



Wake County Public School System

Improving Outcomes for Students, Staff Morale, & Parent Satisfaction

Prepared by District Management Group

July 7, 2022

Contents

Introduction and Background 1
Workstream 1: Identify Ways to Strengthen Stakeholder Feedback and Improve District Responsiveness..... 5
Introduction 5
Approach and Methodology..... 6
Data Analysis..... 6
Focus Groups 7
Stakeholder Interviews..... 8
Overview of the Issues 8
Who is reporting issues?..... 9
Where are issues occurring?..... 9
When do issues occur?.....10
What are the issues?11
Special Transportation Challenges.....13
Current State13
High-Level Barriers to Issue Resolution13
Current State of the Issue Resolution Process.....17
Current State Issue Resolution Process Map.....23
Future State.....23
Issue Resolution Framework.....23
Issue Resolution Process Map.....25
Enabling Opportunities.....27
Workstream 1 Conclusion.....29
Workstream 2: Deepening the Understanding of The Strengths and Distinctiveness of Special Education Services30
Introduction30
Approach and Methodology.....30
Database and Consistency Analysis31
Focus Groups and Interviews.....32
Stakeholder Re-engagement: Focus Groups and Teacher Survey32
Findings of the Specialized Programs Review33
Discussion of Programmatic Strengths33
Framework for Specialized Program Opportunities34

District-Wide Opportunities and Recommendations37
Program-Specific Opportunities and Recommendations40
Implications for District Oversight and Management Structures74
 Opportunities and Recommendations74
Workstream 2 Conclusion.....77
Overall Conclusion77



Introduction and Background

In 2021, Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) and District Management Group (DMGroup) embarked on an effort to improve outcomes for students, staff morale, and parent satisfaction as related to special education services.

WCPSS is the largest school district in North Carolina and one of the largest districts in the country, with over 160,000 students in 194 schools. Serving around 19,000 students with disabilities, with roughly 3,100 of those students in more than 250 specialized programs, WCPSS is a leader in how it supports students of all abilities and needs. However, given the district's size and complexity, improving outcomes for students and parent satisfaction in special education is a particularly complex challenge.

In Wake County, the process for how best to resolve concerns raised by parents, guardians, and loved ones¹ of students receiving special education services, as well as who should be responsible for resolving these concerns, is not always clear or effective. In addition, different parents have varying expectations as to what makes a "great" program for their child. This is especially true for families from other states, and the many challenges imposed by the pandemic have further compounded these issues.

WCPSS partnered with DMGroup to help improve how special education issues are resolved in the district, and to refine and enhance specialized programming and the way in which programs are highlighted.

The goals of this project were to develop:

1. A new recommended resolution process to more effectively address common issues and concerns related to special education programming and services.
2. Concrete recommendations to effectively highlight and showcase the district's special education programs and services, especially regional, or "specialized," programs.

Through extensive qualitative and quantitative data analysis over the course of eight months, DMGroup, in collaboration with WCPSS, accomplished these goals through two distinct yet interconnected workstreams supported by initial research activities to build understanding of the district context.

Workstream 0: Build Understanding of District Special Education Practices and Common Issues

First, we worked together to develop a foundational understanding of common issues in the district and a preliminary map of district special education services. Major activities included:

- Project kickoff
- Interviews with senior district leaders

¹ Please note: Though "parents" are referenced throughout this report, DMGroup recognizes student support systems come in many different forms. The term "parent" is used to include a student's primary guardian, regardless of relationship.



- Review of special education service documentation
- Creation and validation of preliminary plan to resolve special education issues

Workstream 1: Identify Ways to Strengthen Stakeholder Feedback and Improve District Responsiveness

Following Workstream 0, DMGroup worked to create a practical plan to better resolve parent and family issues and concerns related to special education. To accomplish this goal, major activities included:

- Analysis of existing issue reports and databases to identify common issues
- Focus groups and interviews with district stakeholders to understand root causes of issues and to map current roles and responsibilities
- Identification of improvements to the district’s issue resolution processes

Workstream 2: Identify Strengths and Distinctiveness of Special Education Services

In coordination with Workstream 1, DMGroup also developed a prioritized set of opportunities to improve and rebrand special education services and programs. To accomplish this goal, major activities included:

- Inventory of district specialized programs
- Focus groups with district stakeholders to assess program strengths and weaknesses
- Identification of improvements to prioritized set of specialized programs
- Review of management structures of specialized programs and proposed refinements

To guide the work, DMGroup and WCPSS developed a Steering Committee of special education stakeholders and leaders in the district. The Steering Committee was composed of a representative set of senior district stakeholders with decision authority who helped guide the work and review findings.

Name	Role
Jill McKenna	Assistant Superintendent of Special Education Services
Pam Doak	Senior Director, Instruction & Behavior for K-12, Special Education Services
Audrey Jones-Langston	Former Senior Director, Family & Community Connections & Related Services, Special Education Services
Bruce Page	Senior Director, Family & Community Connections & Related Services, Special Education Services



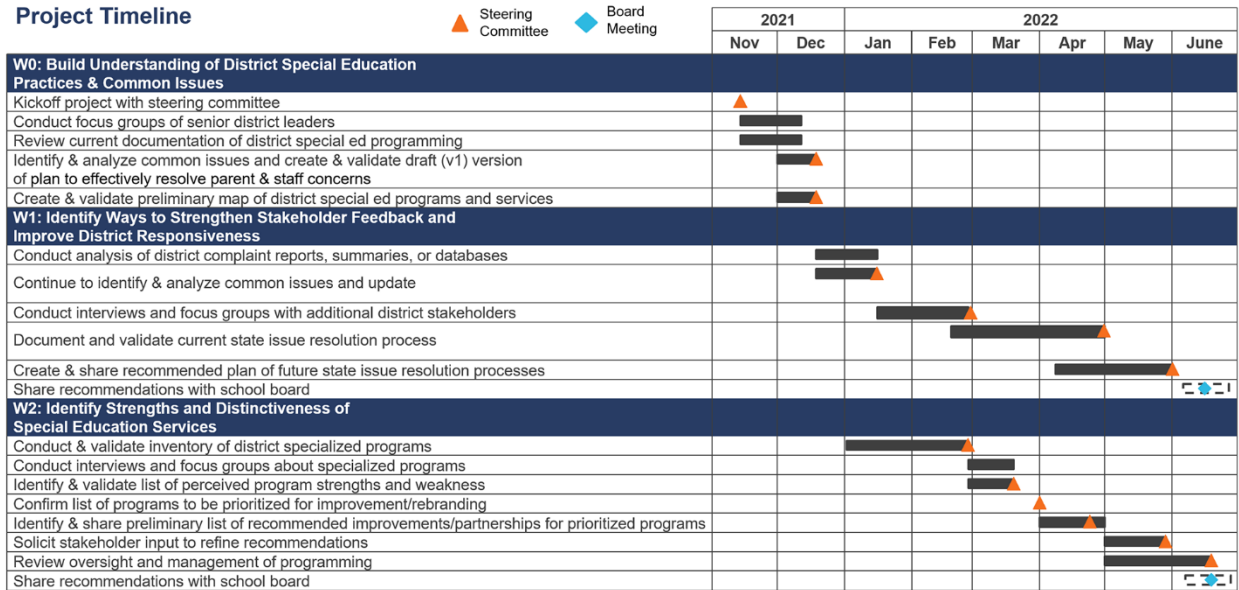
Name	Role
Gay Lytton	Director of Preschool Services
Alicia Miller	Director of Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS)
Matt Dees	Senior Administrator, Communications
Marie Palmer	Brooks Magnet Elementary School
Candace Witherspoon	Senior Director, Policy, Special Education Services

The Steering Committee played a vital role in this project, serving as champions for the work and advocates for constructive changes on the ground. Throughout the course of the work, members of the Steering Committee were tasked to:

- Guide the direction of the project
- Provide diverse perspectives based on members' experiences
- Provide expertise on district context
- Validate what DMGroup is learning and seeing in the district
- Provide feedback and validate project approach and activities
- Inform final findings and opportunities
- Join monthly Steering Committee meetings from Winter to Summer 2022.

Project work spanned from November 2021 through June 2022. The different phases of work are outlined in the following project timeline.

Project Timeline



All findings and recommendations presented in this report are the result of extensive quantitative and qualitative data analyses, tied to the goals of each workstream. Throughout this project, DMGroup’s findings were developed through the review of multiple quantitative and qualitative data sources, including interviews, focus groups, and analysis of both publicly available data and research, data, and documentation from internal district systems. Findings were validated in partnership with the project Steering Committee. Members were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on each section of the work outlined in this report.

No personal identification is used in this report; individual comments are identified only with respective public positions (e.g., Special Education Teacher, Parents, or School Principals).

The workstream-specific methodology, findings, and recommendations are outlined in the subsequent sections.

Workstream 1: Identify Ways to Strengthen Stakeholder Feedback and Improve District Responsiveness

Introduction

Small problems can become big problems when they aren't addressed quickly and thoughtfully. Concerned parents of students with disabilities typically first reach out to school-based staff and school-based leadership; if school-based staff don't or can't resolve the issue, it is escalated to the central office, often to senior leadership. Sometimes the simple act of having to escalate the issue to the central office increases parent frustration and makes the discussion higher stakes. In a large district like WCPSS, this can also overwhelm senior leadership.

Moreover, while parents experience frustration over unmet needs or unresolved questions, school-based staff also feel the brunt of these interactions. Teachers want to be responsive but may not have the authority or the answers that are needed. They may leave these unresolved interactions feeling stressed, under-supported, frazzled, or disrespected – it is a lose-lose situation. Ultimately, this leads to increased teacher burnout, staff turnover, and even fewer school-based staff with the needed experience to resolve issues quickly and well.

Across the country, this all-too-common situation has been exacerbated by the debilitating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the many challenges imposed by the pandemic, including school closures, frequent changes to instructional approaches, and other myriad issues that are out of the hands of educators and district leaders.

Districts with high levels of parent satisfaction and minimal due process issues tend to address most concerns at the school level. The first workstream of DMGroup's work with WCPSS focused on providing school-based staff the tools and support they need to resolve issues at the school level and prevent escalation to district staff, while providing parents and families the support they need to navigate the special education landscape.

Approach and Methodology

Workstream 1 comprised five major phases of work, with specific goals aligned to each:

1. Identification of Main Challenges and Common Issues
 - a. Build understanding of the most common areas of concern and issues along with an understanding of the common challenges to issue resolution.
 - b. Map the current issue resolution process and the roles and responsibilities of key players.
2. Stakeholder Engagement
 - a. Refine list, and improve understanding, of the most common areas of concern and issues by stakeholder.
 - b. Build understanding of the resolution process and the main challenges to issue resolution.
 - c. Collect recommendations for how the issue resolution process could be improved.
3. Draft Current State of Issue Resolution Process
 - a. Document and validate the current state of the issue resolution process.
4. Draft Future State of Issue Resolution Process
 - a. Create, share, and validate recommended plan for the future state of the issue resolution process.
5. Finalize Recommendations and Share Findings
 - a. Finalize the current state of the issue resolution process.
 - b. Finalize the future state of the resolution process and recommendations.
 - c. Share findings and recommendations.

The findings for this workstream were developed through a comprehensive analysis of quantitative and qualitative data sources, outlined below.

Data Analysis

DMGroup reviewed staff and parent resources and training materials created by the district, such as Advocacy for Parents, the Parent Handbook, and the Every Child Accountability & Tracking System (ECATS) and Policy Manuals. Documentation reviewed was used to inform initial understanding of the landscape of Special Education Services (SES) in the district and the issues facing SES.

DMGroup also conducted an in-depth analysis of district databases (including Cherwell, Let's Talk, MARS, and the Policy Team's Action File) that track issues and inquiries within special education. The quantitative analysis primarily draws from Cherwell data, from July 2018 through January 2022, to capture issues and complaints by type of issue, program, and school. This analysis is further informed by the Policy Team's Action File and Let's Talk. As the most robust source of inquiries, Cherwell served as the primary data source for analysis and informed the identification of common issues and concerns in the district.

External research and DMGroup's past work and research were leveraged to inform best practices for issue resolution and recommendations for process improvement.

An important limitation to note is that, while district-level systems provided a strong body of data to work with, school-level tracking data on issues was not available except in the form of information gathered from interviews and focus groups. Information about when complaints and issues occur throughout the family journey is primarily anecdotal, as systems only capture formal complaints and issues that have already escalated past the school level. There is also a lack of differentiation between complaints, issues, questions, or comments in Cherwell, limiting the ability to assess specific issues and instead encompassing all inquiries.

Focus Groups

To better capture the reality of the issues facing families and students receiving special education services in WCPSS, DMGroup conducted 70 focus groups with 207 internal and external district stakeholders. Participants were identified in collaboration with the district and included a wide variety of stakeholders to gather all relevant perspectives. Focus group participants included:

- Community members:
 - Parents (93 participants)
 - Special Education Advisory Council (8 participants)
- School-level staff:
 - General Education Teachers (3 participants)
 - Special Education Teachers (24 participants)
- District-level staff:
 - Coordinating Teachers (30 participants)
 - Related Service Leads and Providers (21 participants)
- School and District Leaders
 - Principals and Special Education Administrators (24 participants)
 - Area Superintendents (4 participants)

Methodology for Selecting Participants

Individuals invited to participate in parent focus groups were selected, in partnership with the district's department of Data, Research, and Accountability (DRA), through a stratified sampling approach. The DRA team pulled a representative list of parents of students receiving services from across all regions, ages, and programs. DMGroup invited a representative group of 223 parents to participate in focus groups. The initial response rate to focus groups was lower than expected, at 4%.

To ensure parent experiences and voices were adequately captured, DMGroup hosted an additional round of parent focus groups. A stratified sample of over 2,000 parents was invited to the second round of focus groups. Ultimately, DMGroup conducted a total of 35 parent focus groups, speaking with 93 parents.²

² It is important to note that while the list of invited parents represented parents of students from across the district, programs, and socioeconomic backgrounds, response rates were very low and, ultimately, those who participated self-selected from the initial stratified sample. The response rate for the first round of parent focus groups was 4%, and 5% responded for the second round of focus groups.

DMGroup also experienced a low response rate among general education teachers (7%). In collaboration with the Steering Committee, it was decided that the general education perspective was adequately captured through focus groups and other district leader interviews.

Stakeholder Interviews

DMGroup conducted 18 one-on-one interviews with key district leaders and staff. Participants were identified based on their role within WCPSS and SES. All interviewees had a role either in SES or working with families and offered a unique perspective into the issues and the resolution process. These interviews informed DMGroup's initial understanding of the common issue themes and topics related to special education in the district. Key stakeholders were re-engaged throughout the process to build and validate findings.

DMGroup spoke with:

- Senior District Leaders
 - Assistant Superintendent of Special Education Services
 - Senior Director, Instruction & Behavior for K-12, Special Education Services
 - Senior Director, Family & Community Connections & Related Services, Special Education Services
 - Director, Special Education, General Curriculum
 - Director, Social/Behavior Programming and Extended Content
 - Director, Related Services
 - Director, Policy
 - Director, Preschool Services
 - Director, MTSS
 - Director, Psychology Services
 - Senior Administrator, Communications
- Senior Administrators
 - Senior Administrator, Family and Community Connections
 - Senior Administrator, Dispute Resolution (2)
 - Senior Administrator, Audit, Monitoring, PD
 - Senior Administrator, Elementary Programming
 - Senior Administrator, Strategic Data and Help Desk
 - Senior Administrator, Special Transportation

Overview of the Issues

Special education and providing individualized services to students is a complex process, and issues are inevitable. In order to adequately begin to address the issues, it is important to first understand when and where they are arising and what they are primarily about.

To build an initial understanding of the issues in WCPSS, DMGroup conducted an in-depth analysis of the primary system the district uses to track issues and inquiries, Cherwell. The Cherwell analysis is bolstered by information gathered from focus groups, interviews, and other



qualitative data. Together, these analyses informed the identification of the issues families are experiencing with Special Education Services in the district.

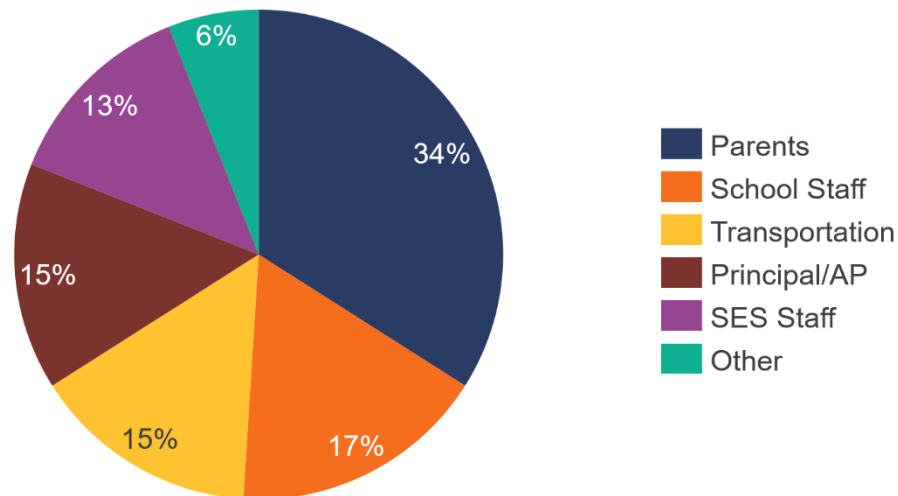
Who is reporting issues?

