
Special Education Review

School District 70 (Alberni)

Port Alberni Tofino Ucluelet Bamfield

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Additionally, my thanks go to:

- ❖ the Special Education Enhancement Committee, for their representation of the SD70 education community, and designing the review of programs and services; for their sense of hope and collective wisdom of current strengths and challenges in the provision of services for children with special needs in SD70. The Committee has a long term vision for Support Services and their willingness to engage a third party to review that vision is to be commended.
- ❖ Central Staff and the Board of Education, sincere thanks for their courage to invite an external review, to objectively view current practices, and consider both general and specific recommendations that serve in the best interest of challenged students throughout the District.
- ❖ Barb Witte, Executive assistant, for her outstanding effort to coordinate and distribute special education surveys.

STRUCTURE FOR THE REVIEW

The Student Support Services Department of SD70, in consultation with Senior Staff and Trustees, requested an independent review of services and supports for students with special needs. A Steering Committee was struck, representing a broad spectrum of the education community. The committee is chaired by the Director of Student Support Services.

The purposes of the independent review are as follows;

- a. To review current practices in light of best practice.
- b. To review current services and service delivery models utilized throughout SD70.
- c. To provide an opportunity to the education community to identify strengths and challenges, both at the school level and district level, via focus meetings and surveying.
- d. To view, via school visits, both services and supports available to students with special needs.
- e. To provide the Steering Committee with support and service recommendations that can be considered for the short, mid term and long term implementation, based on best practice, available expertise, and within the financial resources available to SD70.

On December 9, 2007, the Special Education Enhancement Committee met and identified the areas to be considered during the review.

The Steering Committee requested that the review explore staffing allocation, staffing models and the roles of those that are providing support throughout the district. A secondary goal is to identify those aspects of the district function which would be viewed as positive and supportive.

Inclusive education, and its meaning within SD70, emerged as a theme to be reviewed, taking into consideration the roles of Administrators, Special Education Resource Teachers (SERT), Educational Assistants (EA) and Itinerant staff allocations across the district.

The following themes were identified by the committee for development of short term, mid term and long term recommendations:

- Training of EAs and role
- Fall bumping, and EA replacement
- Secondary Program options
- Succession of Occupational Therapist, Learning Assistance Teachers, Speech/Language Pathologists, Special Education Resource Teachers (Specialty Staffing), Educational Psychologists, Behavioural and Autism Staffing

- Strengths of Student Services
- Expertise of Regular Class Teachers and School Based Teams
- In School Special Education Teachers
- Director of Student Support Services
- Educational In-service
- Student Placement / District Screening options
- IEP Activities (Implementation)
- Compliance (Ministry of Education)

SCHEDULING OF THE REVIEW

The review took place from December 8 to December 15, 2007, with an initial meeting of the Review Steering Committee on Sunday, December 9. During the ensuing week Dr. Zigler, the External Consultant, met with the following focus groups:

- a. School District Administrators including Alternative Education (14)
- b. Central Staff, School Board Staff (9)
- c. Nuu-chah-nulth Education Workers (8)
- d. Ministry for Children and Family Development, Youth Mental Health and Band Social workers (7)
- e. Regular Classroom Teachers (ADTU President) (7)
- f. Itinerant Special Education Staff (13)
- g. Para-Professional EA (CUPE President) (31)
- h. Parents of Students with Special Needs Elem/Middle/Secondary (19)
- i. DPAC (3)
- j. Board of Education (7)
- k. Alternative Education (26)
- l. Enhancement Committee (8)

NOTE: 4 confidential letters were received for review.

SCHOOL VISITS (9)

Site (school) visits were conducted during the review week, providing an opportunity for direct insight into the strengths and challenges for both students and staff, in the provision of support services. Having a sense of physical facilities, along with seeing real students and staff in action, provides a realistic basis for collecting information and providing direction. Brief discussions with school staff and administration provided an opportunity to get an impression only. The following schools were visited:

EJ Dunn Middle School AW Neill Middle School VAST Alberni District Secondary School
Eighth Avenue Elementary School Alberni Elementary School Wickaninnish Community
School Ucluelet Secondary School Ucluelet Elementary School

DATA COLLECTION

Prior to the site review, surveys designed by Dr. Zigler and Darren Ausmus were distributed across the spectrum of education partners in SD70. All surveys were returned, in confidence, assuring respondents that they would be used by the Dr. Zigler, to identify trends, strengths and recommendations. Specific comments are not attributed to the respondent and were not shared with the Director of Student Support Services or Central Staff.

The following surveys were returned for review:

Regular Class Teachers	87 School Based Team
Learning Assistance Teachers	9 Elem / Mid / Sec
Education Assistants (CUPE)	41 Elem / Mid / Sec
Itinerant Special Education Staff	9 SERT, Ed Psych, SLP, Behaviour
Regular Class Teachers	87 Elem / Mid / Sec
Education School Based Teams	13 In-School
Parents of Children with Special Needs	52 Elem / Mid / Sec
Parents of Children with Gifted Abilities	11 Elem / Mid / Sec
School District Administrators	21 Elem / Mid / Sec
Student Survey	86 Elem / Mid / Sec
Central Staff	3
DPAC	1
Total Respondents	386

FINDINGS

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Participants responded to open-ended discussion regarding strengths, challenges and the overall vision for the District to support students with special needs. Each group met, in confidence, providing both verbal and written replies regarding various aspects of programming and support.

❖ ADMINISTRATION FOCUS GROUP

All schools were represented, along with the District Administrator for Alternative Education.

