

**Glen Ellyn School District 41**

**Special Education Review  
Follow Up Progress Report**

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Completed by  
Dr. Judy Hackett  
Dr. Tim Thomas

The Glen Ellyn School District 41 administrative team connected with TJ Consultants during the Fall, 2019. They requested a follow-up review related to the efforts and progress made during the past two years regarding the priorities established in the comprehensive audit and the focus on special education programming and services across the district.

The focus of the 2020 follow up review targets the four main priority areas of focus reflected in the recommendations of the Special Education Review completed in March, 2017. Shortly after the Glen Ellyn School District 41 Board presentation and review of the comprehensive report, the District formed a strategic planning committee representing a diverse group of stakeholders and began the earnest efforts of developing a multi-year strategic plan aligned to the identified areas of need. The Special Education Strategic Planning Committee (SESPC) was formed and represents stakeholders serving in various roles across the district - parents, certified and classified staff, administration and the Board liaison who serves as the committee chair. In the initial meetings between district administration and TJ consultants, strong consideration of what evidence and measures would be most reflective of the district's progress towards growth in the priorities were identified. It was important to review the measures denoted in the special education strategic plan and those areas that related to the broader Glen Ellyn District 41 Strategic Plan. To best triangulate the information gathered for the review, the consultants held stakeholder groups of parents, staff, administrators and the SESPC. There has also been a focused survey targeting the four identified priority areas and survey results were tabulated for both the parent perspectives and staff perspectives. The following analysis reflects interpretation of the data gathered from multiple sources including interviews, focus group meetings, survey information and review of

related district artifacts. It is organized under each of the four recommendations delineated in the report.

The first recommendation from the original report was:

**Model actions that reflect a supportive, inclusive educational culture.**

Directly related to this item were three survey prompts for parents and staff. Survey item #2 was *“The school district has increased its efforts to include students with special needs in their respective home school and classrooms.”* Of the parents who participated in the survey the vast majority (58 individuals) provided a positive response to the district’s efforts to model a supportive inclusive culture. There were only six negative responses. The results from this item suggest that the majority of parents believe the school district has made significant strides including students with special needs in their respective home schools and classrooms.

Similarly, staff also responded favorably to this survey question. There was an overwhelmingly number of positive responses (85) with very few (4) negative responses. These results seem to indicate that the strong majority of staff believe the school district has made significant progress including students with special needs in their respective home schools and classrooms reflected in various district steps.

The parent focus group reflected a greater mix of perspectives that also acknowledged the efforts to advance the efforts of a more inclusive focus for the district community and the associated benefits for students with disabilities and their peers. This was a significant positive shift from several of the parent forums held in the initial comprehensive review. Conversely some parents also expressed concerns regarding inclusive practices, fearing that inclusion

wasn't for every student all the time, but acknowledged and appreciated the cultural shift to a stronger inclusive mindset for the district community that has promoted a greater sense of belonging and shared responsibility for every student. A few parents felt that there are fewer program and service options since the district has shifted to different ways of providing service and supports. Many of the parents acknowledged the district's increased emphasis on services within the general education classroom. They also noted the increased efforts support the district's mission to embrace diversity of needs across the educational community. Several parents expressed concern regarding whether teachers have enough support across classrooms and schools to manage the increased expectations and diversity of needs within the classrooms. Many parents acknowledged and conveyed appreciation for the increased targeted professional development, support, understanding and broader focus on changing the district/community views of acceptance, understanding and celebration of diversity.

In the staff focus groups, staff commented that over the past few years there are more students being educated in inclusive learning environments and proudly shared there are many associated student success stories. There were also several positive comments of the discussions around philosophy and gaining a common understanding and increased professional development to support an inclusive focus. Other associated comments in the evolving efforts also included concerns around having enough support to address individual needs, a need for greater clarity and future direction, determining factors to gain more support for individual needs and addressing the full continuum of programs services and needs that include addressing students with behavioral needs.

