

## Summary of Peer Review – Special Education

May 2, 2008

*The Seattle Public Schools has completed a number of academic and operations **peer reviews**. These reviews, which have been performed by national experts, show us what we are doing well and point out how we can improve.*

*The recommendations from each peer review will inform the district's strategic planning process, so changes and improvements to individual programs will advance our overall vision for the future.*

### The Subject

#### Special Education

Approximately 13 percent of all students in Seattle Public Schools have disabilities. These students face many challenges at school:

- Students with disabilities are suspended or expelled at double the rate of students without disabilities.
- The proportion of students with disabilities who meet standard on the WASL is less than half that of students without disabilities.
- Only 50 percent of students with disabilities graduate from high school, compared with 75 percent of students without disabilities.

SPS has developed a number of special education services to help students with disabilities **get a fair and equitable education** and overcome these challenges.

The **Special Education** peer review evaluated SPS' special education services and recommended strategies to strengthen and improve them.

### The Reviewers

The Special Education study was conducted by a team from the **Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative**. The Collaborative, which is located in Newton, Mass., is a network of more than 100 urban school districts from around the country that work together to strengthen education for students with disabilities. Team members included Dr. David Riley, executive director of the Collaborative; Dr. Elise Frattura, University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee; and Dr. Richard Lombard, University of Wisconsin – Whitewater. All three team members have extensive experience working with special education programs for students with disabilities.

## Summary

The reviewers concluded that Seattle could strengthen its special education programs by updating the programs to bring them in line with recent research. Their recommendations include:

- **Service delivery:** Instead of organizing special education programs by disability (which means that students can attend only the school that offers a program for their particular disability), SPS should instead assign students with disabilities to regular, general education classrooms at the school of their choice and then help them with the extra support they need.
- **Transition:** Planning for the transition to life after high school is important for all students. It is particularly important for students with disabilities to help them realize their full potential. SPS should develop a district-wide career and postsecondary planning curriculum to help students with disabilities plan for the future.
- **Organization:** The superintendent should ensure that special education is a priority of everyone in the district, not just those in the special education department. This might require organizational changes within the district.

## Study Methods

The review team **interviewed** more than 100 SPS staff, education professionals and families of students with disabilities and **reviewed** SPS reports, records and other documents related to special education services.

## Findings and Recommendations

The review team evaluated three specific areas of special education services:

- Service delivery – how students receive services at school
- Transition – how students prepare for life after high school
- Organization – how special education is structured at SPS

**Service delivery:** SPS provides a range of special education services. Students receive different types of services depending on their needs. Some students spend most of their time in a regular (general education) classroom and see a specialist for extra help once or twice a week; others spend nearly all their time in a special education classroom. In general, students with disabilities spend more of their time in special education classrooms—rather than in general classrooms—as they get older.

The reviewers noted that current research shows that it is better for students to spend more time in general education classrooms, and they praised SPS for the

district's growing commitment to "inclusive" education, in which students with disabilities spend as much of their time as possible in a general classroom, learning alongside students who do not have disabilities. The reviewers also praised SPS for offering instructional assistants a way to obtain a special education teacher license.

However, the reviewers expressed concern that SPS special education programs are largely organized by disability, with students assigned to them based on their "label." This can make it difficult for students to attend the school of their choice, can marginalize lower-income students and students of color, and can reinforce a message that students with disabilities cannot achieve as much as students without disabilities.

The reviewers recommended that Seattle move toward an "integrated services" model of educating students with disabilities. In this model, all students would be assigned to a general education classroom and would then receive additional support based on their individual needs. The reviewers note that this change would be significant and could take time and effort to implement.

**Transition:** To thrive in today's world, students must plan carefully and creatively for life after high school: They must set goals for postsecondary education and career choices and then learn what they must do in high school to work toward those goals. Planning for the transition out of high school is particularly important for students with disabilities, as people with disabilities are too often underemployed.

In this area, the review team praised SPS for adopting lessons for students with disabilities that help them explore careers, learn about postsecondary education and develop Individualized Education Programs (IEP). The team also praised SPS for ensuring that all students age 14 and over participate in planning for life after high school, rather than waiting until age 16, as federal law permits.

However, the review team suggested that SPS could strengthen its transition planning services in several ways. They noted that students need help setting measurable postsecondary goals and planning for the support services they will require in a postsecondary program. In addition, they noted that many special education teachers—the people who spend the most time with students with disabilities—have not received enough training to be able to help students plan for the future.

The team recommended that SPS develop a formal, district-wide transition planning program for all special education students. This program should include career awareness for students in grades K through five, career exploration for students in grades six to eight, career preparation for students in high school and career assimilation to help students with disabilities make the transition out of high school. In addition, the reviewers recommended that families of students with disabilities must be engaged more actively in helping their students plan for the future.

**Organization:** As the reviewers examined the district’s current organization of special education programs, they noted that school districts throughout the country have been reorganizing special education to respond to new research about how students with disabilities can be served best. Over the last 10 years, they noted, the definition of special education has changed from being “a place” where students with disabilities are educated to “a service” that supports the larger education system and serves all students, including students with disabilities.

The reviewers praised SPS for working toward this new vision of special education. They noted that teachers have been receiving training on how to “differentiate” lessons to serve students with different levels of ability. And they noted that special education curriculum is being aligned with statewide standards to ensure that all students are held to the same high expectations.

However, the reviewers expressed concern that the role of special education within the district is not always clear. Seattle’s strong tradition of site-based management sometimes means that district special education staff have to “ask permission” from a principal to coach special education teachers at a school. In addition, the reviewers were concerned that many of the people they interviewed had low expectations about what students with disabilities could be expected to achieve.

The reviewers recommended that the superintendent ensure that special education is a priority of the entire district, not just of one department. They suggested that the superintendent develop a clear mission and vision for special education and that the district’s organizational structure be changed as needed to reflect this vision.

### **Next Steps**

The Special Education peer review was carried out as part of the **Seattle Public Schools’ strategic planning process**. The strategic plan is being developed to help the school district strengthen academic achievement for all students by allowing us to assess where we are now, develop a list of priorities for improvement and then take action. The strategic plan will be adopted by the school board in June 2008 and will be carried out over the next several years.