KEY STRENGTHS IDENTIFIED

- The regional screening process is both program and student focussed (VAST).
- Inclusion is a standard and is functional; acceptance among regular students is universal.
- Assistance and support is exceptional, at the district and school level.
- Strong relationship with parents, especially at the elementary level.
- School Based Teams (SBT) are functional and provide school based leadership.
- IEP development is cumbersome but useful.
- Union relationships are viewed as encouraging.
- Transition from school to school is perceived as well developed.
- Prevocational and Life Skills programs provide appropriate education at the secondary level.
- Director of Student Support Services is approachable, possesses a high level of expertise, communicates well and is well supported.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Bumping and EA changes, after September, are disruptive for schools and students.
- Wording of postings is not always consistent, creating specialty position problems.
- Equity among schools is not always apparent; we need a greater understanding of priorities, funding and identification is needed.
- When unqualified staff are hired, programs suffer, and kids fall through the cracks.
- Middle School programs differ from one school to the other. Is there a better way to resolve this issue?
- Is there a better system for IEP implementation?
- The SERT model is not working.
- A model that supports in-school special education staff is needed.

❖ **ITINERANT STAFF (Student Support Services)**

The itinerant staff focus group was comprised of nine members representing District priorities.

KEY STRENGTHS IDENTIFIED

- Highly collaborative, committed to students, schools and professional development.
- Each school has a different student demographic.
- Central screening process and could be extended to secondary.
- Consistent IEP process; very time consuming.
- School based staff and administration are very knowledgeable and flexible.
- The school psychology program is excellent, providing programming suggestions, adjudication and categorical assessment.
- Allocation of staffing seen as fair and equitable, at the elementary level.

- Materials and resources are current and available, tech support needs improvement.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Review of Educational Psychology mandate is required as some requests for assessment are inappropriate and caseload referrals are mounting.
- EA changes through the fall are disruptive and counterproductive.
- Learning assistance needs qualified personnel, trained and consistent.
- Learning Assistance manual needs to be developed, understanding the job and complexities.
- Consulting Staff in behaviour, autism and counselling require role clarification with Administrators; collaborative planning is a must.
- Director of Student Support Services visibility and passion are evident; regular meetings help build a stronger team.
- Auditing criteria, funding and categorical changes are not well understood by administrators and teachers.
- Who will replace itinerant staff members upon retirement?
- In-service required on the relationship between language, behaviour, and adapted and modified programs.
- EA roles and EA boundaries regarding parents, teachers, itinerant staff and special education staff (SD70 EA Handbook would provide clarification).
- Changing parent perception that more EA time solves student need and programs.

❖ PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A total of 19 parents participated in the focus group. With an overview of the review process, and an opportunity to reply, parents of elementary students, parents of students in middle and secondary, and parents of students with gifted abilities, were all allowed to provide perceptual views on the strengths and needs addressed by the District. The focus group was structured to identify school involvement, IEP involvement, program satisfaction and general comments. This section will identify trends and issues as shared, or common experiences of parents with special needs children in SD70.

INVOLVEMENT WITH SCHOOLS

As is traditionally the case, elementary parents were much more involved with their schools than at the middle or secondary level. Time to attend functions and meetings was limited and some parents felt that their voices were not heard. Staff availability was positively commented on, regarding program and planning issues that affected their children. Comments, related to transition from school to school, focussed on the use of IEPs as a living document which was rarely reviewed and restarted each year. The process was time-consuming for parents. Administrators and special education teachers were viewed as key communicators related to programming, and were characterized as positive advocates. Practical, life skills-based programs were identified as strengths at the secondary level; however, opportunities for practical electives at the middle school, were limited. EA support was viewed as a major asset at all levels; however, EA support for students with designated and non-designated learning challenges was viewed as a significant gap. Some parents were concerned that learning assistance was not viewed as Special Education, but rather glorified tutoring or holding programs for non-academic students. Differentiating programming for students with gifted abilities appeared to be school, rather than district, based.

INVOLVEMENT WITH IEPs

Parents at all levels identified the IEP process as flawed. In most cases, the IEP was developed at the school level, with little or no direct involvement. The perception of many parents was that the final IEP was presented as a finished document for signing, with no direct involvement of parents. In some cases, organized parents provided written input to the development of an appropriate IEP for their children and the suggestions were incorporated into the final document. It was suggested by parents that the IEP be reviewed during May/June of each year and that the content of each IEP be further reviewed at the end of November. In this way, progress on goals can be evaluated and potential modifications can be developed early in the year. Parents had great sympathy for staff and the volume of IEP work required. Parents felt that a more efficient IEP system would reduce paperwork and create more time to provide support for their children.

DEGREE OF SATISFACTION WITH THEIR STUDENT PROGRAM

A great deal of passionate discussion was generated, as parents discussed the issues of satisfaction. In order to highlight comments and notes taken at the session, grouping of trends are listed below;

- a) Parents are well satisfied with the targeted programs available at the middle and secondary level. The appropriate inclusion of most students in non-academic electives and life skill-based programs is well respected and is viewed as a strength. Elementary parents were significantly encouraged by their children's support; however, the use of itinerant staff to provide direct support is limited. SERT positions are viewed as paperwork oriented and their involvement is limited. Elementary schools were characterized as knowledgeable and welcoming, placing the needs of students as a priority.
- b) Parents were concerned about the part time nature of some special education staff, and enquired as to the reasoning of part time assignments. They indicated that student programming often suffers when special education teachers are not available, when travelling to many schools.
- c) Parents of elementary students wanted to understand the degree of training of regular class teachers had for dealing with students with special needs, and what responsibility they had in supervising EA support. They indicated that some regular class teachers did not fully understand the behavioural or learning needs of their children, leading to miscommunication.
- d) Few understood the process of funding available through the Ministry of Education for support and how the district established priorities for support.
- e) Support of the Director of Student Support Services was evident. He is seen as a problem solver and advocate for students with special needs. A direct meeting with parents and the Director has been arranged.
- f) Parents wanted greater co-operation between school district personnel and other outside agencies, such as MCFD, paediatricians and mental health agencies, leading to collaborative program planning. The schools are viewed as doing a great job with the resources they have at their disposal, but it is felt that there is not enough support.
- g) Parents wanted to know if EA changes could be minimized during the first part of the school year. In one case a student had twelve EAs, prior to Christmas. It seems that the Union and seniority rights come ahead of student needs. "I think that they have it backwards; if it weren't for our kids they would not have jobs at all".

