

PUBLIC SCHOOL

# GETTING IT RIGHT

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**School-Level Implementation of  
New York City Department of Education  
Special Education Reform**



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## About Us

Perry and Associates, Inc. (P&A) is a national consulting firm that acts on its commitment to social justice and equity by assisting district, school, and teacher leaders improve the academic achievement and performance of all students. P&A has extensive experience in expanding the instructional leadership of district and school leaders, and designing, implementing, and aligning systems of support that contribute to raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps. P&A senior associates, assisting districts across the country, are practitioners with current and/or recent experience working in districts and schools.

For more than a decade, P&A's research-based and experience-driven methods have produced results in improving student achievement within large urban districts. P&A has worked with districts and schools on behalf of state departments of education, and several national foundations and reform support organizations including the Panasonic Foundation, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, the Gates Foundation and the Stupski Foundation.

The P&A team is led by its Executive Director, Dr. George S. Perry, Jr., who is the primary author of the first report in this study from August 2012, *Educating All Children Well: Special Education Reform in New York City Public Schools* has responsibility for coordinating all aspects of the project. Dr. Perry has designed and executed studies on district level initiatives in Chicago (IL), in Long Beach (CA) and Jefferson County (KY) on behalf of Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and in Boston on behalf of the Panasonic Foundation. Dr. Carol Wright, Associate Director, has responsibility for overseeing the project's research design and methods including creating data collection protocols, supervising the group of assistant researchers, and creating and managing the research database for analysis. Nancy Baez, Project Manager, has responsibility for logistical planning and monitoring of all components of the project, facilitating communications and outreach, and managing administrative duties including data collection coordination and processing. Dr. Perry, Dr. Wright and Mrs. Baez shared responsibility for data analysis, and authored this report collaboratively.

Assistance in quantitative analysis was provided by Henry Park. Most of the 25 school visits were conducted by Research Assistants Dr. Liza Pappas, Dr. Joseph Nelson, and Annette Kunin, as well as Dr. Perry and Dr. Wright. Adam Briones and Hannah Baker assisted with coding in the software database. All of the 11 focus group interviews were conducted by Dr. Perry and Dr. Wright with assistance from Mrs. Baez.

## About The Fund for Public Advocacy

The Fund for Public Advocacy was formed by the Office of the New York City Public Advocate and incorporated in 2002. The mission of the Fund for Public Advocacy is to serve and promote the public good by engaging New York City residents in policy making and programs that make government more responsive, accountable, innovative and transparent. The Fund for Public Advocacy, affiliated with the Office of the New York City Public Advocate, is an independent non-profit organization created to aid and advance critical New York City civic issues.

Since its establishment, the Fund has supported initiatives to help New Yorkers receive necessary services and have a voice in shaping policies that affect their lives. Ensuring fair and equal access to government resources is one of society's greatest challenges to overcoming and breaking the cycles of poverty. As a 501 (c)3, the Fund has the ability to develop and design projects to achieve the goals of civic engagement, social justice and equity to raise private funds to execute/implement these projects. Projects of the Fund for Public Advocacy include an Immigrant Services Manual, Immigrant Small Business Connection, Asian Pacific New Yorkers Count Report, 2013 GED Campaign to Finish and NYC Public Education Parent and Community Engagement.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, the second in our three-year study of Special Education Reform, examines Reform implementation in schools. It is not uncommon for a well-intentioned system-wide policy to be stopped in its tracks at the school door. *This is not the case with Special Education Reform in New York City.* As our findings indicate, Special Education Reform, one of the most ambitious and necessary system-wide initiatives, is taking hold in schools.

### BACKGROUND

In 2010, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) announced its intention to begin a system-wide effort to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. For many, DOE's announcement was long overdue. New York City Public Schools lag behind the nation in addressing concerns about access to rigorous instruction and poor graduation rates of students with disabilities. The results are that only 31 percent of students with disabilities graduate from high school, far below the New York State Department of Education target of 53 percent or higher<sup>1</sup> and the graduation rates for students with disabilities who are educated in self-contained classrooms has been as low as 4.4 percent in past years<sup>2</sup>. Isolating students with disabilities is not working.

### THE REPORT

The purpose of the DOE's Special Education Reform is to ensure students with disabilities graduate high school prepared for success in college, careers and independent living. Our first study considered the DOE's expectations and plans to establish Special Education Reform as a system-wide priority<sup>3</sup>. In *Getting It Right*, our study examines and describes the Reform from the school perspective. The findings describe both progress made and challenges faced in the first three years of implementation. Research evidence and recommendations are intended to support DOE and schools in strengthening and implementing programs, processes and practices that will help students with disabilities graduate high school prepared for college, careers and independent living.

*Getting It Right* includes 35 findings and 22 recommendations based on the interviews with 453 administrators, teachers, parents and students in the schools that have been at the forefront of the Reform for all three years. The findings validate and debunk the many anecdotes that may be heard about Reform implementation. The findings are organized to address each of the DOE's Reform goals, and key themes that emerged during our study. Each of the findings is followed by a detailed explanation that includes illustrative comments by interviewees.



<sup>1</sup> New York State Education Department, Special Education School District Data Profile for New York City Public Schools for 2011-12

<sup>2</sup> ARISE Coalition report: Educate! Include! Respect! A Call for School System Reform to Improve the Educational Experiences of Students with Disabilities in New York City. A Report Issued by the ARISE Coalition. [www.arisecoalition.org](http://www.arisecoalition.org), (September 2009) p. 18

<sup>3</sup> Perry and Associates, Inc. August 2012. *Educating All Students Well: Special Education Reform in New York City Public Schools* <http://advocate.nyc.gov/special-ed>

## **KEY FINDINGS**

In this executive summary, we condense and organize the findings into progress and challenges to provide readers with a sense of the schools' perspective on Reform implementation.

### **Progress**

Principals “got the message” from the DOE that they were expected to implement Special Education Reform and support inclusion, and they have taken specific actions to do so.

Principals and school staff express being well informed about the Reform's goals - including the push towards less restrictive environments, flexible scheduling, and general education inclusion. Messaging to principals was done early on.

Schools experiencing success in providing targeted, appropriate services make it a priority to know their students well.

Instructional strategies are changing to meet the needs of students with disabilities, while curriculum (content and difficulty level) remains the same as that of their non-disabled peers.

Schools that have high expectations and have intentionally created a college readiness culture report successfully graduating more students with disabilities admitted to college.

Overall, parents of students with disabilities are pleased with the quality of the home-school relationships, although they believe they need to “fight the system” on behalf of their children. Parent expectations vary by school level and grade. Parents have a positive opinion about schools or targeted programs that share a general philosophy of successful inclusion, have small classes or have a family-like feeling.

### **Challenges**

Only a few principals interviewed have used Special Education Reform as a means to transform their schools into places committed to educating all students to meet high standards.

Many administrators and teachers report they are modifying IEPs with the agreement of parents and offering comparable service plans based on what schools have available, not based on what the student truly needs.

Schools struggle with defining and distinguishing between when students need specialized services to change disruptive and dangerous behavior (linked to a special education classification such as an emotional disturbance) and when and how to discipline regardless of students' classification. IEP's are unclear on this issue.

Though Integrated Co-Teaching is the dominant service delivery model, schools struggle with implementing successful models of this classroom structure under day-to-day constraints faced by schools and co-teachers.

With some exceptions, negative stereotypes, beliefs and stigmas about special education present a significant challenge to serving students well in less restrictive environments.

Schools report inadequate funding levels and human resources necessary to ensure that each student's needs are met. They believe that the expectation for schools to meet Reform goals without adequate supports has been stressful and overwhelming for many, especially teachers who feel they will be blamed if Reform fails.

Many elementary and middle schools experience overcrowding, which they believe is due to the Home Zone provision. These schools are required to keep their current bused students and accept the students in their zone. Some schools struggle to prepare for the resulting programmatic changes. In particular, school psychologists are feeling overwhelmed by additional *Turning Five* evaluations.

Teachers and parents believe schools should integrate career pathways for students not ready for or interested in college following graduation.

Parents feel they have to be strong advocates for their children in order to get appropriate services in the school and the system as a whole. Parents believe their child's specific needs are not understood well enough and call for more training for school staff. While not specifically related to the Reform, parents also express a desire for supplemental activities such as music, art and sports.