There appears to be substantial consensus among parents and staff that the school

district has made considerable strides through their planning and action steps to include students with a wide range of learning needs into their home schools and classrooms. Several staff and parents spoke favorably regarding the increased focus and sense of commitment and desire to do this well and for the compelling philosophical reasons of supporting students in an inclusive learning environment. There was acknowledgement of the focus of the working SESPC committee and the living document that guides ongoing work in a fluid approach that reflects additions, changes as needs evolve. As a significant focus and change in the district, the committee shared the work of developing a definition of inclusive practices and associated guiding principles and refining action steps to take to continue to advance the work. As the committee highlighted the guiding principles, they also shared several current stressors associated with the changes that include some confusion on what inclusion is in practice and how it should best be implemented, how to best address a range of needs within a classroom and what aspects of a continuum of programs, supports and services should continue to exist to address the needs of students in the district. Many participants and leaders acknowledged that the complex work of change is not yet complete and more effort and time is warranted to develop greater depth of understanding, clarity of purpose and alignment and execution of the associated steps in the implementation of a fluid evolving inclusive plan for the district. As reflected in focus groups and surveys, the determination of what resources are needed and most effective in supporting students continues to be an area of emphasis. The majority articulated a positive shift in culture, in the inclusive student-focused approach the district emulates to support all students, building a greater sense of collaboration, respect and acknowledgement that this continues to be an important part of the district mission.

The survey item #3 was *“There has been noticeable progress in the district’s inclusive practices outlined in the strategic plan.”* This item correlates to the first recommendation noted above.

The parent responses to this survey item reflected a strong majority of positive responses. There were 35 positive responses and 13 negative responses. These results seem to suggest that approximately twice as many of the parents who participated in the survey feel the school district has made noteworthy progress related to its inclusive practices.

Staff survey results on the same question reflect a more evenly split response. There were 40 positive responses and 36 negative responses. These relatively equivalent results reflect a considerable difference of opinion among the district special education staff who completed the survey related to the district’s inclusive practices. Seems that it would be beneficial for the school district to examine why there are the differences noted between parents and staff related to this perspective.

Special Education Strategic Planning Committee (SESPC): The formation of the committee, the ongoing emphasis of the “living document”, the communication and increased professional development was acknowledged by both staff and parents. Participants spoke about the various discussions and consensus building efforts around an operational definition of inclusion and acknowledging that although growth is evident in inclusive practices there is more work to do. Variations in responsibilities, resource allocations and what the resource model should look like and how it is determined was a part of a group discussion. Several suggestions were provided that emphasize a need for greater flexibility in resource allocations, including assistive technology (often associated with Universal Design), that can

be provided and use of those resources, gaining greater knowledge and experience, deeper discussions on the long-term focus and plan and what associated needs will enhance effective implementation of a long-term plan. Further discussion regarding alignment of professional learning and coaching, general decision-making processes regarding programs, services and supports and the range of potential interventions and supports best aligned to determine what devices, options and resources are most effective for individualized needs.

Survey item #5 was *“There are sufficient supports for inclusive instructional practices.”*

This item also correlates to the first recommendation previously noted.

Reflected in the parent responses was a comparable number responding both positively and negatively. There were 31 positive responses and 30 negative responses. These results suggest that the parents are equally split in their perspective regarding having sufficient instructional supports related to inclusive practices.

There was an overwhelming agreement from the staff related to this survey item. There were only 6 positive responses, while there were 73 negative responses. These survey results strongly convey a significant perspective from the staff that they do not feel there are sufficient instructional supports being provided to implement the district’s inclusive practices effectively.

The responses to the three survey items directly related to inclusion indicates the school district has made considerable strides forward related to advancing understanding and implementing greater inclusion of students in their home schools and classrooms. However, it

also suggests the school district needs to continue its efforts to more fully support students and staff.

This trend was supported by the thoughts shared in the various forums although articulating what supports were needed varied among participants. Some staff felt strongly that additional teaching assistants were needed in the classrooms while others felt additional coaching and resources, including technology and instructional materials would be beneficial. The one area of consistent praise across surveys and forums was the noteworthy increased effort and commitment toward targeted professional development and parent engagement through the extensive Facilitated IEP training efforts. Both parents and staff continue to see this focus as a very positive step forward in working collaboratively to build individualized educational plans for their students. The resources provided have enhanced those important IEP discussions and allowed staff and parents to be more actively engaged and authentic in the process of developing an educational plan together.

There is a strong feeling among stakeholders that there are an increased number of students with more complex needs requiring additional support within the classrooms. Several shared that with such a diverse range of needs within classrooms, determining how to best support every student becomes exponentially more challenging. The emphasis on a coordinated team approach is considered most effective but that there continues to be a need for further coordination and articulation of what is needed, how to best allocate resources and ensure that all the team members have the training and support to implement an evolving learning plan.



Related to LRE/inclusive educational practices, the initial recommendations that include use of a systems change framework that builds greater consensus and understanding, builds a stronger infrastructure, and initiates planned implementation that will increase the probability of systemic success and sustainability. Embedded in any sustainable change process of this magnitude is an appreciation of a multi-year plan of implementation, a need for ongoing review, reflections and revisions and flexibility to best address the action steps and continued check of understanding and consensus to ensure the foundational philosophy and goals propel the work forward.

