

Exceptional Children Program Review – Orange County Schools
September 15-17, 2010

Executive Summary

The Exceptional Children Division of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction conducted a program review of the Orange County Schools' Exceptional Children Program. Orange County Schools requested the review to cover the following topics: caseloads/class sizes; paperwork procedures; staffing/licensure; service delivery models/instructional methods; and programs for students with autism. The review team was comprised of staff within the Exceptional Children Division, representing a wide variety of specialties and backgrounds. The review included school visits, classroom observations, paperwork reviews, staff interviews/discussions, and a parent forum. Commendations include: adequate professional staff; strong elementary and middle school programs; good access to professional development and instructional materials, and; good development of collaborative initiatives. Specific concerns will be shared separately with Orange County Schools leadership. Recommendations include: develop systems for writing and implementing stronger Individualized Education Programs (IEPs); examine and refine special education programs in the high schools; develop better communication amongst all stakeholders; improve professional development plans as noted, and; help teachers develop a better understanding of evidence-based strategies for students with autism, with a primary focus on enhancing the communication/language abilities of each individual student.

Introduction

Representatives of Orange County Schools' leadership team contacted Mary Watson, Director of the Exceptional Children Division, to request a program review of Orange County Schools' Exceptional Children Program. The Exceptional Children Division offers this as a service to local education agencies (LEAs) in addition to its more regular monitoring and support activities. Though program review requests by LEAs are fairly infrequent, they can provide valuable qualitative information to use for strategic planning and to respond to emerging trends and concerns. While the scope of these reviews can be broad, they are driven by particular concerns/areas expressed in the initial request. Typically, program reviews consist of consultants and other Division staff: visiting and observing classrooms; reviewing records, and; interviewing teachers, staff and other stakeholders. All of this is true of the Orange County Schools review.

Lead contact persons of both parties were identified for the program review. Dr. Denise Morton, Assistant Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer, was the primary contact for Orange County Schools. Tom Winton, Section Chief for the Instructional Support & Related Services Section, was the primary contact for the Exceptional Children Division.

Overview of Visit

Official correspondence was exchanged between Orange County Schools and the Exceptional Children Division to express and confirm acceptance of the request and to clarify the areas and topics to be reviewed. It was decided that the review would be conducted September 15-17, 2010. Dr. Morton and Mr. Winton corresponded on several occasions prior to the visit to discuss these areas and topics. An in-person meeting was held on September 3 to plan specific activities and identify preliminary information for Orange County Schools to provide. This meeting also was attended by other Orange County Schools representatives, including Milinda Martina, Exceptional Children Director, Patti Sproule, Program Specialist, and Sheila McDonald, Program Specialist.

The visit began at 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday, September 15, at Orange High School with a welcoming meeting with Orange County Schools leadership and the Orange County Board of Education. Mr. Patrick Rhodes, Superintendent, warmly welcomed the review team. The review team separated into four smaller teams to visit schools through the county. Visits included classroom observations, records reviews, and interviews with various Exceptional Children personnel at the schools. The DPI School Psychology Consultant conducted a phone interview with the Lead School Psychologist for Orange County Schools. Finally, in the late afternoon, the team reconvened at Cedar Ridge High School and met with the Orange County Exceptional Children Leadership Team, a group of special education staff representatives from each school, which functions as an advisory group to Ms. Martina.

On Thursday, September 16, the review team visited more schools with similar activities. In the afternoon, the team convened at the Orange County Board of Education Building to debrief. A subcommittee interviewed Marcie Holland, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources. In the evening, a parent forum was held at the Board building. Approximately 20 parents met with review team personnel; no Orange County Schools personnel were present for the parent forum.

On Friday, September 17, the review team visited more schools throughout the morning. Two team members interviewed Ms. Martina. The team convened in the Board Room to debrief and prepare for the exit discussion. In the early afternoon, the entire review team met with Orange County Schools leadership, including Mr. Rhodes, to discuss preliminary results, sharing initial commendations, observations and recommendations. Plans were announced to have a final report delivered to the school system in approximately six weeks.

