
**A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF PK-12 SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR
COLCHESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

Final Report



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Submitted to:
Superintendent of Schools
Colchester Public Schools
127 Norwich Avenue
Colchester, Connecticut 06883

April 11, 2022

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Colchester Public Schools engaged InCompliance LLC to conduct a comprehensive review of the district's PK-12 special education programs. InCompliance LLC consultants experienced in all aspects of special education administration and programming conducted the review addressing the following areas:

1. Are the policies, procedures, and goals of the special education department clearly articulated?
2. Do metrics exist for evaluating educational benefit?
3. Is there sufficient capacity to meet the educational goals and to predict future special education expenditures?

Upon completion of the review, the consulting team met with district leadership to discuss the team's initial findings and to assist in establishing district goals. A final written report was respectfully submitted to the Superintendent of Schools on April 11, 2022 by the consulting team.

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COMMENDATIONS

The following commendations are made for Colchester's ongoing efforts in meeting the needs of its special education students:

Colchester is commended for:

- An articulated administrative structure for administering all aspects of their special education programs consistent with the recommendations of the Council for Exceptional Children.
- Principals and assistant principals who share a great deal of the responsibility for administering the special education programs in their buildings.
- Special education teachers and related services specialists who provide a continuum of high-quality specialized instruction to students with varying degrees of disability in the regular, resource, and separate classroom as well as alternative and community settings.
- Providing a continuum of special education services including specialized in-district programming for students with significant learning challenges.
- Strong sense of teamwork and collaboration among building-level teams.
- Fiscal mindedness in light of the negative impact of federal and state funding limits.

- Vision and forward thinking of the Board of Education and district leadership in establishing the Connecticut Transition Academy of Colchester.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Comprehensive Program Review offers non-prioritized recommendations for the Colchester leadership team to consider.¹

1. Increase the visibility of the Director of Pupil Services and Special Education within schools, as the primary mode of communication between the director and building administration is email or memo.
2. The director convenes regularly scheduled meetings with the principal to address regulatory changes; changes in policies and procedures; current trends in special education and special education law; and consultation on difficult cases that are beyond the purview of building administration.
3. Establish a communication plan with guidelines for the levels and types of communication appropriate to the issue at hand. This plan must reflect shared decision making, participation and responsibility and must be effective and efficient. The hierarchy of communication needs to be clarified as well. Inefficient communication practices can negatively affect the quality of instruction, especially given the time constraints for regular and special education teachers to meet and collaborate. It is also imperative that the district special education teachers meet regularly to plan schedules for incoming students, develop specialized instruction, and consult and collaborate on IEP development and implementation to ensure that each student is receiving education benefit throughout the school year.
4. The Director of Pupil Services and Special Education no longer act as the 504 coordinator and oversight for this program be delegated to a regular education administrator.
5. Establish a district inclusion team consisting of central office and building administrators, district inclusion facilitator, special and regular teachers, and related service providers to monitor inclusive practices at the high school. The team's focus would be to develop a comprehensive plan that promotes inclusive practices that addresses but is not limited to the following areas:
 - a. Professional development for all staff, including special education teachers, general education teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals on the following topics:
 - i. Best practices for supporting students in inclusive settings.

¹ It is important to note that following a meeting to discuss the team's initial findings and to assist in establishing district goals, Colchester administration began work immediately to address specific areas identified by the study.

- ii. Accessing the general education curriculum through differentiation.
 - b. Scheduled meetings with grade-level teams to model best inclusive practice and differentiation. Additionally, there should be common, regularly scheduled time for collaboration between the regular and special education teachers assumed within the teachers' schedule.
 - c. On-site coaching of best practice in inclusive settings, including differentiation of curricula, implementation of behavior management systems, and progress monitoring tools.
 - d. Review and revision of structures of support for students with special needs through IEP recommendations during annual review and transition meetings.
6. Building administration be afforded advanced professional development specific to special education policies, procedures, and legal issues.
 7. The director actively participates in the hiring of new special education staff and the evaluation of special education teachers.
 8. Provide the most recent "*Model Special Education Procedures and Practice Manual*" (2019) to all schools. The manual should also be made available on the district's website for ease of access given that written policies and procedures establish a common set of expectations for all stakeholders.
 9. Provide staff training on eligibility determination including all required eligibility determination documentation completed in a manner consistent with the guidelines established by the Connecticut State Department of Education.
 10. Professional development and coaching be provided to all special education and related services staff on the required data elements of the Individualized Education Program. Rather than providing a more generic overview, the training should focus on the specific mandated requirements for each element of the Individualized Education Program and their connection to the program as a whole.
 11. Develop a system of central oversight of Individualized Education Programs to ensure that all required elements are included and in compliance with established policies and procedures. In the event that a technical or substantive error is identified, procedures prescribed by the Bureau of Special Education for making changes to the Individualized Education Program are to be followed. Points to monitor include but are not limited to:
 - a. Documentation that parents are provided with Prior Written Notice and that the Prior Written Notice accurately reflects the actions proposed or rejected by the PPT.
 - b. Alignment of student goals with identified area(s) of need.
 - c. Data substantiating master of goals is included in the record.
 - d. Annotated copies of student goals and objectives are included in the student file.
 - e. Documentation that the periodic reports of progress are sent to parents.

- f. Accurate calculation and reporting of hours of special education and related services.
 - g. Delineation of the amount of time each service implementer will work directly when several are referenced for a single service.
 - h. For students whose IEP includes transitioning planning, post-school outcome statements and post-secondary and employment outcome statements are consistent with guidance language provided by the State Department of Education.
12. Identify specific learning objectives aligned with department goals with accompanying outcome metrics for all professional development activities related to special education. In keeping with best practice, it is recommended that baseline data and goal targets be included in order to evaluate growth as a result of these activities.
 13. Review the feasibility of retaining the special teacher assigned to district-wide initial evaluation.
 14. Provide professional development to educate staff on the language needs of EL student referred or eligible for special education.
 15. Develop a process that supports the induction of new staff hired following the start of the school year.
 16. Provide documentation that quarterly progress reports were sent and received by parents.
 17. Adopt and maintain fidelity to a system of progress monitoring that provides accurate data reflecting ongoing student progress for all IEP goals and objectives.
 18. A process be developed that assists teams in using data to more effectively determine why paraprofessional support is necessary, and where, when, and how the supports are to be delivered.
 19. Review requirements for referring hospitalized students to special education.
 20. Formalize the transition program to include a manual/handbook articulating processes, procedures, and guidelines including but not limited to entrance/exit criteria, and program goals and credit activities. This information should also be included on the district website.
 21. The district monitor graduation rate using the Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education SPP Indicator 4 District Suspension/Expulsion Self-Assessment
 22. Provide stipends for students enrolled in the transition academy to allow staff to teach students personal money management skills aligned with “best” practice.
 23. Meet with East Haddam to discuss feasibility of common start and end times, and common program identity.
 24. Reinstate the use of the parent exit survey following each PPT meeting.
 25. Report aggregate exit survey data to the superintendent on a quarterly basis.

26. Provide support for the reestablishment of the special education parent group (SEPTO).
27. Include a parent group as part of the interview process when hiring the new director.
The district may consider allowing the parent group to meet with the applicants separately in order to provide the district with their impressions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The consultants would like to thank the superintendent, principals and assistant principals, pupil services and special education administrators and support staff, school personnel, and parents for their cooperation in conducting this program review.

1.0 INTRODUCTION AND DISTRICT OVERVIEW

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Colchester Public Schools engaged InCompliance LLC to conduct a comprehensive review of the district's PK-12 special education programs. InCompliance LLC consultants experienced in all aspects of special education administration and programming conducted the review. At the request of the school district, the program review addressed the following:

1. Are the policies, procedures, and goals of the special education department clearly articulated?
2. Do metrics exist for evaluating educational benefit?
3. Is there sufficient capacity to meet the educational goals and to predict future special education expenditures?

Data for this review was collected over multiple days using a variety of methods:

- Review of special education student records.
- Review of district special education financial records.
- Review of IDEA Grants 611 and 618.
- Review of district special education policies and procedures.
- Interviews with:
 - Superintendent,
 - Central office administration,
 - Building administration,
 - Special education teachers,
 - Related-services personnel, and
 - Parents.

1.2 DISTRICT OVERVIEW

Colchester is located in northwestern New London County, Connecticut. Ranked #114 on the 2022-2023 Adjusted Equalized Net Grand List per Capita², Colchester Public Schools is classified as a District Reference Group D (DRG D) school district (see Appendix A). Colchester has four schools; Colchester Elementary, Jack Jackter Intermediate, William J. Johnston Middle, and Bacon Academy. The district also provides an alternative high school setting and a community-based transition program. The total district enrollment as noted in the 2019-2020 state reporting is 2322 students which ranked Colchester as the eighteenth largest DRG D school district (see Figure 1).

² <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Grants-Management/Report1/WRank/aen2023.pdf>

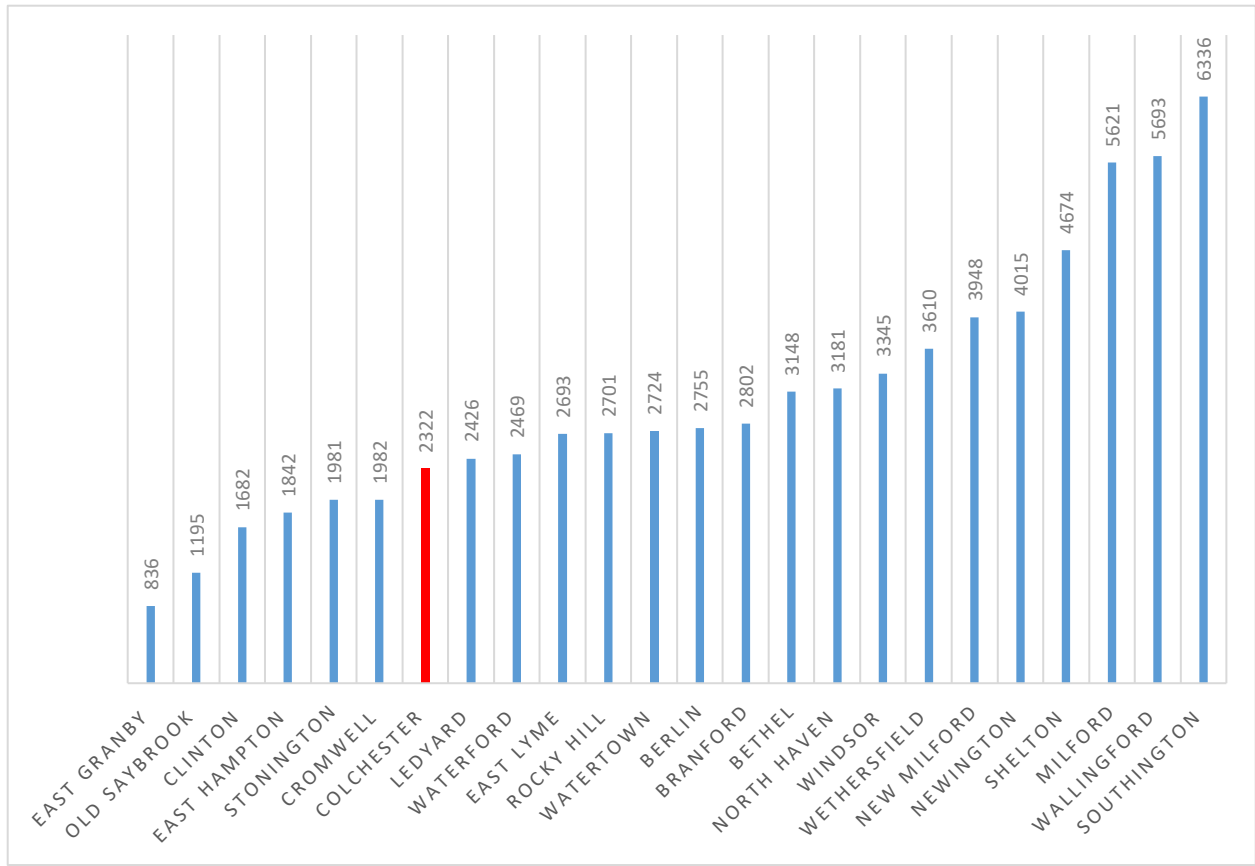


Figure 1. DRG D District Enrollment (2019-2020).

Colchester has long prided itself on the quality of education provided by the school district. The town’s commitment to its students and their families is well reflected in the district’s mission statement and goals³:

OUR MISSION

- *We create innovative thinkers for a dynamic world.*

OUR GOALS

- *We will raise academic growth expectations for all students.*
- *Students will develop innovative thinking and authentic problem-solving skills by engaging in rigorous tasks.*
- *Our instruction and curriculum facilitate integrated, real-world learning that maximizes individual potential of each student.*
- *We will increase our capacity to respond to student academic, emotional and social needs through partnerships with caregivers and the community.*
- *We align the budget with the district vision and the needs of our students.*

³ <https://www.colchesterct.org>

1.3 PREVALANCE RATE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Prevalence rate refers to the percentage of identified children with disabilities found eligible for special education and related services within the district. Prevalence rates in Colchester have been consistently above the statewide average ranging from 0.3% to 1.5% higher for 2016-2017 to 2019-2020 and 0.6% lower than the statewide average for 2020-2021. Colchester's prevalence rate has been consistently above the DRG D average for the time period 2016-2017 to 2020-2021, ranging from 0.5% above to 2.5% higher (see Figure 2).

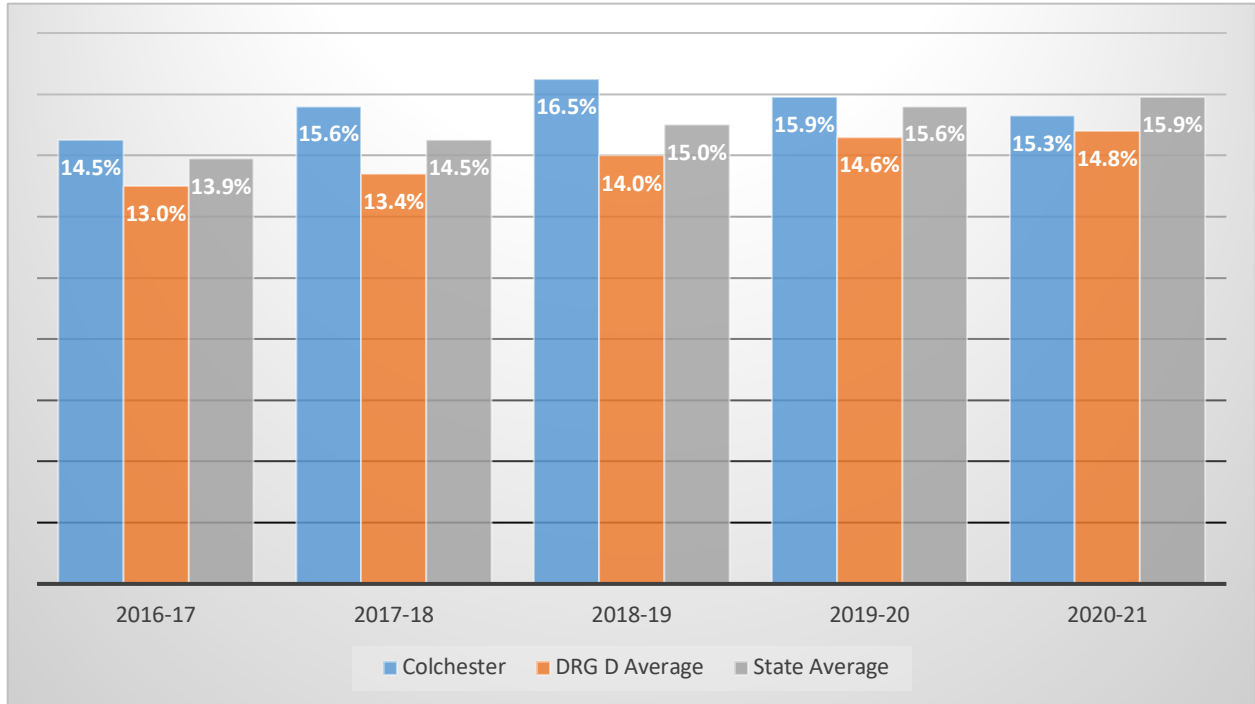


Figure 2. Special Education Prevalence Rates: Colchester, DRG D, and Statewide

2.0 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND STAFFING NECESSARY TO SUPPORT THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

2.1 Administration

The responsibilities of special education leaders have been described as complex and diverse as the needs of the students they serve. Their work is founded on the belief that all children be included in the educational experience regardless of their level of disability and they must continually adapt to new legislative initiatives, budgetary constraints, changes in best practices, and differing systems of accountability that govern their ability to serve the students under their charge.

