

City Schools of Decatur Research & Evaluation Partnership

School Board Presentation May 8, 2018

Research & Evaluation Team Members



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Partnership Goals & Activities



Partnership Goals & Activities

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

Mixed methods approach, triangulation across 3 data sources:

Interviews &
Focus Groups

Surveys

Administrative data
on children, teachers,
& classrooms

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

Individual Interviews & Focus Groups



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

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

Surveys



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

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

Administrative Data



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

Emerging Themes



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

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

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

Foreshadowing in the survey findings



Decatur Residents with Children Attending CSD (n = 109)

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

Theme #1

Shared Values



Common ideals held & maintained CSD community stakeholders

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

Challenges: “...*average at a state level is not the same as average at City of Decatur level*. They’re not the same average.”

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

Theme #2

Organizational Structure



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

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

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

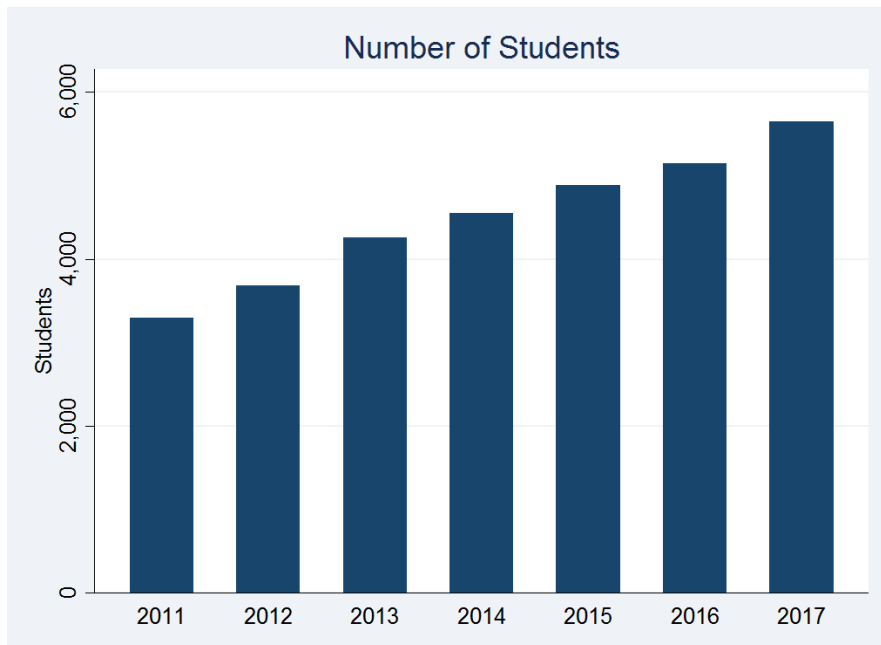
Tension: *"We receive a fair amount of support from our central office...I feel like they're responsive and they're very supportive and they come and they help problem solve all the time. So they're stretched thin but they're supportive."*

