

Davis Joint Unified School District Special Education Review

Executive Summary Report

**Dona Meinders, Tori Ballew, Dustin
Bindreiff, Ann Hern, and Tina Tranzor**

September 3, 2022

© 2021 WestEd. All rights reserved.

Suggested citation: Meinders, D., Bindreiff, D., Ballew, V., Hern, A., & Tranzor, T. (2022). *Davis Joint Unified School District Special Education Review*. WestEd.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit agency that conducts and applies research, develops evidence-based solutions, and provides services and resources in the realms of education, human development, and related fields, with the end goal of improving outcomes and ensuring equity for individuals from infancy through adulthood. For more information, visit [WestEd.org](https://www.wested.org). For regular updates on research, free resources, solutions, and job postings from WestEd, subscribe to the E-Bulletin, our semimonthly e-newsletter, at [WestEd.org/subscribe](https://www.wested.org/subscribe).

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Methodology	7
Major Discoveries	9
What We Found: Five Themes	12
Recommendation Highlights	12
Theme 2: STRUCTURES - <i>Student Enrollment and Comparison Analysis</i>	13
Theme 3: PROCESS - <i>Implementing Policy, Procedures, and Processes</i>	14
Theme 4: INSTRUCTION - <i>Increasing Access and Achievement</i>	15
Theme 5: CULTURE - <i>Improving Equity, Culture, and Climate</i>	15

Executive Summary

Special education programs exist within a larger educational system and are designed to serve the needs of students who require additional support to meet the outcomes identified by the teachers, administrators, parents, students, and other team members. Well-designed special education programs are collegial and inclusive and are part of a continuum of services and supports designed to meet the diverse needs of students with individualized education programs (IEPs) in their Least Restrictive Environment. A well-implemented special education system is both effective and efficient in the delivery of special education services that meet the progressive academic and functional goals of the students in the district.

Evaluation Notes

Why: This evaluation examined the efficiency and effectiveness of the Davis Joint Unified School District's special education program.

How: Our analyses are based on interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, and document reviews.

Who: Special and general education teachers, psychologists, special education paraeducators, and parents participated in this study.

When: The majority of the review took place from January 2022 to August 2022.

Introduction

Davis Joint Unified School District (DJUSD) is a pre-K–12 public school district that covers the southeastern section of Yolo County and a small part of Solano County. DJUSD provides a variety of educational programs to approximately 8,500 students in grades TK-12, at over 16 school sites and campuses. The schools include a diverse mix of options including: six neighborhood elementary schools and four choice elementary programs; three neighborhood junior high schools and one charter junior high; one comprehensive senior high, a continuation high school and a charter high school; as well as a K-12 school for independent study, a preschool program and an adult school.

DJUSD partnered with WestEd to examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the district's special education programs and services. The district's goal for this study is to understand the current level of success of the district's special education program and to identify overall programmatic and

