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# Amherst-Pelham Regional School District Special Education Program Evaluation

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

June 2010



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## **Special Education Program Evaluation**

### **Submitted to:**

Amherst-Pelham Regional School District (APRS)  
Massachusetts

June 2010

**Prepared by Public Consulting Group's  
Center for Resource Management**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Evaluation of the Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools Special Education Program

Public Consulting Group's Center for Resource Management (PCG-CRM) was contracted by the Amherst-Pelham Regional School District (APRS) to conduct a Special Education Program Evaluation. The overall purpose of the evaluation was to determine program effectiveness in supporting positive outcomes for students receiving special education services, and to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement in the organization and delivery of services. Qualitative and quantitative data collection procedures were multifaceted, collaborative, and designed to ensure input from multiple stakeholders. They included: 1) the use of PCG-CRM's data warehouse technology to support outcome analyses; 2) a review of district documents that were pertinent to the focus of the study; 3) staff and parent surveys; 4) phone interviews with district and school administrators at the elementary, middle, and high school levels; 5) onsite focus groups with school teams and parents of children receiving special education services; and 6) follow-up meetings/phone discussions with coordinators of special programs. A total of 330 parents completed the parent survey (58% response rate), and 161 staff members completed the staff survey (52% response rate).

### Summary of Findings and Conclusions

#### Characteristics of the APRS Special Education Population

**The Amherst-Pelham Regional School District provides a wide range of services to students with disabilities who comprise 19% of the K–12 student enrollment, a rate slightly higher than the overall Massachusetts rate of 17%.** Special education rates vary across individual schools, with Pelham (24%) and Crocker Farm (22%) elementary schools and Amherst Regional Middle School (21%) having the highest proportion of special education students in their school populations. Three-year trends showed some variations in school rates, but generally no major shifts. **The higher representation of Hispanic students and male students in the special education population compared to their representation in the total population is an area that should be monitored.** The district should particularly examine the identification of Hispanic students in the learning disability and the communication impairment categories to ensure that the difficulties these students are experiencing are not primarily due to lack of full English proficiency or being struggling readers. Gender-based differences in the APRS special education population by disability showed a higher percentage of male special education students identified as having an emotional impairment or autistic spectrum disorder compared to female students.

**The APRS K–12 special education population includes a range of disabilities that varies somewhat from state percentages.** Students identified as having a specific learning disability comprise 29% of the APRS special education population, followed by communication impairment (17%), health impairment (13%), autism (12%), emotional impairment (10%), and neurological impairment (8%). State percentages were higher for specific learning disability (34%), and lower for health impairment (8%), emotional impairment (8%), autism (7%), and neurological impairment (4%). The distribution of the population by disability varies at school levels, which has implications for the types of services offered. **Three-year trends for the elementary, middle, and high school levels indicated a district commitment to inclusion, with about half or more of the special education population in a general education setting for 80% or more of the day.** Education environment/inclusion trends did not vary significantly across the three years.

#### APRS Special Education Student Outcomes

##### Attendance Patterns

**The district is to be commended for exemplary attendance patterns for both special education and general education students, but needs to monitor the increase in absence for special education students at the high**

**school level. Higher absence may be a factor contributing to lower Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) performance for some students.** For the grades 3–6 and grade 10 tested special education students, those with higher absence were less likely to achieve proficiency on both the English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments. For the grades 7–8 tested students, those with a higher number of days absent were more likely to score at the Warning level on the MCAS mathematics assessment.

### **MCAS Achievement Trends**

**Three-year MCAS ELA achievement trends for APRS special education students showed uneven progress at grades 4 and 6, and improvement at grades 8 and 10.** Significant increases in the percent scoring at the Warning level on the grade 4 assessment should serve as an indicator to the special education program of the need for more intensive ongoing progress monitoring to improve the academic achievement of the lowest performing students. **Three-year MCAS mathematics achievement trends for APRS special education students showed steady increases in the percent of students scoring at the Warning level in grades 4, 6, 8, and 10,** again a strong indicator of the need for more systematic ongoing progress monitoring for the lowest performing students.

