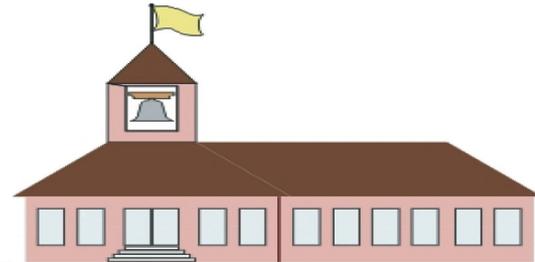


Westwood Public Schools Special Education Review



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Purpose of the Study

Westwood Public Schools contracted consultants from Ribas Associates and Publications to provide the following:

- a study of the effectiveness of its current special education department and programs,
- to consider what revision and reorganization could be implemented as a result of the review
- provide feedback on the current preschool program and structure
- examine the integration of special education programs at each school
- examine the criteria for special education student program placement
- examine the implementation of regular education interventions, including the District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS).



Project Methodology

- Literature and Budgetary Review
- Interviews with the Superintendent and Senior Leadership within Central Administration
- Interviews with District and Special Education Leadership
- Interviews with School Committee and SEPAC
- Focus Groups with Parents and Teachers
- Created questions for survey (approved by Superintendent)
- Created, distributed, and analyzed survey results
- Visits to Pine Hill School, Thurston Middle School, and the preschool program at Westwood High School;
- Preparation of Draft Final Report and Recommendations



8 Areas of Focus

- Organizational Structure and Leadership
- Special Education Rates
- Continuum of IEP Services and Specialized Programs
- Westwood Applied Behavioral Analysis Program (WABA)
- Instructional Assistants and ABA Tutors
- Resource Allocation
- Preschool Program
- Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)



Overall Commendations

- Westwood is a high performing district with many experienced leaders, passionate educators and engaged families
- The community takes great pride in its schools
- Westwood is committed to meeting the needs of all of its students in Westwood
- Westwood has developed robust special education programming and has created a significant number of specialized programs
- Westwood has a very small number of students placed in out-of-district programs
- Westwood offers an integrated early education program staffed by dedicated professionals



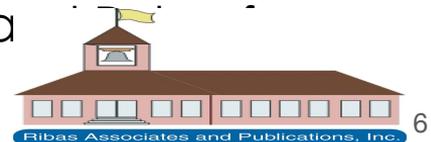
1. Organizational Structure and Leadership

Commendations:

- District is well staffed in most areas with many long term and highly experienced educators.

Findings:

- Significant turnover among ABA tutors, Instructional Assistants and Special Education Department Heads
- Current Department Head model appears to be inadequate to accomplish tasks assigned to this position
- Department Heads function as “Unit B” within the Unit A collective bargaining agreement
- Nursing, Extended School Year (ESY), Preschool Intake a Psychologists/Adjustment Counselors



1. Organizational Structure and Leadership

Recommendations:

- Implementation of a Team Chairperson model
- Better alignment of Department Head FTEs.
- Better clarity regarding responsibilities for ESY
- Clarity and consistency around the role of Principals in special education
- Lead Nurse role
- Roles and expectations for Psychologists and Adjustment Counselors



2. Special Education Rates

Commendations:

- Westwood has a well deserved reputation for providing robust and high quality special education services. In addition the district has built a significant number of programs and services designed to address the needs of students with IEPs within Westwood Schools.

Findings:

- Westwood's special education rates have increased from 18.3% in 2021 to 21.3% in 2025
- Westwood's overall rate of students on IEPs is higher than many of its comparison districts
- Lack of tight and cohesive systems for instruction, assessment, progress monitoring and intervention in general education often results in students being moved into special education too rapidly and/or unnecessarily

2. Special Education Rates

Findings:

- Lack of tight and cohesive systems for instruction, assessment, progress monitoring and intervention in general education often results in students being moved into special education too rapidly and/or unnecessarily

Recommendations:

- A thorough analysis of the general education curriculum, structures, systems and practices with specific attention to the areas of early elementary **literacy** and **executive functioning** in middle schools
- Examine assessment and eligibility determination practices and calibrate best practices pre-K-12.
- Professional development to ensure comprehensive, standardized and culturally responsive assessment batteries and consistent understanding and expertise in educational disability determinations



3. Continuum of IEP Services and Specialized Programs

Commendations:

- Westwood has a well deserved reputation for providing robust and high quality special education services. In addition the District has built a significant number of programs and services designed to address the needs of students with IEPs within Westwood Schools.
- Westwood has the lowest rates of out of district students amongst its comparative districts and one of the lowest rates in the state at 3.5%.

Findings:

- While special education is deservedly a point of pride in the Westwood community, it is apparent that students with and without disabilities are being served in special education.



3. Continuum of IEP Services and Specialized Programs

Findings:

- Students are pulled out of general education instruction beyond what some may deem necessary. This was raised specifically with regards to early literacy where, in many cases, pull out services are provided during the general education literacy block.
- The level of A grid (consultation) and C grid services (outside of the general education classroom) written into student's IEPs in many cases exceeds the needs of individual students.
- For many students in learning centers, the special education pull-out time focuses on study skills and getting homework done versus specialized instruction.