## **THE REFORM**

Special Education Reform includes incentives, structures and an accountability system to move students from self-contained classrooms to a less restrictive environment to maximize time with their general education peers. Schools have responded by moving students in that direction. Concurrently, schools believe changes in the Department of Education's funding formula, intended to help schools rework special education programming, resulted in reduced resources to many schools. Consequently, schools do not feel adequately supported to meet reform goals in terms of budget, professional development, time, expertise, communications, SESIS and compliance. The structures created to encourage and ensure implementation are often misaligned, which threatens successful implementation of the Reform.

As important as the appropriate supports, however, is the social and interpersonal context of learning that exists alongside logistical changes. Whether the Reform will be strengthened or stifled going forward is contingent upon the capacity to adopt the necessary mindset as resources are allocated and received. For schools this means re-examining pedagogy, curriculum and expectations for, and interactions with, students. Change on the part of school staff in terms of attitudes, beliefs, expectations and practices is necessary in schools where this was not already present to establish a climate of effective and constructive collaboration. Adults in the school must embrace Reform goals, build trusting relationships, and create a supportive learning environment that can reduce bias and negative stereotypes about students with disabilities and students of color, positively influencing achievement outcomes. For the central office of the DOE, this means being aware of the necessity of fostering this context in schools for Reform success, and using that knowledge as an essential piece of their decision making in how they support their schools.

## **KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Getting It Right's* 22 recommendations are organized in the areas of (1) communications and messaging, (2) approach and attitudes about Reform, (3) professional development and learning, and (4) investments, supports and structures. Many recommendations indicate ways that current practices may be shifted or extended to better support Reform implementation. Some recommendations will require decisions to be made about refocusing time and resources from other programmatic areas at the system and school levels. There are a few recommendations that will require continuing and expanding funding to enhance implementation, at least in the short-term.

## **Communication and Messaging**

Among the recommendations, there are three related to DOE communication and messaging about Special Education Reform. The recommendations as a whole provide a multi-directional strategy that develops system-wide actions that address concerns about aligning expectations and messages, two-way communications from schools to DOE system leaders, and communications to facilitate learning of best practices across schools.

## **Approaches and Attitudes**

Six recommendations address the need to sustain and strengthen DOE's current efforts to increase access of students with disabilities to rigorous academic curriculum. These recommendations call for intentionally creating a culture of inclusion, engaging parents as partners, responding to schools that are struggling to meet students' needs, and holding schools accountable. Further, they recommend strengthening efforts to create college and career readiness cultures, as well as creating multiple pathways for post-secondary school success.

## **Professional Development and Learning**

There are six recommendations related to professional development and learning. The recommendations identify the specific audiences that should be the target of learning opportunities, including principals, school-based teams of teachers and paraprofessionals and psychologists. The specific areas of learning – specifically leadership best practices, Common Core Standards, differentiated instruction, classification of students with emotional disturbance, and racial and cultural biases – are recommended.

## **Investments, Supports and Structures**

Finally, there are seven recommendations for improving investments, support and structures necessary to achieve Reform implementation. The investments recommended include transition funding for schools moving students to less restrictive environments, expanded funding for positive behavior/discipline systems, continued funding for technology and interactive computer database, and school funding for music, arts, athletics and afterschool programs. Additional supports recommended include reinstating the special education coordinator position at all schools, and providing opportunities for Home Zone schools to pool resources to better address student needs.



## INTRODUCTION

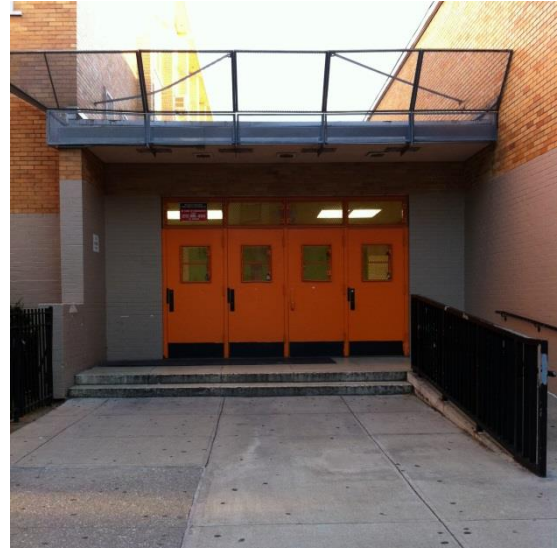
*Getting It Right*, the second in our three-year study of Special Education Reform, examines Reform implementation in schools. Schools are the places where policy and system-wide initiatives conceived by system leaders are defined, interpreted and realized. It is at the school level that policies come into contact with administrators and teachers who execute them, and students who are their ultimate beneficiaries. Research on leadership and student learning suggests that unless system and school leaders agree with the purposes of a reform and appreciate what is required to make it work, the chance of improving student learning is remote.<sup>4</sup>

To understand successes and challenges, we gathered evidence from the efforts of New York City Public Schools involved in Special Education Reform for three years as they define, interpret and implement the Reform. Schools have stories that are useful in understanding current system-level efforts and making adjustments in system-level policies and directives. We fully appreciate that there are strongly held and differing opinions about the Reform and its successes and challenges. We sought the opinions of the policy community, advocates, union and association leaders and parents in response to our first report and as we designed our school level report. We may disappoint readers who believe that the Reform is completely misguided and is only meeting resistance at the school level. Likewise, we may disappoint readers who believe that the Reform is on track to full implementation.

Our findings suggest there is much support for the Reform among principals, teachers, parents and students. Yet, the stories and successes vary among schools pioneering the Reform for three years. Further, the Reform is struggling with “growing pains” as school-level changes occur. We conclude that the commitment to Special Education Reform should not waiver. However, to be successful actions must be taken to drive implementation deeper in the right direction and improve services to students.

## THE NEED FOR REFORM

In 2010, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) announced its intention to begin a district-wide effort to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. For many, DOE’s announcement was long overdue. New York City Public Schools lag behind the nation in addressing concerns about access to rigorous instruction and poor graduation rates of students with disabilities. The numbers are staggering. There are 174,000 students with disabilities enrolled in New York City Public Schools<sup>5</sup>. 36 percent of these students spend more than 60 percent of their school day in settings separate from other students<sup>6</sup>. At the start of the Reform, many of these students spent their day in self-contained classrooms that have a special education teacher, a paraprofessional and 12-to-15 students. These students receive all of their instruction in that one classroom and do not have access to general education teachers and non-disabled peers who can help them learn. Students in self-contained



<sup>4</sup> Leithwood, K., Louis, K.S., Anderson, S. and Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education [www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledgecenter/schoolleadership/keyresearch/howleadershipinfluencesstudentlearning](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledgecenter/schoolleadership/keyresearch/howleadershipinfluencesstudentlearning).

<sup>5</sup> New York State Education Department, Special Education School District Data Profile for New York City Public Schools for 2011-12

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

classrooms do not perform well academically. New York State, which is heavily impacted by New York City, ranks 51<sup>st</sup> in the nation in the amount of time its students with disabilities spend isolated from other students during the school day<sup>7</sup>.

The results are that only 31 percent of students with disabilities graduate from high school, far below the New York State Department of Education target of 53 percent or higher<sup>8</sup> and the graduation rates for students with disabilities who are educated in self-contained classrooms has been as low as 4.4 percent in past years<sup>9</sup>. Isolating students with disabilities is not working.

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<sup>7</sup> State comparison includes District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Source: [www.ideadata.org](http://www.ideadata.org), then IDEA data, part b, Educational Environment.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> ARISE Coalition report: Educate! Include! Respect! A Call for School System Reform to Improve the Educational Experiences of Students with Disabilities in New York City. A Report Issued by the ARISE Coalition. [www.arisecoalition.org](http://www.arisecoalition.org), (September 2009) p. 18

## ABOUT THIS STUDY

The New York City Department of Education's (DOE) Special Education Reform, a term used to describe the collective actions taken to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities, is an ambitious and complex system-wide initiative. The Reform is designed to address three system-wide goals:

- Build system-wide instructional and organization capacity at the central, network and school levels.
- Close the substantial achievement gap by providing students with disabilities increased access to and participation in the general education curriculum.
- Promote more flexible instructional programs by using innovative approaches and maximizing the flexibility within the Continuum of Services provided to students, and learn about these designs from schools.

The goals are to ensure that all students with disabilities:

1. have access to a rigorous academic curriculum and are held to high academic standards, enabling them to fully realize their potential and graduate prepared for independent living, college, and careers;
2. are taught in the "least restrictive environment" that is academically appropriate, and, as often as possible, alongside students without disabilities;
3. receive special education services that are targeted and provide the appropriate level of support throughout the school day; and
4. are able to attend their zoned schools or the school of their choice, while still receiving the supports they need to succeed<sup>10</sup>.

