



Capstone Analysis - Special Education Action Plan

Prepared for Alexandria City Public Schools

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PROJECT OBJECTIVE

Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS) aimed to gather stakeholder feedback on its Special Education Action Plan, “Ensuring Success of Students with Disabilities.”



- ✓ How well do stakeholders feel the Special Education Action Plan addresses the needs of students with disabilities and their families?



- ✓ What do stakeholders think are the primary strengths of the current draft of the Special Education Action Plan?

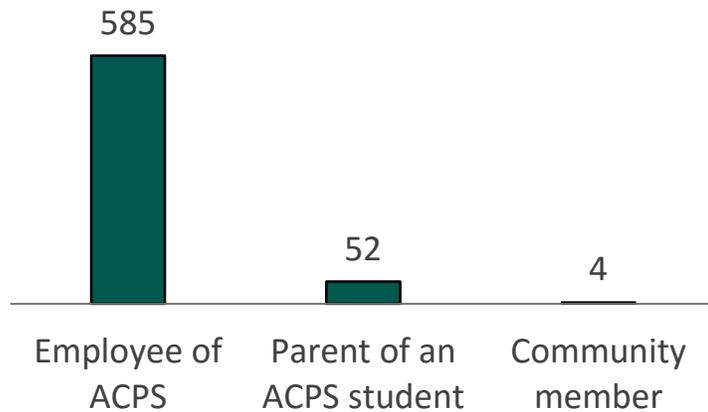


- ✓ What do stakeholders think are the primary areas of need/weaknesses of the Special Education Action Plan?

METHODOLOGY: SURVEY

Hanover Research surveyed ACPS employees, parents, and community members to gather feedback on the Special Education Action Plan. **Hanover received a total of 641 valid responses to the survey.** The survey was fielded online using the Qualtrics software platform from November 2, 2018 through February 2019. This report includes an overview of survey findings. For full aggregate and segmented results, please consult the accompanying *Data Supplement*.

Count of Respondents by Role



Note: ACPS Employees that also have students currently enrolled in ACPS schools were asked to select parent as their role and to complete the survey as a parent.

Count of Respondents by School or Site

T.C. Williams HS (all campuses)	232	George Washington Middle	22
James K. Polk Elem.	51	John Adams Elem.	21
Lyles- Crouch Elem.	43	Douglas Macarthur Elem.	20
Patrick Henry K-8	36	William Ramsay Elem.	17
Charles Barrett Elem.	35	Mount Vernon Elem.	11
Francis C. Hammond Middle	35	Samuel W. Tucker Elem.	8
George Mason Elem.	31	Cora Kelly Magnet Elem.	6
Jefferson-Houston K-8	30	District Office	3
Matthew Maury Elem.	25	Chance for Change	0
Ferdinand T. Day Elem.	23	N. VA Juvenile Detention	0

Note: Parents were given the option to select all of the ACPS schools that their children currently attend. Employees were asked to select their primary work location.

METHODOLOGY: DISCUSSION GROUPS



Hanover Research also conducted **five discussion groups** with a total of approximately **42 participants** in November 2018 and January 2019:

- **Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC)** (4 participants, including two school board members)
- **Parents** (11 participants across two groups)
- **Teachers and School Staff** (2 participants)
- **Principals** (approximately 25 participants, including all school principals and the Superintendent)



NOTE:

Hanover's moderators used a discussion guide (see Appendix) to elicit the stakeholders' true perceptions without pushing them toward any specific answers.

METHODOLOGY: LIMITATIONS



The survey results represent a larger and wider range of stakeholders, with the opinions of a total of 641 employees, parents and community members. Comparatively fewer stakeholder (approximately 42) participated in the discussion groups. As such, results from the survey may carry more weight than trends identified in the discussion groups.

Qualitative analysis of the discussion groups is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

Further, the open-ended nature of qualitative research conducted through discussion groups resulted in a larger discussion of the special education program in general in addition to the more focused discussion of the Special Education Action Plan.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Based on stakeholder feedback gathered through the survey and discussion groups, Hanover recommends that ACPS:

1

Continue to communicate with parents regarding a) the district's progress implementing the Special Education Action Plan and 2) special education referral processes, laws, resources, and opportunities for connecting with one another.

2

Consider adding specificity and information on accountability for monitoring plan implementation, as well as clarifying expectations for evaluating goals. For example, ACSP could consider adding a glossary of special education terminology to the end of the plan to help parents.

3

Increase collaboration and communication with school staff, especially for implementing the plan and scheduling and designing needs-based professional learning opportunities.

