



INDIANA INSTITUTE ON DISABILITY AND COMMUNITY  
**CENTER ON EDUCATION AND  
LIFELONG LEARNING**

Duneland School Corporation  
Special Education Program Review  
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## Introduction

In the fall of 2022, the leadership in Duneland Schools requested an external review of their Special Education program. The program review included a comprehensive documentation of the services delivered across the continuum of placements for students with disabilities in Duneland. The evaluation compiled data to determine the fidelity and effectiveness of the services provided to students with disabilities. Evaluation questions, protocols and data requests were agreed upon in an initial meeting with the Superintendent's Leadership Team.

Data collection was between February and May, 2023 and included 1) focus groups sessions with general and special education teachers, principals, related service staff, para-educators, parents and school psychologists; 2) interviews with members of the executive leadership team; 3) observations in special ed classroom at all levels including direct self-contained classrooms, co-teaching classrooms, and general education classrooms at every level, and 4) documents related to special education (see Appendix A). Approximately 109 individuals participated in the focus groups and interview sessions, and 32 classrooms were observed. An observation was also done at the Special Education Learning Facility (SELF).

An inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data that was collected. This method is applied to a set of texts, such as interviews or focus group transcripts. The data are closely examined to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. Thematic analysis is a good approach when you are trying to find out something about people's views, opinions, knowledge, experiences, or values from a set of data – for example, interviews, focus groups or survey responses.

Triangulation, the process of using several different kinds of data collection instruments to explore an issue or problem, was used in the development of this report (Borg & Gall, 1989). It requires the use of several data-collection methods to explore an issue or problem. No single item of information was given consideration for this report unless it was triangulated. If a comment or piece of information came to light from one person, steps were taken to validate the comment or piece of information against at least one other source (for example, a second interview or an interview with someone else) and/or a second method (for example, an observation or review of documents).

This report is intended to provide the district with a "picture" of the current special education program and includes recommendations for strategies and programmatic adjustments to improve the delivery of special education services. It is important to note that these recommendations are grounded in the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of the stakeholders. The report begins with

commendations, followed by the findings based on identified themes. Finally, recommendations and next steps conclude the report.

### **Commendations**

1. In May of 2022, Dr. Tammy Ummel conducted an external review that was prompted by “lingering questions” related to the efficiency and effectiveness of the current interlocal agreement with the Porter County Educational Services (PCES). Dr. Ummel recommended that 1) Duneland move toward greater decentralization of special education services; 2) special education staff be employed by Duneland Schools and 3) local programs offer services to students with greater needs to be served in an educational setting with their peers. Since this report, select special education staff have moved from PCES to employment under Duneland contracts. The Duneland Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Chip Pettit and his leadership team are to be commended for acting on the first two recommendations and to commission this review to further analyze special education program and recommend further direction for the special education program in the district.
2. The district leadership has a strong commitment to improving special education in the district. This began with the hiring of a new Director of Special Education and three district Coordinators to lead the district forward.
3. During the classroom observations, we observed high quality teaching across the district. The district has passionate and committed teachers, related service staff and paraprofessionals serving Duneland students.
4. In every interview and focus group, individuals expressed that they were happy and excited that the special education teachers will be moving from PCES to Duneland in the fall of 2023.
5. Duneland Schools is in the process of building the Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum for course and grade levels across the district. Once in place, this should ensure that all students have access to the same content, knowledge, and skills for success.
6. Tier 2 supports, provided to students who need supplementary supports for a specific or targeted skill deficit, have been moved to the general education classroom. This change allows more students to receive supports within their classrooms rather than being pulled out.
7. The new Director is a part of the Superintendent’s leadership team.
8. Duneland Schools are well staffed with Instructional Coaches/Reading Specialists.

### **Focus Groups, Interviews, Observations and Document Review Results**

The results presented below are organized by themes that emerged from the focus groups, interviews, and observations of general and special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related services staff, building and district leadership and parents.

### ***Program Coherence and Consistency***

Instructional program coherence ensures that every component of a student’s academic experience is aligned and designed to advance grade level instruction; and, instructional components are working effectively and efficiently throughout the district

[https://www.studentachievement.org/wp-content/uploads/Instructional-Newmann\\_2001.pdf](https://www.studentachievement.org/wp-content/uploads/Instructional-Newmann_2001.pdf). This includes curriculum, instructional frameworks, interventions, supports and services, assessment, use of data, professional development etc. Additionally, the different aspects of an instructional program must be implemented with fidelity for the desired outcomes to be achieved. This section of the report will review components that were discussed during the review.

### ***Special Education as a Separate System***

There is a high level of staff commitment to meeting the needs of all students in Duneland schools. However, coordinating service delivery, placements, programs, and supports for students with IEPs through a consistent system of decision-making across the district is impeded by staff roles and responsibilities defined by program structures that create separate systems for students with IEP's. Unified systems that eliminate silos and coordinates services across schools and districts are critical to the effective provision of high-quality educational experiences for students (Burrello, Lashley & Beatty, 2001).

While there are exceptions throughout the district, there appears to be a lack of collaboration between special and general educators. As a result, a dual system of education—special and general education—exists within Duneland Schools. It is worth noting that up to this point, the separate system was exacerbated by the fact that all aspects of special education (governance, hiring, supervising, programing) have been the responsibility of PCES, a separate entity outside of Duneland Schools. Over time, the culture, attitudes, and beliefs have been formed and reinforced by this separation.

