



Date: May 20, 2021

TO: Newton School Committee

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RE: Special Education Update Report

It is with honor that we present the SY20-21 special education update. As a department, we joined our colleagues in reimagined education in light of the pandemic's circumstances. In a district deeply committed to inclusive education, some of our challenges were heart-wrenching and difficult to cultivate. The pandemic illuminated pervasive inequities in our world and we saw that play out in special education. Working to mitigate and overcome these inequities occupied our focus and attention. On the other hand, we saw some of our special educators, students, and families flourish in ways we hadn't seen in our pre-pandemic world.

This update provides an overview of the unique criteria for special education, the connection of special education to the overall educational opportunity for all learners, and the specific programs available for students requiring such environments. We also share a brief overview of our demographic data, impressions of the data, and our action plan to continue the hard work of addressing existing disproportionalities.

We continue our single-minded dedication to creating more anti-ableist spaces and providing opportunities for access of all learners, especially learners with educational disabilities, and the environment to flourish.

Governance:

Federal:

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA](#)
- Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA](#)

State:

- Mass. General Law 71B (children with disabilities) [MGL 71B](#)
- Commonwealth of MA Regulations [603 CMR 28.00](#)

Continuum of Services, Eligibility, and Least Restrictive Environment:

As a small component of the overall educational experience (see fig. 1), special education ensures the provision of specialized instruction and service to students deemed eligible via a multi-step process. Eligibility requires comprehensive evaluation in all areas of suspected disability. Students identified as having an educational disability which is the root of a lack of effective progress and who need specialized instruction to ameliorate that lack of progress are eligible for special education.

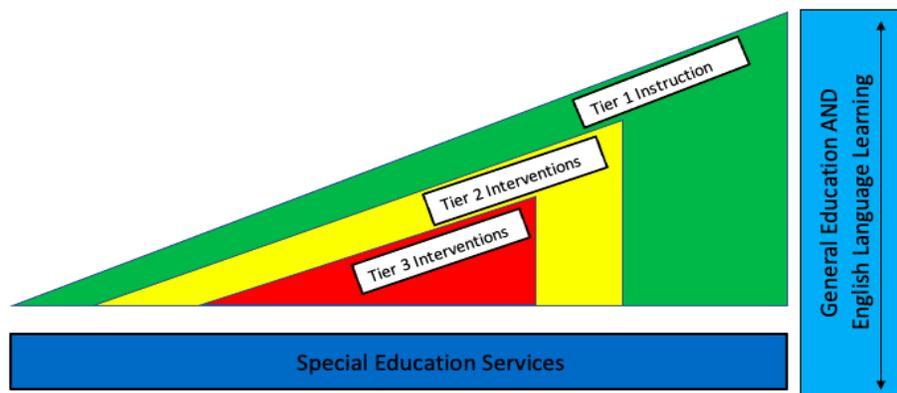


Figure 1. Educational Organization of Tiered Support

Special education is a highly regulated component of the educational framework. Eligibility follows a prescriptive 4-step process:

1. Existence of an educational disability
2. Lack of effective progress in general education with supports
3. Lack of progress is due to the identified educational disability
4. Need for **specialized instruction** to address disability

Eligibility is established through a comprehensive evaluation of all suspected disability areas and must take into consideration classroom access data. Each team must conduct a culturally responsive evaluation to ensure special education team decisions around eligibility are truly related to the education disability. Eligibility is not intended to be a barrier to continued access to robust tiered supports within the general education environment. Specialized instruction is NOT Tier III (or Tier IV) intervention.

Once a student is determined eligible for special education, the team must consider all factors and provide specialized education in the least restrictive environment. It is also important that the educational decisions an IEP team makes take into consideration the specifically designed specialized instruction and data measures for the consideration of opportunities in a lesser restrictive environment. NPS provides a full continuum of special education services for all eligible students (see fig 2). It is important to understand the premise of special education while examining figure 2. It is a special education team that must provide the least restrictive setting/services possible. The special education team should only look to a move to more restrictive settings when necessary and should be revisited annually at a minimum.