KEY FINDINGS: OVERALL PERCEPTIONS

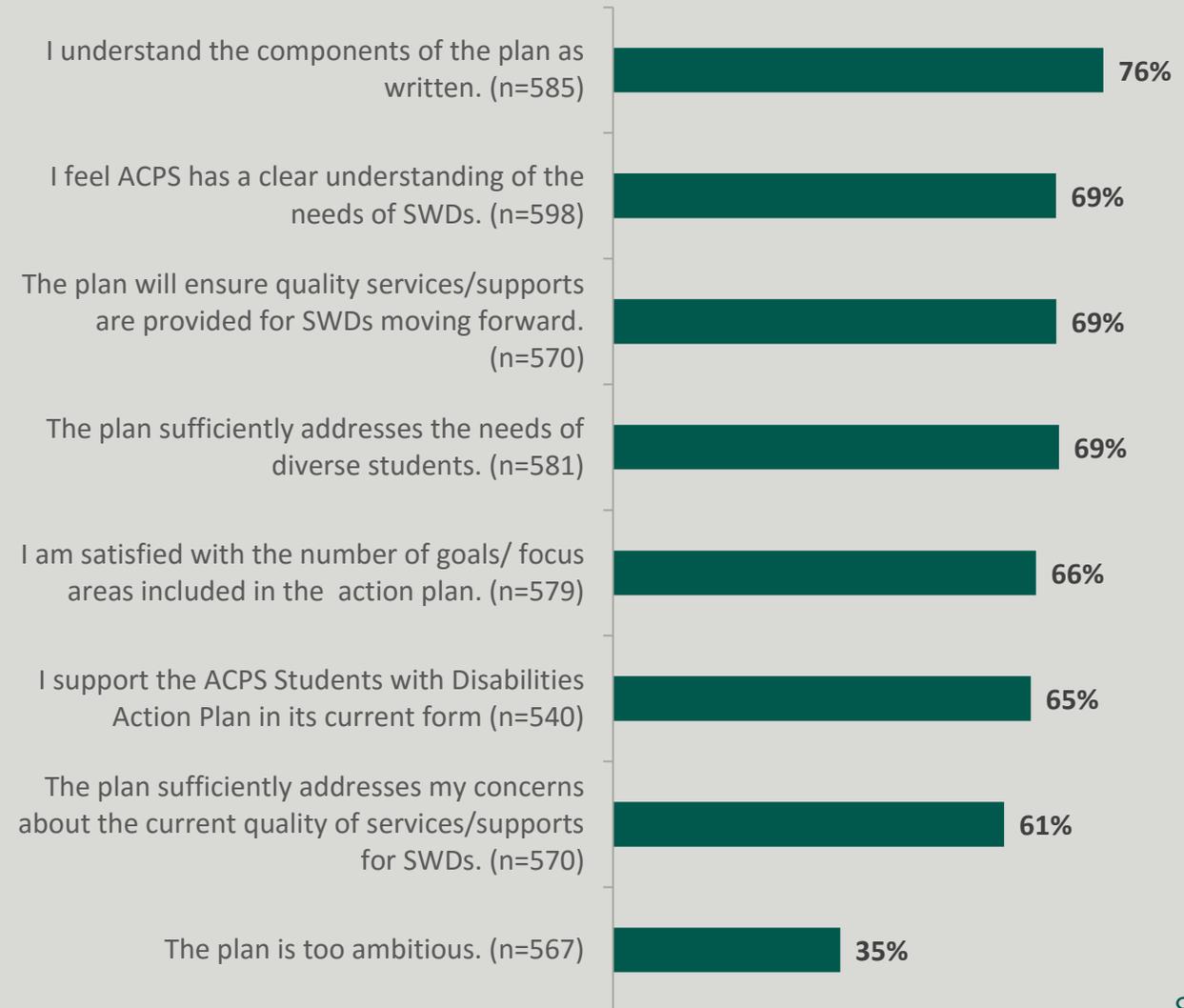


Across both the survey and discussion groups, stakeholders report appreciation for the ACPS Special Education Action Plan and have a positive perception of the Action Plan overall. Nearly 70 percent of survey respondents agree that ACPS has a clear understanding of the needs of students with disabilities (SWD), that the plan will ensure quality services and supports for SWD, and that the plan sufficiently addresses the needs of diverse students. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents agree that they support the Action Plan in its current form. In the discussion groups, stakeholders also expressed an appreciation for the plan's goals and action steps for improving special education within the district.

“ I like the goals that are here. I think that they're very positive, the action steps.
– Parent

“ I love the goal of optimism, rigor, and high expectations. I mean, that came out really early on.
– SEAC Member

% Somewhat Agree + % Strongly Agree



KEY FINDINGS: PRIORITY AREAS



Stakeholders believe that staff recruitment, retention, and morale should be prioritized. This was the most frequently selected priority area among survey respondents, with 47 percent indicating it as a top priority. In discussion groups, stakeholders highlighted the importance of using staff efficiently and improving hiring processes for special education teachers. This includes improving the speed of hiring processes to compete with neighboring districts and ensuring the district hires the “right people.” Further, when asked about the quality of various aspects of the current special education program, comparatively few (49%) rated staff recruitment, retention, and morale as excellent or good.

“ I think the action steps in [the Action Plan] are good steps to try to remedy some of [the hiring challenges] but it's deeper than just ‘how fast can they go’?
- Teacher

Highest Priority Area (n=587)
Respondents could select up to three areas



KEY FINDINGS: IMPROVEMENT AREAS



Stakeholders feel the Action Plan lacks methods for monitoring and measuring whether the goals and action steps are implemented. In discussion groups, administrators in particular expressed appreciation for the increased accountability in the plan, however they would like additional details on how the district will implement the plan as well as methods for monitoring and evaluating implementation. Thirty-five percent of survey respondents also listed leadership and accountability as a priority area.



Stakeholders appreciate the inclusion of professional learning in the Action Plan, but shared concerns about its implementation. Specifically, stakeholders want to ensure that professional learning offerings are based on data of staff and student needs, are differentiated, and that professional learning topics are developed in collaboration with school-based staff.

With the implementation [...] **how is that tying back into accountability?** In any section, how does this directly link back to whether it's a principal, assistant principal, teachers?
- Parent

I hope when the plan gets **more refined when it comes to teachers' time and learning, that part is considered.** And [...] will make the learning more accessible to the teachers and the implementation."
-Principal

KEY FINDINGS: BY STAKEHOLDER GROUP

During the discussion groups, stakeholders provided the following additional feedback about the Action Plan:

SEAC MEMBERS

- Find the plan confusing, lacking specificity, and lacking a sense of urgency.
- Feel the plan needs to provide authority to those responsible for implementing the plan and clarify lines of authority to ensure the plan can be implemented efficiently.

TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

- Feel the plan lacks methods for measuring goals and monitoring accountability for plan implementation. Staff and leaders need a better understanding of data and improvement cycles.
- Would like the district to clarify MTSS, behavioral, and social-emotional supports within the Special Education Action Plan, provide teachers with additional resources for addressing behavior challenges, and ensure that all schools are implementing PBIS with fidelity.

ADDITIONAL STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK

Although not specific to the Action Plan, stakeholders provided the following feedback about the special education program in general:



Stakeholders believe that ACPS can improve the perception of special education in the district by adjusting the mindset towards students with disabilities and improving parent communication and engagement. Stakeholders describe a culture that views students with disabilities as a burden, and would like educators to view students with disabilities with high expectations and open minds. Additionally, parents find navigating special education referral processes and services challenging, would like ACPS to improve communication and engagement efforts, and feel that teachers do not follow students' IEPs. Similarly, parents explain that engagement levels depend on the culture and welcoming nature of each school.

It's just so important that teachers believe that, say, students with significant disabilities can succeed. And that they can learn without, 'Oh, this is hard for them.' That mindset needs to shift to, 'How can I make this accessible to them?'

- SEAC Member

Communication with parents in general, that's a huge issue. And that needs to improve. [Including] a true belief that parents are part of the support team.