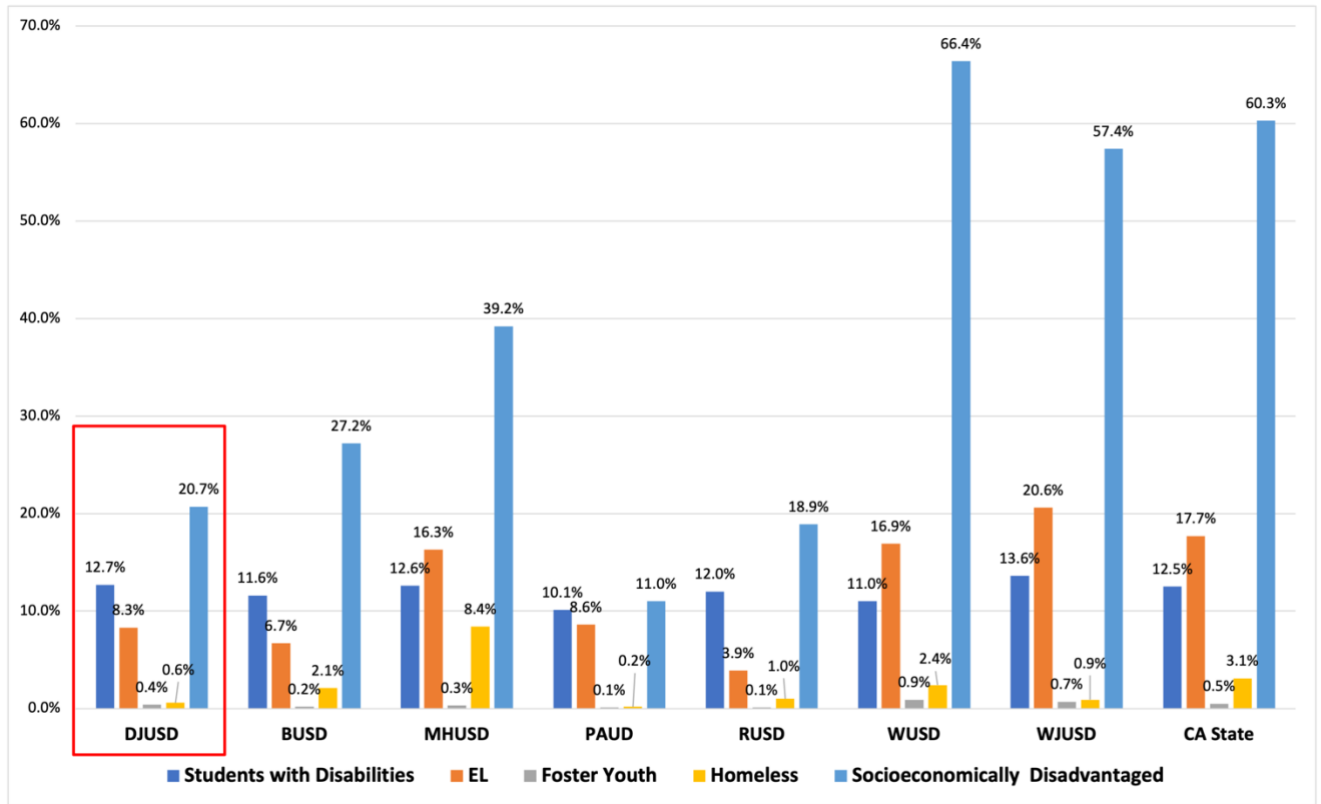
organizational improvements for increasing progress for students with disabilities efficiently and effectively. WestEd's approach to reviewing the DJUSD special education program is drawn from research on systems thinking, organizational development, leadership and instructional practices, and school system structures designed to support all learners.

This report aims to provide DJUSD with an objective analysis and a set of recommendations that can be used to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of its special education program while also honoring the strengths of the district's current structure and approach. The recommendations are intended to be used as a catalyst for dialogue and collaboration within the district as a means of charting a course for effective, efficient, and inclusive programs and services for all students with disabilities.

The WestEd team reviewed multiple data sources across DJUSD to provide an overall context for the analysis and an understanding of the workings of the district. Data was collected and analyzed from stakeholder focus groups, surveys, interviews, school observations, and reviews of IEPs. DJUSD also provided data, policy and procedural documents, and district-level plans and initiatives, all of which were reviewed for consistent application across the district.

In addition, WestEd worked with DJUSD to choose peer districts with similar demographics in order to compare statewide and regional data, highlight any structures or processes used by the districts that may positively impact their results with students with disabilities, and inform DJUSD's structures and processes. Six peer districts were selected: Berkeley Unified (BUSD), Morgan Hill Unified (MHUSD), Palo Alto Unified (PAUSD), Rocklin Unified (RUSD), Washington Unified (WUSD), and Woodland Joint Unified (WJUSD). Four of the peer districts were selected due to similar demographics to DJUSD (BUSD, MHUSD, PAUSD, and RUSD) and two of the peer districts (WUSD and WJUSD) were selected as neighboring districts to DJUSD. These peer districts are discussed in detail in Theme 1 and are used throughout the report as examples of how students with disabilities are performing in similar districts. Figure 1 highlights the demographics of the district and DJUSD.

Figure 1. Demographics of Peer Districts FY 2021



Source: Source: California Department of Education Dashboard 2021: <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/>

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years has caused unprecedented disruption and changes in our education system across the county. The sudden shift to online instruction, ever changing and evolving mandates, staffing shortages, and changes in student enrollment, to name a few, have caused an interruption in our educational system and has impacted our traditional processes and cycles. These issues will be noted where appropriate in this report, but the scope of the report will examine the system prior to the pandemic, as well, in order to provide an overall view of where the system was heading and where it needs to evolve to address the current situation.