According to the Council for Exceptional Children⁴ the system of organization and administration developed for special education should be linked with regular education to increase the capability of the system to make more flexible responses to change in the behavior of individual students, to change conditions in schools, and to permit all elements of the system to influence the policies and programs of the others. The major purpose of the special education administrative organization is to provide and maintain those environmental conditions in schools that are most conducive to the growth and learning of children with special needs.

Colchester employs two central office administrators responsible for all aspects of the special education programs consistent with the recommendations of the Council for Exceptional Children.⁵ The Office of Pupil Services and Special Education is headed by a director who is responsible for administering all program operations including budget development and management as well as oversight of all special education programs district-wide. The assistant director is responsible for assisting the director in the coordination of all special education

⁴ “Special education must provide an administrative organization to facilitate achievement for children with exceptionalities of the same educational goals as those pursued by other children. This purpose can be achieved through structures that are sufficiently compatible with those employed by regular education to ensure easy, unbroken passage of children across regular-special education administrative lines for whatever periods of time may be necessary, as well as by structures that are sufficiently flexible to adjust quickly to changing task demands and child growth needs”. <https://www.cec.sped.org/Policy-and-Advocacy/CEC-Professional-Policies/Special-Education-in-the-Schools>

⁵ “Special education must provide an administrative organization to facilitate achievement for children with exceptionalities of the same educational goals as those pursued by other children. This purpose can be achieved through structures that are sufficiently compatible with those employed by regular education to ensure easy, unbroken passage of children across regular-special education administrative lines for whatever periods of time may be necessary, as well as by structures that are sufficiently flexible to adjust quickly to changing task demands and child growth needs”. <https://www.cec.sped.org/Policy-and-Advocacy/CEC-Professional-Policies/Special-Education-in-the-Schools>

programs. The number of special education administrators in Colchester is organizationally consistent with the three most comparably sized DRG D school districts; Cromwell (2), Ledyard (2), and Waterford (2).

In addition to the role of administrator assigned to oversee special education and related services, the director is assigned responsibility for coordination and oversight of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. § 701).⁶ It is common practice to assign administrators in a school district the size of Colchester multiple program responsibilities. While the additional assignment of Section 504 coordination may appear logical, the dual assignment of both special education and 504 coordination to the director is incongruent to guidance issued by the Connecticut State Department of Education.⁷

To further assist the director and assistant director, the district assigns special education team leaders who lead and facilitate building-based special education teams to improve programming. This an annual stipend position (per teacher contract) offered to current employees who possess a minimum of a Master's Degree, possess valid Connecticut Teaching Certification in the appropriate field, have a minimum of three years teaching experience (in-district experience preferred), demonstrate exemplary performance as a teacher, and have experience leading teams and mentoring teachers. The special education team leader serves as the "building expert" in special education matters and building liaison to district administration.⁸ The special education team leaders also serve on the Special Education Leadership Team which works to establish department priorities in programming, professional development, and departmental initiatives.

The district has experienced multiple personnel changes for the position of director over a five-year period. Following the departure of its third director in March 2022, the district is in the process of conducting a search for its fourth. The consultants find the high-attrition rate for the position of director concerning for several reasons. First, it is generally accepted that it takes five to seven years for changes to occur that support good quality student learning. Second,

⁶ Section 504 regulations "require a school district to provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to each qualified student with a disability who is in the school district's jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. Under Section 504, FAPE consists of the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the student's individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met" (<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>).

⁷ "The school district designates a Section 504/ADA Coordinator, along with the telephone number where this person can be reached, who is familiar with the federal Section 504/ADA regulations and requirements. It is recommended that this individual be someone other than the Director/Supervisor of Special Education, for instance, a regular education administrator" (CSDE: Circular Letter: 13, Series 2008-2009).

⁸ Colchester Public Schools, Special Education Team Leader, Job Description (2018).

research supports frequent changes in administration negatively impact student achievement, result in higher teacher mobility, and create a less positive school culture and climate.⁹

The consultants found it commendable that Colchester principals and assistant principals share a great deal of the responsibility for administering the special education programs in their buildings. They meet with their special education and related services staff and are regular participants in Planning and Placement Team meetings (see Section 3.1.G).

2.2 COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE PUPIL SERVICES CENTRAL OFFICE AND BUILDING LEVEL ADMINISTRATION

Overall, the consultants found communication between Pupil Services central office and building level administration ineffective in addressing the complex nature of special education service delivery. There is little evidence of regularly scheduled meetings between the director and principals to address building-based special education. Instead, the predominant mode of the communication between Pupil Services central office, school administration, and for that matter school staff, is via email or memo. Some communications typically addressed “housekeeping” items, while others contained directives from Pupil Services central office which were at times absent sufficient explanation or provided misleading guidance.

The importance of effective communication practices cannot be overstated. Given their high level of involvement in administering the special education programs within their respective building, the principal and assistant principals rely heavily on clear guidance from the director. The consultants recommend that a communication plan be developed with guidelines that establish the hierarchy of communication that reflects levels of participation and responsibility for shared decision-making. The consultants recommend that the director also maintain increased visibility within each of the schools. The director should convene regularly scheduled, face-to-face meetings with each of the building principals to co-lead effective instruction for special education students, address regulatory changes, changes in policies and procedures, and current trends in special education for future planning purposes. These meetings would serve as the vehicle for direct consultation and advisement on specific cases along with other matters, the complexity of which at times extends beyond the purview and expertise of building administration. The consultants however, are not insensitive to the time that must be dedicated for these activities. As previously referenced, the consultants recommend that the director no longer act as the district’s 504 coordinator. 504 coordination is a regular education initiative and consistent with aforementioned state guidance, should not fall under the purview of the special education department. The jurisdiction for this program should instead be

⁹ Snodgrass Rangel, V. (2018). A review of the literature on principal turnover. *Review of Educational Research*, 88(1), 87–124. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1166231>

delegated to a regular education administrator who will be responsible for district 504 oversight and policy guidance.

2.3 EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT ADMINISTRATIVE STRUCTURE FOR COORDINATION AND OVERSIGHT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

Effective collaboration between regular and special education is considered the lynch pin of a successful special education program. Shared ownership results in a greater capacity among staff to meet student needs, encourages more integrated delivery of special education services, facilitates membership of students with disabilities in the general classroom, and increases the quality of instructional time for students with disabilities. A collaborative approach further provides students with the opportunity to be educated in the least restrictive environment and to have equal access to the general curriculum.

The responsibility of fostering collaborative teaching begins with leadership that motivates others to act toward achieving a common goal. Here, Colchester has established practices between regular and special education administrators that unnecessarily bifurcates roles and responsibilities. The consultants were concerned by Pupil Services central office administrators' limited involvement in the management of special education programs at the building level. Building principals have shouldered the responsibility of interviewing and hiring special education staff. The building principals are also burdened with the sole responsibility of supervising and evaluating the special education teaching staff in their building. This is concerning because simply put, without input and/or control of these two processes, the director is unable to administer an effective special education program. First, special education teachers fall under the pupil services and special education budget. Because this budget is managed by the director, the director should maintain direct control over new hires with shared input from the building principals in order to maintain fiscal responsibility. Second, the role of the special education teacher is not limited to direct instruction. Special educators are also responsible for administrative duties related to case- management and oversight of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The complexities of case- management require specific technical knowledge which falls outside of the purview of the building principal. As such, the director needs to maintain direct involvement in staff supervision which in turn, contributes to staff evaluation. While the building principal is more aptly positioned to provide administrative supervision, the director possesses the technical knowledge necessary for effective clinical supervision.¹⁰

¹⁰ Administrative supervision typically focuses on issues such as personnel matters, legal, contractual, or other organizational matters specific to the school district. Rather than discipline-specific skills, administrative supervision includes things such as staff assignments and performance of job-related responsibilities in accordance with labor agreements. The primary focus of clinical supervision is the development of discipline-specific professional skills.

It is not uncommon for regular education administrators to spend a considerable amount of time each week on special education issues. One activity in particular, attendance at PPT meetings, accounts for the greatest demand on the regular education administrator's time.¹¹ The consultants utilized regular education administrator attendance at PPT meetings as an indicator of regular education administrators' involvement in special education at each of the Colchester schools.

Review of the data for PPT meetings convened in Colchester during the 2021-2022 school year through the date of this report reveals that all of the district schools had a regular education administrator chair 100% of the PPT meetings. The commitment of building administrators is commendable and key to an overall successful special education program. They represent the school within the community for maintaining ongoing community support for educational goals, and with issues related to the school environment. Their direct involvement also strongly communicates to parents a commitment to children with disabilities generally and to their child's educational needs specifically. While its laudable that the building administrators "own" all the special education programs, their lack of expertise in special education policies, procedures, and case-law has resulted in procedural errors that have unnecessarily complicated service delivery.

2.3 Teaching personnel

CERTIFIED STAFF

Unlike the regular education program in which staffing needs are predicated on projected student enrollment, class size limits, and/or budgetary constraints, staffing the special education program is based not only on the number of children identified as needing special education and related services, but more importantly on the intensity and duration of the individual services prescribed for those students. The intensity and duration of services directly impacts the size of a special education teacher's caseload (see Section 3.1). Federal law does not specify requirements for caseload or class size with regard to students requiring special education and related services. Likewise, state statute does not prescribe staffing ratios but specifies only that the number and age range of children requiring special education and related services assigned to a class shall be such that the specifications of each child's individualized education program (IEP) can be met.¹²

Colchester's capacity to meet the individualized needs of its special education students is illustrated by the extensive special education and related services available within the district.

¹¹ Lasky, B., & Karge, B.D. (2006). Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities: Experience and Confidence of Principals. NASSP Bulletin 90 (1), 19-36

¹² Conn. State Regulation 10-76d-5

Colchester special education teachers provide a continuum of specialized instruction to students with varying degrees of disability in the regular, resource, and separate classroom as well as alternative and community settings. Based on the Colchester Adopted Budget 2021-2022, the district employs a total of 27 certified special education teachers, one of which is assigned to conduct district-wide initial evaluations only. The number of special education teachers appears generally consistent with the three most comparably sized DRG D school districts; Cromwell (24), Ledyard (27), and Waterford (30.4). The district employs (1) Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) to primarily address the needs of students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder and one transition coordinator, both of whom are also certified special education teachers. Comparison of the number of special education students to teachers for grades K-12 reveals an average of approximately 14:1 student to staff ratio district-wide with individual caseloads ranging from 8:1 to 15:1.^{13,14} In terms of related services specialists, Colchester currently employs four (4) school psychologists, seven (7) school social workers, seven (7) speech and language pathologists, four (4) occupational therapists, and one (1) physical therapist.

NONCERTIFIED STAFF

Based on the Adopted Budget 2021-2022, Colchester employs 62 paraprofessional who provide direct instructional support to special education students. Of the 62, three (3) are identified as child development associates and one (1) a registered behavior technician. In comparison to the three most comparably sized DRG D school districts trend analysis from 2016-2017 to 2020-2021 reveals the number of paraprofessionals employed by the district for school year 2016-2017 exceeded that of Cromwell, Ledyard, or Waterford. The number of paraprofessionals employed by the district for school years 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2020-2021 exceeded that of Cromwell and Ledyard but not Waterford (see Figure 3).

¹³ The ability to predict special education staffing needs is tentative at best given that school budgets are developed nearly one year in advance of knowing actual service needs. Although decreasing special education staffing as a means of decreasing budget expenditures may be fiscally alluring, it is important to note that resulting increases in caseloads not only decrease student contact time but simultaneously place greater demands on staff time to attend required meetings and complete required paperwork both of which are known to negatively impact individualized instruction and are correlated with high teacher attrition.

¹⁴ It is important to distinguish between caseload and workload. Caseload refers to, the number of students who are provided direct services. Workload on the other hand includes all activities required and performed by the special education teacher. This includes the caseload (e.g., number of individual students served) as well as all other activities that are necessary and important to support students' educational programs, implement best practices, ensure compliance with educational mandates, and fulfill the responsibilities that are associated with working in a school setting.

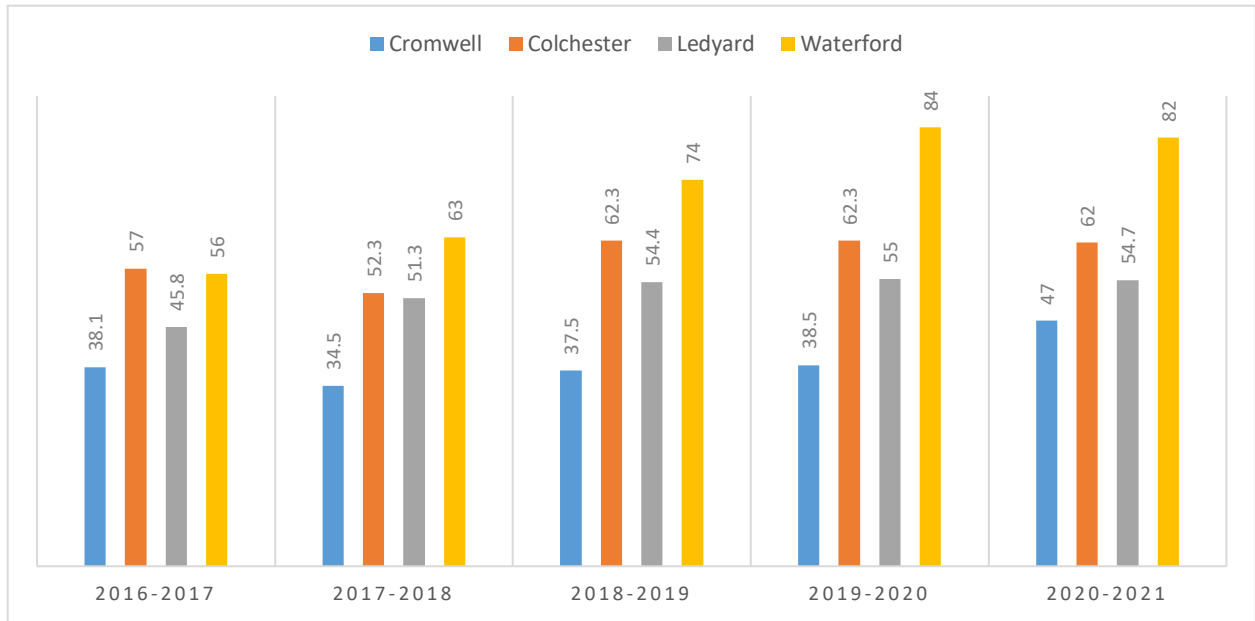


Figure 3. Number of paraprofessionals employed by the school in comparison to the three most comparably sized DRG D school districts.

TEACHER ATTRITION/RETENTION

The attrition rate among special educators has remained stable nationwide at approximately 25% over the past two decades.¹⁵ Work stress and dissatisfaction related to negative school culture, lack of administrative support, lack of collegial support, lack of paraprofessional support, and the degree to which social contexts provided autonomy to make decisions are highly correlated with teacher turnover.¹⁶ Connecticut is not unique with special education, school psychology, and speech and language pathology continuously cited as a shortage-areas across the state.¹⁷ Given that school districts have historically struggled to fill open positions with qualified candidates, it is important to identify factors contributing to teacher attrition as well as retention strategies to maintain qualified staff for these shortage areas.