- SEAC Member

ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK: BY STAKEHOLDER GROUP

During the discussion groups, stakeholders provided the following additional feedback about the special education program in general:

SEAC MEMBERS

- See a need for changing district culture towards students with disabilities to offer full support rather than minimal legal compliance. They want to ensure that all stakeholders believe that serving students with disabilities benefits all students and the entire district.

PRINCIPALS

- Feel the district office should communicate and collaborate with school-based staff more and trust them to know what is best for students.
- Need additional resources for supporting students whose needs cannot be met via placement in co-taught classrooms.
- Emphasize that professional learning must be needs-based, differentiated by school and staff needs, include paraprofessionals, and scheduled with teachers in mind.

PARENTS

- Feel that teachers and schools are not doing all they can to ensure students receive IEP accommodations.
- Feel that the district needs to improve communication to parents, as parents do not know what is going on with their child, as well as interdepartmental communication to ensure staff know and can meet students' IEPs and needs.
- Find the referral process and laws concerning special education confusing, drawn out, and difficult to navigate on their own.

TEACHERS AND SCHOOL STAFF

- Feel the district needs to increase the speed of hiring and recruitment processes to be competitive with neighboring districts.



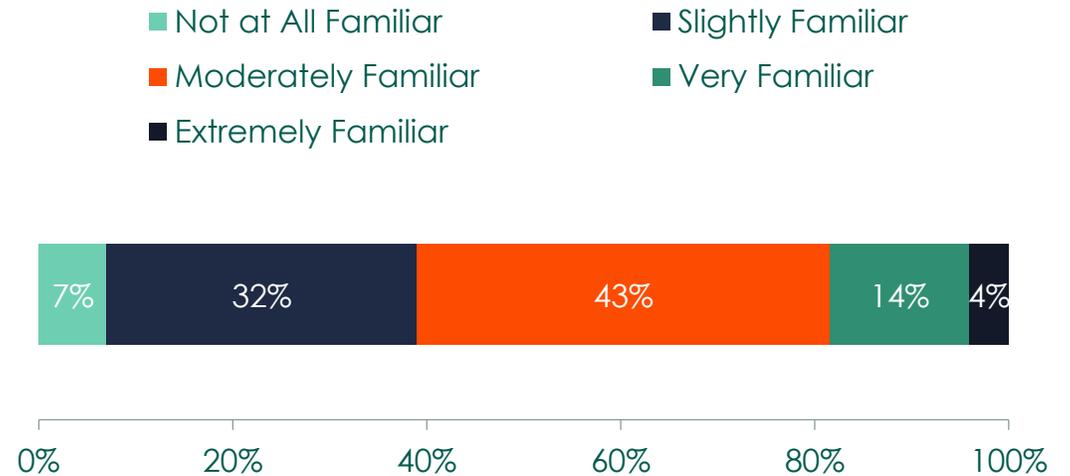
SURVEY FINDINGS

ACTION PLAN - STRENGTHS

- **Most respondents are familiar with and understand the ACPS Students with Disabilities Action Plan.** Only 7% of respondents are not familiar with the plan at all and three-quarters agree they understand the components of the plan as written.
- **The majority of respondents support the ACPS Students with Disabilities Action Plan in its current form.** Nearly two-thirds “somewhat” or “strongly” agree with supporting it, while only 16% disagree. Additionally, 69% of respondents agree that ACPS has a clear understanding of the needs of SWDs.

Which of the following statements best describes your level of familiarity with the ACPS Students with Disabilities Action Plan?

(n=641)

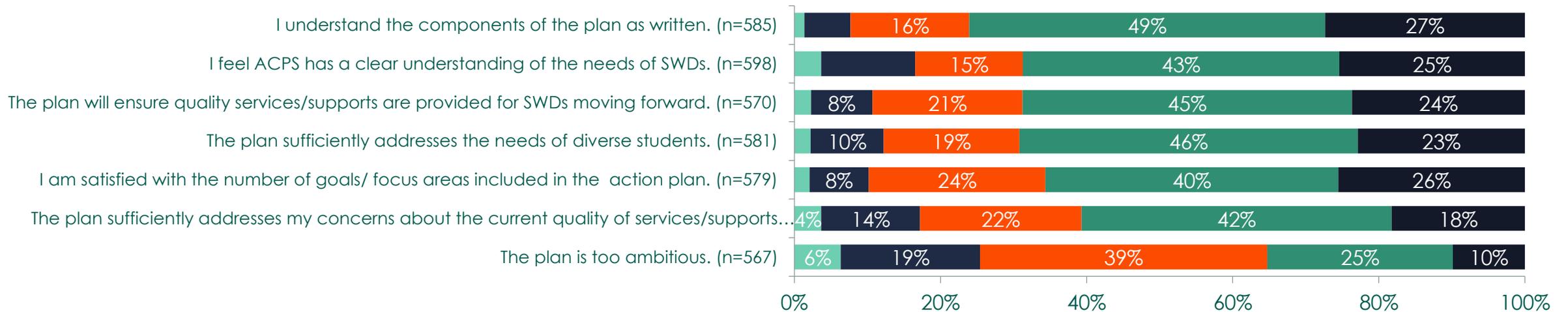


ACTION PLAN - AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

ACPS needs to confirm and communicate that the plan is achievable. While most respondents are satisfied with the ACPS Students with Disabilities Action Plan, 35% of respondents agree that the plan is too ambitious.