In September 2010, the DOE invited 10 Children First Networks and their member schools, to be the first to implement the Reform. These 260 schools became known as "Phase One Schools." During the 2010-11 and 2011-12 school years, Phase One schools began the process of changing their practices to meet the Reform's goals. Phase One continued through August 2012, at which time DOE required the Reform to be implemented by all New York City's more than 1,700 public schools.

In June 2011, Public Advocate Bill de Blasio and Chancellor Dennis Walcott agreed to collaborate in a study designed to inform the DOE's implementation of Special Education Reform, and charged Perry and Associates, Inc. (P&A) to conduct the study. From the beginning, the study was to be an independent, objective inquiry into DOE's efforts, with overview provided by Fund for Public Education. Both the Public Advocate and Chancellor agreed that Special Education Reform is important and necessary. Both parties also agreed that it is of first importance to *get implementation right*. This understanding has guided P&A's inquiry and conversations with Corinne Rello-Anselmi, the Deputy Chancellor of the Division of Students with Disabilities and English Language Learners, who is leading the Reform, and her senior staff. DOE has been collaborative, open and supportive, even when there have been differences in perspectives and/or disagreement. We recognize and applaud their commitment to the success of the Reform, and appreciate their support for the study. We also appreciate Deputy Chancellor Rello-Anselmi's

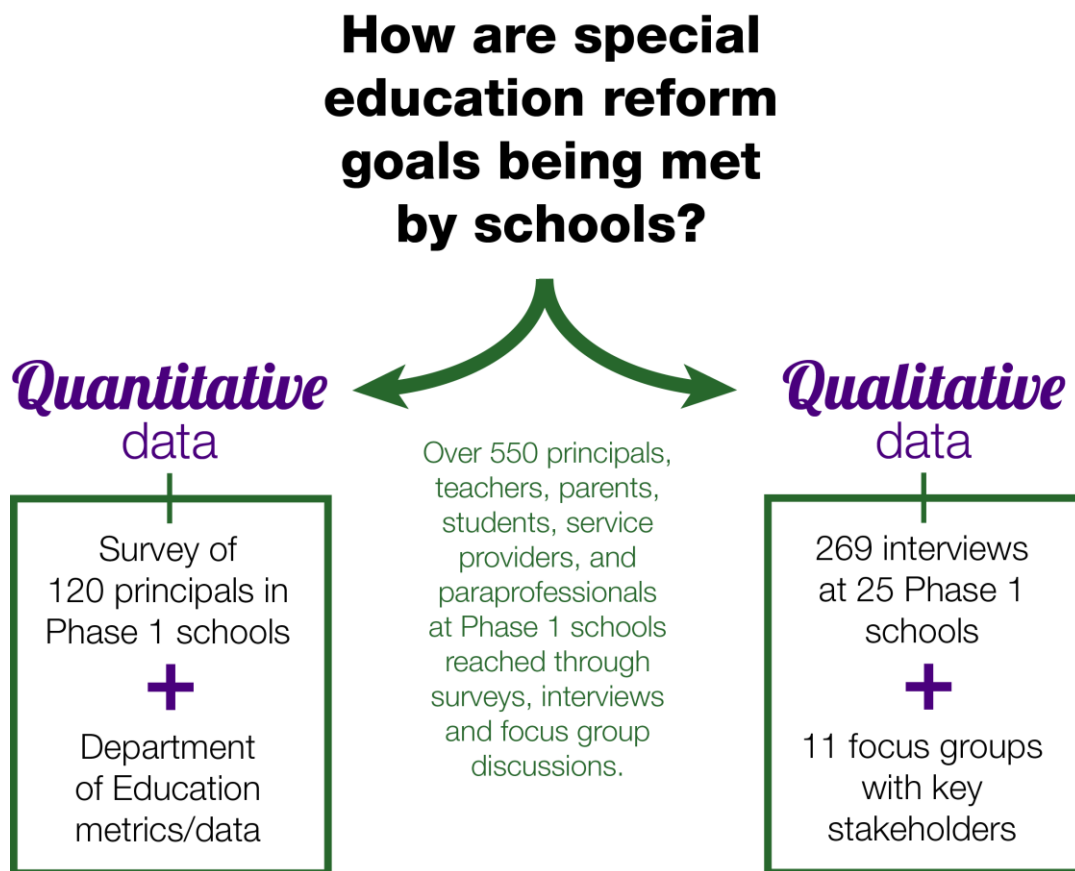
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<sup>10</sup> <http://intranet.nycboe.net/SpecialPopulations/SpecialEd/default.htm>

commitment to examine the themes emerging from our study, engage in thoughtful dialogue and use the data to inform their approaches and strategies.

*Educating All Students Well: Special Education Reform in New York City Public Schools*, the first report released in August 2012, provides a system-wide perspective on the Reform<sup>11</sup>. *Educating All Students Well* records and explains, from the perspective of system leaders, the purposes of the Reform and the actions taken at the system-level. The report provides the context and history of Special Education Reform and the implementation timeline. Further, the report chronicles DOE’s professional development and system-level support in the initial two years of the Reform.

This second report, *Getting It Right*, seeks to answer the question “what can we learn from schools about the successes and challenges in implementing the Reform goals?” Starting in September 2012, P&A conducted regular coordination meetings with the DOE’s Deputy Chancellor Rello-Anselmi and DOE staff to discuss the study design, and select and encourage principal and school participation. The study uses a multi-method design which concurrently employs quantitative and qualitative methods to provide information and analysis on Reform implementation. Our study asks questions about what happened and why and how it happened. For more information about our research design and methods see the Introduction to the Appendices.



<sup>11</sup>Perry and Associates, Inc. August 2012. *Educating All Students Well: Special Education Reform in New York City Public Schools* <http://advocate.nyc.gov/special-ed>



Data collection includes:

- In December 2012, P&A invited all principals of Phase One schools to participate in a survey about the status of implementation. 120 principals participated in the survey. The results were analyzed and presented to Deputy Chancellor Rello-Anselmi and DOE staff in January 2013, and sent to all principals of Phase One schools<sup>12</sup>.
- Quantitative data was analyzed on the achievement and performance of students with disabilities system-wide and for all Phase One schools.
- From February through May 2013, P&A visited and conducted confidential in-depth interviews in 25 Phase One schools, which are about ten percent of all Phase One schools. The schools selected were representative of the total population of Phase One schools geographically and by school level.
- From March through May 2013, P&A conducted 11 focus group interviews. The focus group participants – principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers - were selected almost exclusively from among Phase One schools not schools visited for the study.

The set of preliminary findings for professional development, behavior/discipline, and changes attributed to the Reform were shared and discussed with Deputy Chancellor Rello-Anselmi and the central office staff in July 2013. A final draft of this report was reviewed and discussed with DOE central office leaders and staff, who were able to verify the accuracy of our statistical analysis.

Part One presents the findings from the interviews. There are 35 key findings in total. Our findings are organized into two sections, each with four segments. Section One includes four segments specific to addressing each of the four Reform Goals. Findings associated with each of the goals are in order, grouped around each one.

Section Two also contains four segments with findings on topics that are relevant to the implementation of the Reform as a whole. The first segment in Section Two addresses the schools' understandings about the Reform based on messages from DOE system leaders. The second segment addresses themes from conversations with parents. While their perspectives are included throughout the report, this study provides a rare opportunity to hear the thoughts and concerns from a cross-section of parents. Finally, segment three provides findings specific to budget policies. Budget and resources are mentioned in almost every interview, so although references to this topic are included in several findings, it is necessary to address this issue as a separate segment as well. We end Section Two with our thoughts on school leadership that are needed to achieve successful implementation of the Reform goals.

Part Two contains recommendations for moving forward. Interviewees did not hesitate to offer recommendations or examples of policies or practices in need of refinement from their experiences. We attempted to include as many of the recommendations from interviewees as feasible, while protecting their anonymity. Most of the recommendations come from our analysis of the findings and synthesis of the data from the interviews and focus groups.

Each segment under Section One and Section Two begins with a brief introduction. Each finding that follows includes an in-depth explanation of the finding from the data. Quotations are used frequently to provide the voice of the interviewees who freely gave their time to be included in this study. In all cases, quotations are selected because they represent the opinions of multiple interviewees and themes heard across interviews.