It is important to note that there are many assets and positive structures within DJUSD that the district is responsible for creating, implementing, and maintaining; and we witnessed these assets and structures as evidenced in our analysis. Overall, we observed that DJUSD's special education program is competently run by staff dedicated to ensuring the program is compliant, cost-conscious, and of high quality. The style and structure used to manage the special education program has its strengths and areas in need of improvement. So, although we consider the strengths of the program to be considerable and deserving of commendation, the purpose of this study is to offer recommendations for improvement. Hence, this report places more focus on identified gaps, since they are the basis for

improvement. **The fact that more words and space are dedicated to areas for improvement should not be taken as a sign that they outweigh DJUSD's strengths.**

Methodology

Online Surveys for Staff, Administration, and Parents

Online surveys were created and implemented to provide school staff, school administration, and parents an opportunity to contribute their perspectives on relevant areas of inquiry. Surveyed groups included school administrators, special education area managers, special education teachers, special education providers of related services (e.g., speech-language pathologists, psychologists), general education teachers, paraeducators, and parents/family members. There were three different surveys: one for staff working on a school site, one for central office administrators at the district level, and one for parents of students receiving special education services. The number of respondents for each of the surveys included:

- School site staff – 351
- Parents of students receiving special education services – 215
- Central Office administrators - 6

Extant Data

The following data was collected from data provided by DJUSD and from the websites of the California Department of Education (CDE), and peer districts:

- Student demographic, enrollment, attendance, and achievement data
- Educational environments of students with disabilities (Least Restrictive Environment settings) and the percentage of time students with IEPs have access to general education settings
- Exiting data (rates of graduation and postsecondary outcomes)
- Results of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) and the California Alternate Assessment (CAA) in the areas of English language arts (ELA) and mathematics
- Special education student information and forms accessed through the district's online Individualized Education Program (IEP) system
- Historical data in the form of prior external evaluations and reviews of the district
- District plans related to instructional programming, such as a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), special education services, and key initiatives
- State monitoring reports and supporting documentation
- Whenever possible, state, and local data from similar school districts in California. These school districts were identified by DJUSD as appropriate to use for comparison

Individualized Education Program Documentation

As part of the review, 22 IEPs for Davis Joint Unified School District (DJUSD) were reviewed to assess whether they were reasonably calculated to provide educational benefit. This was defined in 1982

when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled, in *Board of Education v. Rowley*, that an IEP must be reasonably calculated to enable a child with disabilities to receive educational benefit. A free appropriate public education (FAPE) and the LRE became the guiding standard to ensure that children are afforded opportunities to benefit from education provided to them. In 2016, the Supreme Court expanded this standard and rules, in *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, that an IEP must be calculated to enable a child to make meaningful progress and that the IEP must require meaningful educational benefit. For an IEP to meet the standard of meaningful educational benefit, it must be a meaningful cohesive document that is utilized as an instructional framework and a guide for ensuring that the child is benefiting from the education provided.

The educational benefit review process is different from a compliance review. A compliance review monitors for the inclusion of components of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the IEP; an educational benefit review looks for interconnectedness of the components. The main components to determine educational benefit were:

- Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance, to include the impact of the disability on the ability to access the general curriculum
- Measurable Goals
- Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) or Specialized Academic Instruction (SAI), as it is more frequently referred to in California, which defines how the student's specific unique needs resulting from the disability will be met
- Least Restrictive Environment
- Description of any Potential Harmful Effects

Small Group and Individual Interviews and Focus Groups

From February through June of 2022, WestEd staff used the Zoom platform to conduct a total of 15 small group interviews, 14 individual interviews, and 32 focus group interviews hearing from approximately 325 individuals from all stakeholder groups across special education, general education, site administrators, district administrators, and parent/family members.

Data Analysis

The qualitative and quantitative analyses were checked using standard procedures such as cross-method and cross-information triangulation of discoveries, negative case analyses (i.e., explicit search and explanation of discrepant information), the careful examination of records, and checking with

select key partners to ensure the veracity of conclusions. A theming process was used to analyze the qualitative focus group data:

- Thematic content analysis procedures were used to identify significant statements (those that contributed to answering evaluation questions).
- Significant statements were tagged with the main point or meaning.
- Similar tags were grouped, creating codes.
- Codes were grouped by similar themes, which were then analyzed to inform the main discoveries for consideration.