❖ REGULAR CLASS TEACHERS, LEARNING ASSISTANCE AND IN-SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

This section characterizes strengths and challenges identified by both special education and regular class teachers. Many of the themes identified are similar in nature, viewed from various perspectives. Although each teacher viewed the issues quite differently, some commonality emerged.

KEY STRENGTHS IDENTIFIED

- Pre-school programs are great for transition and should be encouraged, space permitting.
- The early intervention screening process was identified as valuable and well worth the time.
- Speech and Language was viewed as a thin veneer of service, with little practical impact. SLP service should be focussed on early intervention for direct service at the elementary level, and consultation only for the middle and secondary schools.
- School based teams (SBT) and their use are viewed as vital and important to establish school based priorities.
- The Director is visible, approachable and very knowledgeable.
- Administrators seem to really understand special needs students and their parents.
- Itinerant staff is very knowledgeable, but stretched.
- Special Education Pro-D is a priority.
- Parents trust the system, and are very pleased with Special Education Services.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Learning assistance is very fragmented at many sites; qualified special education teachers service too many schools, and don't have the time to mentor classroom teachers.
- Some LA teachers are not qualified or skilled to work with learning disabled students.
- Training of own special education teachers.
- Behaviour students are the greatest challenge, are there elementary Alternate Programs available?
- Speech/Language Pathology (SLP) services are stretched too thin meaning that some language kids do not get SLP service.

- The IEP process is well designed: however, very time consuming, and challenging to adapt and modify student programs.
- More EA time needed, with available substitutes.
- The EAs do a great job following the IEP.
- Time needed to work with EAs when the students are not there.
- Itinerant staff seen very rarely, as they are always doing paperwork and IEPs.
- Referral process is slow, particularly with young primary students.

❖ **EDUCATION ASSISTANTS (CUPE)**

The focus group of EAs consisted of 29 CUPE support workers, representing the majority of schools in the district. This session lasted over 2 hours with written and verbal input providing direction for the review. Commentary is included when a topic was repeated more than twice.

KEY STRENGTHS IDENTIFIED

- The practice of inclusion is well entrenched and is most valuable for students.
- EAs work as a team at the school level, with direction coming from the Administrator.
- Positive work environment.
- The Director is student focussed and wants the best learning environment for students.
- Itinerants value EAs' work.

KEY CHALLENGES

- Time for collaboration with the team; part time teachers and part time itinerants make it impossible to meet during work hours.
- Lack of involvement in the IEP process; IEPs may be rolled over from year to year with little input from EAs or parents.
- Formerly one to one support has been made less possible; EAs work with 3-4 students.
- Labelled students get help and non-labelled get no service.
- No District direction for Pro-D.
- Parental expectations are sometimes unrealistic and cause team stress.
- Threat/Violence with autistic type students is of great concern.
- Specialty positions are difficult to fill and EAs are left to figure it out. (Vision)

IMPROVEMENTS AND ENHANCEMENTS

A predominate theme during the paraprofessional session was based on more personnel, more resources, more time and more collaboration. (M and M syndrome) This theme has significant financial implications and should be considered when support services' priorities are established.

- Clear role description and duties of EAs required, to avoid challenging issues.
- Recognition of the role and function of paraprofessionals.
- Development of a clear protocol when Threat/Violence reports are made.
- Inclusion of appropriate paraprofessionals in SBT meetings, and IEP meetings, when a specific student is discussed.
- Access to current IEPs for program implementation.
- Access to professional development for EAs, on their own time.

SURVEY REVIEW

A total of 386 surveys were returned for review. The surveys were designed collaboratively by Darren Ausmus and Dr. Zigler to elicit confidential replies to be used by Dr. Zigler as part of the review process. A general consensus approach, identifying common themes, was used to analyse survey results and develop recommendations.

*** REGULAR SCHOOL TEACHERS (School Based Team) Respondents 45**

General consensus

- a) The School Based-Team function is of great value, is flexible and leads to appropriate decision making at the school level.
- b) Elementary SBT requests for assessment are timely; however, middle school and secondary requests take much longer.
- c) The direction of the SBT is respected by the Administrator and follow up is timely.
- d) The direction of the SBT becomes the school based plan for all Low Incidence, High Incidence, English as a Second Dialect and Behaviour students.
- e) The use of paraprofessionals at the elementary level is of great value to support classroom instruction.
- f) Teachers rated the role of the SBT, with respect to coordination, assessment, monitoring, IEP review and assisting teachers, within the range of satisfied to very satisfied.

*** LEARNING ASSISTANT TEACHERS (Respondents 9)**

General consensus

- a) The average experience of LA teachers range from 25 years to 60 days.
- b) At the secondary and middle school level, the average case load ranges from 49 to 76 weekly.
- c) At the elementary level, the caseload ranges from 23 to 33 weekly.
- d) Collaboration with regular classroom teachers (RCT) and EA personnel is limited.

- e) IEP development is time consuming and generalized, except for low incidence students.
- f) A significant gap in service, for both high incidence and learning disabled students.
- g) The greatest challenge is low academic behaviour students.
- h) SBT function varies from formal referral to informal discussion.

✱ **EA PARA-PROFESSIONALS (Respondents 37)**

General Consensus

- a) Involvement with IEP development ranges from reasonable involvement at the elementary level to little or no involvement at the middle and secondary level.
- b) For those that choose Pro-D, i.e. POPARD, positive regard was identified.
- c) Sufficient planning time and collaboration with RCT and itinerant staff was seen as a major problem.
- d) EA involvement with staff and administration was identified as extensive; whereas, EA involvement varied from being isolated to full inclusion.
- e) Regular class teachers' orientation to the appropriate use of paraprofessionals would create better working relationships.
- f) Prefer to start on the first day of school, to establish the role and begin working with students. Seniority and temporary positions create a great deal of movement until Christmas, which is really destructive to students and relationships with staff.
- g) Job security is important and seniority needs to be respected, but not at the cost of student progress and consistency of EA service.

