

# SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM EVALUATION FOCUS GROUPS

Prepared for Alexandria City Public Schools

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In the following report, Hanover Research presents findings from three parent focus groups on priorities for special education program evaluation, to support the Division's development of an RFP for external evaluation of its special education programs.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary and Key Findings .....</b>	<b>3</b>
INTRODUCTION .....	3
METHODOLOGY .....	3
Recruitment .....	3
Protocol Design and Administration.....	4
Data Analysis.....	4
Limitations .....	4
KEY FINDINGS.....	4
<b>Section I: Approaches to Evaluation.....</b>	<b>7</b>
COMPLIANCE VERSUS INSTRUCTION .....	7
STUDENT DATA: BEYOND IEPs AND STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS.....	7
TEACHER TRAINING AND SPECIALIST STAFFING ADEQUACY .....	9
SYSTEM-LEVEL EQUITY, CULTURE, AND SUFFICIENCY .....	10
SUMMARY OF EVALUATION PRIORITIES.....	11
<b>Section II: Concerns Around ACPS Special Education Programming.....</b>	<b>13</b>
IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION .....	13
FOCUS ON TRANSITION POINTS .....	15
STUDY “POCKETS OF EXCELLENCE” TO IMPROVE CONSISTENCY .....	16
<b>Appendix: Focus Group Protocol .....</b>	<b>18</b>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

## INTRODUCTION

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS, or the Division) commissioned Hanover Research (Hanover) to conduct three parent focus groups to support the Division’s preparation of a Request for Proposals (RFP) to evaluate its special education programming. In the following report, Hanover presents the findings from these focus groups in the following two sections:

- **Section I: Approaches to Evaluation** addresses the core research questions on the mechanics of evaluation, in terms of topical focus and methodological approach.
- **Section II: Concerns Around ACPS Special Education Programming** describes additional commentary from the focus groups exploring specific concerns in greater detail. While these ideas lie outside the technical bounds of a discussion on evaluation mechanics, they serve to highlight targets for evaluation and hypotheses about root causes as well as solutions that might be explored through evaluation.

A subsection below describes the methodology in detail, including limitations of this study. The final subsection of this Executive Summary presents key findings from the research.

## METHODOLOGY

### RECRUITMENT

ACPS sent a letter home to every parent of a special education student in the Division in September 2016. The letter provided parents with a link and Qcode to an electronic survey invitation, which asked parents to indicate interest and availability to participate in the study. At the request of the Division, all ACPS SEAC members who indicated interest in participating were invited to a focus group. Hanover then conducted a stratified random sample of interested parents to ensure representation from elementary, middle, and high school. Parents who were selected were then notified of the date and time of the focus group via email. Figure A presents the number of participants invited and those who attended.

**Figure A: Summary of Qualitative Data Collection**

DATE/TIME	PARTICIPANT TYPE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS INVITED	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS WHO ATTENDED
October 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2016 – 8:00 am	Predominantly parents of elementary school students	8	4
October 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2016 – 12:00 pm	Parents of mixed level students	13	9
October 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2016 – 6:30 pm	Predominantly parents of secondary level students	11	5
<b>Total</b>	--	<b>32</b>	<b>18</b>

## PROTOCOL DESIGN AND ADMINISTRATION

Hanover, in collaboration with ACPS, developed questions for the focus group guide (see Appendix) to obtain information about parent priorities and preferences in evaluating the Division's special education programming. At the beginning of each focus group Hanover informed ACPS parents of their rights as research participants and sought the permission of the group to audio record each discussion.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Hanover performed two rounds of collaborative coding – open coding to establish all of the salient patterns in the data and axial coding to merge together the patterned data into themes. The findings from this research are presented below incorporating participant's verbatim comments to add appropriate context to the analysis. Because of the nature of the focus group questions and research objectives, Hanover maintains participants' anonymity throughout the presentation of these results.

## LIMITATIONS

Despite careful selection and facilitation, participants often struggled with the research questions guiding these focus groups. The orientation around evaluation mechanics proved less motivating than simpler discussion of special education programming experiences and challenges. Participants frequently expressed interest in learning more about the details of programming and evaluation within the Division. Specifically, participants wanted more information about:

- The method for rating teachers as effective (A);
- The methods for monitoring and measuring student performance (B); and
- The relationship between student performance and method for rating teachers as effective.