There are many examples of this dual system of education in Duneland. There were many references to “their kids” and “my kids”, which would indicate that there isn’t a shared responsibility for teaching all students. Special education teachers shared that they felt that they had the primary responsibility for dealing with behavior, adaptations and accommodations, and problem solving when issues related to students with disabilities surfaced. They also felt that some teachers believe that students with disabilities are better served in separate locations. Special education teachers have not been participating in building level PLC’s which limits opportunities for collaboration with less exchange of ideas, knowledge, problem solving, intervention partnerships, and experiences between special and general education teachers. This has created an “us” and

“them” mentality across the district, further exacerbated by special education teachers in Duneland not being on the same contracts as other teachers in Duneland. The culture in Duneland was described by one administrator as one of “...get the student out...” and “it seems that we are trying to make the problem go away rather than solving problems”.

There is a critical need to unify the two systems to ensure greater collaboration, problem solving, and coherence at the district, school, and classroom levels. Without this unification, programming for students with disabilities will continue to be fragmented and disconnected. This will impair achieving desired student outcomes through an effective system of services and supports unrestricted by a general versus special education distinction.

### Transitions

In Duneland, the transition from one level to another is not always seamless. Moving to a new level or building is often difficult for many students. For students with disabilities, it is important the receiving teacher and the sending teacher engage in meaningful conversation regarding the student’s special education services. IEP’s may be written at one level without understanding the supports and structures at the next level. Additionally, this transition should ensure that the student’s IEP’s and service needs are not compromised because of the different building schedules, expectations, or supports. Steps should be taken to create more effectively coordinated transition experiences for students, parents, and teachers.

The mention on several occasions that decisions are being made as early as 4<sup>th</sup> grade as to whether a student will be on a diploma track is concerning. These decisions create default tracking in the system that separates students into very different school and classroom experiences. Doing so early in a student’s matriculation relegates them to attenuated expectations that may not reflect their potential. Decisions and discussions concerning diploma tracks should be undertaken during a student’s transition conference which happens at age 14. Doing so prior to transition into the high school grades eliminates potential opportunities for students that may more appropriately enable more challenging and appropriate learning opportunities. There are clearly a small group of students (1%) who are eligible for the alternate assessment in the state accountability system, and most likely will not be earning high school credits for a diploma. However, limiting opportunities for general education classroom experiences prematurely can compromise the intent of transition planning, the transition IEP, and students benefitting for a more appropriate school experience and preparation for post school outcomes.

The Results Driven Accountability (RDA) System is used by states to ensure school corporations are implementing the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The RDA includes compliances to the federal special education indicators and academic results. Duneland’s

recent report had a finding for Indicator 13—transition. Transition has been a responsibility of PCES; as this responsibility moves to Duneland, it will be important to gather data on the *experiences* that students and families have with this process. The procedures and processes for developing a strong transition component will need to be reviewed and likely strengthened. This link provides a good reference for the transition process. <https://instrc.indiana.edu/pdf/Transition-IEP-Rubric-2021-2022.pdf>

Finally, there is no distinct transition from high school to an 18–22-year-old program for students who stay to 22. Younger students, and 18–22-year-old students are in the same classroom. Students in 18–22-year-old programs should be moving toward an adult employment outcome with independent living options.

In an effective 18–22-year-old program individualized work-based learning activities occur to help make a good job match as students transition into a service plan that continues beyond the student’s public-school placement. For this transition the adult employment provider takes on most of the responsibility for the student’s services and continues after the formal K-12 program has ended. During this period transition plans and services are focused on work and skill development and the facilitation of access to work experiences through coordinated transportation.

Additionally, the plan includes the development of experiences that emphasize skills necessary for effectively navigating housing and other community-based requirements for successfully existing in their neighborhoods and communities. The objective is to facilitate the development of relationships between students (and families) and the adult providers while schools are still involved in the student’s transition and providing support. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is clear that the 18–22-year-old program needs to be different from the high school program and should include integrated competitive employment (as opposed to a segregated work placement). Independent living and competitive employment should be the goal for every student.

### *Curricular Programs and Interventions*

Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS), a framework for coordinating placements, services, and programmatic interventions across general and special education settings, is in its infancy in Duneland. Hiring an MTSS Coordinator to align decisions, programs, and placements for supports consistently across buildings and programs within the district will help move this effort forward. (It will also help with the development of effective transition planning as students matriculate through the different levels of the district.)

Throughout the district, individuals seemed to use Response to Intervention (RTI) and MTSS interchangeably. MTSS is a distinct approach that builds upon the original concept of tiered support offered by the RTI process, but it is broader in its approach, evaluating and bringing system and school resources to schools, classrooms, and programs in addition to student specific interventions. MTSS, unlike RTI, addresses systemic barriers and conditions for both teachers and students. While RTI focuses on academic outcomes for students at risk, MTSS encompasses this goal and adds to it with broader implications for social and emotional learning, behavior, school culture and community-school involvement, and specific adjustments to general education classroom instruction and behavioral support as well as community services.

The RTI framework can be used as one of many strategies that are part of an MTSS approach. It is important that teachers understand the unique differences and to understand that MTSS is a system for ensuring that decisions for student supports are made with the purpose of ensuring that all system resources are coordinated for maximum impact before a special education referral occurs.