There are six main stakeholders reporting issues or directing inquiries to the district through Cherwell:

1. Parents
2. School staff
3. Transportation
4. Principal/AP
5. SES Staff
6. Other³

The breakdown of total volume of reported issues and inquiries by stakeholder is illustrated in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: Cherwell Submissions by Role



Source: WCPSS Cherwell Report, July 2018 – January 2022

Where are issues occurring?

School Level

By overall volume, the total number of issues at the elementary school level far exceed that at the middle and high school levels. However, when looking at the average number of complaints per 100 special education students, there is little variance in the volume of complaints across school

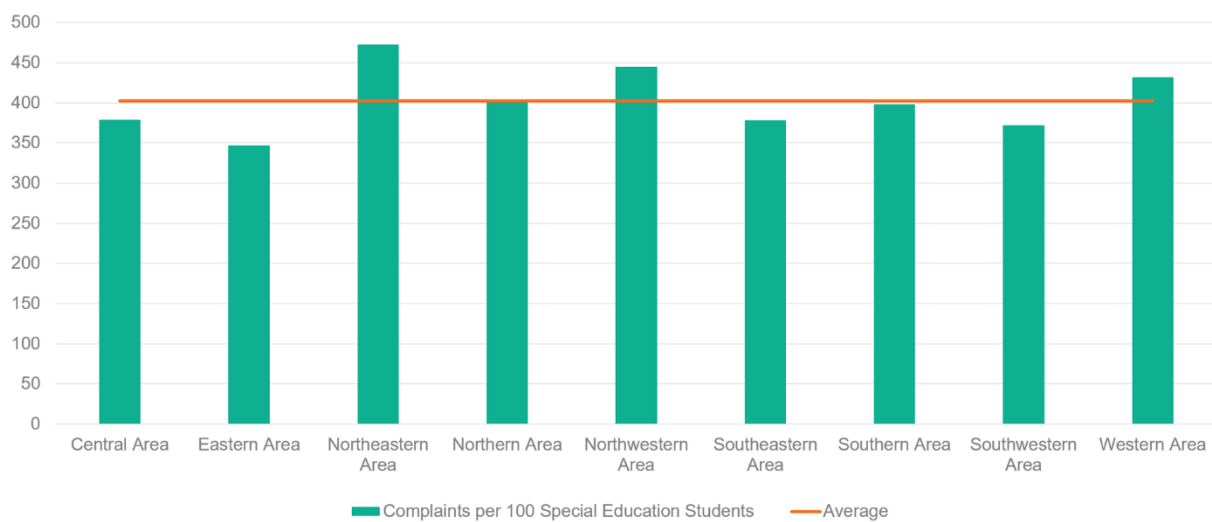
³ “Other” includes: other, central services (WC), case worker (non-WC), vendor, new/prev prov/LEA, CASS/nurse, and non-public school.

levels. This indicates that issues in WCPSS are neither more nor less prevalent at any grade or school level.

Region

Regionally, the Northeastern, Northwestern, and Western areas have a higher occurrence of inquiries than other regions in the district, when weighted for number of students receiving special education services. The Eastern area has the lowest volume of inquiries in the district, proportionate to special education student enrollment (shown in Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2: Issue & Inquiry Volume by Region



Source: Cherwell Issued Created from 7/2/2018 – 1/14/2022

Program

The Cross-Categorical Resource (CCR), Extended Content Standards (ECS), and Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) programs have the highest volume of inquiries compared to other programs. However, inquiry volumes correspond to relative program size, as CCR, ECS, and Pre-K have the highest enrollment of all specialized programs in the district.

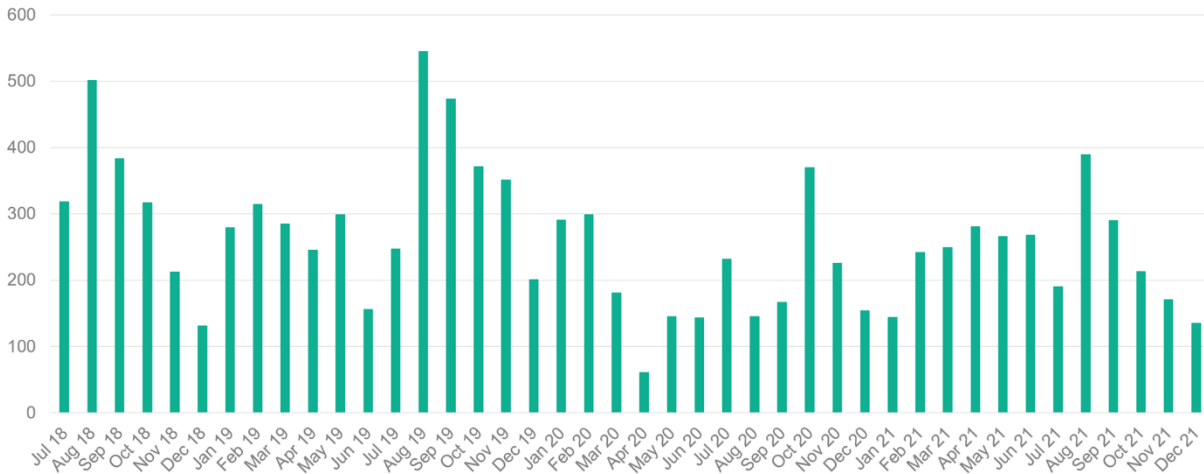
When do issues occur?

Inquiries occur throughout the school year with cyclical ebbs and flows. Inquiries tend to spike at the beginning of the school year and in the new year, as a new semester starts. Exhibit 3 shows the pattern of issue and inquiry volume over time. This is not surprising, as transition points in a student's journey and resulting changes in services would be expected to cause issues to arise. Interestingly, the data shows total inquiry volume began to decline in March and April of 2020 even though the Covid-19 pandemic started in March 2020. Based on parent focus groups and district leader interviews, the decrease in inquiry volume can most likely be attributed to a



decrease in transportation issues when schools were closed and remote schooling halted the need for special transportation services.

Exhibit 3: Issue Volume Over Time



Source: Cherwell Issued Created from 7/2/2018 – 1/14/2022

Anecdotally, in focus groups, most parents reported issues frequently occurring at key moments in the student lifecycle. The key moments noted as experiencing many issues include: the pre-referral period, the referral process, eligibility determinations, re-evaluation determinations, Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, and school-level transitions.

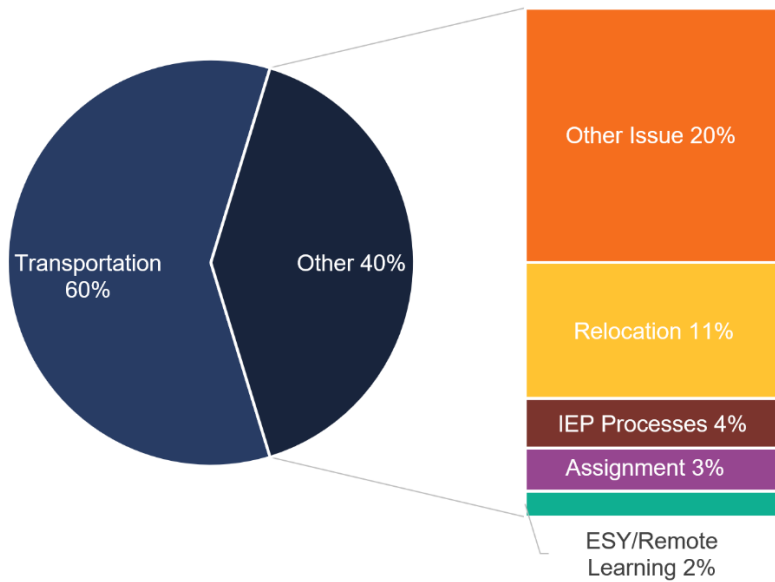
What are the issues?

In Cherwell, 44 different inquiry types are reported, with 37 inquiry types making up less than 5% of total inquiries. Rolling up issue types into 20 overarching categories shows that the main challenges families are experiencing involve:

1. Transportation
2. Relocation
3. Other
4. IEP Process
5. Assignment
6. Remote Learning
7. School Problems

The vast majority of inquiries the district receives are about transportation, with transportation complaints composing 60% of total volume, as shown in Exhibit 4.

Exhibit 4: Issue & Inquiry Volume by Category

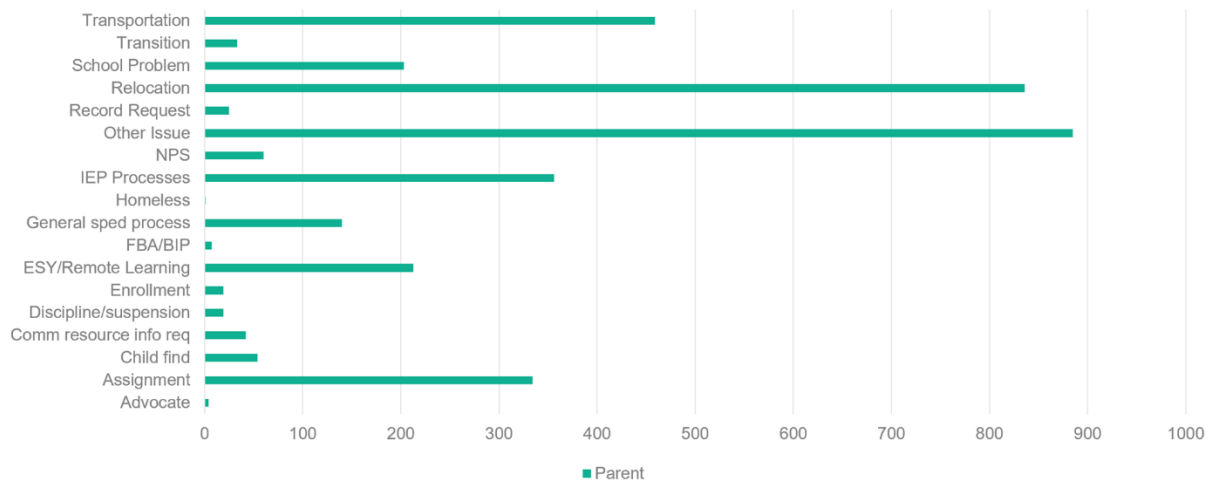


Source: Cherwell Issued Created from 7/2/2018 – 1/14/2022

However, only 7% of transportation complaints come from parents. The majority of transportation inquiries are reported by school staff and SES staff, accounting for 57% of the total transportation issues and inquiries.

Parents are most likely to go to the district with inquiries around other/uncategorized inquiries, relocation, transportation, IEP processes, assignment, remote learning, and school problems. Exhibit 5 shows the types of issues and inquiries parents report to the district.

Exhibit 5: Volume of Parent Issues and Inquiries by Category



Source: Cherwell Issued Created from 7/2/2018 – 1/14/2022

Though inquiries reported to the district level by parents tend to be largely logistical, focus groups and interviews with district leaders showed that the issues starting at the school level most commonly involve the provision and quality of services.

Provision of Services

Of the 93 parents and families interviewed, many expressed that they are unhappy with the provision of their child's special education services or with the services provided to their child via their IEP. Parents reported concerns about whether their students are in the appropriate setting or receiving the appropriate services for their needs. Parents request additional or different services for their child based on personal perception, experiences in other states or districts, or recommendations from private services. Some parents also reported issues with continuity of services due to a lack of adequate staff (both due to a staffing shortage and staffing capacity).

Quality of Services

Some of the parents and families in the focus groups are primarily concerned with the quality of the services their students receive. Service quality concerns often have to do with transportation services or the way in which general educators serve special education students. Parents also expressed concerns about inconsistencies across programs and services at different school sites. This concern also extends to the quality of instruction, as some parents and families believe the programs and services available are not strong enough to meet the needs of their students.

Special Transportation Challenges

While transportation issues make up the majority (60%) of inquiries regarding special education services reported through Cherwell, much of the ability to resolve these issues lies outside of SES. SES can help improve the experience of accessing special transportation services, but the quality and provision of these services, such as routing and driver quality, lies with the district transportation office and transportation vendors.

DMGroup and WCPSS jointly decided to focus on non-transportation issues in this work and to provide the appropriate routing information for transportation issues as part of the final process flow.

Current State

The issue resolution process in WCPSS, and for special education generally, is highly complex. In its current state in WCPSS, the process is informal and largely ad hoc at the school level. What happens at each phase of issue resolution differs based on the school, the issue, the situation, and the knowledge and expertise of those involved.

High-Level Barriers to Issue Resolution

There are a few driving forces that create challenges to resolving issues and thus cause issues to escalate past the school level:

1. A lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities throughout the issue resolution process lengthens and complicates the process for both parents and school site staff.
2. Staff and families have inconsistent and/or misaligned levels of knowledge and understanding of available resources for navigating special education policies and procedures.
3. Relationship dynamics and the level and quality of communication between parents and staff members both greatly impact the issue resolution process.

Roles and Responsibilities

In focus groups and interviews with parents, school staff, and district leaders, these key stakeholders reported that a lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities creates significant challenges in resolving issues. This lack of clarity is driven by unclear points of contact, de facto experts, IEP meetings, and unclear ownership.

Unclear points of contact: Both parents and school and district staff express difficulty identifying who to go to with what questions or issues. Most parents report it is unclear who to contact within the district or in schools to answer specific questions or resolve issues. Most school-level staff face similar challenges and report not knowing who to reach out to in which situations.

- “I think that’s a problem. They don’t really know who to go to with those [policy] questions.”
- Related Service Provider
- “Maybe we would go to the district office? I don’t really know who we would reach out to.”
- Parent

De Facto Experts: Many school staff lack background knowledge or adequate training on special education policies and procedures. School staff reported school and/or district staff who have the most knowledge typically become de facto experts without true special education policy training or defined responsibilities (e.g., school psychologists and/or coordinating teachers), which takes away from their primary role functions.

- “We’re not the policy department – there *is* a policy department! While I’m happy to help with the process, when it comes to a policy question, I really have to dig my heels in and tell them to contact Policy and Compliance. I can tell you what I think, but it’s not my job to quote policy.” - Related Service Provider

IEP Meetings: The roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders who should be in IEP meetings are not always clear and vary school to school. Focus groups reported:

- The more senior/experienced staff only become involved in crisis triage. The right people are not always in IEP and transition meetings.
- General education teachers are not clear on their role in the IEP process.
- Because IEP meeting ownership is unclear, meetings are often meandering and can go on for hours.

Unclear Ownership: It is unclear who owns which aspects of various processes within special education. Focus groups revealed varying perspectives from school leadership on what is the school’s responsibility versus the district’s responsibility. Some schools shift responsibility onto the district for issues that should be addressed at the school level.

Knowledge and Resources

School staff and families report having inconsistent and/or misaligned levels of knowledge and understanding of available resources for navigating special education policies and procedures. This problem specifically came up in regard to training and resources, access to support, and fidelity of issue tracking.

Training and Resources: School staff are not always sure how to effectively serve and communicate with parents, particularly when it comes to conflict resolution. Furthermore, many staff do not know special education policy in detail or where to find the policy; existing resources on policies and procedures are not user-friendly and are hard to understand. As a result, some parents do not feel school staff are the authority on their student's services. Parents also report not fully understanding the special education programming in the district or the role of the school in a student's services. Many parents do not entirely understand special education policies and procedures, and many families report not knowing what resources are available within the district, such as Family and Community Connections, or outside of the district, such as the Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC) or education, support, and advocacy organizations.

- "Not all parents know the same things or what the resources available are – it is all dependent on parent search and access." - SEAC Member
- "We often provide 'professional development on the fly' or reactively when a school is experiencing an issue that none of the staff know how to handle." - Coordinating Teacher
- "It's like we have an all-you-can-eat buffet of professional development and didn't put up a sign saying 'Buffet this way,' and everyone is just starving to death." - Related Service Provider

Access to Support: District-level school support positions are often spread thin and hard to access. In many cases, the more senior/experienced staff only become involved when an issue reaches crisis level. Most school staff find it difficult to access Coordinating Teachers and Behavioral Specialists and to do so in a timely manner.

- "Schools often don't have the capacity to do what they need to do the way they need to do [it], be it the humans, knowledge, or drive." - Coordinating Teacher
- "Do we really care about human beings? Everything seems to be about systems." - Parent

Fidelity of Issue Tracking: Issues are not tracked consistently until they reach the Family and Community Connection or Policy teams or when litigation is involved, making the transmission, accessibility, and consistency of information challenging. School-based staff are using ad hoc, personal systems to record notes and track cases, which presents difficulties in the investigation stage of the resolution process and prevents the use of early warning systems to trigger proactive measures.

Relationships and Communication

Relationship dynamics and the level and quality of communications both greatly impact the issue resolution process. All staff and the majority of parents reported that having a strong parent-school relationship was the most important factor in setting schools and families up to effectively resolve issues.