✱ **ITINERANT STAFF (Respondents 11)**

General consensus

- a) School-based itinerants have greater communication and collaboration with school personnel than traveling staff.
- b) School-based special education teachers are more effective than travelling ones.

- c) Owing to scheduling, itinerants may or may not be directly involved in the SBT process at individual schools.
- d) Balancing direct service and consultation is a significant challenge.
- e) Caseloads have continued to increase and have become more complex over the last 3-5 years.
- f) IEP development can be overwhelming and takes away from direct service to students.
- g) The Director is skilled, approachable and can pull it all together. He demonstrates compassion, flexibility and leadership.
- h) Standards for hiring special education teachers need to be maintained.
- i) Developing a manual, for Learning Assistant Teachers, that sets out expectations and describes the role, would help when under qualified staff members are hired.
- j) Recognition by the system of the time needed to complete the following:
 - ✓ IEP
 - ✓ meeting with school based staff, parents and outside agencies
 - ✓ meeting with other itinerants and EA personnel
- k) Wasting time training EAs who will be bumped in a short time.
- l) Educating staff and administrators on the referral process and the expected outcomes of assessment.
- m) Establishing district goals for implementation of support services, considering referrals, demographics and school based expertise. Various schools operate numerous models with little theoretical understanding of a needs based service delivery model.
- n) Establishing a required protocol for children transitioning from pre-school to K, school to school, and school to the community.
- o) Consideration for an alternative SLP model of service delivery.
- p) Reviewing Secondary and Middle School service delivery options for high incidence and severely learning disabled students.

* **REGULAR CLASS TEACHERS (Respondents 94)**

General Consensus

- a) School practices were positively regarded, across the spectrum, leading to an acceptable level of job satisfaction.
- b) Inclusion of students with special needs is viewed as a standard that is working well in some schools.
- c) The use of paraprofessionals in the elementary schools is of great value, and supports not only identified students but the entire school population.
- d) The co-ordination of support services and SBT has a history of successful practice and supports the full range of students with special needs.
- e) Elementary teachers view itinerant staff as overworked and somewhat inaccessible due to high case loads and endless paperwork.
- f) Generally teachers were concerned regarding the qualifications and expertise of school based special education staff.
- g) The greatest concern, at all levels, is support for high incidence, students with learning disabilities and behaviour students who jeopardize the learning environment for others. Behavioural support and behavioural management in-service were identified as key directions.
- h) Understanding the role of regular classroom teachers, in adapting and modifying curriculum for students that learn differently.

* **IN-SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFF (Respondents 21)**

General Consensus

- a) Experience in Special Education ranges from 23 years to 1.5 years, with the majority averaging 8-10 years.
- b) The complexity of the job has increased substantially over the past 5 years.
- c) IEP development and testing requirements take valuable time away from direct service to students.
- d) Itinerant staff members are important in developing appropriate programs and services.

- e) Supervision of EA program implementation is limited due to time constraints and lack of in-school meeting times.
- f) Fragmentation of services creates issues of continuity; part-time assignments and travel time between schools create service gaps.
- g) Middle School programs vary from school to school. Each middle school provides different services, based on model and philosophy.
- h) Variation of middle school programs leads to inequities of staff and time available for support.
- i) Administrative support from both the Director and the Principals is excellent. They have the student interest as a priority, but do not neglect teacher and EA needs.
- j) IEP development is a crucial part of the job and should be included as a task for homework, or outside of instructional hours. Taking time away from students to do the paperwork is unethical (25 year veteran).
- k) The greatest concern among special education teachers is the increased number, and complexity, of high incidence and behaviour students, at all levels.

✱ **PARENTS (Respondents 92)**

General Consensus

- a) Elementary parents are positive in reflection of supports and services for their children.
- b) In the majority of cases, parents expressed positive progress made across the curriculum at the students' level.
- c) At the elementary level, parents are involved in the IEP process and express appreciation for the efforts of school personnel, ensuring consistency and flexibility in addressing individual differences.
- d) Less involvement of parents at the middle and secondary level, where students' IEPs are based upon program options and addressing needs through elective and resource room models.
- e) Parents are highly supportive of support services and view the expertise of school staff and itinerants as effective and appropriate.

- f) In a minority of surveys, parents were fully satisfied with wait times and the implementation of supports in a timely manner.
- g) Home school communication was viewed as a significant strength at the elementary level.
- h) Parents expressed clear satisfaction with the support services provided to their children at the school level, but question the value of itinerant support.

✱ **PARENTS OF STUDENTS WITH GIFTED ABILITIES (Respondents 11)**

General Consensus

- a) Parents expressed significant concern that no programming or assessment was available to their children.
- b) In all areas surveyed, parents responded with positive comments regarding the supports and services provided to their children, excepting the IEP.
- c) Parents were not aware of the requirement of an IEP for gifted students and did not know if their children had one or not.
- d) Specific strengths in curriculum, graduate profile, support services and home / school communication were noted.

✱ **ADMINISTRATION (Respondents 22)**

General Consensus

Surveys reflected that 30% of school-based administrators had direct experience and qualifications in Special Education.

- a) Administrators identified three aspects of their in-school program that support students with special needs. They were in-school special education personnel, EA support and itinerant staff support.
- b) When looking for staffing in special education, administrators identified training and experience as top priority, with work ethic flexibility and resourcefulness as positive attributes.
- c) Administrators identified the following strengths of the Director of Student Support Services:

- i. Effective manager of budgets,
 - ii. supporter of equitable distribution of available staffing,
 - iii. effective communicator with school based administrators,
 - iv. very knowledgeable, and
 - v. always goes over and above to meet student and staff needs.
- d) Significant challenges identified by administrators include: EA bumping in the fall, recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified staff, union contracts and lack of flexibility.
- e) Administrators need to understand the financial management of the school district, so that they can have input into priorities and services.
- f) Special Education Services is viewed, by many, as the best organized and most responsive department in the district.
- g) Many teachers do not know how to deliver modified and adapted programs.
- h) Priority schools need to be identified (demographics, poverty, aboriginal learning needs and FASD) and supported differently.
- i) The IEP process needs to be less time consuming.
- j) A small number of behaviour kids need alternate placement .
- k) Time for EA/Teacher planning.
- l) In-school special education staff vs. Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) model.
- m) Support for students with learning disabilities (Q), behaviour support, or mental illness (R).