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<sup>12</sup> Perry and Associates, Inc. June 2013. *A View into New York City Public Schools' Implementation of Special Education Reform: Survey of NYC Public School Principals of Phase One Schools*. [http://fundforpublicadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Principal-Survey-Report\\_7-2013.pdf](http://fundforpublicadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Principal-Survey-Report_7-2013.pdf)

PART ONE:  
**FINDINGS**

## SECTION ONE: REFORM GOALS

### **REFORM GOAL 1: Students have access to a rigorous academic curriculum and are held to high academic standards, enabling them to fully realize their potential and graduate prepared for independent living, college and careers.**

Interviewees were asked questions about changes in curriculum and instruction, and strategies to engage students in meeting the demands of rigorous coursework. In addition to curriculum and instructional strategies used across classrooms, we heard about the importance of attitudes, beliefs and expectations in developing a supportive climate for academic success. Our findings are grouped into three areas: curriculum and instruction shifts, attitudes and beliefs, and college readiness culture.

#### **Shifts in Curriculum and Instruction**

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- **Finding 1:** General education teachers apply curriculum and high academic standards equally to students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.
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In approaching this study, we wondered whether administrators and teachers might find it necessary to adjust the curriculum, standards and/or pace of general education courses as students with disabilities join general education classrooms. Specifically, we wondered whether standards would be lowered or the pace would be slower so that students with disabilities could more easily grasp rigorous content. With a few exceptions, interviewees report that no changes were made in the curriculum because students with disabilities would be joining their non-disabled peers. In general, teachers continue to use existing general education course curriculum and materials. Administrators and teachers appear to embrace the purpose of the Reform by providing access and opportunity to rigorous course work, and not altering standards.

There are different approaches to curriculum and lesson development across the schools. In some schools, teachers have attended training to obtain information about Common Core Standards, and the schools use the standards and materials provided by the DOE. As a high school principal explains, “Well, if you look at what we’ve called the workshop lesson plan model that we utilize ... it has some of this, a universal design for learning<sup>13</sup> strategies, and they’re embedded into [our school’s] lesson plans. They have of course a primary goal – what is the objective? – and it specifically states what Common Core standards they’re using.” Two schools we visited are piloting curriculum from external sources. In addition to receiving the materials, these schools are supported by staff developers in implementing the curriculum. The schools welcome the extra support and materials. Other schools are using textbook based instruction that is not aligned with the Common Core Standards. In at least one school, teachers are not required to, nor did they, prepare lesson plans.

Administrators and teachers, especially special education teachers, admit that special education teachers often do not have a strong background in curriculum or adequate content knowledge to teach rigorous content. Lack of content knowledge is reported as even more of a problem when schools created what is called “bridge” classrooms, which are self-contained classrooms in which a teacher has responsibility for multiple grade levels (i.e. sixth,

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<sup>13</sup> UDL is an acronym for Universal Design for Learning. UDL is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all students equal opportunity to learn. (Source: NYC DOE DSWDELL)

seventh or eighth graders) in one classroom. Also, special education teachers express concern that they are not always included in professional development in Common Core Standards, and therefore are falling further behind general education teachers in their content knowledge.

Students and parents confirm that the general education classes provided more rigorous instruction than received in self-contained classrooms, and that all students are expected to meet the standards. Students with disabilities notice the change in pacing from self-contained classrooms and that they are expected to cover content quicker. As a high school student explains, “In special ed, we might take something for two weeks, probably three. And this we take it for a week, and then we start the next subject. And then we take the next one.” The quicker pace translates into students being exposed to more content and information. Parents describe a change for their support for their children. Parents need to keep their children on pace, particularly in keeping up with homework, and staying focused.

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➤ **Finding 2:** The use of instructional strategies is changing to meet the needs of students with disabilities and general education students.

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There is strong evidence from teachers and administrators that there is an increase of planning and collaboration among general education and special education teachers to differentiate and individualize instruction in order to meet the needs of all students, including but not limited to students with disabilities. An elementary school general education teacher explains, “We have our overall curriculum which we base our lessons on. And then it’s a matter of differentiating. All right, if I’m doing persuasive essays, I know that this student can’t just sit and write it, so graphic organizers, chunking, breaking it up piece by piece.”

Instructional strategies that teachers reference include cooperative groups, structures for learning together, memorization, critical thinking, rigorous content, scaffolding instruction, introducing vocabulary from state exams and simple visual clues such as color coding slides. In particular, heterogeneous grouping of students in ICT<sup>14</sup> classes has been seen as a valuable instructional strategy. As an United Federation of Teachers (UFT) chapter leader at an elementary school states simply, “Children sometimes are the best teachers of other children.” It is also evident that when time is not made for collaboration and planning, teachers are not as successful. We explore the importance of collaboration more in-depth in our discussion of Goal 3.

The inclusion of students with disabilities in their classes has caused many to rethink how they approach their teaching. As the UFT chapter leader at a secondary school explains when asked if students are doing better as a result of the Reform, “I think so. I think that the more conscientious effort that we put in in terms of going over their IEPs, talking with the special ed teachers in charge about those particular students, talking with the parents, working with supervisors, working one-on-one with small group instruction with the students, knowing that they can use that encouragement that they can achieve in the regular education classroom – just knowing that and doing that has improved greatly over the past two year.”

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<sup>14</sup> ICT is an acronym for Integrated Co-Teaching, an instructional model that combines in one classroom a general education teacher, a special education teacher and a combination of students with and without IEPs. (Source: NYC DOE DSWDELL)



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- **Finding 3:** The use of technology as classroom tools and online grade books to support instruction, collect data, monitor student progress and communicate with parents has increased with a positive effect on student learning.
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Use of technology in schools and in classroom instruction has increased in the past few years. Interviewees mention specific computer programs such as Acuity, Jupiter Grades, and Achieve 3000 have been purchased and utilized at schools to assist with better student tracking and targeted, differentiated instruction. Interviewees strongly believe that increased use of technology helps students become more excited about the lessons, more engaged in the assignments, and more motivated to continue improving upon their skills. As a middle school general education teacher describes, “even just our projectors and our smart boards are real assets to students who have a different learning style or who are audio or visual learners or just are middle school students who are just a little not motivated.” Technology use as a whole in the classroom, including smart boards, iPads, and other tools, is perceived to be very successful.

Computer programs are available to individualize and reinforce student learning, specifically in reading and writing. Programs assign work for the child, score the work, and assign future work accordingly, so students are challenged to advance and are also given assignments appropriate for their level. A few interviewees also mention computer programs used for Response to Intervention purposes. Generally, access to computer programs is considered a great advantage for students to progress.

Interviewees describe technology to find more efficient means to utilize student data, not just for storing but also for planning and communication purposes. Many of the new computer systems include grade books that store and utilize all the students’ information including attendance, test scores and homework assignments. Teachers discuss using these interactive databases to maintain constant communication with the parents and the students who have access to computers at home. Teachers use technology to plan their curriculum and set specific goals for each student, paying particular attention to the strengths and weaknesses exhibited in the work of each child.

### **Attitudes and Beliefs**

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- **Finding 4:** With some exceptions, negative stereotypes, beliefs and stigmas present a significant challenge to serving students in less restrictive environments.
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The impact of negative stereotypes, beliefs and stigmas about special education is reported across the interviews and focus groups. Stereotypes about students with disabilities are in evidence at Phase One schools as they are in larger society. Interviewees refer to the Reform as providing opportunities for students with disabilities to interact with the “whole school” and their non-disabled peers. Progress is being made in breaking stereotypes through flexible programming and ICT classes. As a middle school general education teacher describes, “I think their self-esteem has risen because they feel like they’re part of a regular classroom [instead of being] ... isolated in this little class where some kids will bother them or [say] ‘You’re in the crazy class or the stupid class.’ ... they feel more part of the school.”

The belief that self-contained classrooms are appropriate placements for students with disabilities is evident. There is no disagreement that self-contained classrooms are the most appropriate setting for some students. However, many teachers strongly express their belief that students with disabilities, particularly those students diagnosed with

emotional issues, cannot function in less restrictive environments and should remain in self-contained classrooms<sup>15</sup>. Several interviewees describe past practices of placing students into self-contained classes without considering whether students were capable of success in a less restrictive environment. Some teachers continue to question whether students are “ready” to learn with their non-disabled peers, even for part of the day. Some interviewees hold on to this belief despite describing how students gain confidence and change their behavior once they are able to experience success in ICT or general education classes.

The stigma about being labeled as a student with disabilities or being in a self-contained classroom is discussed as an obstacle to students receiving the services they need. Some parents do not want their children “labeled” as having a disability, regardless of the teachers’ recommendation that students are in need of support. Some teachers and paraprofessionals worry that students with disabilities carry a stigma with them into ICT and general education classrooms, which results in students withdrawing or acting out. Worries about carrying a stigma is perceived as an obstacle to students breaking into less restrictive environments.