Investigation of the districts special education and related services workforce reveals that nearly half of these certified staff have four years or less experience in the district with 20% having two years or less. These findings are concerning in that yearly turnover of either good experienced or inexperienced teachers can negatively impact a school’s learning environment resulting in difficulty sustaining programs, loss of momentum in school-wide improvement

¹⁵ <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/tchr-ret/cresource/q1/p01/>

¹⁶ Billingsley, B. & Bettini, E. (2019). Special education teacher attrition and retention: A review of the literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 10, Vol.89 (5), p.697-744

¹⁷ https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Talent_Office/Talent-Office-home-page/Shortage-Areas

initiatives, and loss of the stability associated with teachers who remain with schools for the long-term. These dynamics can result in both short- and long-term compromises in student achievement.¹⁸

The consultants identified four themes related to job satisfaction across the district and contributing to staff turnover. First, although staff felt supported by their building administrators, they felt unsupported by Pupil Services central office administration. This perception is concerning given that this type of administrative support promotes an inclusive culture, supports special and general educators' collaboration, ensures all teachers have resources to do their work effectively, and is paramount to a positive environment for special educators. Because special educators rely on coordination among many professionals to serve their students, their retention may be especially dependent on the felt support of all administrators. Second, the staff identified lack of autonomy in decision-making. They reported that they often "second-guessed" themselves when making decisions because of "mixed-messages" emanating from Pupil Services central office. Third, the staff identified lack of opportunity to regularly meet with district-colleagues to address district-wide consistency and continuity of services. They were frustrated by the paucity of regularly scheduled meetings and the limitations put on them when planning and coordinating services across buildings and programs. Finally, the staff identified a lack of meaningful professional development relative to their identified areas of need. They reported little value in the current PLC model which appears to lack specificity and purpose.

The district is commended for its New Faculty Academy, a robust induction program designed to acclimate new staff to the district who were hired prior to the beginning of the school year. There is no clear process for induction of new staff hired after the New Faculty Academy aside from the list of training requirements that must be completed within six months of their date of hire. The consultants were concerned by the lack of support provided to new teachers hired following the start of the school year. Specifically, new staff reported that they were uncertain about who they report to, did not know who their colleagues were, and were uncertain of district processes and procedures.

¹⁸ Darling-Hammond, L., & Sykes, G. (2003). Wanted: A national teacher supply policy for education: The right way to meet the "Highly Qualified Teacher" challenge. Education Policy Analysis Archives, 11.

3.0 PROCEDURES AND PROTOCOLS FOR DELIVERY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

3.1 POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND GOALS OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Written policies and procedures that comply with federal and state requirements along with a clearly articulated vision and goal-setting are considered foundational to continuous special education program improvement. In order to respond to the question, the consultants first reviewed Colchester’s current special education policies and procedures manual for compliance with state and federal requirements. Next, the consultants examined Office of Pupil Services and Special Education annual goals for alignment with their stated purpose of refining special education policies, procedures, and programs. The consultants then examined required elements of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) as evidence of goal attainment.

3.1A SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL POLICIES AND PROCEDURES MANUAL

Special education policies and procedures are governing principles that mandate or constrain the actions of the school district to insure compliance with federal and state regulations. As implementation standards, they also establish a common set of expectations for stakeholders. The consultants found the district relying on the outdated Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education “*Model Special Education Policies and Procedure Manual*” as a guidance document rather than the most recent “*Model Special Education Procedures and Practice Manual*” (2019) which contains up-to-date guidance provided by the Bureau.^{19,20} The consultants recommend that the district provide staff with the updated manual and that the manual also be posted on the district website for ease of parent access.

3.1B GOALS AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Establishing vision is the cornerstone of effective leadership. Vision provides for a clear, distinctive, and specific view of the future connected to strategic organizational advances.²¹ The

¹⁹ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Special-Education/Special-Education-Procedures-and-Practices-Manual.pdf>

²⁰ It is important to note that the consultants from INCOMPLIANCE LLC have since directed the district to the revised “Special Education Procedures and Practices Manual” consistent with the required elements outlined by the Connecticut State Department of Education. The consultants recommend that a link to the document be posted on the district’s website and links to the older document removed. It is important that this information be made readily available for ease of public access given that written policies and procedures establish a common set of expectations for all stakeholders.

²¹ A Leader’s Vision. <https://granite.pressbooks.pub/ld820/chapter/9/>

Council for Exceptional Children defines vision as “forward-thinking and courageous decision-making dedicated to excellence and influence in an evolving environment”.²² The consultants were unable to identify a clearly articulated vision for the special education department. Rather, greater emphasis on daily operations or more simply, “just getting the job done” appears to have taken precedent. Moving forward, it is important for the district to establish clear expectations for the director and assistant director. The director’s primary focus should be more on attention to the future and what needs to be done conjointly with input from the district leadership team, while the assistant director should focus on directing staff to efficiently complete required tasks.

Goal-setting serves to scaffold efforts along a continuum and in congruence to the vision. Although the Department of Pupil Services and Special Education was unable to provide a set of goals tied to the district’s strategic plan, the consultants found specific goals for the district articulated in the FY 2020 IDEA 611 Grant:²³

- **Create and develop and continuum of special education services PK-12.**
- Develop clear exit and entrance criteria for district specialized programming.
- **Provide professional development in the following areas:**
 - a. **Writing IEP goals and benchmarks aligned to identified weaknesses,**
 - b. **Developing and implementing data collection systems to track progress,**
 - c. **Implementation of evidence-based instructional practices,**
 - d. **Designing IEPs that demonstrate educational benefit, and**
 - e. **Training in special education procedures, policies and regulations.**
- To develop and implement a comprehensive 18-21-year-old program within the district.
- **To continue to provide consultation to the district’s programs for students with social-emotional/behavioral health issues.**
- **To collaborate with special educators across the district to increase consistency among various programs.**
- **To provide quality special education services and supports to students who require an alternative educational opportunity.**
- **To meet monthly with related service personnel and specialized program staff.**

Two additional goals were included for the FY 2021 IDEA 611 Grant:²⁴

- **Develop a comprehensive assessment system to identify specific learning weaknesses.**
- **Provide evidence-based interventions that can be systematically monitored and adjusted.**

²² <https://exceptionalchildren.org/about-us/our-values>

²³ Note: Goals in bold text are repeated in the FY 2021 and FY 2022 IDEA 611 Grant.

²⁴ Note: Goals in bold text are repeated in the FY 2022 IDEA 611 Grant.

One additional goal was included for the most recent FY 2022 IDEA 611 Grant:

- Coordinate with district special education PLC leaders to provide professional development and disseminate best practices.

The consultants agree that the stated goals are consistent with IDEA grant requirements. However, the consultants were unable to identify an action plan or metrics to evaluate progress specific to the stated goals.

3.1C INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students eligible for or in need of special education and related services serves as the bedrock of special education policy and practice as described under § 300.101 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).²⁵ Central to FAPE is the provision of individualized instruction as prescribed by the Individualized Education Program (IEP). According to Connecticut State Regulations Sec. 10-76a-1, the “Individualized Education Program” or “IEP” means a separate written [plan] statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed and revised by a Planning and Placement Team (the “PPT”) to meet the needs of each child requiring special education and related services in accordance with the IDEA and Section 10-76d-11 of the Regulations of Connecticut State Agencies. The IEP is intended to facilitate a student’s access to, participation in, and progress in the general education curriculum and setting. The development of the IEP incorporates the elements of effective instructional practices into the design of how supports are organized and implemented and is calculated in a manner that provides educational benefit to the child.

The following subsections are based on review of IEP elements and supporting records for twenty randomly selected Pk-12 students.

MEMBERSHIP

The Planning and Placement Team (the “PPT”) is the sole body responsible for making decisions necessary to ensure that students eligible for special education receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The PPT meeting is conducted to determine eligibility, developing, reviewing, and revising the IEP, and designing and reviewing evaluations and reevaluations. Each PPT that (1) develops, reviews and revises an IEP; (2) designs and conducts an initial evaluation or reevaluation; (3) determines eligibility; (4) conducts a manifestation determination; (5) develops a functional behavioral assessment; or (6) develops, reviews or modifies a behavioral intervention plan, includes as members:

- The parent(s) or legal guardian of the student with a disability;

²⁵ <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2015-title34-vol2/pdf/CFR-2015-title34-vol2-sec300-101.pdf>

- At least one regular education teacher of the student (if the student is, or may be participating in the regular education environment);
- At least one special education teacher of the student, or if appropriate, at least one special education provider (i.e.; speech and language pathologist) of the student;
- A representative of the District who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities, is knowledgeable about the general curriculum and about the availability of resources within the district;
- If appropriate, a related services provider(s);
- An individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results (who may be one of the previously listed team members other than the parent);
- If appropriate, the student; and
- At the discretion of the parent or the district, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the student, including related services personnel.

All records reviewed included the required membership necessary to convene a PPT meeting.

MEETINGS

Appropriate documentation was included that the parent or eligible student was advised in writing of the right to participate as a member of the Planning and Placement Team within at least five school days prior to a meeting to develop, review or revise a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP).

The state-approved Notice of Planning and Placement Team Meeting (ED623) includes the following reasons for convening a meeting:

- review a referral to special education and consider/plan an evaluation
- review evaluation results and determine eligibility for special education
- develop, review or revise the IEP
- conduct an Annual Review
- consider transition needs/services – transition planning
- plan a reevaluation to determine continuing eligibility for special education and related services
- review reevaluation results to determine continuing eligibility for special education and related services
- conduct a Manifestation Determination
- other: (specify) _____

With exception to a single instance, the consultants found that parents were provided with the Notice of Planning and Placement Team Meeting (ED623) consistent within the five-day

notification rule. The consultants also found that required written parental consent was obtained for initial placement or private placement of a child who requires or may require special education and related services in all cases reviewed.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) requires schools to provide the parent with a notice containing a full explanation of the procedural safeguards available under the IDEA in accordance with IDEA regulations. Regulations require that a copy of the procedural safeguards shall be made available to the parents of a child with a disability one time per year, except that a copy also shall be given to the parents--

- (A) Upon initial referral or parental request for evaluation;
- (B) Upon the first occurrence of the filing of a complaint under subsection (b)(6);
- (C) Upon request by a parent. (H.R. 1350 Section 615(d)(1)(A)); and
- (D) Upon a change in placement resulting from a disciplinary action.

In compliance with both the IDEA and state regulations, the Connecticut State Department of Education has provided written guidance for district personnel directing the PPT recorder to check one of the two boxes provided on the IEP form that the Procedural Safeguards in Special Education document was either given to the parents previously in the current school year, or is enclosed with the current IEP. Parents must be given a hardcopy of the Procedural Safeguards in Special Education, therefore simply providing them with a web site address does not meet this requirement.

Prior Written Notice is intended to provide written communication to parents of the action(s) proposed or refused by a Planning and Placement Team. Further, Section 10-76d-8(a)(5) of the special education regulations states that:

“Written notice required by this subsection may be provided to the parents at the PPT meeting where such PPT proposes to, or refuses to, initiate or change the child’s identification, evaluation, or educational placement of the child with a disability or the provision of a free appropriate public education to the child with a disability. If such notice is not provided at the PPT meeting, it shall be provided to the parents of the child with a disability, or to the parents of a child who may be eligible for special education and related services, not later than ten days before the PPT proposes to, or refuses to, initiate or change the child’s identification, evaluation or educational placement of the child or the provision of a free appropriate public education to the child.”

According to the Connecticut State Department of Education’s, IEP Manual and Forms,²⁶ districts have only two options for providing Prior Written Notice (PWN):

²⁶ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Special-Education/IEP-Manual-REVISED-December-2021-PDF-ver.pdf>

1. The first (and preferred) option is to give the parents the completed PWN at the PPT meeting. This allows the implementation of the IEP to take place within a reasonable timeframe; this would include implementation the next school day if both the parents and district agree. Document parents' receipt of the PWN and agreed upon implementation date on page 2 of the IEP. If the parents are provided with the PWN at the meeting, but do not agree with the proposed or refused actions, then the reasonable timeframe for implementation of the IEP is ten school days from receipt of the PWN. The complete IEP, if not provided at the PPT meeting along with the completed PWN, must, in all cases, be sent to the parents within five school days.

2. If the PWN is not given to the parents at the PPT meeting, the second option is to send the IEP, with the PWN, to the parents within five school days. For example, if the PPT takes place on a Monday, then the IEP, with the PWN, must be sent by the following Monday (five school days). Parents must receive the PWN at least ten school days prior to the implementation of the IEP unless the parents and district agreed to an earlier IEP implementation date at the PPT meeting. As above, document the agreed upon implementation date on page 2 of the IEP.

The consultants found in each of the files reviewed consistent documentation substantiating that a copy of the Procedural Safeguards in Special Education was provided to the parents as required. The consultants also found the following required elements of the prior written notice as being included: a description of the action proposed or refused by the PPT; an explanation of why such PPT proposed or refused to take the action; a description of other options the PPT considered and the reasons why those options were rejected; and a description of other factors that are relevant to the board of education's proposal or refusal. The consultants however found evidence of inconsistencies between the Planning and Placement Team recommendations, the actions proposed or refused by the PPT; an explanation of why such PPT proposed or refused to take the action; a description of other options the PPT considered and the reasons why those options were rejected; and a description of other factors that are relevant to the board of education's proposal or refusal. There was also a lack of documentation substantiating that parent(s) of a child with a disability, or who may be eligible for special education and related services documentation was provided a copy of the Prior Written Notice.

DEVELOPMENT

Required elements in the IEP include a statement of the child's present level of educational performance, including, where appropriate, academic achievement, social adaptation, prevocational and vocational skills, psychomotor skills, self-help skills, and initial evaluations and reevaluations were present. However, the information provided appeared "wordy", lacking

specificity to the IEP goal statements, and lacking empirical data substantiating current performance levels.

The IEP must include documentation of parental input which is recorded on the Present Levels of Performance. Although the records referenced information provided by the parent about their child, the information recorded was non-descript. The consultants also found the same statement regarding parental input repeated across different student IEPs.²⁷

The IEP must also include information regarding the student's participation on state-wide and district-wide assessments. This information was consistently included in all records reviewed as appropriate.²⁸

CONTENT

In addition to the IEP components required under the IDEA, the IEP must also include a statement of short-term instructional objectives derived from the measurable annual goals. A measurable annual goal, including academic and functional goals, is designed to meet the needs of a child with a disability that result from the child's disability to enable such child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum and meet each of such child's other educational needs that result from such child's disability. In addition to a statement of the child's present levels of performance, the IEP must include the following components:

1. A statement of annual educational goals for the school year under the child's individualized educational program;
2. A statement of short-term instructional objectives derived from the annual educational goals. This shall include objective criteria, evaluation procedures and schedules for determining, on a regular basis, whether the short-term instructional objectives are being achieved;
3. A statement of specific educational services needed by the child, including a description of special education and related services which are needed to meet the needs of the child. Such description shall include the type of transportation necessary and a statement of the recommended instructional settings;
4. The date when those services will begin and length of time the services will be given with the length of the school day and school year needed to meet the child's special education needs, including criteria to determine when services will no longer be needed and;

²⁷ Given that the parent(s) is one of the most if not the most important participant in planning their child's education, it is important to obtain parent feedback on their participation and involvement in the PPT process for example, by the use of an exit survey at the end of each PPT meeting (see Appendix B).

²⁸ https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Special-Education/2015-2016_accommodationform.pdf

5. A description of the extent to which the child will participate in the regular education program. This shall include a description of how the regular education program will be modified to meet the child's needs.

All records reviewed included statements of annual educational goals with short-term objectives. Several areas requiring attention however were identified by the consultants. Specifically, instances were found in which:

- Stated annual goals lacked alignment with the identified area(s) of concerns/needs.²⁹
- Objectives identified specific elements required for instruction such as assistive technology and manner of service delivery not reflected in other required areas of the IEP (see Considerations).
- There was an absence of available data in all records reviewed substantiating progress toward and/or mastery of the goals and objectives.³⁰
- In some cases, goals and objectives were repeated over multiple years.

