



Date: April 25, 2023
 To: Portland Public Schools Board of Education
 From: Michelle Murer, Senior Director of Special Education
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 Subject: **Special Education Programming and Continuum of Services**

The purpose of this memo is to provide the Board of Education a comprehensive update on the Special Education Department’s progress toward strategic goals and outcomes.

Background:

The mission of the Special Education Department is to provide instructional services in inclusive environments that will prepare students who receive special education services for life and careers. This work is in support of the PPS board goals and aligned to the [vision](#) as well as represented in the Portland Public Schools Strategic Plan, [Forward Together](#). The Special Education Department, in collaboration with others, is developing a comprehensive plan integrated with Forward Together which will improve services to, and outcomes for, our students.

The table below provides our enrollment over the last three years. For each school year, the first column represents the number of students who are eligible for special education services. The second column shows the representation of students eligible for special education services in Portland Public Schools (PPS).

	2020-21		2021-22		2022-23		2022-23 % DISTRICT Total Enrollment
	#	%	#	%	#	%	
Special Education Enrollment	7268	15.3 %	7164	15.7	7420	16.3 %	16.3%
Asian	307	4.3%	284	4.1%	270z	3.6%	5.8%
Black/African American	822	11.5%	771	11 %	805	10.9%	8.3%
Hispanic	1361	19.1%	1320	18.8%	1472	19.8%	17.3%
Two or more	864	12.1%	889	12.7%	933	12.6%	12.1%
Native American	64	0.9%	58	0.8%	69	0.9%	.5%
Pacific Islander	48	0.7%	36	0.5%	35	0.5%	.8%
White	3670	51.4%	3648	52.1%	3836	51.7%	55.2%

Strategic Plan Goals:

As a school system, our strategic plan, [Forward Together](#), outlines what we want to be true for students with disabilities:

- **Establish Systems and Structures for Inclusion:** All of our systems and structures support the understanding and implementation of inclusionary practices for students with disabilities. (page 31)
- **Promote an Inclusive Mindset:** We all share the mindset that students with disabilities are everyone's students. (page 32)
- **Build the Advocacy Power of Students and Families of Students with Disabilities:** We ensure that all families and students, especially those historically underserved, have the knowledge, information, and support they need to fully engage in, and contribute to, the special education process. (page 33)
- **Reimagine Relationships and a Sense of Belonging:** Students develop a strong sense of belonging, and we foster safe, healthy, and positive learning and working environments. (page 21)

The comprehensive plan for systems and structures for Inclusive practices in PPS is centered around the four strategic goals listed above and will support the understanding and implementation of inclusionary practices for students with disabilities.

Special Education Continuum of Services:

Special education is specially designed instruction and services for students. It is identified within an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that addresses a student's unique needs based on a disability that is eligible to receive special education services. A term often used to describe this in special education is "free and appropriate public education (FAPE)." PPS provides eligible students with a continuum of services in the least restrictive environment (LRE), consistent with state and federal law.



The continuum of placement options available includes, but is not limited to:

- General education classes
- General education classes with support services and/or modifications
- Combination of general education and special education service time
- Specialized special education classes
- Placements outside of a school district
- Home instruction
- Day/residential care or treatment facilities

Each Individual Education Plan (IEP) outlines the percentage of time a student is expected to participate in in the general education setting. Students in all settings are provided access to meaningful participation in the general education classrooms with effective instruction in grade-level content standards.

Portland Public Schools Special Education Programming:

- Early Childhood Special Education Services: Special education services for students, birth through age 5. This program is run outside of PPS through the Multnomah Early Childhood Program.
- K-12 Levels of Support:
 - Learning Center: Supplemental special education services provided at every school campus in PPS. The Learning Center is staffed at a ratio of one (1) special education teacher to 28 students.
 - Focused Specialized Classrooms: Specialized classroom locations are located throughout PPS. These classrooms are staffed by a ratio of one (1) special education teacher to 11 students and 3 paraeducators with some variation for SES classrooms depending on grade. Students are assigned to focus classrooms by the district following the decision of the IEP team that includes the parents. The IEP team must implement the due process rights of the student and parent of the student eligible for special education services.
 - Locations of Focus Classrooms in PPS
 - Communication Behavior: Special education instruction with a primary focus on social communication needs.
 - Social-Emotional Skills: Special education instruction with a primary focus on social/behavioral needs, collaborative problem solving, and positive behavioral supports.
 - Intensive Skills Classrooms: Instruction to students with a primary focus on adaptive and academic skill development.
 - Therapeutic School Services: Services focused on social/behavioral needs, collaborative problem solving, and positive behavioral supports.
- Ages 18-21 Community Transition Program: Provides services to students ages 18-21 that are identified through the course of study within their IEP as needing continued special education services beyond the fourth year of high school. Services focus on the transition from school to adult services.

Program Improvement:

The program improvement plan for special education requires that students who receive special education services in PPS are provided access to grade level standards content. Students should be engaged in grade level and standards aligned universally aligned tasks, with scaffolds that support students access without modification of the tasks themselves.