The second recommendation from the original report was:

**Related to LRE/inclusive educational practices, use a systems change framework that builds greater consensus and understanding, builds a stronger infrastructure, and initiates planned implementation that will increase the probability of systemic success and sustainability.**

Survey item #1 was *“The district’s strategic plan has resulted in growth related to common district vision and greater understanding of inclusive practices.”*

Parent responses resulted in a higher level of positive responses (35) compared with considerably fewer negative responses (10). These results suggest the parents think the school district has systematically advanced understanding of their inclusive educational practices over the past two years.

The same survey item presented to the staff resulted in similar results with positive responses doubling the negative responses. The staff survey totals on this question were 45 positive responses and 21 negative responses. These results suggest the staff believe the school district has systematically moved forward with their efforts to assist with greater understanding of their inclusive educational practices.

There appears to be consensus among both parents and staff that the school district has made considerable strides through their strategic plan and ongoing efforts to gain greater common understanding of their inclusive action steps. The frequent updates and district communication regarding the efforts of the strategic plan have been shared and posted on the website as well as discussed with staff in various forums. There are obvious signs that reflect a concerted effort to engage more staff and parents in the development and implementation of the special education strategic plan reflecting an inclusive mindset. Conversely, the associated challenges expressed include a need for further efforts on social emotional needs and associated resources to support supplementary materials. It is also important to several participants that there is greater articulation of long-term goals, associated and revised measures that indicate a successful implementation and balancing the needs and supports for all students.

The third recommendation from the original report was:

**Advance a customized Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) model which incorporates increasing intensities of instruction through progressive levels of**

**intervention provided to students in direct proportion to their individual needs.**

Survey item #4 was *“The district/school teams have progressed in providing early instructional and/or behavioral assistance through continued efforts in the multi-year D41 Strategic Plan that includes advanced efforts in a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS).”*

Clearly this survey item directly correlates to the third recommendation above.

Twice as many parents responded positively to this item than those responding negatively. More specifically there were 31 positive responses compared to 16 negative responses. These results suggest the parents believe the school district is making progress with their MTSS efforts.

Conversely, staff responded more negatively to this survey item. There were 28 positive responses while there were 45 negative responses. These results suggest the staff reflect more of a range of perspectives regarding the district wide MTSS progress, with the majority sharing that they do not feel there has been significant progress in this area. The contrast between parent and staff perspectives denoted in the surveys warrants further consideration and discussion in this area.

Similarly, in the parent and staff forums there were strong opinions shared by both parents and staff in this area of focus that further supports additional efforts in this area of focus. Some parents had a general understanding of the district multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) process but others challenge the scope of interventions, processes and progress monitoring across the district. Staff commented that MTSS does not exist in pre-

school, that they did not feel there were enough research-based interventions particularly at Tier 3 and that although there is a great deal of discussions and problem-solving, the decisions are felt to be made often at the administrative level after the students went through the MTSS pipeline. Others reported that there is much energy and effort in looking positively at the MTSS data and the support of interventionists who can review the supports in place, the associated data and the implementation of strategies with fidelity. There is a district level MTSS committee and much effort on data collection and tiers of support which has served as a great springboard for additional effort and refinement. At the middle school level, there are more reading and math interventions but further effort and problem-solving is indicated in the other core areas of science and social studies. As common in many districts, there are differences in decision-making, schedules and implementation across schools and more focus on articulation seems to be indicated. Similar to the growing pains of systemic change in an inclusive mindset, moving MTSS to an advanced level presents challenges in execution. The role of the interventionists in the advancing of MTSS are viewed by many staff as positive supports and the review of data seems to indicate that there has been increased student progress in buildings with interventionist support. As students progress through the educational system and the correlation between the inclusive strategy plans and advancing MTSS seems to require greater clarity and guardrails. Determination of what the most effective and impactful research-based programs and interventions are and how to progress monitor comprehensively will also be important aspects of a more defined tiered model. As previously reflected, the resource allocations for the district could be more closely aligned to a decision-making process embedded in the MTSS framework reflective of a

range of types of supports most aligned to the range of intensity of student needs throughout the tiers. Several staff and parents acknowledged the important efforts of special education leaders who are actively engaged in professional learning committee (PLC) meetings and advancements in literacy at the elementary level, additional coaching that has been beneficial and how to balance needs, caseloads and student supports most effectively.

The fourth recommendation from the original report was:

**Advance the school, family and community collaborative partnership emphasizing genuine meaningful engagement.**

Survey item #7 was *“Through the strength based Facilitated IEP process, parental involvement has increased.”* This survey item strongly correlates to the fourth recommendation.

