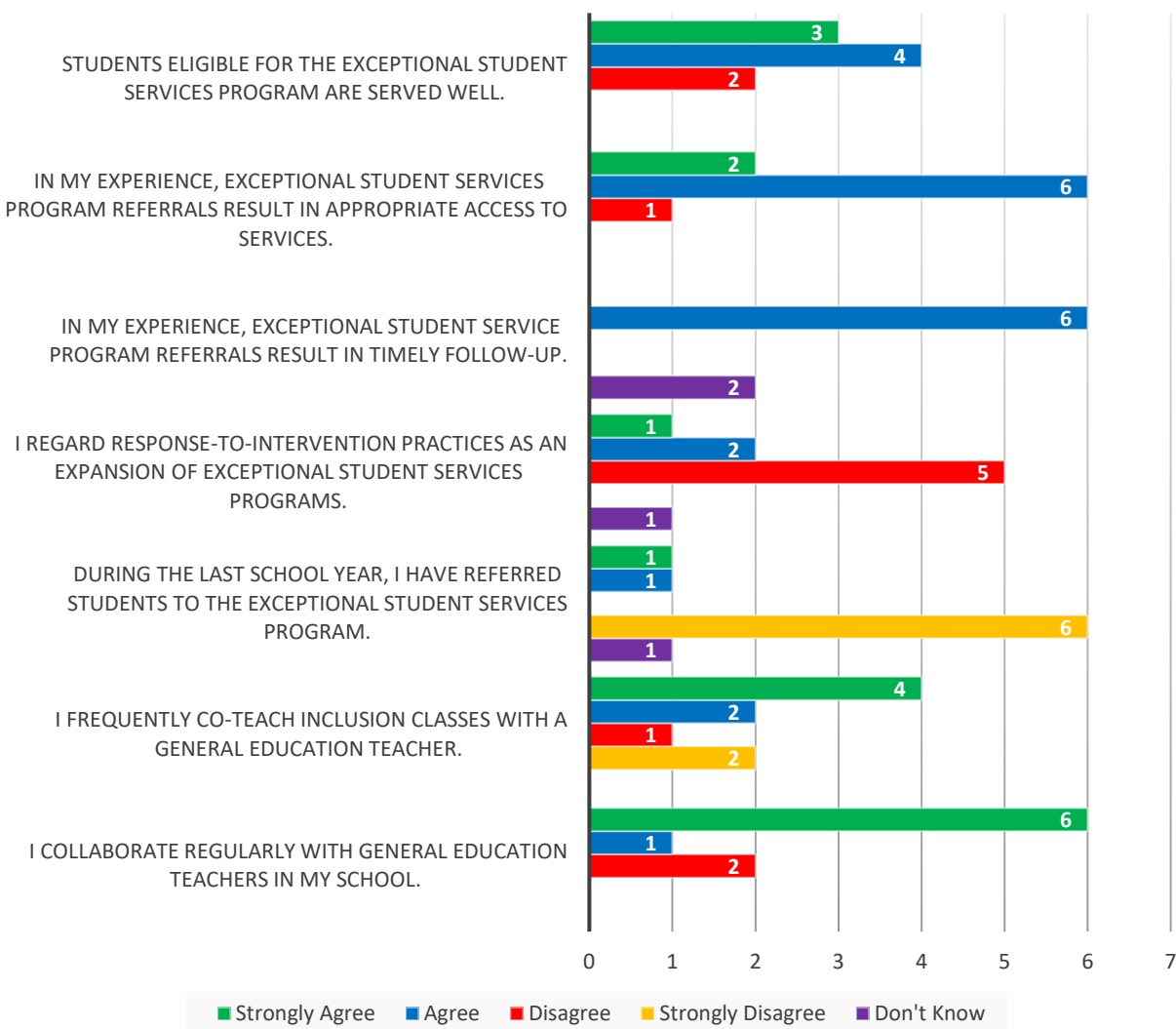


Figure 7. Survey responses from CSD employees in ESS with no children served by ESS.

Another difference among CSD employees in both general education and ESS occurred regarding parents (who are CSD employees) with children not served by ESS (Figures 7 & 8). Those CSD employees perceived ESS in a more negative manner than those CSD employees in general education with children served by ESS (Figure 9) and CSD employees in ESS with children served by ESS. Some portion of the dissatisfaction with the program appears to come from sources external to the ESS program. This could be from parents of students found ineligible for services or from parents who have overheard negative reports from others.

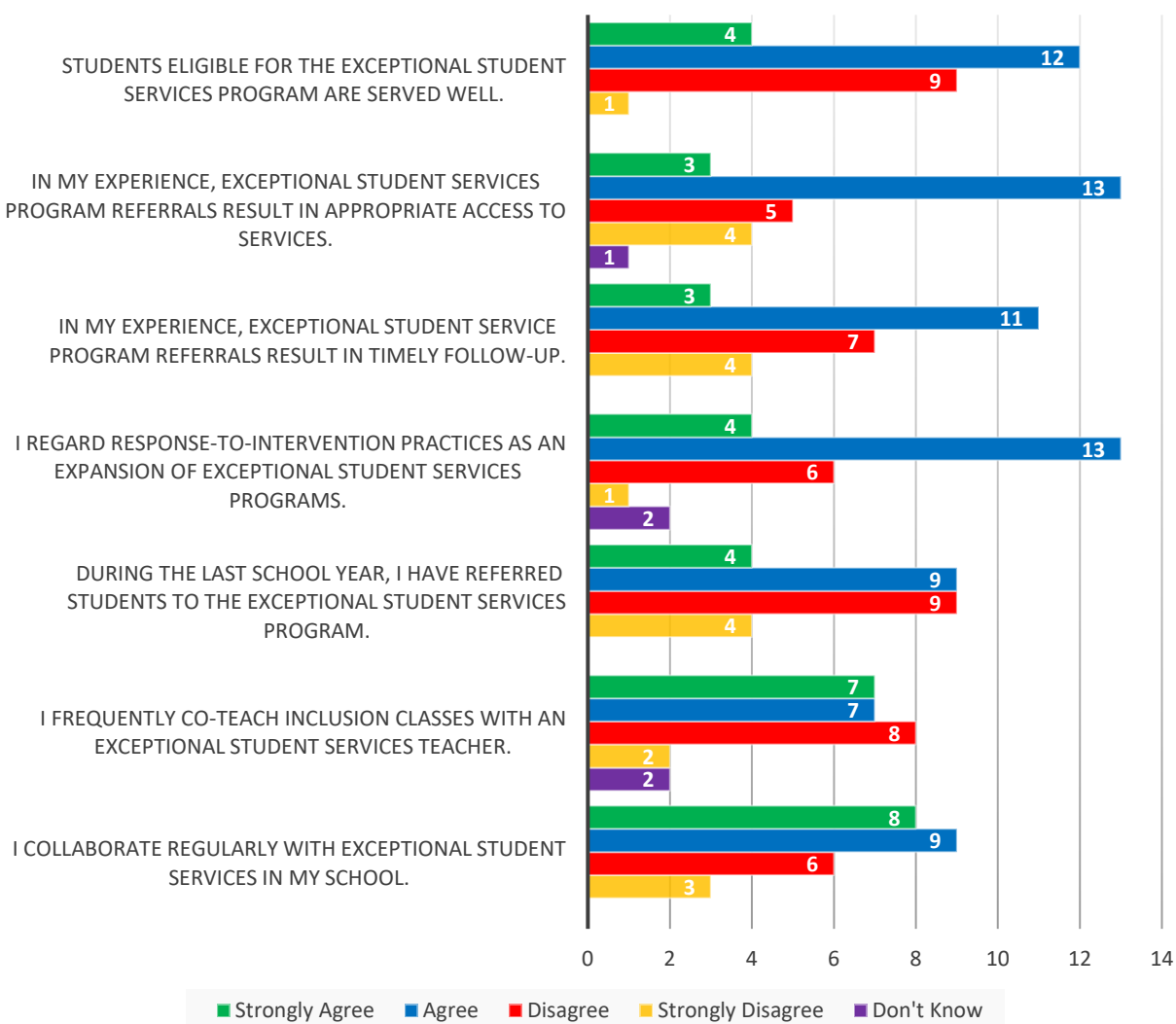


Figure 8. Survey responses from CSD employees in general education with no children served by ESS.

Regardless, it is unfortunate that a substantial portion of negative views of ESS is among people who currently have little contact with the actual operation of ESS. This may reflect an opportunity for the district to better communicate the operations and success of ESS.

A similar finding is shown by the responses of CSD employees with children in ESS with respondents endorsing the safety, dignity, privacy, trust, honesty, and respect items (from 94% to 70% agreement) and the two items - [Helps you gain skills or information to get what your child needs] and [Provides services that meet the individual needs of your child] rated at 65% and 56% agreement respectively. In this case the ratings of these two items are not as negative as the parents but show less agreement than the safety items.

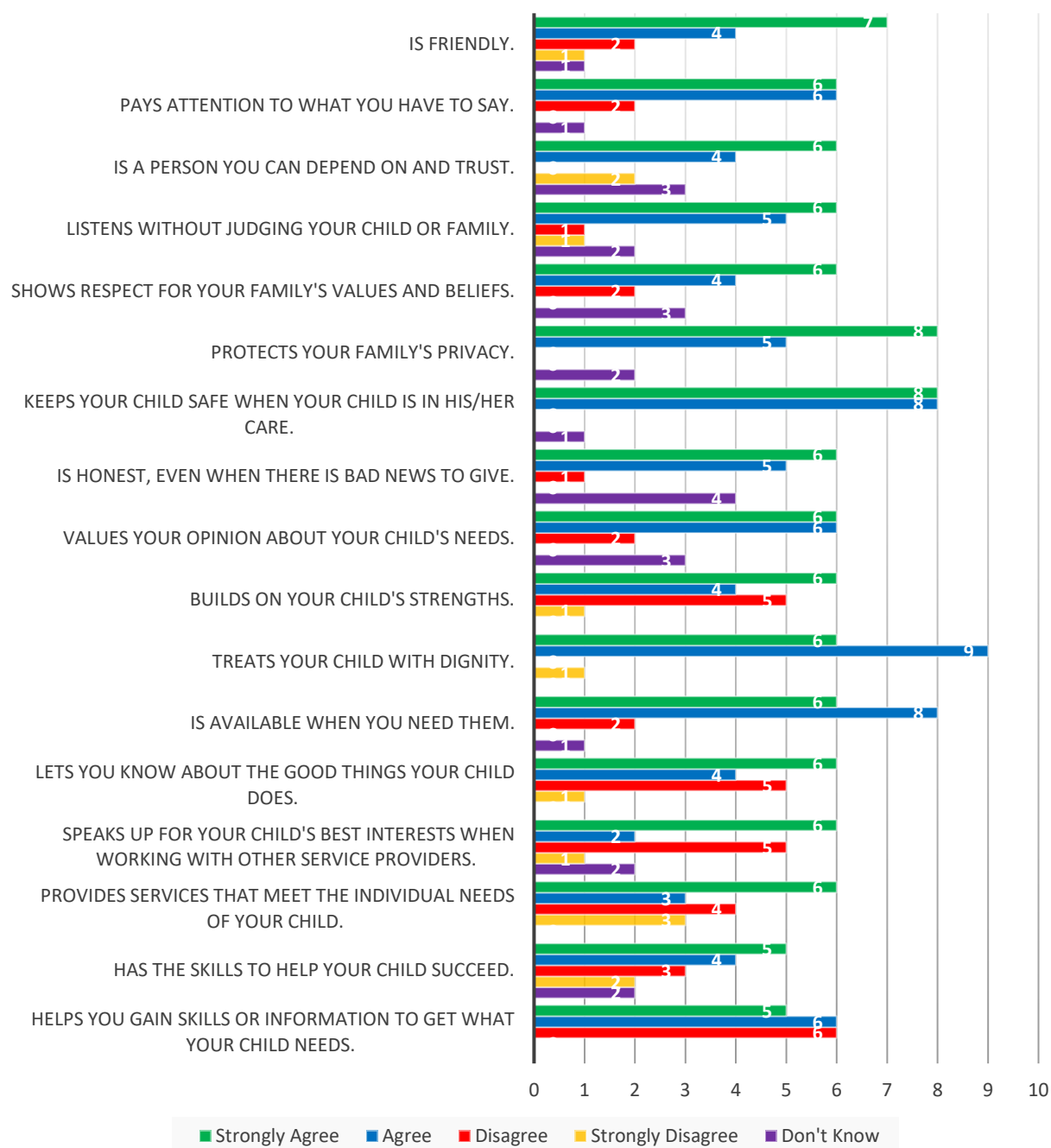


Figure 9. Survey responses from CSD employees in general education with children served by ESS. Items began with the prompt: “The Exceptional Students Services provider ...”

Another observation about the survey responses is regarding the perceptions of RTI. For the responding general education teachers, 71% perceived RTI as an expansion of Exceptional Students Services while only 44% of ESS teachers responding viewed the RTI as an expansion of ESS.

Typically, the survey indicates that the ESS is perceived as providing a safe environment, eliciting trust, and treating the students with dignity and privacy. It may be perceived that the basic and intermediate needs as identified in Maslow's hierarchy are provided for ESS students. However, when parent support and the individual needs of the child are examined, the survey responses indicate that only about half of the parents perceive that ESS is helpful in getting the skills or information needed for the student.

Open-ended Responses

Finally, the survey instrument included an open-ended response prompt, one for non-employee parents/guardians and one for CSD employees. When parents were asked, *Do you agree with the decision of the Exceptional Students Services program regarding your child?*, several responded "yes", with a small number of "no" answers. In addition, many detailed responses were submitted that included more than a simple yes-or-no response. Overall, there were 29 positive results and 24 negative results reported in response to these open-ended prompts among parents not employed by CSD. When CSD employees were asked the same question, all of the open-ended responses were positive or neutral.



Administrative Data

The evaluation plan included a quantitative analysis component focused on a descriptive analysis of data over a five-year time period. As part of the district's normal operations, data are routinely collected from students, families, teachers, and schools. While this administrative data is primarily collected for the purposes of oversight and compliance, it is also possible to combine these data in ways that will inform the district's planning and strategies surrounding the delivery of special education services. The remainder of this section presents the methodological plan, the data actually provided to the evaluation, analysis, and results.

Methods Plan

The evaluation plan outlined data elements to be provided to the evaluation team, including student, family, teacher, and school information for a five-year time period beginning with the 2011-12 school year. The requested student data included individual-level data files designating the demographic characteristics of students and information on student's engagement, behavior incidents (consistent data only available for subset of years), enrollments, program eligibility, and academic performance. Enrollment information was to include identifying information to teachers linked to specific students based on roster (enrollment) data. Specific data related to the provision of special education services including Tiers 2 and 3 service delivery, test scores on instruments designed to determine special education program eligibility with the date of testing, and referrals to determine program eligibility were all requested.

Family characteristics collected by CSD were requested with identifiers that would allow linking to individual student records. The evaluation team also requested time-varying data on the characteristics of teachers employed by CSD with identifiers that allowed the linking of students to teachers based on the roster information of students requested. Typically maintained district administrative data might include total years of teaching experience, licensure status, pay, education level, teacher observation data, teacher professional development provided by the district, and student ratings of classroom environment. School-level expenditure data based on the state's chart of accounts was also requested, but the data were determined to be insufficiently detailed to provide useful information given the nature of the questions pursued in the evaluation.

Data Provided

Over the course of the contract period, CSD provided detailed data on students attending the district over the seven-year time period ending with the 2016-17 school year. While the majority of the requested student level data elements were provided for the evaluation as outlined in the scope of work, the district did not provide data on Tier 2 and Tier 3 service provision, student level referral to evaluation for special education eligibility, and data related to the assessments conducted to determine services eligibility. Data were provided to indicate which student records were being served by Tier 4 (ESS) services and the category of disability for these students. This allowed reporting on comparisons between students being served through ESS and all other students in the district. These comparisons included information on enrollments, measures of student engagement (attendance), disciplinary incidents, and student academic performance. In addition, comparisons could also be made between students in various categories of disability and roster-level enrollment data allowed comparisons across school buildings.

Administrative data related to staff characteristics provided by the district was limited to the number of years staff members had been employed by the district. The district did not provide administrative data on teacher licensure, years of teaching experience recognized by the Professional Standards Commission, pay, education level (bachelor's, master's, etc.), and other teacher characteristics. The final compiled dataset reflected the educational records of 8,773 students and over 37,000 unique students by year records from the requested time period.

Analysis

The evaluation plan outlined examinations of administrative data to determine if any differences existed across student subgroups (identified by their being served in any special education capacity) using descriptive analyses. As data from the survey, focus group, and interview data were analyzed, the evaluation team considered whether the administrative data made available for the evaluation might inform the themes evident from these other sources of information. This section is organized with a review of the major district trends over the time period of the provided data and repeats with a number of analyses to separate reporting by students with disabilities and all other students served in the district.

Figure 10 displays the growth in enrollment in CSD over the time period from the 2010-11 through the 2017-18 school year. Throughout the time period, the district faced continuous increases in enrollments. This growth is substantial and represents a steady increase between the years of 2011 and 2017.