### **Changes in Achievement Gaps Between 2008 and 2009**

**Evidence of positive progress was shown in significant decreases at certain grade levels in MCAS percent proficient between APRS students with disabilities and the total tested population between 2008 and 2009.** Decreases in proficiency gaps were shown at grades 4, 8, and 10 on the MCAS ELA assessment, and grades 4, 6, and 8 on the MCAS mathematics assessment. The decreases were larger than those for the statewide population of students with disabilities.

### **MCAS Performance by Disability**

While the report provides three-year MCAS performance patterns for each disability group, it must be noted that even with combined grade level groups (3–6 and 7–8), with the exception of the specific learning disability category, the number of students for each disability group was still small, making it difficult to make inferences about differences in performance patterns across the years. However, **the overall decline in the grades 3–6 MCAS performance of students with a communication impairment in both ELA and mathematics merits attention by staff in the elementary schools.**

### **MCAS Performance by Percent of Time in General Education**

**The support provided to APRS students with disabilities in grades 3–6 and 7–8 who are in general education 80% or more of the day has led to success for many of these students, with relatively high percentages achieving proficiency on the MCAS ELA and mathematics assessments.** Results also indicated that relatively high percentages of students in the general education classroom less than 80% of the day are scoring at the Warning level, an indicator of the need for more consistent monitoring of the progress of these students.

### **Student Cohort Progress and MCAS Growth in Achievement**

**The three-year performance of 2009 grade 6, 8, and 10 special education cohorts (same students over time) provided evidence of positive progress for these students.** The percent scoring Proficient on the MCAS ELA assessments increased for all of the three grade level cohorts from 2007 to 2009, and for the grade 6 and grade 10 cohorts on the mathematics assessment. The cohort analyses demonstrate the importance of following the performance of same-group cohorts over time to determine the actual progress a specific group of students is making in improving proficiency, a more robust indicator than trend data which represent a different group of students each year.

**The use of the Student Growth Percentile (SGP) methodology selected by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) showed very mixed growth patterns at every grade level, indicating that while many of the special education tested students achieved very positive growth between**

**2008 and 2009, many did not.** Across the district, 46% of the tested special education tested students showed low/very low growth on both the ELA and mathematics assessments, while about 40% showed high/very high growth.

## APRS Special Education Program

### *The Administrative Structure, Staffing, and Programs and Services*

**The APRS administrative structure within the student services office as well as the district's central office has been in continuous transition over the past several years, which has required an ongoing focus on responding to changes.** This has inhibited progress in establishing a stable and clear leadership structure across general and special education in the district. At the close of the evaluation, however, there was some indication that a more stable administrative structure was being established that would continue through the 2010–11 school year. The current interim superintendent will continue in that role. The current interim special education director will move up to the position of director of student services. Two special education administrators and a 60% program coordinator will assume the administrative responsibilities for the special education program and report to the director of student services. A curriculum coordinator has been hired who will have elementary staff working as coordinators under her direction at the school level.

**The APRS special education program provides a comprehensive and commendable range of services to support the learning and development of the district's population of students with disabilities at all levels.** Services include support from special education teachers and paraprofessionals within and outside the general education setting. **There is considerable variation across the elementary, middle, and high school levels regarding where special education teachers and paraprofessionals provide most of their service support to students.** At the K–6 and high school levels, the pull-out service model is prevalent. In contrast, at the middle school level, more than half of the special education students receive their service support in the general education classroom most of the time.

**There is extensive related services support for students with disabilities.** Half of the district's special education population receive speech language services, 38% receive counseling/psychological support, and 31% receive occupational therapy. Other more specialized services are also provided. In addition, the district provides considerable specialized programming through special programs housed within the district which are staffed by special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and specialists as needed.

**Staffing patterns for special education teachers and paraprofessionals appear to be reasonable for the numbers and types of disabilities being addressed through the APRS special education program, the emphasis on inclusion, and the specialized programs provided by the district.** There are no clear formulas for the combination of teachers and paraprofessionals, and state regulations allow school districts to exercise judgment in line with students' special needs. In order to maintain an inclusionary model, it is necessary to have adequate numbers of staff, particularly paraprofessionals, to work in the general education environment in supportive roles for both students and professional teaching staff. Paraprofessionals in the specialized programs also provide the individualized support required for children with the most intensive needs.