Consider: Enrollment

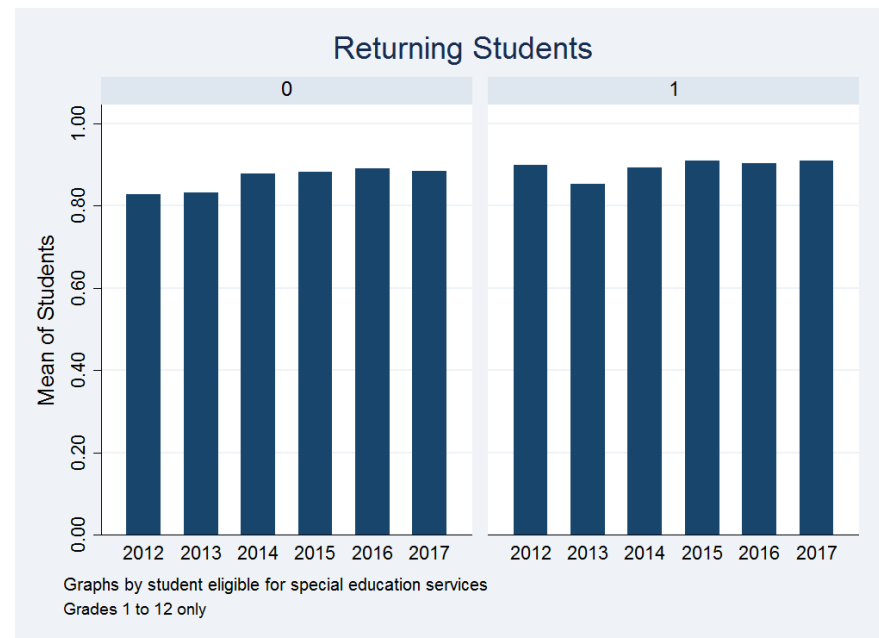


- *The district has experienced rapid growth in recent years.*
- Students who enroll tend to stay, with no significant differences between students with and without disabilities.