Parents who completed the survey shared twice as many (33) positive responses over the negative (16) responses. These results suggest the parents believe the school district is making progress related to parental involvement connected to the Facilitated IEP process.

Similarly, staff shared a comparable perspective with twice as many (29) positive responses over those who did not feel parent involvement has increased (16). These results suggest the staff believes the school district is making progress related to parental involvement connected to the Facilitated IEP process.

The correlation between parental and staff responses implies there is overall agreement that the district is making good strides including parents via the Facilitated IEP process. Many reported the series of trainings provided over the past 2 years, that paraprofessionals/teaching assistants were now involved in IEP meetings and all felt that it was helpful to be a part of the team and share valuable perspectives and updates of how the students were progressing. Many parents commented that they felt more engaged as active members of the IEP team and that they have a greater impact, a positive feeling about the meeting dynamics and subsequently positive consensus on IEP development. The district has received positive feedback and staff ask routinely what can we do differently, more specificity regarding the strengths and challenges and how to best share needs.

Survey item #8 was *“Communication and engagement of parents with disabilities has progressed.”* This item connects to the fourth recommendation noted above.

In the important area of communication, the parent surveys indicated a closer split of positive (29) responses and (24) negative responses. These results suggest there is a considerable difference of opinion among parents related to the district’s progress communicating and engaging them.

Conversely, staff responses to this item indicate a stronger, more positive effort on behalf of the district related to communication. There were 31 staff providing positive responses and 11 negative responses. Relative to the survey responses, it appears that it would be beneficial to gain further insight into the difference perspectives among parents, and likewise between parents and staff regarding communication and engagement.

Beyond surveys and forums there are many other opportunities for parents to be involved and engaged in their child's educational plan and collaboration with the district. There are meetings, trainings, parent camps, increased communication processes and engagement in committees and forums. The focus on this area was also a direct result of the special education audit report and the impetus for the Facilitated IEP training and change in processes. Most parents indicate that it has provided a more strength-based engaged process. While there are differences of opinions among parents in the direction the district is headed in the inclusive mindset and strategic planning, the communication discrepancies might be intertwined with understanding the dynamics associated with the changes and the impact that has on their child's special education programming and services.

The two survey items tapping into the district's efforts related to increased parental involvement and engagement suggest mixed results. It appears that the district's use of the Facilitated IEP process has increased the perspective of both parents and staff that the district has made progress. However, overall, there may not be as strong of a perception by parents that the district has made considerable progress regarding their involvement and engagement.

In addition to the careful review of the perspectives shared by parents and staff in both the surveys completed and the input of participants in the forums, several important insights were provided through a candid review of progress made thus far by the Special Education Strategic Plan Committee (SESPC). One of the important first steps was to ensure that the committee composition included a wide range of roles and perspectives across the district. The committee's first task, reflected in the PowerPoint and notes provided was to establish

the purpose of the D41 Strategic Plan as follows, *“We empower diverse learners to advance their academic, social and emotional success in school and in the world. In partnership with families, we design and implement services that ensure students reach their maximum potential in a supportive and inclusive school community.”* Leaders and staff shared that those early discussions included the important connection of the committee's purpose to the vision and mission of Glen Ellyn District 41. The committee then went on to build consensus on established inclusive principles/belief statements that would guide the work. The inclusive principles developed reflective of SESPC committee consensus are as follows: 1) viewing every child as a general education student; 2) developing a continuum of services that is driven by individual student strengths and needs; 3) creating a culture that develops a sense of belonging for all diverse learners; 4) assuring shared ownership by every educator for every student; 5) respecting every student’s strengths and needs; 6) presuming competence for each student; 7) engaging in collaborative problem solving to develop, challenge, and accommodate all learners. Based on review of meeting notes, updates and associated discussions, it appears evident that a substantial amount of time and energy have been dedicated to the extensive planning, committee work, discussions and communication processes of the strategic plan implementation. From the early stages of the strategic plan development in the Fall of 2017, it was deemed a ‘living document’ with goals, responsible stakeholders, outcome projected and timelines of progress outlined under the four designated areas - a) philosophy, leadership and goals, b) program and instruction, c) professional development and d) communication. Detailed updates continue to be provided through various forums that include staff meetings, department meetings, board meetings,



SSPAC meetings, the School Board SESPC committee meeting summaries, professional development trainings, consultation and coaching aligned to designated action steps with Dr. Julie Causton, guiding the district's inclusive practices training.