This in itself is a potentially valuable finding that relates to issues of communication and transparency that participants recommended be a component of evaluation. However, it also demonstrates a limitation of the research, in that participants may not have complete knowledge about the opportunities for evaluation of special education programming.

## KEY FINDINGS

### *RECOMMENDED RESEARCH TOPICS*

- **Participants want evaluation to consider system-level infrastructures such as staffing and operations in addition to classroom-level compliance and instruction.** They are particularly concerned with avoiding evaluations that misidentify the root cause of a symptom by ignoring site or system changes that could improve experiences across individuals and classrooms. For example, participants identified several specific data points around staffing, including retention rates, staffing levels

or ratios, and caseloads, but saw them as connected to each other: high caseload leads to low retention. Participants also emphasized the importance of qualitative constructs such as satisfaction and quality, and more abstract concepts such as communication networks, training schedules, and reporting structures. Finally, participants feel evaluation should consider all school opportunities, including the regular-year classroom as well as after-school and summer enrichment programs.

- Participants' definitions of *compliance* focused on the development and implementation of IEPs with fidelity, including availability of adequate staff, resources, programming, and related training. Accountability is key.
- Participants' definitions of *instruction* focused on the appropriateness of standardized testing, testing accommodations, and use of testing data. However, they emphasized the importance of going beyond testing data to evaluate quality of teaching staff, pedagogy, accommodations, differentiation, and related factors.
- **Participants suggest ACPS evaluate the equity and cultural responsiveness of its special education programming.** The quality, frequency, and consistency of teacher professional development on special education topics were all mentioned as contributors to the "culture" of each site relative to setting high expectations and believing in the value of accommodations for all students with needs. Participants also mentioned the importance of the site principal in setting this culture. Finally, participants were interested in examining data on special education identification and placement to ensure equity across subpopulations (e.g., race/ethnicity, English language status).
- **Participants suggest ACPS evaluate the effectiveness of school transitions,** including students' first experiences with new teachers and subjects, new grade levels, and new schools or sites. They acknowledged that the difficulty of these transitions may arise from challenges in a number of factors such as teacher retention, teacher training, or communication practices. However, a clear message participants shared was that there is a lack of knowledge transfer within the Division.
- **Participants were interested in examining parent engagement in terms of real opportunity.** Participants want the Division to examine the quality of interactions between staff and parents in addition to frequency and type (e.g., phone, email, in person). They identified a variety of barriers to participation, and suggested a potential disconnection between Division marketing efforts and parent needs. For example, many participants expressed interest in having a parent mentoring or advocacy group, but others felt that one already existed and had low participation. Furthermore, focus group participants are concerned that the special education population's linguistic and cultural diversity is not being adequately addressed, and want to ensure that parents of all special education students are given a voice and opportunity.

### RECOMMENDED RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

- **Broadly, participants recommend the use of a mixed methodology that situates quantitative data into context through stakeholder surveys and “conversations”** (e.g., interviews, meetings, or focus groups). Participants recommended a variety of student data points that the Division might use, such as standardized test scores (SOL, CogAT, etc.), IEP progress, disciplinary records, and GPA, but emphasized the importance and value of receiving and analyzing qualitative feedback from the teachers and specialists who work with their children. Participants also expressed interest in evaluating post-graduation employment and “functionality” data, if possible.
  - *Participants expressed enthusiasm to continue speaking with the Division in formal and informal settings, but want greater transparency and communication about how their efforts are being used to effect change. Several participants have participated in multiple focus group studies and do not feel they understand how their contributions are being used in decision-making.*
- **Participants also recommended benchmarking internal best practices at the “pockets of excellence” within the Division that have demonstrated high quality service for students and families with special needs.** They again suggested a mixed methodology approach to include data analysis, in-depth interviews, and video and in-person observation of quality classrooms and teachers. Participants felt these case studies could support development of models and trainings to improve the consistency and quality of special education across Division sites.