For MTSS and strategies like RTI to be effective, and for teachers to feel confident in teaching students with disabilities, a greater understanding and capability in implementing interventions that enable students more opportunities to access and participate in general education classrooms and instruction will be needed. The effective use of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) can enable students this access by developing a skill set among teachers that includes appropriate adjustments in their instructional design and delivery. UDL is a framework to improve and optimize learning in inclusive environments that increases access and removes barriers to learning <https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl> .

As mentioned in the commendation section, Duneland Schools has several support personnel to provide interventions to students. According to the reading specialists, interventions are a supplement to Tier 1 instruction and do not replace it. This is good, as it is important that interventions do not replace Tier 1 instruction. Essentially, this means that content area instruction in the general education classroom is not replaced through services that supplant this instruction outside of the classroom. However, it appears that few opportunities exist for collaboration between the support personnel providing interventions, the special education personnel, and general education teachers.

Alignment of interventions and consistency in implementation across the district also appear to be a work in progress. If there is fidelity data to support the continued use of the interventions available, it is important that it is used to monitor outcomes. If fidelity data is not currently being collected, this will be important in the future to ensure alignment and consistency across the district. Using fidelity data to address program implementation is also critical for achieving intended outcomes.



## ***Effectiveness of the Special Education Service Delivery Model***

### Overall Outcome Data

Data for programmatic effectiveness is presented in this section and includes IRead data for students with disabilities, and overall results for state assessments. Within the next several years, because of redesigned services and supports for students and teachers, the selection of new programmatic approaches, and implementation with fidelity, scores could begin improving.

Duneland Schools can be proud of their overall student achievement. In all areas for the 2019-2020 data, Duneland students are achieving above the state average on the state assessments.

[https://inview.doe.in.gov/corporations/1064700000/proficiency?student\\_group\\_id=stud\\_dis&lang=en#chart-grid](https://inview.doe.in.gov/corporations/1064700000/proficiency?student_group_id=stud_dis&lang=en#chart-grid) Additionally, 2022 data on the state assessment for growth for **all** students shows an increase from 2019 in both ELA and Math. IRead scores for students with disabilities have gone down since 2018. The data indicate a decrease in the number of students with disabilities passing IRead since 2018. It also shows a decrease for all students in Duneland, although there was a slight increase from 2021-22. It is difficult to determine if the decrease in passing is post-Covid related, which could account for some of the loss, or if the reading interventions are not having the expected outcomes.

<b>IREAD 3</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
Duneland					
ALL DSC Students	94.3%	93.3%		88.7%	89.9%
DSC Non-English Learners	94.8	93.2%		89.0%	89.8%
DSC High Ability	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%
DSC Not High Ability	95.0%	94.4%		86.8%	88.8%
DSC Not Homeless	99.0%	98.8%		88.6%	89.9%
DSC Free/Reduced Meals	89.5%	86.5%		75.2%	77.6%
DSC Paid Meals	96.7%	96.6%		93.5%	94.8%
DSC General Education	98.8%	99.0%		96.3%	97.2%
DSC Special Ed	72.5%	72.6%		66.0%	63.2%
DSC Black	84.6%	NR		90.9%	78.6%
DSC Hispanic	93.2%	89.1%		77.4%	89.3%
DSC Multiracial	100.0%	100.0%		83.3%	93.3%
DSC White	94.9%	93.7%		90.9%	90.3%

The disaggregated growth scores for students with disabilities shows growth from 2019 to 2022 on

both ELA and Math, though the growth scores are below the state rate.

ILearn Growth 2022:

<b>ELA ALL GRADES</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
English Language Learner	44.4%		12.5%	8.3%
Non-English Learners	46.3%		52.0%	59.8%
High Ability	76.6%		79.6%	85.4%
Not High Ability	41.1%		47.5%	55.6%
Homeless	60.0%		37.5%	38.5%
Not Homeless	46.2%		51.7%	59.2%
Free/Reduced Meals	35.6%		39.1%	48.9%
Paid Meals	51.0%		55.8%	62.7%
General Education	50.9%		56.2%	64.5%
Special Ed	22.9%		28.4%	32.7%
<b>MATH ALL GRADES</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
English Language Learner	22.2%		12.5%	37.5%
Non-English Learners	43.0%		44.0%	55.8%
High Ability	79.7%		77.3%	88.3%
Not High Ability	36.6%		38.7%	51.2%
Homeless	45.5%		25.0%	33.3%
Not Homeless	42.8%		43.8%	55.7%
Free/Reduced Meals	31.1%		28.1%	42.2%
Paid Meals	48.1%		49.0%	60.3%
General Education	47.8%		48.1%	61.1%
Special Ed	18.0%		21.5%	28.3%

*Note: State rate for students with disabilities for ELA growth is 36% and for Math growth it is 40%.*

Duneland 2022 ILearn Proficiency for Students with Disabilities:

ELA Grades 3-8	22.2%
ELA Grade 10	21.7%
Math Grades 3-8	28.8
Math Grade 10	10.0

*Note: State rate for students with disabilities for ELA proficiency is 30.12% and for Math proficiency it is 30.36%*

Schools in Indiana are put into “leagues”. Leagues consist of districts that are comparable to Duneland in demographics such as size, attainment, compensation, performance etc. Below is the League data for Duneland for ILearn proficiency.