## College and Career Readiness

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- **Finding 5:** Schools that have high expectations and have intentionally created a college readiness culture are successfully graduating more students with disabilities admitted to college.
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Expectations for students matter. Most interviewees recognize the importance of raising expectations system-wide because expectations impact students. As a UFT chapter leader at a middle school explains, “... I experienced it here three years ago where the special needs students, there were no expectations for them, and if the classroom teacher had those expectations the philosophy of the school did not mirror those expectations ... when the system doesn’t mirror the expectations, it’s very hard for a child to internalize a set of higher expectations.”

Data from some schools show student academic progress, and parents and teachers are able to relate success stories of students who were able to meet higher expectations. Students themselves tell of the impact when expectations, and supports, were in place. A female high school student says, “I have a learning disability. I have an IEP. And it’s been frustrating, like in elementary, and I thought I was never going to make it to high school... And when I came to this school, it opened so many doors. I like this school.” And, a male high school student tells us; “I didn’t think I was going to graduate. And, then I came here, I started to see the opportunities I had, and I took advantage of them, and now I have 42 credits and I am set to graduate ... And I am only in the eleventh [grade].”

Most interviewees express their understanding that schools are expected to prepare students to graduate high school ready for success in college and careers. Some interviewees clearly expressed that one of the purposes of the Reform is to provide students with disabilities the same opportunities to participate in academically rigorous and challenging courses as their non-disabled peers. Further, many interviewees across all high schools are aware that students with disabilities are required to pass the Regent’s Examination in order earn a diploma.

Saying there are higher expectations alone, however, does not enable students to meet them. Two of the seven high schools visited are particularly intentional in creating high expectations and assert that they are college readiness schools. The administrators, teachers and parents from these schools confirm the shared expectations for students in earning a Regents diploma. They express the importance of starting in sixth grade to set the expectation, and begin the process of visiting and being admitted to a college. Parents are particularly strong in voicing their opinion that they expect their child with disabilities to persevere and become college ready. Supports

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<sup>15</sup> See also finding 15.

for students, in the form of Saturday prep classes, increasingly flexible programming, retaking courses and access to guidance counselors, were provided to help students meet high expectations. As a secondary school principal explains, “We are a college-readiness school. We are focused on college readiness. So every student here – they’re in the same classes as everyone else... college awareness starts with us in sixth grade and so every kid here has gone on college tours ... sees the college counselor.”

Expectations for college readiness are accompanied by supports at these schools. As a student explains about his counselor, “he has helped me set a goal ... honestly, I don’t know a lot of things about college, because I am the first one to go to college in my family. He’s helped me, he’s guided me.” A secondary school principal explains, “For us, fairness is every kid getting what they need, it’s not every kid getting everything the same in the classroom, but by the end of the day, everyone is held to the same standards and given the same opportunities.”

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➤ **Finding 6:** Teachers and parents believe that schools do not integrate enough career pathways for those students who may not be ready for or interested in attending college directly following graduation.

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In recognizing the power of expectations, teachers, administrators, parents and students wrestle with setting realistic or attainable expectations for students with disabilities, particularly high school students. Parents worry that students are, as a parent says, “... going to be lost. And I’m afraid that’s when you’re going to really see kids start giving up in school.” Paraprofessionals also worry about the comparisons being made between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. “I am not going to say they expect too much [from students with disabilities], but they expect a lot more without giving consideration of what you are dealing with. ...I think you should value the Special Ed kids’ progress more.” A high school special education teacher observes “[students with disabilities] are used to just getting by, so there is a lot of apathy, because there is not a lot that has been expected of them in the past.” It is because of these worries that interviewees underscore the importance of monitoring how well students are responding to expectations, and making adjustments as necessary.

Teachers express strong concern for their high school students who do not seem on track to enroll and be successful in college right after high school. These teachers have high expectations for their students, but do not feel that they are provided with adequate support to thoroughly explore all of their post graduate options. Teachers mentioned specific interests in music production, art, and automotive and other trades. However, many students do not have access to intern or train in areas that they believe they may be interested in pursuing before graduation, and there is no assistance from the school to enter a career path directly after high school. Having one standardized set of expectations for all students, without support for alternate strategies when necessary, also leaves some students behind. As a high school special education teacher said, “the fast pace doesn’t really allow for some of the repetition and reinforcement that students with disabilities really need. And I think we try to do as much of it as we can, given the constraints that we have. But I always think that it would be nice to have certain courses if we offered them over two years or a year and a half so that we can try and catch some of those students that are lacking the skills.”

Teachers feel that the DOE as a whole is only supportive of a one-size fits all model for student success, defined by a high school to college to career path. As another high school special education teacher put it, “I think that the movement for college and career is just focused only on the college part. And those skill sets are not the same. And we’re being evaluated on the college readiness part, so there is no movement in any of the schools to actually do anything about that.”

There is an overarching sentiment that the onset of the Reform Goals and the Common Core Standards has created expectations devoid of sufficient support at the school level, which leave no meaningful alternatives for

students who struggle to pass all their Regents Examinations, or are not adequately prepared for success in college and a career. Teachers and parents fear that students are left to either sink or swim.

**REFORM GOAL 2: Students are taught in the “Least Restrictive Environment” that is academically appropriate, and, as often as possible, alongside students without disabilities.**

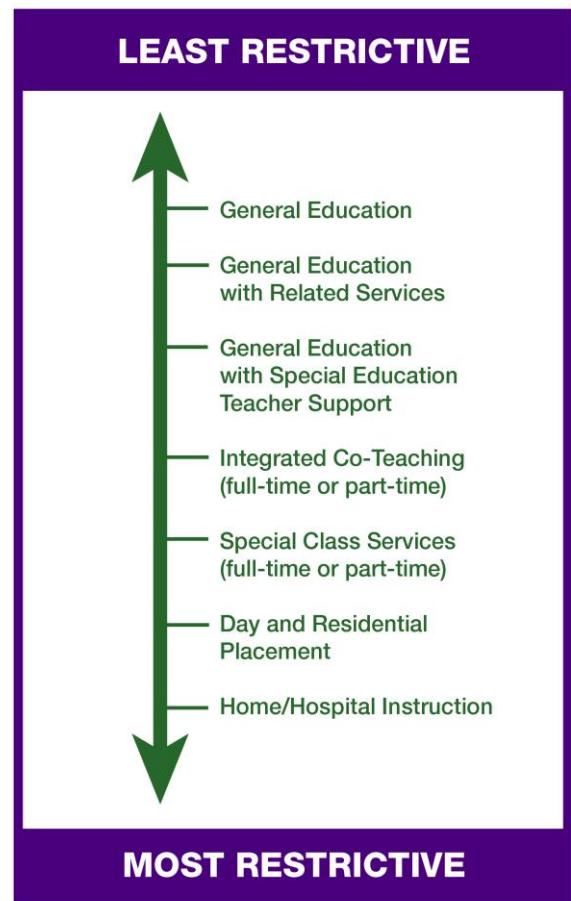
Special Education Reform has been introduced to schools and DOE has conveyed the message that there is an increased emphasis on individualized supports to enable students with disabilities to fully participate in inclusive classroom environments. This section identifies barriers to effective practices with Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT), the most frequently used classroom model. Findings from the study indicate issues with team collaboration due to time pressures, access to ongoing, detailed professional training, disciplinary concerns and inadequate budgetary supports; these are the most significant barriers to successful ICT implementation and integration. Our findings are grouped into three areas: Flexible Programming, Discipline and Behavior, and Race.

**Flexible Programming, Particularly ICT**

- **Finding 7:** Most schools are purposefully reducing or eliminating self-contained classes and moving students to less restrictive class settings such as Integrated Co-Teaching, Special Education Teacher Support Services and general education classes.

Almost all schools embrace the Special Education Reform goal of better educating children with disabilities in their school in the least restrictive environment alongside their non-disabled peers when appropriate.<sup>1</sup> However, the Reform requires a shift in mindset for some schools. Schools are asked to re-evaluate special education structures and practices, and interview data reveal multiple attempts to serve students with disabilities differently than in the past. In particular, there are many attempts to blend general education students and students with disabilities and provide access to core curriculum. This idea is echoed in this statement by a high school principal, “I agree with the Reform goal, and definitely understand the spirit behind it – to get these kids out and have them work collaboratively within the general education setting, so they are in the least restrictive environments and they do have access to the same rigorous common core that most cities across the nation are pushing towards.”