* **STUDENTS**

A total of 76 students responded to the confidential survey. In most cases students were paired in their response. The secondary response constituted 45 replies, middle school 12 replies and 19 replies from elementary students.

A number of significant themes emerged, focussing on social inclusion, human rights and accessibility. Middle school respondents discussed the nature of positive interaction with students with special needs (SSN), social inclusion and the need for becoming more informed about various disabilities. Secondary respondents discussed the degree of social inclusion as positive; however, academic inclusion was seen as a distraction when SSN are not doing the same type of assignments as the rest of the class. Accessibility concerns were universally expressed at the

secondary level. Elementary respondents were highly encouraging in support for SSN, pointing out the value of having all students included.

The following quotes were drawn from the student surveys reviewed:

(S) Secondary **(M)** Middle **(E)** Elementary

“Are school is excesibel for wheelchair kids” (E)

They are part of the class, when they fit (E)

Everyone should try to understand them (E)

They get allot of help (E)

They are part of the whole school (M)

They do everything we do, with help (M)

Everybody is part of our school (M)

They are very involved in school activities (M)

They are hidden away in special classes (S)

They have their own teachers and helpers (S)

They are not included.....and need to be (S)

I think that students with special needs are happy in school and get the help they need (S)

They should have their own class (S)

Commentary

Student respondents indicated favourable attitudes towards SSN and the overall model of appropriate inclusion. As a social movement, inclusion begins with the general consensus that all students have value and should be educated with non-handicapped peers. Support for inclusion is clearly evident among the student group.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The following recommendations are derived from an analysis of information gathered during the review process. An amalgam of input through focus groups, school visits and survey data has formed the definition of best practice within the context of School District 70 (Alberni). Best Practice is defined by the needs of the students, the expertise of the staffing and the expectations of the education community. The purpose of this section is to promote dialogue among those who directly or indirectly provide support to children in SD70, and to serve as a reference point for subsequent planning and decision making.

Overall, parents, professional staff and administration were very positive about their experience with the support services of SD70. It is evident that the overall consensus of opinion points to well qualified, dedicated staff, that are student focussed. The education community engaged in extensive discussion and explorations of the strengths and challenges in providing for diverse needs of students in a dispersed district. The focus of challenges was, for the most part, based on the limitation of resources and the need for collaboration among school staff, parents and administration. The education community clearly values the strengths of the department and the leadership provided by the Director of Student Support Services.

OVERVIEW

This section is comprised of recommendations that are implementable in the support of the full range of students with special needs in SD70. The foundations of these reflections are based on issues of organization, expertise, transparency and equity.

The structure of this section is divided into four stages:

- (1) General Recommendations
- (2) Short term implementation,
- (3) Mid-term implementation (1 to 3 years), and
- (4) Long term recommendations (beyond 3 years)

Within the context of a changing service delivery model, the following will serve as a general template for consolidation of existing successful programs and potential consideration for change.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. ORGANIZATION: Middle, Secondary

Middle schools and secondary schools offer a wide range of supports for students with special needs. As a discussion point with administration, parents and special education staff, significant differences exist in the allocation of program priorities and ensuring equitable program options across school sites. The goal is to utilize professional development days, or other opportunities, to gather administration, special education staff and the Director of Student Support Services to align, understand differences of populations and expertise, and then evaluate long term student outcomes.

This process will establish a baseline of district services at the middle school and secondary school levels. Implementing this recommendation may be a priority for the spring of 2008, prior to staffing and program descriptions being made available for the fall. Input, and my observations of information regarding this issue, appear to be of significant concern to parents, administration and special education personnel.

Issues for Review:

- Transition of students from middle schools to the secondary school
- Course and program offerings for diverse student need
- The delivery of learning assistance support at the secondary level
- Rationale for student movement from secondary to VAST
- Post-graduation review of all students with special needs to determine transition to upgrading, work, or other post-school options. (Survey to be conducted in the fall after graduation.)

2. ORGANIZATION: All Schools

The organization of support services is based on the high degree of expertise both within school programs and the deployment of specialized itinerant staff.

It would appear, due to staffing constraints, that the majority of schools have challenges with the part-time nature of special education staff and those who are responsible for school based special education positions. The internal monitoring of successful practices and services may be compromised, when special education staff shuttle between schools on a part time basis. This is highlighted when in-school special education staff has multiple schools and part time assignments in each school. A review of part time assignments, and discussion with School Based Team (SBT) members, would yield a consolidated model that provides consistency and loyalty to individual schools.

The challenge comes from small enrollment schools, where needs and numbers do not warrant more full time assignments. This situation is also evident as teachers attempt to top up their assignments to full time, adding partial special education or ESD assignments.

The development of a school based Special Education Teacher model (Learning Resource Teacher /LRT, responsible for the SBT, IEP development, direct group instruction, B Level Assessment, supervision of EA roles, and direct involvement with the spectrum of all category and LA type needs) should be explored. With long term inclusion of students comes the need for long term inclusion of staff.

ISSUES FOR REVIEW:

- Part time assignments, contractual obligations and Union implications.
- Consolidation of special education school based services.
- Supervision and role of the EA; differential skills review.
- Long term consideration for utilization of an LRT model that is school based and includes all special education expectations.

3. ORGANIZATION: General /IEP Issues

The IEP forms a substantial part of the accountability for services and outcomes for students with special needs. Over the last nine years, the demands on staff to design appropriate IEP formats, including ministry requirements, goals and objectives, strategies, evaluation and full parental partnerships, have caused the drawing of service time away from direct service to children. Increasing paperwork and meetings have delayed the implementation of planned IEP goals for direct services to children. This unfortunate turn of events has caused many special education teachers to transfer to the regular classroom, with a severe loss of expertise resulting.