Point Person: Parents benefit from having a single point person, but often latch onto the first person who is helpful, regardless of their role. High teacher turnover makes it difficult to continue parent relationships, provide consistent services, and adequately collect data to track the progress of students.

- “Parents frequently go above the school site with issues because they don’t know who to go to.” - Coordinating Teacher

Relationship Strength: Issues tend to escalate when relationships degrade or do not exist. Issues also escalate when there is a difference of opinion between a service provider and case manager or teacher, and parents receive conflicting information.

- “It is all about the relationship and trust between the teacher and the parent.” - Coordinating Teacher
- “Schools with better relationships with district staff and families and better communication styles solve challenges more effectively.” - Coordinating Teacher

Communication: Issues tend to escalate when there is not enough proactive communication between the teacher/school staff and parents. District staff, school staff, and parents reported that district- and school-level communication about special education with parents and families is not always effective. Additionally, most parents report not being satisfied with the frequency and quality of communications from school staff regarding their student’s progress and services.

- “Staff communication with families is the root of most issues and escalations.” - SEAC member
- “Communication with families isn’t a strength. We typically only communicate with families when there is an issue.” - General Education Teacher
- “IEP meetings feel cold and important and dire and scary – it feels like it is us against them.” - Parent

Expectations and Perceptions: Both parents and district staff report a perceived misalignment between parent expectations and district/school expectations as well as a disconnect between how the district sees itself providing services and how parents see the quality of services delivered. Parents also report inconsistencies across programs and school sites, and among general education and special education, leading to perceived inequities and varying expectations for what a school site should provide.

The IEP Process and Barriers to Issues Resolution
IEP meetings were consistently referenced by parents and school staff as experiencing all three of these issues.

<u>Roles & Responsibilities</u>	<u>Knowledge & Resources</u>	<u>Relationships & Communication</u>
There is a lack of staff coordination and alignment	IEP meetings lack structure and can go on for hours, into	Parents often do not feel supported throughout the IEP

on issues and who should do what in IEP meetings. This results in staff not presenting a united front to the families and often defaulting to acquiescing to parents' requests or leaving the IEP meeting without resolution.

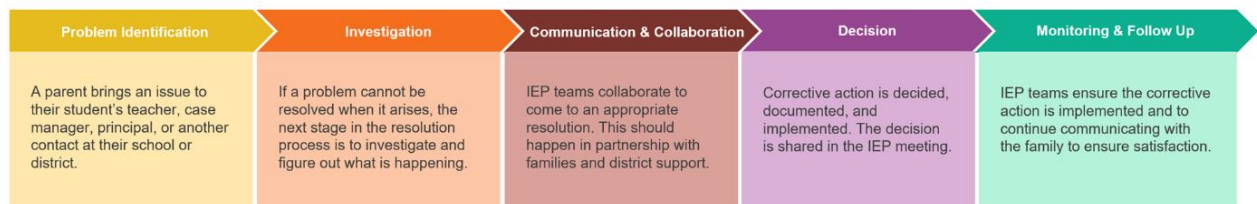
the evening, without resolution. In many cases, both parents and staff are unsure of meeting expectations and outcomes.

process or feel that they are an integral part of the IEP team.

Current State of the Issue Resolution Process

In the current issue-resolution landscape, most issues move through five standard phases of resolution: problem identification, investigation, communication and collaboration, decision, and monitoring and follow-up, illustrated in Exhibit 6. (These phases are described in more detail in the following subsections.)

Exhibit 6: Typical Issue Resolution Process



Source: DMGroup.

Initially a parent will bring an issue to their student's teacher, case manager, principal, or another contact at their school or district. If the problem cannot be resolved when it arises, the next stage in the resolution process is to investigate the situation and figure out what is happening. The case manager and IEP teams will then collaborate, as needed, to come to an appropriate resolution. Corrective action is then decided, documented, and implemented. Once corrective action is decided upon, school teams ensure the corrective action is implemented and, ideally, continue to communicate with the family to ensure that they are satisfied and the issue has been resolved adequately. Monitoring and follow-up on issues at the school level is informal and only happens on a case-by-case basis.

Across the issue lifecycle, there are some factors that make the resolution process go well, and other factors that hinder resolution and satisfaction. Through DMGroup's research, key success factors and opportunities for improvement were identified for each stage of the issue resolution process; these will be detailed below.

The following is a detailed description of what happens in each phase of issue resolution, including typical and ideal situations experienced, common challenges, and success factors and opportunities for improvement.

Phase 1: Problem Identification

In most situations, a parent will bring an issue to their student’s teacher, case manager, principal, or another contact at their school. They typically go directly to the person they know the best, regardless of their role.

Ideally, the first person a family contacts can resolve the issue (if it’s a simple situation) or identify the proper person at the school level to resolve or investigate the situation.

However, the path a family takes to raise an issue or complaint is heavily influenced by their history in the district – if they have had bad experiences in the past, they are more likely to involve a lawyer or an advocate or to immediately escalate issues to school leadership or the district.

In some cases, families will go directly to someone at the district level, such as an area superintendent, a Special Education Services director, or a senior administrator. Families typically move to this level if they have had an earlier issue that was resolved by a district representative, if an issue has been ongoing with no resolution at the school level, or if the family does not know who to contact at the school level.

A major challenge in this phase is that, in many cases, finding the right person to bring an issue to is particularly challenging and unnecessarily prolongs the time it takes to resolve an issue, leading to the need for escalation in many situations. Additionally, many families report not having a direct contact they trust to bring problems to.

In the case of more complicated situations, identifying what the actual problem is and aligning family and staff on that definition presents challenges to issue resolution.

<u>Success Factors</u>	<u>Challenges</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Strong family-educator relationships: If the parent has a strong relationship with their contact or their student’s teacher, the issue is likely to be resolved, and if it is not easily resolved, there is enough trust that the issue will not escalate.● Clear point of contact for parents: If it is clear who the point of contact and correct owner is for respective issues, the issue is more likely to be resolved at this stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Identifying the correct point of contact for the issue● Misalignment on the issue

Phase 2: Investigation

The next stage in the resolution process is to investigate and understand what is happening. An investigator will review district systems that track student information including grades, placement, and history.

In an ideal situation, the teacher/case manager can work with the IEP team and their coordinating teacher to fully understand the situation and what corrective action should be taken.

Typically, with more complex issues, a principal or senior administrator will reach out to the family to understand what the concern is and what the parent is hoping for as an outcome.

They will also reach out to the case manager, teachers, and related service providers (if relevant) to better understand the situation and the student's and family's history.

The person the problem was brought to and/or the severity of the problem typically determines which stakeholder will conduct the investigation. In most cases where this is necessary, a senior administrator is responsible for the investigation. Principals who are more involved and connected to special education staff at their school are more likely to be a part of this stage.

The primary challenge in the investigation stage, in many cases, is asymmetrical information. Despite the many systems in place, there is a lack of formal, systemic tracking of situations with families aside from IEP meetings, which creates a barrier to effectively and efficiently developing an understanding of the problem and situation.

Success Factors

- **Strong systems and documentation:** Strong documentation that is easily available and accessible enables this stage to move much faster.
- **Access to high-level support:** If the CT or Behavioral Specialist is accessible and closely connected to schools, investigations and observations are more streamlined and issues are more likely to avoid escalation and can be resolved quickly.

Challenges

- Inconsistent tracking of issues and resolution activities

Phase 3: Communication and Collaboration

After the first two phases, IEP teams will then, in many cases, collaborate to come to an appropriate resolution. This should, ideally, happen in partnership with families and district support. In ideal situations, collaboration between the staff team would happen ahead of IEP



meetings and continue until the next meeting if corrective action is not decided upon. Senior administrators and behavior specialists are consulted as needed, depending on the situation.

For paperwork and compliance issues, coordinating teachers work with case managers to correct issues. Coordinating teachers collaborate with teachers more frequently than other roles to identify strategies to address issues, especially when the issues are simple and straightforward.

Often, due to the cadence of IEP meetings, issues take longer to resolve – in some cases, the team is only working together, and with the parent, twice a year in IEP meetings and there is little opportunity for issues to be resolved or documented. This happens even with seemingly straightforward issues if they cannot be resolved until a change is made to the IEP.

For contentious IEP meetings, the staff team may meet beforehand to align on what will happen in the IEP meetings, how to best present information to families, and to ensure all of the proper data and information are available; however, there is no standard for when IEP pre-meetings are utilized.

If the staff team does not pre-meet, determine a meeting plan and agenda, and align on the issue in advance, conflict may occur during the IEP meeting.

<u>Success Factors</u>	<u>Challenges</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Collaborative and aligned IEP teams: If IEP teams are connected and collaborative, and have strong support from coordinating teachers, staff are more likely to find resolutions to issues before escalation.● IEP pre-meetings: If staff teams create formal time to align on solution options and common language to use prior to IEP meetings, it leads to better outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Varying levels of knowledge about special education policies and procedures and available options

Phase 4: Decision

Corrective action is decided, or a decision is reached, agreed upon, and documented. For simple issues, this can happen outside of IEP meetings. For complex issues or IEP issues, corrective action must be decided in an IEP meeting with the IEP team. Ideally, the family agrees with the corrective action/decision and it can be implemented.

Typically, the solutions that can be identified by school-level staff are limited by their knowledge of special education policies and procedures in the district and what services and programs are available and how to access them. The person in the room who has the most experience tends to become the main authority in the room, whether or not they have the relevant training or



expertise. In many cases, school-based psychologists end up serving in this capacity due to their experience. Having an expert in the district's policies, procedures, and offerings or access to an expert during IEP meetings plays a big role in how effectively and efficiently schools are able to resolve issues.

In some cases, the school or case manager does not have the authority to make decisions for corrective action, such as with certain placement changes; these decisions are referred to more senior-level district staff to make the final decision. For more complex issues, the decision can be to re-evaluate the student and revisit eligibility with the appropriate district staff.

With more difficult situations or complicated issues, senior administrators are often the decisionmakers in the IEP meetings. This scenario presents a significant challenge to setting schools up as informed and empowered actors in the issue resolution process. Challenges in the decision process also arise when there is disagreement over what the issue is or what appropriate solutions are. This typically happens when families lack knowledge on topics such as the role of the school and special education policies and procedures.

One of the biggest challenges in this phase, as well as to the overall issue resolution process, is that parents often do not feel like they are a core part of the IEP team, if a part of the team at all. Families often feel it is "us against them." IEP meetings often end up feeling very procedural and focused on due diligence rather than focused on the student. The length of IEP meetings also poses a significant obstacle to family satisfaction.

<u>Success Factors</u>	<u>Challenges</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Expert in WCPSS special education policies and procedures: IEP teams that include, or have direct access to, an expert in special education policies and procedures are more likely to be able to efficiently identify and implement solutions.● Inclusive environment in IEP meetings: A collaborative and welcoming environment in IEP meetings can make families feel more empowered, and it is then more likely they will agree with corrective action or positively engage with determining an appropriate solution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Lack of authority over decision● Disagreement over appropriate solutions● Management of IEP meetings

Phase 5: Monitoring and Follow-Up

In ideal situations, continuous monitoring of progress toward IEP goals can be used to proactively anticipate and address issues.



In the best-case scenario, in cases that have escalated to the district level, senior administrators may contact parents on a weekly basis and will attend IEP meetings until they feel the situation is resolved and no longer requires their participation.

Typically, coordinating teachers will follow up with teachers at their assigned schools at ongoing touchpoints to provide continuous support and guidance and to ensure paperwork changes are made or strategies are working.

Though these actions occur as understood best practice with high-performing staff, there is no formal process or guideline for monitoring situations after corrective action has been decided, aside from the basic progress-monitoring required as part of the IEP process. It is primarily up to the case manager to ensure that the corrective action is implemented and to continue communicating with the family to ensure their satisfaction.

Success Factors

- **Ongoing communication:** Open channels of communication between families and both the teacher and the school, as well as consistent communication, lead to better outcomes.
- **Effective progress-monitoring:** Diligent progress-monitoring creates opportunities for proactive problem resolution and for monitoring the success of the solution.

Challenges

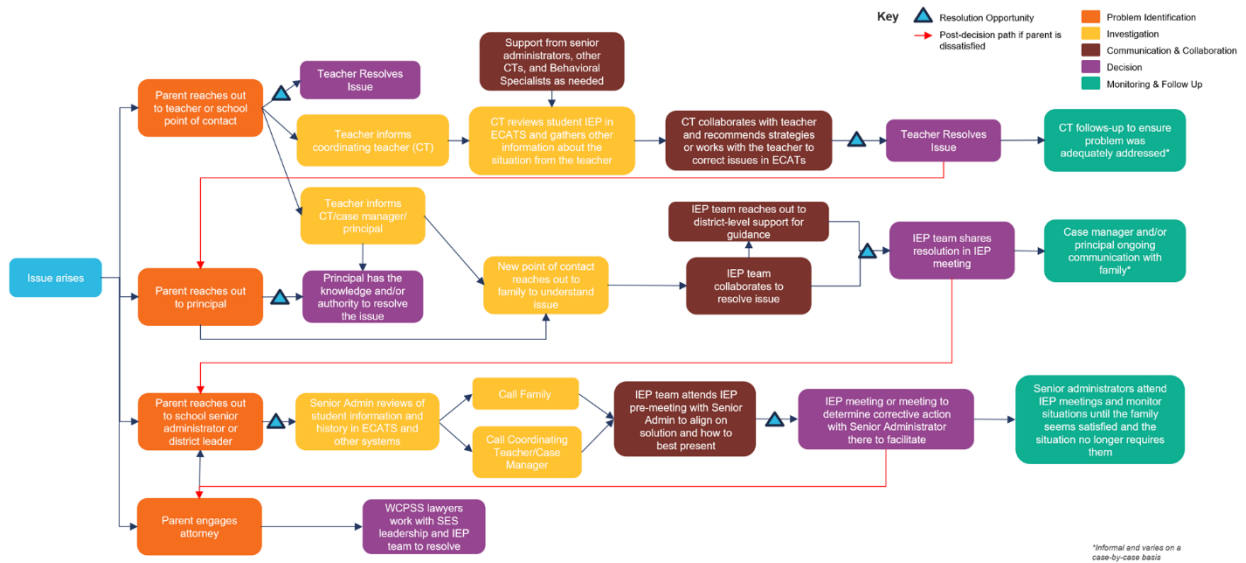
- Lack of clear process and guidelines for monitoring situations



Current State Issue Resolution Process Map

The activities that occur in each stage of issue resolution, in its current state, typically follow the high-level process flow illustrated below in Exhibit 7.

Exhibit 7: Current State Issue Resolution Process Map



Source: DMGroup.

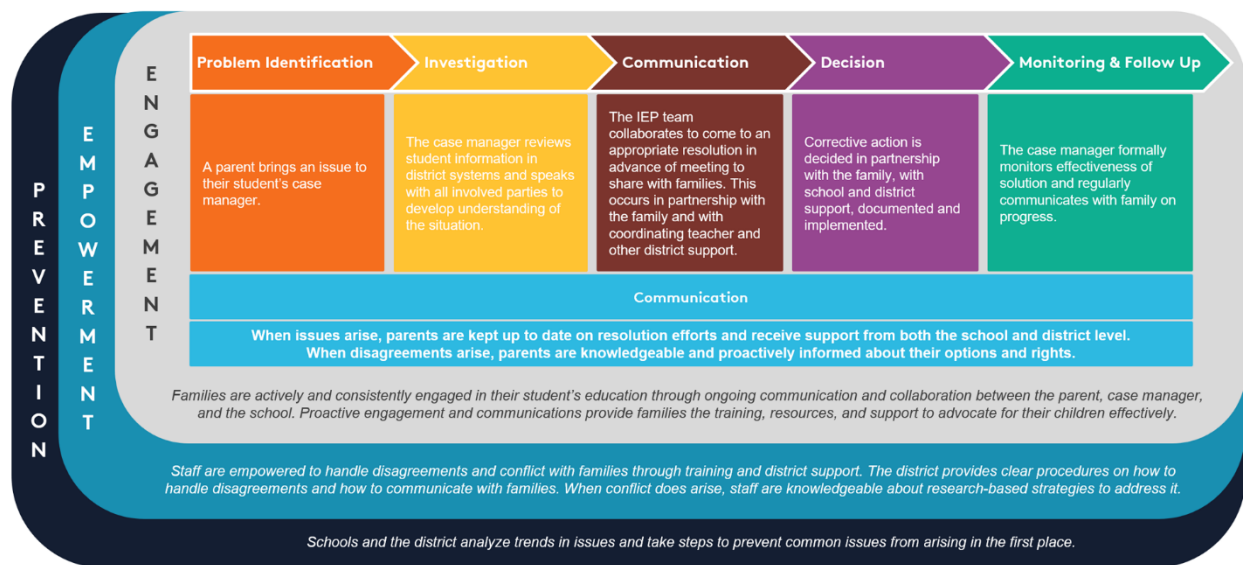
Future State

The following section of the report outlines how WCPSS can improve not only the process for resolving issues but also the ways in which parents, teachers, and staff are supported to prevent and resolve issues.