Quantitative analyses were conducted on survey results and secondary data sources, such as student outcome data from CDE's website on accountability. Comparison groups and multiple reviews by WestEd staff were used to check the accuracy and reasonableness of the quantitative analysis.

For both qualitative and quantitative analysis, WestEd collaborated with district leaders to identify and talk through the meanings of the discoveries and to merge the quantitative and qualitative data to tell the full story of the evaluation.

The discoveries from the data collection process have been analyzed and cross-referenced to identify five key themes that arose across all the areas we explored. These key themes are summarized next, in the section, What We Found: Five Themes, and followed by a synopsis of the recommendations suggested under each theme.

The body of the report describes each theme in detail. The description of each theme includes four sections:

- Strengths: Existing areas within the District from which to build
- Key Discoveries: Presents key data and discoveries under the theme.
- In Their Own Words: Features quotes that substantiate the discoveries. These quotes are taken from the interviews, focus groups, and surveys of administration, staff, and parents.
- Why It Matters: Describes why the theme and recommendations are important considerations for improving outcomes for students with disabilities as well as all students.
- Recommendations: Describes each recommendation in detail.

Major Discoveries

Changes in the DJUSD enrollment rate for students with disabilities has increased while the total student enrollment has had an overall cumulative decrease. Specifically, from FY 2018 through FY 2021 the district's total enrollment **decreased** by 4.6% and the enrollment for students with disabilities **increased** significantly higher at 14.9%. (Figure 2).

DJUSD's students with disabilities as a percentage of the total enrollment compared with the peer districts and the State of CA indicates that:

- All of the districts and the state overall have experienced increases in their students with disabilities over the five year period.
- DJUSD's rate of increase in the percentage of students with disabilities is the highest of the peer districts and the state average.
- DJUSD has the second highest percent of students with disabilities of the peer districts and is above the state average.
- These two data points seem to indicate a lack of other supports and services available to students as they begin to struggle and that the increase in special education placements over the last two years indicates that the additional supports and/or interventions were not sufficient to support the needs of the students who were struggling in general education so special education placement was viewed as the only way that additional support could be accessed.

These two data points are important to monitor over the years to ensure that the District has preventative interventions and supports in place in general education to assist students who may need this assistance to experience advancement on state standards and their overall educational program. In addition to these strategies, DJUSD should also review its special education referral practices to include and align with interventions, strategies, and assessments used in general education before a student is referred for special education. If pre-referral interventions and strategies are not utilized, then students may continue to experience a lack of an appropriate level of growth and success within the general education class causing the need for additional supports from special education which are often limited or only available in more restrictive programs. Preventative, early interventions and supports under a systemic framework such as a Multi-Tiered System of Supports, are often not in place in districts where there are high percentages of students with disabilities.

Overall, WestEd's data analysis shows that while there are many parts of the DJUSD program which are successful, there is also a need for a systematic plan to develop a coherent organizational structure, data collection, and fiscal transparency. The discoveries in this report show that the district should consider staff and parent concerns regarding the structure of the district and where to access support. Additionally, the data reflects the need to maintain compliant IEPs and ensure that they are also written to be educationally beneficial for their students. We also found that the achievement gap between the students with disabilities and the students without disabilities for English Language Arts (ELA) averaged 47% points below the students without disabilities and was 45% points below in mathematics. This indicates that the students with disabilities are not succeeding at the same rate as their peers without disabilities.

The data collected also shows a need for a common definition and understanding of what inclusion means or should mean in DJUSD. There is a clear belief and respect for the value of inclusion and the staff and parents in the district take great pride in their reputation as a model inclusion district. We also found that while there is a deep belief in the value of inclusive education, there is also often a belief that the students with IEPs are visitors to the general education class and the overall

responsibility for the accommodations and support that are needed to address the student's needs should come solely from special education staff.

Finally, DJUSD would benefit from more professional development around the areas of Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Universal Design for Learning, instruction of dually identified multilingual learners, co-teaching model of instruction, and IDEA compliance for administrators. Working with staff to understand how these areas align with the mission, vision, values, and goals of the district and of the special education department would help with the clarity and coherence within the system. These areas of need are supported by the discoveries in this report as well as research on student achievement.