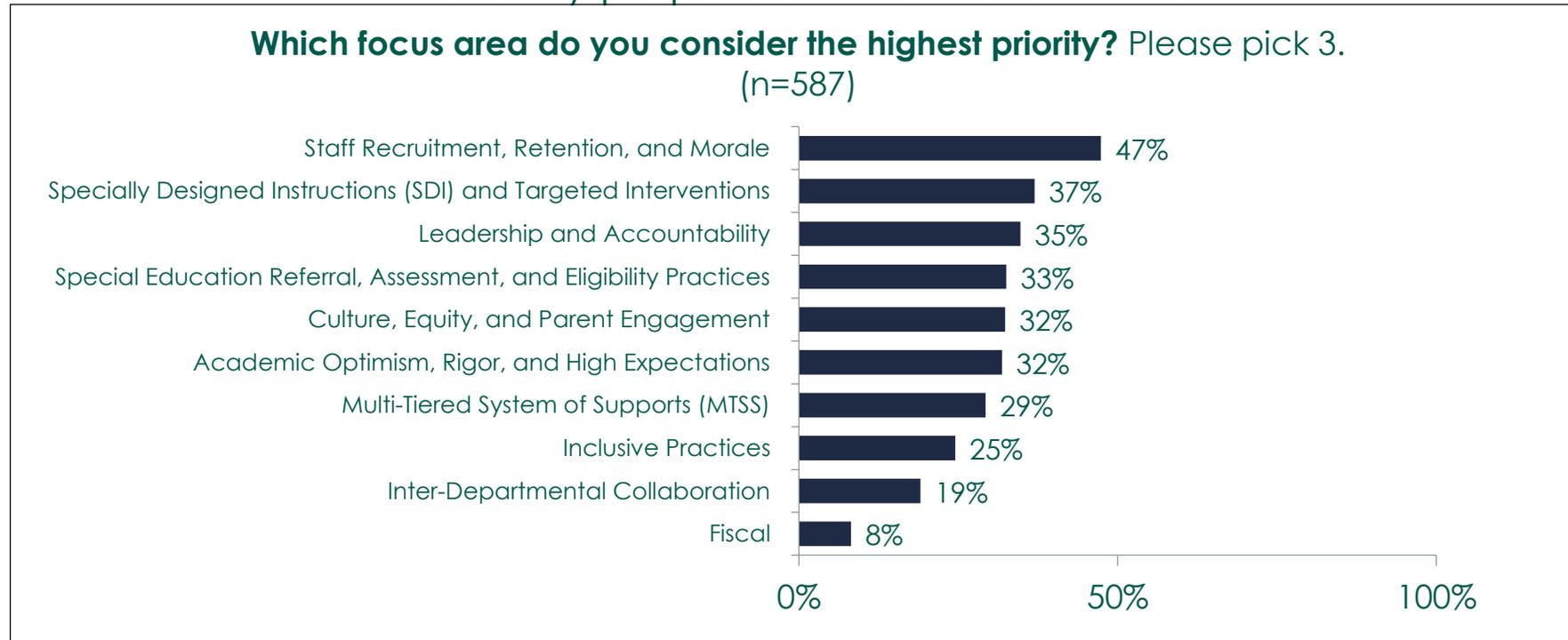
Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements about the ACPS Students with Disabilities Action Plan:

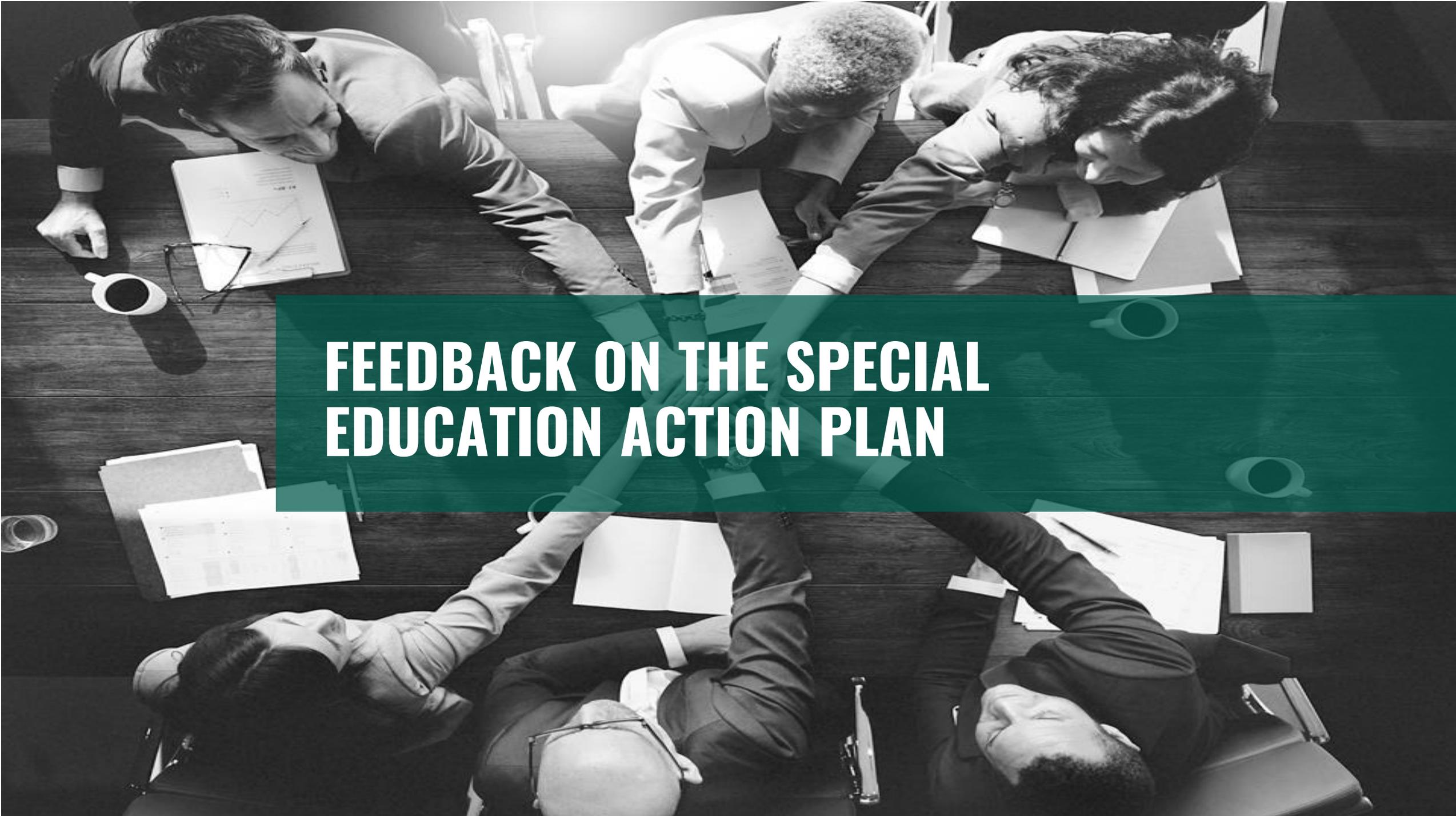
■ Strongly Disagree
 ■ Somewhat Disagree
 ■ Neither Agree nor Disagree
 ■ Somewhat Agree
 ■ Strongly Agree



ACTION PLAN - AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Staff recruitment, retention, and morale should be a target for improvement. Almost half of respondents say this should be a top priority. Additionally, out of all the focus areas, this area received the lowest quality rating of those services currently proposed in the Action Plan.