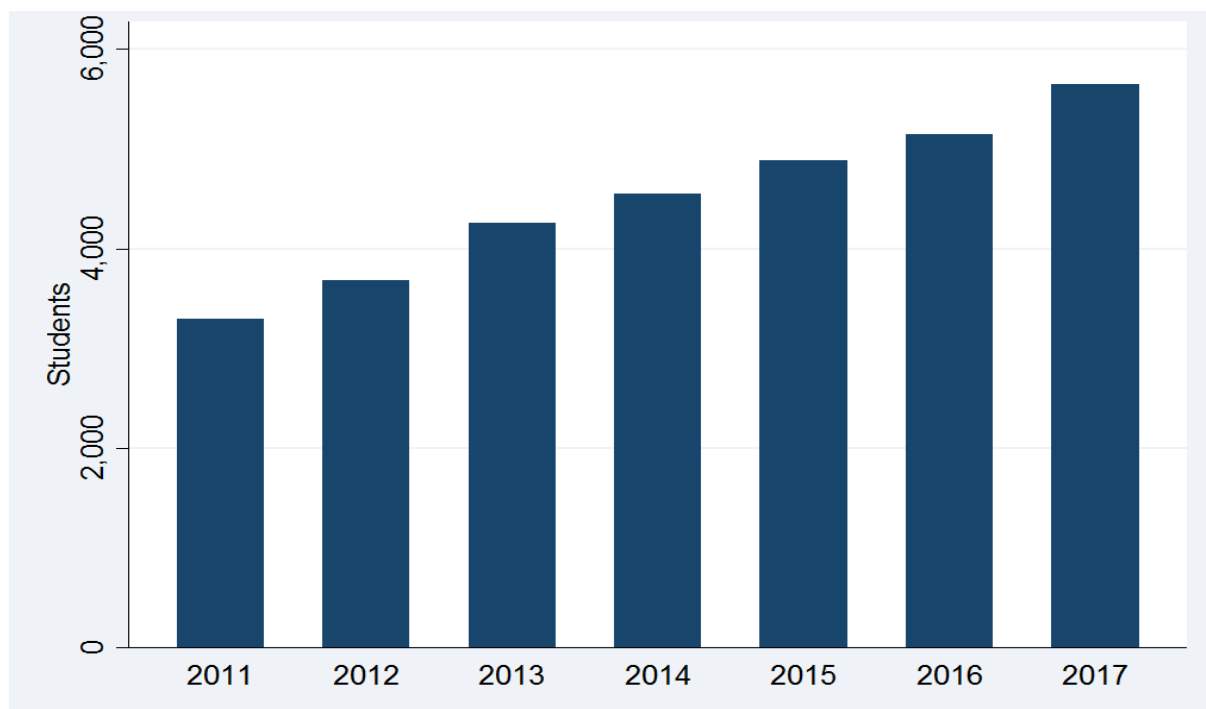


Figure 10. Number of students – CSD.

We next turn to data to examine trends in student disciplinary incidents, student engagement, and academic performance. We investigate these trends among students who are and are not eligible for special education services (those served by Tier 4 interventions) to determine whether the growth in overall student enrollment is matched by growth in programs serving subpopulations of students.

Figure 11 visualizes the trend in student disciplinary incidents over the time period of the 2012-13 through the 2015-16 school years. Data from the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years is omitted due to inconsistent reporting. Data from the 2016-17 school year is not included due to incomplete data at the time when data was provided to the evaluation team. The rate of behavioral incidents in CSD schools does not show a general trend, but does represent an increase in the rate of recorded incidents between the 2011-12 school year and later years. Rates are generally consistent in more recent years. In discussions with CSD personnel, the increase in disciplinary incidents was due to changes in the district between the 2012-13 and 2013-14 school years which increased the consistency of reporting related to behavioral incidents. These levels of behavioral incidents reflect a relatively low rate of behavioral incidents compared to other districts in the state and nation.

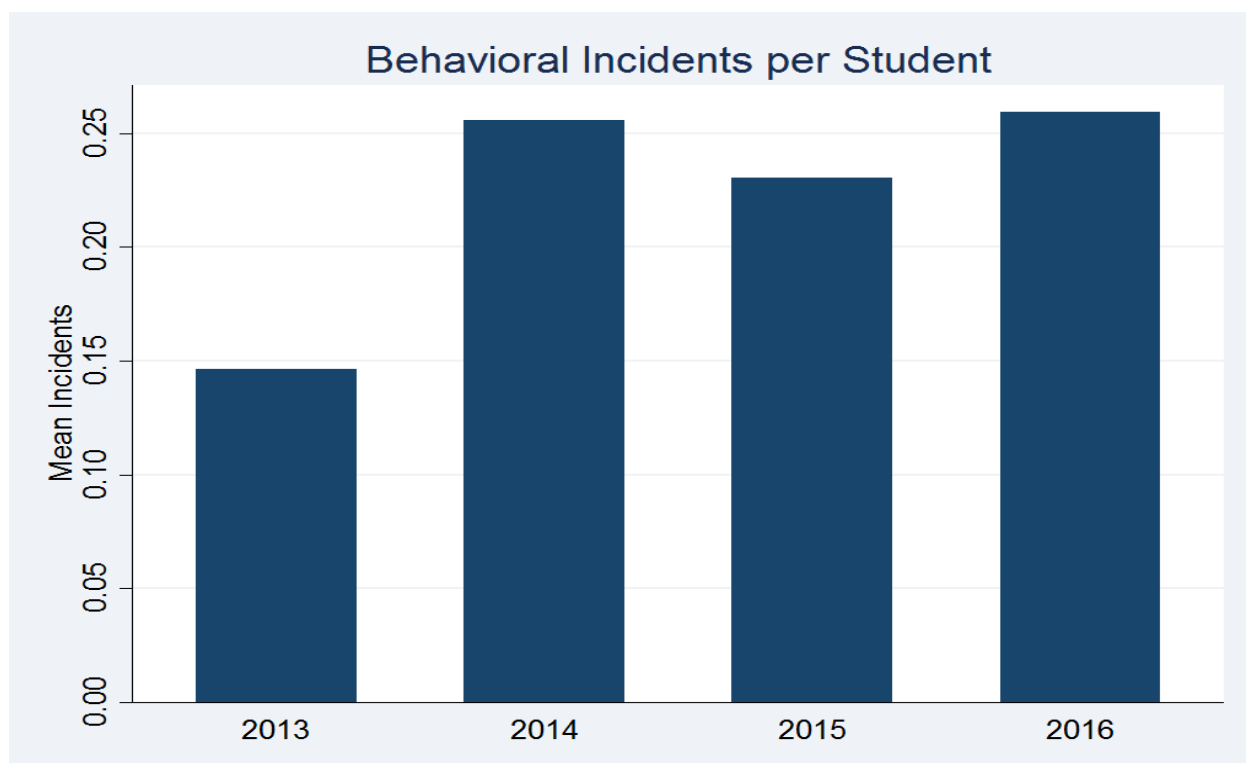


Figure 11. Behavioral incidents per student.

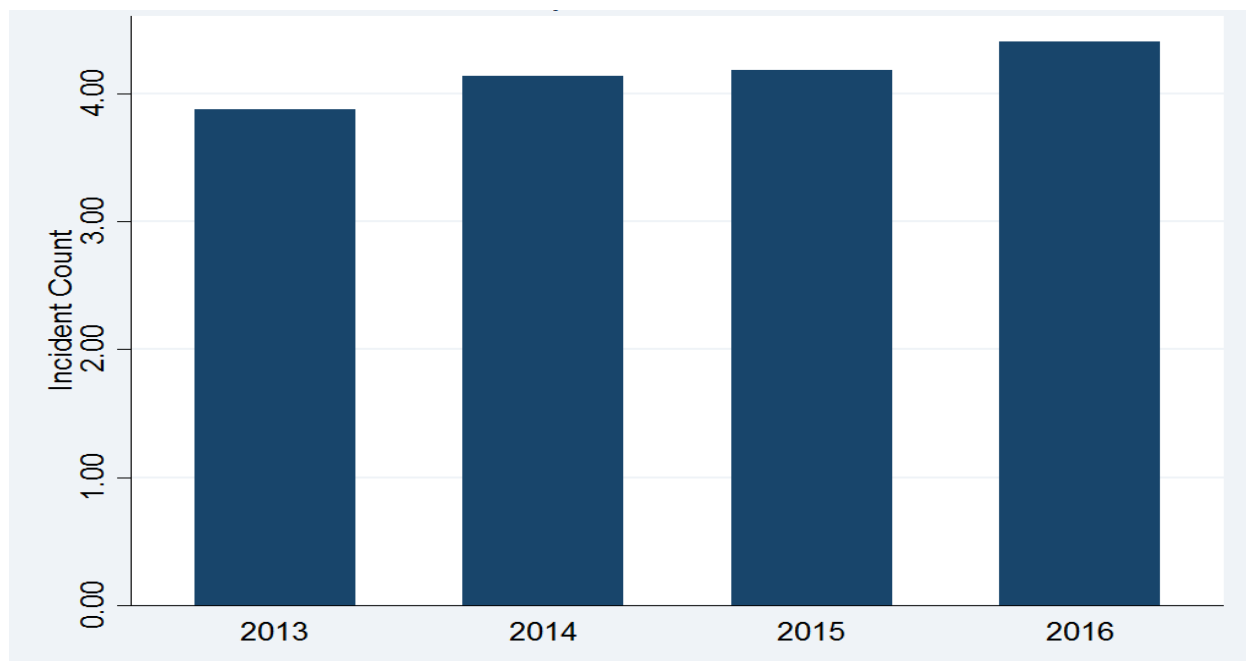


Figure 12. Behavioral incidents per student (for students with at least one incident).

Merely reporting the mean number of incidents calculation may be somewhat misleading due to a large number of students who have zero reported incidents during a given school year. Figure 12 computes the average number of disciplinary incidents among student with at least one disciplinary incident. This chart displays a more consistent pattern compared to that in the prior figure with a slight increase in the mean number of incidents over the examined time period.

In Figure 13, we report the average of three types of student engagement data: excused absences, unexcused absences, and tardies. We exclude partial year data from the most recent school year. While there is some variation in values across the time period, we find no consistent time trend in these student engagement areas.

Figure 14 displays the share of students in each of four categories: ESS (Tier 4 special education services), Gifted, LEP (Limited English Proficiency), and all other students (no assigned program). Over the time period, most growth in enrollment has been from students who are not served by any specific program. The proportion of students served in LEP programs appears stable over the time period with slight decreases in the proportion of students being served in Gifted and ESS programs. Even though the proportion of students being served in these programs is slightly smaller, it does not mean that there has not been growth in the number of students being served in these programs due to the overall growth of the district. Figure 15 contains the count of students being served in the ESS program only over the examined time period. While there have been slight declines in the number of students served in the ESS

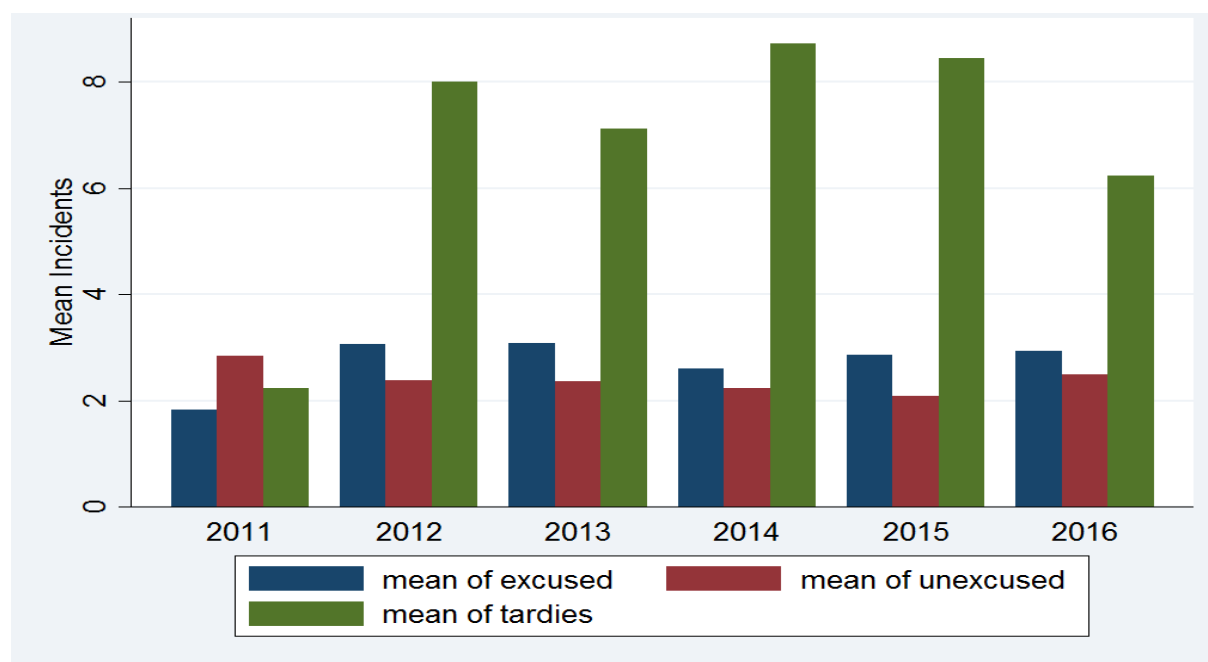


Figure 13. Absences per student 2011-2016.

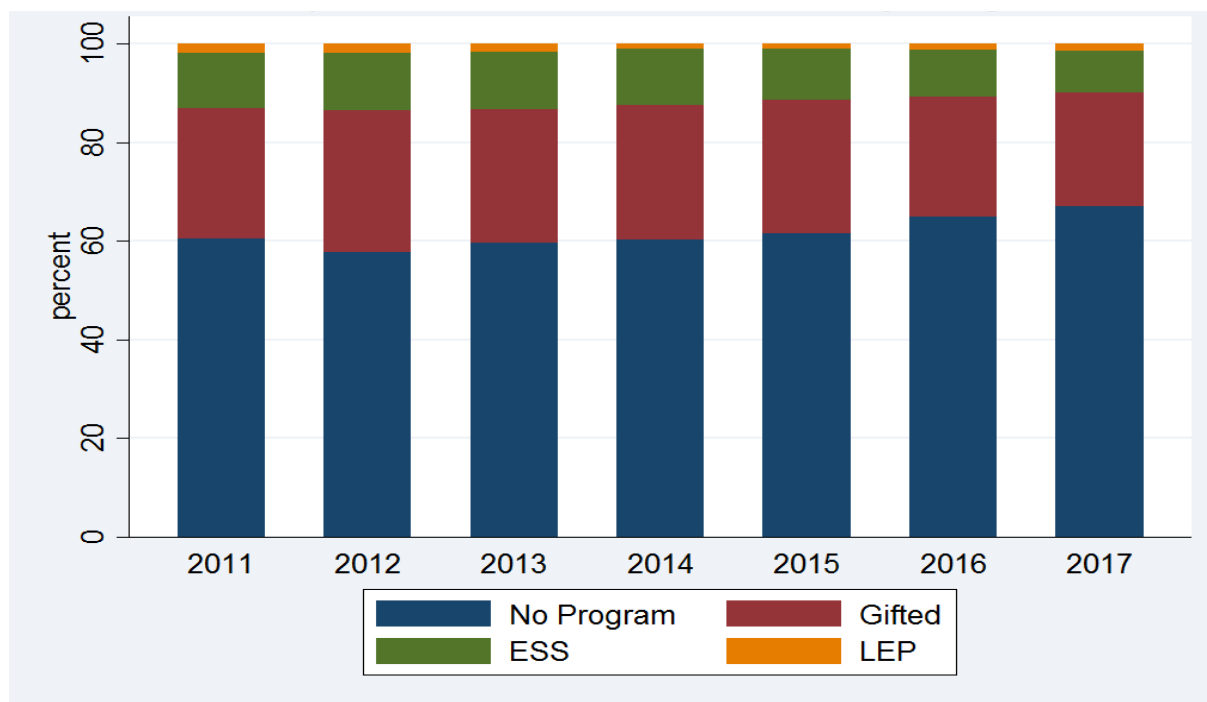


Figure 14. Proportion of students identified by program 2011-2017.

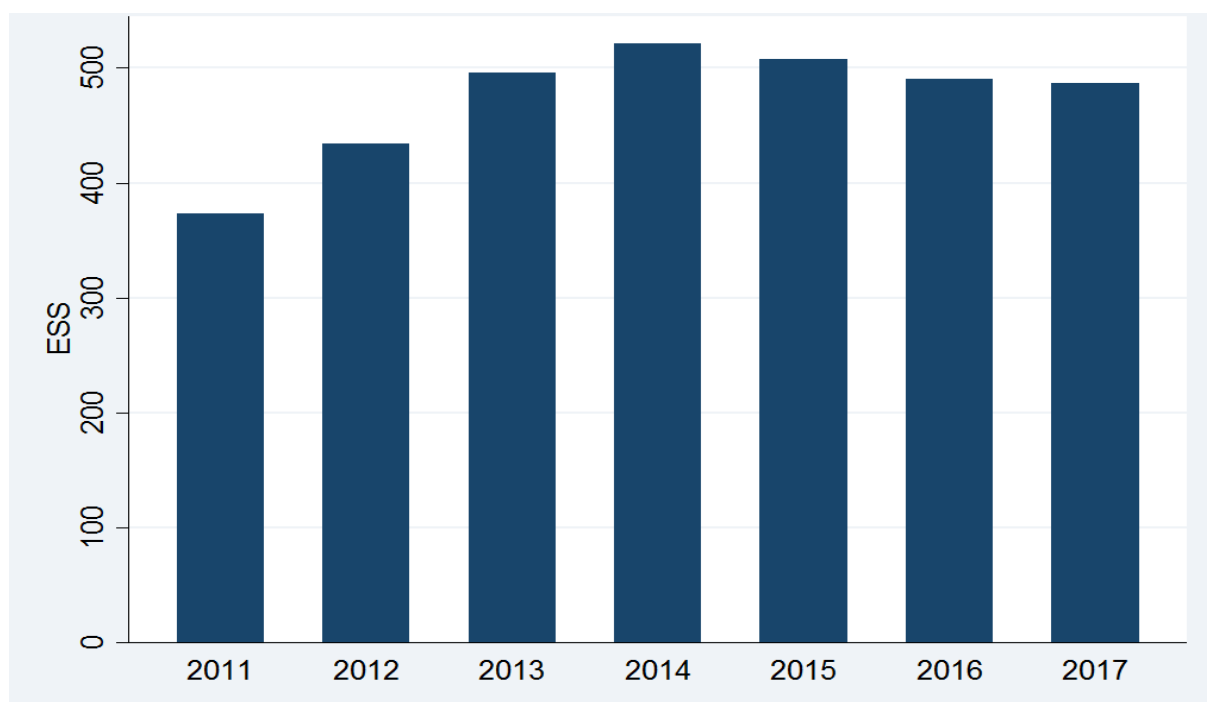


Figure 15. Count of students identified by program 2011-2017.

program since 2014, the overall growth between 2011 and 2017 was substantial with a dramatic increase in students being served in this program between 2011 and 2014. The increase during this time period was fewer than 400 students being served to more than 500. The total count of students receiving ESS services remains near 500 students in the district.