At PPS, more than 80% of the students eligible for special education services are in general education settings for more than 80% of the school day. This is something we should be proud of and is supported by best practices and also overwhelmingly by research in special education. The table below delineates the percentages of our students who participate in the general education environment and at what level:

PPS Student Placement	2020-21		2021-22		2022-23	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
40% to 79% of the Day in Regular Class	580	8.13%	648	9.25%	706	9.51%
80% or More of the Day in Regular Class	5677	79.55%	5621	80.23%	5919	79.77%
Home-Schooled	21	0.29%	9	0.13%	3	0.04%
Homebound	24	0.34%	33	0.47%	28	0.38%
Less Than 40% of the Day in Regular Class	516	7.23%	400	5.71%	449	6.05%
Private School	74	1.04%	103	1.47%	127	1.71%
Private Residential Facility	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	15	0.20%
Private Separate School	8	0.11%	7	0.10%	5	0.07%
Public Residential Facility	8	0.11%	1	0.01%	11	0.15%
Public Separate School	228	3.20%	184	2.63%	157	2.12%

We fundamentally believe in providing a continuum of special education services and instruction to address the needs of our students that receive special education services. In October 2021, PPS opted to have a third-party review of special education programming at PPS and how it aligns with the PPS Strategic Plan, [Forward Together](#). We partnered with the Urban Special Education Collaborative, a nationally recognized organization based at the University of Arizona, that works with school districts to increase inclusive special education services in schools and decrease the disproportionate representation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in classification rates, separate educational environments, and disciplinary actions. The [review](#) highlighted key shifts including the need to focus on a neighborhood school model.

Based on that review, Special Education is developing a plan for program improvement, including a shift toward a neighborhood school model. The Special Education departmental goal this year is to backward map and build out a comprehensive plan for systems and structures that support the understanding and implementation of inclusionary practices for students with disabilities. [The Special Education: Systems and Structures for Inclusive Practices Project Charter](#) is the foundation for the plan and is in alignment with the [PPS Vision & Graduate Portrait](#) and the Instructional Framework. The comprehensive plan centered on the strategic goals described in the project charter above will be iterated annually. Action steps for each activity will be outlined and assigned annually.

Community Engagement:

This project plan has been developed collaboratively with Special Education staff, including teachers, and centers the voices of our students and families. Below are some of the community & family engagement activities we have engaged in thus far:

- The Special Education Steering Committee consists of staff in the following roles: Teacher, Occupational Therapist, Paraeducator, School Psychologist, Speech Therapist, Qualified Mental Health Professional (QMHP) and has been foundational in building this plan over the year.
- Students' voices have been gathered at each type of our Focus Classroom (Social Emotional Skills classroom, Communication & Behavior classroom, Intensive Skills classroom) and at both the middle and high school levels, including Pioneer and the Community Transition Program at Dr. Martin Luther King Elementary. These students' stories are being examined for themes to integrate and potential issues to mitigate.
- Family listening sessions and surveys in English, Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Somali.
- Identified building administrators were invited to provide feedback on the plan as well through listening sessions with Michelle Murer, Sr. Director of Special Education.

The listening sessions conducted this year are intended to be foundational, and the team will use lessons learned from the work this year to build a practice of ongoing two way communication with key stakeholders in support of our continuous improvement cycle for Special Education services in PPS. Guided by our vision, strategic plan, program review, and stakeholder input and feedback, we are focused on backward mapping and building out a comprehensive plan that builds knowledge, structures, and practices that are more inclusionary across every PPS school.

Inclusionary Practices:

Central to the plan for improved Special Education programming, and student belonging, is inclusionary practices. Inclusionary practices actions that educators, schools, and districts take to create opportunities for students with diverse abilities to learn and be a part of the general education curriculum, classroom, and school community. In alignment with the prioritization of student belonging, we believe all students have the right to access academic and social opportunities in their neighborhood schools; this includes access to core content and a continuum of special education services. A neighborhood school is defined as a school assignment within the neighborhood in which a student lives. Currently, 6111 out of 7410 students that receive special education services attend their neighborhood school.

Providing appropriate support for students in their neighborhood schools increases a sense of belonging and school engagement. As we have heard from students and families in our listening sessions, enabling students to continue their education with their neighborhood peers helps them feel part of the community. Parents have also expressed that transportation to and from school can be challenging when their child is placed at a school outside of their neighborhood.

Effective inclusionary practices facilitate student access to grade level content and core instruction for students with disabilities. These critical factors lead to improved student outcomes including academic achievement, eighth grade readiness and high school graduation rates. Ensuring that students and families feel part of their school community will also empower them to share their voice and advocate for their needs.

As we work towards a more inclusive environment and supporting students with disabilities within their neighborhood schools, the staffing model may shift. Our talented staff with expertise in supporting and teaching students with various disabilities will continue and deepen their collaboration with general education teachers and staff.