FEEDBACK ON THE SPECIAL EDUCATION ACTION PLAN

FEEDBACK ON THE SPECIAL EDUCATION ACTION PLAN



POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Stakeholders appreciate the plan's positive goals for improvement, professional learning, and increased accountability.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Suggestions for improving the plan include reducing jargon, adding specificity, and prioritizing actions to improve implementation timelines.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Stakeholders appreciate the inclusion of positive goals and action steps for improving special education within the district.

“I love the goal of optimism, rigor, and high expectations. I mean, that came out really early on.”
- SEAC Member

“I love this. And I would hope that it really does happen.”
- Parent

“I like the goals that are here. I think that they're very positive, the action steps.”
- Parent

“Well, I think that there's a better understanding about the services and the quality, how these services should be implemented in the classroom [...] So just providing that professional development, that learning, and understanding also the expectations that we had at schools.”
- Principal

“I was excited to see that focus on a couple of goals for the trauma-informed care and the PD around that. [...] So the focus on that as a division, having it part of the plan, I think it's great.”
- Principal

“I like the accountability in the plan, I like the ability for our special ed office to look at our master schedule and collaborate with us”
- Principal

Administrators appreciate the inclusion of specific goals for targeted professional development and increased accountability.

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

SEAC members identified the following areas for improving the Special Education Action Plan:

Clarifying plan language, adding urgency to language, and reducing jargon

“

There's so much jargon. I mean I read this thing, this page, over and over and over [...] I'm college educated, I've spent years doing special ed stuff, and this was like practically Greek to me. So I would say being a little more concrete.”
– SEAC Member

Adding specific actions

“

“The actions didn't have action. It didn't tell me how we're going to—[...] I'm just saying there were no specifics on how do you actually do this? [...] I was looking for more tangible specifics.”
– SEAC member

“I'd like to see something in there that's as explicit as-- I'm making this number up, that the director of specialized instruction can require that all gen ed teachers participate in five hours of professional development, or three hours of professional development a year, or 10, or whatever that number is. But it's required.”
– SEAC Member

Communicating a vision for special education

“

“I think it needs to explicitly say this idea about what improves special ed improves all gap group.”
– SEAC Member

“We need more of, is the vision piece. [...] really what is that vision for the district?”
– SEAC Member

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Stakeholders identified the following additional areas for improving the Special Education Action Plan:

- Clarifying **SEL and behavioral supports** and including a more explicit focus on behavior as part of MTSS
- Adding **specific details on SDI implementation in coteaching pairs**
- Prioritizing actions and **reducing implementation timelines**

"I don't think that [social emotional and behavioral supports] is very clear from a parent perspective "
- Parent

"What does that look like in terms of special design and instruction for the student? I think that we need a little bit more refinement and support around the SDI part and how it lives, instructionally, with two people who are co-teaching."
- Principal

"I think the three-year aspect implementing this, in my opinion, is too long. The data-- I mean if you look at it in comparison to other jurisdiction, I mean ACPS really has a long way to go. And this is a significant situation. And I think it should be-- I would hope that the superintendent would prioritize this as one of the first things that he does."
- Parent



IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT AND EVALUATION

IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT AND EVALUATION

Findings in this section relate to implementing and monitoring the goals articulated in the Special Education Action Plan. Stakeholders spoke to the following themes related to the Action Plan.



INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ENSURING PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

Stakeholders would like additional details on how the district will implement the plan as well as methods for monitoring and evaluating implementation.



ENSURING COLLABORATIVE PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND DIFFERENTIATION

Principals want to ensure school-level plans are developed and implemented with input from school staff.



IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Stakeholders want to ensure that professional learning is needs-based and collaboratively designed, and share concerns about scheduling and implementation.



IMPROVING STAFFING

Stakeholders would like the district to improve hiring processes, increase staff, and reduce staff caseloads.



IMPROVING INTRA-DISTRICT COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

Stakeholders would like the district to improve communication and collaboration between departments and between the central office and schools.

INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ENSURING PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

Stakeholders believe the Special Education Action Plan is **ambitious** and worry that **implementation is not feasible**.

Stakeholders also feel that the Special Education Action Plan lacks methods for **monitoring and measuring** whether the goals and action steps are **implemented**, as well as guidelines for **holding staff accountable** if the goals are not implemented.

“I think there's the framework for making [the plan] happen [...] but **it's not clear that we've got the infrastructure to make it happen**, the rules or whatever, requirements.”

- SEAC Member

“What happens if a school doesn't [implement the action steps]? [...] Is there a plan in place **if these expectations are not met?**”

- Parent

“[The plan] sounds good but **where is the nexus that is actually going to say that people have to do it?**”

- SEAC Member

“With the implementation [...] **how is that tying back into accountability?** In any section, how does this directly link back to whether it's a principal, assistant principal, teachers?”

- Parent

“I also wonder **who will monitor this and the quality of monitoring?**”

- Teacher

INCREASING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ENSURING PLAN IMPLEMENTATION

SEAC members would like the district to **clarify accountability and “lines of authority”** between district leaders, the interdepartmental team, special education, and school leaders to implement the plan.

“There's a big mask of collegiality within ACPS but the undercurrent is everybody's backbiting.”
- SEAC Member

“The lines of authority, I mean, that's almost like a tragic flaw, like an Achilles' heel of the report.”
- SEAC Member

“I have real doubts about that [interdepartmental] team having any real authority or any ability to actually structurally move from point A to point B. [...] who's chairing that interdepartmental team? And do they really have the proxy of the of the superintendent or not? And if somebody doesn't like what the team's doing? The culture within ACPS seems to be that they go running behind their colleagues back, directly to the superintendent.”
- SEAC Member

“I want to see special ed instruction have a little bit more clout instead of having to [...] charm her colleagues into agreeing with her, a little bit more clout to get it done.”
- SEAC Member

ENSURING COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND DIFFERENTIATION

Principals want to ensure that the school-level implementation plans are developed in **collaboration** with school-based staff and are **differentiated** to meet the needs of the different sites within the district.