While the total count of students served by ESS services has stabilized in recent years, the distribution of students served by grade levels tells a different story regarding the extent to which enrollments have stabilized in this area. In Figure 16, we plot the number of students served in ESS programming by grade level where Elementary is grades K-5, Middle is grades 6-8, and High is grades 9-12. While the 2011 through 2014 years reflect the overall increasing enrollment of students served in ESS programming, it also reveals that this trend has continued through to 2017 among students being served in high school. More recent years have seen a decrease among elementary grades students and a stabilization of student populations in the middle grades. This pattern may indicate a need to reallocate resources related to the provision of ESS services as the distribution of students with disabilities within the district has changed substantially over the most recent seven year time period. Since 2011, the number of students in high school grades served in the ESS program has tripled. This dramatic growth in the number of students served in high school grades is reflected in Figure 17.

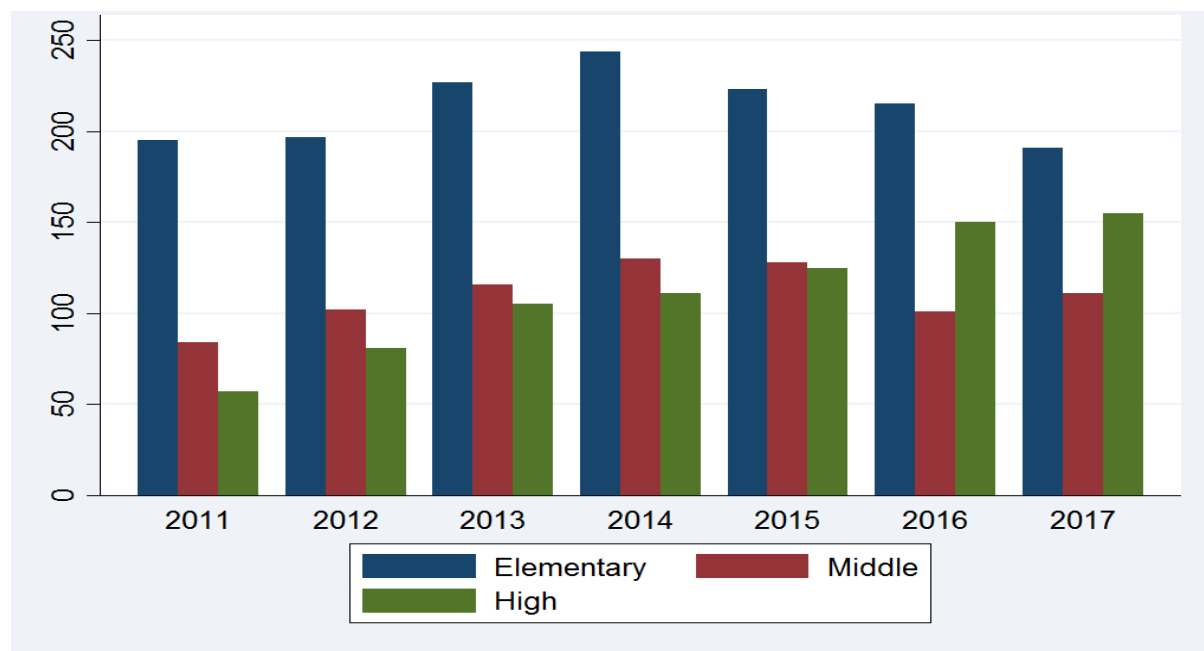


Figure 16. Count of students with disabilities by school level.

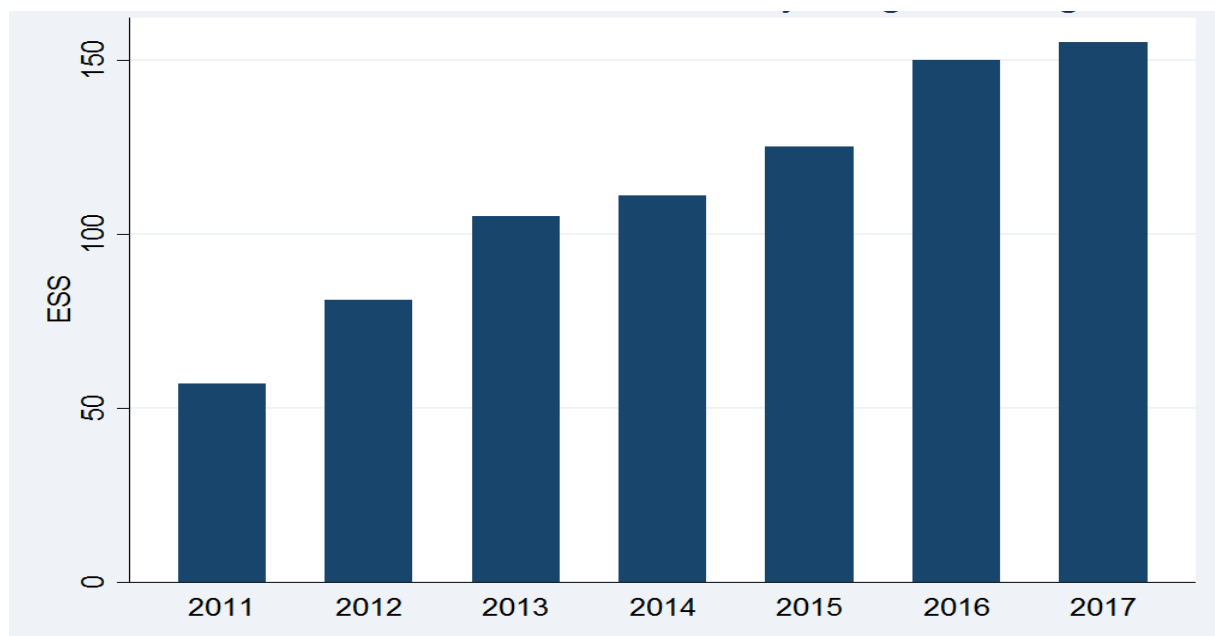


Figure 17. Count of ESS students at high school level.

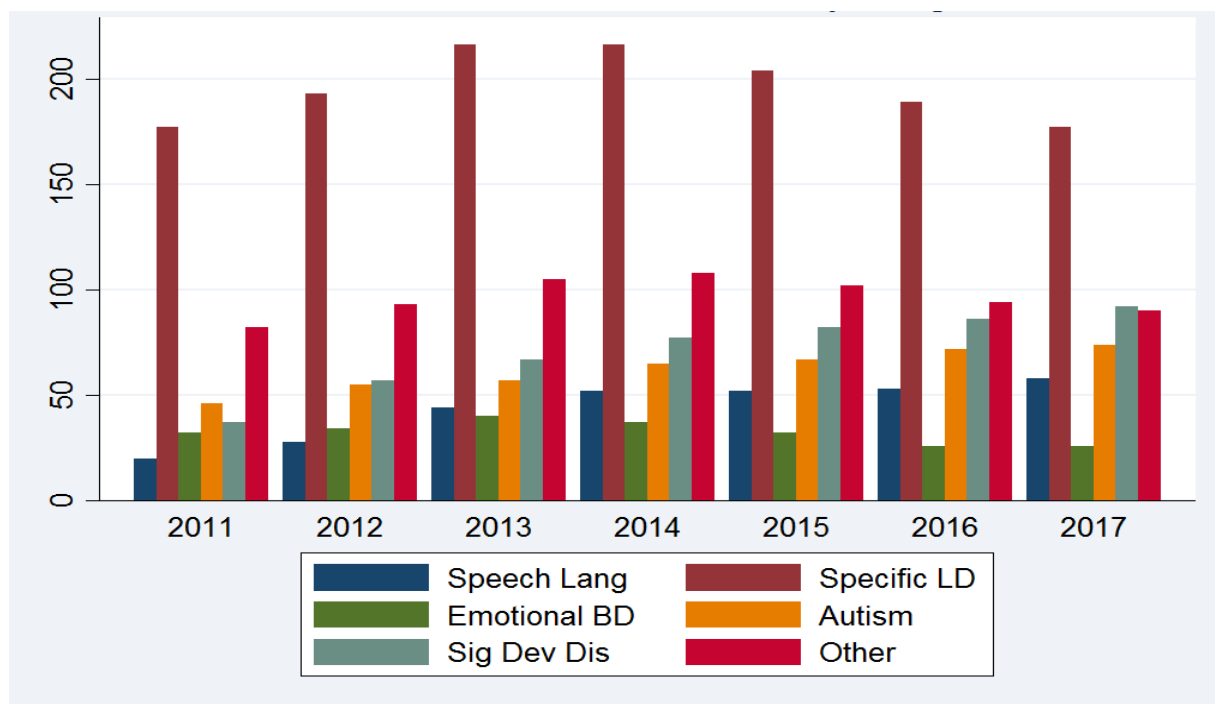


Figure 18. Count of students identified by program.

In addition to the changes in the grade level composition of students served by ESS programming, the evaluation team examined changes in the specific subcategories of disabilities. Using non-mutually exclusive categorical designations of disability, we observed some growth over time in the categories of speech/language disabilities, autism, and significant developmental disability. These trends are evident in Figure 18. The patterns of changes in disability subcategory have varied over time based on the grade level of students. In elementary grades, there has been substantial growth in the number of students served with speech/language disabilities and significant developmental disabilities, while there have been decreases in the number of students served with emotional/behavioral disorders and specific learning disabilities. Middle grades have seen some growth in students with autism being served and recent declines in students with specific learning disabilities. Finally, high school grades have witnessed the most significant growth in enrollments among students with specific learning disabilities and students with autism. Overall, students with autism are a relatively small portion of the total number of students with disabilities in the district. We do not report specific counts in these categories here because of some relatively small counts of students in specific categories of disability designation.

We next turn to comparisons in outcomes between students with disabilities and students not served in ESS programs within the district. These figures can be interpreted as plots of outcomes for students without disabilities (ESS = 0) on the left hand side of the figures and students with disabilities or being served by Tier 4 interventions (ESS = 1) on the right hand side of the figure. In Figure 19, we observe a substantial difference in the average or mean rate of behavioral incidents when comparing students with and without disabilities over the time period observed. Similar to Figure 11, which pooled data for all students, we observe increases in the rate of reported incidents between 2013 and 2014 and later stabilization among students without disabilities. Reporting separately among students with disabilities (the right hand side of figure 19), we see a general trend of an increasing number of mean incidents per student where the overall rate of incidents per student is more than double the rate compared to students with disabilities across all time periods (i.e., about 0.2 incidents per student in 2015 for students without disabilities compared to a rate of greater than 0.4 incidents per student in 2015 among students with disabilities).

Figure 20 plots the mean behavioral incident rate across incident types for students without and with disabilities. We observe that the discrepancies in the rates of behavioral incidents reported appear to be consistent across all types of incident categorizations. The largest category of reported behavioral incidents is in minor problem behaviors.

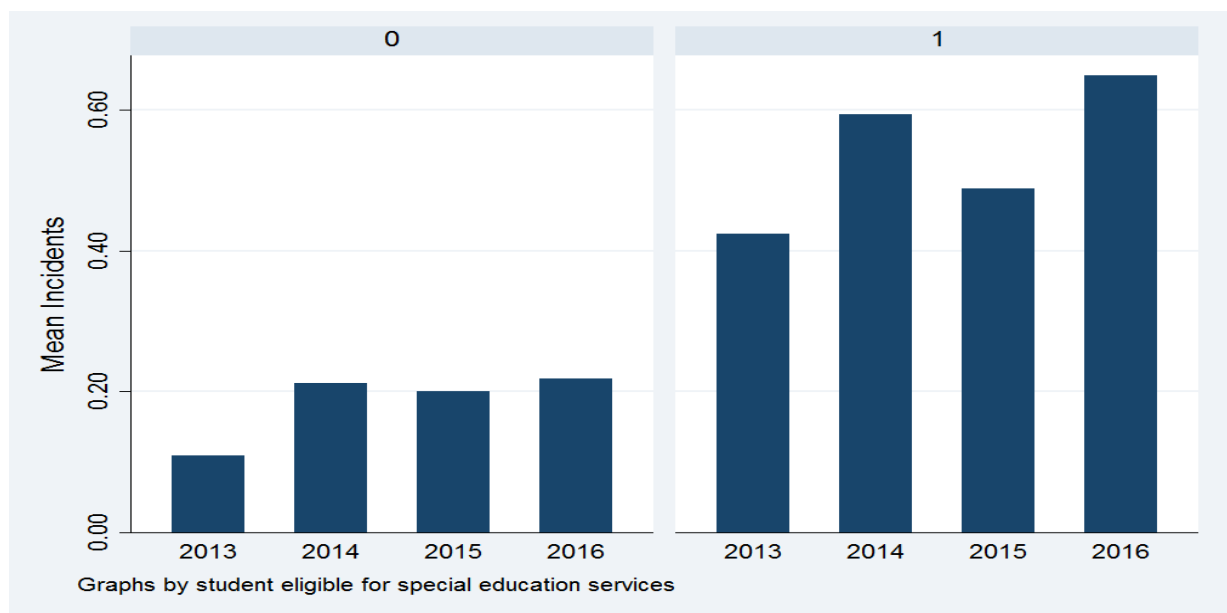


Figure 19. Behavioral incidents rate by year. Column 0 = students without identified disabilities. Column 1 = students with disabilities.

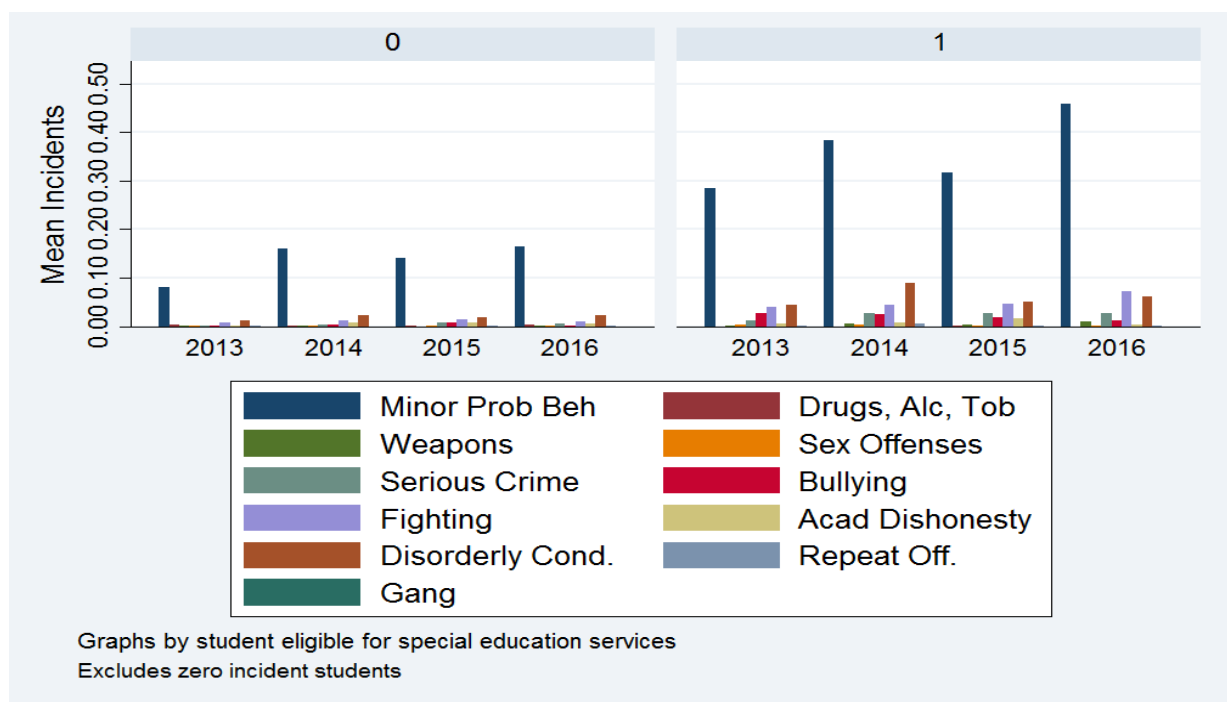


Figure 20. Behavioral incidents rate by type. Column 0 = students without identified disabilities. Column 1 = students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities are less engaged with school as measured by absenteeism and tardy attendance. Figure 21 plots the number of absences, unexcused absences, and tardies separately for students without identified disabilities and students with disabilities. The pattern of results across time is relatively consistent across the two groups of students, but students with disabilities have consistently higher rates of absenteeism and tardy attendance throughout the time period examined.