SD70 has a comprehensive IEP system that is labour intensive, cumbersome, and requires significant time for the development of IEP documentation. The design of each IEP may take many hours and the follow-up meetings with the IEP team many more. The adoption of a web-based IEP system, that reduces the time to create comprehensive ongoing IEP documents, should be considered with haste. *IEP Central*, designed in BC, with BC standards and a comprehensive data base of user-friendly information, is being used by 8 districts in the province, with overwhelming positive regard.

ISSUES FOR REVIEW:

- Cost of IEP web based systems
- Review of districts currently using IEP Central for feedback to SD70
- Time commitment for implementation
- IEP requirements for audit compliance

EXPERTISE: General

- ✓ Clearly the expertise of special education staff is appropriate. The application of special education services and the scope and sequence of the school experience for students is one that can be viewed as challenging, but working.
- ✓ Itinerant staff are viewed as competent, yet overwhelmed with significant caseload issues.
- ✓ The Director of Student Support Services is universally viewed as a visible leader, with expertise and credibility in all aspects of service delivery. He is viewed as visible, transparent, and serves as a model to his staff and the administration team.
- ✓ Itinerant staff and in-school special education staff are focussed on the needs of students.
- ✓ The EAs bring hands-on expertise to support both inclusion and striving for independence of all students.
- ✓ As is typically the case, the need for MORE was a recurring theme of all focus groups, school visits and survey analysis. Within financial realities, the expansion of services is optimistic; however, the organizational recommendations would serve to consolidation of existing services under the leadership of appropriately qualified staff on a school to school basis.
- ✓ A review of Administration surveys identified a substantial expertise in Student Support Services, both on an experiential and coursework basis. Approximately 40% of administrators have direct experience or qualification in Special Education.

ISSUES FOR REVIEW:

- a) Reduction of direct SLP services to the middle school and secondary schools with an emphasis on elementary intervention. Concentrating direct SLP service to the elementary school would eliminate unrealistic caseloads and enhance student outcome. SLP support at the middle and secondary levels can be maintained on a consultative basis only.

- b) Caseload review of all itinerant staff regarding compliance to Provincial Guidelines. Regular reviews will ensure compliance.
- c) Minimum levels of qualification for in-school special education staff.
- d) Succession planning: Malaspina Special Education Post Grad Diploma.
- e) In-service for all administration on Special Education Services Delivery priorities, including the Superintendent, Asst. Superintendent and Secretary-Treasurer.
- f) Monthly articles in the local newspaper highlighting Special Education Services and student success.
- g) Caseload review of the District School Psychologists, reviewing priorities and the need for potential expansion of such services.

TRANSPARENCY AND EQUITY: General

Confidence in any system is based on full disclosure of available resources and the review of a rationale for determining priorities. In situations where financial resources and priorities are not viewed as transparent, suspicion and loss of relationship may occur. At the same time, discussions of inequitable allocation of support arise when input for determining priorities appears to be inadequate.

It is recommended that the Special Education Department develops a Budget Allocation Committee that reviews revenues, the existing determination of resource allocation and the demographic needs of schools within the district. This would support transparency, ease concerns regarding equity and enable access to the making of school based decisions.

The challenge will always exist that there are never sufficient resources to provide for the full support of all children, according to existing budget allocations for students with special needs. It is the responsibility of the Director of Student Support Services to ensure that differential needs across school communities are addressed and at the same time, an understanding of priorities and limitations is made apparent to all in the education community. With declining enrollment and increasing recognition of needs, budgetary transparency will assist in dispelling rumour and myth in resource allocation.

ISSUES FOR REVIEW:

- Who represents the education community?
- When financial allocations are made to the District, (Level 1,2 and 3), the Budget Allocation Committee assists the Director in reviewing revenues, and the allocation of resources to support the needs of schools.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS (SHORT TERM)

RECOMMENDATION #1:

That time be made available, within the work week of EAs, to allow consultation with classroom teachers.

Rationale:

The enhancement of the value of the EA role is determined by the working relationship and understanding of expectations. Regular classroom teachers need to work in concert with designated EAs to achieve consistency and direction.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

That the in-school special education model be reconsidered: amalgamation of the role of Learning Resource Teacher (LRT) to include IEP development (all categories); EA directions; High Incidence direct instructional support; SBT Chair; assessment referral; and ESD.

Rationale:

School based special education takes into consideration the allocation of school based personnel resources, matches strengths to needs, and establishes the baseline of support programs. The itinerant Special Education Resource Teacher (SERT) model is not viewed as adequate in addressing such issues. Converting SERT allocations to a school based LRT model will create a more timely determination of program goals and would rely on the expertise of in-school special education to manage the support system. The LRT would provide supervision of EA personnel and guide regular classroom teachers in the implementation of adapted/modified programming for students in the classroom environment.

Current in-school special education is viewed as fragmented, (English as a Second Dialect, First Nations, Learning Assistance, IEPs, assessment referrals, EA roles, Inclusion, SBT role) and, thus, consolidation under a school based qualified special education professional would enhance service delivery.

RECOMMENDATION #3:

Implement a hiring protocol where the Director of Student Support Services assists in the development of all teacher postings within the Special Education department, to ensure minimum levels of expertise. The Director of Student Support Services then assists the school based administrator in short listing and interviewing potential candidates, for maintaining an appropriate level of service at the school level. In cases where special education assignments are determined by seniority, caution must be exercised to encourage new hires with appropriate qualifications and experience. In cases where qualified applicants are not available, appointment letters must specify the expectation of further training.

Rationale:

Ensuring appropriately qualified staffing is a significant role of the Student Support Services Department. In this way, student need is addressed by those who have the training and experience to provide such services. The quality control function of the District rests between school administration and the Student Support Services Department. This collaborative effort ensures that services become all-inclusive and compliance to Special Education Guidelines is in place.