Overall student enrollment by year



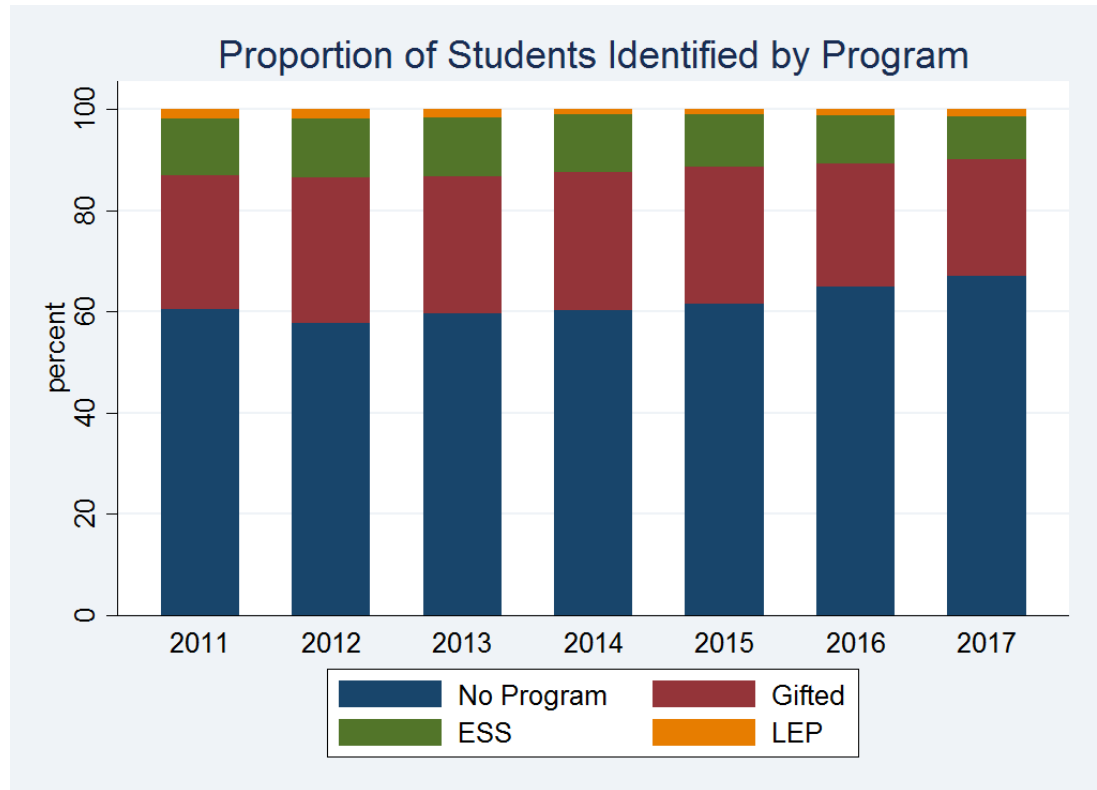
Returning students by year



Consider: Enrollment



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



Theme #3

Resource Utilization



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

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

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

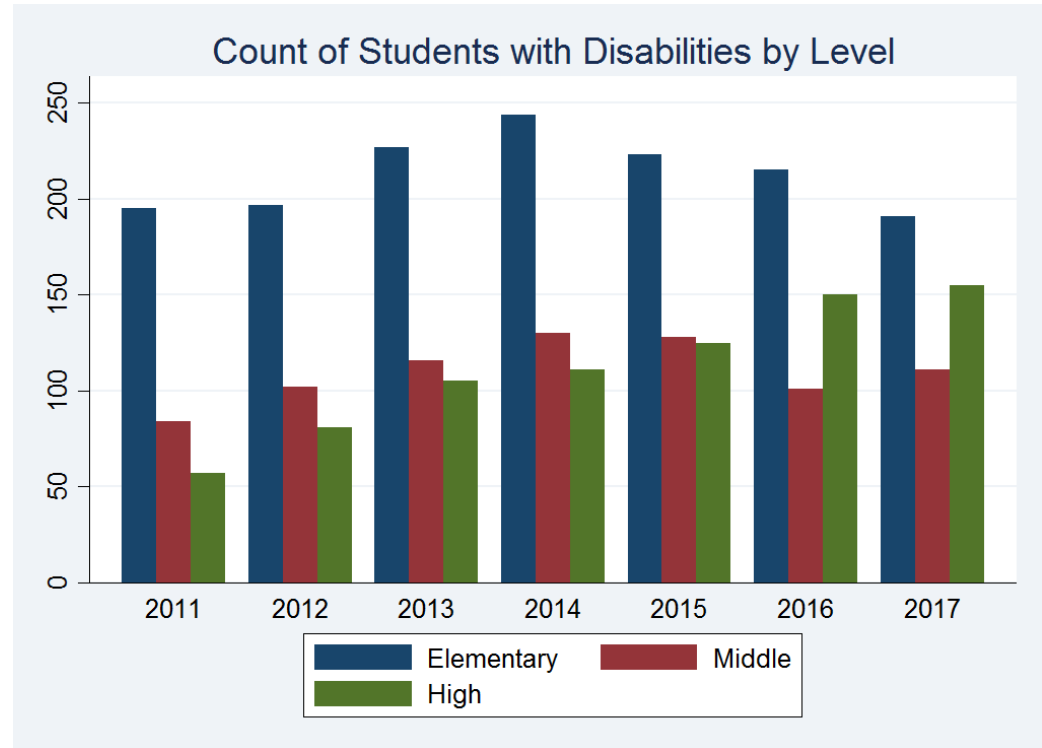
Tension: “...we do approve things that are supported by data and in the child’s IEP...Just because we approve, it doesn’t mean that everyone gets the same thing...our job is to ensure that we are delivering *equitable and compliant practices* based on students’ needs.”

Consider:

Enrollment by grade



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

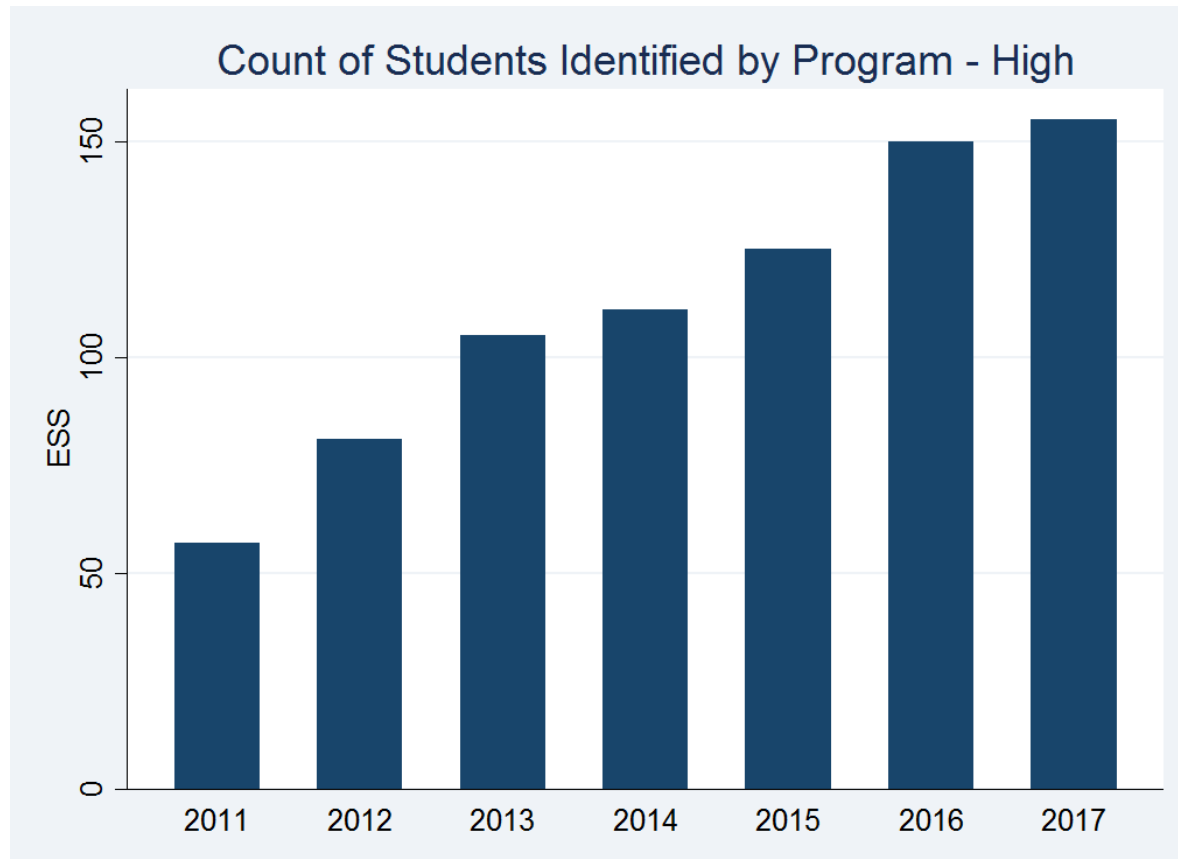


Consider:

Enrollment by grade



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

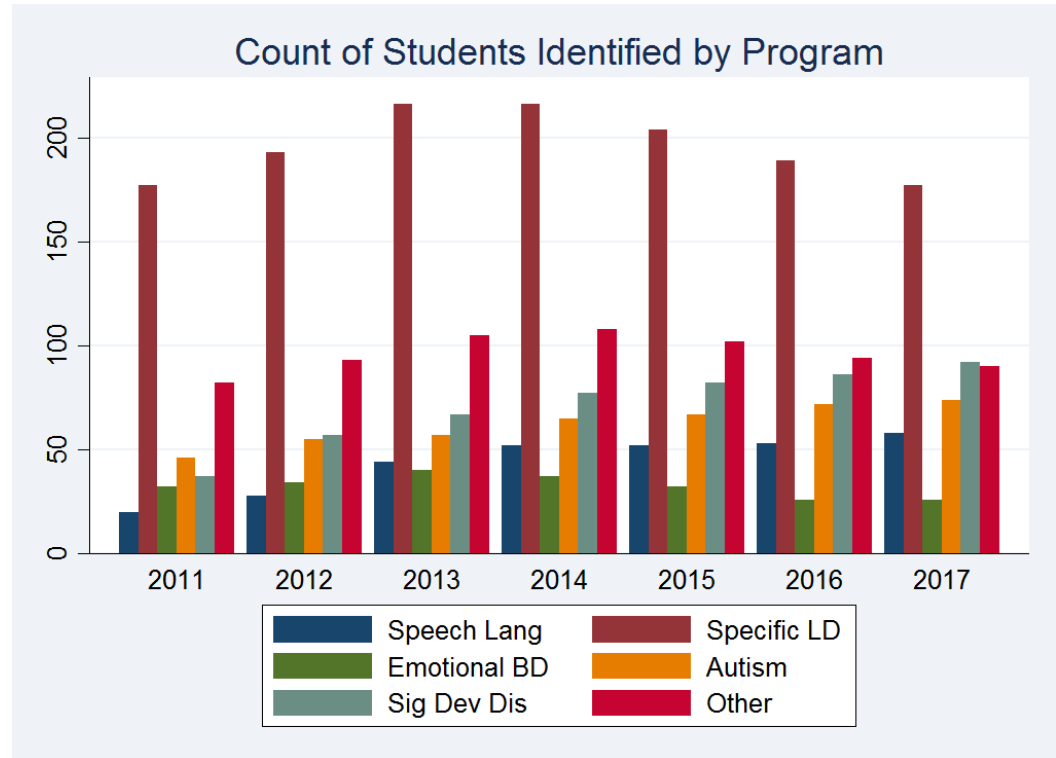


Consider:

Enrollment by disability



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



Consider:

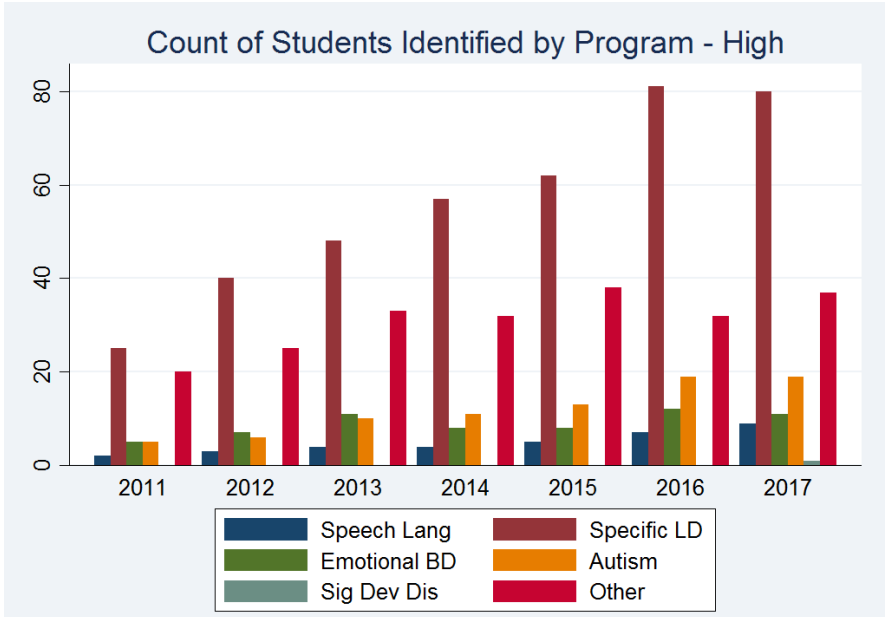
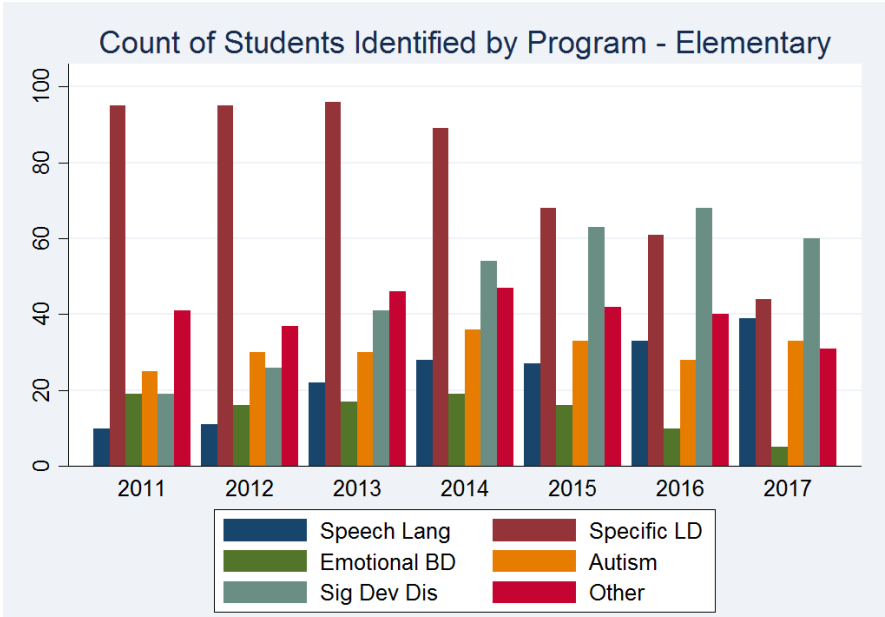
Enrollment by disability & grade



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

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

In high school, SLD and Autism are increasing.