“There's going to be overlap probably between the district and the site-based plans, but **there's got to be some nuance in the site-based plans**, for the [...] needs that are **unique to the schools.**”

- Principal

“When this plan gets finalized at the division level, I think it's really important to [...] **differentiate** [...] the school-based plan, and the connection between the division plan. [...] [H]ow that gets executed [...] at the school **has to be done with us**, right? With our team, and with our kids in mind, with our scores in mind, with their needs in mind. So I don't think I saw that in there.”

- Principal

“[The plan] felt **top down**, or power, or heavy to who makes the decisions. And so, [school staff] wondered a lot about who was on the interdisciplinary collaborative team. It sounded like it was more like SLT and **central office deciding things to happen and then bringing it to us**. As opposed to, they wondered, **where's the teachers or the staff or the principals on that committee?**”

- Principal

“So making it **differentiated-site-based plans done in collaboration.**”

- Principal

IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Needs-Based and Collaboratively Designed

Stakeholders appreciate the inclusion of professional learning (PL) in the Action Plan but **emphasize the need for professional learning offerings to be based on data of staff and student needs.**

Principals similarly note that not all staff requires the same training, and thus **professional learning must be differentiated** according to individual needs.

Additionally, principals would like the district to develop PL priorities and topics in **collaboration** with school-based staff to ensure it meets their needs.

“

“It'll be like looking at the professional development around what are the students presenting with, what is in all the IEPs, and are we trained [in these areas]?”

- Parent

“

“Mak[e] sure that it is the principals and the teachers in the school that work directly with the kids that were saying, ‘What type of PD?’ So just that real collaboration [...] to make sure that we're asking those people before we go and dictate what we're doing.”

- Principal



“ „

“There's a lot [of professional learning in the Action Plan]. It's about capacity building and instructional expertise building and a lot of learning. And that is just a **major investment and a stress on teachers**, right? Because when they're doing that, **they're not with their kids** unless it's off contract time or summer or something like that. So I **hope when the plan gets more refined when it comes to teachers' time and learning, that part is considered.** And that [...] will make the learning more accessible to the teachers and the implementation.”

-Principal

IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Implementation Concerns

Stakeholders share concerns about the implementation of PL and the **impact on scheduling**, ensuring that students still receive services if teachers are out of the classroom for PL, and not adding additional stress to teachers.

Principals worry about how the professional learning specified in the Special Education Action Plan will be scheduled, including working with the number of PD days teachers have as well as training different staff together. Principals would like further details on how this time will be allocated in practice.

“[Substitutes while teachers participate in PL] need to be more robust for special ed kids than just regular subs.”
- Parent

“You have to do a full session [in September] and then they do a refresher in January, and which in my experience the two aren't different. So it didn't give you anything that you needed in January, but then part of it is like but if we're using this as implementation you know it has to be different in January than it is in September.”
- Teacher

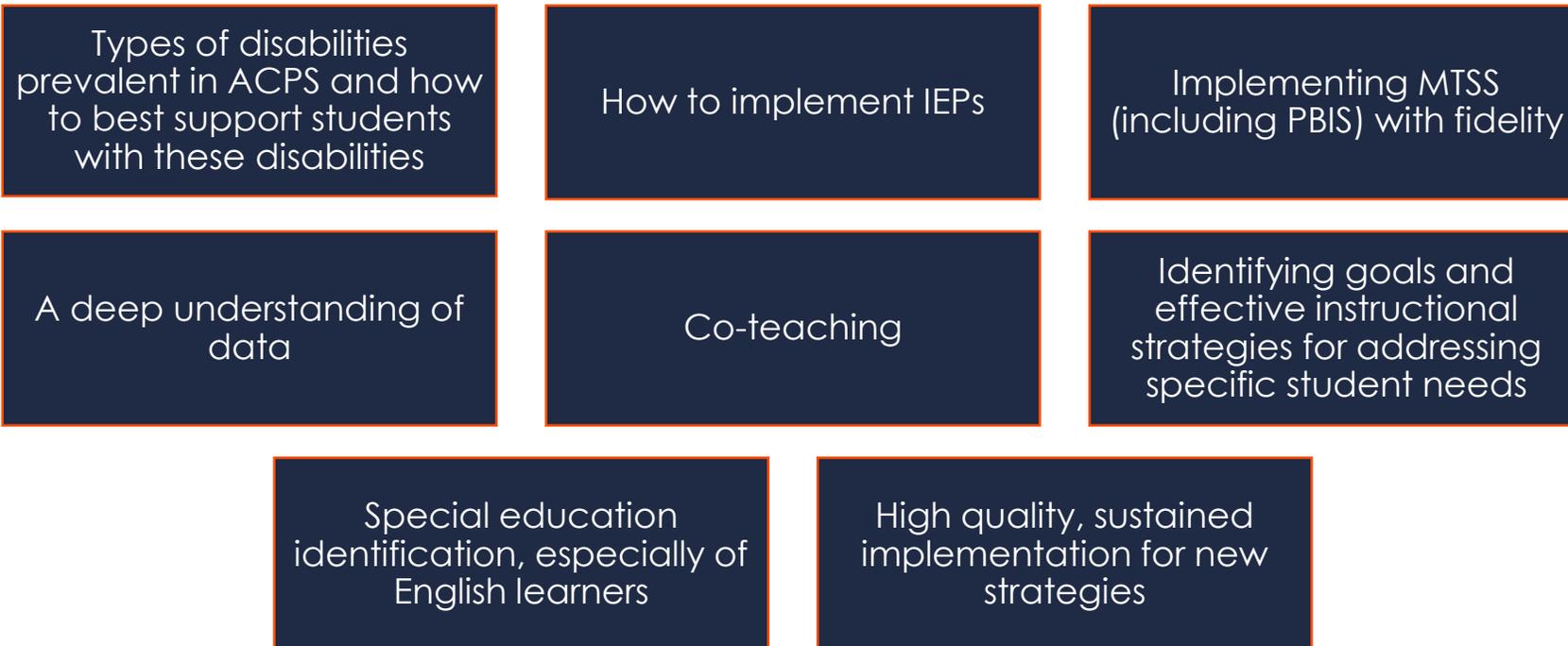
“Part of this also is the bigger picture, like the district calendar and trying to figure out more ways for us to have PD days. Because there's a lot of PD in there that's needed.”
- Principal

IMPLEMENTING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Recommended Topics

Teachers note a need for improved professional learning that focuses on implementation fidelity and is frequent enough to combat frequent teacher turnover.