Other forms of data collection revealed concerns regarding the satisfaction of families of students with disabilities being served by the district. The evaluation team leveraged administrative data on year to year comparisons of students returning to the district from a prior time period or new students entering the district to determine if there were systematic differences in the retention rate of students across provision of ESS services. Figure 22 plots the proportion of students returning from the prior year in grades K-12 separately for students without identified disabilities and students with disabilities. Students from both categories of disability return to the district at similar rates, but students with disabilities return to the district from a prior year at slightly higher rates compared to students without identified disabilities.

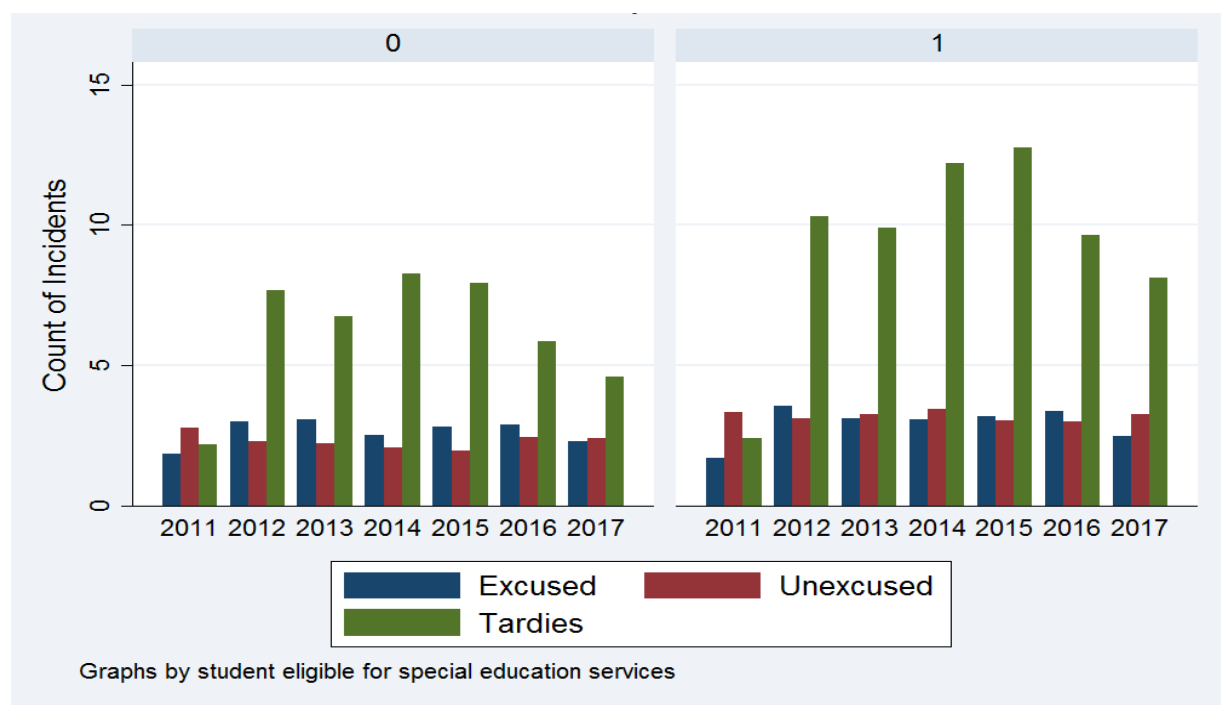


Figure 21. Absences per student. Column 0 = students without identified disabilities. Column 1 = students with disabilities.

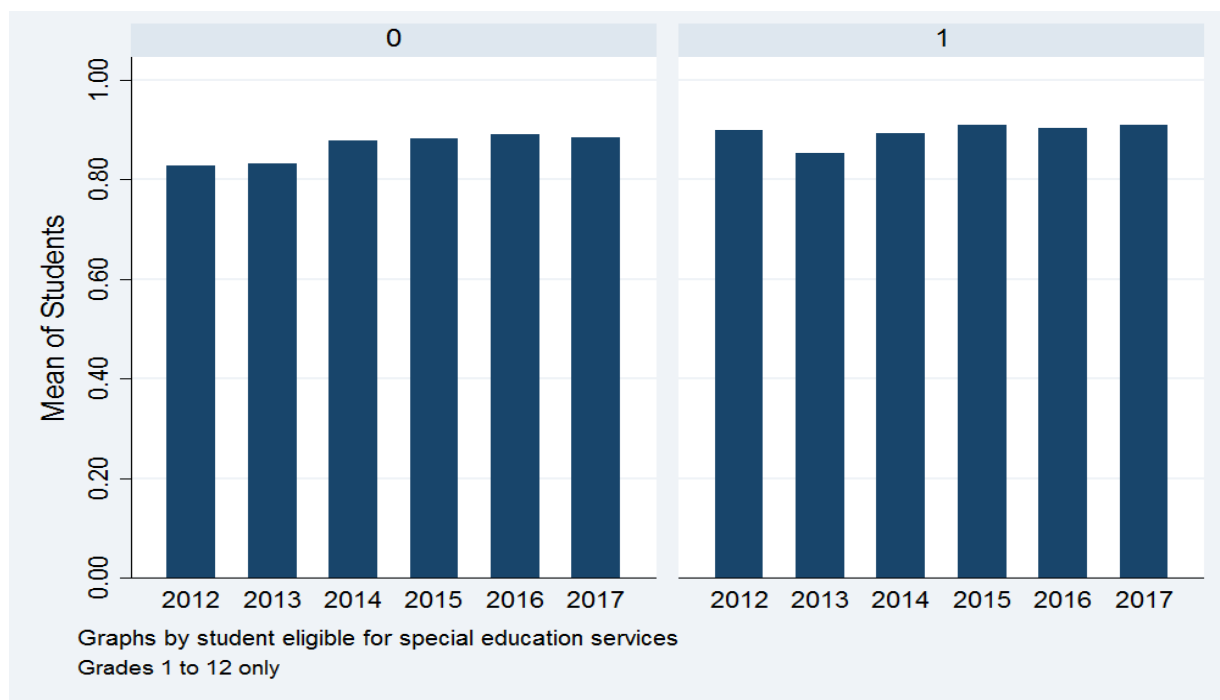


Figure 22. Returning students. Column 0 = students without identified disabilities. Column 1 = students with disabilities.

Academic outcomes data provided by CSD to the evaluation team enabled us to compare the performance of students served in special education programs to students not being served by these programs across the school years 2012-13 through 2016-17 to students in grades 3-8. Figure 23 displays the mean scale scores on end-of-grade exams across these two groups of students. The drop in scores between the 2013-14 school year and the 2014-15 school year is due to the change in the state's testing regime from CRCT to the newly adopted Georgia Milestones Assessment. The state also discontinued the EOG Language exam with this transition in testing. Within group comparisons reveal no substantial trends in test performance up or down in the average test score of students. Across groups, we observe a relatively consistent gap in performance between students served by special education programs where students served in special education programs score lower, on average, compared to students not served in these programs. Some gap in test score performance is expected as a lack of proficiency on state exams is a part of the criteria for establishing eligibility for these programs. Reductions or increases in the size of the performance gap between these groups of students would indicate differential growth rates in aggregate scores between the groups (assuming no substantial changes in the grade distribution of students across years). Based on EOG test score outcomes, we find a relatively consistent gap in performance between the groups.

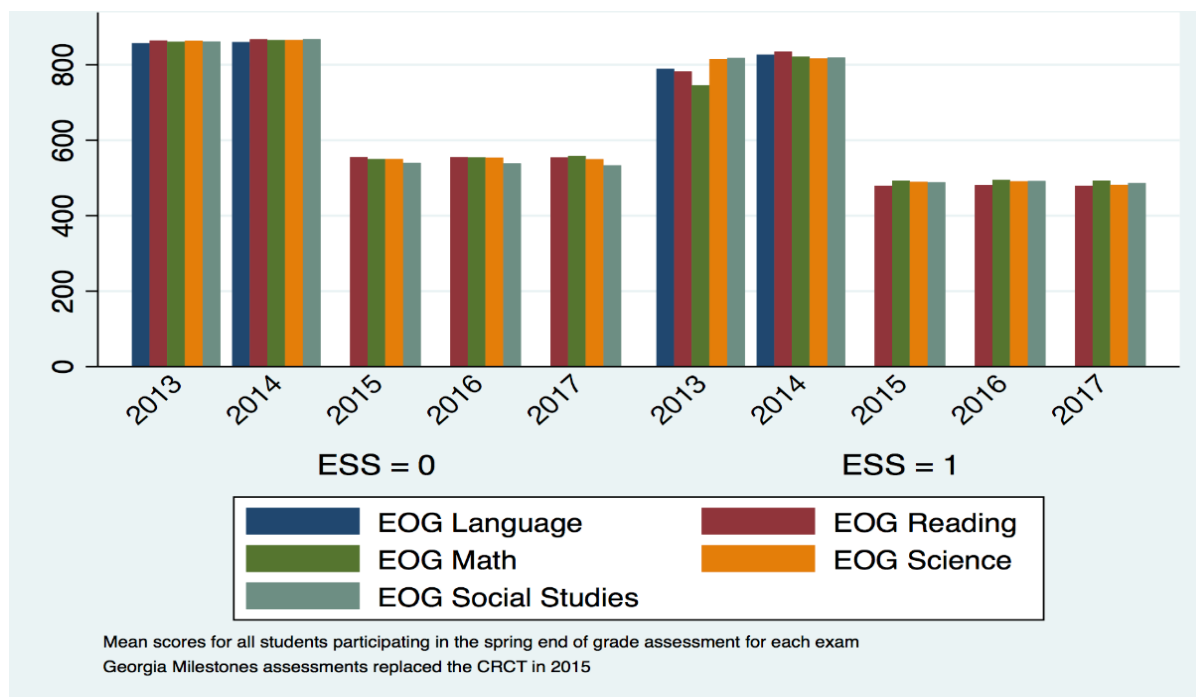


Figure 23. Student test score performance by year: End of grade exams. Column 0 = students without identified disabilities. Column 1 = students with disabilities.

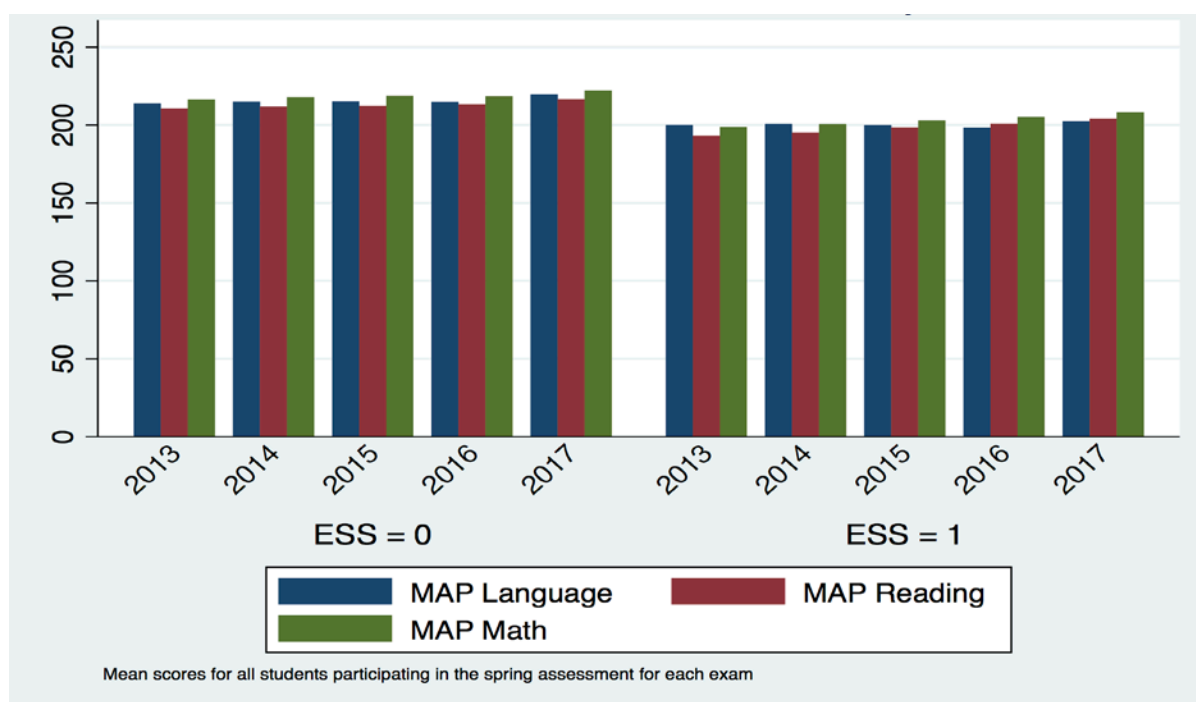


Figure 24. Student test score performance by year: Georgia Milestones Assessment. Column 0 = students without identified disabilities. Column 1 = students with disabilities.

Figure 24 reports the mean scores on spring Georgia Milestones Assessments administered to students in CSD over the school years 2012-13 to 2016-17. Within group, we find trends of modest growth in student's Milestones Math scores over the time period examined for students in both groups. We also observe modest growth in Milestones Reading scores for students served in special education programs. Across groups, we find relatively stable score gaps between these two groups of students with some modest reduction in gap in Milestones Reading scores between the two groups.

Finally, we examined the rates of special education identification based on student gender and ethnicity. Figure 25 displays demographic information for students identified as not eligible for special education services ($ESS = 0$) and those who are eligible for special education services ($ESS = 1$). Across the school years noted in Figure 25, we find that the identification rates for male students are substantially higher than those for female students. Among students served in special education programs, more than 60% are male (0.6 proportion in the figure above) and this value has been relatively stable over the time period. Higher rates of eligibility for special education services among boys is a typical finding in the academic literature. We also observe increased rates of special education eligibility among students identified as Black in the data. Over the time period of the data, we observe decreasing proportions of Black students in both populations of students based on special education services. The proportions of students identified as White is generally increasing, while the proportion of multiracial students has been stable. Black students are identified as eligible for special education services at higher rates than their proportion in the non-identified sample compared to lower rates of identification for multiracial and White students. While this discrepancy may be concerning, there is considerable controversy within the academic literature regarding whether minority students are under or over-identified for special education services (Morgan, Farkas, & Hillemeier, 2017). We note these discrepancies in identification rates for informational purposes, but it was beyond the scope of this evaluation to attempt to determine explanations for these discrepancies.

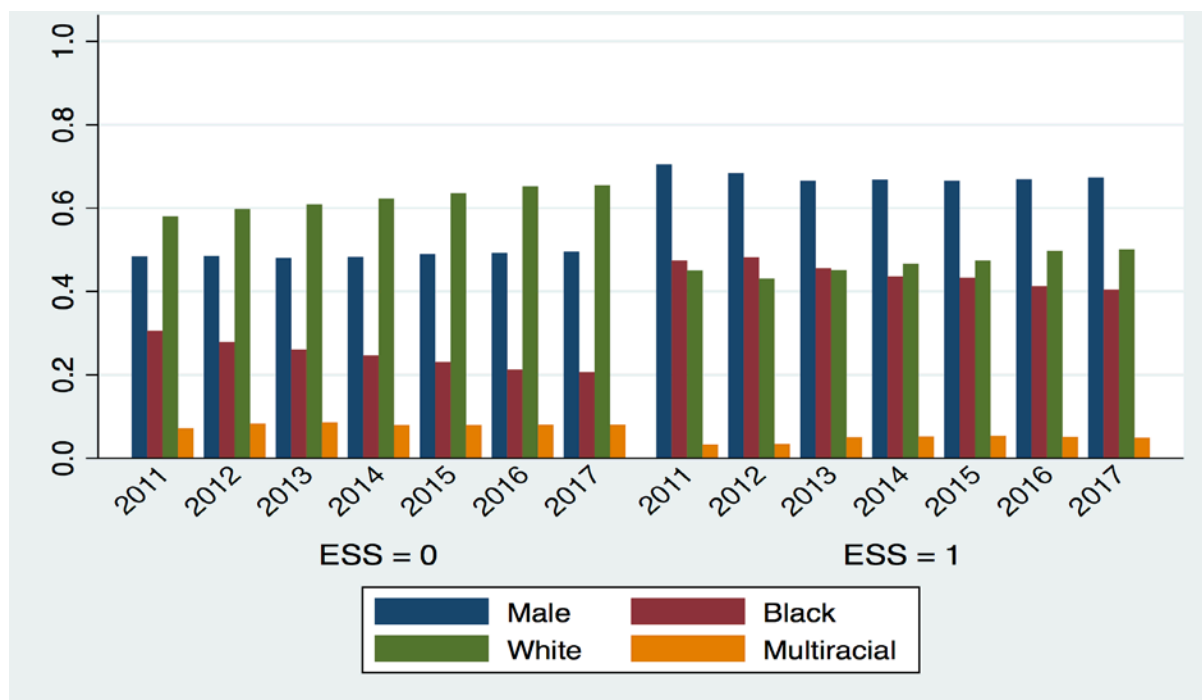


Figure 25. Proportion of students served by year: gender & ethnicity.