Other district artifacts reviewed describe an overview of the processes that support goals established. These include processes for establishing daily staffing needs broken down by activity, groupings and staff needed to address the scope and time associated with activities as well as documenting any staffing support needs. There is also a district planning instrument used to determine the level of individual aide support based on the activities outlined during the day, level of independence for the student, when assistance is needed and what areas further promote social acceptance, including how peers may play a role. Another related area of focus that arose in staff and parent discussions was an increased need to advance behavioral supports. There is a designated behavior problem solving consultation protocol that guides a process to gain further insights into student strengths, type and frequency of behaviors, antecedents, and interventions attempted and those that have been effective. This process has a strong alignment to the functional behavior analysis and behavior support plan. While there were no direct references to this process during the staff and parent forums, addressing behaviors for individual students and the increased focus through MTSS appears to be an ongoing need as the strategic plan implementation continues. Glen Ellyn School District 41 Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Academic and Behavior Document provides parents with an overview of the MTSS systemic approach to supporting individual student needs. The MTSS organizational chart further defines the three tiers for both academic and behavioral concerns, the associated decision-making team members,

what each tier is and isn't and further explanation of the relationship of special education under the MTSS chart. While there are several documents and charts that further articulate MTSS, the discussions and survey data reflect a need for further clarification and commonalities across schools and opportunities to deepen understanding and advancement of the systemic framework of support for all students.

Through the progress review and reflected in the survey and forums with staff in particular was an expressed need for additional support to address the evolving strategic plan and needs of students. Over the past few years, the overall district enrollment has decreased slightly, causing a slight increase in the percentage of students with disabilities. For 2017-2018, the percentage of students with disabilities in the district reflected 12%, for 2018-2019 11% and for this year, approximately 13%. During the same period of time, the state average has continued to increase and is now at 16% across Illinois. Over the same period of time, there has also been a slight decrease in the total number of students with disabilities reflected in the ISBE December 1 Child Count and on the Glen Ellyn District 41 report card. The most recent state count from the March, 2020 I-Star report reflects 433 D41 students with IEPs. Aligned to the district's special education strategic plan and associated action steps there is also an increase of approximately 30 students from 2017-2018 to the following year educated in a general education environment and an additional 14 students from 2018-2019 to the 2019-2020 school year. During the same period of time, staffing ratios have remained fairly consistent, a 10:1 ratio of students to certified staff that include special education certified staff and additional staff hired over the past few years in special services. Further analysis of the trends in the district's child count data, district enrollment and staffing ratios and

increased number of students included in general education classes all play a role in the discussions and resource alignments across the programs and schools of the district.

## **Summary**

Glen Ellyn School District 41 engaged in a comprehensive special education review process during the 2016-2017 school year. The review addressed a number of important areas. Recommendations from that review focused on the district's inclusive educational practices, multi-tiered systems of support, as well as parental involvement, engagement and communication. As a result of that process the school district engaged in many specific and guided activities to address the recommendations. Activities included increased parental committees work, the use of Facilitated IEPs, regularly scheduled school team meetings, additional professional development focused on these areas, the development of numerous internal staff documents and worksheets for critical decision-making, and hiring additional staff trained to address the needs of students with the learning styles associated with inclusive learning.

This current special education follow-up review was designed to address the school district's actions following the 2016-2017 review and how well these actions are progressing. The current review reinforced that the school district has implemented many positive activities that are highly correlated to the recommendations from the 2017 report. Additionally, overall, the responses from parents, staff and administrators indicate that the school district's efforts are positive and noteworthy.

The recommendations from the 2016-2017 review implied that considerable systems work would be necessary in order to accomplish the goals. Working within the context of the district strategic plan the school district chose to engage in the needed systemic approach to improve these areas. The evidence from the current review reflects this. As with any systemic change process, it will take time. The evolutionary aspect of educational change is measured in years. The steps the school district has taken are impressive, yet it is understandable that the district is still in the beginning phase of change. Therefore, the district is experiencing the anticipated initial challenges associated with a new endeavor.

Occasionally, especially in the early stages of change and growth, there may be confusion and a need for ongoing clarification. Additionally, there may be times some individuals do not feel adequately skilled or prepared in order to provide the necessary support for a number of the learners. The school district administration continually is working to provide the necessary support and information in order to enable the practices to continue moving forward.

Another critical element worth noting is the desire by a number of stakeholders to maintain a legitimate full continuum of programming and services. The district is aware of this need and continues to strive for the important balance of providing inclusive education while offering appropriate educational options. This is a challenge for all school districts. Therefore, the district administration wisely continues to review programs and services and provides ways for ongoing stakeholder input.