<b>Corporation</b>	<b>ELA 3-8</b>	<b>ELA 10</b>	<b>Math 3-8</b>	<b>Math 10</b>
Duneland	22.2	21.7	28.8	10.0
SW Allen	18.9	54.3	22.9	26.8
Northwest Allen	17.2	29.9	21.6	13.4
Zionsville	32.3	67.8	39.3	36.2
Hamilton Southeastern	24.2	37.0	29.6	23.9
Westfield	33.3	38.1	40.7	8.2
Carmel	32.4	44.0	38.1	26.7
Noblesville	25.2	32.1	31.8	11.4
Center Grove	21.7	39.7	26.4	29.1
Brownsburg	34.6	23.1	46.7	16.9
Avon	35.7	16.1	41.6	8.1
Plainfield	37.9	44.4	42.5	26.7
Lake Central	29.8	33.0	29.0	9.4
Crown Point	28.8	38.8	29.7	16.7
Munster	30.3	56.3	38.6	18.8
Valpo	33.8	34.0	36.5	17.0
Penn Harris Madison	30.8	39.2	30.6	26.3

The league rankings show the following for Duneland:

- ELA 3-8                    13<sup>th</sup> out of 17
- ELA 10                    16<sup>th</sup> out of 17
- Math 3-8                   13<sup>th</sup> out of 17
- Math 10                    13<sup>th</sup> out of 17

Currently, 18% of students in Duneland have an IEP. This is above the state average of 14%. LRE data indicate that 82.7% of students with disabilities spend most of their time in general education classrooms (state average is 88.8%). The 2022 Results Driven Accountability (RDA) report shows that 87.5 % of students with disabilities graduate with some type of diploma (state average is 74.6%). The RDA report shows that Duneland received a compliance finding for Indicator 13, Transition. The district is above the state average for graduation rate for students with disabilities.

To summarize the outcome data, outcomes for students with disabilities in Duneland can and should be better. While students with disabilities in Duneland have shown improved growth over the past 4 years, their growth percentages are below the state average in ELA and Math. Other data

show:

- Proficiency percentages for students with disabilities are below the state rate.
- Duneland is below the state average for students spending most of their day in general education.
- Duneland is above the state average in percent of students identified for special education.
- IRead scores for students with disabilities have dropped over the past four years.
- Special Education “league” data show outcomes for students with disabilities in the bottom third of districts in the league.

### Delivery of Services

Overall, Duneland has managed its resources well. New construction will update facilities and the working and learning environment will be improved for teachers and students. However, the inconsistent implementation of programs and the way programs and services are placed and used inevitably leads to the inefficient allocation and use of resources. This inefficiency ranges from caseload inequity to program implementation, as well differences in the roles of support personnel.

We observed many special education classrooms across the district; each building appears to have defined special education supports in their own way. The use of co-teaching varies, the use of direct classes varies, and academic and behavioral supports vary. This results in fragmentation and a lack of fidelity across the district. This was evident in both the focus group conversations and the observations of classrooms.

Much of this fragmentation and inconsistency was due to staff having different views of what the programs are for, understanding special education policy requirements, and a lack of collaboration and coordination within buildings and across the district. Many individuals were uncertain of the purpose and function of the PASS program. There were different levels of inclusion and co-teaching across buildings. And there were different views of the role of general educators in providing service for students with disabilities. For instance, it was shared in focus groups that there is some confusion among general education teachers as to whether they can provide adaptations and accommodations to students unless it is in the IEP. This misconception would prevent proven practices and strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) from being implemented with fidelity. A foundational concept for UDL is imbedding instructional strategies within the learning environment for access to any student. This approach increases access to instruction in the general education classroom and it is not restricted to a particular type of student. However, for it to be implemented consistently, a better understanding of what is possible, expected and required for students with IEPs must be developed with Duneland teachers.

What was particularly clear from both the focus groups and observations is that many more

students with disabilities could be included for more time in the general education classroom. There are pockets across the district where there is confidence that a more inclusive system is possible in Duneland. However, in other locations there is the concern of whether inclusive services are possible and whether they will make a difference in student outcomes. It was our observation that there were many students in the “direct courses” (courses that were self-contained outside of the general education classroom) that could be included in general education classrooms for their instruction and provision of supports. Additionally, there were students in the Applied Skills classroom that should have greater access to instruction with their non-disabled peers. The concern that more students should be in their home school was expressed in focus groups. The capability of more students in the Applied Skills classroom to have greater access to instruction in general education classrooms was also an observation of the evaluators.

It is important to understand that the conclusions drawn from observations of students in separate settings who could be better served in inclusive settings is grounded in research. Two recent comprehensive studies on inclusion in Indiana that looked at outcomes for students included when compared with those receiving services outside of the general education classrooms underscore the importance of inclusion (Cole & Murphy, 2020,2022). The findings from these studies include:

- Students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms across grade levels (4,5,6,7,8, and 10) had significantly greater achievement in both ELA and Math on the state assessment.
- Students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms at the high school graduated with different diplomas. If you were a high school student in inclusion, you were significantly more likely to graduate with a diploma and to graduate with a Core 40 diploma.