## SECTION I: APPROACHES TO EVALUATION

This section summarizes participant commentary most relevant to the core research questions on evaluation mechanics: what should the Division prioritize in operationalizing a special education evaluation, and how should these targets be approached through various methodologies, data points, and frameworks?

### COMPLIANCE VERSUS INSTRUCTION

Participants expressed interest in a balanced approach to evaluating the compliance and instruction aspects of special education programming, providing answers such as “both” and “everything” to the facilitator’s prompts about prioritization between the two categories. However, this should not suggest there was consensus in any given session. A few participants recommended slight emphasis on compliance. One noted, “When I speak to parents and teachers that I volunteer with, I hear more concerns about [compliance] than I do about the actual instruction.” To contrast, others felt the instructional component should be emphasized, “because [...] you can be compliant without being effective.”

*“I don’t see it as two-dimensional where there’s instruction and compliance; I see it as evolutionary.”*

Moreover, a broader point emerged that **the Division should consider a range of program components beyond compliance and instruction.** “I don’t see it as two-dimensional where there’s instruction and compliance,” explained one participant. “I see it as evolutionary.” In his opinion there are four foundational elements to solid special education programming,

including compliance and instruction as well as “operational limberness” and “people management.” Another participant mused, “I’m also curious as to how you can separate instruction from compliance.”

Another participant interpreted “instruction” in terms of professional development, noting that the Division needs to provide more than “one training class” in a “haphazard” way. This participant was simultaneously arguing for greater continuity of service across years: “every year there was a different business, a meeting program that *we’re using now*, and *this will take care of it.*” Related to this point, a participant in a different session emphasized the importance of evaluating compliance “in gen ed settings, because the teachers aren’t trained. They don’t know what to do.” Themes of training and support are reflected further in this Section.

### STUDENT DATA: BEYOND IEPs AND STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS

Student-level discussion centered on IEPs. Participants expressed skepticism about the intentions of the Division to support special education students through their individualized supports: “there is no accountability for the IEPs. The whole goal of most of the processes is just to avoid getting sued.” Another described it as no “more than a lot of wasted time and a lot of paperwork.” Participants shared stories of establishing an IEP with myriad accommodations, and

then discovering through classroom visits or talking with their child that the resources were not available to follow through on those IEP promises. Parents also shared examples of having their child’s diagnosed needs questioned by Division authority figures, including heads of IEP development and teachers involved in their child’s education. One participant assured the group that “compliance over the past ten years has gotten better [... but] absolutely, we can tell you a bunch of horror stories on compliance.”

Others expressed general confusion around the development of IEPs, and worry that they do not have enough expertise to assess whether or not their child’s plan is appropriate. Parents shared examples of students with diagnosed disabilities being misplaced into classes that were too large or too challenging for their needs, despite having an IEP. One participant explained, “I shouldn’t have to hire an advocate” to interpret the plan. Others shared that, based on their experiences as a military family, “we [have] had experience throughout the continuum, and what we’ve found is there’s so many variations in how they conduct IEP meetings.” Another described IEP development as “an art.”

**Participants principally asked for a “culture of accountability,” or an otherwise “urgency to make sure that the IEP is followed.”** Several identified a lack of continuity in case management roles as having repercussions for the student experience and opportunities. These themes around knowledge transfer are reprised in Section II.

Participants introduced a variety of student data categories to consider during evaluation, including behavioral data, outcome data, social measures, student grades, IEP progress, and testing. Specific metrics that were explicitly mentioned are summarized in Figure 1.1. **The variety of metrics reflects a common perception across all focus group sessions that standardized testing scores are a problematic data point for special education students.** One participant provided an example of her child receiving a CogAT score at the bottom of the bell curve, and expressed concern both about how her child might have received that feedback and what that means for the school in interpreting her child’s ability: “She could not handle the mechanics of taking that actual test. So we don't know what these scores mean.” Another participant added, “if you look at my son’s [progress] up until last year you have easily 3.5 to 4.0 grade point averages, but [he] tanked on the SOLs.”

