

Financing Special Education in New Jersey

New Jersey School Boards Association

September 2007

Results of the Survey of Districts

Researchers developed a 15-item survey (Appendix A-1) that was sent to all school districts in New Jersey and returned by 51% overall. In general, special education administrators completed the surveys. Returns among the three regions of the state (north, central and south) varied slightly, from 49% to 53%. Among the various school district operating types, the returns ranged from 42% to 62%, with the rate of response greatest among smaller elementary districts and lowest among larger K-12 districts. (Only 6% of the charter schools responded, so they were excluded from analysis.) The return rates by district factor groups (DFG) – i.e., an indicator of socio-economic status ranging from A (lowest) to J (highest) – ranged from 43% in the B and CD districts to 62% in the FG districts. In both DFG A and DFG I, 46% of the districts returned the surveys; 52% to 55% of the districts in the remaining DFGs responded. The high return rates provided an ample representation of each group and the state as a whole.

Districts were also asked to nominate exemplary programs. These programs were visited and evaluated. The descriptions of these programs are included elsewhere in this report.

Item 1 – Reasons for High Cost of Special Education: The survey asked school districts to rate factors that contribute to the increase in special education costs on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing the most significant factor and 5 the least significant. Researchers provided a list of 10 specific factors, as well as an 11th category, “other reasons,” in which respondents could list and rate factors not included in the list.

“Personnel,” “transportation” and “out-of-district placements” were given most significance, with average ratings of 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4, respectively. They were followed by “increase in number of students with disabilities,” “related services,” “preschool programs” and “other reasons,” each of which was rated 2.5 or 2.6. The “other reasons” mentioned most often were autism services, increase in the severity of disabilities, legal fees, professional consultations and extended school year. “Due process,” which was one of the ten factors specified on the list, ranked last among the cost factors at 3.7. Nonetheless, due process was a frequently listed concern in separate survey questions addressing needed regulatory change and the cost, financing and effectiveness of programs. Due process involves parental rights to challenge a student’s individual education program. The ranking of topics was similar among the state’s three geographic regions. Rankings among school district operating types and DFGs were similar to statewide totals, with some stronger opinions about “transportation” and “personnel” indicated by the larger K-12 districts and in district factor groups DFG GH, I and J. Concern over personnel costs among the latter districts is validated by the state’s Certificated Staff Report, which reports higher salaries in the three highest DFGs.

Item 2 – Impact of Three-Year Age Range: Over 50% of the responding districts indicated that a negative financial and/or administrative impact would result from a regulatory three-year age-range limit on students who could be placed in the same elementary special classes. (The regulation was to have taken effect in the fall of 2007, but has been voided by the state’s Council on Local Mandates as an unconstitutional, unfunded state mandate following challenges by local school districts, which were supported by NJSBA and other organizations). Districts most frequently reported that additional staff (62), classes (48) or facilities (12) would result from the regulation or that it would have created scheduling difficulties (28). Responses were similar across regions, operating types and DFGs. Districts provided extensive comments explaining their responses. (See Appendix A-2.) Forty-eight percent of the responding districts indicated that the impact of new regulation would have been negligible.

Item 3 – Impact of the Single Subject Limit on Resource Programs: The impact of the elimination of multiple subjects taught in resource programs during a single period was considered negligible by 194, or 66%, of the respondents. The remaining districts reported that they would have to add classes and staff and would have scheduling difficulties. This held true across regions, operating types and DFGs. Districts’ extensive comments are included in Appendix A-3.

Item 4 and 15 – Suggestions for Regulations and Other Concerns: In separate queries, the survey asked school districts to identify (a) changes in state regulations that would better control special education costs without affecting program quality and availability and (b) other concerns about the cost, financing and effectiveness of special education programs. These two items elicited similar comments, so responses were combined. (See Appendix A-4.) Primary concerns were the high cost of out-of-district placements (tuition - 43%; and transportation - 13%) and inadequate state and federal funding (44%). Next most frequently cited were the issues of age range, class size, due process and burdensome paperwork. These concerns were similar across regions, with class size and due process being more prominent in the north than in the other areas of the state. In addition, K-6 and medium-sized K-12 districts cited due process and funding most frequently. Concerns were similar across all DFGs.

Item 5 – Current Shared Services: The survey asked respondents to indicate services they currently share with other districts and the structure used to share those services. Transportation was mentioned most frequently (84 times), followed by related services (e.g., physical therapy, speech and occupational therapy – 76 times) and child study team services (40). Respondents indicated special classes, including autistic programs (classes, Applied Behavior Analysis programs, home instruction), 20 times. Other services cited were professional development (14) and preschool services (12). Shared services were similar across regions. Child study team services were mentioned frequently in K-6 districts and small and medium K-8 districts. The K-12 and secondary districts cited special classes most prominently. Child study team services represented the shared service listed most frequently by DFG A and B districts while, in DFG CD districts, it was the second most cited shared service. DFG J districts most often shared autistic programs and special classes. The other DFGs listed transportation first.