RECOMMENDATION #4:

There is one significant issue identified, by analysis of input, that impacts on consistency of support for students with special needs in SD70. In all cases the focus is on EA support and the impact of EA movement in the fall of each year. A comprehensive discussion with CUPE, negotiating a means to reduce EA movement would ensure staff consistency throughout the school year, and respect employee rights to job security and seniority. Most school districts have such an agreement in place, leading to greater relationship building and reduced stress for the students.

Rationale:

This issue was identified by focus groups, surveys and school visits, as impacting on the consistency of service by EA positions in the district. In some cases, replacement of temporary positions can span into November. Time taken for holidays during the instructional year are at the discretion of the employer and should be reviewed in light of consistency of student support. A review of existing memorandums of understanding from other districts would assist in negotiating a workable solution to annual fall EA movement.

RECOMMENDATION #5

The development of a comprehensive support system is dependent upon the acquired skills and knowledge of all team members. This approach is designed to ensure that each team member has the sufficient skill and background to play each vital role. It is recommended that regular class teachers be provided opportunities to acquaint themselves with an understanding of each low incidence student who will be included in his/her class. Ideally, this in-service would be provided by visitation to the prior year's classroom and contact with the itinerant staff and special education teacher(s) involved.

Rationale:

Successful in-class inclusion of low incidence students revolves around the understanding of student need and the appropriate deployment of EA support. The sequence of the day, the skills for social inclusion and the role of the EA will enhance all inclusive classrooms.

RECOMMENDATION #6

The recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified special education teachers and itinerant staff, in specialty areas, will require a great deal of energy and pre-planning. The Special Education Department will only flourish when this crucial objective is fulfilled. There are four sources of professional staff recruitment and one strategy to retain the folks you have. The four sources are:

- New Graduates
- Providing practicum placements for 5th year special education teachers
- Continued course offerings with Universities to continue Post Grad programs in Special Education locally
- Pilfering from other districts

With declining enrollment, comes the annual lay-off of low seniority staff. With the retirement of well seasoned special education teachers comes the hiring of less experienced teachers. It is recommended that the district discuss the rationale of exempting qualified special education teachers and other specialty itinerant staff to ensure continuity of supports over the long term. This understanding will enhance the recruitment and retention of special education staff.

Rationale:

From school visits and focus group sessions, it was determined that 40-50% of special education personnel will retire in the next 5 years. Further, qualified and experienced special education personnel will move to districts that take into consideration specialty qualifications during annual lay-off times.

RECOMMENDATION #7

School catchment areas represent significant differences in socio-economic status, transiency, and specific learning needs. It is recommended that the Director of Student Services convene a meeting of Administrators, Special Education staff, Ministry of Children and Family Development, and social worker representation from Nuu-chah-nulth, in order to identify service gaps, student need and existing inter-agency support.

Rationale:

Enrolment is not the only factor that determines appropriate support levels by school. Thus, collaboration to establish an understanding of demographics and student need would provide clarity in support allocations.

RECOMMENDATION #8

As determined by the input of focus groups, the need for clear transitional planning from pre-school to K, elementary to middle, and middle to secondary, would ensure transferability of IEP programs and documentation required to support newly established programs in the receiving school.

Rationale:

Concerns were expressed that both review of IEPs and student documentation is delayed when students transition from school to school. Part of the concern is the September pressure for the 1701, and often special education programming is not established in the receiving school until well into the fall. This concern has impact on parental involvement, EA allocation, and presents challenges for regular class teachers in supporting appropriate inclusion.

RECOMMENDATION #9

Both the breadth of Student Support Services, and the complexity of Ministry expectations regarding compliance, speak to the need for Administrators and the Director of Student Support Services to meet regularly.

Rationale:

Administrators have expressed a desire to have regular meetings with the Director of Student Support Services regarding issues of service delivery, funding, categorization of students and school-based support issues. By meeting regularly, (minimum 3 times per year), the expressed concerns and understanding of diverse learners would be shared and more appropriately understood.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS (Mid Term)

RECOMMENDATION #1

In a district that represents two distinct geographical areas, the need to consider a service delivery model for the West Coast is imperative.

It is recommended that the Director of Student Support Services establishes a concentrated service model where itinerant staff member visit West Coast schools on a rotational basis; i.e. for one month in the fall and one month in the spring. In this way, itinerant staff can work with in-school special education personnel to establish IEP expectations, speech aid services, and direct assessment for referred students.

Rationale:

The West Coast is part of SD70 and, thus, the challenge to provide equitable service in more rural and remote areas is recognised. The Director needs to establish a base line of itinerant service to ensure that the special needs students enrolled in West Coast schools are adequately addressed.

RECOMMENDATION #2

It is recommended that the Director continue to pursue the implementation of a web-based IEP system.

Rationale:

Clearly, significant concerns were expressed regarding the time needed to establish comprehensive and compliant IEPs in SD70. The implementation of a BC based IEP system that allows for transferability between schools, and access to relevant goals, objectives, strategies and evaluation, would address this challenging barrier.

RECOMMENDATION #3

In the evolution of developing a Learning Resource Teacher model, the need for handbooks, at all levels, defining roles, responsibilities and protocols, becomes evident. Consequently, existing Special Education personnel would collaborate in the establishment of this new service delivery model. In addition, personnel hired in future special education service would have a clearly articulated handbook to follow.

Rationale:

The establishment of LRT positions requires consistency and application in order to fully address the diverse needs of students with special needs.

RECOMMENDATION #4

Significant concern and confusion surround the role and mandate of Education Psychology Services throughout SD70. It is recommended that the educational psychologists provide written guidelines to administrators and others in the educational community, defining priorities and protocol for assessment. Directed in-service should be provided annually, on a professional development day, highlighting the roles and responsibilities of educational psychologists within the context of SD70.

Rationale:

During focus groups, and the analysis of surveys returned, significant confusion and lack of understanding of Education Psychology Services became evident. As a key component of student programming, adjudication and categorization of students with special needs, educational psychology practice requires clarification for parents, administrators and special education personnel.