Beyond individual-level concerns around standardized tests, participants had mixed knowledge and perceptions about the way these data are used in the Division. One participant expressed concern about “ACPS SOL scores for students with special needs is flat.” The participant links stronger SOL achievement to sites with “principals that take responsibility for special education in their school.” Another added that it “might be good to

Figure 1.1: Suggested Student Metrics

- 
- SOL
  - CogAT
  - IEP
  - GPA
  - Discipline records
  - Post-grad employment
  - Qualitative observation data



look at [...] how the SOL testing actually works, and if the services are strong enough and accommodations for the kids taking the test.” Another expressed similar concern about the interpretation of results as a reflection of the school in good times and the test in bad times: “if the scores are low or go down, well you can't really go by that test we need to account for the grades, but if the scores go up, look, see how we increased the scores.”

Suggestions went beyond testing data. “Maybe the social part is something to be looked at, too,” suggested one participant. Several suggested that disciplinary data could be useful as an alternative or complement to academic data. Another added that qualitative data from teacher and staff observations may be helpful to address these aspects of special education student progress. Participants in two separate sessions also addressed consideration of post-graduation factors, particularly employment and “functionality as adults.” Moving beyond student-level considerations, one participant extended the discussion to consider equity in special education: “we know that kids with disabilities, kids with mental illnesses, and kids of color are disciplined differently, usually more severely than their typical white peers – and that’s a piece that every school has to look at.” Equity themes are described further in the system-level subsection.

Some participants in the third session recommended using a survey to track satisfaction with “[a] child’s needs being met.” Overall, then, participants were interested in using a variety of measures and levels of analysis to track individual student needs and optimize the impact of change.

## TEACHER TRAINING AND SPECIALIST STAFFING ADEQUACY

**Regarding teacher-level discussion, participants were chiefly concerned with caseloads, continuity (or retention), and staffing levels.** One participant framed concerns about staffing levels in terms of a disconnect between family and administrator perceptions of adequacy: “I hear a lot of concern [from the community] that there’s not enough speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and I think the school’s position is [that] there is [sufficient staffing], so there’s definitely tension there.” In some cases, specialists are such a rare resource that there is a lag in placement: “they didn't have a PT on staff at the beginning of the school year, so almost three weeks, two to three weeks went by, before [...] the PT person was hired.” Another participant linked staffing concerns to issues of case load:

A speech pathologist can be up to 60 some per case load, and years ago there were people that reduced back to in the 40's, so they could spend the time. My guess might be, and that's something maybe to look at as a resource issue as your population's are increasing, how are you keeping those resource services? Why is that still at the same level than it was when the population was substantially lower?

Another connected this line of thought to the impacts of heightened case load on staff retention: “One of my son’s best favorite special ed teachers is leaving [...] because she’s overwhelmed by paperwork and all this other stuff and she doesn’t have time to spend with the kids.” Other participants echoed that specialists’ schedules were “too booked.”

Participants also recommended an examination of staff retention and turnover, such as “the average tenure of a speech therapist,” as well as the minimum and maximum. Tenure, participants noted, might be examined at the Division level or at the school site level. One respondent adds, “Do some people stay at school A for years [...] but run as fast as they can when they leave? Do they go to other schools in ACPS? Do they go outside?” Another linked this conversation around retention and turnover to teacher supports, “looking to see what the follow-up is after the training and they have these other pieces.” Another asked the Division to improve training around co-teaching, specifically.

One participant broached acknowledgement of structural pressures around attempts to improve staffing levels: “I know this becomes a bigger issue because city council has to allot the funding for them to create new positions.”

### TRAINING

“Adequate staffing” was addressed both in terms of number of staff and the training of staff. One participant mused, “How come reading specialists or people at the school, how come they can't be trained for those programs that actually do help kids to read?” Others were concerned about training the general teaching staff — especially those leading elective courses such as band — in differentiation methods that support IEP delivery. One participant commented, “A lot of the compliance or any of this has to be in gen ed settings because the teachers aren't trained. They don't know what to do.”

Others saw this as an opportunity to build teacher support networks: “We don't utilize the fabulousness that we have.” Another added, “Maybe they should come up with a mentoring program for teachers that teach them how to manage that kind of stuff.”