Issue Resolution Framework

In the future state, the major five phases of the framework remain the same, except that communication has been added as an ongoing phase of the issue resolution process. The major phases are now supported, however, by the additions of engagement, empowerment, and prevention to anchor the overall approach to supporting parents and staff in special education. The future issue resolution framework is illustrated below in Exhibit 8.

Exhibit 8: Recommended School-Level Issue Resolution Framework



Source: DMGroup.

Issue resolution should start at the school level. In the future state, schools are set up to successfully prevent and resolve issues with families by building out and standardizing the process for issue resolution at the school level. By grounding the issue resolution process in a framework focused on leveraging prevention, empowerment, and engagement activities at the school level, the district will create an enabling environment for schools to more effectively and efficiently resolve issues related to special education services. This also involves better supporting teachers and families throughout the process.

Engagement: One of the greatest pain points that parents expressed is the lack of engagement and collaboration between themselves and their school and district partners. Creating intentional opportunities for parents to engage with the school community and additional supports can facilitate stronger relationships and collaboration.

Empowerment: School staff do not feel they have the tools, knowledge, or authority to resolve issues at the school level. Focusing on empowering teachers and school staff through training, resources, and intentional support helps set them up to be the experts and decision makers.

Prevention: Though the new process decision tree and framework components will help improve the issue resolution process in WCPSS, the district should also consider how to prevent issues from arising in the first place. Regular structured analysis of reported issues can help the district to identify and take preventative steps against common issues.

Detailed recommendations to support the implementation of these added components of the framework follow in the next section.

Issue Resolution Process Map

One of the greatest challenges facing school-based staff when confronted with a parent's issue is understanding how the approach to issue resolution changes depending on extenuating factors – for example, what to do differently if an advocate comes to the IEP meeting, or if it is a recurring issue. To provide more clarity on the process, DMGroup developed an in-depth process map and decision tree to enable more issues to be resolved at the school level and empower school staff to confidently work to resolve issues with families.

The future-state process map (exhibit 9) serves the dual purpose of clearly documenting and communicating the issue resolution process and supporting staff as a decision-making tool to leverage as they move through the issue resolution process.

Key Definitions and Guiding Questions

To move through the process map, staff must determine the type, complexity, and severity of the issue. With that come key terms to understand and questions to answer in determining how to move forward through the resolution process. DMGroup has developed, in collaboration with WCPSS, definitions and a decision tool to help staff decide how to move issues along the process map.

Staff should be able to utilize Table 1 as a checklist to help them understand the type of issue they are dealing with, how complex it is, and how severe it may potentially be as they progress an issue through the process map.



Exhibit 9: Future State Process Map

Wake County Public School System Special Education Services Issue Resolution Decision Tree
June 2022

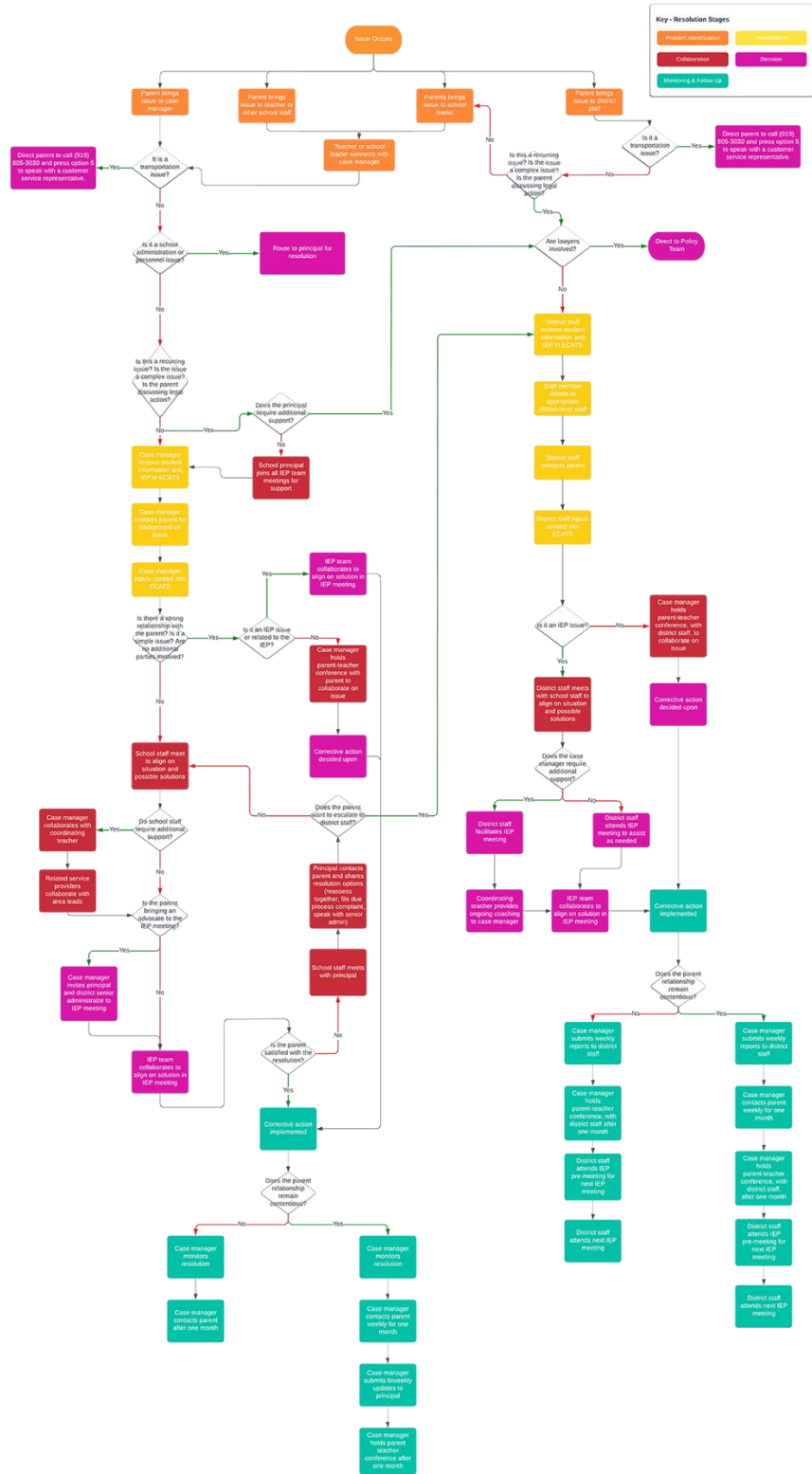


Table 1: Issue Categorization Checklist

Term	Definition <i>May meet one or all factors</i>
Simple Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a clear cause and effect • Is easily identifiable and fixable • May include basic accommodations • Is a first-time issue • Includes few stakeholders
Recurring Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occurs or is reported more than once
Complex Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could result in multiple solutions • Is difficult to define or understand • Has many stakeholders involved • Requires significantly updating IEP • Involves an advocate
Severe Issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impacts a student’s safety at school • Is ongoing and unresolved • Impacts a student’s ability to make progress at school • Involves litigation
IEP Issue – Procedural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relates to how information was entered into ECATS or the language in an IEP • Is usually a simple issue
IEP Issue – Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relates to how services and supports are delivered as outlined in an IEP • Can be simple or complex depending on issue
IEP Issue - Placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arises when a student has not, or is perceived to not have, been placed properly or with the right services per their IEP • Is usually simple if the IEP is unclear, or can be complex if the services in the IEP are not appropriate
Strong Parent Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is collegial and warm • Include regular, non-emergency (i.e. not issue related) contact about student’s progress • Has experienced few or no issues • Is focused on the success of the student • Spends time explaining/onboarding the parent into the special education landscape
Weak Parent Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Includes minimal/no contact outside of required or parent-initiated touchpoints • Is strictly professional without collegiality or warmth • Has involved multiple complex or severe issues • Is focused on factors other than the student’s success

Enabling Opportunities

Undergoing preventative initiatives in addition to clarifying and modifying the issue resolution process may reduce the overall volume of issues and the likelihood of escalation. These

opportunities are aligned with, and informed by, the enabling framework for the issue resolution process: Engagement, Empowerment, and Prevention.

Engagement

Relationships

- Develop clear relationship maps within schools to ensure every parent has at least one strong relationship with a staff member
- Collaborate with SEAC to create a “buddy program” for new parents to connect with more seasoned parents within the special education community and identify other opportunities for families to network

Knowledge Management

- Onboard new families with their case managers to start a relationship and explain the special education landscape and policies
- Improve the parent-facing website to include additional, targeted information – including an explanation of the resolution process – and expound upon the Parent Rights Handbook

Empowerment

Training

- Provide resolution training for all staff so that they are equipped with the soft skills needed to prevent unnecessary escalation
- Create a formal role for a policy and special education expert at each school and provide appropriate training to that person

Knowledge Management

- Refine policy handbook and/or create an executive summary version to make key policy answers more accessible
- Develop a formal approach for IEP meeting management, including agendas, pre-work, communications, and overall guidelines
- Develop a parent communications plan and requirements for school-based staff

Prevention

Issue Analysis

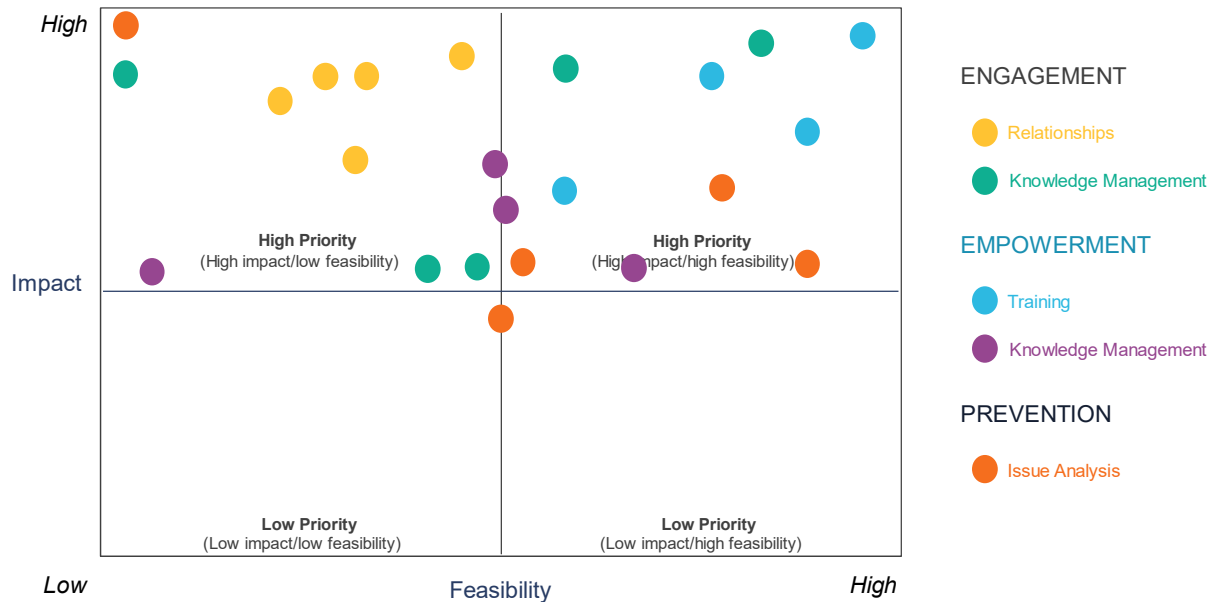
- Create and disseminate policies regarding use of ECATS and Cherwell to ensure consistent, accurate issue-tracking
- Create quarterly opportunities to review trends in issues and identify prevention opportunities
- Continue to engage the Steering Committee to collaborate across the district, and consider adding additional school-based staff

DMGroup held an abbreviated prioritization workshop with the Steering Committee to determine the impact and feasibility of these opportunities. The group clearly ranked Training as the highest-priority opportunity. Relationship Management was generally considered to be highly impactful but challenging to implement. The remaining opportunities were widely spread with no clear



trends to be drawn. The ranking of recommendations from the prioritization workshop are shown in exhibit 10.

Exhibit 10: WCPSS Prioritization of Enabling Recommendations



Source: DMGroup.

Workstream 1 Conclusion

WCPSS, like many districts of its size and complexity, experiences challenges in successfully managing complaints and issues regarding special education services. Not only is the district's special education landscape particularly complex and extensive, but the same is true of the way in which its staff works together to resolve issues in collaboration with parents. Supporting the district's teachers, staff, and families by providing them the tools and resources to both prevent and address problems will help to address the major pain points its stakeholders experience when challenges arise and improve parent satisfaction with the district's special education services.

Workstream 2: Deepening the Understanding of The Strengths and Distinctiveness of Special Education Services

Introduction

Supporting students who have more significant or complex needs requires a school district to develop a robust and nuanced set of specialized programs and services that support the unique needs of each child. Specialized programming must balance a number of competing needs, ranging from providing strong academic, developmental, and in some cases medical support for students, to leveraging opportunities for meaningful inclusion and thoughtfully coordinating and deploying limited district resources. It is critical that districts optimize the right blend of programs and services to ensure all students are appropriately served.

WCPSS has a strong history of delivering specialized or regional programs for students with more significant or complex needs. As the district has grown over the last several decades and the population of students with more significant needs has grown both in size and complexity, the nature of providing specialized programs and services has evolved. In response, the district strategically adjusted its specialized programs to improve inclusive opportunities, strengthen the rigor of academic and developmental programming, and bolster structures to safeguard students' access to least restrictive classroom environments. While thoughtful and mission-oriented, the district's updated strategy experienced implementation challenges as the nature of programs changed and staff roles and responsibilities shifted. The Covid-19 pandemic further complicated how the district supports students with the greatest needs.

The second workstream of this project reviews WCPSS's specialized programs, highlighting their strengths and distinctiveness and identifying opportunities to enhance programming and services moving forward. Through a comprehensive analysis of district data around programming, staffing, and student enrollment, as well as extensive interviews and focus groups, DMGroup developed a deep understanding of current program and service offerings and identified opportunities and recommendations for programmatic improvements for a prioritized subset of specialized programs. DMGroup's findings and recommendations aim to create systemic improvements to better support students with more significant or complex needs and ensure all students have access to robust and differentiated programming.

Approach and Methodology

Workstream 2 comprised six major phases of work, with specific goals aligned to each:

1. Database of Specialized Programming
 - a. Codify a database of specialized programs using district-supplied student enrollment, staffing, and programmatic data
2. Consistency Analysis of Specialized Programs



- a. Analyze the list of programs to assess consistency of practices across schools, with a focus on programs with similar names or descriptions to assess how they are similar or different
 - b. Create and administer a program survey to understand the variation in how instruction and services are being provided to students across the district
3. Map Perceived Strengths and Weaknesses of Existing In-District Programs
 - a. Conduct meetings and focus groups with parents of students in district programs to gain insight into the key strengths and areas for improvement within specialized programs
4. Draft Recommendations for Program Improvements
 - a. Create a draft list of areas of opportunity and corresponding recommendations for enhancing specialized programs
 - b. Share preliminary findings with community and school stakeholders through re-engagement sessions to gather feedback and refine recommendations
5. Finalize Recommendations with Draft Plans for Implementation
 - a. Share a draft plan with WCPSS Special Education Services leadership
 - b. Collaborate with the WCPSS Special Education Services to support the prioritization and planning of opportunities and recommendations
6. Review Oversight and Management of Specialized Programming
 - a. Provide clear recommendations for how best to organize, manage, and lead the specialized programs for students with significant needs

The findings for this workstream represent insight from a variety of district leaders, school staff, and community members, developed through a robust analysis of district data.

Database and Consistency Analysis

To develop a comprehensive understanding of district-wide specialized and regional programming, DMGroup developed a database of all specialized programs to document the full scope of programs and classrooms that are currently available to students. It captured staffing, enrollment, and programmatic data, including how various programs serve students by ability and grade level, how various levels and types of inclusion are offered to students, and how programs are staffed and resourced. The database documented nearly 250 classrooms across 9 program types serving 3,152 students with more significant or complex needs.

DMGroup used the program database to conduct a consistency analysis, examining programs with similar names and services, including comparisons based on needs of the students served, variations in class sizes, staff sizes, and access to various services and specialized staff. DMGroup also assessed opportunities for inclusion based on program type and configuration. The consistency analysis provided insight into unintentional inconsistencies present across programs and uncovered where programs could be more intentional or strategic in their configuration.

Given the size and complexity of WCPSS and the diverse needs of students, some variation is expected between classrooms within similar programs. Understanding the extent of this variation

helped identify opportunities to strengthen program offerings and improve opportunities for students.

Focus Groups and Interviews

DMGroup leveraged the extensive stakeholder interviews and focus groups completed in Workstream 1⁴, to identify strengths and areas of opportunity for specialized programs. These focus groups and interviews were pivotal to understanding individual experiences with specialized programming across the district.

DMGroup synthesized findings from focus groups, interviews, database, and consistency analysis to prioritize a smaller subset of programs, in partnership with SES leadership, for deeper review. Programs were prioritized based on the highest leverage opportunities that would impact the greatest number of students. More information on the rationale for prioritizing each program is provided in the program-specific sections of this report.