The types of providers that delivered shared programs were local school districts (163) and either educational services commissions or special services school districts (105). Regional consortiums and jointure commissions were cited 53 and 19 times, respectively. The structure for sharing services varied among the state's three regions. Respondents from northern New Jersey indicated that shared services were most frequently provided by local school districts or through regional consortiums. In central New Jersey, respondents most often identified shared service efforts with other local school districts or through educational services commissions/special services school districts. In the south, educational services commissions/special services school districts were the most common vehicles for providing shared services (56); local school districts were a close second (51). Generally, responses appeared to relate to the availability of certain types of shared service providers in the vicinity of the school district, rather than to the district's grade organization or socio-economic status. However, there was a notable contrast in the responses of the DFG J and DFG A districts. DFG J districts listed efforts with other school districts most frequently, with only one reference to educational services commission/special services school district. DFG A districts most often cited educational services commissions/special services school districts.

Item 6 – Potential Shared Services: Future areas of shared services include related services (cited by 118 districts); special classes, especially those for low-incidence disabled and autistic (102); transportation (43); and child study team services, (30). Twenty-six districts cited professional development. Behaviorist and Applied Behavior Analysis services were frequently cited (18 and 15 times, respectively). Related services (e.g., counseling, occupational therapy, and physical therapy) topped the list for each district operating type and each DFG.

Item 7 – Impediments to Shared Services: Scheduling (75), transportation (62), supervision (52) and cost allocation (40) were cited most frequently as difficulties in sharing services. Balancing needs (28), space constraints (19) and planning-training (18) were indicated as well. The impediments that would be very difficult to overcome were control issues, such as local loyalty and territoriality (38), reluctance to share (17), and parent rights perceptions (12). Six districts mentioned the resistance to share with other socio-economic populations. The list of impediments by region is in Appendix A-5.

Item 8 – Impact of NCLB Highly Qualified Teacher Requirement: Eighty-two districts said that there would be no impact or minimal impact from the Highly Qualified Teacher provision of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The provision requires that teachers be properly certified in the subject area and grade level at which they are employed. Another 86 districts reported that the provision would present hiring difficulties in special education, 38 reported scheduling difficulties, and 39 said the provision would require more professional development. K-6 and K-8 districts most frequently indicated that the provision would have no impact or minimal impact, while K-12 and secondary districts cited hiring difficulties as their primary concern. DFG A districts reported that they would have professional development and scheduling difficulties. Some districts in the other DFGs indicated hiring difficulties, but a large number of these districts reported that there would be no impact from the provision.

Respondents' comments on the impact of the Highly Qualified Teacher requirements are in Appendix A-6.

Item 9 - Ratios of Students with Disabilities to Teachers and to Aides by Type of Special Education Program: Responses to this inquiry were limited because district data do not usually record staffing in such detail. The average student-teacher and student-aide ratios reported by districts that had the data were as follows:

Program	Students to Teachers	Students to Aides
Supplementary Aids and Services	4.6	3.1
In-Class Support	9.3	6.3
Pull-Out Resource	10.2	24.7
Special Class	8.3	6.3

Use caution in interpreting the data, especially for Supplementary Aids and Services since the definition may encompass a disparate array of services among districts.

Twenty-five of the districts that took part in the survey had difficulty responding to this question. Even districts that responded had difficulty reporting accurately the number of students, teachers and aides by program in every instance.

By Region Average numbers of students per teachers and students per aides were greater in the northern and central regions than in the south for Supplementary Aids and Services and In-Class Support. Regional differences in the student-teacher ratios were not significant for Pull-Out Resource programs and were small for Special Classes. Regional differences were also small in the student-aide ratios for Pull-Out Resource programs. However, for Special Classes, there were more significant differences in the student-aide ratio, with 9.4 students per aid in the north, 6 in the south, and 4.5 in the central region.

By Operating Type With a few exceptions, the numbers of students per teacher and students per aide increase with grade level and enrollment size in all four programs: Supplementary Aids and Services; In-Class Support; Pull-Out Resource programs, and Special Classes.

By Socio-Economic Status For all four programs, student-teacher ratios and student aid ratios varied considerably among the eight district factor groups but did not necessarily trend with increases or decreases in socio-economic status.