CONSIDERATIONS

The IDEA requires that the Planning and Placement Team (the “PPT”) document special factors for each Individualized Education Program (the “IEP”). Colchester records included consideration to the following factors:

“(i) in the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child's learning or that of others, consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and other strategies, to address that behavior;

(ii) in the case of a child with limited English proficiency, consider the language needs of the child as such needs relate to the child's IEP;

(iii) in the case of a child who is blind or visually impaired, provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP Team determines, after an evaluation of the child's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the

²⁹ H.R. 1350 Section 614(d)(1)(A)(i)(II), goals and objectives are designed to meet the child’s needs that result from the child’s disability. Therefore, the concerns/needs detailed in this column which have a marked impact on the child’s educational performance and requires specialized instruction should result in a corresponding annual goal. If there are concerns raised that do not rise to the level of needing specialized instruction, then the PPT may note these under options discussed and considered by the PPT but rejected in favor of the proposed actions and should be recorded on Page 3: Prior Written Notice. [IEP Manual and Forms](#) (pg. 9)

³⁰ “It is important to keep in mind that every IDEA-eligible student’s program is the sum of their access to, and progress in, the general curriculum along with progress on their individual functional goals.” -Miguel Cardona, U.S. Secretary of Education, *Letter to Educators and Parents*, March 24, 2022. <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/coronavirus/letter-to-educators-and-parents-regarding-new-cdc-recommendations-03-24-2022.pdf>

child's future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child;

(iv) consider the communication needs of the child, and in the case of a child who is deaf or hard of hearing, consider the child's language and communication needs, opportunities for direct communications with peers and professional personnel in the child's language and communication mode, academic level, and full range of needs, including opportunities for direct instruction in the child's language and communication mode; and (v) consider whether the child needs assistive technology devices and services.” (H.R. 1350 Section. 614 (c) (B)).

The consultants found that the special factors were correctly documented for most records reviewed. However, the consultants found that the language needs of a student identified as an English-Learner (EL) were not taken into consideration. The consultants found that the records included dates for periodic reports on the progress the child is making toward meeting the annual goals. However, no supporting data was found substantiating progress. Although staff indicated that the reports are forwarded to parent as specified by the IEP, documentation substantiating this claim was also absent in the records.

SPECIALIZED INSTRUCTION

Colchester records included a statement of specific educational services needed by the child, including a description of special education and related services which are required to meet the needs of the child. The records included the length of time the services will be given with the length of the school day and school year needed to meet the child's special education needs, including criteria to determine when services will no longer be needed, a description of the extent to which the child will participate in the regular education program, and a description of how the regular education program will be modified to meet the child's needs. In one case however, the consultants found the hours for itinerant services incorrectly calculated. When several implementers shared a service, only the total length of time but not the time specifically allocated to each implementer equaling the total was reflected. The Connecticut State Department of Education IEP Manual and Forms recommends that the amount of time each implementer will work directly with the child should be specified under Description of Instructional Service Delivery.³¹

LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT

34 C.F.R. Section 300.114 LRE of the IDEA requires each public agency to ensure that—

- To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and

³¹ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Special-Education/IEP-Manual-REVISED-December-2021-PDF-ver.pdf>

- Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

Colchester records indicate that the placement of each student with a disability was determined annually and was based upon the child's IEP. Parents consistently attended PPT meetings and were involved in the decision-making process.

Three data points are monitored to inform districts about their compliance with 34 C.F.R. Section 300.114 LRE:

1. Percentage of students with disabilities who spend 80% or more their time with non-disabled peers.
2. Percentage of students with disabilities who spend less than 40% of their time with non-disabled peers.
3. Percentage of students with disabilities in separate placements.

The consultants compared Colchester data to state-established targets for the above-referenced areas.

REGULAR CLASS PLACEMENT

It is expected that a district's data for the percentage of students with disabilities who spend 79.1% or more their time with non-disabled peers meet or exceed state-established targets. Colchester has consistently performed above the state-established target in the percentage of students with disabilities who spend 79.1% or more of their time with non-disabled peers for the time period 2015-2016 to 2019-2020 (see Figure 4 and Table 1).³²

³² The most recent data published by the Connecticut State Department of Education. <http://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>

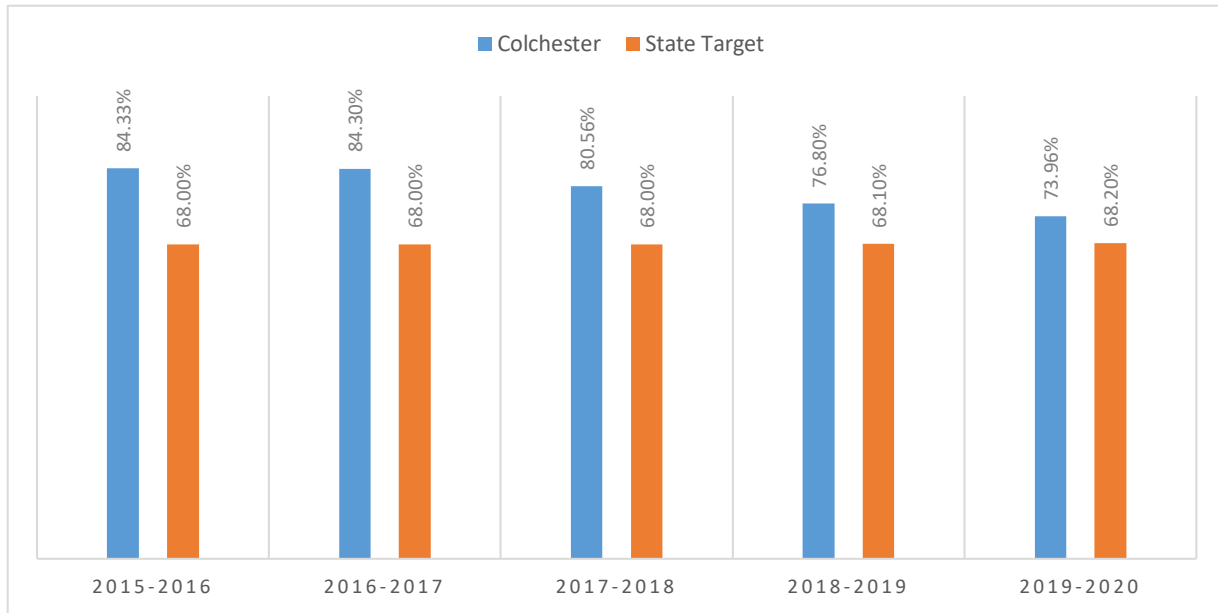


Figure 4. Increase regular class placement as compared to State Target.

Table 1. Difference between Colchester increase regular class placement and State Target.

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Colchester	84.33%	84.30%	80.56%	76.80%	73.96%
State Target	68.00%	68.00%	68.00%	68.10%	68.20%
Difference	16.33%	16.30%	12.56%	8.70%	5.76%

SEPARATE CLASS PLACEMENT

The expectation for the percentage of students spending less than 40% of their time in the regular class is that district data fall below state-established targets. In fact, Colchester fell below the state target for the percentage of students spending less than 40% of their time in the regular class from 2015-2016 to 2018-2019 and above the state target for 2019-2020 (see Figure 5 and Table 2).

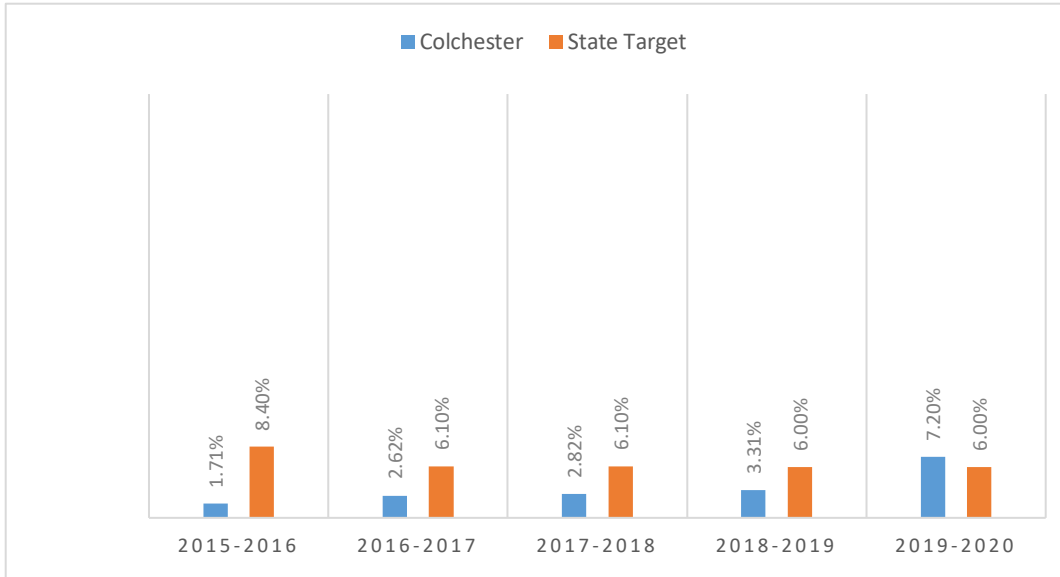


Figure 5. Decrease separate class placement as compared to State Target.

Table 2. - Difference between Colchester decrease separate class placement and State Target.

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Colchester	1.71%	2.62%	2.82%	3.31%	7.20%
State Target	8.40%	6.10%	6.10%	6.00%	6.00%
Difference	-6.69%	-3.48%	-3.28%	-2.69%	1.20%

OUT-OF-DISTRICT PLACEMENT

It is expected that district data for the percentage of students placed in out-of-district placements (separate schools) also fall below state-established targets. Colchester has consistently fallen below the state-established target in the percentage of students placed out-of-district from 2015-2016 to 2019-2020 (see Figures 6 and Table 3).

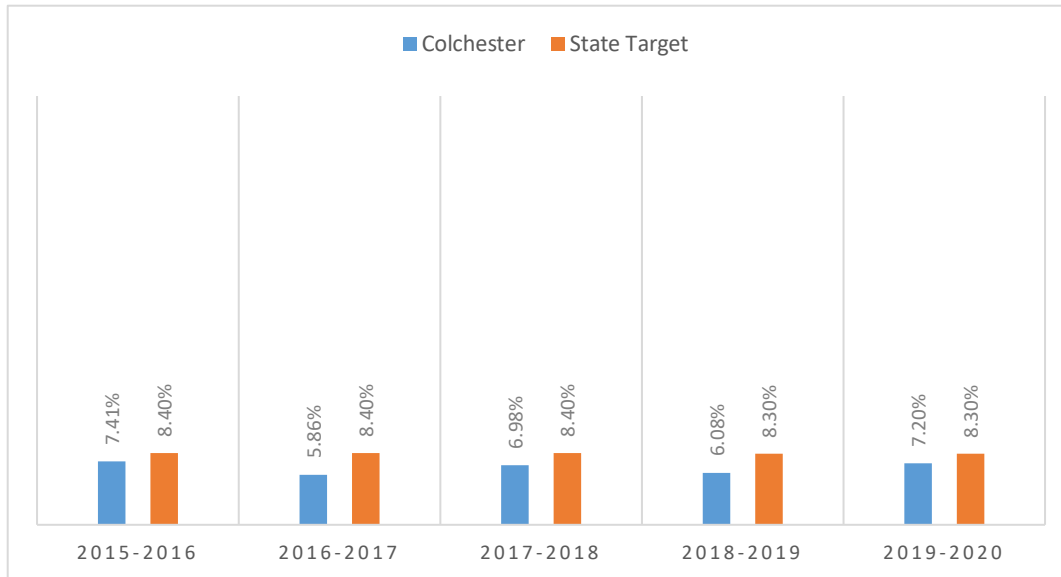


Figure 6. Out-of-District placements as compared to State Target.

Table 3. Difference between Colchester Out-of-District placements and State Target.

	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020
Colchester	7.41%	5.86%	6.98%	6.08%	7.20%
State Target	8.40%	8.40%	8.40%	8.30%	8.30%
Difference	-0.99%	-2.54%	-1.42%	-2.22%	-1.10%

Given the increased prevalence of developmental disorders and nature and severity of mental health problems in younger children, the district is commended for its efforts to provide a variety of in-district programs as part of their continuum of special education services.^{33, 34}

The consultants identified barriers that impede progress toward greater inclusive practices. The district continues to rely primarily on a “pull-out” model of instruction.³⁵ This is most apparent where IEPs routinely include reference to a resource room model. Transition upward from one school to the next was identified as problematic. There appears to be a tendency to recommend increased special education services in anticipation of increased curricular demands. Differences in the organizational structures inherent to individual schools as well as limited opportunities for collaboration between building staff were also identified as

³³ <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr087.pdf>

³⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/childrensmentalhealth/data.html>

³⁵ According to the Connecticut State Department of Education, regular class placement appears to have a greater impact for students in the high SES districts (25 point gaps between regular class and resource room) than for those in low SES districts.

contributing factors. Finally, over-reliance on paraprofessional support in the regular classroom is evident. Although well-intentioned, over-reliance on the paraprofessional does little to promote student independence. It is recommended that a process be developed that assists teams in using data to more effectively determine why such supports are necessary, and where, when, and how the supports are to be delivered.

Given the aforementioned barriers and the district data reflecting a decreasing trend in regular class placement along with an increase in separate class placement in comparison to state targets, the consultants recommend that a district inclusion team consisting of Pupil Services central office and building administrators, a district inclusion facilitator, special and regular education teachers, and related service providers be established to regularly monitor district-wide inclusive practices. The team's focus would be to develop a comprehensive plan that includes but is not limited to school-centered professional development³⁶; scheduled grade-level team meetings; on-site coaching of best practices in inclusion; and review and revision of structures of support for special education students through IEP recommendations at annual review and transition meetings.

EVALUATION AND REEVALUATION

Evaluation and reevaluation are critical functions of the PPT. In addition to diagnostic evaluation reports that assist the PPT in identifying underlying learning problems, evaluation and reevaluation also includes multi-source information necessary to monitor student growth and progress over time and to adjust instruction as necessary. The process of conducting an initial evaluation begins with the initial referral to special education. Districts are required to complete and maintain on record ED621 Referral to Determine Eligibility for Special Education and Related Services and ED622 Parent Notice of Referral to Determine Eligibility for Special Education and Related Services.³⁷ The ED 621 and 622 were present in the records reviewed.

³⁶ School-centered professional development is a locally facilitated process focusing on longer-term change and meant to solve problems experienced during implementation of new skills.

³⁷ The special education referral date immediately affords the student and parent(s) all special education procedural safeguards. This referral also "starts the clock" with respect to the timelines specified in RCSA 10-76d-13(a)(1) and (2) which provide that "(1) The individualized education program shall be implemented within forty-five days of referral or notice, exclusive of the time required to obtain parental consent. (2) In the case of a child whose individualized education program calls for out-of-district or private placement, the individualized education program shall be implemented within sixty days of referral or notice, exclusive of the time required to obtain parental consent." If a parent communicates in writing directly with a staff member that they wish to refer their child for an evaluation to determine her/his eligibility for special education services, the date the staff member receives this written communication constitutes the date of referral. If a parent communicates verbally with a staff member that they wish to refer their child for an evaluation to determine her/his eligibility for special education services, the staff member should provide the parent with a copy of this referral form and, when necessary, assist the parent in completing this form. It should be understood that, in all instances, this is a referral for an evaluation

These forms are important for documenting that (1) a copy of the referral which outlines specific concerns and the information used as the basis for this referral, including alternative strategies employed prior to the referral, (2) a copy of the Procedural Safeguards in Special Education, and (3) a Planning and Placement Team meeting notice has been provided to the parents.