RECOMMENDATION #5

As a priority to support the inclusion of students with special needs in appropriate school settings, the need for both a theoretical and practical understanding of modified and adapted programs is required. It is recommended that the Student Support Services department establishes a high priority for in-servicing regular class teachers in this methodology.

Rationale:

Regular classroom teachers need to be included as a support for diverse learners within their classes. Considering that the regular classroom teacher is responsible for supervision and evaluation of students with special needs, targeted skills in adaptations and modifications would enhance the student experience and support appropriate inclusion at all levels.

RECOMMENDATION #6

Specific concerns were expressed regarding the incidents of threat/violence against employees in SD70. A clear communications and resolution protocol is required to define threat/violence and provide support to employees that experience such situations.

Rationale:

The development of this protocol would ensure that programming of students who exhibit impulsive violence, or demonstrate threatening behaviour, would be recognised and appropriately established. Safety of employees is a significant responsibility of the Board of Education, and needs to be addressed in consultation with representatives of the EA employee group.

RECOMMENDATION #7

As a significant proportion of student enrollment, students with special needs should be included in the district's Student Achievement Plan. It is recommended that the Student Support Services department utilizes Ministry data ("How Are We Doing?") and locally derived information, as an integral part of this district document.

Rationale:

Progress in student achievement towards both IEP goals and enhancement of independence are priorities for the Student Support Services department. Ensuring that achievement data reflects District priorities and that all students are included in the Student Achievement Plan should be desired outcomes for SD70.

RECOMMENDATION #8

The school based team (SBT) should function as a central consultative body that determines school needs, referral process, and collaborative problem solving. There are many different models operating in SD70 from informal conversations to formally documented meetings. It is recommended that Student Support Services establishes a district wide SBT model, with district financial support, to recognise the validity of the SBT function.

Rationale:

The members of a functional SBT fully comprehend the priorities of student needs, and the desire to access specialty services for challenged students. Since practice throughout the district varies, establishing a consistent SBT model would ensure equal voice, regardless of the size and composition of the school.

RECOMMENDATION #9

Cultural diversity is a hallmark of SD70. In recognition of this diversity, and the need for enhanced support for student achievement, it is recommended that the Student Support Services Department develops a strong working relationship with the Nuu-chah-nulth Education Workers and the Tribal Council.

Rationale:

A minority of schools in SD70 have up to 50% of their enrollment being students of aboriginal ancestry. The number of undiagnosed students with special needs is significant, and, therefore, representatives of the aboriginal educational community and Student Support Services working together, would assist in educational assessment that would enhance the educational experience for many who are struggling.

RECOMMENDATION #10

A small, yet significant, number of elementary students require services that are currently not available in SD70. Specifically, children with severe behaviour disorders or emotional disturbance require a treatment-based educational program in an alternate setting. It is recommended that exploration of early intervention models be initiated.

Rationale:

School visits and discussion with elementary administrators identified this challenging group of students who jeopardise the safety of themselves and others and the mental health of the classroom teachers. The development of an Early Intervention treatment program would provide for the social and emotional needs of this group.

RECOMMENDATION #11

It is recommended that the Director meet with parents of designated students in the Gifted category (P), for the purposes of discussing program assessment and future directions for this group of student with special needs.

Rationale:

Through surveying and the parent focus group, concerns were expressed regarding specific programming and development of appropriate IEPs for students with gifted abilities.

RECOMMENDATION #12

It is recommended that the Director review the allocation of specialty supports for students with visual impairments, access to a teacher for the visually impaired, and the role of dedicated EAs who support visually impaired students.

Rationale:

In relation to the provincial guidelines, development of appropriate programming and IEP requirements, indicate the need for direct involvement of a qualified teacher for the visually impaired.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS (Long Term)

RECOMMENDATION #1

SD70 is in the midst of a significant challenge to retain and recruit special education personnel. It is recommended that the Student Support Services Department provides incentive for interested professionals to establish special education qualifications, ensuring continuity and the best possible service delivery throughout the district.

Rationale:

With a qualified and experienced special education staff, the development of a fully articulated service delivery model is achievable in the long term. Access to post-graduate special education certification is available in co-operation with Malaspina College. This local training will enhance skills for regular classroom teachers and those interested in pursuing careers in special education.

RECOMMENDATION #2

With a significant proportion of special needs students being of aboriginal ancestry in SD70, the need for qualified teachers of aboriginal ancestry becomes a priority. Working with the local aboriginal Tribal Council in establishing long term training options is recommended.

Rationale:

Role modelling and integrating professionals from various cultural groups enhances student outcomes and ensures equitable access for all specialized programming throughout SD70.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Clear articulation of the rights, roles and responsibilities of EAs in SD70 is recommended. In collaboration with education partners, the development of a working handbook outlining these expectations is of great significance.

Rationale:

As a member of the Student Support Services team, EAs often need clear and consistent guidelines to enhance participation, and recognise the value of their role. The handbook should include all members of the support team and clearly define the roles of each one.

NEXT STEPS

The purpose of this section is to assist the Special Education Enhancement Committee in recognizing their vital role.

With the leadership of the Director and the contents of this report, the next steps become self-evident. Political will, a collaborative implementation plan, and a review of the enclosed recommendations, will provide opportunity for defining direction. I trust that the motivation and working relationships will ensure an achievable model for SD70, within the framework of declining enrollment and fiscal challenge.

I would be very interested in receiving a copy of your Implementation Plan to use as a model for enhancing services for student with special needs.

CONCLUSIONS

As a district, you provide exemplary services to students with special needs. Your dedication and skill is evident, from seasoned administration to the overall perceptions of parents who view the system with great appreciation.

In any external review, areas of concern and challenge will be disclosed; however, the goal of this review is to make a good system even better. I applaud your efforts and the vision to expose all, with a view for the future.

I will be bringing a number of your practices back to my district for consideration. This review has been the best of possible professional opportunities for my own professional practice.

Thank you for this wonderful opportunity.

***Cheers,
Dr. Richard Zigler
February, 2008***