There are many labels associated with teachers and students in Duneland. Special education classrooms, teachers and students were often referenced by their label. This creates a system that is less flexible and specific in terms of meeting the needs of students. (Even students with the same labels and within similar placements have different needs.) It also causes some pragmatic concerns with scheduling, caseloads etc. Special education teachers can provide services for any student with a disability. What they feel capable of doing is a matter of training and support for skill development and professional growth. Licensing in Indiana is not categorical. Teachers are licensed as mild intervention teachers and/or intense intervention teachers. This crosses disability categories. A multi-categorical approach affords districts more flexibility and creates a problem-solving culture to meet student needs.

There was some confusion regarding the terms and assignments of Teacher of Record (TOR) and Teacher of Service (TOS). Teacher of record refers to the single special education teacher to whom a student with a disability is assigned (In Indiana this would be either mild intervention or intense intervention.). The TOR has the responsibility to ‘case manage’ the students assigned to him/her. Teacher of Service refers to any special education teacher providing instruction or service to a

student. According to state assignment code for Indiana (<https://www.in.gov/doe/files/Exceptional-Needs-2.2.23.pdf>), if you hold a mild intervention license, you can be TOR for a number of disability categories: Orthopedic Impairment, Learning Disability, Emotional Disability, all areas of Cognitive Disabilities, Autism Spectrum, and Other Health Impaired. When possible, it is advised that the TOR and the TOS be one in the same. This arrangement ensures that the teacher who knows the student best through classroom instruction is also the person who communicates with families and develops and monitors the students IEP.

### ED/PASS program

Nearly everyone we spoke with expressed concerns about the PASS program. PASS is a leveled program for students who have behavior challenges. However, the role and function of the program is not clear. PASS looks differently in each building. In some cases, it is a resource for students to reset and build social-emotional skills. In other cases, it is a destination where students spend most of their day. In nearly all cases, staff are available for “radio calls” and to respond to students who “who are upset”. There are a wide variety of behavior needs across the students in the PASS program. Many students in the PASS program spend time in the general education classroom. A small few have significant mental health concerns. Staff turn-over in the program has historically been high which leads to a lack of stability for some of the most vulnerable students.

Concerns were also mentioned related to the quality of Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIP). Some stated that for some students they were basically non-existent. Again, these have been the responsibility of PCES and will now be the responsibility of Duneland Schools. FBA’s and BIP’s are essential to ensuring that student behaviors are being addressed in a consistent and effective manner. They are also critical to the understanding and development of appropriate IEP’s and their successful implementation.

### Special Education Learning Facility -SELF

As of March of 2023, there were 21 students housed at SELF, the separate school run by PCES. Eight of those students are ED (4 high school and 4 elementary); the remaining students are classified as Other Health Impaired, Autism Spectrum and Significant Cognitive Disability. These students are not in their home schools and are in the most restrictive setting, with little or no interaction with their same age peers. Very few school systems in Indiana have this number of students in a separate school apart from their home district. It is unclear as to how students are placed at SELF, as compared to the Duneland Applied Skills classes or PASS program.

Some individuals from focus groups expressed interest as to whether students would come back to Duneland from SELF and what programming would look like for those students. There is a

perception that the students at SELF were significantly different than students who were already being served in the district. While there appeared to be more students at SELF with mobility issues, the students observed had similar needs to those in Duneland's Applied Skills and PASS program and the services provided were not distinctly different at SELF.

### Applied Skills

Duneland Applied Skills is a programmatic area where there may be some needs for additional staffing, specifically, in terms of the number of paraprofessionals. Caseloads in the Applied Skills classrooms range from 12-16; these classrooms should be held to 8-12 students. (This a specific instance of where more inclusive placements can impact programmatic experiences and impact staffing in a positive way). And, even with good caseload numbers, there may be specific student needs in a classroom that would warrant additional paraprofessionals. For example, if a classroom has many mobility, medical, or toileting needs, then that classroom would need more paraprofessionals than if the classroom did not have those same needs.

There is an excellent peer tutor program at the high school. However, across the Applied Skills program there seemed little opportunity for students to interact with their same age peers, even in "specials" or elective classes. Additionally, it was unclear as to why some of the students in these classrooms, particularly at the elementary level, were not included in the general education classroom.

In June of 2018, the Indiana State Board of Education approved "Content Connectors" for ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies <https://www.in.gov/doe/students/indiana-academic-standards/content-connectors/>. These Content Connectors were developed for Indiana's Alternate Standards that are measured by Indiana's Alternate Assessment. They are aligned with Indiana's Academic Standards and afford students who take the alternate assessment access to grade level aligned curriculum to achieve educational accountability for all students. All Applied Skills classrooms should be using these content connectors; yet there has been little or no training for staff on these content connectors. Moreover, some familiarity with the content connectors by general education teachers would be necessary for these students to be included in general education for more of their school day. The use of assistive technology to support students who are non-verbal was not observed. If assistive technology is available in Duneland, it wasn't evident that assistive devices were in use. Assistive technology is an excellent support for students who are non-verbal and increases their access to peers and to the general education environment.

### Co-teaching

Co-teaching is one excellent model for including more students with disabilities into the general

education classroom. Historically, special education teachers have been the most common to partner with classroom teachers. However, the model is beginning to expand to include school psychologists, speech therapists, instructional coaches, EL teachers, and other related service providers. While the research is small, the limited studies show that it is an instructional model that can be beneficial for both students and teachers (Beninghof, 2020). Expanding the model to include other roles in the district will require shared professional development in areas of curriculum and instruction so that classroom instruction can be a collaborative activity across personnel with different roles and responsibilities but with student contact expectations.