### SYSTEM-LEVEL EQUITY, CULTURE, AND SUFFICIENCY

**Discussion on system-level evaluation focused principally on issues of culture, specifically on family engagement and communication.** These issues are more fully described in Section II. However, in terms of evaluation mechanics, one participant succinctly described the communication network that operates to support the Division's efforts over time: “[When] people who contact you, do you follow up? Was it a good contact?” But the participant expresses frustration that “they don't measure that. They just measure [that] we talked to this many, people emailed us or stopped by.”

Another participant approached this in terms of identifying supports the schools have given to their parents: “What are they doing? I would like to know this actually. What are they doing to help those families? They want these families to be engaged and come to IEP meetings and PTA stuff. What are they doing to truly, truly help them?”

**Another major system-level concern was equity** or, as one participant called it, “the cultural level.” This aspect encompasses a range of experiences. One participant asked to consider the quality of inclusion settings and experiences. Another broached concerns around the

Division's language diversity and "whether parents from other cultures or who speak other languages are really getting the same kinds of information [and] having the same opportunities." Another participant considered "equity between buildings."

**Participants also encouraged the Division to include summer access programs in evaluation, particularly the Extended School Year's (ESY) reduced time for instruction, and participation in after-school activities.** Several participants in one session strongly agreed with a co-participant's comment that "kids on the cusp of passing the SOLs [...] need that access to after-school tutoring [...but] a lot of times these kids get left out."

Others suggested they look at the school's care in context: "how many families are having to use outside resources, or get private tutors or private therapists?" Another suggested that ACPS dive deeper into what supports or needs were not being met through Division efforts:

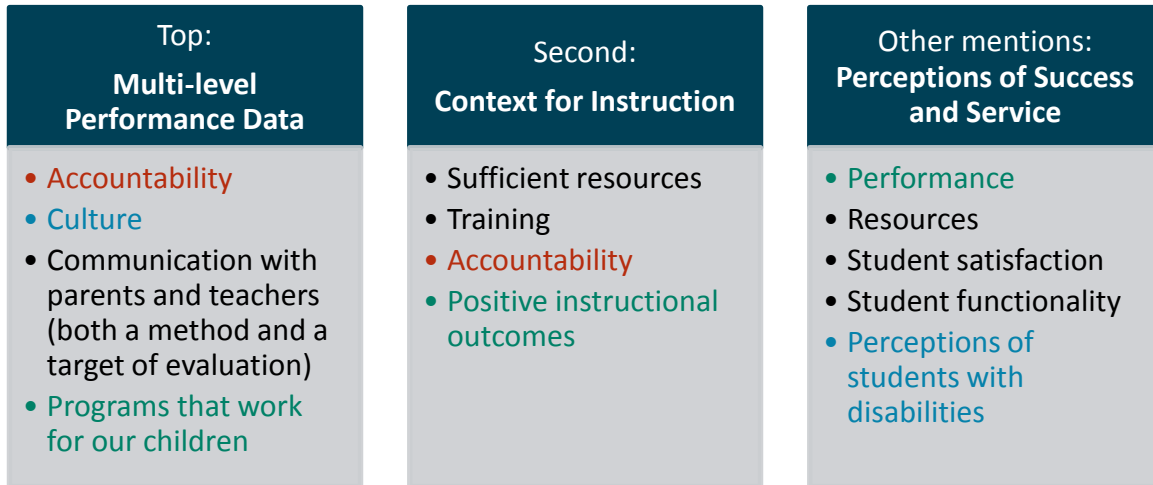
it could be a survey that you click the button of, "Yes, we go out for this, this, this and this." It doesn't have to pull into the financial commitment, but you know. It just would be interesting to see how many families or families that have had the resources are in private placement, not necessarily on ACPS time.

One participant suggested the Division outsource these system-level evaluations to a third party "who's very experienced in dealing with most of American populations. How do you go in and get them to actually respond to you, and there's very particular methodology that places like that are used to.. [...] They really need to make in investment in these populations." That is, participants are interested in seeing a highly qualified research team capable of working with the Division's diversity.