Colchester records included appropriate documentation that the PPT described the test/evaluation procedure(s), the area of assessment, and the evaluator and that the PPT obtained signed written consent from the parent prior to conducting either an initial evaluation or a reevaluation in all cases. The consultants identified an instance in which the evaluators were identified by name rather than professional identity, a practice inconsistent with state guidance. The consultants also identified an instance in which Birth-to-Three providers, not district staff, were responsible for conducting the initial evaluation, also inconsistent with state guidance. The PPT maintains sole responsibility for recommending specific evaluation procedures which are not subject to unilateral change.^{38, 39}

The consultants found that in general, diagnostic evaluation reports consistently included more than one method of assessment, functional and developmental information about the student, and parent and teacher information consistent with the requirements for a comprehensive evaluation (34 CFR §300.304). Evaluation procedures also included review of existing evaluation data (§300.305), review of local or state assessments (§300.305), were conducted by a qualified group of professionals including the special education teacher, general education teacher, and other professionals (e.g., school psychologist, reading teacher) (§300.308), included parental input (§300.306), and included observation of student in area of difficulty (§300.310). Several instances were found however in which recommended tests did not appear consistent with the area of suspected disability. There was also an absence of eligibility determination forms in some cases consistent with guidelines established by the Connecticut State Department of Education to assist school districts and families in determining eligibility for special education and related services.⁴⁰

The consultants question the feasibility of assigning one special education teacher the sole responsibility of conducting initial educational evaluations district-wide. In the absence of establishing a district-wide evaluation team which is not recommended in this case, there appears little logic to sustain this practice. The special education teachers assigned to each

to determine eligibility for special education services. Actual eligibility for special education services is determined by the PPT only after an evaluation has been completed.

³⁸ For example, a practitioner may choose to employ an equivalent testing instrument as either a substitute or supplement based on the nature and severity of the disability and professional judgment.

³⁹ <http://www.nasponline.org/standards-and-certification/professional-ethics>

⁴⁰ <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/>

building already conduct reevaluation of their students and are well-positioned to conduct initial evaluations for students assigned to their caseload.

The consultants are concerned by the routine practice of not referring hospitalized students to special education upon discharge. Hospitalized students are protected under the ADA and Section 504 and must be provided reasonable accommodations in order to have an equal access to the school programs as children without disabilities; or special education and related services in order to receive a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) while hospitalized and upon their return to school.⁴¹ Consequently, referral to special education appears a prudent step for several reasons. First, referral to special education documents the districts actions with regard to its child-find responsibilities. Second, it is the sole responsibility of the PPT to conduct an initial evaluation and determine special education eligibility.

RELATED SERVICES

Related services refers to transportation, and developmental, corrective, or supportive services as may be required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes the early identification and assessment of disabling conditions in children. It does not include a medical device that is surgically implanted, or the replacement of such device.

Colchester currently provides a wide-range of related services required to provide benefit from special education including speech-language pathology and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, social work services, school nurse services designed to enable a child with a disability to receive a free appropriate public education as described in the individualized education program of the child, counseling services, orientation and mobility services, and medical services, except for those that are for diagnostic and evaluation purposes only. The consultants identified a tendency to over-prescribe related services, particularly school-related counseling, with no rational provided substantiating an identified need.

TRANSITION

Transition planning and related goals and objectives are an integral part of the IEP beginning at the annual review following a student's 14th birthday, or earlier if determined appropriate by the PPT, and annually thereafter. Section 10-76d of the Connecticut General Statutes and requires, effective July 1, 2021, that:

The planning and placement team (PPT) shall, in accordance with the provision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 20 USC 1400, et seq., as amended from time to time, develop and include a statement of transition service needs in the individualized education program (IEP) for each child requiring special education,

⁴¹ Students with Disabilities, 67 IDELR 189, (OCR 2015)

beginning not later than the first IEP to be in effect when such child becomes fourteen years of age, or younger if the PPT determines it is appropriate. Such IEP shall include (A) appropriate measurable postsecondary goals based upon age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment and, where appropriate, independent living skills; and (B) the transition services, including courses of study, needed to assist such child in reaching those goals. Such IEP shall be updated annually thereafter in accordance with the provisions of this subdivision. Nothing in this subdivision shall be construed as requiring the Department of Aging and Disability Services to lower the age of transition services for a child with disabilities from sixteen to fourteen years of age.

Transition Services means a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that is designed to be within a results-oriented process, focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities, including postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation; and is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests and includes instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives; and if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and provision of a functional vocational evaluation. Transition services for children with disabilities may be special education, if provided as specially designed instruction, or a related service, if required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education.⁴²

Based the most recent Annual Performance Report provided by the Connecticut Bureau of Special Education, Colchester meets compliance for Indicator 13, Secondary Transition.⁴³ The consultants review of IEP records indicates that the Student/Parents were informed about secondary transition/IEP transition planning and that their input and concerns were noted in the IEP. The records indicate that the student was invited to the PPT meeting. The records also indicate that in a majority of cases, agency participation was sought as applicable and that the agency participated when present. The records reviewed further include a transition goal

⁴² <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Special-Education/Secondary-Transition>

⁴³ Percent of youth with IEPs aged 16 and above with an IEP that includes appropriate measurable postsecondary goals that are annually updated and based upon an age appropriate transition assessment, transition services, including course of study, that will reasonably enable the student to meet those postsecondary goals, and annual IEP goals related to the student's transition service needs.

statement addressing both employment and postsecondary education which appear consistent with guidance provided by the State Department of Education.⁴⁴

CONNECTICUT TRANSITION ACADEMY OF COLCHESTER

On March 30, 2021, the Colchester and East Haddam Boards of Education entered a shared services agreement “to combine the resources of the two Boards and provide a robust program in all areas of transition programming, including, but not limited to, vocational, leisure and academic programming to meet the needs of students ages 18 to 21 of the respective Districts. The goal of the Transition Program is for students of both Districts to experience a unified program with the resources available by both Districts.” The consultants, with consideration to “best” practice, highly commend the Colchester Board of Education and district leadership for their forward thinking in meeting the current and future needs of this population of students. The transition program provides students with vocational experience within the community setting. The program is well staffed by a certified special education teacher, a transition coordinator, also a certified special education teacher, and a job coach who together, provide services for nine (9) students ages 18-21.

Although the program is thus far a success, the consultants identified areas of concern that require attention. First, the consultants found no clearly articulated program model in place that describes the program’s theory of action including its purpose, goals, organizational structure, role clarification, and operational procedures. The consultants also found that the program does not provide student stipends for work performed. In order to meet the requirements Connecticut State Department of Labor application as a community-based vocational training program for students receiving special education;

- students participating in the program must receive academic credit to those who satisfactorily complete the program, and
- students receive a stipend for participation in the program.⁴⁵

Providing stipends to students is an integral part of a successful transition program. The stipend allows the staff to teach students personal money management skills. Under this provision, students are required to open a personal banking account, make biweekly bank deposits, and budget their money toward payment for program-based shopping and leisure

⁴⁴ Each IEP for a transition age student must include a minimum of two PSOGS and related annual goals: one PSOGS in postsecondary education or training (February 2009a IEP page 6, #5a) and an annual goal on page 7 with related objectives and one PSOGS in employment (page 6, #5b) and an annual goal on page 7 with related objectives. If appropriate, a student may also have a third PSOGS in independent living skills (page 6, #5c) with an annual goal on page 7 with related objectives.

⁴⁵ Section 31-58(i) of the Connecticut General Statutes exempts the program from minimum wage requirements provided that these conditions are met.

activities. The program currently relies on fund-raising activities and money provided by the parent. The lack of student stipend does not contribute to program cohesion with East Haddam, which according to the staff, provides such stipend to their students. Second, there is inconsistency in the daily start and end-times for the program. Both districts operate on their respective high school's schedules for drop-off and pick-up times. Third, the consultants recommend that the transition coordinator be required to participate in all PPT meetings for students transitioning from Bacon Academy to the program. The transition coordinator has been directed to not attend these key meetings which appears contrary to the transition coordinator's role and does not contribute to a seamless transition. Finally, the program appears to operate under two different names. According to program staff, the program was registered with the State Department of Education under one name by Colchester, and another by East Haddam. Program staff also report that the program's street sign reflects the name given by East Haddam and not Colchester. The consultants recommend that a meeting between school districts be convened to discuss the feasibility of a common daily start and end-times for the program and development of a common identity.

CRITERIA FOR EXITING SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS

The PPT must address in each IEP the criteria that will be used for exiting a student from special education. The criteria include the ability to succeed in regular education without special education support, graduation, age 21, or other specified reason. Colchester records consistently included information addressing exit criteria for each student. Although the district IEPs reviewed comply with required exiting criteria, the consultants are concerned by the practice of relying on standardized, norm-referenced test scores when exiting students, in particular for students with a Specific Learning Disability. The consultants found that the PPT principally relies on this metric without consideration to other data sources including treatment effect of the specialized instruction, progress monitoring, district- and state-wide test results, and parent input. The current practice appears inconsistent with guidance provided by the Bureau of Special Education.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Special-Education/Special-Education-Procedures-and-Practices-Manual.pdf> (pg.65)

3.2 Do metrics exist for evaluating educational benefit?

Educational benefit is defined as the extent to which students with disabilities are afforded access, meaningful participation, and progress in general education over time. The following data points were reviewed for evidence of educational benefit:

- 1) The number of students with disabilities taking the statewide assessment (both standard and alternate).
- 2) The performance of students with disabilities on statewide assessment in English Language Arts and Math.
- 3) The State Identified Measurable Result for Children with Disabilities (SIMR).
- 4) Four-year graduation rate.
- 5) Decrease 10+ Days Out-of-School (OOS) Suspension Rate

PARTICIPATION RATE

The consultants compared the number of students with disabilities taking the statewide assessment (both standard and alternate) in Colchester to both the state-established target and DRG D average for school year 2018-2019. No data is reported for 2019-2020 due to school closure as a result of COVID-19 pandemic. Colchester participation rates were 3.2% above the state-established target and 1.6% above the DRG D average for English Language Arts, placing Colchester as 5th highest in DRG D. Colchester participation rates for Math are 3.2% above the state-established target and 2.8% above the DRG D average for Math, placing Colchester tied with East Granby for 4th highest within DRG D (see Figures 7, 8, and 9).

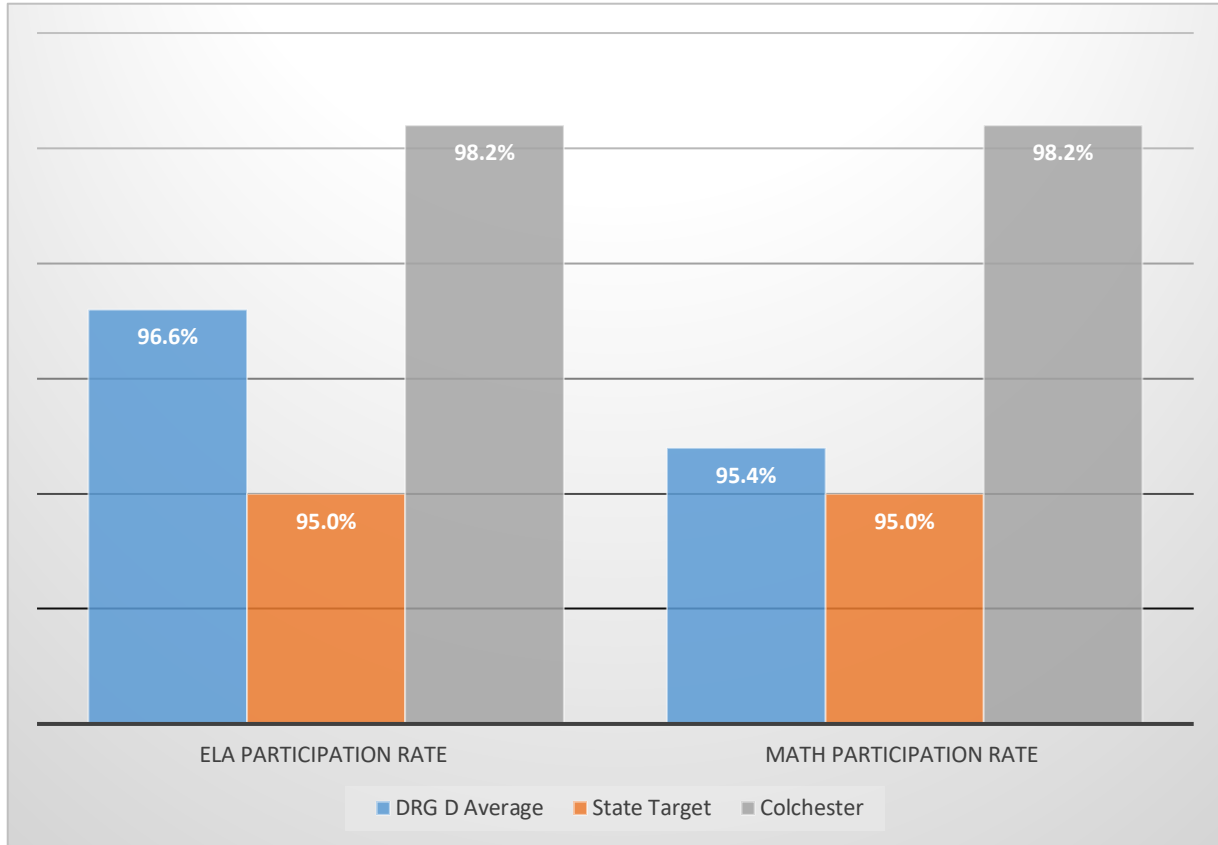


Figure 7. Grades 3-8 Participation Rate (2018-2019)

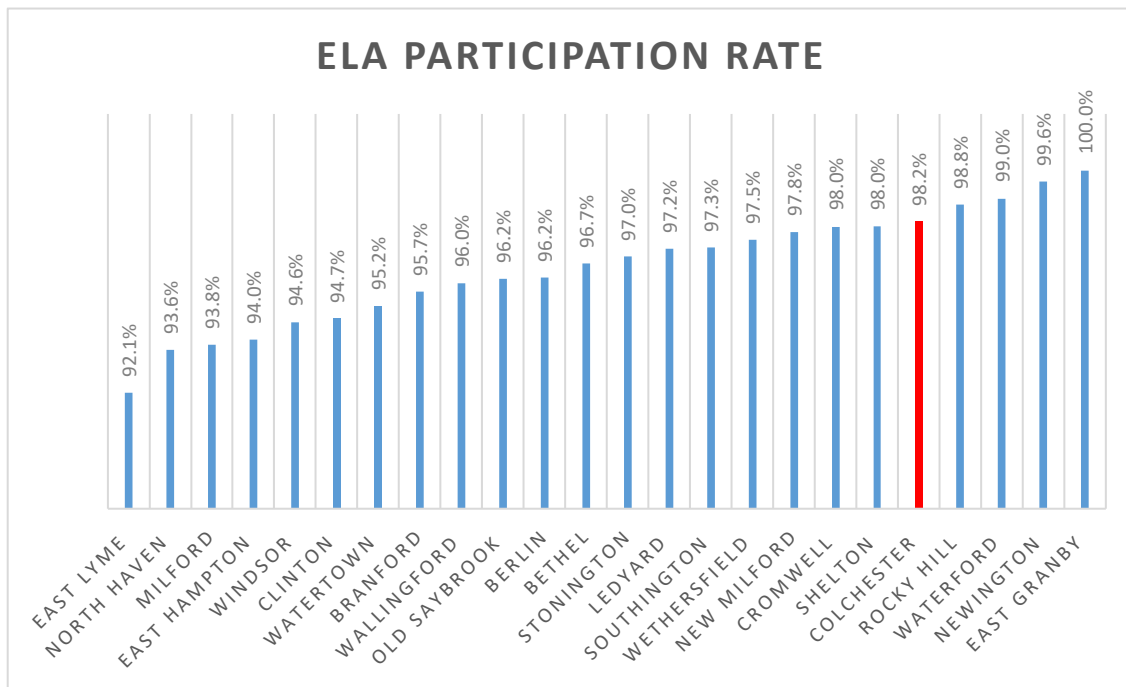


Figure 8. DRG D English Language Arts Participation Rate (2018-2019)

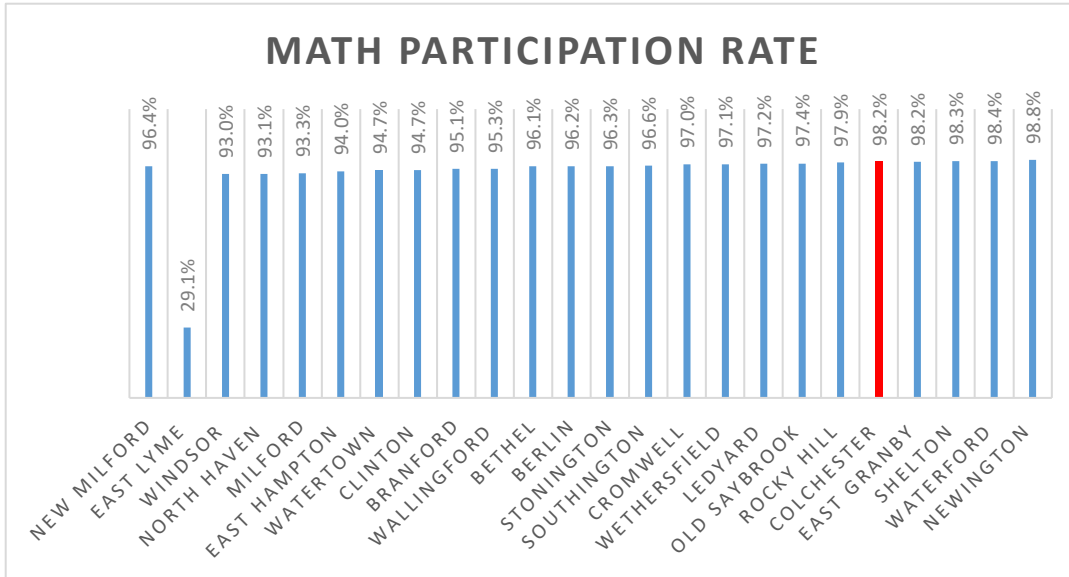


Figure 9. DRG D Math Participation Rate (2018-2019)

PERFORMANCE ON STATEWIDE ASSESSMENT

Investigation of Colchester proficiency data reveals that 26.3% of students with disabilities grades 3-8 reached proficiency on statewide assessment in English Language Arts which surpassed the state target by 7.3% and the DRG D average by 3.5%. Likewise, 22.5% of Colchester students with disabilities reached proficiency in Math which surpassed the state target and DRG D average by 4.3% and 8.8%, respectively (see Figure 10).