Consider

Staff Professional Development



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

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

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

Theme #4

Data-Driven Decision Making



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

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

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

Consider

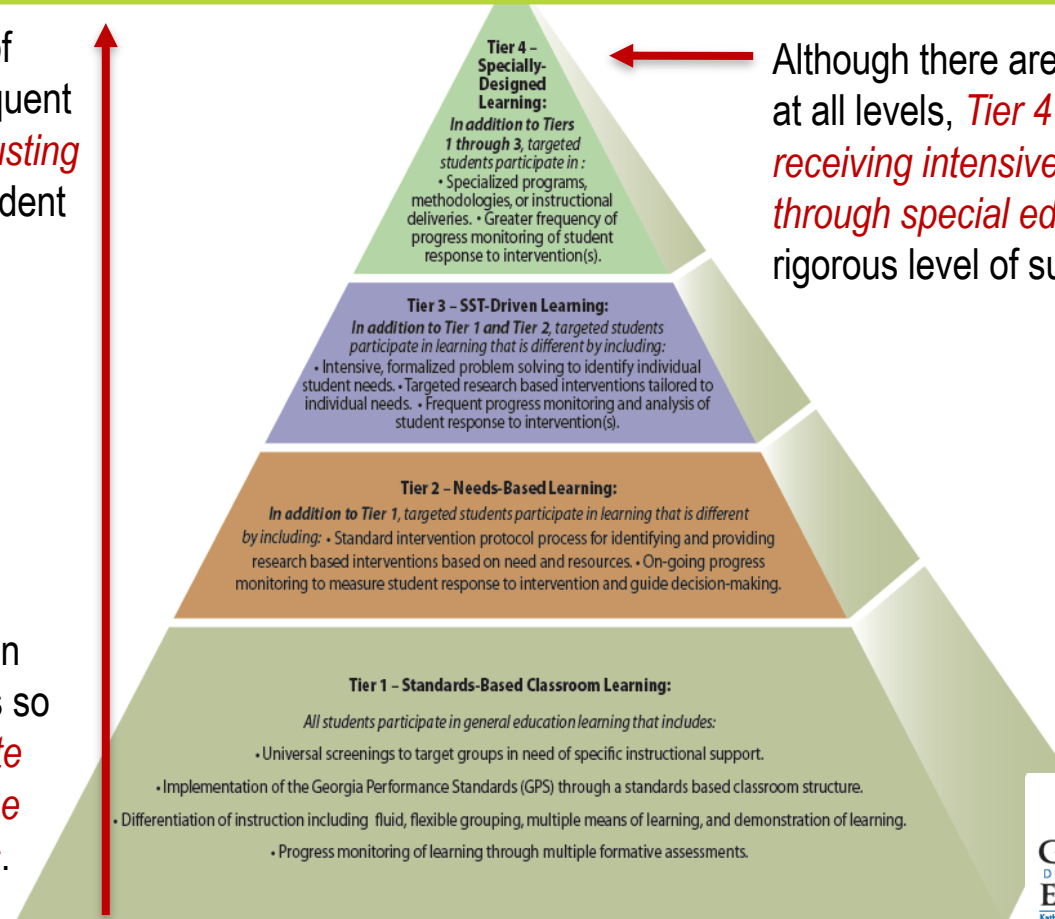
Response to Intervention (RTI)



Response to Intervention: The Georgia Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions

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

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



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

Theme #5

Accountability & Transparency



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

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

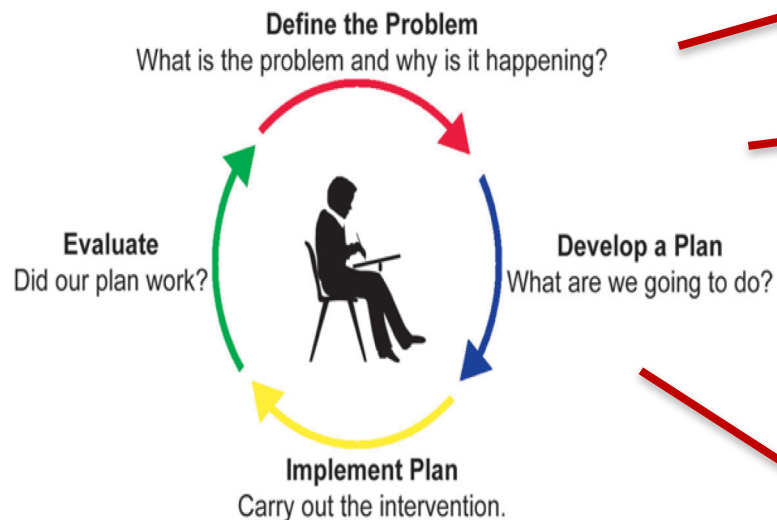
Challenges: “That’s the inconsistency piece....*it just depends on who I am talking to which year, which teacher, and which administrator.*”
(regarding accommodations and services)

