

**Federal Way School District**  
**Superintendent**  
**Dr. Tammy Campbell**

**Evaluation of**  
**Special Education Services:**  
**Summary Report**

Submitted by the  
Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative  
Education Development Center  
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## Section A: Introduction

In Spring 2017, Federal Way Public Schools (FWPS) contracted with the Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative (the Collaborative) at Education Development Center (EDC) to conduct a comprehensive review of programs and services offered by the school district to students with disabilities. The district leadership asked for the review because they want to have information and recommendations to improve special education services. It is our hope that these observations and recommendations will enable the district to strategically progress to providing the highest level of service when supporting their students with disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

### Federal Way Public Schools

Federal Way Public Schools is a school district in King County, Washington, covering all of Federal Way and portions of Kent, Des Moines, Auburn, and the unincorporated census-designated areas of Lakeland North and Lakeland South, encompassing 35 square miles. The district has 38 schools, which include 21 elementary schools, 2 K–8 schools, 6 middle schools, 4 high schools and 5 specialized schools that offer alternate learning experiences. Federal Way enrolls approximately 24,000 students. Of those, 14.5% receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The racial makeup of the student population in Federal Way is 73.41% other than White. Students receiving free or reduced lunch comprise 56.3% of the population. Over 120 different languages are spoken by the district's families.<sup>2</sup>

### Urban Special Education Leadership Collaborative

The Collaborative, which is housed at EDC, is a national network of 100 school districts committed to improving outcomes for students with disabilities and other culturally and linguistically diverse learners. In addition to over 20 years of experience in providing leadership development and networking opportunities to its membership of special and general education administrators, the Collaborative has organized and delivered technical assistance to more than 50 local education agencies and state departments of education. The Collaborative approaches its work as a “critical friend” by asking probing questions, examining data through multiple lenses, and offering concrete recommendations with a full appreciation of what is already in place and working well. The goal of this technical assistance work is to assist education agencies in their efforts to improve outcomes and opportunities for students with disabilities and other culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

The Collaborative's understanding of special education stems from IDEA, which states that special education services are to provide children with disabilities a “free and appropriate public education” in the “least restrictive environment” to prepare them for “further education, employment and independent living.” In addition, IDEA “ensure(s) that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected.” Dr. Thomas Hehir, who was

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<sup>1</sup> For a list and description of Collaborative team members, see Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> From Federal Way Public Schools “District Profile” on the district website: <https://www.fwps.org/Page/2612>. Note, the numbers listed here differ slightly from our analysis of 2016-2017 student-level data.

responsible for the most sweeping updates of IDEA in 1997, has stated, and we affirm, that "special education is meant to minimize the impact of disability and maximize the opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in general education in their natural community" (Hehir, 2005). Further, as the law is clear that students should remain in the educational environment they would be in if they did not have a disability and removal from this environment must be justified, we work with the assumption that "special education is a service, not a place."

In response to the school district's request for a program and service delivery review, the Collaborative organized a team of experienced educational leaders to identify organizational, programmatic, policy, procedural, resource allocation, and service delivery improvements that the district might implement to enhance student outcomes, address gaps in achievement for students with disabilities, and conform to standards of contemporary best practice.

### Methodology

In order to conduct this study, we collected district, state, and national data; examined district documentation; interviewed approximately 100 Central Office and school-level staff and families; and visited six schools. We communicated with staff and families via email and also conducted a survey for staff and families, which received 306 responses. We collected and analyzed our data during the spring of 2018. While our interviews and focus groups occurred during this time, the quantitative data we collected represented the 2016-2017 school year. As such, the data represented a snapshot of special education at that time.

### Organization of Report

We have organized this report to move from general education to special education as it is our belief that because special education is a service, the stronger the district's general education practices, the stronger the district's special education practices. We want those reading this report to focus first on general education. Further, districts are required to support all students in meeting their academic standards and in building systems of tiered support. The first tier lays the foundation for the second and third tiers and, therefore, must not only be strong but purposeful in including students with disabilities.

## Section B: Strengths of the System

1. The district has focused on developing and implementing a guaranteed and viable curriculum.
2. The district reports high rates of students of color in advanced placement courses.
3. The district has been engaged in its second year of conducting racial equity work.
4. The district has revamped partnership with the Federal Way police force to improve collaborative structures,
5. English language arts (ELA) and math curriculum guides have been developed to ensure consistency and high-quality instruction for all students in the district.