3. Continuum of IEP Services and Specialized Programs

Findings:

- Need for education on the difference between students who need support in general education with accommodations and students who require specialized instruction in order to receive a FAPE.
- Over-referral rates to special education have been exacerbated since COVID; “everyone with needs qualifies regardless of whether there is a disability.”
- At the middle and high schools level the need to provide accommodations is often conflated with the need to guarantee good grades.
- The continuum of special education services across grade spans is not consistently aligned vertically. Entrance and exit criteria for programs is not clear.



3. Continuum of IEP Services and Specialized Programs

Findings:

- The largest disability category in Westwood is health (27.4%). This percentage exceeds the state percentage of 15.4% by 12 percentage points. ADHD is prominent in this category.
- The percentage of students on IEPs and 504s at the middle school level is over 30%, some of which is driven by the executive and organizational demands of the middle school years and the lack of general education structures, systems and instruction in this domain.



3. Continuum of IEP Services and Specialized Programs

Recommendations

- Articulate the continuum of services from pre-K-22 in the Westwood Public Schools. Wherever possible, the District should align program names between the levels. Program descriptions should also include clear criteria for entrance and exit into each program.
- Leadership of both general education and special education should explore the instructional models currently in place, particularly in literacy and work to individualize so that students requiring specialized instruction in reading are also benefiting from the reading instruction that is occurring in the classroom and are not routinely pulled out of literacy instruction to receive services.
- IEPs should focus on disability-related needs; additional services and supports should not be added to students IEPs who do not require them solely because they are already on an IEP.



3. Continuum of IEP Services and Specialized Programs

Recommendations

- Professional development for general and special educators as well as monitoring and oversight of IEP service design and delivery. The current model of multiple case managers in buildings handling the IEP process exacerbates this pattern.
- Executive functioning and organizational and study skills instruction within general education is an area for further inquiry. When there is limited support in this area in general education, students end up being put on IEPs to address executive functioning issues that could be addressed in general education through systematic instructional processes.
- Many students can be well served with strong and consistent instructional practices in general education with a strong District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP).



4. Westwood Applied Behavioral Analysis (WABA) Program

Commendations:

- Deep appreciation for the program and, in particular, for the ABA tutors among parents
- Parents are passionate about the needs of their students and committed to having their children remain in the Westwood Public Schools
- Programs provide robust services

Findings:

- Programs are well-staffed, resourced and located in spacious classrooms.
- IEPs contain programmatic elements in the grids that are not individualized and not required
- Perception that desire to provide so much in the way of services is inadvertently encouraging “learned helplessness”
- High degree of consultation services



4. Westwood Applied Behavioral Analysis (WABA) Program

Recommendations:

- Engage in a pre-K-22 program review of the WABA program with an outside expert specialized in public school programming for students on the autism spectrum.
- This should be inclusive and, at a minimum, should include:
 - looking at all programmatic elements;
 - examining the transitions between elementary and middle school and middle school and high school;
 - impact of the current model and structure of the program on staff quality of work experience and retention;
 - assessing the purpose and provision of home-based services,
 - examining the curriculum and instructional model(s) being utilized



5. Instructional Assistants and ABA Tutors

Commendations:

- Instructional Assistants and ABA Tutors play a key role in providing quality experiences for students in Westwood.
- This work is valued highly by parents
- Likewise, in many buildings, their contributions are recognized and valued by staff and administration.

Findings:

- Significant level of turnover among ABA tutors, particularly at the beginning of the 2025-2026 school year.
- Departures were attributed to the salaries, working conditions including the amount of home based services, case loads, and scheduling concerns
- Both the instructional assistants and ABA tutors are compensated well below that of Westwood's comparison districts.



5. Instructional Assistants and ABA Tutors

Recommendations:

- Closely examine these positions, the contractually mandated working conditions, and wage comparisons with comparison communities in order to create contractual conditions designed to retain these individuals in Westwood
- Enhance the view and support the professionalism of IAs and ABA tutors in the District and its schools, including:
 - the development of an ongoing professional development plan, designed to enhance the skills of individuals in these roles
 - the creation of an educator licensure program pathway for IAs and ABA tutors in partnership with local colleges, and/or other school districts and/or a collaborative, created to incent those who are interested in securing professional licensure and remaining in Westwood



6. Resource Allocation

Commendations:

- Westwood has robust resources and services and provides a deep and broad array of services and supports to students, particularly those in special education.

Findings:

- Distribution of students on IEPs across schools has wide variation
- The level and complexity of overall student need varies from school to school.
- Staffing allocations, resources and patterns do not necessarily align with the variability in numbers and needs.
- Caseloads are also imbalanced with variation not only between schools, but within schools for job-alike roles. This is most pronounced at the Pine Hill School.