The table below outlines our staffing over the last three years:

Staff Role	2020-21 Total FTE	2021-22 Total FTE	2022-23 Total FTE
Speech Pathologist	93.2	96	95
School Psychologist	57.31	56.8	58
Learning Center Teacher	181.5	181.5	176.5
Communication Behavior Classroom Teacher	23	23	23
Intensive Skills Classroom Teacher	38	37	36
Social Emotional Skills Classroom Teacher	25	25	24
Pioneer Teacher	16	16	16
Community Transition Program Teacher	9	9	8.5
Qualified Mental Health Professional	16	16	16
Therapeutic Intervention Coach (TIC)	14	14	23
Para Educator FTE Communication Behavior Classroom	69	69	69
Para Educator FTE Intensive Skills Classroom	118	118	108
Para Educator FTE Social Emotional Skills classroom	64	64	64
Para Educator FTE -1:1 Support	172	168.5	159

Instructional Framework - Academic Learning:

A key component of the PPS Strategic Plan, [Forward Together](#) is the [Instructional Framework and Roadmap to Educational Equity](#). The plan outlines a shared vision of what teaching and learning should look like in PPS. In partnership with teachers, school leaders, and staff from across the district, we are calibrating around this shared vision of highly effective teaching and learning, adopting new curricula to support that instruction, and offering improved professional learning experiences for all teachers. Every special educator in PPS is committed to meeting the specific learning needs of our special education students.

The Special Education Department is collaborating with the MTSS department to develop tiered systems of support and streamline services to students. Through multi-tiered systems of support, students receive individual interventions to meet students' needs regardless of whether the student has a disability or not. Effective tiered interventions will address learning needs and will lower special education referrals as students' needs get met earlier in the process.

Effective implementation of the Instructional Framework with tiered interventions and scaffolded supports for students with disabilities will improve academic achievement and graduation rates as outlined in the board goals.

Professional Learning and Curricular Materials:

Key to changing our practices is to provide professional learning and updated resources. In order to support implementation of newly adopted district curriculum Special Educators have been provided training alongside their general education peers to learn the curriculum and ensure that students receiving special education services have access to the core curriculum. Additionally, some students require supplemental or alternative curricula to address their needs, professional learning has also been provided to support the implementation of these instructional materials.

The Special Education Department is collaborating with the Office of Teaching and Learning (OTL) and MTSS, among others, to align resources and ensure that all students have access to high level resources and supports; and all educators have the same curricular resources to center their work around. Ongoing professional learning provided to school and central office staff will also support the shift toward inclusionary practices and an inclusive mindset.

All TOSAs and Program Administrators from the Special Education Department have participated in a year-long professional learning opportunity with their colleagues from the Office of Teaching and Learning to develop their instructional coaching skills aligned to the instructional framework. These same staff also participated in a two day training with UnboundEd to support this work.

It is important for Special Educators to be familiar with the grade level curriculum in order to determine appropriate accommodations and scaffolds required to support students in accessing grade level content. Professional cadres are an essential component of our professional learning model. This year special educators were provided scaffold guidelines and the opportunity to dig into the new curriculum through their attendance at cadres with their general education colleagues for English Language Arts (ELA) and math curriculum implementation.

Special educator specific professional development has addressed family engagement in the IEP process, training on alternative and supplemental curricula, grade level transition support as well as a mid year student progress data review. Learning Center teachers have attended training and coaching opportunities focused on a supplemental intensive structured literacy instructional tool, the Wilson Reading System. Additionally, special educators supporting our Intensive Skills Program attended a training on the alternative curriculum, TeachTown, for students with moderate to severe disabilities. We also piloted Slumberkins, a social emotional skills curriculum, in four of our K-2 focus classrooms. All of these instructional materials and training are integral to providing effective special education services for our students.

In addition to teachers, professional learning opportunities are developed and provided regularly for special education staff including school psychologists, qualified mental health professionals (QMHPs), speech language pathologists, paraeducators, occupational therapists and physical therapists. For

example, monthly in-depth training was provided to all speech and occupational therapists to build capacity in the area of feeding protocols. For school psychologists and QMHPs, learning opportunities have focused on increasing family engagement and social emotional needs of students. Paraeducator training has focused on behavioral strategies for students with social-emotional needs.

The resources and support that special education staff have received this year will be foundational to the implementation of program improvement and the district strategic plan.

Conclusion:

The Special Education Department is committed to continue the support of inclusive practices for students with disabilities to improve academic achievement, graduation, and post secondary engagement outcomes. The department is focused on the strategic outcomes outlined in [Forward Together](#). We fundamentally believe in providing a continuum of special education services and instruction to address the needs of our students that receive special education services, and we are committed to meeting the vast majority of those needs in our neighborhood schools.

Looking forward, the Special Education department will continue to leverage the comprehensive program review to examine our programming and its alignment to the district strategic plan and graduate portrait. Ongoing staff and community engagement will deepen our understanding of how students and families experience their education and provide essential feedback on how to serve them better. We will deepen collaboration with schools and central office departments to ensure that all staff receive necessary professional learning that is aligned across the district. Through these activities, and the implementation of the [Instructional Framework](#), we will attain educational equity for all students.