We know a lot about the characteristics that make co-teaching effective. The requirements include two professionals with equivalent licensure, a reciprocal partnership based on parity between the two teachers who share instructional responsibilities and have shared goals, planning time and two teachers who share ownership for all students in the class. The intent of co-teaching is to provide specialized services to students with disabilities in the general education classroom rather than send students to a separate classroom.

Duneland has some good examples of co-teaching. However, overall, the model is not being implemented as intended. Many co-teaching classrooms have a high density of students with disabilities in the class (often over 50% of the classrooms were students with disabilities). There is little parity between the teachers, and most often the general education teacher provides most of the instruction. Teachers who do work together do not have common plan time and often partnership are rotated depending on the school schedules. Using current co-teaching relationships to advance co-teaching by observation and demonstration teaching would demonstrate to district staff the capability and the rewards for this strategy within district resources that have credibility among their peers.

It was unclear as to how co-teaching is being used. Students with disabilities in a co-taught classroom should be students who otherwise would be in a self-contained/direct classroom, eliminating the need for pull out/direct classrooms. Districts do not have the resources to support a co-teaching model for any classroom that has students with IEP's; therefore, the co-taught classroom should be for the students with the greatest need.

### Pre-K

Literature and research on the inclusion of students with disabilities in inclusive Pre-K programs indicate that there are many social, emotional, and academic benefits (Odom, Buysse & Soukakou, 2011). Currently, the PK program in Duneland is a program that is only for students with disabilities and is not a five day/week program. PK is a child's first school experience and experiences that include same-age peers without disabilities can make a difference in the child's future access and



success in the general education environment.

### Related Services

There are still many questions from the School Psychologist, Occupational Therapist (OT), Physical Therapists (PT) Social Workers and Speech Therapists as to when and if they will move from PCES to Duneland. The consensus is that they would like to move to be a part of the Duneland system. Currently they feel disconnected to the Duneland programs and would like more integrated relationships in the district and school culture for planning and collaboration of services to students and teacher supports. They believe that they would be of greater value if they were a part of the same system and program that the students and their teacher colleagues are a part of.

The caseloads in all the related services areas are high. OT has 84 Duneland students; speech caseloads range from 88-112 and there are 160 students county-wide receiving PT. There are 3 full time diagnosticians and 1.7 school psychologists for Duneland. The school psychologists expressed a desire to be more involved in MTSS/RTI. Most of the related services are provided as pull-out services. There are few instances in which the services are provided within the context of the general education classroom.

Nurses have also expressed concern with respect to their roles and responsibilities should students be moved from the SELF program to Duneland. Currently, many applied skills teachers and staff manage toileting of students and minor health related concerns.

### ***Use and Adequacy of Staff***

It was noted on several occasions during our visits that there were vacancies in some special education positions. Better retention of teachers and staff after the move to a new contract under Duneland Schools is possible. However, special education shortages are a major problem for school districts across the state, and Duneland will need to consider how they recruit and retain special education teachers in the future. There are now several excellent options for teachers and paraprofessionals to get their special education license which could help Duneland in the future. These include: 1) ASSET- <https://icoaose.wildapricot.org/ASSET/> 2) I-SEAL- <https://sites.google.com/uindy.edu/indianaiseal/home> and 3) Purdue online licensure program <https://online.purdue.edu/programs/education/special-education-licensure-online>

While we often heard concerns about caseloads and staffing, review of actual caseload numbers for special education teachers, specifically, were good. The numbers ranged from 11 to 24 at the high school, 9 to 23 in the middle school and 12 to 29 at the elementary level (there was one caseload at LES with 42). Most classrooms were in the 18-24 range. These are all comparable to surrounding

school districts. The one area of some concern is with the Applied Skills classrooms where the student to staff ratio wasn't great. These classrooms, which have students with more extensive medical and toileting needs, should have a smaller student to staff ratio.

The perception regarding the need for more staff may be related to clearer role definition, building schedules, unfilled vacancies, and a reliance on the categorical service model. As mentioned in another section of this report, categorical labels drive services in Duneland. This prevents the kind of flexibility that allows for more even caseload numbers. Teachers are categorized by labels as are classrooms. For example, within the Applied Skills program at one elementary, the teacher referred to the "moderate applied skills" classroom and the "mild applied skills" classroom. It was unclear, based on our observations of the students and the curriculum, what the criteria for the distinction was.

There were several individuals who believe that there is a need for additional behavior specialists and social workers. Counselors and School Psychologists noted that more students are being identified for a 504 plan, and that incidents of depression and anxiety are high. This seems to be a pattern across the state post-Covid. Social workers and behavior specialists can provide needed support at the Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels.

As mentioned in the commendations, Duneland is fortunate to have several support personnel with reading specialists and instructional coaches. As noted earlier, for these resources to be used efficiently and effectively, alignment and coordination across the district of the supports provided by these individuals will be important.