Stakeholder Re-engagement: Focus Groups and Teacher Survey

DMGroup re-engaged relevant stakeholders through additional interviews, focus groups, and a survey to identify potential features, services, or partners to strengthen prioritized programs. Participants from previous focus groups and interviews were invited to participate to ensure initial insights were captured accurately and to build enthusiasm and momentum for the work.

DMGroup crafted targeted strengths, opportunities, and recommendations for each prioritized program to review with stakeholder focus groups. During re-engagement focus groups and workshopping sessions, district stakeholders refined input on the greatest areas of opportunity for their specific programs and discussed the highest leverage recommendations for program improvements. Re-engagement focus group and interview participants included:

- Community members:
 - Parents (25 participants)
- School-level staff:
 - Special Education Teachers (20 participants)
- District-level staff:
 - Coordinating Teachers (11 participants)
- School and district leaders:
 - Principals and Special Education Administrators (5 participants)
 - Special Education Leadership Team – 3 workshopping sessions (10 participants)

DMGroup, in collaboration with the WCPSS SES team, also surveyed a subset of specialized program teachers to better understand the variation in how instruction and services are provided to students across the district. In total, 147 program teachers participated in the survey. Survey participants included special education teachers from:

- Extended Content Standards (100 participants)
- Elementary Behavior Support (27 participants)

⁴ For further detail, see the Approach and Methodology section from Workstream 1.



- Cross-Categorical Kindergarten (11 participants)
- Intellectually Disabled – Severe (7 participants)
- Multiple Disabilities (2 participants)

Survey results, and targeted feedback that teachers provided on the current levels of support and training they receive, further informed the identified programmatic opportunities and tailored recommendations to best align with the needs of staff.

To support the district with implementation planning, DMGroup reviewed how specialized programs are currently managed and supported by the central office and proposed adjustments to management structures to ensure the district would be well positioned to implement any recommendations.

Findings of the Specialized Programs Review

Discussion of Programmatic Strengths

The district has much to celebrate when it comes to serving students with complex needs. DMGroup identified five areas of strength that highlight how the district is providing enhanced services for students:

1. ***Specialized program teachers and staff are highly dedicated to their students and committed to serving as strong liaisons for parents and families.*** Throughout conversations with parents and families, the dedication of program staff was consistently named as a top strength. Parents with students across several specialized programs praised the work of teachers to not only support students but also help parents navigate the special education landscape and understand the opportunities available to them. Additionally, teachers voiced their appreciation for the outreach and mentorship that veteran teachers provide. Strong educators and staff members are integral to the success of specialized programs.
2. ***The strategic shift to move more specialized programs back into base schools has helped foster more inclusive and collaborative school environments.*** The strategic initiative to transition some specialized programs to base schools offers students an opportunity to access high-quality services and tailored programming while also supporting their ability to integrate within their local community. Providing a greater variety of programs within many base schools has provided a myriad of benefits not only for students served within the specialized programs, but for the greater school community. Stakeholders across the district lauded the benefits of having more specialized programs housed in more schools, from creating school environments that are more inclusive and accepting of all students to offering students and families shorter commutes to school. Parents also appreciated the opportunity for their children with complex disabilities to attend school with siblings and neighborhood peers.



3. ***An enhanced focus on inclusion across the district has created more collaborative learning environments and provided students, both with and without disabilities, an opportunity to learn from one another.*** With the increased number of programs in base schools, many students, both with and without disabilities, have reaped the benefits of more inclusive school environments and learning opportunities. The district's movement toward enhanced inclusion, in conjunction with its push to move programs to base schools, has enabled students with complex needs to participate in a plethora of inclusion opportunities. From buddy programs with non-disabled peers to inclusive "spring fling" dances to theater productions, schools across the district have demonstrated a clear focus on creating a safe and inclusive environment for all students. Teachers work diligently to provide students in the specialized programs with an array of tailored inclusion opportunities.
4. ***The configuration of programming to focus on how students access content and curriculum has expanded access to more responsive and appropriate placements.*** By focusing on how students access content instead of their disability type, programs have become more responsive to serving students' learning styles and needs. This approach also increases the rigor of academic and developmental support for students, leveraging more opportunities for inclusion when appropriate. For example, a student in a specialized program who excels in math may receive math instruction in a general education setting; however, for other subjects where they may need additional support, they will continue to receive targeted and supported instruction within their specialized program. This responsiveness has helped move programs away from becoming "tracks" for students and offered opportunities for students to receive targeted support while continuing to access a rigorous curriculum.
5. ***Specialized programs in the district provide high-quality instructional tools and supports for students with unique needs.*** Many of the district-wide curricular structures support differentiation to meet each student's unique needs. The Unique Learning System, used across extended content standard programs (ECS, ID-SEV, and MU), was praised by parents and teachers alike for its ability to scaffold content and provide thematic instruction for students.

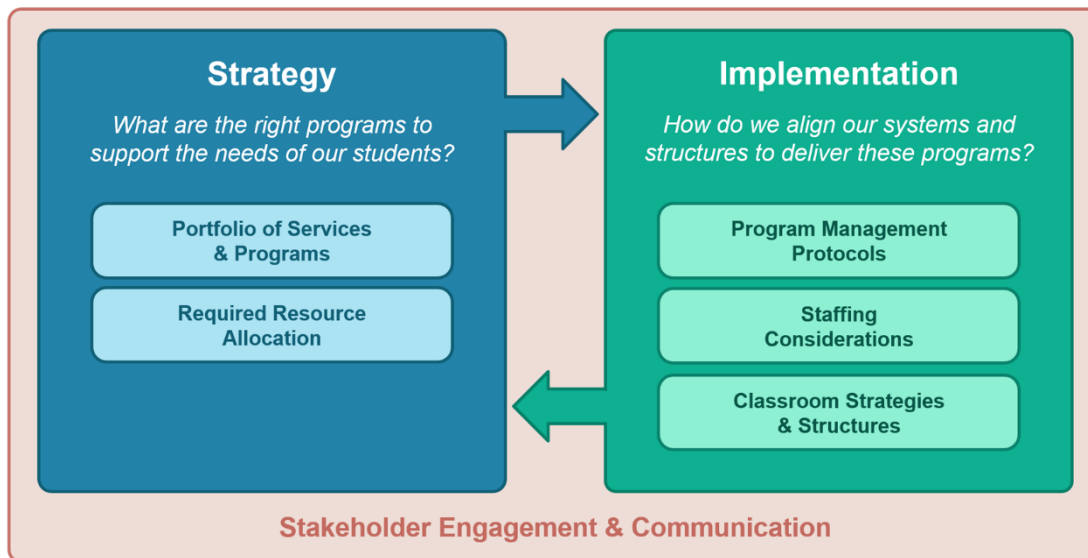
Framework for Specialized Program Opportunities

Strengthening specialized programs depends on honing the district's strategy for delivering programs as well as aligning its implementation to ensure that each program has the conditions for success. Within both strategy and implementation are a series of district-wide themes that emerged after robust stakeholder engagement and analysis. The framework graphic (exhibit 11) details the relationships between the various opportunities in determining the root causes of the challenges facing individual specialized programs. It is based on opportunities we identified as well as on existing distinctive district and programmatic strengths. This framework provides structure for both district-wide and program-specific opportunities.



Exhibit 11: Framework for Strengthening Specialized Programs

Understanding the Relationship between Program Strategy, Execution, and Stakeholder Communication and Engagement.



Source: DMGroup.

Strategy

Strategy focuses on clarifying how the portfolio of services and programs will meet the needs of all students. This includes aligning district-wide on a clear mission and vision for each specialized program and defining how resources will be allocated to bring the strategy to life:

- **Portfolio of Services and Programs:** The combination or suite of special education programs and services must meet the diverse needs of students and must convey the district's strategy to ensure a common understanding of offerings and to allow for effective and consistent implementation.
- **Required Resource Allocation:** Based on each program's strategy, the necessary resource investments must be aligned to ensure that each program can successfully provide services and support to students; resource considerations include facilities, staffing ratios,⁵ materials, equipment, and transportation.

Implementation

Implementation refers to the various systems and structures that bring a programmatic strategy to life. Given the specialized nature of these programs, staff at all levels of the district require a

⁵ "Staffing ratios" refers to the idealized staffing ratios that the district sets proactively, as outlined in the WCPSS Special Education Services Landscape, and their alignment with programmatic strategy and goals. "Staffing considerations," under implementation, refers to the actual distribution of staff across school sites, training mechanisms, and systems of staff support.

distinct skillset and robust training to deliver high-quality, responsive instruction and implement strategies successfully:

- **Program Management Protocols:** Programs must be supported by school- and district-level systems and protocols to operate effectively, including student data tracking and assessment supports, student placement protocols, and ongoing professional development support for administrators and educators.
- **Staffing Considerations:**⁶ Staffing levels and skillsets must correspond with the identified needs of each classroom, and district leaders must strategically deploy staff and programmatic support so that students and staff are set up for success.
- **Instructional Strategies and Structures:** Within classrooms, teachers must use appropriate and robust instructional materials, strategies, and structures to support the diverse needs of students, especially in classrooms that may be supporting a broader range of student needs.

Communication

Specialized programs rely on a variety of staff members to provide comprehensive support to students; thus, robust communication structures must exist within the district so that all parties remain aligned and organized and parents stay up-to-date on their student's progress:

- **Stakeholder Engagement and Communication:** Strategic and clear communication, both initial and ongoing, ensures that all stakeholders are clear on the district's vision for special education programming and how it will deliver on those programs to allow for the continued success for all stakeholders involved – students, parents and families, and staff.

⁶ See previous footnote.



District-Wide Opportunities and Recommendations

The following district-wide opportunities and recommendations were identified as areas of high need across the prioritized set of specialized programs. Although each opportunity and recommendation may manifest differently for each program, the district-wide landscape of opportunities offers a clear portrait of the most pressing needs. It is important to note that while these opportunities and recommendations were generated and synthesized through a robust series of conversations, interviews, and data analysis, individual experiences of students, staff, and families may vary.

	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
S T R A T E G Y	Portfolio of Services & Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 1: The current portfolio of specialized programs may have unclear distinctions and descriptions that do not accurately represent the scope of services and supports provided or for which students various programs are designed. As a result, some staff, parents, and families may express undue confusion or frustration about the appropriateness of their students' placement or how services, instruction, and support should be provided. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider refining the strategy, visions, and descriptions for specialized programs to capture how students and their complex sets of needs are served by the variety of responsive and appropriate programs and services offered by the district. Consider adjusting program names, when appropriate, to reflect the student experience or the services rendered, rather than students' federal disability designations.
	Required Resource Allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 2: Some stakeholders perceive that to be successful, some programs or classrooms may require additional or different resources, such as facilities, additional or adjusted staffing ratios, instructional materials, etc., especially in the context of each program's vision and description. Through focus groups, teachers across a variety of programs expressed concerns about their ability to offer key programmatic opportunities, such as inclusion, for all students, due to resourcing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarify the alignment between student needs and the required resources, including staffing levels, staff skill sets, facilities, and materials, to ensure that commensurate staffing and resources are aligned with identified student needs.



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
I M P L E M E N T A T I O N	Program Management Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 3: Stakeholders noted that some building administrators may have limited training or knowledge in special education, which may result in the inconsistent delivery of similar programs and services across the district, creating diverging or inequitable experiences for students, families, and staff members. ● Opportunity 4: Some stakeholders felt the current process for determining student need and program placement was unclear. In some situations, lack of a clear process for placement decisions may create challenging classroom dynamics that make it difficult for staff to balance the various needs of students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enhance professional learning materials and support for school-based administrators to build their knowledge of what constitutes a strong specialized program and how their role is integral in developing and managing programs so they are better positioned to support students, families, and staff. ● Consider examining the district's process for evaluating student needs and determining program placement so that placement protocols can be streamlined and clarified to ensure that students are placed appropriately.
	Staffing Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 5: The district's current approach to supporting teachers with professional learning may need to be enhanced or refined to develop the necessary skill sets in all staff members so they can successfully support students with diverse learning needs. ● Opportunity 6: The impact of nationwide and district-wide staffing shortages and the relative inexperience of staff may be exacerbated by the increased number of students who require specialized programs, putting pressure on district- and school-based resources and supports, which then creates challenging experiences for teachers and students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider enhancing hands-on modeling, coaching, and observational learning opportunities for teachers and instructional aides. Also consider providing more collaborative workshops throughout the year to help staff at different school sites share ideas and best practices and build mentoring relationships. ● As the district expands and offers specialized programming based on student needs, consider strategically increasing support to newly opened programs to ensure that all staff and administrators in the building are equipped to support the more diverse needs of students and are able to provide increased opportunities for inclusion.
	Instructional Strategies & Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 7: The district's overarching strategy for supporting students with complex needs is predicated on the use of specific materials, structures, and inclusion models, but these strategies and structures may not be understood fully or implemented with fidelity across 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Refine the connection between instructional strategies and structures and the unique design of specific programs, and then enhance professional learning, modeling, coaching, and collaboration options to strengthen the use of materials and instructional strategies that are critical to the



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
		classrooms, possibly leading to less effective staff and student experiences.	<p>success of each program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Once district-approved instructional strategies and structures are refined, collaborate with school-based staff to identify supplementary materials and program supports based on the identified needs of students in each classroom.
C O M M U N I C A T I O N	Stakeholder Engagement & Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 8: While WCPSS has many strengths relating to stakeholder engagement, the district may not be clearly and consistently communicating its strategy and programming options to support the diverse and complex needs of students to all stakeholders, including parents and families, teachers, and administrators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider strengthening channels for district-school-staff communication to ensure that messaging is clear and consistent and to provide opportunities for stakeholders to articulate their questions and concerns. Consider creating strategic communication plans to ensure that necessary information is received by relevant stakeholders in a clear, easy-to-understand manner.



Program-Specific Opportunities and Recommendations

Introduction to Program-Specific Opportunities

Based on a robust analysis of program data, as well as extensive conversations with district stakeholders, DMGroup, in coordination with the WCPSS Special Education Services Team and Steering Committee, identified five specialized programs for further review:

1. Extended Content Standards (ECS)
2. Elementary Behavior Supports (EBS)
3. Cross-Categorical Kindergarten (CCK)
4. Intellectual Disabilities – Severe (ID-SEV)
5. Multiple Disabilities (MU) Programs

These programs provide extensive services to 75% of students who receive more specialized support in the district, and student enrollment in this subset of programs is on the rise. With the continued expansion of these programs across the district, the following program-specific opportunities and recommendations will support not only the development and enhancement of programming, but also their long-term growth.

The district-wide landscape of opportunities highlights the most pressing needs of specialized programs as a whole, although each opportunity manifests differently for each program. The following exhibit illustrates the alignment of district-wide opportunities to program-specific opportunities. A checked box represents close alignment between district-wide and program-specific opportunities, while a “~” indicates a less direct connection between district-wide and program-specific opportunities.



Exhibit 12: Overview of Program-Specific Opportunities and Recommendations

✔ Aligned w/ District-wide Opp. ~ Somewhat aligned w/ District-wide Opp.

Areas of Opportunity		Opportunities	ECS	EBS	CCK	ID-SEV	MU
Strategy	Portfolio of Services & Programs	Opportunity 1: Need for clear program distinctions and descriptions	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
	Required Resource Allocation	Opportunity 2: Resources and staffing levels must align to program goals	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Implementation	Program Management Protocols	Opportunity 3: Building administrators must be equipped to support programs and may require additional training or guidance	✔	✔	~	✔	✔
		Opportunity 4: Student assessment and placement process must be clarified	✔	✔	✔	~	~
	Staffing Considerations	Opportunity 5: Staff may require more or refined coaching, modeling, collaboration, and support	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
		Opportunity 6: Impact of teacher shortage on increased school-based need	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
	Instructional Strategies and Structures	Opportunity 7: Refining instructional materials and ensuring training on and consistent use of materials and structures	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Comm	Stakeholder Engagement & Communication	Opportunity 8: Sharing clear strategy and program options with stakeholders	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

Source: DMGroup.

Extended Content Standards (ECS)

Program Background

ECS programs were developed through an initiative to enhance support for students with a variety of complex needs. ECS programs support students in a highly structured learning environment with enhanced visual, communicated, and physical support and predictable daily routines. ECS has provided more students with the opportunity to receive an education in their local, base-zoned school and has



created more inclusive educational environments that reflect the students who live within each community. The enclosed opportunities and recommendations for ECS programs reflect the experiences of the numerous ECS stakeholders engaged throughout this process and serve to improve the experiences for almost 1,800 students.

Program Fast Facts ⁷	
Enrollment	1,777 students (56% of students in WCPSS's specialized programs)
School-based FTE	221 teachers
Schools	119 schools (61% of WCPSS school sites)
Curriculum	Extended Content Standards
Grades Supported	K-12
Class Size Range	4 - 12 students
Staff Experience	41% less than 5 years of experience
Disabilities Served	Autism, ID-MOD, Developmental Delay, Multiple Disabilities, Traumatic Brain Injury, Specific Learning Disabilities, Other Health Impairments

Rationale for Prioritization

ECS programs provide instruction and support to more than half of WCPSS students enrolled in specialized programs. With recent reconfiguration and the changes, ECS programs now support a greater diversity of student needs and are expanding to more base schools. The expansion of programs has led to some variation in the way ECS programs are organized and managed across schools. To support the recent changes to ECS programming and program expansion, ECS programs were prioritized for a closer review.