What We Found: Five Themes



THEME 1: VISION *Alignment and System Of Support*

Systems

There is a need for an aligned system-wide, collaborative, and integrated instructional model of a tiered system of support that reflects a proactive shared responsibility for learning and intervention for all students by special education and general education staff, families, and community partners.



THEME 2: STRUCTURES *Student Enrollment And Comparison Analysis*

The District's growth in the student with disabilities (SWD) population has outpaced the growth for the enrollment of total students and the challenges that emerged due to the pandemic have impacted program size and structure.



THEME 3: PROCESS *Policy, Procedures, and Communication*

DJUSD's special education department has developed structures and written policies and procedures but is lacking clear processes for consistently updating, communicating, implementing, and monitoring use of these.



Theme 4: INSTRUCTION *Increasing Access and Achievement*

DJUSD has the opportunity to make systemic changes to allow students with disabilities improved access to inclusive environments in order to positively impact academic and social achievement by recognizing that students with disabilities have a place in the general education classroom and by aligning the supports and services and building staff capacity to provide access and improved progress in the general environment and curriculum.



Theme 5: CULTURE *Improving Equity, Climate, and Capacity*

There is a continued need to provide school staff and administrators with collaborative, high-quality, system wide professional development focused on optimizing the access and engagement that students with disabilities have to general education, through differentiating and accommodating instruction, and improving equity, behavioral and social-emotional systematic instruction, and intervention.

Recommendation Highlights

The following are summaries of the recommendations by theme, however, the themes and recommendations are interwoven across the system and as such, should be approached as part of a systematic plan for overall systemic improvements aligned with the District's mission, vision, values, and goals. To develop a long-term systemic plan for aligning and integrating the themes and processes, it

is recommended that the District utilizes the Multi-Tiered System of Supports teaming structures described under Theme 1 to align and prioritize the development of the overall district plan.

Theme 1: VISION: Improving Systems Alignment and System of Support

As the DJUSD's vision and mission are currently being revisited and revised to reflect and reinforce the focus on access and inclusion of all learners, there will be a need to reflect and redesign the overall structures and systems within the District to implement this new vision. This new vision and mission will create the need for an aligned system-wide, collaborative, and integrated instructional model of tiered systems of support that reflects a shared responsibility of learning and intervention for all students by special education and general education staff, families, and community partners. As the DJUSD's has already begun to implement their version of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework it will be important to re-engage and redesign their system and processes to align with the vision and mission.

As the DJUSD's Multi-Tiered System of Supports is being developed and implemented systematically across the district, it will be important to consider the following:

- Re-engage in design and implementation of Multi-Tiered System of Supports by creating and assigning working teams to identify and clearly define each tier of the system.
 - This should include entry and exit criteria, specific interventions to be used within each tier, and data monitoring processes to ensure consistency of support across the district.
 - Within these tier definitions, special considerations should be made related to the inclusivity and accessibility of Tier 1 instruction.
 - Staff from special education should be involved in all aspects of the design process.
- Building staff capacity for developing a robust and flexible Tier 1 which is grounded in the principles of Universal Design for Learning provides a solid foundation for the other tiers of support.
- Consider tasking the teams with defining and improving the pre-referral/referral process for special education in order to ensure alignment of this process under the Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework, and consider developing accompanying policies and procedures in concert with the recommendations of this report.
- Lastly, evaluate the extent to which general education and special education teachers have the structured time and clearly defined processes necessary to create truly robust and research based inclusive general education settings.

Theme 2: STRUCTURES - Student Enrollment and Comparison Analysis

DJUSD has experienced an increase in the enrollment of students with disabilities which is often representative of the need for additional interventions and supports within general education to assist students as they begin to struggle. This reinforces the need for implementation of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework to systematically develop and align resources to address the needs of all students. Focusing on designing the system to focus on the prevention of school failure by providing

interventions and supports within Tier 1 (general education classrooms) and designing more intensive supports as needed based on accurate data, will provide the just in time support that is often needed for students to experience success.

To design the system to address the needs of student population as it changes over time will require a system which includes:

- The use of systematic ongoing processes for data collection, analysis, and accessibility across all areas including:
 - Data on classroom and intervention tracking, demographic, and special education indicator data in order to guide decision-making for systemic improvements.
 - Development of a transparent data collection, analysis, and accessibility plan that has protocols in place for district financial and achievement data with ongoing review and analysis by leadership teams.