### ***Parent Communication***

The parents in the focus group were pleased that Duneland was moving away from PCES. They felt like the communication from the Superintendent regarding this change was good. Most of the concerns were about the communication with and responsiveness of PCES. They also have high expectations of special education moving forward. They acknowledge that there needs to be greater collaboration between special education and the general education staff. They worry that in the past, expectations for their students were low, and they hope that this can change with new leadership and new direction in Duneland. During the focus group, the parents spent some time simply networking, sharing what they knew about the 'system' and resources that have been helpful for them. They acknowledged how important this was and are hopeful that this networking can take on a more formal structure.

## Recommendations

Duneland Schools has an excellent strategic plan. The following recommendations will reference this plan to demonstrate alignment to the goals and strategies of this plan.

1. The district should engage in conversations about the vision and future direction of special education in Duneland Schools. As the data indicate, many more students with disabilities can have access to the general education classroom for all or most of the day. With new special education leadership, the commitment of executive leadership and the shift to bring special education teachers under the Duneland Schools contract the district has an enormous opportunity to move the district forward. It is further recommended that this process include 1) a clear definition of the term “inclusion” as it relates to the district and 2) the creation and use of the Implementation Science framework which will ensure the district initiatives are aligned, the structures are in place to support teachers, interventions will be implemented with fidelity, and that the efforts will be sustained over time.
2. As the Guaranteed and Viable Curriculum is completed and implementation begins, it will be important that special educators have opportunities to be involved in training and discussions related to students with disabilities.
3. Co-teaching is an excellent vehicle to include more students in the general education classroom. However, there needs to be extensive training for staff so that co-teaching can be of high quality. Many students with disabilities can be included in the general education classroom without a co-teacher if the instructional environment is universally designed. Thus, the co-taught options should be reserved for students with disabilities who are currently in the direct taught courses.
4. PASS, in its current form, should not continue. Additionally, ED students from SELF should return to Duneland Schools. However, for both recommendations to be successful, there will need to be some structural and programmatic changes. Specific recommendations are as follows:
  - The mental health needs of a very small number of students (estimated to be around 10-12 individuals) should be address through the creation of an intensive therapeutic program with mental health wrap around supports at the secondary and elementary levels. This program should have a full-time mental health specialist/therapist hired by the district that would split time between elementary and secondary levels. Additionally, the program should include a dedicated behavior specialist, a teacher and 2-3 paraprofessionals for both the elementary level and the secondary level. The needs of the students in the Pass program are wide and varied; students with severe mental health needs are in the same classroom with students who have lesser behavior concerns. This fragments the support and services that can be provided to students, and it is not an effective nor efficient use of resources.

Additionally, the small group of students with severe mental health concerns are not having their needs met either because of a lack of resources or because the personnel in the classrooms are not equipped to provide the therapeutic programming needed. This intensive program should have strict criteria for entrance into and out of the program (See Appendix B for example). The program staff should work as a team with the building social worker to provide wrap around support that includes the family.

- Students who are not eligible for the therapeutic mental health program should be returned to their home school if they are not already in their home school. Each school should establish re-set rooms (not seclusion rooms) that provide sensory regulation and a self-regulation space. Often these spaces can be a part of the general education classroom and/or a resource room and should be available for any student.
  - Tier 1 and 2 behavior supports in each building should be strengthened. This would include:
    - Establishing strong Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) systems in each building. This should be a clear expectation of each Duneland school.
    - Providing intensive training in PBIS to all administrators prior to any major changes in the ED program.
    - Adopting the Tiered Fidelity Inventory to gather data across schools on PBIS implementation. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/tfi> This assessment reviews all three Tiers of PBIS.
    - Increasing the number of Behavior Support Specialists available to each building. The Behavior Support Specialists should have clearly defined roles, including (but not limited to) the coordination of behavior plans, supporting teachers to problem solve specific behavior concerns, providing resources to staff, and connecting and coordinating with community mental health agencies etc.
    - Increasing the level of support that each building is getting through the partnership with the community mental health system. The community mental health systems are stretched; however, this partnership and the communication regarding how the partnership can better serve the district should be considered. A stronger partnership with community mental health may necessitate the hiring of an additional social worker(s) to support the wrap around services between school, home, and the mental health provider.
    - Ensuring alignment and integration of services provided by the Behavior Support Specialist, School Social Workers, and School Counselors.
5. There should be a specific plan in place within the next two years to return all students who are at SELF to Duneland schools.
  6. There are many teachers in Duneland that have a strength-based mindset when considering students in their classrooms. Undertaking an intentional effort to increase the numbers of

teachers with this mind-set so that it becomes a part of the district's culture, will increase high expectations for students through providing training and support to teachers. Undertaking this intentional effort to address expectations for students will result in a problem-solving approach to identify and provide student supports, and the effective use of resources to support teachers in providing these services. Universal Design framework mentioned earlier helps teachers shift to an asset-based approach to teaching. It is recommended a professional development plan be created to roll out Universal Design for Learning across the district. This could begin with the current instructional coaches and special education leadership being trained in UDL. These individuals would then continue to push out training and support to teachers.