⁷ Source: WCPSS Staffing and Enrollment Data SY 2021-2022.



Opportunities and Recommendations for Improvement

Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">S T R A T E G Y</p> <p>Portfolio of Services & Programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 1: An unclear vision and description have led some stakeholders to perceive that ECS is less specialized and less differentiated than previous program configurations. The current vision and description of ECS programs are relatively vague and do not adequately capture how students with diverse needs are supported in ECS classrooms. With the recent shift in program strategy, some stakeholders are confused as to how ECS programs are an improvement or how they are able to support differentiated instruction with more student need types being served in a single setting. Other parents expressed concerns that the current suite of program options available is not adequate to meet their student’s needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider aligning on a clear vision and mission for ECS programs district-wide, noting the benefits and key features that make these programs desirable. Formally documenting the rationale and strategy behind combining Autism and ID-MOD programs into a single ECS program will make it easier for the district to communicate the benefits related to the new approach and how it enhanced the quality of services a student receives. ● Consider branding the benefits of ECS programs around enhanced curricular structures and the inclusion opportunities that they now offer to build enthusiasm and excitement about the programs. Taking additional steps to formally highlight, brand, and distribute this information to stakeholders across the district can increase the general understanding of the program and its intended goals. In our interviews, many parents and families expressed appreciation of the plethora of benefits that ECS programs now offer. ● Consider clarifying that ECS programs remain highly responsive to the unique needs of students. As ECS programs have expanded the support students receive within their base schools, the district must clarify how they continue to remain responsive to the unique needs of students through strategic program configurations. Though there has been an increase in the number of programs available, the district (and schools) have taken



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
		<p>steps to ensure that students are served in a setting that supports their unique needs. For example, consider highlighting the existence of ECS-supported classrooms, or ECS classrooms balanced by student need types, to help clear up any stakeholder confusion or concerns.</p>
<p>Required Resource Allocation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity 2: Some stakeholders feel that sufficient staffing ratios may not be provided or that the necessary support for teachers (i.e., administrator or coordinating teacher supports) may be inadequate or inaccessible. ECS program teachers expressed concerns about the responsiveness of support they receive from their schools and from district coordinating teachers – yet, only five district coordinating teachers are tasked with the challenge of supporting teachers in nearly 120 schools. With limited support, many new or less experienced teachers expressed concerns about delivering ECS programming with fidelity and offering students access to more inclusion opportunities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider reviewing staffing ratios of both coordinating teachers and program staff, to clarify how they align with the district’s strategy and approach to ECS programs. Formally articulating how staffing ratios are designed, including expectations about how various staff members are to be utilized, will work to ensure that teachers use their resources effectively and in ways aligned to program goals. Reviewing staffing ratios will also provide an opportunity to reconsider how support structures (coordinating teachers) are distributed across the district in a way that supports both new and veteran teachers. • Consider enhancing the level of support provided to teachers, especially those in more geographically isolated programs, to ensure that it is commensurate with the needs of staff and easily accessible. The structure and strategy behind a successful ECS classroom is unique; therefore, it is critical that ECS program teachers have access to targeted support.
<p>Program Management Protocols</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity 3: The placement decision-making process and communication to schools is often unclear, and as a result schools may take varied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider providing transparent guidelines and rationale to schools regarding the placements of students, especially around ECS-supported



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
I M P L E M E N T A T I O N	<p>approaches when allocating students across classrooms. In the instances where greater differentiation based on need is offered, such as with supported ECS classrooms or ECS classrooms with intentionally smaller class sizes, placements rationales are often not communicated to program teachers. As a result, some program staff indicated that they must then review the district placements and may reorganize ECS classrooms within their school to be more responsive to the needs of the students. However, this reorganization may not be closely monitored or communicated back to the district.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 4: As ECS programs expand to more schools, some principals may not have the background in special education or the skillset to support ECS program teachers and the unique classroom environments they require. A principal with limited background in special education can stymie the goals of ECS programs, such as limiting the inclusiveness of the program within a school or providing less targeted support to program staff. In conversations, many ECS teachers expressed concerns about how well their principal was supporting and observing their classrooms, often a result of the principal not knowing what to look for or how to provide support. Even experienced principals, who have taken steps to develop their knowledge and skillset to better support ECS programs, highlighted the need for additional training or guidance on how to best support ECS 	<p>classrooms. For schools with multiple ECS programs, also consider providing clear guidelines on how they can shift or redistribute students to create classrooms of students with similar need types. Creating systemic structures will allow staff working most closely with students to make placement decisions while also ensuring the shifts align with the greater program strategy and goals. Additionally, the district should consider clarifying what constitutes a supported ECS placement to help schools manage and prepare for the needs of these students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider educating principals, through professional development or easily accessible programmatic “look-for” lists and checklists on the expectations and goals of ECS programs. Consider providing ongoing professional development and support for principals so that they can be an additional layer of support to teachers and school-level staff and create more inclusive environments for students in ECS programs.



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	classrooms.	
Staffing Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 5: Some ECS program teachers have not received enough training, or lack the expertise, to support the diversity of student needs within their classrooms. Because ECS programs support students with both moderate intellectual disabilities and students with autism or who may have social-emotional or behavioral needs, the skills required for ECS teachers have expanded. Staff who previously supported a more specific subset of students noted the challenges related to integrating additional classroom structures for students with needs they may have more limited experience working with. Some staff expressed concerns that teachers continue to remain hesitant about embracing the new configuration of programs, in part because they feel the district has not provided sufficient training to properly support them in the transition. Staff members who have recently joined the district also cited limited professional development, training, and onboarding opportunities. ● Opportunity 6: The placement of ECS programs within base schools has limited the collaboration among teachers as well as the responsiveness of support that coordinating teachers can provide. The increasing number of ECS classrooms and the number of school sites offering ECS programs has placed an added burden on coordinating teachers to support more teachers and schools that may 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider enhancing professional development opportunities to provide hands-on modeling, coaching, and observational learning opportunities for teachers. Offering teachers an opportunity to experience the sights and sounds of a strong ECS classroom can go a long way in providing them with the tools and strategies they need to be successful in their classrooms. With nearly 41% of ECS program teachers new or entering laterally, and many others transitioning to supporting a great range of student needs, targeted professional development and coaching can provide a myriad of benefits to both students and staff. ● Consider leveraging virtual professional learning teams to strengthen the opportunities for teachers across the district to collaborate and share best practices and ideas. Virtual tools provide a straightforward way for teachers across the district to connect and share their valuable knowledge. In focus groups, many veteran teachers in the district said they were happy to offer their expertise to new or laterally entering teachers. Creating formal opportunities for this collaboration, potentially in place of staff meetings or PD that may not be relevant to ECS teachers, can create a more collaborative ECS community without long commutes or moving programs. ● Consider increasing coordinating teacher staffing or bolstering support for school-based administrators



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>have administrators who are less familiar with specialized programs. CTs cited constantly having to “put out fires” and therefore are limited in the proactive support they can offer. Additionally, with fewer ECS programs housed within each school, some teachers have limited opportunities to connect and collaborate with fellow ECS staff. This lack of support was most acutely felt by new or laterally entering staff, who expressed a feeling of “being on an island.”</p>	<p>to provide more responsive support for ECS program teachers. Adding coordinating teachers with designated roles around training and proactive coaching can help ensure that teachers are well supported and will alleviate the number of “fires” that current coordinating teachers are currently tasked with putting out. Alternatively, the district could consider providing paid training sessions for principals to equip them with the skills to provide responsive support to the teachers within their schools.</p>
<p>Instructional Strategies & Structures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 7: Though there are many curricula and instructional resources available to staff, most resources the district provides are implemented in less than 50% of classrooms. While the district offers a variety of curricula and materials to staff, Unique Learning Systems is the only curriculum and instructional material used in every classroom. Some ECS program teachers noted the limited training opportunities as a barrier to more widespread implementation. Others felt that the decisions on resource selection did not provide an opportunity for teachers to share feedback or input, and therefore the resources did not align with the needs of their students. ● Opportunity 8: Some program teachers need additional strategies and structures to support students’ behavioral needs, especially as the behavioral needs of students have been exacerbated by the pandemic. With the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Align district-wide on a few core instructional practices and provide robust training opportunities around these practice areas. Consider using in-house “expert” teachers from formerly Autism or ID-MOD programs to lead training for staff who may not have as robust a background or experience to support students with specific disabilities (and vice versa). ● Consider enhancing behavioral support training and hiring a BCBA to support challenging behaviors (CTs try to support but do not necessarily have the higher skillset to support in this area). The district should consider creating additional professional development opportunities to help staff develop enhanced classroom structures that are more responsive to the growing social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students. Additionally, the district should consider reviewing the current staffing, particularly



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
COMMUNICATION		<p>consolidation of Autism and ID-MOD programs into a single ECS program, staff expressed an increased challenge to provide behavioral support to students, particularly among staff who had a more limited background in working with students with autism. The pandemic has also created an additional need for behavioral support, and the current approach and strategies may not be sufficient to meet the current level of student needs.</p>	<p>behavioral support staff, to ensure that behavioral support and training can be provided equitably and consistently to staff.</p>
	<p>Stakeholder Engagement & Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>Opportunity 9: The strategy around base programs may not have been communicated effectively to all stakeholders, and as a result, the rationale is not widely understood and many stakeholders do not understand the benefits and trade-offs. In conversations, various parents and many school staff in the district were unclear on the broader programmatic goals of ECS programs. Several parents expressed concerns that when programs merged, their students lost access to highly targeted and tailored support. Other parents wondered how the limited program options could serve the diversity of student needs within the district.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>Consider enhancing the current special education landscape document so that it becomes a hub for stakeholders to access resources, goals, and opportunities around ECS programs. A clarified program strategy, in an easy-to-access location on the district's website, will help alleviate any confusion about program goals and help parents better understand how their students will be served in the program. Additionally, building out the hub to highlight existing or potential opportunities for programmatic partnerships or training from outside groups, such as the Autism Society, can help teachers and families become more aligned and united around supporting students within ECS programs.</p> <p>Consider creating systems for teachers to provide recommendations and/or feedback about current systems and structures used in classrooms. Throughout conversations, teachers appreciated the opportunity to share their input and provide</p>



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
		potential recommendations. The district should consider making more systemic structures for teachers, particularly ECS program teachers, who are in many ways still adjusting, adapting, and evolving their classrooms to meet the unique needs of their students, to share feedback and input on how to continuously improve programs.

Elementary Behavior Supports (EBS)

Program Background

EBS programs are designed to support students who require a high level of structure and support and who exhibit significant behavioral and/or emotional needs. Students are given individualized, small-group, and in-class support to help stabilize their behaviors and prepare them to participate in the general education environment. EBS classrooms are designed to support students with the standard course of study and therefore hinge on strong collaboration with general education teachers and classrooms. Moreover, as student placement in EBS follows the least restrictive environment (LRE) and individualized education plan (IEP) procedures, EBS is intended for students with the most significant behavioral and/or emotional needs.

Program Fast Facts ⁸	
Enrollment	245 students (8% of students in WCPSS's specialized programs)
School-based FTE	49 teachers
Schools	30 schools (16% of school sites)

⁸ Source: WCPSS Staffing and Enrollment Data SY 2021-2022.



Curriculum	Standard Course of Study
Grades Supported	K-8
Class Size Range	3 - 7 students
Staff Experience	31% with less than 5 years of experience
Disabilities Served	Autism, Emotional Disability, Developmental Delay, Multiple Disabilities, Intellectual Disabilities, Other Health Impairments, Specific Learning Disabilities

Rationale for Prioritization

Preliminary conversations with stakeholders revealed that the intent of EBS programs may not be understood broadly, with students being inappropriately referred for services by some school-based staff. EBS programs are intended to serve a specific subset of students with a certain blend of emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. Additionally, given that students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs are growing, both in volume and complexity, district leaders articulated the need to clarify how EBS fits within a broader spectrum of tiered supports and services offered by the district.

Opportunities and Recommendations for Improvement

	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
S T R A T E G Y	Portfolio of Services & Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 1: The vision and description of how EBS programs are designed to support students with significant behavioral or emotional needs may not be clear to stakeholders, especially in the context of the range of other emotional or behavioral supports that the district offers. As a result, there may be an over-referral of students to EBS programs, as stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a robust program description that clearly identifies which specific student needs EBS programs are intended to serve and how students will be supported by EBS programming to ensure inclusive opportunities and academic support aligned to the Standard Course of Study. Clarify how EBS programs differ from the range of other emotional or behavioral supports offered



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>perceive that EBS is the primary district program or intervention to support students with any kind of behavioral or emotional need. While the number of EBS programs has expanded over time in an attempt to meet the increasing needs of students, some students might be better supported in their base schools, if effective classroom structures and interventions are present.</p>	<p>across the district to delineate which students should be referred to EBS and how other students with social, emotional, or behavioral needs should be supported instead.</p>
<p>Required Resource Allocation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 2: While EBS may be sufficiently resourced given the specific subset of students for whom it is designed, district stakeholders felt that the resources needed to support the full range of emotional and behavioral needs of all students across the district may be lacking. This potential lack of resources, especially at the elementary level, may put undue pressure on district behavioral supports, particularly behavior support therapists. It may also lead to EBS teachers being pulled to intervene in crises and provide support to students outside their caseloads, as EBS teachers become the de facto behavior experts for their buildings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider evaluating how EBS programs are nestled within the full spectrum of emotional and behavioral interventions and supports for students, to safeguard staffing for EBS while also ensuring that the emotional and behavioral needs of students outside of EBS are supported. ● Consider creating a school-based behavioral interventionist role that might be able to provide more proactive and ongoing support for students and staff and lessen the impact on EBS staff in schools and at the district level.
<p>Program Management Protocols</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 3: Principals of schools with EBS programs have varying backgrounds in special education, and some principals have limited experience supporting students with significant behavioral or emotional needs. Stakeholders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider creating professional development opportunities, including one-time training sessions, guidance manuals, or ongoing coaching, to share with principals the goals and key features of EBS programs, including best



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
I M P L E M E N T A T I O N		<p>noted the essential role of a principal in creating and maintaining strong EBS programs, particularly in fostering inclusive environments within a school. While the district supplies schools with guidelines and clear structures, the burden for implementation often falls on school leaders. There are many effective principals who support EBS programs in their buildings, but if a principal has limited experience in supporting students with significant behavioral or emotional needs, their ability to manage and support programs may be limited. This limited experience may lead some EBS programs to not be implemented in full alignment with district goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 4: Some stakeholders feel the student referral and assignment process for EBS may lack clarity, which leads to the perception that there are inconsistencies in determining which students are served in EBS programs and frustrations regarding how to adequately support students for whom EBS may not be appropriate. For example, some stakeholders with less familiarity with EBS articulated their frustration with the observation and referral process because it felt overly cumbersome and time-consuming. However, those procedures exist to ensure that students are served in the least restrictive environment, in a manner commensurate with their needs. 	<p>practices and protocols for creating inclusive environments for students within their school. The guidance provided should also clarify how school leaders can promote the expansion of general behavior supports across all classrooms in their school.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using the refined program descriptions for EBS, clarify and streamline the process for referring students for EBS programs to ensure that students are appropriately placed in the least restrictive environment, in a manner commensurate with their identified needs.