Results

The examination of administrative data revealed a number of trends within the district and some differences in the outcomes between students with and without disabilities in the categories of behavioral incidents, student engagement, and academic outcomes. The trends in enrollment across recent years suggest that CSD may need to align resources for students to reflect the changing age composition of students with disabilities in the district. Improvement in the district's data infrastructure and human capital related to administrative data would also allow the district to examine additional subcategories of students (i.e., students served in Tiers 2-3 programming). It would be premature to draw strong conclusions regarding differences in the reported outcomes across students with and without disabilities without additional information. Student engagement may differ across students with and without disabilities due to health needs that require more frequent services provided by professionals located in off campus locations. Similarly, CSD should examine whether the differences in disciplinary outcomes across students with and without disabilities to determine whether the criteria for disciplinary referrals are appropriate for individual students.

We also examined whether students with and without disabilities re-enrolled in the district at similar rates and found that students with disabilities return to the district at slightly higher rates compared to students without disabilities. This evidence suggests that families of

students with disabilities are not expressing dissatisfaction with services by leaving the district at higher rates compared to students without disabilities. Academic outcomes data revealed expected differences in student performance across subjects, and some indication that students with disabilities were closing the performance gap with students without disabilities based on Georgia Milestones Assessments. Finally, we presented information on variation in the demographic characteristics based on a student's eligibility for special education services. In the district, male students and Black students are identified as having disabilities at higher rates than their representation in the non-eligible sample. White and multiracial students were under-represented in the sample of students with disabilities. There is some controversy in the literature related to whether one should expect, a priori, higher or lower representation of minority students in the population of students with disabilities, but the data revealed a similar pattern of changing demographics based on time.



General Discussion and Conclusions

Across the three separate data collection approaches undertaken in the evaluation, we identified four areas of overlap from these results: (1) positive trends within the district, (2) resource allocation, (3) communications, and (4) data structures.

The evaluation work uncovered a number of positive trends within the district regarding shared values from the qualitative investigation and generally positive results from the survey instrument documenting a high degree of agreement that the ESS program provides a safe environment, elicits trust, treats students with dignity, and protects their privacy. We also found from the administrative data that CSD is a rapidly growing district that is attracting increased enrollment and no evidence that students served in the ESS program are less likely to re-enroll in the district the following year.

While resources generally were perceived as sufficient within the district according to data obtained in focus groups and interviews, the allocation of resources related to ESS programming surfaced in two areas of data collection. The administrative data analysis identified changes over time in the numbers of students served in the ESS program over the time period of data analysis and the qualitative data analysis surfaced concerns that human capital resources and professional development sessions might be more efficiently allocated to align with the needs of students with disabilities served by ESS programs in the district.

Both the survey results and the focus group / interview data analysis identified areas of disconnect between various stakeholders in CSD. The survey results noted a difference in agreement with the statements “CSD helps you gain skills or information to get what your child needs” and “CSD provides services that meet the individual needs of your child” between individuals with students served in ESS programs compared to individuals without students served in these programs. In addition, the focus group / interview data analysis revealed themes related to unclear organizational structures, concerns regarding accountability and transparency, and weak communications / feedback loops for information of concern related to the delivery of ESS services. Across these identified themes, a common thread is a higher reliance on informal sources of communication versus formal sources among stakeholders who are not directly employed by the district.

Finally, issues surrounding data and the use of data to make program improvements surfaced in reporting related to both the focus groups / interviews and the administrative data portions of the study. In focus groups / interviews, stakeholders expressed concerns regarding the use of data commonly collected in the regular administration of ESS program delivery. Participants questioned whether the utilization of this data was optimized to improve the delivery of services and communicate effectively with parents on the progress of students. In the administrative data analysis, we noted limitations of the study that occurred due to an inability to obtain data on students in Tiers 2 & 3 served by interventions that did not meet the criteria for inclusion in ESS program participation.



Recommendations

Recommendation One. Standardize Communication.

The first recommendation is to standardize communication protocols to ensure common language, expectations, and processes for information flow, specifically for parents/families and school-based stakeholders (i.e., teachers and administrators). Clarifying and communicating procedures for determining eligibility and service delivery in organizational structure, processes, procedures and protocols would decrease the need for district level intervention.

Teachers and Administrators. Based on data collected during the evaluation, teachers and administrators were aware of and recognized the organizational structure, processes, procedures and protocols for ESS, particularly as it related to special education. Teachers and administrators knew whom to contact for specific special education issues or needs at the school or district level. However, teachers and administrators spoke of alternative routes used by parents to resolve issues. The circumvention of building level teachers and administrators around the special education process decreased communication between parents and teachers and/or administrators as well as denied the teacher/administrators insight into perceived issues parents are having with the process. Frequently, building level teachers and administrators felt that they could have facilitated a favorable solution without district level intervention. Establishing and maintaining a clear protocol for addressing parent/family concerns would be a first step in addressing this issue. This will require that district level personnel ensure that the protocol has been followed consistently. For example, this may require that a documented building level meeting has occurred first prior to an issue being addressed at the district level. Further, establishing a consistent mechanism by which this protocol is communicated to CSD parents and families may facilitate the effective implementation of this process.

Parents. Based on data collected during the evaluation, organizational structure, processes, procedures, protocols, and standards that are in place within the ESS structure are often unclear to parents. Parents spoke of being able to identify the special education district contact person that could address their questions or concerns but could not consistently do so at the school level. Thus, the process of reporting and solving concerns around ESS at the school level was unclear. This occurred more commonly when addressing issues specifically related to special education. Ensuring this information is correct, consistent, available and accessible to all

stakeholders at the school building level would be beneficial to parents in three ways. First, it would provide some assurance that teachers, staff, and administrators in the school building are all knowledgeable about the ESS program. Second, it would facilitate communication between parents and school-level personnel, giving teachers and administrators insight into parents' concerns and allowing them the opportunity to address them appropriately and expeditiously. Such transparency with parents about school-level processes and procedures should also decrease parents' need to take special education questions or requests directly to the central office. Third, it would reduce parents' reliance on informal channels to navigate the ESS program. Though well-intentioned, information gathered through informal channels can be full of error and misguidance, increase tension between the school and family, and ultimately lead to less favorable services for the student.

Ultimately, having strong communication protocols not only increases stakeholders' knowledge about the ESS program, but also ensures that all parties have equity as they participate in various aspects of the program. It is imperative that all school personnel, including teachers, support staff, and administrators, have shared knowledge of ESS and use common language while setting expectations for special education services. It is equally imperative that parents have access to the same information, regardless of their student's academic year, school, grade level, or teacher(s). Establishing strong communication protocols can help the district achieve these conditions.

Recommendation Two: Reevaluate Resource Allocation.

Both grade level and disability type should be considered in the allocation of resources within the school district. The administrative data analysis revealed changes in the distribution of students by both disability subcategories and the number of students served at various grade levels in ESS programs within the district. Comments by stakeholders also revealed a concern that there was a mismatch between the needs of students served in ESS programs and the allocated resources appropriate for the unique needs of students. CSD should consider implementing changes to resource allocation processes that explicitly consider whether the current allocation of resources and proposed changes in allocation align with the needs of students in the ESS program.

The district should also reconsider how it provides professional learning opportunities for teachers at all levels. School and district based stakeholders spoke of the availability of numerous and varied professional development opportunities for teachers. Special education teachers noted that the monthly ESS meetings as a source of information, feedback and information gathering. However, while 75% of the teachers surveyed agreed that the professional

development was beneficial, tensions exist as it related to the prioritization of resources for professional development. Many school-based stakeholders reported that the professional development opportunities, in some cases, were overwhelming. *“CSD is very heavy in professional development. And so it ends up being, oftentimes, that there are many days of training where we are taken out away from the students to receive trainings that we may or may not perceive as a priority.”*

Other school-based stakeholders were concerned about the relevance of the trainings and professional development opportunities that were required by the district. *“If we are going to have the required professional development, I would like to see some geared more towards what our kids [in special education] really need.”* It is recommended that teachers be given more autonomy over the selection of the PD experiences by providing differentiation of PD that is rooted in the individual needs of the teachers. A second recommendation for PD is that the teachers be surveyed at the district level to identify the perceptions of their own unique PD needs noting that it will be different across the grade levels.

Recommendation Three: Examine Response to Intervention (RTI) processes for Tiers 1-4 across P-12.

The qualitative and quantitative data collected through this evaluation generally indicate a level of agreement (although perhaps some misperceptions or lack of information) regarding processes, procedures, activities, and outcomes for students in Tier 1 (all CSD students) and students in Tier 4 (CSD students receiving special education services). However, perceptions varied across stakeholders regarding processes, procedures, activities, and outcomes for CSD students in Tiers 2 and 3. Formal data were not available throughout the district for evaluation within these tiers, limiting both the qualitative and quantitative findings of this evaluation significantly. Consequently, the quantitative analyses within this report were limited only to comparisons between students in Tier 1 to Tier 4. Meanwhile, data collected through interviews, focus groups, and the survey provided some insight into stakeholder perceptions about Tiers 1 through 4. In general, stakeholders held different perceptions about data collection procedures, governance of the RTI program, communication about RTI, progression of students from tier to tier, and availability of resources for students within each tier. These findings, coupled with the lack of available data, indicate a need to investigate CSD’s implementation of RTI.

In addition, the differing perceptions of the process and purpose of RTI, particularly at Tiers 2 and 3, indicate a need to clarify the implementation of RTI, overall. This is especially

critical in establishing a common understanding among all CSD personnel, which could lead to a more consistent message to parents and families. There are example data collection processes and procedures described on the Georgia Department of Education (2018) website that may be helpful in addressing this concern. It is recommended that CSD establish a clear organizational structure for its RTI continuum, with identifiable distinctions between services and supports provides in Tiers 2 through 4 and a formal Student Support Team (SST) process to monitor students' progress within and across tiers.

Recommendation Four: Improve data infrastructure.

The evaluation work conducted revealed some weaknesses related to data infrastructure within the district. The focus group/interview analysis reported on the perceptions of stakeholders that data systems in place to monitor the progress of students served in ESS programs is not being utilized optimally. Some respondents felt that while progress monitoring data was being collected, this data was not being systematically analyzed to alter program delivery for students. Analysis of the administrative data held by the district was limited due to the unavailability of data on services provided for students in intervention tiers two and three. It was unclear in the conduct of the evaluation whether these data limitations were related to data systems limitations, human capital resources deployed to access such systems, or a lack of institutional knowledge concerning the maintenance and location of records related to these types of interventions.

School districts face significant challenges in developing and maintaining the technical human capital resources sufficient for the maintenance and utilization of administrative data systems. The numerous reporting requirements associated with oversight and compliance activities required of districts limits their ability to utilize sources of administrative data for program improvement and data driven decision making. These requirements are especially challenging for relatively small districts who may be faced with insufficient resources to employ a separate department dedicated to data analysis. Districts commonly utilize numerous non-integrated data systems recording data by student, classroom, teacher, and school. The lack of integration and a gap between potential data users and those with the technical knowledge to access these data seriously inhibits the ability of districts leverage this data for purposes not explicitly required for oversight and compliance purposes. Nevertheless, effective RTI implementation requires data that is timely, accessible, and useful for making decisions about educational programming monthly, weekly, and even daily. Therefore, attention to these aspects of the district's data systems will ultimately support positive outcomes for students in the ESS program.



References

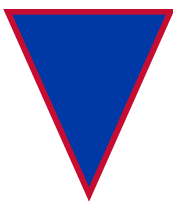
Bernard, H. R., & Ryan, G. W. (2010). *Analyzing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Georgia Department of Education. (n.d.). Special Education Annual Report accessed from <http://archives.gadoe.org/ReportingFW.aspx?PageReq=211&PID=61&PTID=67&CTID=217&SchoolId=ALL&T=0>

Georgia Department of Education. (2018). *Response to Intervention (RTI)*. Retrieved from <http://www.gadoe.org/Curriculum-Instruction-and-Assessment/Curriculum-and-Instruction/Pages/Response-to-Intervention.aspx>

Morgan, P. L., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M. M., & Maczuga, S. (2017). Replicated evidence of racial and ethnic disparities in disability identification in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 46(6), 305-322.

Summers, J., Hoffman, L., Marquis, J., Turnbull, A., Poston, D., & Nelson, L. (2005). Measuring the quality of family-professional partnerships in special education services. *Exceptional Children*, 72(1), 65-83.



Appendices

A	Interview Protocols	53-58
B	Online Survey Questions	59-70
C	Presentation Slides	71-99
D	One-page Summary	100-101

Appendix A – Interview Protocols

Georgia State University Center for Evaluation and Research Services

Evaluation of Exceptional Students Services for the City Schools of Decatur

Leaders Protocol: Exceptional Students Services Administrative Personnel

[Compete informed-consent procedures.]

1. What are your responsibilities in terms of Exceptional Students Services for the Decatur City Schools? Tell me how you work to meet these responsibilities daily. Do you have what you need to do your job effectively?
2. How effective do you feel the Exceptional Students Services Program is when serving students with disabilities?
3. Tell me about your successes providing leadership for Exceptional Students Services.
4. Tell me about the challenges you have faced providing leadership for Exceptional Students Services.
5. Have you participated in and/or provided professional development for the Exceptional Students Services Program in the last year? If so, what?
6. Are there any unique needs for professional development in the Exceptional Students Services program? What might they be?
7. What best practice teaching strategies are being used in the Exceptional Students Services program? Are inquiry-based strategies being used? Example?
8. How are you supporting the use of best practice teaching strategies for the Exceptional Students Services program?
9. Describe the continuum of Exceptional Students Services currently being provided by the program.
10. How frequently are parents coming to you with concerns about the program?
11. What protocols are in place to respond when parental concerns are voiced?
12. Do you feel supported by the Superintendent and Board? Why or why not.
13. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your time.

Georgia State University Center for Evaluation and Research Services

Evaluation Exceptional Students Services for the City Schools of Decatur

Leaders Protocol: Board Members

[Compete informed-consent procedures.]

1. How effective do you feel the Exceptional Students Services program is when serving students? Successes? Challenges?
2. How frequently is feedback given to you about the program? From whom? About what?
3. What are the next steps when feedback is given?
4. How do your experiences with the Exceptional Students Services program align with your expectations?
5. Would you be interested in additional information on the Exceptional Students Services program? If so, what?
6. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your time.

Georgia State University Center for Evaluation and Research Services

Evaluation Exceptional Students Services for the City Schools of Decatur**Leaders Protocol: Principals**

[Compete informed-consent procedures.]

1. What are your responsibilities in terms of Exceptional Students Services for the Decatur City Schools? Tell me how you work to meet these responsibilities daily. Do you have what you need to do your job effectively?
2. How effective do you feel the Exceptional Students Services program is when serving students?
3. Tell me about your successes providing leadership for Exceptional Students Services personnel in your school.
4. Tell me about the challenges you have faced providing leadership for Exceptional Students Services personnel in your school.
5. Have you participated in or made available professional development opportunities for the Exceptional Students Services program in the last year? If so, what?
6. Are there any unique needs for professional development in the Exceptional Students Services program for your school? What might they be?
7. What evidence-based practices are being used in the Exceptional Students Services Program classrooms in your school? Examples?
8. How are you supporting the use of evidence-based practices for the Exceptional Students Services Program in your school?
9. Describe the continuum of Exceptional Students Services currently being provided by the program. How does RTI implementation work at your school?
10. How frequently is feedback given to you about the program? From whom? About what?
11. What are the next steps when feedback is given?
12. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your time.

Georgia State University Center for Evaluation and Research Services

Evaluation Exceptional Students Services for the City Schools of Decatur

Leaders Protocol: School level administrators other than Principals

[Compete informed-consent procedures.]

1. What are your responsibilities in terms of Exceptional Students Services for the Decatur City Schools? Tell me how you work to meet these responsibilities daily. Do you have what you need to do your job effectively?
2. How effective do you feel the Exceptional Students Services Program is when serving students?
3. Tell me about your successes providing services for Exceptional Students Services in your district.
4. Tell me about the challenges you have faced providing services for Exceptional Students in your district.
5. Does the system have difficulty finding qualified applicants for the Exceptional Students Services program when openings occur? If so, why?
6. Have you participated in and/or provided professional development for the Exceptional Students Services program in the last year? If so, what?
7. Are there any unique needs for professional development in the Exceptional Students Services Program for your district? What might they be?
8. What evidenced based practices are being used in the Exceptional Students Services Program classrooms in your district? Examples?
9. How are you supporting the use of evidenced based practices for the Exceptional Students Services program in your district?
10. Describe the continuum of Exceptional Students Services currently being provided by the program. How does R.T.I. implementation work in your district?
11. How frequently is feedback given to you about the Exceptional Students Services Program? From whom? About what?
12. What are the next steps when feedback is given?
13. How is information communicated between your office and the schools?
14. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your time.

Georgia State University Center for Evaluation and Research Services

Evaluation of Exceptional Students Services for the City Schools of Decatur

Teachers Focus Group Protocol

[Discuss group confidentiality.]

1. How familiar are you with Response-to-Intervention practices? What is your role in the R.T.I. process?
2. How effective do you feel the Exceptional Students Services program is when serving students? Why?
3. Do you have the resources (human or material) that you need to teach exceptional students effectively?
4. Have you participated in professional development for the Exceptional Students Services program in the past year? If so, what? What additional professional development would you like to have?
5. How frequently is feedback given to you about the Exceptional Students Services Program? From whom? About what?
6. What are the next steps when feedback is given?
7. What departments do you communicate with regarding the Exceptional Students Services program? What are common points of discussion?
8. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your time.