Appropriate, individually determined inclusion, including a full continuum of placement options and services is the typical position expressed by most schools and school staff. This high school principal shares her view, “I think I’m seeing opportunities in the flexible programming that I didn’t see before...having been a Special Ed teacher



Source: NYC DOE DSWDELL



I taught emotionally disturbed, self-contained students in an elementary school...So, it's really about how best to meet the needs of our students. And it's been working out well...We're always looking to see what's working, what's not working, and then how do we fix it if it's not working." Moving students with disabilities to a less restrictive and more inclusive environment has been encouraged for many years in some Phase One schools. Some interviewees acknowledged they are on a path to practicing inclusive education well, even before the Reform. Interpretations about inclusive practices varied among interviewees and schools, as did the benefits.

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- **Finding 8:** In the current climate of Special Education Reform, Integrated Co-Teaching is the most frequently used classroom setting.
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As schools explore flexible programming and move students along the continuum of alternative classroom settings (from most restrictive settings to the least restrictive settings), ICT is the dominant service delivery and staffing model. ICT has a general education teacher and a special education teacher sharing instructional responsibilities for all children (students with disabilities and non-disabled students) in a classroom. School staff indicate co-taught classes has increased opportunities for teacher interaction and interaction with and among students. "So, there's been a lot of movement. We've moved our children out of self-contained and into ICT...there seems to be much more gearing towards ICT; that seems to be what the trend is. You know, because you've got an extra teacher in the room," reports a middle school principal.

Furthermore, federal law and guidance from the New York State DOE provide a favorable climate for increased ICT models.<sup>16</sup> "I feel it is a result of the attempt to move children to a less restrictive environment in the elementary school setting," says a middle school IEP Coordinator. An elementary school special education teacher shares her views, "My understanding is that it is really promoting the least restrictive environment. It's coming into compliance with federal law."

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- **Finding 9:** Schools struggle with Integrated Co-Teaching, although some fare better than others.
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ICT is seen as an important strategy and structure for improving the quality of the education of students with disabilities. However, schools express concerns about implementing the model under day-to-day constraints faced by schools and co-teachers. A secondary school principal describes his concerns, "So ICT is very difficult. Teaching is difficult at first. And then when you place two teachers in the room around the meeting of kids, it can work really well, and it can – the model will sometimes struggle, and so teachers need a lot of support in terms of the different instructional practices that can be implemented."

Interviewees' comments about changes due to Reform focus primarily on the social/emotional benefits to students and for the teachers themselves, rather than academic benefits to students. An elementary school special education teacher reflects on her experience with ICT, "...honestly the need before was that theory of teaching in isolation...the onus was on the teacher in the classroom...where there wasn't as much collaboration, there wasn't as much time built into the schedule to collaborate. Whereas now, we have a lot of time built into our schedule to collaborate. Every Monday during extended day, that first day of the week, instead of children, teachers are getting together."

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<sup>16</sup> New York State Education Department, *A Memorandum from James P. DeLorenzo, Subject: Continuum of Special Education Services for School-Age Students with Disabilities, Section 200.6 (g)* April 2008 (Albany, NY)

Similarly, a high school special education teacher describes her experience co-teaching, “I really think that when I was team teaching in a math class, it was a very good experience for me. For my kids, not so much, because I’m not able to monitor their progress in other classes because I was team-teaching four classes in math. So, there is really no way for me to check what’s going on in other classes...So, I’m not sure how to go about it, how to do it correctly. To be able to provide support for their students in math takes support from ours. I’m not sure how to do that. But that was a good experience.”

Some interviewees believe there are benefits associated with the general increase in ICT classes. The shift pushes staff to collaborate more frequently and look more closely at instruction - specifically, Universal Design for Learning, lesson plan modification, small group work, shared reading, read aloud and visuals. However, more often than not, the nudge to increase the ICT model pushes an idealized model of co-teaching and places little emphasis on the practical implications of making ICT work well. An elementary school special education teacher’s comments reveal some of the challenges with ICT at her school, “...there are ICT teachers in my school who are in part-time three different classes, three different grades. They don’t get any extra time to talk with those teachers, to plan, to help each other write an IEP. They don’t get that time, it’s not given to them to do it.”

Co-teaching can take many forms and coming up with the “right” structure presents schools with challenges. Teachers struggle with how co-teaching partnerships are being implemented and divergent styles of co-teaching exist. In particular, teachers express a need for more planning time with their co-teacher and support in teaching similar content in a classroom across different ability levels. Limited training, inadequate co-planning time and novice teachers not prepared for ICT characterize the ICT implementation process at most schools in the study. So far, interviewees indicate limited success of ICT implementation.

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➤ **Finding 10:** Schools’ ability to create flexible programs, specifically ICT classes, is hampered due to a lack of funding and human resources.

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With the exception of a small group of schools supported by CBOs or grants, most interviewees feel that the ability of their schools to implement a wide range of instructional options, including ICT, is hampered by inadequate funding and human resources. In particular, principals and teachers express a need for increased support (specifically financial support, but also support from people with expertise in working with students with disabilities) in implementing processes, classes as well as instructional strategies to help maintain Reform goals. A secondary school principal explains, “Funding is now a huge issue this year. We have been—up until this time, schools have been encouraged to move students away from self-contained rooms into collaborative-teaching rooms, and in order to fund that, you need two teachers in the room...so those ICT students carry enough dollar amounts to fund the extra teacher and now, we’ve been told this year after being reassured year after year that the funding would be maintained, that they are creating a staggered dollar amount for students...actually there won’t be enough funding to fund the second teacher in the room.”

An elementary school principal talks about costs associated with professional development and for ICT, “We had teachers just going out for professional development ICT. I ensured that whenever ... any kind of professional development [is offered] ... that we had representatives of teachers. We had to send teachers and when we do send teachers yes I had to get substitute teachers, so that because that affects our budget also.”

Furthermore, interviewees call for needing additional or flexible funding when students transfer into the school with an existing IEP. The influx of students recommended for ICT and the addition of these classes is expensive and schools express a need for adequate special education staff to address the needs and funding to support students transitioning from self-contained to ICT classes. An elementary school principal continues, “We had to hire more

teachers because of our ICT. When we have Special Ed it is one teacher, but for each grade to have one ICT on that, yes we had to double.”

## Discipline and Behavior

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- **Finding 11:** Schools struggle with defining and distinguishing between behavioral challenges that may or may not necessitate a special education classification of emotional disturbances, in part because the IEPs for students with emotional disturbances are unclear.
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The onset of the Reform has incited a deeper, broader discussion about behavioral challenges. Within the push for maximum access to inclusive settings, as schools take on more students with emotional disturbances (ED)<sup>17</sup>, school staff members are reevaluating the proper placement and support structures for these students. While there is debate about how to approach and handle this struggle, there does seem to be agreement that students identified with EDs often manifest in behavioral problems that interfere with instruction.

Interviewees express differences of opinion about the appropriateness of classifying students with ED. An elementary school special education teacher considering this question of placement says, “They are taking students who have behavioral issues and label them emotionally disturbed and placing them into a Special Education classroom. I don’t believe that is the right placement for all of these students...I don’t think that’s what Special Ed is intended for.” Regarding the placement of ED and behavior within the overall context of the population of students with disabilities, a high school special education teacher says, “A lot of our boys are also behavior problems in the classroom...there is a correlation between the behavior and those we’ve been talking about in terms of their skill level.” Another high school special education teacher adds, “If you’re not behaving, then you’re not listening. I mean you’re not learning. You need to be present in class and listening and engaging in whatever is going on in order to learn. So, if you’re exhibiting these poor behaviors as a student, over time your skill deficits become greater.”

Teachers look to the IEP for guidance in defining and better understanding strategies and services for ED students. In particular, teachers are often disappointed that IEP’s are too vague and do not offer specifics about providing services to and modifications for these students. “I’m just saying how it’s just hard now with the classes being so large, and having students come in that have severe needs...there’s a lot of distractions going on. So, I think that’s going to be something that we see that’s harder,” says an elementary school special education teacher. When the IEP lacks a level of detail, the root or cause of the ED and effective strategies for handling it are left to the teacher, paraprofessional, or service provider to figure out on their own.