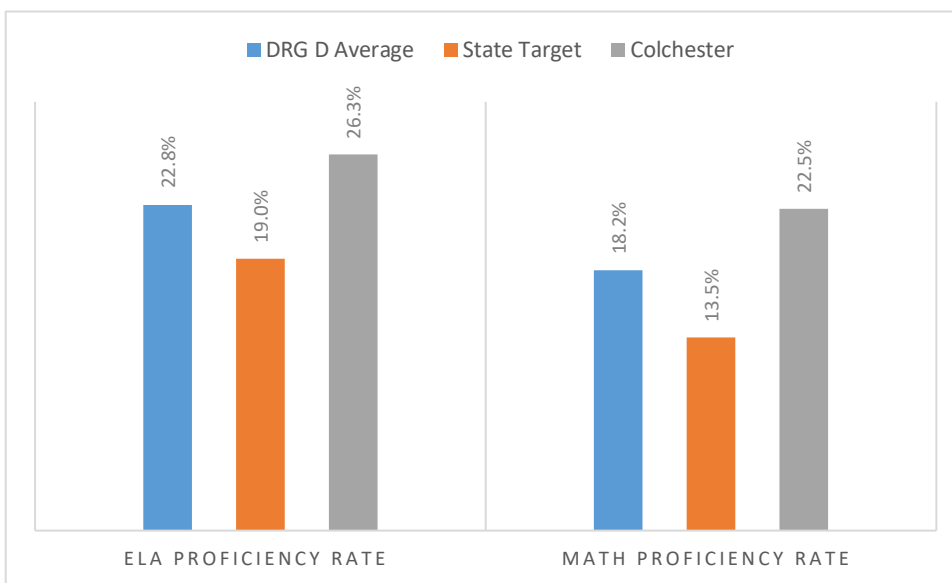


Figure 10. Grades 3-8 Proficiency Rate (2018-2019)

Comparison of Colchester’s proficiency rate within DRG D ranks Colchester as 6th out of the 24 for students with disabilities grades 3-8 in English Language Arts (see Figure 11) and 4th out of 24 in Math (see Figure 12).

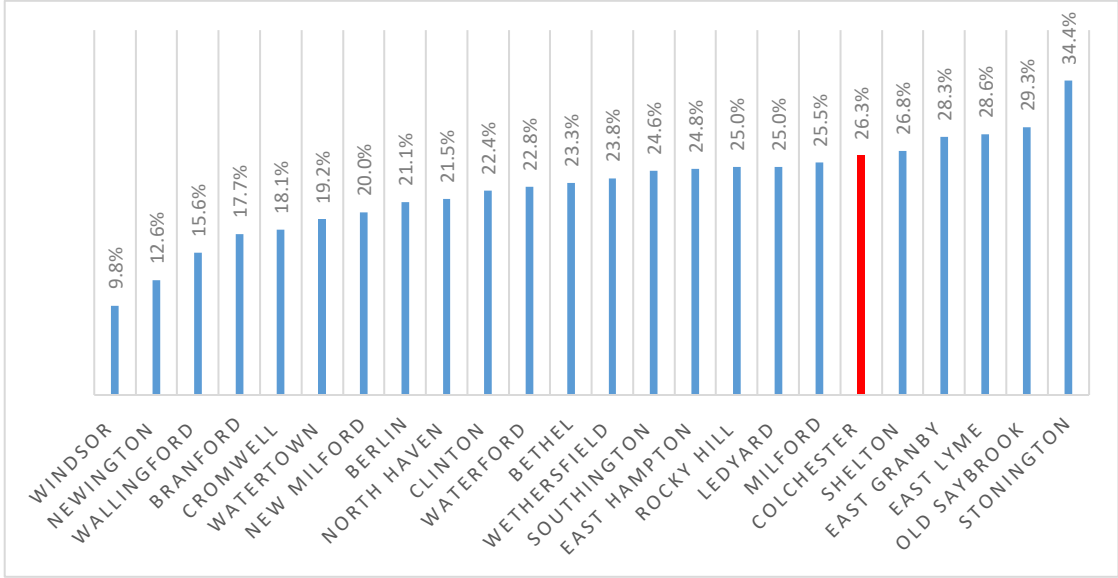


Figure 11. DRG D English Language Arts Proficiency Rate (2018-2019)

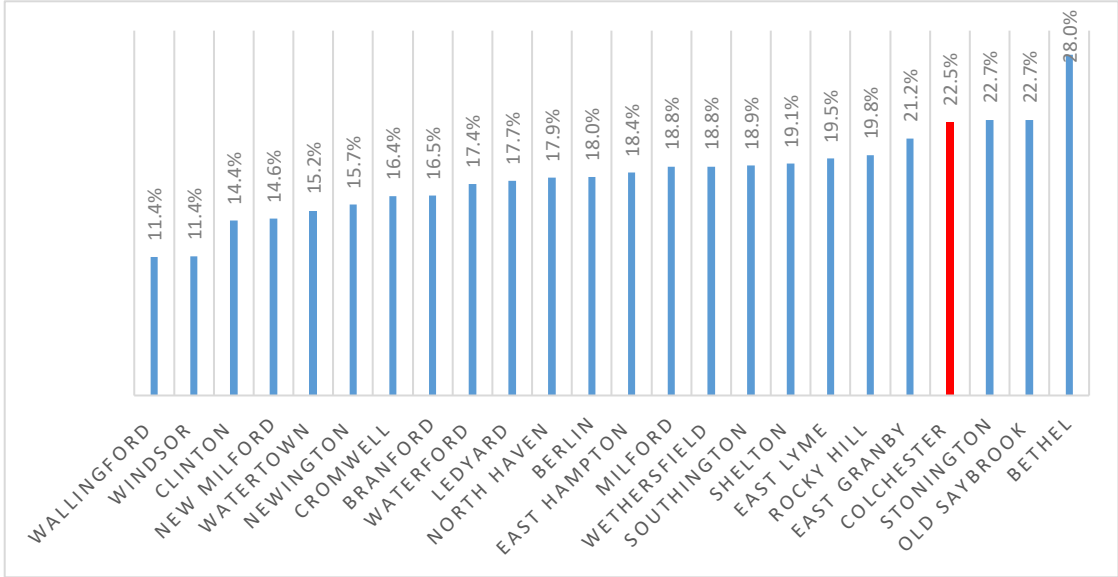


Figure 12. DRG D Math Proficiency Rate (2018-2019)

STATE IDENTIFIED MEASURABLE GOAL FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES (SIMR)

The State Identified Measurable Goal for Children with Disabilities (SIMR) was first included in the June 2016 Annual Performance Report (APR) for each school district. As a relatively new indicator, the SIMR measures the reading performance of all 3rd grade students with disabilities statewide, as measured by Connecticut’s English Language Arts (ELA) Performance Index. The 2019-2020 SIMR is not applicable due to statewide school closures in 2019-2020. Colchester’s 2018-2019 SIMR score of 55.7 surpasses the state average by 4.2 points and the DRG D average by 1.7 points (see Figure 13). Colchester ranks 3rd out of the 24 DRG D districts (see Figure 14).

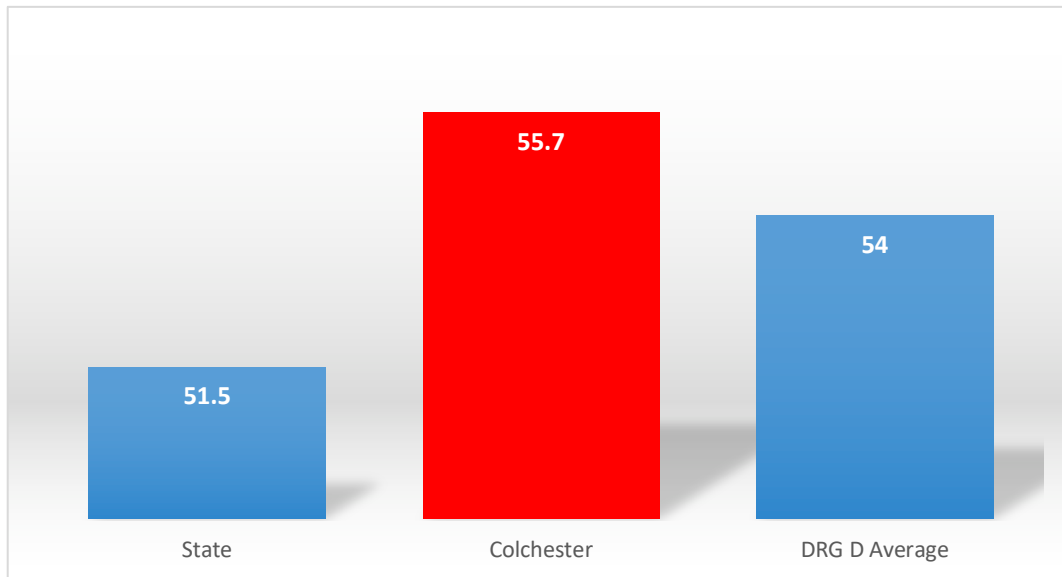


Figure 173 Colchester Identified Measurable Goal for Children with Disabilities (SIMR) in comparison to the state and DRG D averages (2018-2019).

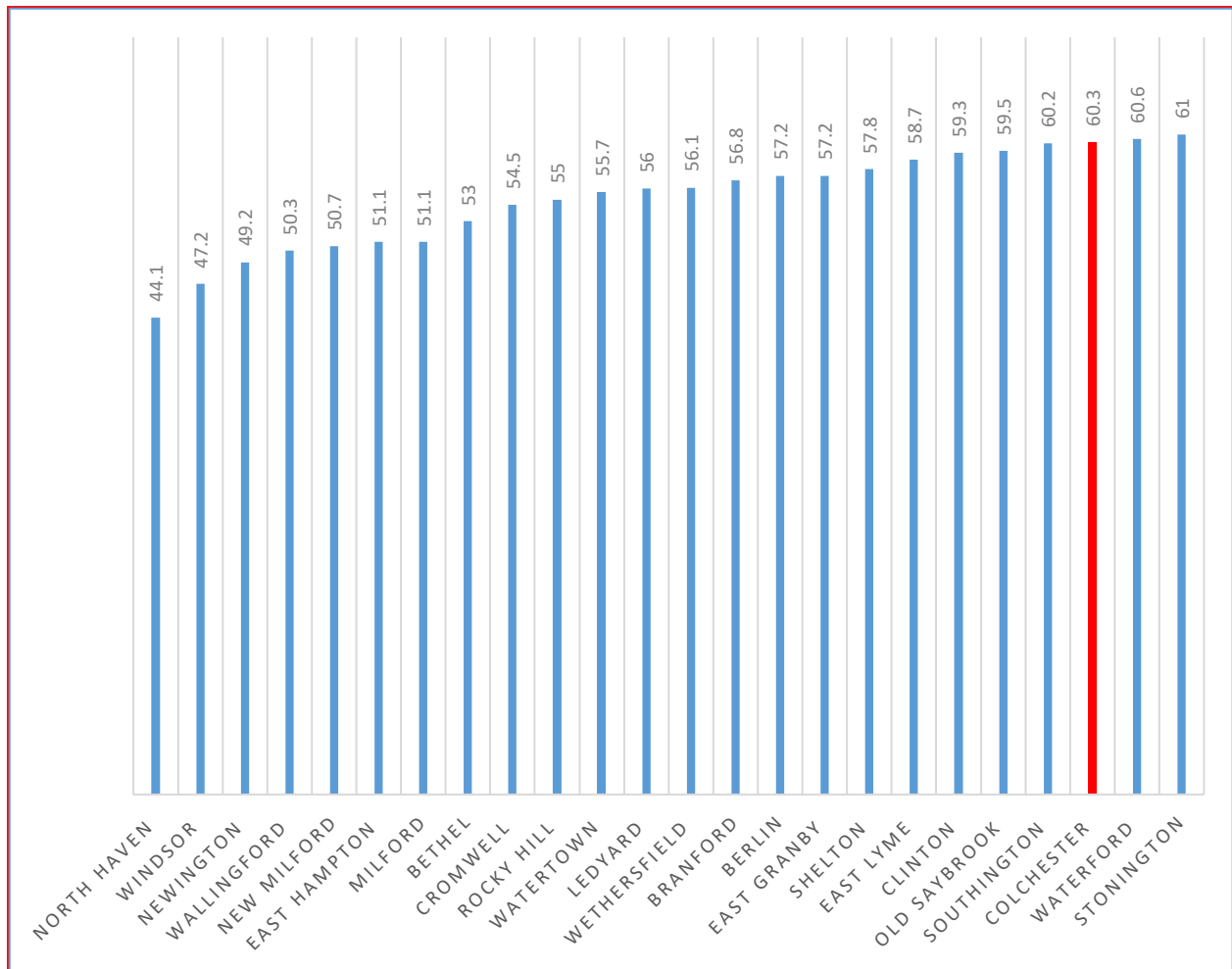


Figure 14. DRG D State Identified Measurable (SIMR) Goal for Children with Disabilities.

An important indicator of the State Performance Plan (SPP) is the increase of student graduation rate with a standard high school diploma.⁴⁷ For this indicator, graduation with a regular high school diploma is defined as receipt of Connecticut’s approved state issued diploma within four years. Graduation with a General Educational Development (GED) or a Certificate of Completion does not constitute graduation with a regular high school diploma. Inspection of Colchester’s graduation rate with a standard high school diploma was 7.7% above the state target for 2016-2017 and 3.2%, 3.2%, and 5.5% below the state target for 2017-2018, 2018-2019, and 2019-2020, respectively (see Figure 15).⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Indicator 1 of the Special Education Annual Performance Report (APR). <https://edsight.ct.gov/SASPortal/main.do>

⁴⁸ In 2001, Connecticut General Statutes were revised to require that by September 1, 2002, each district had to specify basic skill levels necessary for graduation for classes graduating 2006 and later, and the district had to specify a process for assessing competency. This process needed to include, but could not be limited to, assessment on the statewide Grade 11 Assessment.