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
<p style="text-align: center;">Staffing Considerations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 5: Although behavioral specialists act as coordinating teachers to EBS programs, they are also required to provide training, coaching, and intervention support to schools without EBS. This extensive set of responsibilities may limit their reach and ability to provide comprehensive support to all EBS programs, and may lead schools without EBS programs to feel unsupported with their social, emotional, and behavioral needs. ● Opportunity 6: Effectively providing inclusion opportunities for students with significant behavioral needs requires support from an IA or EBS program teacher and coordination with general education teachers and specialists, and yet some EBS programs may lack the staffing capacity to adequately support these inclusion opportunities. ● Opportunity 7: The behavioral and emotional needs of students are increasing across the greater student population, which may be resulting in an increasing need for all teachers, regardless of program designation, to provide proactive support and instruction to help students manage these needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider creating a behavioral coach role that would provide more immediate and responsive support to schools while they are dealing with some of the more significant behavioral or emotional challenges of students. There may also be an opportunity for the district to align a behavioral coach role with a school-based interventionist (as discussed in EBS Opportunity 2) to ensure sufficient support and coverage. ● Review staffing for EBS programs based on the identified needs of students, and consider enhancing professional development for all school-based staff to ensure that all staff members are equipped to support students with emotional or behavioral needs. This professional development may also help to prevent an over-referral of students into EBS programs. ● Provide more preventative, proactive training as well as collaborative workshops throughout the year to help EBS staff at different school sites share ideas and best practices. Materials from these workshops could then be leveraged to support general education and non-teaching staff to strengthen the building-wide support schools offer.
<p style="text-align: center;">Instructional Strategies & Structures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 8: Although EBS programs are designed to provide inclusion opportunities to prepare students to return to their base schools for middle school, many schools do not 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider clarifying the procedure for how general education and EBS classrooms are formally partnered to ensure that students in EBS programs have seats reserved in general



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>designate seats in general education classrooms for students in EBS programs, which limits their ability to prepare for middle school and beyond.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 9: The needs of students in EBS programs have evolved over the years, and as a result, there is a need for a more responsive curriculum and programmatic support, particularly around mental health and wellness. Stakeholders also noted that these needs exist more broadly for students outside of EBS. As school- and district-based EBS staff are seen as the social, emotional, and behavioral experts in the district, they are often asked to support far beyond their caseloads of students in EBS programs. Thus, refined structures and strategies for these areas of need may be required not just within EBS classrooms, but across all classrooms and schools. 	<p>education classrooms, thus safeguarding inclusion opportunities for students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider designating collaborative time for EBS and general education teachers to plan and prepare structured inclusion opportunities. Consider aligning instructional resources and structures across EBS and general education to ease transitions for students between settings. ● Review the existing set of curriculum and material offerings to ensure they meet the needs of students in EBS, and consider enhancing mental health supports for all students in the district to proactively support students' social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing and to limit the pressure on EBS programs and staff.
Stakeholder Engagement & Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 10: Stakeholders noted a deep misunderstanding about the vision and description of EBS programs, particularly regarding for which students EBS programs were designed, which has led to some stakeholders feeling frustrated and unsupported with behavioral and emotional needs of students. This confusion has led some school staff – notably teachers or school administrators without EBS programs within their school – to over-refer students into EBS programs and express 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider creating strategic communication about the vision and description of EBS and the students for which it is designed, as well as how the behavioral and emotional needs of students not identified for EBS should be supported. ● Create formal structures and feedback mechanisms within the district for staff to request and receive support to ensure that students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs are being met. ● Consider proactively engaging and informing



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
C O M M U N I C A T I O N		<p>discontent if those students are not subsequently enrolled into EBS programs, even when it is clear to the district team that the student would not necessarily benefit from an EBS setting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 11: Many school-based stakeholders feel that communication is limited related to EBS programs, particularly related to the specific program goals as well as how student observations lead to placements or recommendations for interventions. In many cases, school-based staff leverage their strong relationships with district staff, when possible, to get information or decisions related to program placements, rather than relying on a standard protocol. This lack of a standard approach may lead to inequitable or unfair experiences for staff and students and may also create additional burdens on district staff as they are asked to address an ongoing flow of questions and concerns. 	<p>general education school-based staff on the goals and expectations of EBS programs. Consider also sharing with school-based staff best practices for how they can support the behavioral needs of students within their own schools.</p>

Cross-Categorical Kindergarten (CCK)

Program Background

CCK programs engage kindergarten students identified with a disability in a diagnostic year with a highly qualified special education teacher. Students served in CCK require intensive, specially designed instruction in a smaller group for a major portion of their day. Often, students are placed in CCK because their needs are continuing to evolve, and it is unclear whether they may need more specific program placements. Once students are enrolled, CCK teachers collect assessment and observational data on an ongoing basis, which allows them to pair students with intervention opportunities, modifications, and accommodations. Students supported in a CCK



program follow the NC Common Core. CCK prepares students to access either the NC Common Core or NC Extended Common Core Curriculum.

Program Fast Facts ⁹	
Enrollment	149 students (5% of students in WCPSS's specialized programs)
School-based FTE	16 teachers
Schools	16 schools (8% of school sites)
Curriculum	Standard Course of Study and Extended Content Standards
Grades Supported	Kindergarten
Class Size Range	7 - 12 students
Staff Experience	35% with less than 5 years of experience
Disabilities Served	Autism, Developmental Delay, Multiple Disabilities, Traumatic Brain Injury, Other Health Impairments

Rationale for Prioritization

CCK programs provide a critical transition experience between Pre-Kindergarten and elementary school for students who require additional assessment and observations. As such, CCK programs frequently serve a variety of student needs and also support parents and guardians of students at the critical entry point into the special education community. Since student needs are still being assessed in CCK, teachers must provide instruction that supports both the standard course of study as well as extended content standards. This blend of student needs and instructional types, as well as the need for additional assessment and observations, makes CCK programs particularly challenging for staff and worthy of additional review.

⁹ Source: WCPSS Staffing and Enrollment Data SY 2021-2022.



Opportunities and Recommendations for Improvement

	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
STRATEGY	Portfolio of Services & Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 1: The vision for CCK programs may be unclear to some district stakeholders (most notably Pre-K parents/families and staff). As a result, a wide range of student need types are referred into CCK programs, even when some students may be more appropriately served in a different program. Stakeholders report that the nature of CCK often results in the program becoming a “catch-all” or “waiting room” for students until enough data can be gathered to justify an alternative placement, which results in CCK classrooms’ supporting a wide variety of needs. Also, given the mix of student needs that are often found in a CCK classroom, the ability of some classrooms to provide rigorous SCOS instruction may be limited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a robust program vision and description that clearly identifies the specific student need types that CCK programs are intended to serve, and clarify how alternative programs better serve other student need types. Consider also noting how a variety of need types should be supported through CCK programs. Consider providing instructional sessions for Pre-K staff as well as for parents and families to proactively support in their understanding and awareness of CCK programs. Greater knowledge about the purpose of CCK will allow all stakeholders to make more informed decisions about appropriate program placement.
	Required Resource Allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 2: Although CCK programs are intended to serve as an opportunity to gather data on students’ unique needs, many of the observational and data-tracking supports and tools are reportedly ad hoc and depend on classroom teachers. This approach may limit the program’s ability to deliver on its dual goals of identifying student need through gathering sufficient data and providing rigorous instruction consistent with the standard course of study. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider creating system-wide data-tracking systems and observational structures, including refined staff roles, to be used across all CCK classrooms to improve standardization and efficiency in the data assessment process and empower classroom teachers to focus on instruction.



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
Program Management Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 3: Principals who oversee CCK programs may not have an extensive background or training in special education or a strong understanding of the needs of students in CCK classrooms. As a result, some principals who lack special education experience tend to manage CCK programs like any other Kindergarten program or mistakenly isolate the program by limiting the inclusion opportunities, and thus limit the overall effectiveness and inclusiveness of CCK. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider enhancing professional development training or education opportunities to share with principals the goals and key features of CCK programs. This added support will help ensure that students in CCK programs have access to seats in general education settings. ● Consider providing training and/or strategies to assist principals in supporting general education teachers to integrate and assist students in CCK programs, when appropriate.
Staffing Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 4: CCK teachers reported the overwhelming set of services associated with their role, which makes it challenging for teachers to be successful in providing support to students. The extensive set of responsibilities for CCK teachers includes providing thorough observations and data monitoring, facilitating inclusion opportunities, managing special education requirements and implementing IEPs with fidelity, and providing rigorous classroom instruction. This variety of responsibilities in the CCK teacher role makes it challenging for teachers to be successful in all areas and may present difficulties for the district when hiring new staff. Also, given the relative inexperience of many CCK teachers, it may be difficult for staff to accomplish the broad array of responsibilities without strong professional development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider enhancing the comprehensive professional development onboarding program for CCK teachers, particularly for new or laterally entering staff. Training should include student assessment and observational services as well as case management and liaising with parents new to special education. ● Develop professional development cycles of learning with multiple follow-up and collaborative sessions for CCK teachers throughout the school year, so that teachers can learn from their peers. ● Consider adjusting school-based special education roles at elementary schools to support with student observations and assessments, so that the burden on individual teachers can be eased and the experience of students and families improved.

I
M
P
L
E
M
E
N
T
A
T
I
O
N



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>structures or outside support. Program staff also noted that their ability to connect and collaborate with other CCK staff was limited because their classrooms were located across different school sites.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 5: CCK teachers frequently serve as the key special education liaison for parents and families at a critical point in the student's educational career and are responsible for recommending student placements that can affect the trajectory of a child's education. Because of the relative inexperience of CCK teachers – nearly 35% have fewer than five years' experience – the critical role of liaising with parents new to special education may be more challenging and more time-consuming for staff. 	
<p>Instructional Strategies & Structures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 6: Given the diverse mix of students placed in some CCK classrooms, it can be challenging to tailor materials and provide the necessary variety of support for students within a single classroom, especially when considering inclusion opportunities. In many cases, teachers may need to adopt additional strategies and structures to support students who access the curriculum at a variety of levels. Moreover, CCK programs rely on inclusion opportunities to ensure that students access the standard course of study. In some schools, structures to support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider clarifying how CCK classrooms are partnered with general education classrooms to guarantee that inclusion opportunities exist for students and to ensure general education staff are positioned to support students effectively. ● Consider designating collaborative time for CCK program teachers and general education teachers administrators to plan and prepare structured inclusion opportunities. ● Consider aligning instructional resources and structures across CCK and general education to ease transitions for students between settings.



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>inclusion may not exist, which places the burden on CCK teachers to create inclusion opportunities and coordinate with general education teachers. This coordination is needed to ensure that students have the instructional materials to support their specific needs while in inclusion settings.</p>	
<p style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg);">C O M M U N I C A T I O N</p> <p>Stakeholder Engagement & Communication</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 7: Stakeholders noted that the distinct function of CCK, as a space for additional assessment and observation, is not communicated clearly to stakeholders, which may result in students not being placed in more precise or responsive programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider increasing the frequency of or enhancing parent information sessions about CCK programs to ease the burden and knowledge sharing required of CCK teachers. ● Consider creating an FAQ portal, or a mechanism or form for gathering general feedback and questions about special education programming to reduce the pressure placed on CCK staff and ensure consistent communication.



Intellectual Disabilities - Severe (ID-SEV)

Program Background

Students in ID-SEV programs are served in highly structured learning environments and smaller group settings. Students enrolled in ID-SEV programs have a variety of complex disabilities and require extensive services, supports, and in some instances physical classroom accommodations to be successful. ID-SEV and multiple disabilities (MU) programs provide students with similar instructional opportunities and academic accommodations; however, students with multiple disabilities often require additional physical accommodations. This distinction has become less clear to stakeholders, though, and in some situations, students with complex physical disabilities are served in ID-SEV classrooms, with specific physical modifications and enhanced staffing accommodations to support their needs.

Program Fast Facts ¹⁰	
Enrollment	160 students (5% of students in WCPSS's specialized programs)
School-based FTE	20 teachers
Schools	15 schools (8% of school sites)
Curriculum	Extended Content Standards
Grades Supported	K-12
Class Size Range	4 - 8 students
Staff Experience	35% with less than 5 years of experience
Disabilities Served	Intellectual Disability, Multiple Disabilities, Autism, Developmental Delay, Traumatic Brain Injury, Other Health Impairments

¹⁰ Source: WCPSS Staffing and Enrollment Data SY 2021-2022.



Rationale for Prioritization

With the recent reconfiguration of specialized programs in WCPSS, many specialized programs now have names that focus on how students access the curriculum rather than the students' disabilities. Given the current naming convention and program description for Intellectually Disabled - Severe programs, however, some stakeholders are unclear about the distinction in services and curriculum access between ID-SEV and MU programs. Additionally, ID-SEV programs have seen an increase in enrollment in recent years and there is a need to ensure that staff and their students are well supported as programs expand. The expansion of programs, as well as the need to highlight the distinctiveness of ID-SEV programs, merits a closer review of ID-SEV programs.

Opportunities and Recommendations for Improvement

	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
STRATEGY	Portfolio of Services & Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 1: Stakeholders, including teachers and parents, are unsure how ID-SEV and MU programs manifest differently to support the profound physical, cognitive, or social-emotional needs of students. The current configuration of programs does not clarify how students are served differently by ID-SEV and MU programs, leading some parents to wonder whether their student's current placement and services is more beneficial than an alternative placement. Even classroom teachers expressed confusion about the rationale for having only ID-SEV programs in elementary schools, but MU programs across middle and high schools, when often the academic and instructional supports needed for students are the same. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider adjusting the program names for ID-SEV and MU programs to reflect the student experience and the services they receive rather than federal disability designations. Given the vast number of similarities between ID-SEV and MU programs, the district should consider strategically combining programs and clarifying program goals, focusing on how students with more complex physical needs will be served or how classes will be modified to be responsive to each student's unique set of needs.
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 2: Some stakeholders feel that the current staffing levels required to deliver the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider reviewing staffing levels and staff skillsets to ensure students are receiving



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
<p>Required Resource Allocation</p>	<p>broad suite of services in ID-SEV programs may need to be adjusted. ID-SEV program staff identified a need for additional support to help them deliver the array of services that students require, including providing high-quality instruction, administering treatments or medications, scheduling additional services, documenting services provided, and moving students with profound disabilities around the classroom and school. With teachers stretched thin to provide this support for all of the students in their classroom, some parents expressed concerns that their students were not receiving services to the extent to which they are entitled.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 3: Program teachers feel that some district-provided materials are not supportive to students with the most significant needs. The district and state both have high expectations for students in ID-SEV programs; however, many of the current curricular resources do not provide enough scaffolds for some students to access the content. The current instructional resources are the same as those used in ECS programs, as expected because students should be accessing the same content; however, given that students in ID-SEV programs often have more profound disabilities, many of the resources are difficult for teachers to use without significant modifications. Some teachers expressed frustration that the district is not providing 	<p>commensurate staff support. The district should consider reviewing the current allocation of staff and identify areas where staff may need additional support, in terms of FTE or training, so that the staff has the tools needed to offer comprehensive support for each student's unique needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider strengthening or modifying the instructional materials offered so they are more tailored to the needs of students in ID-SEV programs. With coordinated input opportunities from program staff, the district should consider enhancing the resources available to ensure that they suit the ways students access the curriculum.



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
		opportunities for teachers to share input or feedback on the current resources.	
I M P L E M E N T A T I O N	Program Management Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 4: Some school-based administrators do not have the specific knowledge and expertise to manage or support ID-SEV program students and staff. Some program teachers expressed concerns about the level of knowledge that their administrators have around their programs and the support they could provide, leading to the isolation or exclusion of programs from the greater school dynamic. This manifested in some programs being in more physically isolated classrooms, while others cited more limited inclusion opportunities for their students. Additionally, some teachers felt unfairly evaluated because of administrators not necessarily knowing what to look for when observing an ID-SEV classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider enhancing professional learning materials and support for school-based administrators to build their knowledge of what constitutes a strong ID-SEV program and how their role is integral in developing programs and fostering more inclusive environments. The district should consider a requisite training or support session for school leaders who oversee ID-SEV programs to ensure that programs are implemented with fidelity across the district and that students are accessing high-quality instructional and inclusion opportunities.
	Staffing Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 5: Some program teachers may lack sufficient support from school-based administrators, coordinating teachers, and collaborative opportunities from similar program staff. The unique systems and structures that must be implemented to support the diversity of student needs within ID-SEV programs require a high level of support for teachers, particularly for the 35% of staff who have fewer than five years of experience in ID-SEV programs. However, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider creating a coordinating teacher position dedicated to facilitating targeted professional development and responsive support for ID-SEV staff. Given the nuanced support that many ID-SEV teachers require, consider dedicating a coordinating teacher to train staff and respond to the unique needs of students within the programs. This position can also help facilitate learning and training for principals and other school-based staff who support students in ID-



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>coordinating teachers cover nearly 140 classrooms, so they are limited in their ability to provide such support, and as mentioned, some school administrators have limited experience with these programs. As a result, program teachers expressed a desire for additional support through tailored professional development (current PD typically groups ID-SEV and MU teachers with ECS), targeted support from coordinating teachers, or simply opportunities to connect and share strategies with program staff located in other schools.</p>	<p>SEV programs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider enhancing the peer-support structures for ID-SEV teachers to foster collaborative learning and strategy-sharing opportunities. Much like the recommendation for ECS program staff, creating formal opportunities for teachers of similar programs to collaborate in person or virtually, potentially in place of staff meetings or PD that may not be relevant to ID-SEV teachers, can create a more collaborative community without moving programs or long commutes to connect.
<p>Instructional Strategies & Structures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 6: Some stakeholders felt that existing instructional materials may be misaligned or inaccessible for students with the most significant or complex needs and that clear guidance may not exist to support teachers in using or adapting materials. Some teachers shared that although they receive extensive new resources and materials, the dearth of clear direction or support from the district on how to use them means that many resources are left to collect dust on the shelves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider enhancing training and modeling support on the provided curriculum to ensure that instructional strategies and resources are implemented with fidelity. Consider giving teachers more agency to select materials to ensure that resources and materials are utilized in the classroom. The district could also consider engaging teachers more collaboratively in the identification and purchase of new instructional materials or resources. With increased teacher engagement in the decision-making process, resources will likely be used with greater fidelity, and special education funding will be spent more efficiently and effectively.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 7: Due to unclear and varied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider strengthening channels for district-to-



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
COMMUNICATION	Stakeholder Engagement & Communication	<p>communication to school-based staff, some staff shared a perception that the central office’s strategy regarding program design and support was disconnected from the classroom reality. Some program teachers also felt the district’s guidance on program design and expectations was not clearly communicated. A few teachers noted their wish for district leaders to visit classrooms more often to improve their communication and to align their expectations with the reality of each classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 8: A number of outside, supplementary resources are available but unknown and underutilized by parents and families, in part due to a lack of awareness and lack of communication from the district. Though sundry agencies and organizations offer services and support for students with more significant disabilities, many families are not aware of the full set of opportunities available. For some parents, it was only through focus groups that they were able to connect with parents of students with similar disabilities and learn more about some of the various outside organizations that provide services for their students. Parents felt that a robust list of opportunities, or a communication newsletter that helped distribute information about such opportunities, would make them far more prepared to take advantage of these options. 	<p>school-staff communication to ensure that messaging is clear and consistent, and that staff has opportunities to articulate questions and concerns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider strengthening partnerships with local and state organizations and creating an easily accessible database of partnerships to expand student and family access to robust programming.