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

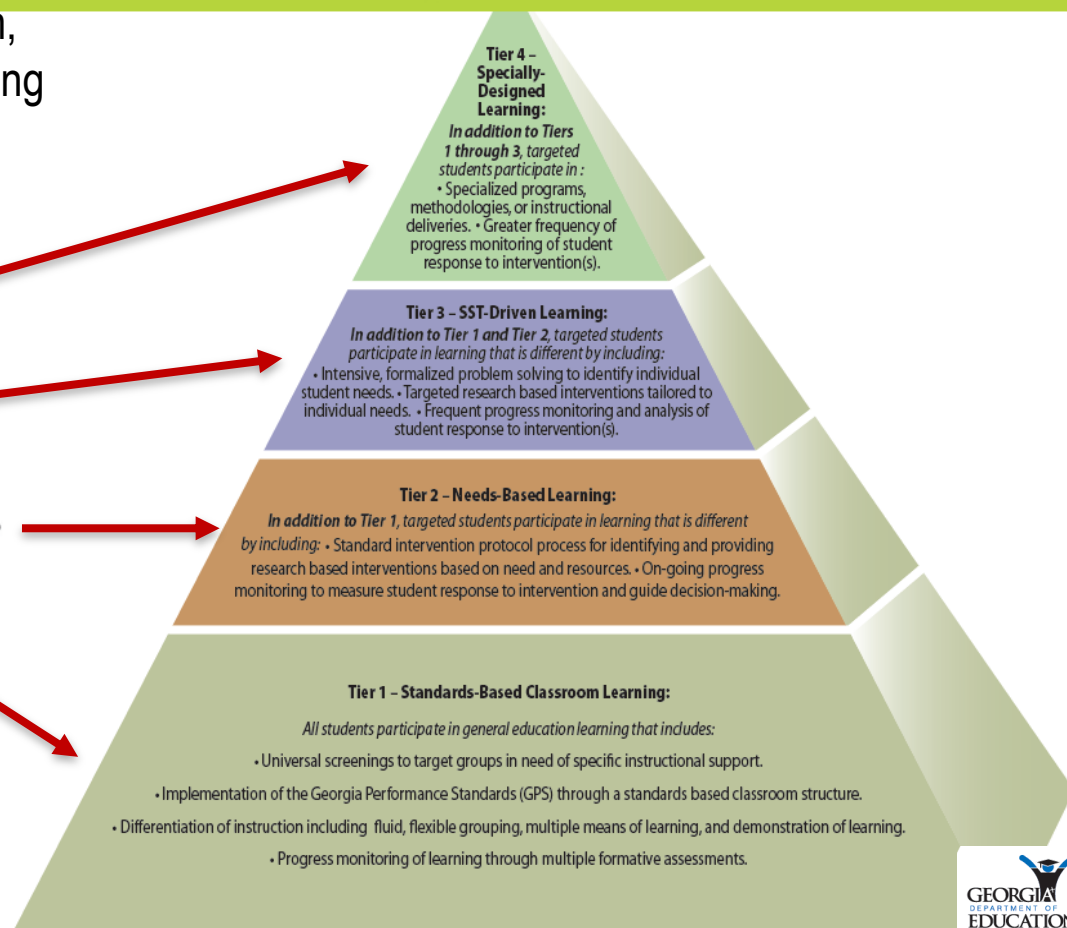
Consider Making RTI Work



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



Response to Intervention: The Georgia Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions



Theme #6

Feedback Loops



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

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

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

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

Theme #7

Communal Networks



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

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

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

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

The Bottom line: *Strengths*



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

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

The Bottom line: *Challenges*



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

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

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

Discussion & Recommendations



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

Discussion & Recommendations



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

Thank you for your partnership!