7. To further decentralization and move toward more individual district control, Duneland should work with the PCES to determine which services moving forward will be shared services. There are several related personnel that currently only serve Duneland; they would be the most logical positions to move over to Duneland. If the related service personnel move to Duneland, it is recommended that caseloads be reviewed as there may be a need for additional staff.
8. As Duneland assumes greater responsibility for special education staff and programs, the district should review how IEPs are being written, the quality of Functional Behavior Assessments and Behavior Intervention Plans, TOR/TOS guidelines, and other special education procedures that may need updating or a complete revision. Improving teachers understanding of IEP requirements will facilitate a more consistent provisions of services to students across the district.
9. There is a need for greater collaboration between special and general educators. However, collaboration cannot be mandated. It is essential to build the structures necessary for this collaboration to take place. Duneland currently has one such structure with their PLC's and WIN. Now that Duneland teachers are on Duneland contracts, special educators should attend and become members of grade level or department PLC's. By including special education teachers as colleagues for collaboration and problems solving, the district can achieve the coherence and coordination necessary for effective program and service delivery managed in a more cost-effective way.
10. The special education program should move away from a categorical model to a multi-categorical model. Labels throughout the district should be diminished.
11. In partnership with local adult service providers, Duneland should establish an 18–22-year-old program that is distinct and different from the Applied Skills high school program. A description of what this program should look like can be found in the narrative section on p6.
12. The district should continue to develop and refine the MTSS/RTI system. It will be important that teachers understand the unique differences and understand MTSS and strategies like RTI are appropriate for all students and should not be a gateway into special education. A

common language will be essential. Fidelity and outcome data should be collected for all interventions used to support students.

13. For any student who requires nursing services (as a related service) or may require the nurse as a resource, the nurse should be involved in the student's case conference. As students are returned from SELF, an assessment of the individual student's medical needs should be considered, and the roles and expectations of the nursing staff should be clearly articulated. It is unclear at this time how many students at SELF would need intensive medical support beyond what can be managed in the classroom; this number should be monitored and reviewed to ensure adequate nursing support is available. The goal should be to increase communication and collaboration between nurses and special education staff.
14. The transition IEP process should be monitored and reviewed during the 2023-24 school year. The expectation should not just be compliance but high-quality transition IEP's that engage families and the student in post-secondary planning. It will be important to gather data on the *experiences* that students and families have with this process. It should be made clear to all special educators that discussions of diploma track in high school should be held until the transition process begins in middle school. The Indiana Secondary Transition Resource Center provides valuable resources. <https://instrc.indiana.edu>
15. The district should develop plans for a full day, inclusive Pre-K program. There are many good resources at this link: <https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/ecc/resources/preschool-inclusion/index.html>
16. The district should form a Parent Advisory Group. This group should serve as a resource to parents of students with disabilities and to increase communication between parents and Duneland staff.
17. All teachers in the Applied Skills program should be trained in the Content Connectors. Additionally, the district should assess whether assistive technology is available to students who need it. PATINS is a great resource for grants and information on assistive technology and accessible educational materials. <https://www.patinsproject.org>
18. As noted in the narrative section, there may be some applied skills classrooms that would warrant an additional paraprofessional.

### Summary

It is the intent of this program review to provide an impartial and valid picture of special education in Duneland Schools. An enormous amount of data was collected; yet it is recognized that in the short amount of time spent in the district, there are strengths, concerns and issues that may have been missed. However, we believe the recommendations will result in improved quality and effectiveness of instruction, an improved organizational structure, improved services for students and a more unified system of education for all students in Duneland. The district will need to build the human capital to change the special education system in the district.

The following are recommended next steps:

1. The report should be shared and discussed with district leadership.
2. The report should be made available to stakeholders for review and discussion.
3. Representative teachers, administrators and staff should engage in discussions that lead to a prioritization of the above recommendations.
4. The report should serve as a framework to create an action plan with timelines to move the district forward.

Duneland has a great opportunity to re-define special education for students and staff. Duneland Schools should work to merge the special and general education systems into a single unified system of support for all students. This will take some time and the continued strong commitment of district and building leadership. The district has a committed group of educators, involved parents and a supportive community which are key components for the development of a system of education that shares the responsibility and ownership for all students.

## References

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## Appendix A: Documents Reviewed

1. Caseload numbers
2. "League" Achievement data
3. State Assessment Data: ILearn and IRead
4. Duneland Strategic Plan
5. Dr. Tammy Ummel report
6. Duneland Schools Organizational Chart
7. SELF data on students from Duneland Schools
8. PCES/Duneland Interlocal Agreement
9. Director, Special Education Duneland Job Description
10. State RDA report for Duneland

## Appendix B: Self Contained ED Therapeutic Program criteria example

Process for changing a student's Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) to self-contained ED program:

1. If the staff involved with a student, based on the data below, believes the student may need to be educated in a self-contained ED classroom that building principal should contact the Special Education Director and submit the data analysis and summary based on the following sources:



- Request for Education Planning
  - Documentation of any out of school mental health services
  - Academic and behavior plans data
  - Interventions data
  - Chronology of increased special education services
  - Office Referrals
2. If it is determined that a self-contained classroom might be appropriate, an observation will be scheduled at the student's home school. This observation will be done by the mental health therapist and the behavior therapist.
  3. If it is determined after the observation that a self-contained classroom might be appropriate for the student, a staffing will be scheduled with all staff involved, as appropriate and the principal(s) to discuss next steps.
  4. Parent intake for therapy must be completed.
  5. A case conference is scheduled with all staff involved and parents.
    - Homeschool TOR is responsible for writing the IEP
    - Receiving teacher goes to homeschool for observations, meet the student
    - Student/parent visit receiving school with homeschool TOR
    - The student will start the transition process to receiving school

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