Multiple Disabilities (MU)

Program Background

Students in multiple disabilities programs are served in highly structured learning environments and smaller group settings. Students enrolled in MU programs have a variety of complex disabilities and require extensive services, supports, and in some instances, physical classroom accommodations to be successful. ID-SEV and MU programs provide students with similar instructional opportunities and academic accommodations; however, students with multiple disabilities often require additional physical accommodations. This distinction has become less clear to stakeholders, though, and in some situations, students with complex physical disabilities are served in ID-SEV classrooms, with specific physical modifications and enhanced staffing accommodations to support their needs.

Given the vast number of similarities between services and instruction provided to students in ID-SEV and MU programs, many of the MU programmatic opportunities and recommendations are closely aligned to those for the ID-SEV programs.

Program Fast Facts ¹¹	
Enrollment	32 students (1% of students in WCPSS's specialized programs)
School-based FTE	4 teachers
Schools	4 Schools (2% of school sites)
Curriculum	Extended Content Standards
Grades Supported	6-12
Class Size Range	4 - 8 students
Staff Experience	25% with less than 5 years of experience
Disabilities Served	Multiple Disabilities

¹¹ Source: WCPSS Staffing and Enrollment Data SY 2021-2022.



Rationale for Prioritization

As was identified with ID-SEV programs, there is a need to clarify how services provided for students in MU programs are distinct from those provided to students in ID-SEV programs. Additionally, MU programs are unique in that they offer a highly responsive set of supports for students with physical disabilities, and it is critical to highlight to stakeholders how these services are provided to students. Although MU programs provide support to a small group of students, a closer review will help ensure that services are delivered with fidelity to students across the district.

Opportunities and Recommendations for Improvement

	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
STRATEGY	Portfolio of Services & Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 1: Stakeholders, including teachers and parents, are unsure how ID-SEV and MU programs manifest differently to support the profound physical, cognitive, or social-emotional needs of students. The current configuration of these programs does not clearly show how students in the ID-SEV and MU programs are served differently, leading some parents to wonder whether their student’s current placement and services are the best option. Even classroom teachers expressed confusion around the rationale for having only ID-SEV programs in elementary schools, but MU programs across middle and high schools, when often the academic and instructional supports needed for students are the same. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider adjusting the program names for ID-SEV and MU programs to reflect the student experience and the services they receive rather than federal disability designations. Given the vast number of similarities between ID-SEV and MU programs, the district should consider strategically combining programs and clarifying program goals, focusing on how students with more complex physical needs will be served or how classes will be modified to be responsive to each student’s unique set of needs.
	Required Resource Allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 2: Some stakeholders feel that the current staffing levels required to deliver the broad suite of services in MU programs may 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider reviewing staffing levels and staff skillsets to ensure students are receiving support commensurate with their identified need. The



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>need to be adjusted. MU program staff identified a need for additional support to help them deliver the array of services that students require, including providing high-quality instruction, administering treatments or medications, scheduling additional services, documenting services provided, and moving students with profound disabilities around the classroom and school. With teachers stretched thin to provide this support for all students in their classroom, some parents expressed concerns that their students were not receiving services to the extent to which they are entitled.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 3: Program teachers feel that some district-provided materials are not supportive to students with the most significant needs. The district and state both have high expectations for students in MU programs; however, many of the current curricular resources do not provide enough scaffolds for some students to access the content. The current instructional resources are the same as those for ECS programs, as expected because students should be accessing the same content; however, given that students in MU programs often have more profound disabilities, many of the resources are difficult for teachers to use without significant modifications. Some teachers expressed frustration that the district is not providing opportunities for teachers 	<p>district should consider reviewing the current allocation of staff and identify areas where they may need additional support, in terms of FTE or training, so that staff have the tools needed to offer comprehensive support for each student's unique needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider strengthening or modifying the instructional materials offered to be more tailored to the needs of students in MU programs by coordinating input opportunities from program staff. Soliciting input would enable the district to enhance resources provided to programs so that they better suit how students access the curriculum.



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
		to share input or feedback on the current resources.	
I M P L E M E N T A T I O N	Program Management Protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 4: Some school-based administrators do not have the specific knowledge and expertise to manage or support MU program students and staff. Some program teachers expressed concerns about the level of knowledge that their administrators have about their programs and the support they could provide, leading to the isolation or exclusion of programs from the greater school dynamic. This manifested in some programs being in more physically isolated classrooms, while others cited more limited inclusion opportunities for their students. Additionally, some teachers felt unfairly evaluated as a result of administrators not necessarily knowing what to look for when observing an MU classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider enhancing professional learning materials and support for school-based administrators to build their knowledge of what constitutes a strong MU program and how their role is integral in developing programs and fostering more inclusive environments. The district should consider a requisite training or support session for school leaders who oversee MU programs to ensure that programs are implemented with fidelity across the district and that students are accessing high-quality instructional and inclusion opportunities.
	Staffing Considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Opportunity 5: Some program teachers may lack sufficient support from school-based administrators and coordinating teachers, as well as collaborative opportunities with staff in similar programs. The unique systems and structures that must be implemented to support the diversity of student needs within MU programs require a high level of support for teachers, particularly for the 25% of staff who have fewer than five years of experience in MU programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider creating a coordinating teacher position dedicated to facilitating targeted professional development and responsive support for MU staff. Given the nuanced support that many MU teachers require, consider dedicating a coordinating teacher to train staff and respond to the unique needs of students within the programs. This position can also help facilitate learning and training for principals and other school-based staff who support students in MU



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
	<p>However, coordinating teachers cover nearly 140 classrooms, so they are limited in their ability to provide such support, and as mentioned, some school administrators have limited experience with these programs. As a result, program teachers expressed a desire for additional support through tailored professional development (current PD typically groups ID-SEV and MU with ECS), targeted support from coordinating teachers, or simply opportunities to connect and share strategies with program staff located in other schools.</p>	<p>programs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider enhancing the peer-support structures for MU teachers to foster collaborative learning and strategy-sharing opportunities. Much like the recommendation for ECS program staff, creating formal opportunities for teachers of similar programs to collaborate in person or virtually, potentially in place of staff meetings or PD that may not be relevant to MU teachers, can create a more collaborative community without moving programs or long commutes to connect.
<p>Instructional Strategies & Structures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 6: Some stakeholders felt that existing instructional materials may be misaligned or inaccessible for students with the most significant or complex needs and that clear guidance may not exist to support teachers in using or adapting materials. Some teachers shared that although they receive extensive new resources and materials, the dearth of clear direction or support from the district on how to use them means that many resources are left to collect dust on the shelves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider enhancing training and modeling support on the provided curriculum to ensure that instructional strategies and resources are implemented with fidelity. Consider giving teachers more agency to select materials to ensure that resources and materials are utilized in the classroom. The district could also consider engaging teachers more collaboratively in the identification and purchase of new instructional materials or resources. With increased teacher engagement in the decision-making process, resources will likely be used with greater fidelity, and special education funding will be spent more efficiently and effectively.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 7: Due to unclear and varied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider strengthening channels for district-



	Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
C O M M U N I C A T I O N	Stakeholder Engagement & Communication	<p>communication to school-based staff, some staff shared a perception that the central office's strategy on program design and support was disconnected from the classroom reality. Some program teachers feel the district's guidance and communication on program design and expectations are not clearly communicated, and as a result, teachers may feel invalidated and unsupported in their work. A few teachers noted that they wished district leaders would visit classrooms or spend more time in schools so that their communication and expectations would be more aligned to the reality of each classroom.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunity 8: A number of outside, supplementary resources are available but are unknown and underutilized by parents and families, in part due to a lack of awareness and lack of communication from the district. Though the state of North Carolina, as well as other community programs, offer services and support for students with more significant disabilities, many families are not aware of the full repertoire of opportunities available. For some parents, it was only through focus groups that they were able to connect with parents of students with similar disabilities and learn more about some of the various outside organizations that provide services for their students. Parents felt that a robust list of opportunities, or a communication newsletter that helped distribute information 	<p>school staff communication to ensure that messaging is clear and consistent, and that staff has opportunities to articulate questions and concerns.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider strengthening partnerships with local and state organizations and creating an easily accessible database of partnerships to expand student and family access to robust programming.



Areas of Opportunity	Opportunities	Recommendations
		about such opportunities, would make them far more prepared to take advantage of these options.



Implications for District Oversight and Management Structures

DMGroup's work with WCPSS yielded a robust set of opportunities and recommendations to strengthen the distinctiveness and effectiveness of the district's more specialized and regional programs. While these opportunities and recommendations are promising, the district must ensure that its systems and structures for managing programs are adjusted to allow for effective implementation. Adjusting and aligning district-level systems and structures will help to ensure that recommendations maximize their intended benefits.

Through the diagnostic work of this workstream, specific opportunities emerged surrounding how district-level management and support structures might be adjusted to enhance outcomes for district stakeholders. DMGroup analyzed management and oversight structures currently utilized across WCPSS via document reviews, interviews, and focus groups. This combination of document reviews and conversations provided substantive insight to identify a coherent set of opportunities and recommendations related to strengthening district oversight and management structures to empower the implementation of district-wide and program-specific recommendations.

Opportunities and Recommendations

Through the targeted review of district documentation and conversations with key district leaders, three opportunity areas emerged that would improve the alignment of district oversight and management structures to programmatic recommendations. These three opportunities represent the highest leverage and most actionable opportunities that would lead to the greatest change, and they are directly related to the district-wide and program-specific opportunities and recommendations. Each opportunity is also accompanied by clear recommendations for how best to organize, manage, and lead specialized programs with significant and complex needs.

Opportunity 1: Student Assessment and Placement Protocols

Students with significant and complex needs often require extensive assessments and observations to appropriately identify and understand their unique needs. Additionally, in early grades, students often experience dramatic development in a short period of time. It is therefore critical that special education services provide robust assessment and observational support to ensure that students' unique needs are understood and that each student is recommended for the most appropriate program and set of services.

Generally speaking, the district's process for assessment, observation, and placement is strong. The vast majority of students are assessed, observed, and placed appropriately by their case managers in collaboration with a host of school- and district-level professionals. However, through our conversations with stakeholders, it became apparent that these procedures may not be consistently implemented or understood across the district, particularly for specialized programs that serve students with the most significant and complex needs. Stakeholders, including parents,



guardians, and staff members, articulated confusion about these procedures, namely being unclear on how some student placements were made.

The process for assessing, observing, and recommending placements for students is fundamentally local, occurring in a student's IEP meeting. For some specialized programs, however, the district must make a final placement decision to ensure students are placed in the least restrictive environment possible and to manage the full portfolio of specialized programs prudently. In these situations, the process by which some students are recommended for programs while others are not becomes less clear for stakeholders, which adds to their confusion and frustration.

- **Recommendation:** Clarify and codify the district's process for assessing and observing student needs as well as the process by which students are recommended for and placed in specific programs tailored to their needs. As needed, adjust the process for each specialized program to clarify program-specific factors that stakeholders must consider. For example, clarify the process by which students exhibiting social, emotional, or behavioral needs might be recommended for Elementary Behavior Support (EBS), emphasizing the extensive assessment and observations required to ensure that students are appropriately placed in the least restrictive environment.
- **Recommendation:** Consider refining the roles of case managers and other school- or district-based professionals who support in assessing and observing students to clarify which positions are responsible for each aspect of the process. In a complex field such as special education, there is often much overlap in roles and responsibilities that may lead to inconsistent or duplicative experiences. Elementary schools may have an opportunity to create a distinct role that supports the observation and assessment of students' needs to ensure a consistent and effective process. Refining and clarifying the responsibilities of key roles will likely lead to a more streamlined and effective approach to assessing student needs and making more appropriate program recommendations.

Opportunity 2: Ongoing Support and Structure for School-Based Administrators

In extensive conversations with stakeholders across all levels of the district, school-based administrators consistently were identified as a critical and underutilized role that could enhance specialized programs. While there are numerous skilled and passionate school-based administrators who are adept in supporting the needs of specialized programs, there are many more who lack a background and confidence in supporting programs for students with more significant and complex needs. As the district grows in both size and complexity and as the number of specialized programs also grows, it is critical that school-based administrators are given the appropriate training and ongoing support to be able to assist their special educators and integrate special education programs into their school communities.

Strong school-based administrators are integral to fostering the inclusive environments necessary for specialized programs by establishing a culture and maintaining school structures, such as schedules and staffing configurations, that allow for inclusion to thrive. Additionally, supportive administrators are necessary to ensure that special educators can successfully navigate



challenging situations with students and their families. As the leaders of their buildings, administrators have the power to address small problems while they are still small, provided that they have the knowledge and confidence to do so. Given the growing size and complexity of WCPSS, it is critical that administrators' roles in supporting specialized programs be strengthened to ensure that these programs can truly thrive. An inclusive model for supporting students with complex needs can only operate with the active and intentional support of school-based administrators.

- **Recommendation:** Refine the set of support structures and materials for school-based administrators to bolster their knowledge and confidence to provide ongoing support to specialized programs. Specifically, consider developing practical walkthrough guides and materials that clarify what model classrooms look like for each of the specialized programs and that articulate how school-based administrators can provide effective support. Within these materials, clarify which district personnel should serve as the primary point of contact for school-based administrators when questions arise. The district might also consider how it could refine and enhance its trainings for administrators related to managing and supporting specialized programs.
- **Recommendation:** With the refined materials and structures for administrators in place, consider clarifying and reinforcing the role of school-based administrators as critical supports for specialized programs. Consider underscoring their vital role in fostering inclusive environments for students with more significant and complex needs and in assisting special educators with navigating challenging situations. Equipped with robust guides and district supports, school-based administrators will be empowered to maintain robust specialized programs within their buildings.

Opportunity 3: Ongoing Support and Structure for School-Based Educators

The identified recommendations for specialized programs depend on highly effective educators to implement them with fidelity. In general, special educators across the district are highly dedicated and effective. Stakeholders specifically named how crucial educators are and have been in supporting students with unique and complex needs. That being said, the district has recently experienced a shortage of special educators, with an increased number of inexperienced, non-traditionally licensed, or laterally entering staff members coming into the district. This relative inexperience has heightened the need for greater support for educators in order to maintain robust special education services and programs for students and families.

- **Recommendation:** Consider refining and enhancing how support is provided to special educators, particularly surrounding how to leverage the specific strategies, structures, and materials that are integral to the configuration of their program. In particular, consider how professional learning sessions could be augmented with cross-school collaboration sessions, where educators who support similar programs can share strategies and experiences with one another. Also, given the district-wide effectiveness of coordinating teachers, consider adding more staffing to enhance the support available to individual educators across the district.



Workstream 2 Conclusion

The recommendations identified through all phases of Workstream 2 represent high-leverage and actionable opportunities for the district to enhance its specialized programs for students with more complex and significant needs. These recommendations represent the perspectives and experiences of hundreds of district stakeholders. The DMGroup team is indebted to these various stakeholders who shared deeply personal and emotional experiences related to WCPSS special education services. While these recommendations provide a roadmap for district leaders, emphasis must shift to planning for implementation. By creating robust action plans that organize and sequence recommendations, the district can take action to enhance its specialized programs.

Overall Conclusion

This report should be one step in an ongoing discussion about how to improve the ways in which WCPSS supports its students and families receiving special education services. The district is well positioned to build on many existing strengths and may consider taking further steps based on the opportunities presented here.

Much conversation and planning is still required through a structured and inclusive process. Not all of the opportunities discussed in this report can be addressed at once. If the district chooses to pursue any of these areas further, it can take up to a year or two of careful planning, research, communication, coordination, and roll-out to successfully make changes for districts, schools, staff, and students. Over the next several months, WCPSS can begin to define a path forward and plan for implementation.



District Management Group is committed to partnering with districts to bring about transformational, measurable, and sustainable improvements in public education. We are committed to helping schools and students thrive.



District Management Group

Helping Schools and
Students Thrive

If you have any comments or questions about the contents of this document, please contact District Management Group:

Tel: (877) 362-3500

Email: info@dmgroupK12.com

Fax: (617) 491-5266

Web: www.dmgroupK12.com

Mail: 133 Federal Street, Boston, MA 02110