Specific topics and strategies that stakeholders mention as professional learning needs include:



IMPROVING STAFFING

Improving Special Education Hiring Processes

Teachers and principals note the importance of **improving hiring processes** for special education teachers and appreciate the inclusion of these changes in the Special Education Action Plan.

Specifically, stakeholders focus on improving the **speed** of hiring processes, ensuring the district hires the “**right people**,” and ensuring that those interviewing potential special education teachers have **expertise in special education**.

“

“I would want to make sure that the right people are at the table when they're interviewing[...] The people at the table that are interviewing really need to know specialized instruction.”
- Teacher

“Put a person forward and they didn't go through fast enough so they went to another county...”
- Teacher

“I think the action steps in [the Action Plan] are good steps to try to remedy some of [the hiring challenges] but it's deeper than just 'how fast can they go'?”
- Teacher

“How do you bring the right people in? And in doing so, that means you have to look at the ones that you have.”
- Principal

”

IMPROVING STAFFING

Increasing Staff and Reducing Caseloads

Stakeholders feel that schools need **more staff** in order to implement what is included in the Special Education Action Plan. Staff should be able to support all special education students, especially “outlier” students with disabilities who do not fit in the co-teaching model, participate in collaborative planning, and provide social -emotional and mental health support.

“

“Our psychologists and their caseloads. I think that that has to be addressed. [...] we have exceeded [recommended caseload] thresholds. Well beyond .”
- Principal

“

“Being able to do [staffing] right means sometimes going outside of the staffing model . [Students with behavior challenges] are in the mainstream class because we just don't have the [staff] resources.”
- Principal

“

“I just thought throughout the whole plan it seemed like there was only one or two very specific, need a new hires, specific hires. And yet this is such an overwhelming big thing that needs to be done.”
- SEAC Member

“

“[My son's] caseworker has 15-plus kids on her caseload and teaches full-time. That's impossible. You can't do a great job at both jobs. That's two full-time jobs. [...] We get to T.C. and nobody's available to help him. He has nobody to go to. So he's miserable.”
- Parent

IMPROVING STAFFING

Increasing Staff and Reducing Caseloads

Principals also note the need to use staff **efficiently**, rather than just hiring additional staff.

“

“So if we're just talking about additional numbers, it's not just the more people, it's the strategic use of those people. But it's the entire system of how we bring those people on, and what we do with them.”

– Principal

”

INCREASING INTRA-DISTRICT COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

Parents describe **a lack of communication and collaboration between teachers and departments about students**, their IEPs, and their unique needs.

"The IEP accommodations are not communicated."
- Parent

"So every year since he's been at ACPS I've explained [my child's IEP and needs] to [teachers]. But it doesn't get passed on."
- Parent

"I usually try to have a meeting with every teacher before the school year starts to give them a little tidbit of what [my child's] issues are. But never once have they had the IEP to glance[at] before school started. [...] Nobody tells anybody anything. And then they just set him up to fail over and over and over again."
- Parent

"[Teachers] are not giving the IEP a glance - my son is walking into school, first day, and nobody knows anything about him."
- Parent



“ ”

“There needs to be collaboration between central office and building on the schedule. Because I know there's been times before that I would be told, "You can make co-teaching happen at this grade level by clustering all those kids together because you only have, let's say, seven." Well, I know that four of those kids, if put together, would be a really bad situation, and I know that, but it doesn't show up in the numbers. And so I can't just have central office being able to say "[Name], you need to have one special ed cluster in your fourth grade and that will allow co-teaching to happen fourth grade," because there is nuances to it. So **I just want to make sure the plan clearly encapsulates the idea that it has to be a collaborative process, knowing that student personality comes into play with those situations.**”

-Principal

INCREASING INTRA-DISTRICT COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

“You have to prove this or prove that [...] the school team meets and says, ‘Well, we really know what this kid needs, but we’re not the decision makers.’ When the school team should be the decision makers.”

- Principal

“The school teams need to have the power [and] trust to say ‘We know what’s going. We have tried all these things and we need the support and not have to—’ it delays the kids getting what they need.”

- Principal

“[A] take away is just collaboration across a number of channels [...] making sure that conversation or that collaboration stays focused on [...] not just the numbers but specific needs of the students.”

- Principal

Principals express a desire for **increased communication and collaboration between the central office and building staff**, including the district trusting and valuing school-based staff to best understand students and their needs.



PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AT ACPS

PERCEPTIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AT ACPS



IMPROVE PHILOSOPHY TOWARDS SPECIAL EDUCATION

Stakeholders describe a culture that views students with disabilities as a burden, and would like educators to view students with disabilities with high expectations and open minds.



SHIFT FROM MINIMAL COMPLIANCE TOWARDS AUTHENTIC SUPPORT

Parents and SEAC members feel ACPS only provides services that meet minimal compliance levels and fail to fulfill students' IEP requirements.



INCREASE PARENT COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Parents find navigating special education referral processes and services challenging and would like ACPS to improve communication and engagement efforts.



PHILOSOPHY TOWARDS SPECIAL EDUCATION

Parents describe **a school philosophy that perceives students with disabilities as a burden.**

Parents also express a desire for *all stakeholders* to believe the philosophy that **what benefits students with disabilities benefits all students.**

“There is an attitude that you kind of rob this set of kids for that, to serve that set of kids.”
- SEAC member

“I've seen the bullying, [school leaders] tolerating other parents bullying children with disabilities in schools, and it's tolerated by leadership.”
- Parent

“There's the inclusion classroom and then the typically developing parents complain that their kid got put in the inclusion classroom with all the special ed kids [...] And then you have some parents of special ed children who are like, ‘My kid got in the stacked class. And so now he's falling back because he needs higher level role models.’ It's just like a no-win situation. And every classroom should be an inclusion classroom and have that culture of acceptance, awareness, accountability, understanding.”
- Parent

“I feel like the school doesn't do anything to include the special needs kid in the general population. Nothing.”
- Parent

PHILOSOPHY TOWARDS SPECIAL EDUCATION



Stakeholders express a desire for all educators to view students with disabilities with **open minds, high academic expectations,** and **plans for academic and social success.**

“That there's not enough kind of open-mindedness that what a child is able to do at 4 is not necessarily what they're able to do at 14, you know?”
- Parent

“I know from being in the system for 15 years that regular ed teachers see [inclusion] as a burden. They absolutely see it as a burden and they complain about it.”
- Parent

“Special education is a deficit model”
- Teacher

“I believe there has to be [...] a presumed confidence.”
- SEAC member

“it's just so important that teachers believe that, say, students with significant disabilities can succeed. And that they can learn without, ‘Oh, this is hard for them.’ That mindset needs to shift to, ‘How can I make this accessible to them?’ So it's just an overarching, I guess, paradigm shift that has to permeate everything.”
- SEAC member

MINIMAL COMPLIANCE VS. AUTHENTIC SUPPORT

Parents feel that ACPS views special education support in terms of the “**minimum compliance**” required by law, rather than educators going beyond compliance to provide students with the full support they need to maximize success.