Least Restrictive Placement in the Continuum of Services

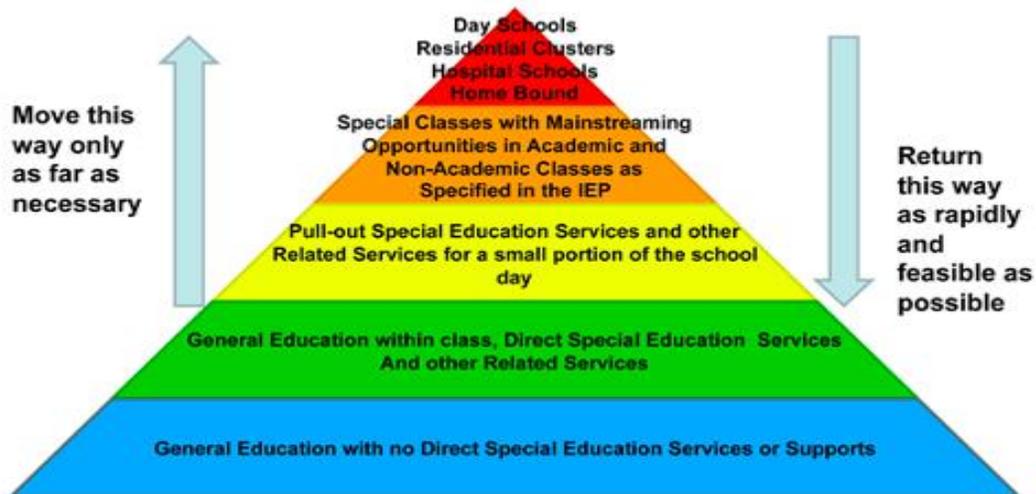


Figure 2: Continuum of Special Education Services

Specialized Program Overview:

As part of the NPS full continuum of special education services are some special programs for students who need significantly modified or specialized educational opportunities. Many of these programs are offered as citywide programs and located in buildings across the city (see table 1). These programs are primarily categorized in the orange section of figure 2. It is important to note that program development is a lengthy, multi-year process. The evolution of program development is a multi-year process. When considering the need for programming, we begin with an identified growing need. The partnership between general education and special education leadership typically illuminates these growing needs. The schools work to schedule learning cohorts and provide specialized instruction. As the need grows or cohort increases, the team establishes a true vision and parameters around programming (such as entry/exit criteria) to continue to support the least restrictive programming to guard against inadvertently creating disproportionality within a program. This process aids identification of a new program. During these years of development, it is common for students to benefit from specialized instruction as part of a small cohort of students. Space constraints and research about more effective inclusion at the younger grades result in fewer programs at that level.

Citywide Special Education Program Overview

*New Programs

<i>Level</i>	<i>Program</i>	<i>Age/Grade Range</i>	<i>Building/Location</i>
Early Childhood	Integrated and Specialized Programming STRIDE	3 yr old to K eligible	Newton Early Childhood Program
Elementary	ACHIEVE	Grade 2-5	Angier
	STRIDE	Grade K-5	Zervas/Cabot
	Unicorn-Yeti*	Grade K-5	Peirce
Middle	Language Learning	Grade 6-8	Oak Hill
	Direct Instruction *		Oak Hill
	Bridge		F.A. Day
	Reflections		F.A. Day
	STRIDE		Brown
	Spark		Brown
	Focus		Brown
Harbor MS	Ed. Center Annex		
High	STRIDE Compass Language Learning* Step Connections	Grades 9-12	NNHS & NSHS
	Rise Southside		NSHS
	Pilot		NNHS
	Springboard Central HS		Ed. Center
	Harbor HS		NSHS Annex
Post-Secondary	Community Connections	Age 18-22	NNHS & Ed. Center Annex
	STRIDE		NNHS

Table 1: Citywide Special Education Program Overview

Each of the programs listed in Table 1 is specifically designed to support a certain learning profile or specialized need. A brief program description is offered:

STRIDE: This program serves students with autism who require a significantly modified curriculum and programming. It is a vertically aligned PK - Post-Secondary program based on a foundation of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) principles. The program is primarily substantially separate with inclusive opportunities within the life of the school as much as possible.

Focus, Spark, Step, Rise: Secondary programs for students who have a primary disability of autism, offering a continuum of programming from full inclusion to substantially separate depending upon the student's level of need. These programs offer a combination of general and special education content-related courses, academic support to access content and develop executive functioning skills, and specialized instruction in social pragmatics and/or social skills.

Direct Instruction: The DI program uses clearly communicated classroom routines and structures, combined with specialized skills-based curricula to remediate learning gaps in a small group setting. Students benefit from targeted and intensive social pragmatic interventions and social skills development. Classwide self-regulation supports are integral to support students with developing the skills needed to succeed in the larger classroom setting.

ACHIEVE, Language Learning Programs: The Language-Based Learning Disabilities programs from Grade 2 - 12 provide intensive instruction to address students' developing language skills. Programming occurs in a continuum of full inclusion to substantially separate, depending on the student's needs. The curriculum is modified and adapted as necessary to include a structured, sequential, multisensory, systematic approach to ensure all learning modalities are engaged to address learning needs in the areas of decoding and encoding, reading fluency, reading comprehension, as well as, written expression.

Unicorn-Yeti, Bridge, Pilot, Southside: The wide range of therapeutic programs throughout the district and offer therapeutic programming for grades K through 12 with the school buildings. Students receiving support from our therapeutic programs participate in targeted social-emotional intervention, skill-building, and executive functioning support embedded in their programming to support access to all curricular content areas. The evidence-based social and emotional curriculum is delivered through individual and group counseling sessions, and small group social skills instruction, as well as throughout the therapeutic milieu. Our therapeutic programs offer a full range of support for students who require full inclusion to substantially separate content area setting for instruction. In order to ensure students are provided the opportunity to be educated within the least restrictive setting students have access to a flexible pullout model in many programs where they can access a therapeutic milieu from their general education classes, as needed, at any time throughout their school day. Students in this programming also receive academic support to further develop executive functioning needs that are impacted by their emotional disabilities.