The utilization of staff in providing academic and other service support to children with disabilities would improve, however, by providing more focused training for paraprofessionals, and more focused training for both general education and special education teachers on differentiating instruction and co-teaching/collaborative teaching methods. Staff utilization would also improve if teachers and paraprofessionals had more time for communication/collaboration about the needs and progress of students. Finally, the district should consider restructuring the support provided by some paraprofessionals from one-on-one support to working with very small groups of students. This could be a positive option for some students who would benefit from the learning

interactions with other students, reduce dependence on the paraprofessional, and allow for more effective utilization of paraprofessionals.

### **Specialized Programs and In-District Versus Out-of-District Programs**

**The APRS special education program has developed extensive capacity at all levels to provide a range of in-district programs that has allowed the district to maintain students with intensive needs who require specialized programming to be served within the district rather than in out-of-district placements.** These programs have special education teacher and paraprofessional support and provide highly individualized programs for students needing intensive language-based support, students with autism spectrum disorder or other neurological conditions, students with more complex learning needs, and students whose primary needs are in the area of social or emotional disorders. The district also offers two alternative day programs for high school students.

**The array of specialized program options APRS has developed has led to a significant reduction in the number of out-of-district placements over the past several years.** When contrasted with the local program costs, out-of-district placements will almost always be higher. In-district program options also reduce the level of transportation costs, often a significant expenditure for students placed in out-of-district day programs. **Based on data provided to the evaluators, the per-pupil costs of the in-district programs are lower than the average cost of providing an out-of-district placement.**

### **Identification and Referral Processes**

**The Child Study Process (CST) process is well established at the elementary level. However, pre-referral processes need to be more consistent across schools.** A common set of assessments is not being used consistently across the elementary schools for initial referral and re-evaluation. While various interventions are used in the general education classroom before proceeding to a special education referral, the use of these interventions needs to be more systematic, and data collection on the effectiveness of interventions needs to be more frequent and consistent. School administrators particularly voiced their support for establishing a more systematic process of intervention similar to a Response to Intervention (RtI) process.

**While the CST is relatively new in Amherst-Pelham Regional Middle School, it appears to be functioning well with a core membership.** However, there is a need for more collaboration between classroom teachers and specialists in implementing pre-referral interventions, as well as a process for documenting the effectiveness of interventions so they can be used more widely by teachers. The middle school appears to have an adequate bank of assessments for initial referral and re-evaluation, with 30 assessments being used frequently. **The CST at the high school appears to focus more on clinical issues for students with emotional/mental health issues rather than academic intervention,** and the school's bank of assessments for initial referral and re-evaluation purposes primarily fall into the category of psychological assessments. The use of pre-referral interventions is inconsistent and needs to be strengthened through more of a team approach and by providing teachers with more strategies.

### **Progress Monitoring, Transition, and Exit from Special Education**

**At all levels, there is no common agreement about how progress monitoring should be implemented, the frequency of progress monitoring, or how ongoing progress should be documented.** There is a lack of sufficient progress monitoring tools and a lack of consistency in progress monitoring approaches across the elementary schools and at the middle school level. At the high school level, the concept of progress monitoring is not viewed from an instructional intervention perspective partly because of a focus on grades, completion of assignments, and, ultimately, graduation.

**Relatively low percentages of parents are satisfied with transition services at different levels, and the transition process into the middle school and high school needs to improve to better support student adjustment to the demands of the receiving school.** Changes that include a busier schedule and increased academic demands, and more stringent expectations for completing in-school work and homework are problematic for special education students. **At the elementary, middle, and high school levels, very few students exit special education once identified, and the attainment of grade-level performance or MCAS proficiency are not viewed as justifying a discharge from special education.** The common rationales are that “an educational disability does not disappear,” and that parents are reluctant to have services and support for their children discontinued.