In describing the IEPs for students she supports, a middle school paraprofessional says, “They’re students with IEPs...they have emotional disturbance...” When asked if she knows the cause of the behavior, she says no, and explains, “If I happen to look at the IEP, it will just say that they have ED. And what happened prior to them coming here.” Another paraprofessional adds, “according to the IEPs, they all have different symptoms...ADHD and – ED and all of that. But their behavior, it stems from what they know what they want to do and feel like doing...they know what right and wrong is. And based on that, they should be able to do what they are instructed to do.” A high school principal expresses her perception of the root of some of these challenges in saying, “what I do see are students that feel that it’s okay to answer back angrily if they’re being corrected...it’s the area, it’s the streets that are saying, ‘You disrespect me, I’m not backing down. I’m standing tall...You’re not going to disrespect me. Even the way you’re looking at me is disrespectful and I am going to disrespect you right back.”

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<sup>17</sup> In 2012, students identified as ED made up 7.5 percent of the population of students with IEPs. (Source: NYC DOE)

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- **Finding 12:** Schools are struggling to understand and manage disruptive behavior for all students, which is perceived to be increasing with the Reform. The perception of a negative influence from students with emotional disturbances on students with learning disabilities is a concern for school staff and parents.
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Disruptive student behavior is a concern of teachers. They express a desire for a wider range of techniques to modify and manage disruptive student behavior. There is a widespread belief that a fundamental shift in the understanding and philosophy around addressing student behavior is necessary. In other words, the entire context in which discipline is understood should change.

An elementary school IEP coordinator represents many interviewees in expressing desire for supports and more detailed guidance for teachers, “So what would help in the behavior piece in terms of an IEP would be something that’s very clear, like a clear process, a clear protocol to follow when we have to assess a child’s behavioral needs to create a plan and put it into place; because a school psychologist who doesn’t spend time with that student can only put so much useful information into a plan.” A middle school IEP coordinator says, “Teachers need to be trained in FBA<sup>18</sup> how to manage a class when there are behavioral issues. You know, it’s not their fault, though...but I think the Board of Ed should do – provide more, you know, services so that teachers can be well trained in order to deal with the behavioral issues.” A middle school special education teacher expresses a similar sentiment, “the support and the resources are just, they’re gone. I mean budget cuts have really lowered the morale of this entire Special Education system. To me it’s just done. It’s done. I feel like no one is thinking about the kids. If you had a child who you know is like this innately just good child, like well behaved, to think of your child in the room with some of the things that we deal with on a daily basis...once you start to put multiple disabilities in the same room you know what’s going to happen. The kid who is innately good, they’re getting overshadowed or they’re turning into kids like J.J. used to be one of those kids, it was only an learning disability problem with J.J. now has learning disabilities and ED because he’s been in the same room with emotionally disabled kids for three years.”

Teachers report concerns about the impact of challenging behavior as the number of students with disabilities, including those with emotional disturbances, join general education classes. There exists a lack of clarity about handling “bad behavior,” including questions of who is accountable, what specific services should be used and who should intervene. In classrooms with children with both ED and learning disabilities, often the sympathy is with the learning disability child and the tendency is to imply that the ED child needs to be kept away and controlled. Some parents are concerned that disruptive behavior leads some teachers to leave the school. As one explains, “they really need to look at what they’re mainstreaming. If there are behavior problems either we need to retrain teachers to be disciplinarians and how to do this, we need to I hate to say isolate these kinds of issues, but I have seen that the behavior problems that are not identified and dealt with correctly...can be disruptive for the whole class and significantly burn out your teachers. There are three teachers that I know of in the last few years who had several years’ experience in the classroom and did fine on their evals who left. And all three of them had to do with the Special Education children coming in and the teachers not knowing-- having to do with everyday behaviors, behaviors, behaviors, and then being accountable for their curriculum.”

School staff are conflicted about when and how to successfully mainstream ED students. As a middle school principal said about one of his students, “He was either off- task the entire period, talking to anybody who sat next

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<sup>18</sup> FBA is an acronym for Functional Behavior Assessment. FBA is conducted for any student whose behavior impedes his or her learning or the learning of other students. It is the process of determining the purpose that a behavior serves for a student and is accomplished by careful assessment of the situations that lead to certain behaviors and the consequences that result. The results of the functional behavioral assessment are incorporated into a behavioral intervention plan which provides intervention strategies to address the behavior. (Source: NYC DOE)

to him. Or he put his head down on the desk. So here are kids who...coming in from a Phase One school, they made those kids less restrictive. They took them out of Special Ed and put them in ICT.” The student had been recommended for a less restrictive setting just before leaving elementary school. In regards to another student, he said, “he is not functioning well in a class of 25, 26 kids. He simply is not. He’s extremely insecure about his academic ability, but at the same time, is a kid who is naturally joyful...but if you ask him to sit in a classroom and to be a participant, because his skills are so low, he avoids work. He avoids challenges. And he avoids it in the way that kids do...he throws papers at kids. He is a handful.”

Some students do indeed have both ED and learning disabilities, and determining and acquiring the appropriate supports is challenging. As described by interviewees, what starts out as a behavioral challenge can quickly set a student back academically, or what starts out as a learning disability can also become emotionally overwhelming. As an high school principal said, “they’re starting with disability of learning, and when you couple it with that emotional and social problem...it hinders them, it gets in their way. So there really needs to be a specialist assigned to a school that is able to handle that need, and I don’t think a social worker, a psychologist, or any person like that can really, because the kids see it as B.S.”

Solving discipline and behavior problems is not easy nevertheless interviewees believe it can be done. In the right nurturing environment, behavior problems can be prevented and corrected using effective strategies that shift the mindset away from controlling bad behavior through restricting a student, and toward understanding and supporting the student with adequate, appropriate services. A middle school assistant principal shares a story of student identified as ED with successful academic performance in his school, “We had a young lady who was emotionally disturbed, tremendous behavioral issues...but she was gifted in math and we worked whatever we could for her program and she went general ed with behavior management para support...I think she scored like a 3.69 on the state Math exam and rocked it...She knew teachers were on her side here...but there was certain things she couldn’t help. That’s why we label it as a disability.”

## Race

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- **Finding 13:** African American and Latino males continue to be overrepresented in special education classes. Racial stereotypes and cultural differences affect the way school staff perceive and understand behavior and school discipline of different children. Misperceptions can impact determinations about disability designations and discipline.
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### *Overrepresentation*

For decades, the overrepresentation of African American students in special education classes has been evident nationally.<sup>19</sup> The United States Department of Education identified disproportionate minority representation in special education as a critical problem, mostly affecting African American and Latino boys. The individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 documented that mostly African American and Latino boys were misdiagnosed and misplaced into special education programs. In contrast to the stability of African American student overrepresentation over time and across nearly every US state, more recent national data indicate Latino

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<sup>19</sup> See Blanchett, W. (2006). Disproportionate representation of African American students in special education. *Educational Researcher*, 35(6), 24-28 and Waitoller, F.R., Artiles, A. J., & Cheney. D A. (2010) The miner’s canary: A review of overrepresentation research and explanations. *The Journal of Special Education*, 44(1), 29-49.

Blanchett, W. J. (2009). A retrospective examination of urban education: From brown to the resegregation of African Americans in special education—It is time to 'go for broke.'. *Urban Education*, 44(4), 370-388. doi:10.1177/0042085909338688

students are underrepresented in special education nationally.<sup>20</sup> However, in New York City, Latino students are overrepresented in special education in speech, language, mental disability and learning disabilities.<sup>21</sup> Although less researched, some data indicate difficulty in accurately distinguishing between difficulties in language acquisition for English Language Learners and language disabilities which complicates identification of a disability for Latino students.<sup>22</sup> The issue is complex and overrepresentation of African American and Latino boys in special education classes in New York City is among one of the most enduring concerns. An elementary school guidance counselor reminds us this continues to be a critical problem, “Black and Hispanic children are overrepresented in Special Education. I have no problem saying that...there are a lot of factors that play into that. Again, it goes back to the beginning, the initial phase of the evaluation, and again I the full complexity of an IEP...and I think we do a disservice particularly for that gender in the inner city.”

The problem of overrepresentation in special education has been especially problematic for African American boys.<sup>23</sup> A high school UFT chapter leader voices her concern on this issue, “I’m saying in this school the population that gets classified is, you just look at the surface sex and skin color...My first year teaching I think I would have one cohort of Special Ed Kids would be like six boys and one girl, and not a single one of those kids would be white. I refuse to believe there weren’t any white kids who were Special Ed. I mean come on.”