Item 10 – Proportion of School Day Devoted to Special Education Services. Districts were asked to indicate the number of students receiving services in each of the four program areas – Supplementary Aids and Services; In-Class Support; Pull-Out Resource programs, and Special Classes – and the number of class periods devoted to those services each day. The researchers hoped this question would elicit more detail on the time devoted to special education, which could range from one period to all day. However, districts do not generally maintain data in such a manner, in fact, 72 districts were unable to report any data at all on the number of students receiving services by period.

One-third of the students in Supplementary Aids and Services receive it for only one period a day; however, 22% receive SAS all day. The next most common allotment of time is three or four periods a day (reported by 13% and 11% of districts, respectively). Students receiving In-Class support are evenly divided, with about 20% each receiving it for one, two, three or four periods a day. The remainder receiving In-Class support for five to seven periods. Most students (36%) in Pull-Out Resource programs receive the services for two periods a day. About 20% each receive Pull-Out Resource services for one, three or four periods. Students in Special Classes typically get four or more periods of service, with 44% receiving service all day. The percentages of students by program by period are reported below:

Percentage of Students in Each Program By the Number of Periods in that Program				
Periods	Supplementary Aids and Services	In-class Support	Pull-out Resource	Special Class
1	34	19	17	4
2	9	24	36	2
3	13	21	20	7
4	11	20	19	16
5	5	6	4	17
6	6	3	3	10
7	22	6	1	44
Sum	100	100	100	100

This statewide data should be regarded as preliminary and interpreted with caution. Additional study on this question may be needed.

Item 11 – Related Services. The survey asked respondents to provide the number of minutes per week that a student receives various related services. Also reported was the hourly rate paid by the districts if the service was contracted to an outside provider. In addition to counseling, occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech-language services, districts could also indicate “other” related services. Applied behavior analysis for students with autism was the most common “other” service cited. The next most common “other” services were personal aides, nursing services, and orientation-mobility training. The latter is more a program than a service related to a program; however, it was included here along with other types listed in Appendix A-7.

Related Service	Minutes per Week	Hourly Rate (if contracted)
Counseling	39	\$121
Occupational Therapy	52	\$75
Physical Therapy	53	\$78
Speech-Language Services	60	\$73
Other	359	\$83

Counseling was provided the fewest number of minutes (39) per week compared to almost an hour each for occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech. Most counseling services were provided by in-district staff (89%) as were speech-language services (71%). Most districts contract for occupational therapy (69%) and physical therapy (84%) at average costs of \$75 per hour and \$78 per hour, respectively. Districts that contracted for counseling paid an average of \$120 per hour. The average cost of contracted speech services was \$83 per hour.

By Region There were only small regional differences in minutes of service provided per week. The rates paid for contracted services were generally less expensive in the south than in the northern and central regions. For example, occupational therapy averaged \$69 per hour in the south, compared to \$75 to \$80 in northern and central New Jersey.

By Operating Type and Socio-Economic Status There were differences in the minutes provided per week for occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech according to district operating type and district factor group. Generally, the amount of time provided increased as grade levels increased. For example, the time provided for counseling ranged from 34 minutes per week in K-6 districts to 47 in secondary school-only districts. Speech-language services increased from 53 minutes in K-6 districts to 62 minutes in secondary school-only districts. The per-hour costs for occupational therapy and physical therapy were about \$70 in all district operating types, except for the largest K-12 and secondary districts where they rose to \$80-\$87. Contracted speech rates varied from \$55 to \$100 without a pattern related to operating type. Occupational therapy, physical therapy and speech rates showed a tendency to increase along with district factor group (socio-economic status).

Item 12 – Home Instruction. The survey asked districts to indicate how much they spend on special education home instruction. Researchers included this question because the information from the state’s Audit Summary did not differentiate between home instruction for students with disabilities and that for general education students. Data provided by districts were extremely limited or inaccurate and could not be used.

Item 13 – Transportation for Students with Disabilities. The data provided by districts was extremely limited or appeared to be inaccurate. The state’s Audit Summary and Transportation reports, however, did provide information on transportation for special education that was of use for this research project.

Item 14 – Assistive Technology. Assistive technology consists of electronic and mechanical devices used to enhance instruction. The most commonly cited assistive technology devices were FM amplification systems or phonic ears, recorded books, computers-software, writing software, calculators, and augmentative communication. The types of devices cited were generally consistent across regions, district operating types and district factor groups. The numbers of students reported as using these devices were greatest for calculators (8,442) and computers (5,550), with another 1,000 to 2,000 students reported as using FM systems, recorded books and writing software. The list of all reported assistive technology devices is in Appendix A-8.