### **Conflict Resolution**

**Legal documentation provided by the district indicated that APRS has not been engaged in an unusually high number of disputes.** In the context of the procedural safeguards that are guaranteed to parents and children as a result of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004, the number and type of disputes that are documented by the district from 2006 through 2009 are not excessive for the size of the Amherst-Pelham district. However, it must be recognized that parents involved in these disputes generally do not experience the process as a positive experience, which leads to parent perceptions that the district is oriented toward litigation and does not fully utilize the options of facilitation and mediation. In all cases, the district needs to ensure that conflict resolution policies and options are clear to parents, that they are followed, and that parents are treated respectfully throughout the process.

### **Parent Perceptions of Program Effectiveness**

**Parent responses indicated that Individualized Education Program (IEP) procedures that are central to parent participation had been followed.** More than 90% of the parents indicated that the reason for their child being placed in special education had been explained to them; that they had received a copy and an explanation of their rights; had taken part in the development of their child’s most recent IEP; and had gone to an IEP meeting at least once a year. More than 70% agreed that their child was getting the number and amount of services listed on the IEP, and that they were getting routine progress reports on how their child was meeting IEP goals. It is noteworthy and commendable that across all of the grade levels, more than 80% felt that they were an equal member of the team in planning their child’s IEP.

**Parents have very different experiences with their participation. While more than half of the parents were satisfied, more than 40% were not satisfied with their participation** in the implementation of their child’s IEP; communication with staff; school staff responses to their needs and concerns; and the extent to which their child’s progress report effectively communicates progress. Parents of children in the disability grouping of autistic spectrum disorder and multiple disabilities had the highest percentages of parent satisfaction, while parents of children in the disability groupings of specific learning disability and neurological impairment had the lowest percentages of parent satisfaction with their participation and the information they received about their child.

**Parents have varying opinions about their child’s program and progress.** It is commendable that a high majority was satisfied with their child’s overall special education program and was of the sentiment that their child was making progress in school as written in the IEP goals. Most parents also indicated that special education staff are skilled in providing services and that regular education teachers are involved in their child’s program. However, less than 60% felt their child’s IEP was an effective working document; that staff had high enough expectations; or that their child’s program was effectively preparing him/her for the future.

### **Parent Perceptions of Program Strengths and Areas for Concern**

**Many parents of children with disabilities in APRS have had very positive experiences with the special education programs and services provided to their children and identified program strengths in areas related**

**to the range of programs, services and academic support provided to children, staff commitment and expertise, and positive communication and support.** Their comments reflected very positive parent experiences with their children's opportunities for learning and academic development; individualized and one-on-one support; the integration of their children in general education classrooms; the dedicated and caring support of staff; staff knowledge and expertise; teacher recognition and response to children's need and strengths; positive communication with staff; and a positive school environment.

**A wide range of concerns and areas for improvement were also cited by parents that provided strong indicators of where a considerable number of parents have not had positive experiences with the APRS special education program in areas related to the IEP process, communication, the delivery of programs and services and instruction, and administration.**

**IEP process concerns** included a lack of transparency in the decision making process; team leader/administration control of meetings with parents afraid to speak; IEPs not being finished in a timely manner and not including measurable goals; and regular education teachers not understanding IEP requirements. **Communication concerns** included insufficient information to parents on available programs/services; not adequately communicating methods and protocols to parents so parents could follow through; and insufficient communication and coordination between special education teachers, classroom teachers, and paraprofessionals. **Concerns related to programs/services and instruction** included delays in the provision of services and inconsistency in the services implemented; the need to improve transition services and the lack of social skills services; inconsistency in the assignment of paraprofessionals; a perception that services are dependent on parent knowledge and advocacy; low teacher expectations and insufficient information on how children are progressing; and difficulty in exiting special education.

**There were several areas of staff-parent agreement and disagreement about program effectiveness and areas for improvement.** **Areas of agreement** included a positive view of the overall quality of special education services and children's involvement in school activities; the need to improve transition services and progress reports; the need for professional development for staff and paraprofessionals; and the need to improve collaboration across staff and parents. **Areas of disagreement** indicated that staff were far more positive than parents about whether parents participated as partners in making decisions about their children's educational programs and services; about teachers' expectations; and about the school's response to the needs and concerns of parents.