## **SUMMARY OF EVALUATION PRIORITIES**

**In summary, participants were chiefly interested in evaluating special education programming in terms of accountability, culture, and impact** (Figure 1.2). Details of these elements include communication internally and with parents, the infrastructure and training to support the Division's efforts, typical performance data as well as post-program and qualitative observational data, and cultural elements such as the perceptions of students with disabilities and how this impacts the development and implementation of Division programming.

**Figure 1.2: Summary of Participant Evaluation Priorities**



## SECTION II: CONCERNS AROUND ACPS SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING

Participants in the focus group sessions often defaulted to sharing personal anecdotes and specific concerns around the Division’s special education programs. While these ideas lie outside the technical bounds of a discussion on evaluation mechanics, they serve to highlight targets for evaluation and hypotheses about root causes as well as solutions that might be explored through evaluation. This section presents these special concerns.

### IDENTIFY BARRIERS TO PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION

**Participants were concerned about the lack of clarity or transparency around what options there are for ACPS students:** “You [have] got to really do your detective work” to locate all the relevant resources for your child. A participant in another session described this as having to “put my war bonnet on. I’m going to go in there and I’m going to shake, rattle, and roll whoever I have to talk to.” In some ways this challenges parents to have “normal” relationships with their special needs children as it relates to schooling. One parent shared,

You don't just say, “Hey, have a great day, here's your lunch, work hard, get smarter” like I did to my other kids and they went on and had their day. It's like a dog with a bone. Did you do this? Did this person show up? Did this, I mean we had a point where we had a speech pathologist that was showing up twice a week, I think, and one of my sons was like, “I don't know who that is,” and that was not part of our disability. He knew everybody in that building, you know so it's just, **we don't have that luxury of sending our kids to school. “Have a great day,” and “Oh, how was your day today,” at the end of the day.**

Others added stories of their own, such as rules around observing one’s own child which have increased barriers to parents dropping in, or feeling “grilled” when a parent wants to have a casual meeting with teachers or the assistant principal.

Some participants see this as an intentional method for avoiding transparency. One parent commented, “Part of it is, I hate to say this, it plays into their hand if you don’t know because [then] they’re not obligated to provide the service.” One participant recommended organizing parent groups to share resources and knowledge about the programs, and parents who have been in the system longer could serve as mentors to newer families.

Indeed, **parents expressed a lot of interest around engagement, not just for themselves but for the entire community of ACPS families with children in special education.** “Whatever you do for your child, you are doing for every child,” one parent said. Participants were concerned about how the Division supports parents who are not positioned to closely monitor whether the Division is providing the appropriate services to their children. As one participant noted, “the ability to be engaged — you have work, you are a single parent, or

**Figure 2.1: Identified Barriers to Engagement**

- No time off work
- Time commitments
- Single-parent family
- Language barriers
- Financial constraints

whatever else [...]. There are so many students that do not have advocates at home.” Other barriers identified by participants included, “time commitments, or language barriers, or financial constraints [...]” One clarified the types of financial constraints that can affect families, noting “the people who can’t even afford a bus ticket to go to the school.” Another participant added, “there are families out there who cannot afford to take off work to come to an IEP meeting. They can’t, so are the schools looking to do off-hours IEP meetings? I mean, they just schedule those meetings and if you can’t make it, that’s it and it’s ridiculous.” Participants were emphatic about the need for equity and for culturally appropriate service, such as continually revising

translations to meet the needs of a changing population (e.g., “a big increase in Farsi”).

One participant argued that a parent organization is already available, but poorly marketed and (perhaps consequently) poorly attended:

ACPS has tried to start up some posters of Parent Resource Center, [but] they have not been well attended. [...] The PRC is definitely a place, the PRC’s focus on support groups should be full of parents and they should be fed from all the different schools. To get some extra help with your child, there’s this support group that’s being supported by the Parent Resource Center and the ACPS and they will keep you up to date on what is going on and you can talk to other parents. So that’s where you actually get parent engagement is actually reaching out, embracing, encouraging parents to be involved.

Again, **this data suggests that ACPS may want to consider measures of parent engagement as part of its evaluation efforts.** Participants were clear that the resources and personnel are available to help them if they push. As one said, “You’ll find the right teachers that are committed to helping your children succeed. They are out there.” But participants feel the barriers to access are not being dismantled. Some questioned the Division’s commitment to removing these barriers because, as several participants noted, “the ones who have money finally take their kids out of the system” but “it’s not really fair even for those of us that do have the means or are on the fence of having the means or making sacrifices so you can do that.”