“I’m looking for [...] an articulated shift from a compliance culture and/or a babysitting culture, to a success culture and an outcomes culture.[...] We have had many, many superintendents who have viewed special ed as strictly a compliance issue to be managed by somebody over here. [...] And if you're thinking about special ed as compliance then you're completely missing the mark.”

- SEAC Member

“I had a special ed teacher tell me, “We are told not to offer services to you. And we're trained to do that. And we're told to give you the very minimum unless you ask us.”

- Parent

“My experience is that ACPS adheres to the minimum legal requirement in delivering special ed services.”

- Parent

MINIMAL COMPLIANCE VS. AUTHENTIC SUPPORT

Parents feel that **teachers do not always follow students' IEPs** and that **IEP accommodations are not appropriately communicated** to different staff members.

They feel that **the responsibility for ensuring that IEP services are provided should be the district's responsibility** not the parents' responsibility.

"The teacher says to me, 'I told [students] I don't take late work.' And I told her, 'Believe the IEP. You do what's in there. You do accept late work, it's in his IEP.'"

- Parent

"[ACPS needs] the expectation that you know as part of your job as a special education provider implementing an IEP, that you can't just blow it off and you won't get caught. Which I hate to think, but I feel like that's just how it is."

- Parent

"The onus for the accountability [for ensuring students receive services] lies with ACPS. It should not lie with parents."

- Parent

"Compliance with service level durations that are outlined in the IEP, in my experience, is left to me."

- Parent

PARENT COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- **Parents and SEAC members feel that the district and schools need to improve communication and engagement with parents of special education students.**
- Parents feel frustrated that they do not know or receive communication from the school about what is going on in school. They feel the school should consistently communicate with parents.
- Parents also express concerns that there is a lack of communication about students with mental health issues and self-destructive behaviors.

“Communication with parents in general, that’s a huge issue. And that needs to improve. [Including] a true belief that parents are part of the support team.”
– SEAC Member

“On any given day, I honestly have no idea if she got her services or not.”
– Parent

“I had two nephews that they cut themselves [...]. My sisters never received a report after she reported this incident [to] the school about what happened there. We don’t know sometimes what’s going on inside of the school [and] the answers we’re receiving from [the school] is zero.”
– Parent

PARENT COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Factors that Influence Parent Engagement

Parents explain that their **engagement in the school is impacted by the individual school culture**, including whether staff are welcoming to students with disabilities and if the PTA is inclusive and welcoming to parents of students with disabilities.



“Parent engagement is dependent upon the atmosphere, the culture, of each individual school. You don't feel like engaging in a school where your child is not welcome, or the principal or staff react negatively towards your child or other students with big disabilities. And then also, the PTA. How welcoming is the PTA? Is the PTA inclusive.”
- Parent

“[The parent group] was a good opportunity to meet other parents. I think that's really crucial as well. [...] Being in a group like that was helpful because then we were able to provide each other with support as well.”
- Parent



Similarly, **parents benefit from the camaraderie of the parent community and opportunities** to meet, discuss, and ask questions of other parents of students with disabilities.

PARENT COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Navigating Special Education Processes

Parents also explain how they find it **difficult** and **time-consuming** to navigate special education, noting that the responsibility is on parents for figuring out the system as they go.

These challenges are exacerbated for parents for whom English is not their first language.

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“My experience has been that you have to really figure it out. [...] I feel like I have to be always sort of vigilant and available. And I think not every parent can do that. [...] But it's very challenging [...] I think back when my son was [younger] I felt like I was really kind of fumbling through the system, trying to figure it out.”

- Parent

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“Parents need more engagement and more emotional help because it's very hard in this nation or country [...] some people don't understand the situation other kids have with some disabilities.”

- EL Parent

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PARENT COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Navigating Special Education Processes

Parents express a desire for the district to **provide clarification, resources, and support** for navigating special education referral processes and services:



A **record or log of services** their child received or how services were made-up, quarterly.



Strategies for adapting instruction to help their student with homework.



Resources at the **school-level**, rather than the central office.



Resources that **explain parental rights and special education processes** in readily comprehensible language.



APPENDIX

Discussion Guide

General Question	Follow-Up Questions	Context and Objectives
<p>The following sections will be presented in an order that flows naturally based on responses.</p>		
<p>What thoughts initially come to mind when thinking about improving experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities and their families? (~10 min)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to you to improve outcomes and experiences for students with disabilities? • What is the current state of outcomes and experiences for these students and their families? 	<p>These questions serve as basic, introductory prompts to initiate discussion and guide into the following, more specific questions regarding the Action Plan.</p>
<p>How well does the Action Plan address the needs of students with disabilities and their families? (~10 min)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Which focus areas do you consider to be priorities to support students with disabilities and their families? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How well does the Action Plan address these focus areas? ▪ Now think specifically about professional development, communication, implementation, and accountability. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How well does the Action Plan address these areas to support students? 	<p>These questions explore how well the Action Plan aligns with the priority focus areas of parents and staff and how well the Action Steps' key levers support the needs of students with disabilities and their families.</p>
<p>What other areas should the Action Plan address to best support students with disabilities and their families? (~10 min)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are particular challenges that affect these student' outcomes and experiences? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How should these challenges be addressed in the Action Plan? ○ How do current systems or processes need to change in the Action Plan to better overcome these challenges? ▪ Which focus areas does the Action Plan not address? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How should these focus areas be addressed in the Action Plan? ▪ What other concerns do you have with the Action Plan? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How can the district best address these concerns? 	<p>These questions are designed to uncover participants' perceptions of any areas for improvement in the Action Plan as well as how the district can address any other concerns.</p>



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