### Staff Perceptions of Program Effectiveness

**There was a very high level of staff consensus across all school levels about program strengths** in areas that related to the overall quality of the district's programs and services for students with disabilities; comprehensive evaluations that identify students' needs and strengths; placement in the least restrictive environment; and the provision of accommodations and/or modifications as written. Areas that staff felt their school did exceptionally well in providing services included the dedication of staff in meeting students' needs; the range of individualized support provided to students; and inclusion and access to general education classrooms and school activities.

**There was an equally high consensus across staff about areas for improvement** related to the lack of time for communication and collaboration between general and special education staff; the lack of a clear model/process for collaboration and co-teaching; the need for more systematic and consistent approaches to pre-referral intervention and ongoing progress monitoring; and the need for more focused professional development for general education teachers and paraprofessionals. Staff responses about what needed to change or improve at their school included having a more collaborative approach across parents, teachers, and the administration; improving in-class supports and providing resources on differentiated instruction; having clearer guidelines for pull-out classrooms; and avoiding overload in general education classrooms.

## Factors Affecting Student Achievement

**The evaluation findings identified a number of factors that may be having an impact on special education student achievement.** While no direct causal relationships can be inferred, it is likely that the dedication and expertise of staff; a high level of staffing support with low student/staff ratios; highly individualized services; academic support in general education classrooms; the availability of many skilled paraprofessionals; and the scope of related services support are all factors that contribute to positive student achievement. It is also likely that the lack of a clear model and time to support collaborative instruction or co-teaching; the need for more systematic intervention processes and a wider array of interventions; the need for more consistent and frequent progress monitoring; and the need for more focused professional development for paraprofessionals and teachers are factors which may be causing uneven student progress in developing essential skills and thus inhibiting the academic achievement of some special education students.

## Recommendations and Action Steps for Improvement

### Shared Responsibility Across General and Special Education

**APRS should establish a more unified leadership and accountability structure for the learning and achievement of special and general education students.** The IDEA shift in focus has created new challenges for school districts in re-directing leadership and accountability structures to move beyond compliance toward a more integrated approach across general and special education. The new administrative structure offers an opportunity to redefine all central office leadership responsibilities and how they interface with the responsibilities of principals in areas related to instructional effectiveness and collaboration across general and special education. Shared leadership responsibilities for ensuring the progress of special education students need to be more clearly defined for administrators at the district and building levels. APRS should develop a strategic plan that addresses this area and specifies the mutual roles and shared responsibilities of general and special education administrators in such areas as determining the effectiveness of the curriculum in supporting the learning and achievement of special education students; ensuring consistency and quality in curriculum modifications and accommodations; determining the effectiveness of reading and mathematics interventions; ensuring adequate staffing support for a more systematic intervention process; establishing and implementing more systematic progress monitoring procedures; and providing a more integrated approach to professional development for general and special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Addressing any of these areas as “separate” special education issues does not represent either a viable or cost-effective approach to program effectiveness and improvement.

### Involvement of General and Special Education Staff

**The dedication and commitment of the APRS teaching staff is an area of program strength that the district should draw upon in developing action plans for improvement.** At all levels, APRS staff are viewed as demonstrating a genuine commitment to providing special education students with the support and instruction they need to achieve success. In developing future action plans, the district should draw upon the strengths of the teaching staff and actively engage them in defining strategies and solutions that address the areas for improvement identified in this report.

### Response to Parent Concerns

**Special education administrators should work collaboratively with the APRS Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAAC) and school administrators to further examine and address issues identified by parents.** At both the district and building level, parent concerns about the IEP process; communication with parents; school response to parent concerns; perceptions of administrative control; delays in services; and parent perceptions of a lack of consistency in service implementation need to be addressed. Specific steps might include assigning a team leader rather than an administrator at each of the schools to convene and lead IEP meetings; developing

clear communication guidelines for IEP meetings that address the need for open communication with each team member participating equally, and ensuring that the process of IEP decision making is transparent; reviewing materials that are being disseminated centrally and by schools to parents about available services to ensure they are consistent across schools, and provide sufficient information about these services; identifying where the process of administrative review is causing delays in IEP completion and/or the delivery of services and addressing the problem; having each school conduct a critical review of how they respond to parent concerns and define a common process to be used across schools to ensure timely and purposeful response; and convening an elementary team with representation from each school to share and discuss service delivery and instructional intervention approaches to improve consistency in service delivery across schools.