6. The Office of Student Support Services has written and made accessible standard operating procedures.

## Section C: District Organization

Observation 1. District Mission: Focus on “High Expectations, High Support, and No Excuses”  
*Federal Way has a mission focused on high expectations for all students; however, the vision for special education and how it would align to the district vision is unclear.*

*Recommendation 1: Student Support Services must go through a process to align the work of the department to the district’s mission and strategic plan with a focus on high expectations for and educational outcomes of students with disabilities.*

Observation 2. District Organization: Structure and Communication

*Federal Way Public Schools’ organizational structure limits collaboration among district departments and communication pathways between the district and schools. In general, staff expressed restrictions in their ability to communicate freely and to act decisively.*

*Recommendation 2: The district must develop structures to allow for greater collaboration and communication between Teaching for Learning and Student Support Services to better enable timely and actionable decision-making.*

Observation 3. Student Support Services Organization: Structure and Communication

*Student Support Services’ organizational structure does not provide consistent and clear support at the district level and timely customer services for both school staff and families.*

*Recommendation 3: Student Support Services needs to develop proactive structures and systems to anticipate and address the complex needs of schools.*

Observation 4. Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS): “Guaranteed and viable curriculum”

*Federal Way Public Schools has started the process of developing an MTSS framework focusing on Tier 1 core academics, known as “guaranteed and viable curriculum.” While positive, without a focus on universal design for learning for all students and tiered strategies to remove barriers to access and provide specially designed instructional supports, many students with disabilities are not succeeding.*

*Recommendation 4: Federal Way must build capacity within the MTSS framework to meet diverse academic and behavioral needs of all students by integrating universal design for learning and tiered strategies to removing barriers to access.*

## Section D: Students with Disabilities

### Observation 5. Students with Disabilities: Demographics

*The percent of students with disabilities in Federal Way is comparable to state and national percentages; however, Black, Hispanic, and students who reported two or more races are more likely to be classified as having a disability.*

*Recommendation 5. Examine and update current evaluation and classification policies and practices to ensure fidelity, and track data disaggregated by race/ethnicity.*

### Observation 6. Students with Disabilities: Academic Achievement

*Students with disabilities in Federal Way are graduating at rates comparable to state and national numbers; however, they are reaching levels of proficiency in math and ELA at significantly lower rates than their peers without disabilities.*

*Recommendation 6: Create and maintain a sense of urgency in improving student outcomes for all students, and especially for student with disabilities.*

### Observation 7. Students with Disabilities: Social Emotional Learning

*The district is in its second year of PBIS implementation; however, students with disabilities are experiencing disproportionate rates of disciplinary actions*

*Recommendation 7: Federal Way must continue to implement PBIS with a focus on developing social-emotional supports and decreasing the disproportionality of disciplinary actions for students with disabilities.*

## Section E: Special Education Supports and Services

### Observation 8. Special Education Supports and Services: Educational Environment

*Special education supports and services are developed with a focus on district-defined programs and schedules rather than on the individual student's educational needs.*

*Recommendation 8: Federal Way must move toward a system focused on addressing students' unique needs and prioritizing providing services in a general education class in the student's home school.*

### Observation 9. Special Education Supports and Services: Accessing Core Curriculum

*Special education supports and services lack a focus on access to and success in core curriculum.*

*Recommendation 9: Federal Way must develop multiple points of access and tiered supports to provide students with access to the general education curriculum.*

Observation 10. Special Education Supports and Services: Specially Designed Instruction  
*Special education supports and services lack focus and clarity as to what is specially designed instruction.*

*Recommendation 10: Student Support Services in collaboration with Teaching for Learning must develop a system for providing specially designed instruction that meet individual student needs.*

Observation 11. Special Education Supports and Services: Staffing  
*Current structures and staffing models result in an overreliance on para-educators as opposed to highly qualified special education teachers.*

*Recommendation 11: Assure appropriate deployment and use of teachers and para-educators.*

Observation 12. Professional Development: Supporting All Staff  
*In order to facilitate the changes required for the improvements listed in this report, professional development is needed for special and general education teachers, educational assistants, and other school- and district-level staff to design and implement high-quality instruction that aligns to the district vision of high expectations for all students.*

*Recommendation 12: Provide professional development to all staff that is focused on the MTSS framework using an approach incorporating universal design for learning for developing instruction.*