School Visits

Four teams of Exceptional Children Division staff visited schools throughout Orange County. Nearly every school was visited, including the alternative school (Partnership Academy) and the new day-treatment program Triumph Academy. All the schools were quite welcoming of the teams and gave team members excellent access to classrooms, files and staff. Teams observed primarily in special education classrooms

with some visits in co-taught or team-taught classrooms, that is, regular classrooms with both a regular education and special education teacher to promote inclusion of students with disabilities. The teams also accessed and reviewed records, including IEPs, evaluations and other pertinent documentation. Finally, the teams conducted interviews with special education teachers, general education teachers and related service personnel to learn how special education services are determined and delivered throughout the school system. The visits helped give the team an adequate representation of programs and services for students with disabilities in Orange County Schools.

Additional Interviews/Forums

The review team conducted interviews with various stakeholders. On the afternoon of Wednesday, September 17, a meeting was held with the Exceptional Children Leadership Team, which is a group of exceptional children teachers, related service personnel and others who work in various schools and act as an advisory group to Ms. Martina. The meeting was very informative with insights into the LEA's approach to various items, such as professional development, least restrictive environment determination, and programs for students with autism. The interview with Marcie Holland offered updates on efforts to address issues on the 'highly qualified' status of teachers. The interview with Ms. Martina offered insights into the perspective of the Exceptional Children Director and her efforts to build capacity and promote achievement in all schools throughout the LEA. Finally, the parent forum gave the review team numerous perspectives on both commendations and concerns about the Exceptional Children Program in Orange County Schools. This meeting was attended mostly by parents identified/invited by Orange County Schools and included representation from throughout the county. Though not everyone invited attended the meeting and not every disability area was represented (e.g., no parents of students with serious emotional disabilities were present), adequate perspectives were offered to give the review team information to consider. Predominant concerns focused on school system/home communication and programming for students with autism.

Feedback

Each of the five areas of study is listed with relevant commendations and recommendations; additional feedback is also included. Specific concerns will be shared separately with Orange County Schools leadership. While all of this is fairly reflective of the topics presented during the exit discussion on September 17, Exceptional Children Division staff are available to discuss these in greater depth should the need arise. As these are considered, know that the Exceptional Children Division extends an overall commendation to Orange County Schools for its hospitality and welcoming of the team at all schools and offices. This school system is to be commended for its openness in a review of its programs for students with disabilities.

AREA I: Caseloads/Class Sizes

Commendations

- There appeared to be excellent caseload and class sizes at elementary and middle schools.
- The caseloads for physical therapists are acceptable, but it would be wise to plan for a part-time position in the near future.
- The caseloads for occupational therapy (OT) are stabilizing after hiring additional staff. NOTE: The DPI OT Consultant conducted a work session with Orange County Schools OT staff on October 13, 2010, to analyze workload and ensure efficient coverage of all sites.
- Caseloads and assignments for school psychologists appear to be appropriate and well thought out.

Recommendations

- Continually monitor low-incidence populations/classrooms for sufficient staffing.
- Consider co-teaching and team-teaching models for those whose licenses do not reflect certification in the content area (e.g., some Occupational Course of Study courses).
- Schedule time for planning and collaboration between general education and special education teachers.
- Review various issues with staff, especially new staff, such as: the EC Facilitator's role; teachers' expectations and their roles; classroom behavior management; and teacher scheduling practices.
- Consider the need to designate a Lead Speech-Language Pathologist and re-establish monthly speech meetings to provide discipline-specific staff development.

AREA II: Paperwork Procedures

Commendations

- In some Individualized Education programs (IEPs), excellent Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance (PLAAFPs), goals and objectives were written.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the maintenance of confidential file adhere to the requirements of Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA).
- Ensure that teachers and IEP Teams are informed of the requirement to include competency goals on the IEPs for students who are assessed using the modified achievement standards (i.e., NCEXTEND2).
- Develop and enforce guidelines and procedures for consistency in goals, PLAAFPs, and all policies related to IEPs and their handling.
- Provide staff development to ensure understanding of the above, possibly to include self-audit procedures/checklists.
- Monitor high school records and promote development of stronger and more individualized PLAAFPs and IEPs.
- Conduct ongoing monitoring of records (consult with your DPI monitoring consultant).

AREA III: Staffing/Licensure

Commendations

- Related service providers were appreciated and their services were valued.
- There appears to be excellent participation in IEP meetings (e.g., appropriate personnel attend and remain throughout IEP development).