Georgia State University Center for Evaluation and Research Services

Evaluation of Exceptional Students Services for the City Schools of Decatur

Parent Focus Group

[Discuss group confidentiality.]

1. How effective do you feel the Exceptional Students Services Program is when serving students?
2. Tell me about the program successes.
3. Tell me about the program challenges
4. Does your child have any specific needs that you feel are not being met?
5. How does your experience with the Exceptional Students Services program align with your expectations?
6. When you provide feedback, how is it handled?
7. Do you have any additional information that you would like to share with me?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix B: Online Survey Instrument

City Schools of Decatur Survey

Georgia State University The Urban Child Study Center

Informed Consent

Title: Evaluation of the City Schools of Decatur (CSD) Exceptional Students Services Program

Principal Investigator: Dr. Kevin Fortner

Co-Investigators: Dr. Nicole Patton-Terry, Dr. Susan Ogletree, Dr. Robert Hendrick, Dr. Gwen Benson

Sponsor: City Schools of Decatur

- I. Purpose: You are invited to participate in a study. The purpose of the study is to evaluate how well City Schools of Decatur (CSD) serves students in the Exceptional Students Services Program. You are invited to participate because you are a stakeholder engaged with students served by CSD. Participation will require up to 15 minutes of your time to complete our online survey.
- II. Procedures: If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey questionnaire about CSD's Exceptional Students Services Program. The survey will ask about your experiences with the program.
- III. Risks: In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.
- IV. Benefits: Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about the administration of the Exceptional Students Services Program. The resulting study will provide recommendations to improve the program for students served in CSD.
- V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
- VI. Confidentiality: We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Dr. Kevin Fortner and the research team will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP), and the City Schools of Decatur, the sponsor). Data sent over the Internet may not be secure. We are not collecting IP addresses. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally. You will not be asked to provide any personally identifiable information in this survey.
- VII. Contact Persons: If you have any questions about this study, call Dr. Kevin Fortner at 404-413-8275. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. If you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team, call Susan Vogtner 404-413-3513. Susan

Vogtner works in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity. The Office of Research Integrity oversees the protection of human subjects in research studies.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Participant: Please print a copy of this consent page to keep for your records. If you agree to participate in this research, please click the continue button.

- ☐ continue
- ☐ I do not chose to participate

Skip To: End of Survey If Georgia State University The Urban Child Study Center Informed Consent Title: Evaluation of... = I do not chose to participate

Please select the one option that best describes your situation.

- ☐ I am an employee of the Decatur City School System and currently have no children attending Decatur City Schools.
- ☐ I am an employee of the Decatur City School System and currently have children attending Decatur City Schools.
- ☐ I am a parent, guardian, or family member with children attending Decatur City Schools.
- ☐ I am a member of the Decatur Community and currently have no children or grandchildren attending Decatur City Schools.

I am currently employed by Decatur City Schools as a...

- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Other Staff _____

Display This Question:

If I am currently employed by Decatur City Schools as a... = Teacher

I primarily teach

- ☐ in general education classes.
- ☐ in the Exceptional Students Services Program.
- ☐ Other _____

Please think about the specific Exception Student Services Provider (Your contact with the total program) when responding to these items. Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions in general of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding the items below:

The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Has the skills to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the support to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the resources to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provides services that meet the individual needs of each student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaks up for the student's best interests when working with other service providers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is available when needed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Treats each student with dignity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Builds on a student's strengths.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If I primarily teach = in general education classes.

Using the scale on the right rate your agreement with the statements below:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
I collaborate regularly with Exceptional Students Services in my school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I frequently co-teach inclusion classes with an Exceptional Students Services teacher.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During the last six months, I have referred students to the Exceptional Students Services Program.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regard Response-to-Intervention practices as an expansion of Exceptional Students Services Programs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Student Service Program referrals result in timely follow-up.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Students Services Program referrals result in appropriate access to services.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students eligible for the Exceptional Students Services Program are served well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If I primarily teach = in the Exceptional Students Services Program.

Using the scale on the right rate your agreement with the statements below:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
I collaborate regularly with general education teachers in my school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I frequently co-teach inclusion classes with a general education teacher.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During the last six months, I have referred students to the Exceptional Students Services Program.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regard Response-to-Intervention practices as an expansion of Exceptional Students Services Programs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Student Service Program referrals result in timely follow-up.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Students Services program referrals result in appropriate access to services.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students eligible for the Exceptional Students Services program are served well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Start of Block: Decatur City Schools Employee - Children in School

I am currently employed by Decatur City Schools as a...

- ☐ Teacher
- ☐ Administrator
- ☐ Other Staff _____
-

Display This Question:

If I am currently employed by Decatur City Schools as a... = Teacher

I primarily teach

- ☐ in regular education classes.
- ☐ in the Exceptional Students Services program.
- ☐ Other _____

My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or her learning.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes

Your child was assessed for the Exceptional Students Services program in a timely manner.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes

As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Students Services Program my child was...

- ☐ Not Eligible for Services.
- ☐ Eligible and began or continued Exceptional Students Services.
- ☐ Other _____

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes

Do you agree with the decision of the Exceptional Students Services Program regarding your child? Please explain.

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = No

Or As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Student Services Program my child was... = Not Eligible for Services.

Please think about the specific Exception Student Services Provider (Your contact with the total program) when responding to these items. Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions in general of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding the items below:

The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Has the skills to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the support to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the resources to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provides services that meet the individual needs of each student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaks up for the student's best interests when working with other service providers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is available when needed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Treats each student with dignity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Builds on a student's strengths.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*Display This Question:**If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes**And As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Student Services Program my child was... = Eligible and began or continued Exceptional Students Services.*

Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding your child specifically:

The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Helps you gain skills or information to get what your child needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the skills to help your child succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provides services that meet the individual needs of your child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaks up for your child's best interests when working with other service providers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lets you know about the good things your child does.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is available when you need them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Treats your child with dignity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Builds on your child's strengths.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Values your opinion about your child's needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is honest, even when there is bad news to give.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Keeps your child safe when your child is in his/her care.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes

And As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Student Services Program my child was... = Eligible and began or continued Exceptional Students Services.

Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding your child specifically:

The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Protects your family's privacy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shows respect for your family's values and beliefs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Listens without judging your child or family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is a person you can depend on and trust.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pays attention to what you have to say.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is friendly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If I primarily teach = in regular education classes.

Using the scale on the right rate your agreement with the statements below:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
I collaborate regularly with Exceptional Students Services in my school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I frequently co-teach inclusion classes with an Exceptional Students Services teacher.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During the last school year, I have referred students to the Exceptional Students Services Program.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regard Response-to-Intervention practices as an expansion of Exceptional Students Services Programs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Student Service Program referrals result in timely follow-up.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Students Services Program referrals result in appropriate access to services.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students eligible for the Exceptional Students Services Program are served well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

If I primarily teach = in the Exceptional Students Services Program.

Using the scale on the right rate your agreement with the statements below:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
I collaborate regularly with general education teachers in my school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I frequently co-teach inclusion classes with a general education teacher.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
During the last school year, I have referred students to the Exceptional Students Services Program.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I regard Response-to-Intervention practices as an expansion of Exceptional Students Services Programs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Student Service Program referrals result in timely follow-up.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
In my experience, Exceptional Students Services Program referrals result in appropriate access to services.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Students eligible for the Exceptional Students Services Program are served well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Start of Block: Parent of current student

My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or her learning.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes

As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Student Services Program my child was...

- ☐ Not Eligible for Services.
- ☐ Eligible and began or continued Exceptional Students Services.
- ☐ Other _____

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes

Your child was assessed for the Exceptional Students Services Program in a timely manner.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Display This Question:

If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes

Do you agree with the decision of the Exceptional Students Services Program regarding your child? Please explain.

Display This Question:

*If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = No
Or As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Student Services Program my child was... = Not Eligible for Services.*

Please think about the specific Exception Student Services Provider (Your contact with the total program) when responding to these items. Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions in general of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding the items below:
The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Has the skills to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the support to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the resources to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provides services that meet the individual needs of each student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaks up for the student's best interests when working with other service providers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is available when needed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Treats each student with dignity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Builds on a student's strengths.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

*If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes
And As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Student Services Program my child was... = Eligible and began or continued Exceptional Students Services.*

Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding your child specifically:

The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Helps you gain skills or information to get what your child needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the skills to help your child succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provides services that meet the individual needs of your child.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaks up for your child's best interests when working with other service providers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lets you know about the good things your child does.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is available when you need him or her.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Treats your child with dignity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Builds on your child's strengths.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Values your opinion about your child's needs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is honest, even when there is bad news to give.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Keeps your child safe when your child is in his/her care.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Display This Question:

*If My child has been referred to the Exceptional Students Services Program for evaluation of his or h... = Yes
And As a result of the referral testing in the Exception Student Services Program my child was... = Eligible and began or continued Exceptional Students Services.*

Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding your child specifically:

The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Protects your family's privacy.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Shows respect for your family's values and beliefs.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Listens without judging your child or family.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is a person you can depend on and trust.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pays attention to what you have to say.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is friendly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please think about the specific Exception Student Services Provider (Your contact with the total program) when responding to these items. Using the scale below on the right, rate your perceptions in general of the Exceptional Students Services Program in Decatur City Schools regarding the items below:

The Exceptional Students Services provider...

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know
Has the skills to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the support to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Has the resources to help students succeed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Provides services that meet the individual needs of each student.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Speaks up for the student's best interests when working with other service providers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Is available when needed.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Treats each student with dignity.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Builds on a student's strengths.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Decatur Community Member (not a parent)

Appendix C – Presentation to School Board



The logo for "movinglives forward" is displayed on a solid blue rectangular background. The words "movinglives" are in a light blue, lowercase, sans-serif font, and "forward" is in a white, lowercase, script font.

City Schools of Decatur Research & Evaluation Partnership

School Board Presentation May 8, 2018

Research & Evaluation Team Members



The Urban Child Study Center and Center for Evaluation & Research Services

- Dr. Nicole Patton Terry
- Dr. Kevin Fortner
- Dr. DaShaunda Patterson
- Dr. Gwen Benson
- Jaime Pasley
- Dr. Susan Ogletree
- Dr. Robert Hendrick
- Dr. Harley Granville
- Dr. Sheryl Cowart Moss

Partnership Goals & Activities



Partnership Goals & Activities

Gather comprehensive information of the how well CSD implements processes and procedures to ensure compliance, effective instruction, student achievement, & family engagement in its special education program.

Mixed methods approach, triangulation across 3 data sources:

Interviews &
Focus Groups

Surveys

Administrative data
on children, teachers,
& classrooms

Data collection, analyses, and reporting occurred from Spring 2017 through Winter 2018

Individual Interviews & Focus Groups



- Interviewers asked open-ended questions about participants' perceptions of special education services in the school system.
- CSD administrator interviews were conducted in March. All other interviews were conducted in April-May.
- In some schools, the interviewers met with all teachers instead of a selected subset of teachers.
- In general, parents were open about their experiences, particularly with regard to their child. Most of the system administrators appeared open as well. Teachers tended to be more guarded with some issues.

Participant or Participant Groups	No.
System Administrator	7
School Board Member	1
Principals	9
Teacher Focus Groups	17
Parent Focus Groups	16
Total	50

Surveys



- The survey was administered through a website, with responses held anonymous. The survey was distributed widely by CSD through schools.
- Responses were collected electronically from April 20, 2017 until June 5, 2017.

Category of Respondent	Number of Respondents
Decatur Resident: w/o children	2
Decatur Resident: w/children	109
CSD Employee: w/o children	70
CSD Employee: w/children	104
Total Responses	285

Administrative Data



- Student data were gathered from the central office, with some data available from as far back as AY 2011 up to AY 2017.
- Data available for these analyses included enrollment, attendance, behavior, and disability category served.

Emerging Themes



Analyses of the data from interviews, focus groups, surveys, and administrative data reveal seven related themes:

1. Shared values
2. Organizational structure
3. Accountability & transparency
4. Data-driven decision making
5. Communal networks (parent involvement)
6. Utilization of resources
7. Feedback loops

*Responses (presented verbatim) reveal **tensions** between the strengths and challenges of CSD's special education program.*

Foreshadowing in the survey findings



Decatur Residents with Children Attending CSD (n = 109)

- **84 (77%): students referred to or being served by special education program during the school year.**
 - 53 (73%) were eligible for special education services
 - 10 (14%) were not eligible for special education services
 - 10 (14%) referrals were in progress
- Survey items referring to **safety, dignity, privacy, trust, honesty, and respect received positive ratings** (~70-100% agreement).
- In contrast, two survey items received **lower ratings**:
 - *Helps you gain skills or information* to get what your child needs (44% agreement)
 - *Provides services that meet the individual needs* of your child (53% agreement).

Theme #1

Shared Values



Common ideals held & maintained CSD community stakeholders

Strengths: *"We want to foster a community. We want to have this **feeling of inclusion**. We want to not only do what we do behind closed doors with our special needs kids but make it part of the larger picture of what we do. I think that makes us a pretty special place for that reason."*

Challenges: *"...**average at a state level is not the same as average at City of Decatur level**. They're not the same average."*

Tension: *"I think we have a well-regarded special education program, specifically has a good reputation. **I'm not sure we deliver on those expectations consistently**. We've had a lot of discussions about students with dyslexia, for instance, and we've had a lot of discussions about where we draw the line for where students get services and where they don't..."*

Theme #2

Organizational Structure



*Processes, procedures, protocols, and standards
that are in place to support the special education program*

Strengths: *"We are restructuring a little but...I know my director will now just direct special ed, so that person will have more time..."*

Challenges: *"I think in general people just don't understand the parameters around special education from the testing portion...there's a lot of misunderstanding, but there has been a lot of tension with parents and district special ed."*

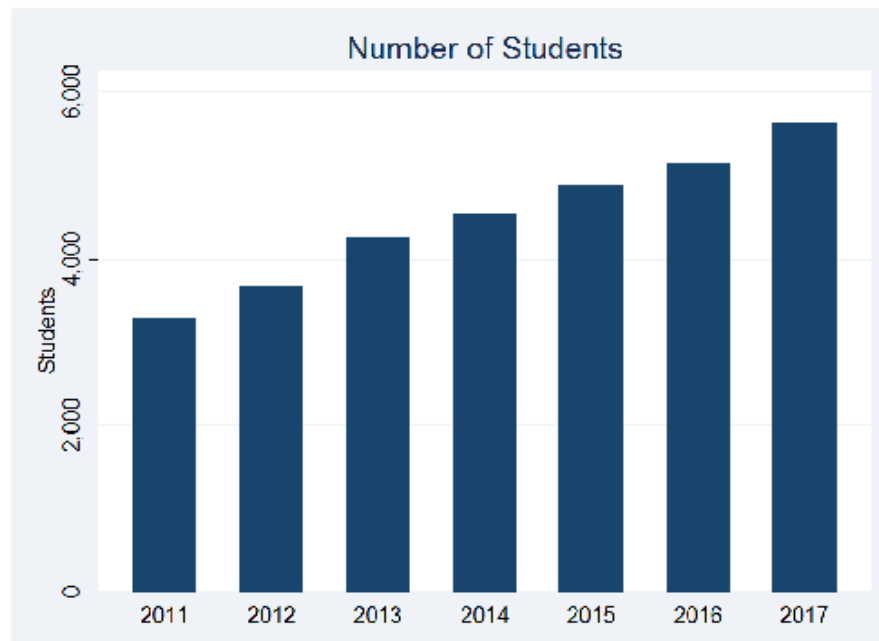
Tension: *"We receive a fair amount of support from our central office...I feel like they're responsive and they're very supportive and they come and they help problem solve all the time. So they're stretched thin but they're supportive."*

Consider: Enrollment

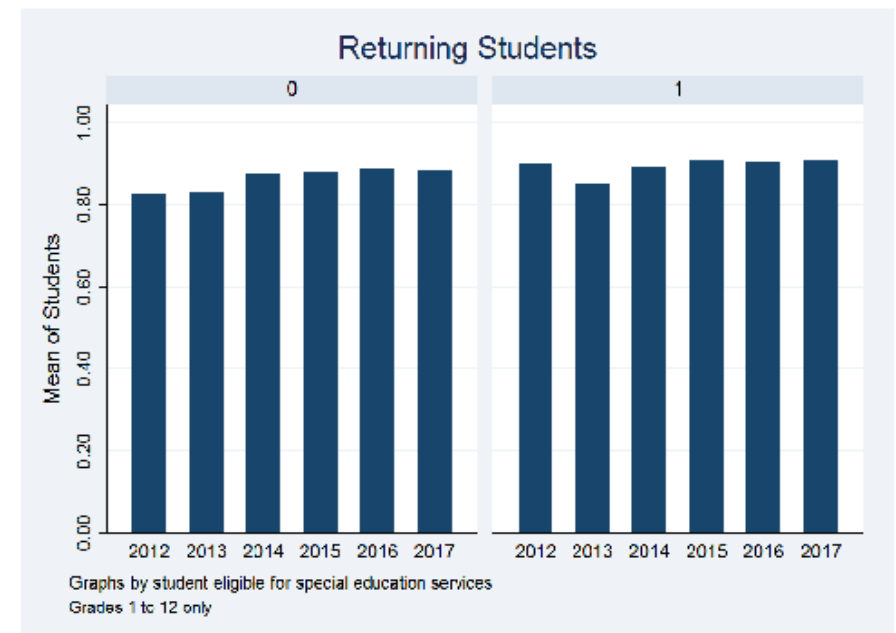


- *The district has experienced rapid growth in recent years.*
- Students who enroll tend to stay, with no significant differences between students with and without disabilities.

