

**Q & A's from IPSN PTA meeting with Dr. Daeschner
Feb. 5, 12008**

Q: I heard a rumor from 2 separate people over the weekend that the target number of teaching assistants per school was going to be 3? Is that true?

A: No, there is no set target number. The resources allocated to each building are determined by the needs of the students and with input of the building principal and team. Each building has its own unique needs, so a set target number could not apply.

Q: Due to my experience at school, the district is lacking certified Wilson instructors. Will District 204 ever hire certified Wilson instructors? How often is District 204 reviewing the reading resources available to the District as a whole? Also, how often does the District review the spelling curriculum?

A: The district currently employs staff certified in Wilson Language Training. This staff provides training for implementation of Wilson, which is only one of several reading interventions offered in the district. Ongoing staff development in all interventions is a priority, as teachers leave our system or move to other positions over time. The district continues its commitment to find effective ways to provide timely and targeted staff development. Curriculum/Instruction and Student Services continue to collaborate in an ongoing review of research based interventions across grade levels. Other curriculum review occurs on a scheduled basis through Curriculum/Instruction.

Q: We have a special needs child who is currently receiving services in home. Will this service still be provided? How will change in special education affect us?

A: The IEP team will continue to determine the appropriate services for a child, and the district will continue to support these decisions. In extenuating circumstances such as may exist with your child, services may be provided outside the school setting. This will not be impacted by the considerations currently under review.

Q: What is the status/future of the gifted programs in D204? Do these fall under special education as well?

A: These programs do not fall under special education in the state of Illinois.

Q: When will the superintendent make a decision? How will changes be announced or communicated to the special education parents?

A: Information regarding any changes in a building's service delivery or practices will come through your home school. If there are district wide changes, these will be communicated through various means, in an effort to reach all those involved. We will continue to be available through the IPSN PTA for questions, clarifications, and dialogue.

Q: What kind of special education training and development is planned for teachers going forward?

A: Each principal will complete a review of the status of needs in their respective buildings, and will participate in prioritizing the needs of their staff. This could include disability awareness, strategies and supports, and differentiation of instruction. We will also work with the teacher's union in finding opportunities for ongoing training and education on the specific needs of our students with disabilities. We recognize that this is an effort that is continual and requires ongoing attention.

Q: Is the district looking into the after high school STEPS program for those 18-22 years old?

A: There is a teacher group currently reviewing our community based transition program (STEPS) and ways to expand our transition service options for qualified students. We also regularly meet with representatives of local districts and our community service providers to exchange ideas on this issue, as it is a priority for all that comes with some degree of challenge.

Q: How and when will the pilot schools be chosen? What type of pilot programs are you looking at? Will they be different at each pilot school?

A: There are a variety of factors being considered in the selection of the schools initially involved in this effort. The district administration retains the right to select these schools, with consideration of the variety of student need, continuity of building leadership, and expressed desire to work through the process. We intend to select buildings that have differences in needs and challenges. While all buildings have many similarities in student needs, each is unique as well.

The next step of this effort is to provide each building with guiding principles for developing their special education delivery structure. The district continues to be committed to an inclusive philosophy. This works well with our current intervention structure, which targets more direct skill instruction when needed. For the majority of our students, we believe increasing opportunities for direct instruction to supplement the core classroom instruction will be very effective in addressing achievement needs. For some, there may be a need for more parallel curriculum or alternative (life skills) instruction. As always, this is determined through the IEP team process based on individual student needs. This may mean changes in the development of caseloads, limiting the span of grade levels in a special educator's schedule, sharing of roles, opportunities for co-teaching or collaborative lesson development, or increased training in specific interventions. Given these considerations, the plan could look somewhat different in each building based on their current status and needs.

Q: When will the parent focus groups be formed? How can I be involved in those?

A: We will be setting this up within the next month as a part of the ongoing nature of this effort. While we would love to include all who are interested in participating, we also need to have this forum represent the diversity of our student needs. As such, we will need to make sure that representation is somewhat equalized. More information will be coming out on this effort.

Q: You mentioned that much of the teaching is being done by aides or teachers who do not know the curriculum as well as the regular education teachers. Is this the reasons for the discrepancy in test scores?

A: This is one possible factor or hypothesis, knowing that there are probably multiple factors. It is one, though, that we do have ability to directly address. Finding more ways to have teachers working with each other can only benefit our students' access to the general curriculum and instruction, and the use of the supports and strategies they require across teachers. Both our general education and special education teachers have knowledge to share in the effort to increase our student achievement. Students' needs are best met when everyone shares in ownership of the concern and the solution.

Q: Are there plans to hire more aides? Or will we be giving additional training to the aides we currently have?

A: Given the difficulty we have experienced in hiring and retaining teaching assistants over the past few years, we believe we have reached the tipping point in the effective use of this valuable resource. This is consistent with what has been found in similar educational settings across the country. By identifying the appropriate level of support for our students, we will be able to more appropriately train and supervise staff. We believe we need to be more prescriptive about the use of our teaching assistant (or paraprofessional) support, not only for consistency of hiring and training, but also for the development of independent skills in our students. If we have not appropriately faded direct support to our students over the course of their school career, we have unintentional increased dependence on adult assistance and prompting, which is a concern for their success in post-secondary settings.

Q: (paraphrase of comment) Is the district moving from a more inclusive district towards what appears to be more of a mainstreaming model? Will there be more self-contained classrooms?

A: The district has always provided the full continuum of programming while maintaining an inclusive philosophy. This has been misunderstood by some of our public and staff. We have never claimed to be a full inclusion district. If some have stated this, they are mistaken. In the determination of a student's program, we require our student teams to first consider the student's presence and participation in their grade level classroom and what it would take to support this option if appropriate. For less than 10% of our students with special needs, however, other settings, supports, and services may best meet their needs at this time. Those options may be present in their home school or they may be available in another district school. At this time, we do not project an increase in our self-contained classrooms. We do not foresee a change in the value we place on more inclusive practices or in the ongoing evolution of using "what works". Our educational practices do need to be responsive to what the data tells us, what practical knowledge tells us, and what research tells us. So even while we may continue to adjust and address our structure of delivering services, we continue to value each student's membership in our district and school community regardless of location of services.