## FOCUS ON TRANSITION POINTS

**Because communication is so important, transition periods are particularly hard for families, whether defined in terms of school calendar** (e.g., start of year, start of second semester) **or in terms of staffing** (e.g., first time with a teacher). One participant described the issue especially succinctly:

[...] the biggest issue in special ed is [...] to get good special ed services, it's all personality driven. You need to get someone who cares and when you find them, try not to let go of them, because there is no repeatable, structural process that supports special education delivery, because everything keeps changing. So that's why the transitions are awful.

The difficulty of these transitions was expressed most often in terms of a negative change in communication patterns. One parent explained, "My daughter was [with] the same special education teacher for the past three years, and we formed a really good relationship with her. [...] It's been great, she really knows my daughter and all her challenges and she's seen it. And now this year, she transitioned to another teacher and there's definitely been a drop-off in the level of communication." Similarly, others describe the experience of "falling through the cracks" when starting with a new teacher:

[...] we spent quite a bit of time in the spring of this year on her IEP for the transition and there was a new special ed teacher hired and she never received IEP plan, like we got like a day or two before the start of the school year an email asking for the IEP, in our minds it was a little bit chaotic, because we spent so much time on that IEP, and the [...] new teacher, didn't have the chance to read it or review it prior to the beginning of the school year. So we actually provided a hard copy because it seemed to get lost in the system, even though it's on a computer.

**Participants attribute transition-time inconsistencies to a variety of factors, including staffing, staff training, and communication skills.** Communication issues arise in multiple directions, including between teachers and parents and among school staff. Each year that a student begins in a new classroom, grade level, or setting, parents feel they must repeat their efforts in establishing an appropriate IEP and ensuring it is followed through in practice. "With each transfer from grade to grade I had to do the same identical thing. The knowledge transfer is non-existent," explained one participant. Furthermore, staff are not given adequate time to prepare for the IEP meeting. One parent shared, "none of her IEP team members or her school-based IEP members have any common planning time. The only time that they are all together in one room is at an IEP meeting. They claim that things get done between virtual Google groups, Google classroom ... It doesn't, necessarily." Another parent provided an example:

We work with physical therapists and OT that we have outside of the school system to get their input in developing IEPs both in the preschool level and now in the kindergarten level. And what we found when we had the draft IEP, **they were drafting goals that have already been met.** For us it was indicating, oh we're going to make the goal. In other words, they're not setting the bar high enough, because if you're drafting a goal that the child already has demonstrated, that she can achieved, has done then you're not setting the bar high enough to have her, the student, get to the next level.

Several participants echoed the idea that they do not expect or want their children to be “pushed through the system.” They expect their children to be held back if they are not meeting appropriate benchmarks, and want high expectations to be set whether their child is high-functioning or not. Appropriate inclusion is important. One participant explained, “I do somewhat feel like inclusion is an experiment a little bit at this point, and not because anyone's lack of good will or maybe because in the lack of training.” Parents of lower-functioning children do not want them to lose opportunities simply because “they might not be easy to communicate with.” One participant offered an example:

Maybe part of that is because at least three of the students in the class have very severe handicaps where they probably do need that level of assistance, but the other three or four children don't, but I think they just kind of mesh them all together, [and assume] that every kid needs to be fed, hand-fed or hand-over-hand drawing or hand-over-hand doing anything. **It lessens the opportunity for the child to realize doing it on their own.**

One participant recommended increased effort on the part of the schools to reach out to parents at the beginning of the year to introduce parents to teachers. Without this initial approach to relationship-building, parents feel lost: “I end up feeling really at a loss as to what is happening and what’s going on after meeting me, a lot of progress.” Similarly, participants recommended automating the knowledge transfer process among Division staff who serve individual students within and across grades, subjects, and sites.

## STUDY “POCKETS OF EXCELLENCE” TO IMPROVE CONSISTENCY

Parents described elementary and preschool experiences as a “protective cocoon” compared to secondary-level experiences. They feel that the Division takes away accommodations before it is appropriate, and without providing support to families to help them understand this scaling-back process.