Theme 3: PROCESS - Implementing Policy, Procedures, and Processes

DJUSD's special education department has developed some structures and written policies and procedures but is lacking clear processes for consistently updating, training, implementing, and monitoring the use of these. DJUSD should consider creating a team of stakeholders to review and revise the district's handbook for special education procedures to align with the Multi-Tiered System of Supports framework and processes. This will include:

- The special education procedural handbook will provide clarity and guidance for administrators, teachers, paraeducators, parents, and students regarding the entire special education program.
- Begin by establishing a clear vision and mission for the special education programs, which is aligned with the District's vision and mission and the Multi-Tiered System of Supports processes along with the required special education processes will provide a common understanding of the purposes and goals of the special education program.
 - Doing this would address some of the concerns expressed by staff regarding a consistent direction and clarity of what is required to develop a program that is not only compliant but also produces educational benefit for the students with IEPs.
- Establish a communication plan for the department that emphasizes solid bi-directional feedback and input and disseminates information about the work of the department as it connects to DJUSD's mission, vision, values, and goals for students, staff, the community, and other stakeholders.
- Develop a process for reviewing and updating the procedural manual to update on an ongoing basis.

Theme 4: INSTRUCTION - Increasing Access and Achievement

While DJUSD's students with disabilities have experienced success due to the access to general education through the strong belief in full inclusion, the district has the opportunity to make systemic changes to improve the instructional design and support which will provide students with disabilities increased access to high-quality support in the inclusive environments. This will positively impact academic and social achievement by recognizing that students with IEPs have a place in the general education classroom first and foremost and by aligning the supports and services to provide improved access and engagement in the general environment and curriculum, students will experience greater success overall.

DJUSD should:

- Develop common values and goals for building equitable and inclusive access to schools by encouraging a discussion regarding the beliefs of teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders about building equitable and inclusive classrooms.
 - Use the discussions to explore attitudes, develop common norms for supporting students, implement a bias-free, positive program culture, identify what's working and not working in collaborative structures between special education and general education staff, and look at the district's actual data related to its inclusion rate.
 - The desired outcome of such discussions would be to establish collective commitments that would guide inclusive goals and successful results for students with IEPs across the district.
 - Then develop a common definition across DJUSD of what it means to be an inclusive district.
 - Build staff capacity to implement a more aligned and cohesive system focused on good first instruction in general education through the use of Universal Design for Learning Principles and specialized academic instruction in the inclusive classroom.
- Design staff support roles and services to accommodate the new structures.

Theme 5: CULTURE - Improving Equity, Culture, and Climate

Throughout this year of uncertainty, issues relating to the climate and culture of the district have increased dramatically. Staff, student, and family mental health and wellness has struggled and the need for new ways to provide support in the areas of social/emotional and mental health has never been more necessary. It will be important for the District to build new structures and vehicles for providing these supports on a continuing basis.

There is also a continued need to provide school staff and administration with collaborative, high-quality, system wide professional development focused on optimizing the access and engagement that students with IEPs have to general education.

The emphasis of the professional development should include:

- Building staff capacity to provide differentiating and accommodating instruction and Universal Design for Learning lesson design
- Improving behavioral and social/emotional systematic instruction through the use of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) along with more intensive interventions in Tiers 2 and 3.
- Providing training and coaching to site leaders to help build their capacity to fulfill their role as a local educational agency (LEA) representative at an IEP meeting, take on more responsibility for this role, and create more clarity and consistency across the district.
- Increasing ways to engage families in more open and two-way communication will provide opportunities for families to provide input into the program as well as engage with each other in supportive dialogue
- The District should provide an improved process for mentorship and coaching for the first two years of a new special education teacher's tenure and provide IEP support for new and veteran teachers who may need support.

Issues of limited availability of substitutes and ongoing absences by staff due to the continuing issues brought about by the pandemic, has created challenges in the provision of professional development. In addition, paraeducators have been leaving the district often due to low pay, stress caused by having additional duties due to the unfilled positions, and lack of training in preparation for their positions. These challenges will have to be addressed through new and creative strategies but can become part of the discussion by staff to identify where and how to build job-embedded professional development into the process. It is recommended that the District could begin by identifying specific staff needs through student outcome data, staff surveys, teacher goals, classroom observations, exploring site master schedules to identify where formal collaboration happens, and other similar information.