### Pre-Referral Intervention

***The district should establish a task force to develop an implementation plan for establishing a more systematic districtwide approach to pre-referral intervention such as RtI.*** The benefits of an approach such as RtI include earlier systematic support for students prior to referral to special education; the referral process proceeding more efficiently because of the intervention and documentation that occurs prior to a referral; and more focused use of data on student progress. Challenges include defining the process clearly to ensure consistency across schools; identifying appropriate interventions; scheduling time for interventions; and having sufficient staff to provide the scope of interventions needed during pre-referral and after referral, as well as document the effectiveness of interventions. In addition, the RtI process becomes far more challenging at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level, and more RtI experience is needed for the process to work at the upper grade levels.

### Assessments Used for Referral/Re-Evaluation and Progress Monitoring

***The range of assessments used for referral/re-evaluation and for progress monitoring needs to be critically reviewed and the district needs to define a core set of assessments that are consistently used across schools.*** The profile of assessments reported by schools should be critically reviewed by a team with central office and school representation, and a core set should be defined for consistent use across the schools for referral and re-evaluation purposes. Progress monitoring is an area that needs to be strengthened and schools will need an array of assessments that go beyond the limited measures currently used in the schools. Progress monitoring procedures need to be clearly defined in terms of how progress monitoring should be implemented, the frequency and allocation of responsibility, and how ongoing progress should be documented. Continuous progress monitoring is increasingly being recognized as an essential component of instruction for lower achieving students and is fundamental to ongoing instructional support and intervention. It is a central element of structured intervention models such as RtI where the research and practice literature recommends that monitoring students' response to interventions and instructional support occur frequently, that is, at least every other week for some students and monthly for others.

### Teacher Collaboration and Co-Teaching and Paraprofessional Support

***While APRS has placed a strong emphasis on inclusion, the implementation of a collaborative teaching model needs to be strengthened and better supported at every level.*** At all three levels, the common planning time that is necessary to support a collaborative teaching process is minimal, and staff indicated the need for more professional development on effective collaborative/co-teaching strategies. Building level administrators need to establish common expectations and norms for collaboration and co-teaching in their schools, and ensure that adequate professional development is provided to support an effective process across general and special education teachers. Also, while the service support provided to students with disabilities has to reflect the requirements of the IEP, the special education administrators and building level administrators should consider an instructional support model that increases opportunities for students with disabilities to receive instructional support from paraprofessionals in small groups versus one-to-one support. While one-to-one support is

important, students also benefit from both the learning and the social interactions that occur in small instructional groups.

### Transition

***The transition process at all levels needs to be improved.*** There was widespread consensus that current transition processes do not effectively support special education students' transition to the upper grade levels and to postsecondary options. Better communication at transition points and transition activities for special and general education staff, students, and parents are needed to facilitate understanding of the school programs at the next level, and enhance the transition process. Staff of the sending school need to develop a better understanding of the receiving school program to develop appropriate IEPs as students transition from one level to the next. Staff of the receiving school need to be involved earlier on in the collaborative development of the IEP to ensure better alignment with the academic and organizational demands students will experience.

### Inclusion in the General Education Classroom

***The special education administration should develop clearer guidelines for pull-out services, particularly at the elementary and high school levels where the pull-out model is prevalent.*** Both parent and staff feedback highlighted the need for more inclusion for some students.

### Reporting of Student Progress

***District and school administrators need to critically review the current system of reporting on special education student progress to provide clearer information to parents.*** The effectiveness of the school's report card or other progress reports in communicating the progress of students with disabilities was an area identified for improvement by parents.

### Professional Development

***APRS district and school administrators should collaboratively develop an integrated and long-range professional development plan for special and general education teachers and paraprofessionals that addresses the areas of need cited in this report.*** The district needs a more coherent vision and plan for professional development to ensure the best use of resources and to avoid fragmentation. Goals for professional development that reflect district priorities, as well as building-level priorities, should be defined and communicated to staff to foster a shared understanding of what is to be achieved through professional development. An approach that supports collaboration and co-teaching, differentiated instruction, and systematic intervention and progress monitoring should be emphasized.