Participants expressed concerns about the variation in quality and service across sites, grade levels, and needs. There were a variety of ways that participants expressed this culture:

- A “culture of low expectations;” “they don’t presume competence.”
- “They're not supposed to gain. They're just not supposed to slip backwards.”
- “You have a great person for a little bit and then they suddenly leave.”
- “They keep changing the names of [programs] so you can't track anything.”
- “At the beginning of the school year, certain equipment wasn’t there. [...] It took my wife and I lots of phone calls and emails over the course of the first few weeks of school to [help the] teacher, and she coordinated getting the equipment over to the new school.”

As one participant explained, “**There's no consistency and that comes back to again, culture, and implementation and the principal at the head of the building and central office,** so again it's the big larger organizational issues that should have pushed down to get in there.” One



participant linked these issues to the perceived reporting structures that place much of the pressure of improvement on the principals:

The special education teachers that deliver services to your children do not report to [the central office]. They report up through the principals, they report up to the secondary principal and the elementary administrator and they report up and to the Superintendent. **Then there is the Office of Special Education that sets policy, sets compliance, but they don't really, other than the OT's and the PT's, [...] deliver the special education services.** So they can say, *here's what you're supposed to do*, but other than kind of doing audits and sitting down and being the enforcers and trying to talk with the principals, saying your teachers aren't doing this. It's up to the principals on how special education is delivered.

One parent offered an example of the way that site leaders can be accommodating or rigid:

What one school does isn't necessarily what the other school is doing. There might be one principal who is jumping through every kind of hoop they can find to be accommodating to people and telling his staff, "You need to be accommodating," where the other one is like, "Well, we're having Back-to-School Night at 5:00, so get here."

Several participants used the term "pockets" to describe the lack of consistency in service. One woman generously described them as "pretty big pockets," but having "specific areas where improvement [is] needed." **Participants encouraged the Division to explore these "pockets" of excellence in greater detail** through examining data, observing classrooms through video or in person, and having those site leaders develop trainings or models for other sites to adopt.

However, several participants feel like they have been asked in multiple ways and at multiple times for recommendations on improvements that have ultimately never been made. That is, they feel there is a lack of follow-through on the Division's part – or at least a failure in communication. One explained, "I keep hoping that this is going to be the time, this is going to be the time and somebody's going to actually open their eyes up and listen this time." Another added, "That's the most frustrating thing with all these focus groups. You tell them the same thing over and over again." **Participants encouraged better communication and transparency in the way focus group and survey data are used to inform change within the Division.**

## APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

GENERAL QUESTION	FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS	CONTEXT
<p>What should the goals of special education program evaluation be in ACPS?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What do you think evaluation of special education programs entails?</li> <li>▪ To what extent should evaluation improvements for individual student experiences?</li> <li>▪ To what extent should evaluation lead to improvements for division or school-level programming?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This question allows participants to develop a shared language around special education evaluation in the Division.</li> </ul>
<p>To what extent should evaluation focus on elements of compliance?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What does “compliance” mean in the scope of special education program evaluation?</li> <li>▪ What are the most important compliance elements in a special education program evaluation?</li> <li>▪ How should the division evaluate these elements?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This question defines the scope of “compliance” evaluation</li> </ul>
<p>To what extent should evaluation focus on elements of instruction?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What does “instruction” mean in the scope of special education program evaluation?</li> <li>▪ What are the most important instructional elements in a special education program evaluation?</li> <li>▪ How should the division evaluate these elements?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This question defines the scope of “instruction” evaluation</li> </ul>
<p>How should ACPS prioritize elements of evaluation?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Describe the ideal emphasis across an evaluation: What proportion of a special education evaluation should focus on compliance? on instruction? on other things?</li> <li>▪ How would you prioritize the possible goals of evaluation efforts?</li> <li>▪ Should the Division prioritize any specific sites or programs?</li> <li>▪ What is the most important thing the Division understands at the end of a special education program evaluation?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This question seeks to specify group priorities related to program evaluation</li> </ul>

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