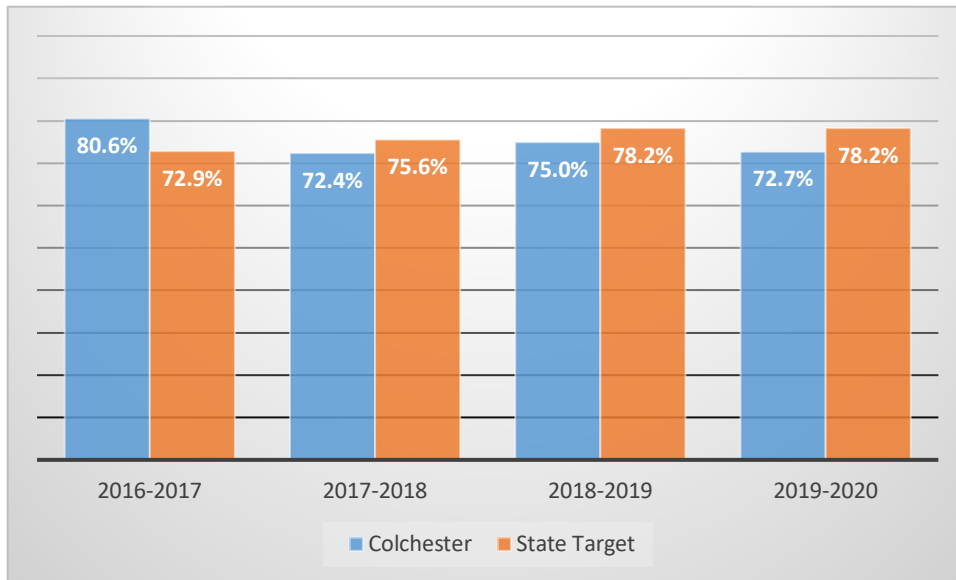


Figure 15. Graduation rate with a standard high school diploma.

States are required to examine data, including data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, to determine if significant discrepancies are occurring in the rate of long-term suspensions and expulsions of children with disabilities. If discrepancies are determined to be significant, the state must then review and, if appropriate, revise (or require the district to revise) its policies, procedures, and practices relating to the development and implementation of IEPs, the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and procedural safeguards, to ensure that these policies, procedures, and practices comply with IDEA. (34 C.F.R. Section 300.170). Significant discrepancy is defined as greater than 2% of students with disabilities in a district suspended or expelled out-of-school (OSS) for any offense for a cumulative total of greater than ten days in a school year.⁴⁹ The consultants found that Colchester’s 10+ days out-of-school suspension rate of .79% for 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 fell below the state target and met requirements. The 10+ days out-of-school suspension rate of 1.53% and 1.51% for 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 exceeded the state target (see Figure 16). However, the state found the district to have made substantial compliance for this time period. Although a significant discrepancy was not identified, the consultants recommend that the district monitor this area using the Connecticut

Districts were also required to create a course of study for students unsuccessful in meeting these competency requirements so they could reach a satisfactory level of competency before graduation. The same rules are applicable for youth with IEPs.

⁴⁹ https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/SDE/Special-Education/SPP/Indicator4_SelfAssess.pdf

State Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education SPP Indicator 4 District Suspension/Expulsion Self-Assessment given the upward trend in the data.

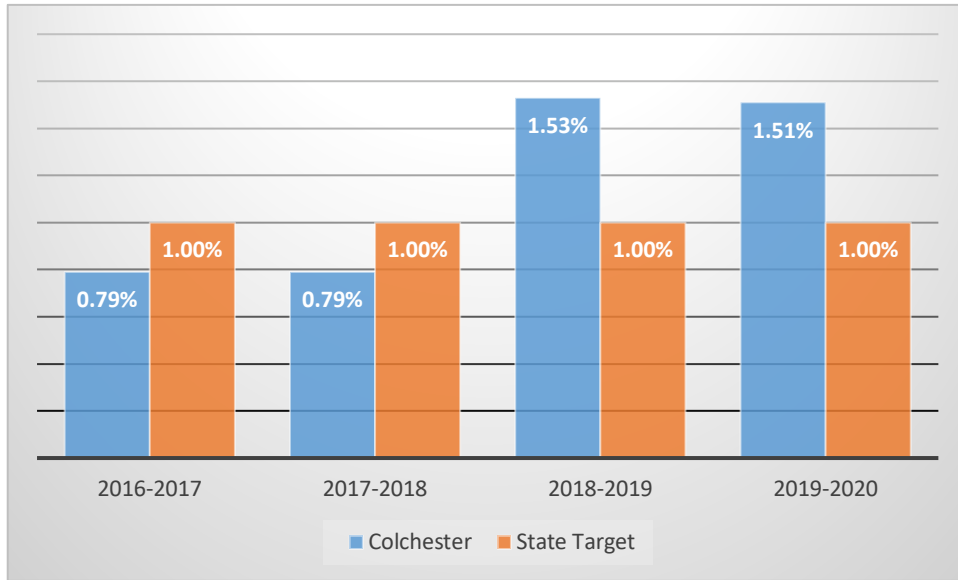


Figure 16. 10+ Day Out-of-School Suspension Rate.

4.0 IS CAPACITY SUFFICIENT TO MEET THE EDUCATIONAL GOALS AND TO PROJECT FUTURE SPECIAL EDUCATION EXPENDITURES?

The IDEA mandates that each school district provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to all children with a disability, regardless of the severity, who are in need of special education and related services. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Colchester to provide funding sufficient to maintain its capacity to meet the needs of these diverse learners. In order to address the question of capacity to meet the educational goals and to project future special education expenditures, the consultants reviewed state financial records to analyze local special education funding trends as a percentage of total current expenditures. The consultants reviewed local funding as well as state and federal grant allocations as revenue streams.

4.1 SPECIAL EDUCATION COSTS AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL EXPENDITURES

Analysis of state financial records indicates that Colchester's special education costs as a percentage of total expenditures has remained relatively stable for the time period 2016-2017 to 2020-2021 (see Figure 17). Colchester's percentage of total expenditures was 2.2%, 1.2%, and 0.9% above the DRG D average for 2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019. Colchester's percentage of total expenditures was equal to DRG D average for 2019-2020 and 0.1% greater than the DRG D average for 2020-2021 (see Figure 18).

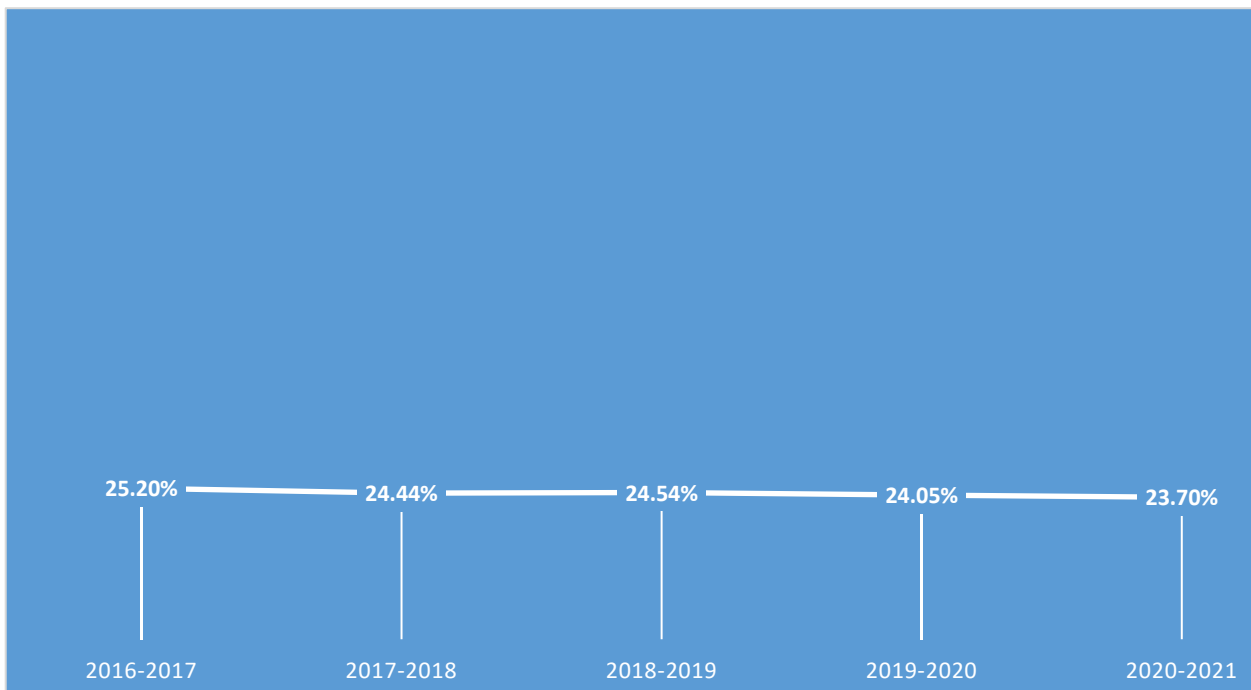


Figure 17. Colchester special education cost as a percentage of total current expenditures.

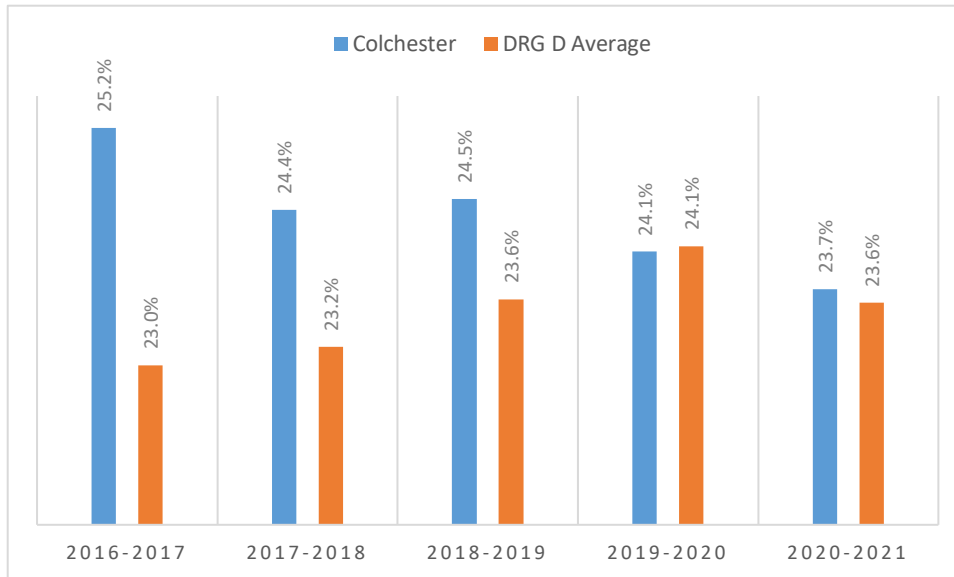


Figure 18. Comparisons of special education cost as a percentage of total current expenditures to DRG D average.

4.2 IDEA PART B 611 AND 619 GRANT FUNDS

Colchester receives federal funds under Part B of the IDEA for each fiscal year in accordance with a plan submitted to the Connecticut State Department of Education that provides assurances that the district meets each of the conditions of the IDEA (20 USC Section 1413(a)). Section 619 entitlement funds are provided for children with disabilities, ages 3 to 5; Section 611 entitlement funds are provided for children with disabilities, ages 3 to 21. IDEA funds must not be used to reduce the level of expenditures for the education of children with disabilities made by the district from local funds below the level of those expenditures for the preceding year (34 CFR 300.203). Funds must be used to supplement state, local and other federal funds and not supplant those funds (34 CFR 300.202(a)(3)). Supplanting occurs when the district's special education budget is less than the previous year's special education budget. Colchester must ensure that expenditures of grant funds adhere to the purpose and intent of the IDEA. As an eligible school district, Colchester must also meet the requirements contained in the IDEA, including the prohibition of commingling and must use a separate accounting system that includes an audit trail of the expenditure of funds received under the IDEA (as defined by 34 CFR Section (300.162 (b))). The IDEA 611 and 619 funds received by the district for each grant year extend for use over a two year period.

Allocations for IDEA 611 and 619 are based on federal formula that falls outside of the district's control.⁵⁰ Colchester was allocated IDEA 611 grant funds of \$522,065, \$539,959, and \$535,701,

⁵⁰ For each fiscal year for which funds are allocated to States under §300.703, each State first must award each LEA described in paragraph (a) of this section the amount the LEA would have received under section 611 of the Act for

and IDEA 619 grant funds of \$27,743, \$27,853, and \$27,993 for 2020, 2021, and 2022, respectively. (see Figures 19 and 20). Colchester, along with most school districts in Connecticut, experienced a reduction in IDEA grant funds (2014) as a result of federal sequestration.⁵¹ Allocations for the 2020, 2021, and 2022 IDEA 611 grant are \$76,056, \$58,162 and \$62,420 less, respectively, than pre-sequestration funding levels. Likewise, allocations for the 2020, 2021, and 2022 IDEA 619 grants are \$569, \$459, and \$319 less, respectively. Because Colchester is not unique in its use of IDEA grant funds to supplement local special education costs, any future reductions in expected federal dollars will shift the financial liability for special education to local taxpayers.

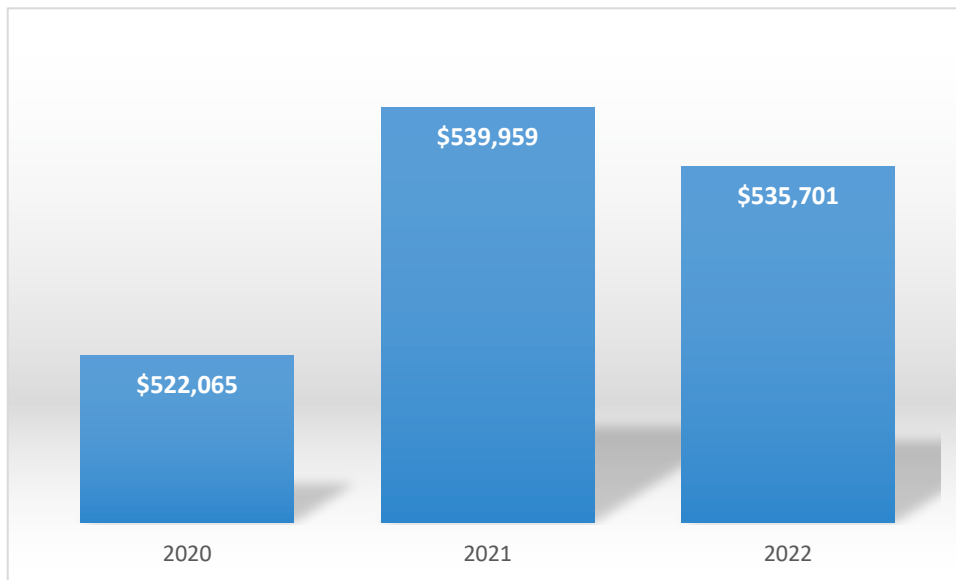


Figure 19. Colchester IDEA 611 grant payments.

fiscal year 1999, if the State had distributed 75 percent of its grant for that year under section 611(d) of the Act, as that section was then in effect. <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/repository/partb-subpartg/#300.705>

“Federal Funding for Students with Disabilities”. New America Education Policy Brief, 2014.

⁵¹ http://www.ideamoneywatch.com/main/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=60&Itemid=72

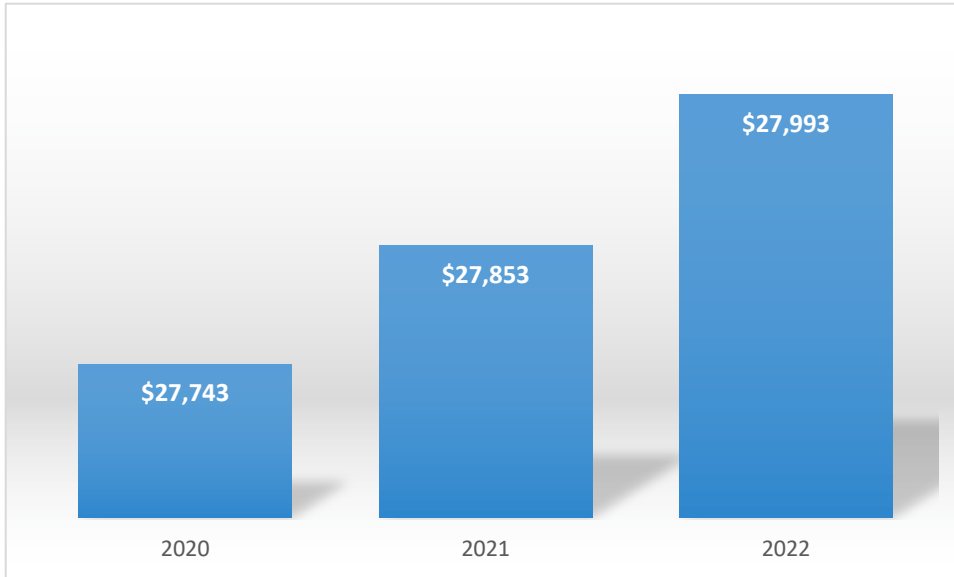


Figure 20. Colchester IDEA 619 grant payments.