Harbor MS, Harbor HS, Springboard: These therapeutic educational programs are outside of the student's home school setting for varied periods of time. Students remain connected to their home school to support continued access to the offerings within the school as possible and to maintain opportunities to return to home school upon readiness to do so. The programs also conduct extended evaluations for general and special education students in an

effort to help determine the most effective educational and social-emotional learning environment for the student.

Central High School: A DESE Approved Public Day School providing educational experiences within a therapeutic milieu. Students receiving support from Central HS participate in targeted social-emotional intervention, skill-building, and executive functioning support embedded in their programming to support access to all curricular content areas. The evidence-based social and emotional curriculum is delivered through individual and group counseling sessions, and small group social skills instruction, as well as throughout the therapeutic milieu. Students access content-area subjects and therapeutic interventions within this alternative environment.

Reflections, Connections, Community Connections: A continuum of programming for students grades 6 - post-secondary, provides comprehensive and systematic small group instruction outside the general education setting for students with complex profiles who require significant modification to the content. These programs provide highly individualized services, programming, and special instruction to students according to their needs and IEPs. The curriculum parallels the scope and sequence of the regular education curriculum and is modified to meet individual student learning needs. Students work on building prerequisite skills and a foundation for life skills and independence. The focus of these programs is to maximize the potential and independence of each student. At the high school and post-secondary level, the goal is to prepare students with disabilities for integrated adult life and build transition-related skills to increase understanding and access within the broader community.

Data and Demographics:

We continue to monitor the demographics of students within the special education umbrella. We know true action planning to address any disproportionality is a partnership with our general education colleagues. Culturally responsive and universally designed instructional practices are our collective path to truly being an anti-racist district.

Overall, our data shows:

- The overall percentage of students with disabilities in our district are relatively consistent over the last three years
 - SY 18/19 = 18%
 - SY 19/20 = 17.2%
 - SY 20/21 = 17.4%
- We saw some growth in our percentages of specific learning disabilities, health-related disabilities, and autism.
- We see nearly twice as many male students in special education (66% males vs. 33% female).
- We see a higher percentage of Black/African American (8% vs 5%) and Hispanic/Latinx (12% vs. 8%) students in special education compared to the total enrollment.

ESY, CCS, and Assessment Center Work:

The summer of 2021 is busier than typical. In most years, we offer a full six weeks of comprehensive extended school year services for eligible students. This year we are also fulfilling our obligation to provide Covid Compensatory Services (CCS) as a result of the State of Emergency and related School Closure during the spring of 2020. We anticipate providing CCS to approximately 291 students across the district this year.

We plan to provide programming to approximately 450 elementary and approximately 295 secondary students. Our post-secondary program will be in full swing as will our NECP, serving approximately 26 and 124 students respectively. Family feedback, hiring, and scheduling are presently underway.

In addition to ESY and CCS, we aim to wrap up our backlog of eligibility assessments this summer. Since reopening, our staff worked tirelessly to accomplish significantly higher rates of testing during the school day and we also offered 198 appointment-based assessment opportunities at our Assessment Center and 163 have been completed.

We intend to continue to work diligently on all of this so we are poised to begin the 21-22 school year with a clean slate.

Post-Pandemic Plans:

Moving forward, we are energized by the opportunity to bring forward some of the pandemic-related discoveries about student learning and access opportunities beneficial to students. As a special education leadership team, we are involved in a few exciting ventures.

1. We are looking forward to continued (and reinvigorated) partnerships with our general education colleagues in pursuit of a multi-year initiative toward effective, integrated, and calibrated UDL practices and further cultivation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support. Our measures of success for this work will play out in the data inquiry cycles established across all levels.
2. We are involved in small group work committees to focus on a few discrete projects.
 - a. *Procedure Manual Development* - identification and explanation of statutory procedural processes for all special education decision-making, calibrated across all levels within the district.
 - b. *Professional Learning* - to establish a calendar of professional development plans for varying stakeholders from admin support personnel, general education faculty, special educators, special education leaders, etc.
 - c. *Co-Teaching Research Team* - to explore current research in the field of co-teaching as an inclusive provision of specially designed instruction
 - d. *Family and Community Engagement* - identify and capture opportunities to continue our practice of families as colleagues in the pursuit of education for our students.

Summary:

In closing, it is with honor that we present this SY20-21 special education update to the Newton School Committee. It is with immense pride that we collaborate with our central staff and building leaders to serve students with disabilities and their families. This pandemic exposed many complications and illuminated many celebrations for our staff, students, and families. We look forward to speaking with you on Monday evening.