Overall student enrollment by year



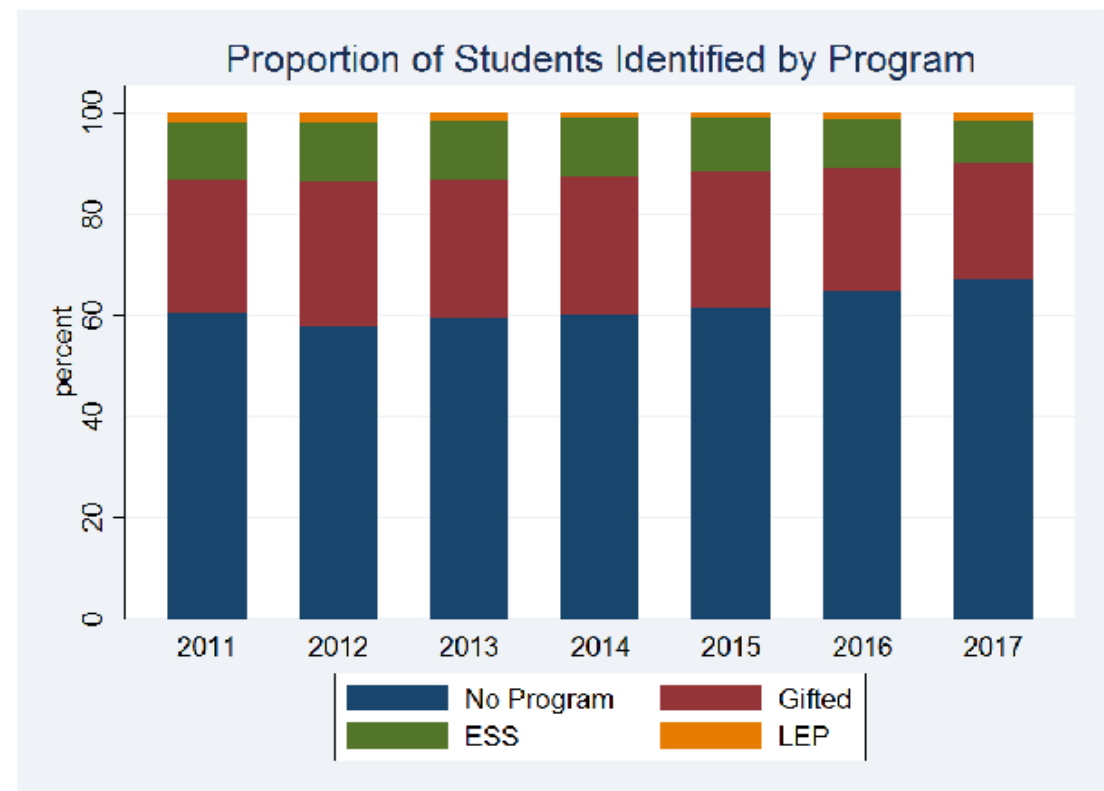
Returning students by year



Consider: Enrollment



- Although the proportion of students with disabilities who are served in CSD has remained relatively stable, the **number of students being served is at its highest** (~500 students).



Theme #3

Resource Utilization



*Processes used to allocate, obtain,
and/or implement resources consistently and equitably*

Strengths: "...we can, every year, *write a list of what we want and pretty much get it.*"

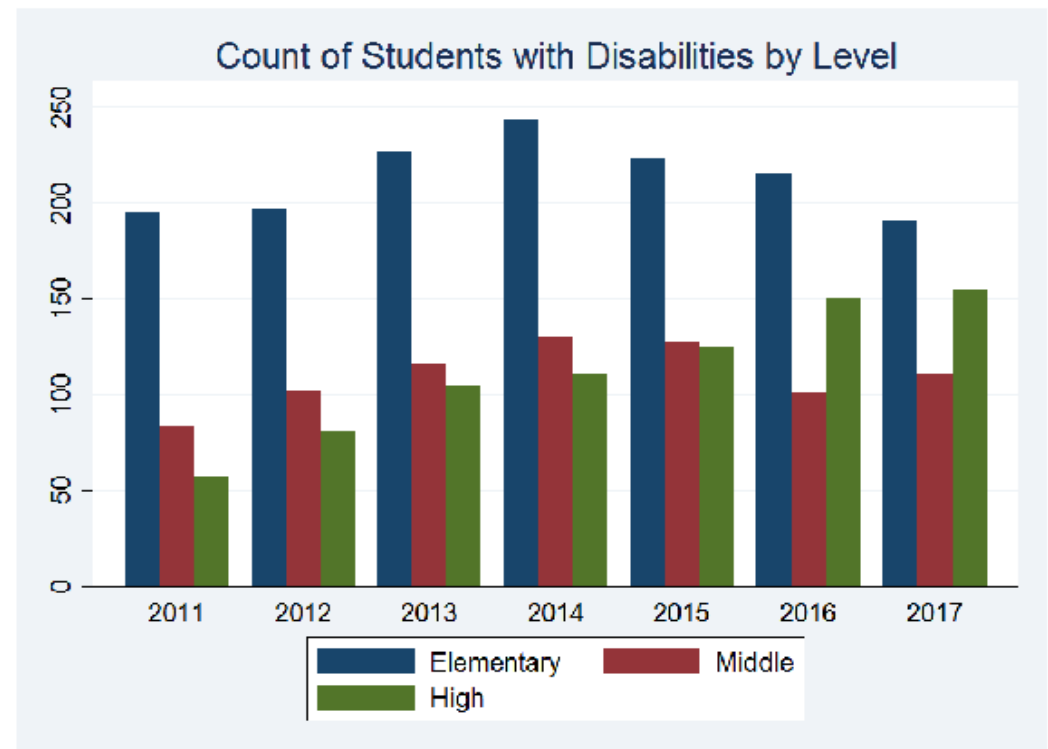
Challenges: "...as far as human resources, again, I feel like *they're spread a little thin...maybe* something they could do is hire one more teacher and they're halftime. There's gotta be a way to balance it."

Tension: "...we do approve things that are supported by data and in the child's IEP...Just because we approve, it doesn't mean that everyone gets the same thing...our job is to ensure that we are delivering *equitable and compliant practices* based on students' needs."

Consider: Enrollment by grade



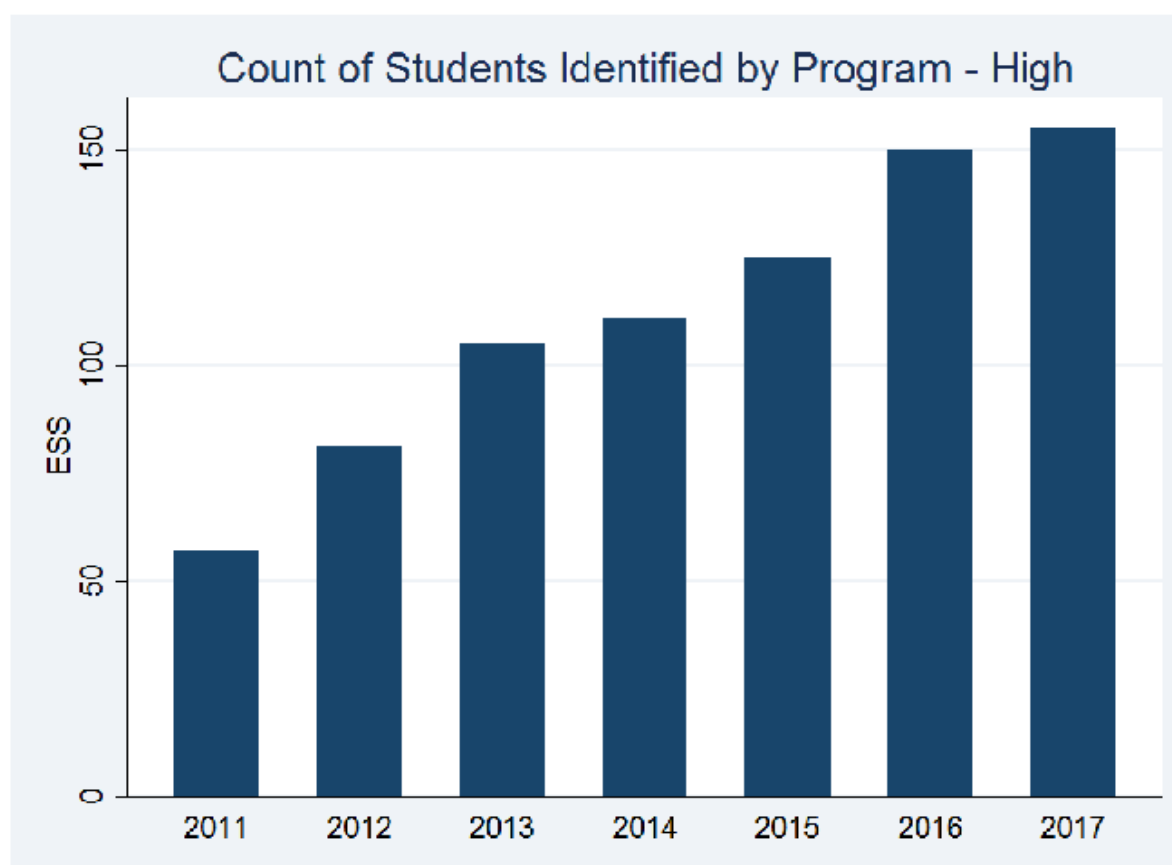
- *The grade level distribution of students with disabilities has changed over time.*
- Fewer elementary students being served.
- Substantial increase in high school students being served.



Consider: Enrollment by grade



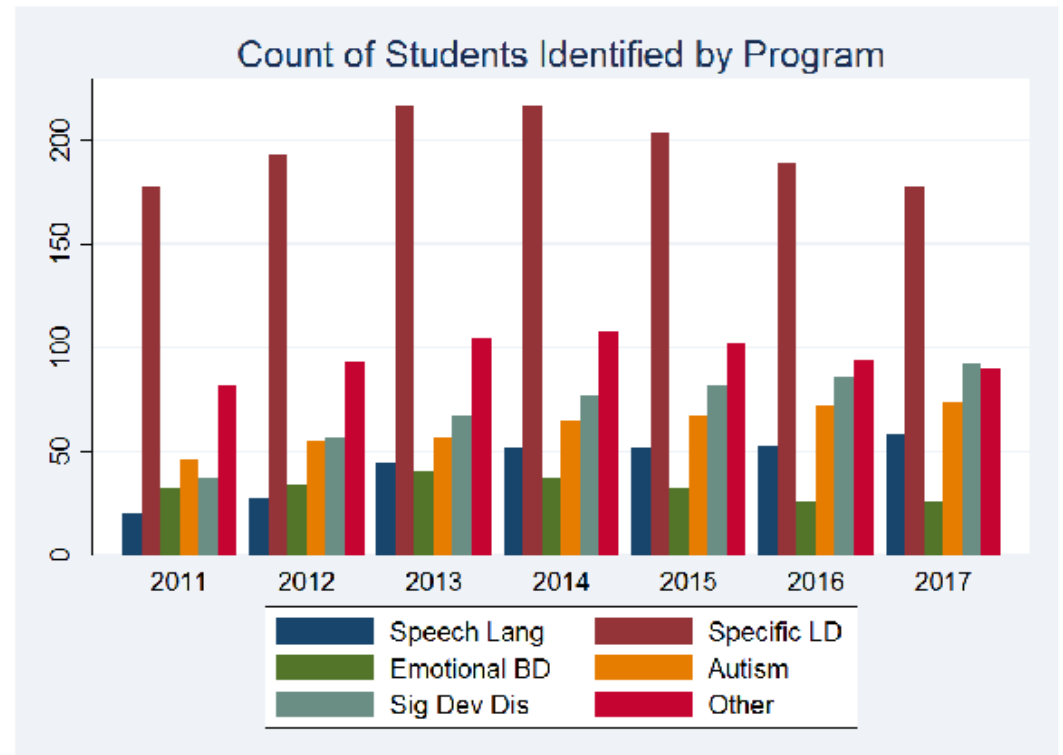
***Between AY 2011-2017,
the number of high school students being served has tripled.***



Consider: Enrollment by disability



- *The type of disabilities served in the district has changed over time.*
- The largest group served is Specific Learning Disability (SLD), and this makes sense.
- In recent years, there have been increases in the number of students served with Autism, Speech Language Impairment (SLI), and Significant Developmental Delay (SDD).



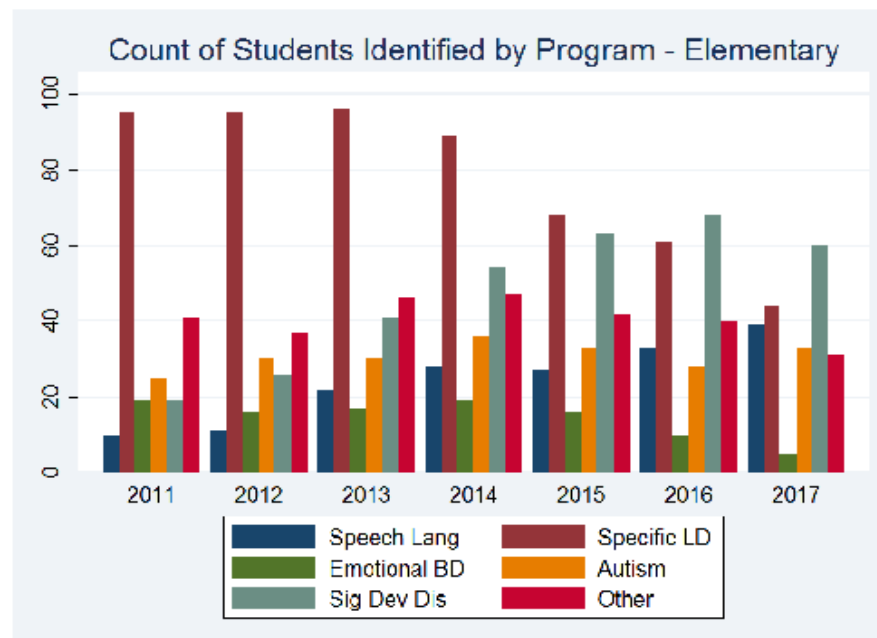
Consider:

Enrollment by disability & grade

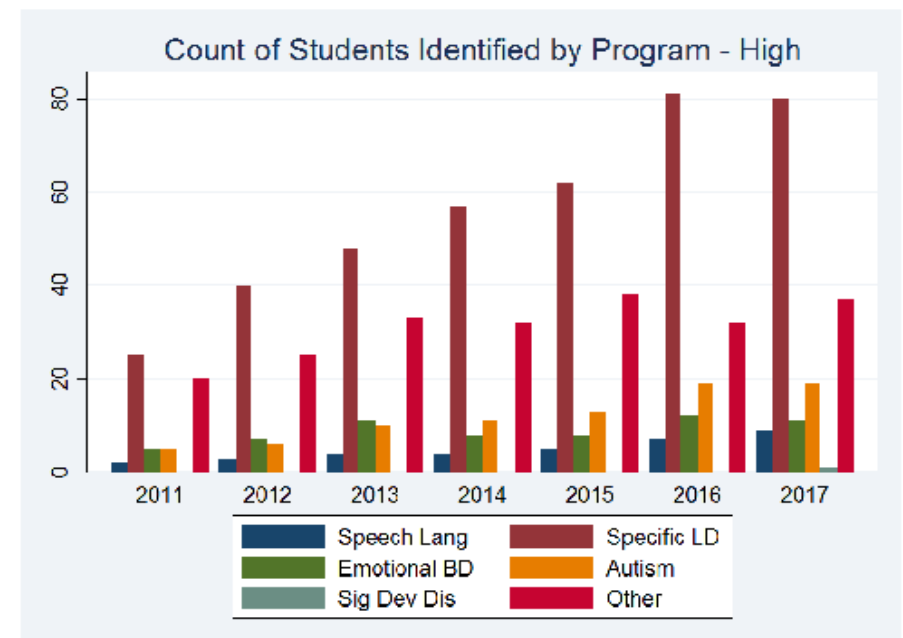


These patterns vary by grade level, likely reflecting differences in Response to Intervention and developmental differences in student needs.

In elementary, SLD is decreasing while SDD and SLI are increasing.



In high school, SLD and Autism are increasing.



Consider Staff Professional Development



Staff are provided with a variety of training opportunities to serve the wide array of disabilities represented across the district effectively.

- ***Learning Disabilities*** Association of America Annual International Conference
- Dimensions of ***Dyslexia*** IDA-GA Annual Conference
- Tools for Life, Bridging the Gap Between Structured Literacy and ***Assistive Technology***
- Georgia Assistive Technology Expo
- Georgia Organization of School-Based ***Speech Language Pathologists*** Annual Best Practices Conference
- Zones of Regulation Training: A Framework to Foster ***Self-Regulation*** and ***Emotional Control***
- Just Words: Wilson Language Training
- ***504*** and ***IDEA*** Legal Training
- Georgia Alternate Assessment (GAA)
- GoIEP (GaDOE ***IEP*** writing software)
- Assistive Technology Compliance and Best Practices
- ***Student Led IEP*** Meetings (ASPIRE)
- ***Functional Behavioral Assessment*** and ***Behavior Intervention Plans***
- Speech Language Therapists Monthly Professional Learning Community Group
- Picture Exchange Communication System, Level 1
- Special Education: The Nuts and Bolts
- ***Discipline*** and the Disabled Student
- MindSet ***Safety Management*** Training
- ***Social Emotional Engagement*** - Knowledge & Skills
- ***Childhood Apraxia*** of Speech Association of North America

*In addition to **monthly** professional learning sessions provided to administrators, staff, and teachers by the Special Education Director and Coordinator.*

Theme #4

Data-Driven Decision Making



Consistent use of evidence to support decisions around instruction and service delivery/eligibility

Strengths: “If we see a child that is needing extra support, that’s **one of things we do is collect data**. We talk to an instructional coach, then collect data. And then this child is put into the RTI process. And so, we’re very much a part of it with collecting the data and sharing our findings in the classroom.”