Recommendations

- Establish who is licensed and appropriately assigned related to “highly qualified” (HQ) issues; determine gaps in services being provided; and make plans for addressing the continuum of services offered and what existing staff can do to work together to offer them.
- Determine if existing staff will take the Praxis exams or coursework to add certification to become HQ.
- Establish who delivers information related to licensure.
- Develop an orientation process for new teachers coming in after the year begins.
- Change the way contracted providers are assigned workloads and contracted services; ensure these providers have background checks conducted on them.
- Consider contracting for related services directly rather than having contractors serve and bill for only Medicaid eligible students. This contracting method has potential for conflict of interest concerns and two levels of service driven by Medicaid eligibility rather than least restrictive environment.

AREA IV: Service Delivery Models/Instructional Methods

Commendations

- Some classes demonstrated very obvious implementation of IEPs.
- Though many good practices were observed, these programs were especially noted:
 - Efland Cheeks Elementary provided an excellent climate for learning, both academically and behaviorally, even though it was designated as a 'low performing' school.
 - Cameron Park Elementary demonstrated excellent examples of inclusion in mathematics instruction.
 - Gravelly Hill Middle appeared to have excellent administrator support of its Exceptional Children program.
 - C.W. Stanford Middle had a positive school environment and classroom climate; a very good inclusion model (the regular education and special education teachers worked well together); and a very organized and supportive Assistant Principal.
- Resource programs across elementary programs appeared to be strong.
- Two low-incidence classrooms observed in elementary schools were engaged in excellent, differentiated instruction with consistent behavioral expectations for all students; very strong programs.
- The Whole-to-Part initiative is being implemented system-wide (initiated by EC Director).
- The Day Treatment Program is demonstrating a good concept and interagency collaboration.
- Orange Enterprises is providing transition activities/training.
- There has been marked improvement at Partnership Academy; it appears that all students attend that school by choice.

Recommendations

- Immediately address ADA-compliance concerns at Orange High School.
- Develop better systems for writing and implementing quality IEPs, utilizing current staff.
- Improve use of data to drive decision-making for individual students.
- Evaluate special education services in high school. Use Academic Strategies classes for true instruction (e.g., reading strategies, test-taking skills, social skills, etc.) rather than just study halls.
- Assign classrooms that are appropriately sized and away from unnecessary distractions.
- Ensure that teachers of core content to students with disabilities are "highly qualified".
- Provide training and supports to teachers on the implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Support and on classroom management strategies.
- Ensure that, during pull-out sessions, all teachers have specific plans to address students' unique need and skill deficits.

- Improve attention to Least Restrictive Environment issues in serving speech-language students.
- Consider conducting a district-wide analysis of scientifically based reading researched materials. Utilize the list of materials to design a pyramid of intervention (e.g., core instruction, supplemental materials, strategic intervention, and intensive intervention).
- Provide professional development in Reading and Math Foundations and on implementation of research-based instructional programs with fidelity.
- Develop a walk-through tool to be used by administrators for evaluating quality co-teaching.

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AREA V: Programs for Students with Autism

Commendations

- Teachers were very complimentary of the Autism Support Team; this team helped two students move from separate classroom to regular classroom.
- Staff were knowledgeable about some specific interventions and strategies.
- All staff were very enthusiastic.

Recommendations

- Develop and implement a dedicated communication system (low and/or high tech) for each student who is non-verbal and for some students who are partially verbal.
- Help teachers understand the Extended Content Standards and how they connect to the development of a curriculum and lesson plans. Decide on a preschool curriculum to guide instruction.
- Help teachers develop an understanding of evidence-based practices (e.g., not just TEACCH, ABA, etc.); use data to drive decisions for each individual student.
- Provide support to underserved classrooms as staffing issues are being resolved.

Other Feedback

Commendations

- Multiple professional development offerings are being made; staff generally are allowed to go to trainings they request.
- Some excellent professional development on reading is available and provided.
- The development of the EC Leadership Team is helpful.
- Many teachers and some parents expressed satisfaction with communication with schools, administrators and the central office.

Recommendations

- Develop a more proactive vision for a system-wide professional development strategic plan, including follow-up.
- Make monthly meetings of the EC Leadership Team more targeted toward the vision of the group.
- Have a system-wide approach to training/fidelity for differentiated instruction and/or program implementation.
- Provide information to parents related to IEP Team decision-making for Extended School Year services.
- Develop better communication systems amongst all stakeholders. For example: consider development and use of a Parent Advisory Council; annually provide an EC update to the Orange County Board of Education; ensure there is a feedback loop among EC teachers, general educators and principals; and participate in DPI Exceptional Children Division regional ~~meetings, directors' institutes and summer institutes.~~