6. Resource Allocation

Recommendations:

- The District should undertake a caseload and workload analysis of special education teachers, psychologists, related services personnel, instructional assistants, counselors, interventionists to ensure cohesive and equitable support allocation district-wide. In addition the differing levels of complexity and student need in each building needs to be factored into this analysis.
- There is also a need for targeted professional development to address the needs of the Pine Hill community.



7. Preschool Program

Commendations:

- The integrated classrooms are staffed by dedicated professionals who have been serving Westwood students for a significant number of years.

Findings:

- The location of the WABA preschool program as a single preschool offering, is a disadvantage to both the staff and students of this program.
- There is no space for additional preschool classes at Westwood High School.
- Data show there is a need for additional preschool classes due to enrollment and demand factors.
- The District has a history of requesting waivers from the Massachusetts Department of Education in order to serve students with IEPs in the integrated classes at a rate that exceeds state and federal law.



7. Preschool Program

Findings:

- Westwood operates a program which has full day and half day students attending the same integrated classes at Westwood High School.
- The District utilizes classroom educators as part of the intake team, which necessitates having no students attend on Wednesday so that this group can engage in their intake work.

Recommendations:

- Relocate the WABA preschool program to be located with the other preschool programs.
- The District should establish a full day preschool model, which would require an additional two (2) classrooms.
- The preschool should establish a dedicated intake team



8. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Commendations:

- The District has committed to working with Katie Novak on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), beginning with the 2025-2026 school year
- The District appears to be committed to an accelerated curriculum review process, designed primarily (at this point) to address the needs of educators and students in literacy.
- Finally, while special education and curriculum leadership in the District is largely new to Westwood, it is clear that they represent a “deep bench” with both general education and special education staff trained in multiple areas of intervention, remediation, and instruction.



8. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Findings:

- The level of understanding and implementation of MTSS frameworks and the current District Curriculum Accommodation Plan (DCAP) is very uneven across schools and the District as a whole.
- A widely expressed sentiment is that the District “does not do MTSS/RTI. We give every child what they need so we don't need it.”
- The implementation of various regular education intervention strategies (Universal Design for Learning, WIN blocks, etc.) vary from school to school.
- Educators and leaders alike will benefit from understanding the conceptual framework of MTSS.
- Special educators are saviors who “sweep” in and take care of all students needs.

8. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Findings:

- One unintended consequence of the resources and the above cited mindset is that it impacts educators' beliefs in what students are capable of and how much scaffolding and support they need.
- The implementation of District initiatives has historically been inconsistent and varied among schools.
- It is considered standard operating practice that there are different models for chairing 504 meetings, operating child study, and other functions across elementary buildings - "We are not a team working together."
- There is resistance to systems or programs that come from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, including MTSS and educator evaluation.

8. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Findings:

- The District does not appear to have (at present) a multi-year professional development plan delineating the work to be done, how that work will be carried out and the indicators of success
- It should also be noted that, even if these plans were already fully developed and in the process of being implemented across the District, it will take time and focused training for general education teachers to master the skills needed to implement interventions within the classroom successfully.



8. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

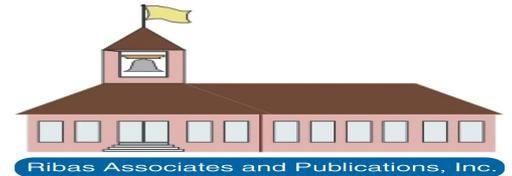
Recommendations:

- The development of clear, transparent, long-term implementation plans, including the professional development needed to implement these plans across all schools with fidelity will be crucial.
 - Providing targeted opportunities for staff to observe well-structured Tier I instruction and interventions.
 - Identification, training and communication of appropriate Tier II & III interventions, ensuring that there are equitable and high quality resources and well trained staff
 - Development of a system wide method for progress monitoring and data analysis.
 - Expectations that all administrators support staff through the trial and error that is necessary to implement instructional strategies that are part of the DCAP and MTSS.
 - Inclusion of job-embedded options for professional development, including coaching, peer modeling, and cross class grouping to assist staff during implementation.

8. Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Recommendations:

- Tight Coupling and Defined Autonomy. It is critically important that all school leaders and central administrators have a clear understanding of the non-negotiables in the implementation of these important initiatives, as well as where there might be differences between buildings because of levels, the population being served, etc
- The key non-negotiables must be defined and supported, with accountability measures in place and monitored.



Summary

- Westwood Public Schools has a strong foundation of experienced and committed leaders and educators, robust resources, and a community that clearly values high quality education for all students.
- This study affirms many areas of strength while also identifying critical opportunities to improve coherence, equity, and effectiveness across special education and general education systems.
- This work will require focused leadership, transparent communication, and continued engagement of staff and families



Summary

The findings and recommendations outlined in this report are intended to:

- support the District in addressing rising special education rates
- strengthen leadership structures, ensuring consistency and fidelity of practice across schools
- build sustainable systems, particularly in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), program design, staffing, and early childhood services, that better meet the needs of all learners.

Meaningful progress will require clear districtwide expectations, strategic investment, thoughtful change management, and sustained professional learning over multiple years.

Questions