4.2 EXCESS COST GRANT

Colchester also receives state funding for special education through the Excess Cost Grant which partially subsidizes the high-cost of eligible special education services. There are two categories of eligibility for this grant; Grant Type I (district placements including district schools and separate facilities) and Grant Type II (agency placements). For Grant Type I, funds in excess of 4.5 times the per pupil cost (\$83,750 for 2021-2022) are to be refunded to the district by the State of Connecticut.⁵² Grant Type II is for the placement of a student outside of the district that is made by another agency. Although this type of placement is made for other than educational reasons, the district continues its responsibility to fund the educational portion of the placement. A different formula applies to Grant Type II students and is based on a 1x per pupil cost (\$18,611 for 2021-2022), not a 4.5x per pupil cost.⁵³ Funds in excess of 1 x per pupil cost are to be refunded to the district by the State of Connecticut through the Excess Cost Grant. Both district and agency placements include all costs paid for by the district including tuition and transportation.

In theory, the Excess Cost Grant is intended to reimburse school districts 100% of funds above these thresholds. In actuality, the percentage of reimbursement is contingent upon the amount of money allocated in the State Budget (the “cap”) and the number of eligible students state-wide. The actual amount reimbursed to school districts has consistently fallen below

⁵² <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/cwp/view.asp?a=2635&q=320562>

⁵³ <https://portal.ct.gov/SDE/Fiscal-Services/Special-Education>

100%, and continues to vary due to both increased placement costs and numbers of eligible children state-wide. According to the 2021-2022 State Revenue report, Colchester’s Uncapped Grant Type I Entitlement of \$833,587 was reduced by the “cap” to \$683,387, a difference of \$150,170 (see Figure 21).⁵⁴ Colchester’s has no Grant Type II Entitlement for 2021-2022.

Although the district currently tracks excess-cost for students placed out-of-district, the consultants were unable to identify a process for tracking high-cost in-district special education students. The cost of these students may be eligible for excess-cost reimbursement if they meet the threshold similar to out-of-district placements.

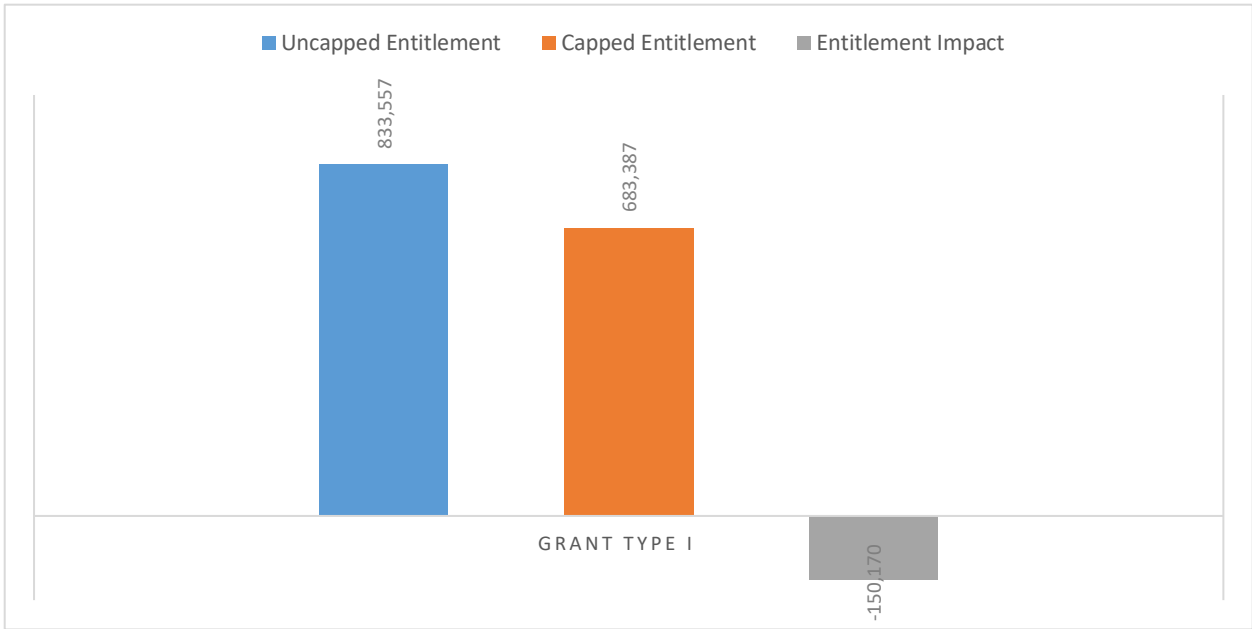


Figure 21. 2021-2022 Excess Cost Grant reimbursements.

⁵⁴ The difference of \$150,170 was unfunded by the state and paid by local taxpayers.

5.0 PARENTAL AND/OR AGENCY INVOLVEMENT IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

Open and honest communication between the school district and parents is paramount to fostering trust and respect. Eight parents met with the consultants to gain input regarding special education practices in the district. The parents who volunteered to participate in this dialogue have multiple years of experience with the district's special education program, have spoken to other parents with children in special education, and were willing to freely share their impressions.

The consultants found no organized parent forum specific to special education in Colchester. This finding is concerning given that the Board of Education Action Plan of Special Education Programs and Services of 12/8/2015 required the Director or Associate Director to form a Special Education advisory committee with membership of staff, parents, and community professionals. Although a SEPTO was created to meet this goal, parents indicated that this group was short-lived. The action plan also recommended that the district implement a comprehensive educational program for parents on special education programs and procedures. Although the district includes specific opportunities for parents to increase their knowledge and understanding of their children's educational needs as part of its IDEA Grant application, the majority method selected by the district is "Written Documentation" rather than in-person or "virtual" training session. In-person or "virtual" training sessions have the advantage in that they provide opportunity for parents to ask clarifying questions and/or gain answers to specific questions they may have regarding their child's disability. The consultants were concerned that no specific training opportunities have been offered to parents. Given that knowledge is power, this type of activity will undoubtedly make the parent's participation in their child's education more meaningful. To that end, the consultants recommend that the district reestablish a forum to educate parents, to hear their concerns, and to monitor trends in order to respond proactively rather than reactively. The consultants also recommend that the district allocate IDEA funds specific to parent training activities and that the training activities include specific training objectives and metrics to monitor effectiveness.

The Colchester parents interviewed reported favorably regarding communication with building level administration. They also stated that they shared a generally good relationships with special education staff. Oppositely, their comments regarding Pupil Services central office administration were less favorable. They expressed frustration with information that doesn't always get communicated readily, decisions being deferred, and phone calls not returned.

The parents interviewed expressed feeling overwhelmed by the PPT process in general, and did not feel as though they were part of the team. With exception to a few, they expressed concern in not understanding the many nuances of the IEP and felt that a better understanding would result in greater trust in the decisions being made. They were frustrated by the lack of accountability data substantiating student progress. As one parent aptly put it, “Show me, don’t tell me”.

The consultants were unable to identify specific data relative to monitoring parent involvement in the special education process. This is inconsistent with the Board of Education Action Plan of Special Education Programs and Services of 12/8/2015 which required the Director of Pupil Services and faculty representatives to survey parents of elementary schools about the effectiveness of accommodations & modifications. Interestingly, the consultants serendipitously located at central office a PPT/504 Meeting Exit Survey along with a specifically designed lock box for securing completed survey forms. The frontside of the survey card includes a description of the survey which reads:

“The survey was adapted from the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center’s (CPAC) PPT/IEP Participation Survey. Adaptations were made by a group of Colchester parents, teachers, and school administrators during a workshop sponsored by Partners for Exceptional Learners (PFEL). The Department of Pupil Services and Special Education is conducting this survey to gain a better understanding of parents’ perceptions on the PPT/504 meeting process. Individual responses to the survey will be kept confidential; results will be shared in aggregate form only. The survey is intended to be completed by parents/caregivers after each IEP or 504 meeting. The survey can be returned to the designated collection box (located in each school building) or mailed at a later date. Thank you for participating”.

The backside of the survey card asks the parents to indicate the meeting type, the school their child attends, and then to respond to the following five statements:

1. I understood the purpose of the PPT/504 meeting.
2. I understood everyone’s role at the PPT/504 meeting.
3. I was able to speak freely at the PPT/504 meeting.
4. I felt my input was valued by the other members of the PPT/504 meeting.
5. If I have further questions about my child’s IEP/504 plan, I know who to contact.

Each survey statement rating is based on a five-point Likert scale: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree or disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. Space is provided at the bottom of the card for comments. The consultants agree the exit survey to be an efficient and effective

vehicle for ongoing monitoring of parents' perceptions of the PPT/504 process. Therefore, the consultants recommend the district reinstate this practice and that aggregate data be reported to the superintendent on a quarterly basis.

6.0 COMMENDATIONS

The following commendations are made for Colchester's ongoing efforts in meeting the needs of its special education students:

Colchester is commended for:

- An articulated administrative structure for administering all aspects of their special education programs consistent with the recommendations of the Council for Exceptional Children.
- Principals and assistant principals who share a great deal of the responsibility for administering the special education programs in their buildings.
- Special education teachers and related services specialists who provide a continuum of high quality specialized instruction to students with varying degrees of disability in the regular, resource, and separate classroom as well as alternative and community settings.
- Providing a continuum of special education services including specialized in-district programming for students with significant learning challenges.
- Strong sense of teamwork and collaboration among building-level teams.
- Fiscal mindedness in light of the negative impact of federal and state funding limits.
- Vision and forward thinking of the Board of Education and district leadership in establishing the Connecticut Transition Academy of Colchester.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

The Comprehensive Program Review offers non-prioritized recommendations for the Colchester leadership team to consider.⁵⁵

1. Increase the visibility of the Director of Pupil Services and Special Education within schools, as the primary mode of communication between the director and building administration is email or memo.
2. The director convenes regularly scheduled meetings with the principal to address regulatory changes; changes in policies and procedures; current trends in special education and special education law; and consultation on difficult cases that are beyond the purview of building administration.
3. Establish a communication plan with guidelines for the levels and types of communication appropriate to the issue at hand. This plan must reflect shared decision making, participation and responsibility and must be effective and efficient. The hierarchy of communication needs to be clarified as well. Inefficient communication practices can negatively affect the quality of instruction, especially given the time constraints for regular and special education teachers to meet and collaborate. It is also imperative that the district special education teachers meet regularly to plan schedules for incoming students, develop specialized instruction, and consult and collaborate on IEP development and implementation to ensure that each student is receiving education benefit throughout the school year.
4. The Director of Pupil Services and Special Education no longer act as the 504 coordinator and oversight for this program be delegated to a regular education administrator.
5. Establish a district inclusion team consisting of central office and building administrators, district inclusion facilitator, special and regular teachers, and related service providers to monitor inclusive practices at the high school. The team's focus would be to develop a comprehensive plan that promotes inclusive practices that addresses but is not limited to the following areas:
 - a. Professional development for all staff, including special education teachers, general education teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals on the following topics:
 - i. Best practices for supporting students in inclusive settings.
 - ii. Accessing the general education curriculum through differentiation.

⁵⁵ It is important to note that following a meeting to discuss the team's initial findings and to assist in establishing district goals, Colchester administration began work immediately to address specific areas identified by the study.

- b. Scheduled meetings with grade level teams to model best inclusive practice and differentiation. Additionally, there should be common, regularly scheduled time for collaboration between the regular and special education teachers assumed within the teachers' schedule.
 - c. On-site coaching of best practice in inclusive settings, including differentiation of curricula, implementation of behavior management systems, and progress monitoring tools.
 - d. Review and revision of structures of support for students with special needs through IEP recommendations during annual review and transition meetings.
- 6. Building administration be afforded advanced professional development specific to special education policies, procedures, and legal issues.
- 7. The director actively participate in the hiring of new special education staff and the evaluation of special education teachers.
- 8. Provide the most recent "*Model Special Education Procedures and Practice Manual*" (2019) to all schools. The manual should also be made available on the district's website for ease of access given that written policies and procedures establish a common set of expectations for all stakeholders.
- 9. Provide staff training on eligibility determination including all required eligibility determination documentation completed in a manner consistent with the guidelines established by the Connecticut State Department of Education.
- 10. Professional development and coaching be provided to all special education and related services staff on the required data elements of the Individualized Education Program. Rather than providing a more generic overview, the training should focus on the specific mandated requirements for each element of the Individualized Education Program and their connection to the program as a whole.
- 11. Develop a system of central oversight of Individualized Education Programs to ensure that all required elements are included and in compliance with established policies and procedures. In the event that a technical or substantive error is identified, procedures prescribed by the Bureau of Special Education for making changes to the Individualized Education Program are to be followed. Points to monitor include but are not limited to:
 - a. Documentation that parents are provided with Prior Written Notice and that the Prior Written Notice accurately reflects the actions proposed or rejected by the PPT.
 - b. Alignment of student goals with identified area(s) of need.
 - c. Data substantiating master of goals is included in the record.
 - d. Annotated copies of student goals and objectives are included in the student file.
 - e. Documentation that the periodic reports of progress are sent to parents.
 - f. Accurate calculation and reporting of hours of special education and related services.

- g. Delineation of the amount of time each service implementer will work directly when several are referenced for a single service.
 - h. For students whose IEP includes transitioning planning, post-school outcome statements and post-secondary and employment outcome statements are consistent with guidance language provided by the State Department of Education.
12. Identify specific learning objectives aligned with department goals with accompanying outcomes metrics for all professional development activities related to special education. In keeping with best practice, it is recommended that baseline data and goal targets be included in order to evaluate growth as a result of these activities.
 13. Review the feasibility of retaining the special teacher assigned to district-wide initial evaluation.
 14. Provide professional development to educate staff on the language needs of EL student referred or eligible for special education.
 15. Develop a process that supports the induction of new staff hired following the start of the school year.
 16. Provide documentation that quarterly progress reports were sent and received by parents.
 17. Adopt and maintain fidelity to a system of progress monitoring that provides accurate data reflecting ongoing student progress for all IEP goals and objectives.
 18. A process be developed that assists teams in using data to more effectively determine why paraprofessional support is necessary, and where, when, and how the supports are to be delivered.
 19. Review requirements for referring hospitalized students to special education.
 20. Formalize the transition program to include a manual/handbook articulating processes, procedures, and guidelines including but not limited to entrance/exit criteria, and program goals and credit activities. This information should also be included on the district website.
 21. The district monitor graduation rate using the Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education SPP Indicator 4 District Suspension/Expulsion Self-Assessment
 22. Provide stipends for students enrolled in the transition academy to allow staff to teach students personal money management skills aligned with “best” practice.
 23. Meet with East Haddam to discuss feasibility of common start and end times, and common program identity.
 24. Reinstate the use of the parent exit survey following each PPT meeting.
 25. Report aggregate exit survey data to the superintendent on a quarterly basis.
 26. Provide support for the reestablishment of the special education part group (SEPTO).

27. Include a parent group as part of the interview process when hiring the new director.
The district may consider allowing the parent group to meet with the applicants separately in order to provide the district with their impressions.

APPENDIX A

DRG D SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Rocky Hill	Colchester
East Hampton	Shelton
North Haven	East Lyme
Cromwell	Old Saybrook
Bethel	New Milford
Clinton	Wethersfield
East Granby	Branford
Berlin	Waterford
Newington	Colchester
Wallingford	Stonington
Milford	Windsor
Southington	Ledyard