Challenges: “..what needs to be improved is more of that **progress monitoring piece** where you’re putting an intervention in place, you’re setting a goal based on that intervention, and then you’re monitoring it. Our teachers are doing interventions so when they come to these meetings, they’re just sort of talking about the improvement...not necessarily with hard data they’ve taken to show that they’re making enough progress...”

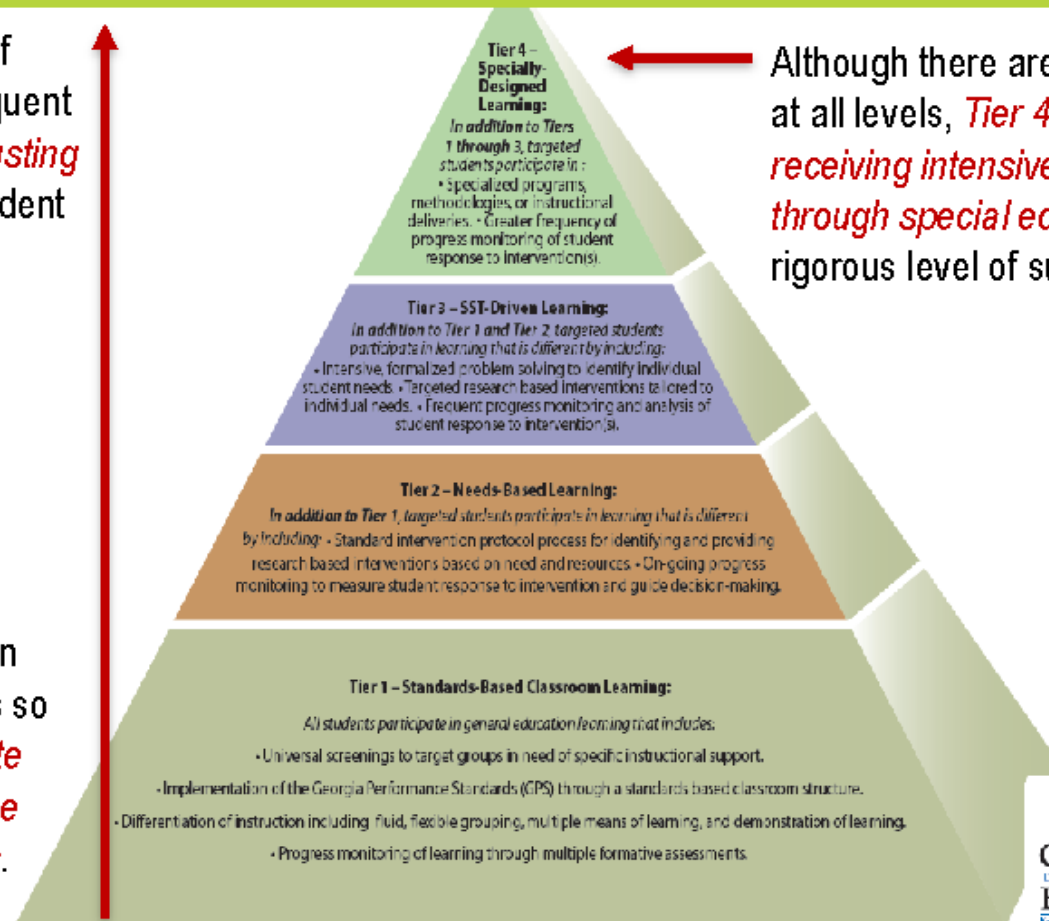
Consider Response to Intervention (RTI)



Response to Intervention: The Georgia Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions

Increasing level of *intensity* of instruction, supported by frequent *progress monitoring* and *adjusting instruction* in response to student performance.

Additive approach, layering interventions and supports in response to students needs so that *all students demonstrate proficient achievement of the GA Performance Standards*.



Although there are children with disabilities at all levels, *Tier 4 is reserved for students receiving intensive specialized instruction through special education* at its most rigorous level of support.

Theme #5

Accountability & Transparency



Degree to which processes and decision-making practices are clear and consistent to stakeholders

Strengths: *"It's **very rare that we find a student packet that does not have the appropriate interventions**...I can think of maybe one incidentout of 20 kids...that had to be sent back because the intervention didn't match the need area."*

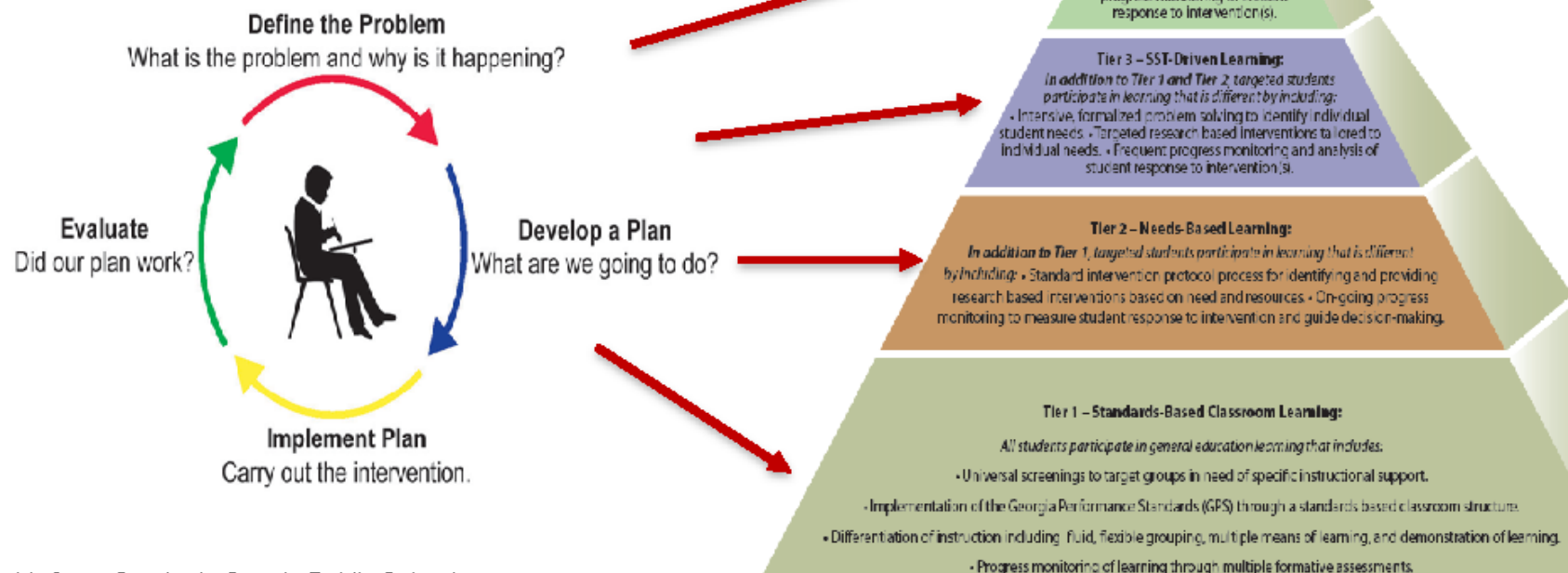
Challenges: *"That's the inconsistency piece....**it just depends on who I am talking to which year, which teacher, and which administrator**."*
(regarding accommodations and services)

Tension: *"We really do make sure we move resources to what the data says the need is for that particular child...**it's not a one size fits all**. We really make an individual case by case decision based on data."*

Consider Making RTI Work

Response to Intervention: The Georgia Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions

The challenge of accountability, transparency, and communication: in an effective RTI system, data-driven decision making and problem solving is occurring *within and across levels for every student every day.*



Graphic from: Seminole County Public Schools
<https://www.scps.k12.fl.us/district/departments/epathways/MTSS/>

Theme #6

Feedback Loops



Feedback loops in place to communicate and/or disseminate information to relevant stakeholders

Strengths: “Student is referred. The student is determined to need services. A **case manager** is assigned. They’re pretty much responsible for most of the feedback that occurs with the students as well as the parent. They’re like the first line...the feedback is expected to be continuous.”

Challenges: “**I don’t get a lot of parents coming to me with concerns. They go right over both of our heads and go right to central office.** A lot of times, if they would have talked to the school, there may be an opportunity for us to help alleviate their concerns.”

Tension: “We have one director and one coordinator [in the central office who] focus on system-wide programming and making sure that we have a system that is supporting teachers and children across the district...Our bandwidth is strained when we have to respond to individual cases...**ultimately it delays our ability to respond not only to that one parent’s need but also all of our students and teachers and families’ needs.**”

Theme #7

Communal Networks



Structures utilized to engage stakeholders in information and resource sharing (parent involvement)

Strengths: “There are *so many people in our community that have knowledge and expertise* with legal background, educators, money, volunteer hours, stay-at-home moms. There are so many people who would gladly do so much more to give the hands-on time and support...”

Challenges: “I think we do fall short a little bit about when it comes to *reaching out to parents* to know what they think is missing...”

Tension: “I am saying all of this great stuff, but *when you guys meet our parents, I wonder if they’re going to say something completely different* from what I’m saying. I think they’re generally really, really positive. I think they know that we have really, really good teachers...I think they’ll complain about some of the processes, especially through the eligibility phase of things, but *I just feel that there’s an element of trust and as assumption of good will...*”

The Bottom line: Strengths



In sum, **strengths observed in CSD's approach to serving students with special needs**

- We're growing! Families want to be here.
- High quality, effective resources for teachers and students
- High quality teaching work force
- Utilization of community partners with expertise
- Culture of care, safety, good will, and high expectations

The Bottom line: Challenges



In sum, **challenges observed in CSD's approach to serving students with special needs**

Rapid growth coupled with changes in the distribution of students served by grade level and disability type have created difficulty with:

- transition from grade to grade and/or school to school
- perceived and actual consistency in delivering services
- communication between families, teachers, schools, and the central office
- distribution of responsibilities between the central office and individual schools

Discussion & Recommendations



1. strengthen **communication protocols** to ensure common language and expectations
 - clarify procedures for determining eligibility and service delivery for special education, and maintain consistency across all school levels
 - provide education and awareness opportunities for all CSD stakeholders
 - create training opportunities for stakeholders on effective approaches and strategies to support students with disabilities
2. consider both **grade level and disability type**
 - in the allocation of resources
 - in professional learning opportunities across P-12
 - consider the unintended consequences of CSD's unique school configuration (ECLC, K-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-12) for resource allocation and possible solutions

Discussion & Recommendations



3. examine **Response to Intervention (RTI) processes** for Tiers 1-4 across P-12
 - examine the number and proportion of students receiving services at Tiers 2, 3, and 4
 - identify and distinguish interventions provided at each tier
 - determine effectiveness of interventions provided at each tier
 - strengthen transition points for new and continuing students, both within and across grades and schools
4. improve **data infrastructure**
 - to support progress-monitoring
 - to facilitate communication with families
 - to examine trends at district- and school-levels
 - to support decision-making for improvement



movinglives
forward

Thank you for your partnership!

Appendix D One-page Summary

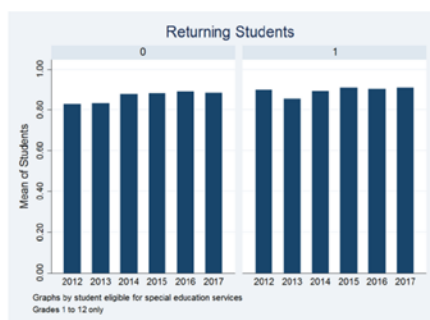
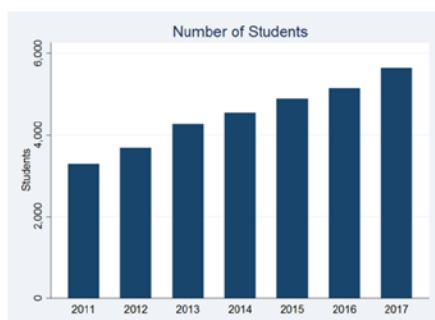


moving lives forward

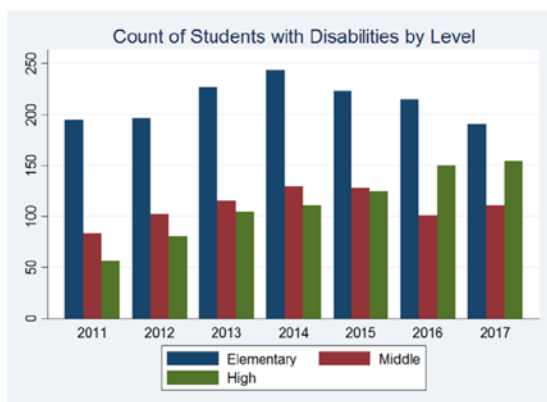
Partnership Goals & Activities

In 2017, the City Schools of Decatur (CSD) partnered with the Urban Child Study Center and the Center for Evaluation and Research Services in the College of Education and Human Development to gather information of the how the district implements processes and procedures to ensure compliance, effective instruction, student achievement, & family engagement in its special education program. Over the course of 9 months, researchers conducted focus groups, administered surveys, and examined school-based data. From the analyses emerged a comprehensive and complex picture of special services programming in the district. **Here's what we've learned:**

CSD is **growing** and students are **staying**.

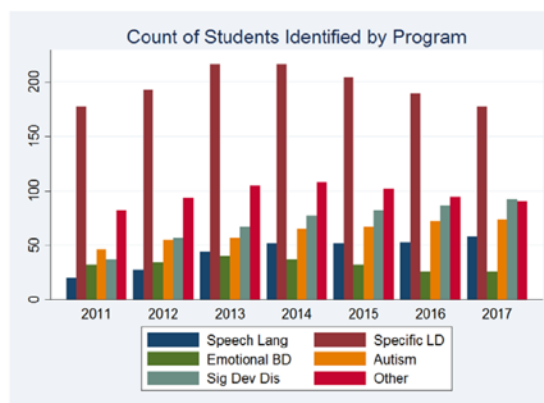


The overall number of CSD students with disabilities is **not growing**, but the numbers differ by grade level. **Middle and high school** are showing the greatest increases. The increase in high school from 2011 to 2017 is 300%!



The numbers also differ by disability served. As in most districts, the largest disability population served in CSD is **Specific Learning Disability**. There are increases in the number of children served for:

- **Significant Developmental Delay** and **Speech Language Impairment** in elementary school
- Specific Learning Disability in high school (emerging in middle school)



Voices “on the ground”

Seven themes emerged from interviews, surveys, and focus groups with families, teachers, and staff:

Shared values

I think we have a well-regarded special education program, specifically has a good reputation. I'm not sure we deliver on those expectations consistently.

Organizational structure

We receive a fair amount of support from our central office...I feel like they're responsive and they're very supportive and they come and they help problem solve all the time. So they're stretched thin but they're supportive.

Accountability & transparency

It's very rare that we find a student packet that does not have the appropriate interventions...

That's the inconsistency piece...it just depends on who I am talking to which year, which teacher, and which administrator.

Data-driven decision making

If we see a child that is needing extra support, that's one of things we do is collect data.

Communal networks (parent involvement)

I am saying all of this great stuff, but when you guys meet our parents, I wonder if they're going to say something completely different from what I'm saying. I think they're generally really, really positive. I think they know that we have really, really good teachers...I think they'll complain about some of the processes, especially through the eligibility phase of things, but I just feel that there's an element of trust and an assumption of good will..."

Utilization of resources

...as far as human resources, again, I feel like they're spread a little thin.

Feedback loops

I don't get a lot of parents coming to me with concerns. They go right over both of our heads and go right to central office. A lot of times, if they would have talked to the school, there may be an opportunity for us to help alleviate their concerns.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Overall, the data suggest that CSD is **rapidly growing district** with skilled high quality teachers and staff, abundant resources, and engaged community. These **assets help to create a culture** of care, safety, good will, and high expectations.

Meanwhile, this growth coupled with **shifts in the disability populations served** at each school level has created **inconsistency in both service delivery and communication** between families, teachers, and the central office. The following recommendations are offered address these challenges:

1. strengthen **communication protocols** to ensure common language and expectations
 - clarify procedures for determining eligibility and service delivery for special education
 - provide education and awareness opportunities for all CSD stakeholders
 - create training opportunities for stakeholders on ways to support students with disabilities
2. examine **Response to Intervention (RTI) processes** for Tiers 1-4 across P-12
 - identify and distinguish interventions provided at each tier
 - determine effectiveness of interventions provided at each tier
 - strengthen transition points for new and continuing students
3. consider both **grade level and disability type**
 - in the allocation of resources
 - in professional learning opportunities across P-12
4. improve **data infrastructure**
 - to examine trends
 - to support decision-making for improvement



**URBAN CHILD
STUDY CENTER**

The future is ours to develop.