*Given overrepresentation, African American and Latino boys will benefit directly in so far as Special Education Reform has increased attention on and facilitated appropriate identification, placement, access to rigorous curriculum, high expectations and standards in meeting the individualized needs of students and is producing positive outcomes for students.*

#### *Unspoken racial bias*

While interviewing school staff about the Reform, race was often the proverbial “elephant in the room”, and a topic challenging for interviewees to discuss. For some, race is unspoken and “unseen” in the day-to-day activities of schools. When asked about the issue of race and Black and Latino boys in special education, this high school service provider responds “I don’t think it’s really, really been a focus. I think sometimes people will bring it out because of their own feeling of feeling responsible and being able to say something. But I don’t feel like it’s something that’s always at the forefront. These are our students, this is what they look like, how do we help these – I don’t think that type of forum has really been put out there.”

Although explicit discourse about this issue is surprisingly absent from the interview data, special education has been a holding place for Black and Latino boys, who are often stigmatized and stereotyped in special education with a negative focus on the management of emotional and behavioral problems. This guidance counselor expresses her view and suggests a disturbing connection between cultural differences and behavioral deficiencies, “...particularly when you have children that are coming from high risk behavior, and I’m not necessarily categorizing

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<sup>20</sup> National Center on Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCRES). (2006). Disproportionality by race and disability. <http://nccres.eddata.net>

<sup>21</sup> Ahram, R., Fergus, E., & Noguera, P. (2011). Addressing racial/ethnic disproportionality in special education: Case studies of suburban school districts. *Teachers College Record*. Volume 113, Number 10, October 2011, pp. 2233–2266

Gottlieb, J., & Alter, M. (1994) An analysis of referrals, placement, and progress of children with disabilities who attend New York City Public schools. Final report. 4-138. Bronx, NY New York University. Also see Ariles, Rueda, Salazar & Higareda, 2002; Harvard University Civil Rights Project Conference on Minority Issues in Special Education (2000). Paper: [www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights](http://www.law.harvard.edu/civilrights); Gulberson, Mark. (2009). Hispanic Representation in Special Education: Patterns and Implications. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*. 53, 167-176.

<sup>22</sup> See Sullivan, A. (2011). Disproportionality in Special Education Identification and Placement of English Language Learners. *Exceptional Children*. Volume 77, #3 P317-334.

<sup>23</sup> See Sample, R.A. (2010). A case of Black male: The overrepresentation of African American males in special education as emotionally disturbed. *Dissertation Abstracts*. 70(11). 2010-99090401.



a housing development as that, but certain cases there may be certain behaviors that come out of a concentrated area...but certain geographic locations have been known to have concentrated behaviors. And over time...I guess I can generalize in that sense.” This elementary school guidance counselor continues, “...because some of our parents, they don’t – I guess we used to have this term, they have a delay in their parenting skills, so there is almost this generic term that we use, arrested development, that they have this kind of, their parenting skills kind of stop at a certain point. And unfortunately for a lot of our kids it stops at the worst point.”

One possible interpretation of this thread of thinking suggests children from a housing development bring “high risk behavior” into the school and this “bad behavior” is connected to the arrested development parenting skills of students’ parents/families. The interconnected references about social class, culture and school behavior suggests a narrative/story, of which race is a major part.

Certainly it is the case that special education placement, when appropriate, can be beneficial to many students, including African American and Latino boys. However, students who are misdiagnosed and inappropriately placed based on racial stigmas and stereotypes often suffer more than they benefit. Negative racial stereotypes can lower school staff expectations, which in turn yield lower quality instruction, which can ultimately stifle access to the general education curriculum. This is a debilitating outcome for a group grappling with the double stigma of being Black and/or Latino boys in special education.

### **REFORM GOAL 3: Students Receive Special Education Services that are targeted and provide the appropriate level of support throughout the school day**

Interviewees were asked about the services provided within the school for students with disabilities, and if they felt these services were meeting students’ needs. They describe strategies for creating flexible programs that target services, whether or not they seem to be working, and experiences related to the tracking and monitoring of service provisions. Throughout, interviewees express their opinions about the changes ushered in by the Reform and the task of targeting services within that context. Our findings are grouped into three areas: the effectiveness of targeted services being offered, challenges associated with targeting services and SESIS<sup>24</sup>, the tracking database for special education services.

#### **Effectiveness of Targeted Services**

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- **Finding 14:** SETSS is frequently used as a helpful tool for administrators in creating flexible programs for their students. However, the effectiveness of its use varies.
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Consistently across schools, interviewees say that they were encouraged to employ flexible programming as a means to target the specific needs of each child throughout the school day based on their strengths and weaknesses in particular areas. Very often schools increased their use of special education teacher support services (SETSS) as a tool in supporting flexible programming. SETSS provides a special education teacher to a student with a disability in a particular subject area<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> SESIS is an acronym for the Special Education Student Information System, a special education data management system. SESIS includes an electronic version of the NY State IEP. (Source: NYC DOE DSWDELL)

<sup>25</sup> SETSS is usually provided for one class period per day, for a total of five periods per week, and double SETSS refers to the provision of SETSS for two class periods per day, for a total of ten periods per week. Push-In SETSS refers to the special education teacher providing

In some cases, the use of SETSS addresses student needs. “I have one child who should be in a ICT class for next year. None of the other children are ready...that’s where flexible scheduling comes in...he will probably leave his class next year and go to a general education class for reading. So what support am I going to give him? The teacher’s going to ignore him because that’s not really her kid, because sometimes that happens. So put the SETSS teacher to push in and make sure he’s being serviced properly and that he has all his goals met,” says an elementary school principal. In other cases, the use of SETSS does not address student needs. “We have SETSS teachers going in for double SETSS at a classroom. I don’t think that’s very successful for the kids. I think we actually should mainstream him where he needs to be mainstreamed and provide special services where he needs them. And we haven’t done that. We actually put the kids altogether in one class and provide double SETSS, and I don’t think that’s working for us,” says an elementary school UFT chapter leader. Some principals provided an in-depth explanation of why SETSS is used, reflecting their willingness to know students well and their belief that the service will provide what is best for students. For others, SETSS offers a convenient way to create a flexible program within constrained resources.

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- **Finding 15:** Many administrators and teachers report they are modifying IEPs with the agreement of parents and offering comparable service plans based on what schools have available, not based on what the student truly needs.
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Flexible programming allows for, and even encourages, the adjustment of recommended services in IEPs, under the assumption that changes are made in the best interest of the student. Since they are encouraged to mix and match service options based on the students’ skill level by subject, administrators now take a flexible approach to providing services within classrooms. For example, an ICT class intended to include two teachers at all times, one general education and one special education teacher, may now have just one teacher for a period or two a day while the other teacher is providing SETSS to students on the same grade level. Administrators struggle to create programs that allow SETSS teachers to focus their support on one curriculum, ensure ample time for co-planning, and keep each class equipped with the required support personnel at all times. Thus for some, a flexible approach to staffing as well as student programming proves a workable solution.

While these administrative adjustments seem to reflect a positive increase in creatively targeting services, the impetus behind the programming strategy is more frequently associated with what the school has available, and not what support the student needs. Administrators believe that the end result is as close as they can get to the recommended services originally on the IEP, based on the school’s available resources. There is widespread agreement that this is a serious problem, but many feel that they are not provided ample resources to offer anything more than their current programs<sup>26</sup>. An elementary school UFT chapter leader says, “We were told: service them to the best of your needs. Fit their IEP into the building... we had to make it work.”

Examples of comparable plans include: offering a child placement in a general education class with two periods of SETSS per day instead of ICT, placement in an ICT setting with a paraprofessional instead of a self-contained class, or a placement in a bilingual class with a paraprofessional instead of a special education bilingual class. When the school has only a few students who require a self-contained class, bridge classes that incorporate two or more grades into one self-contained class are also created in lieu of a self-contained class on one grade level.

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services in the classroom; Pull –Out SETSS refers to the special education teacher providing services outside of the classroom. SETSS is provided in both one-on-one and small group settings; within the latter, the small group will usually have no more than eight students.

<sup>26</sup> See findings 13 and 20.

Discussing the bridge class model, one high school principal says, “And when it gets to high school it’s even more absurd. How do you do a bridge math class? I think it’s the reason that some of those self-contained kids historically haven’t had a lot of success. I mean, what do I teach if I’ve got ninth, tenth and eleventh grade students in one room teaching math? Do I teach Algebra? Geometry? Algebra II? I’m just teaching math, the basic skills, and that’s where it usually defaults to...a very low level thing...the kids then go and try to take Regents exams and they’re not remotely ready. So that model scares me a little bit.”

This practice has become prevalent due to the pressure of serving more students with a wider range of disabilities. Reflecting on this pattern, interviewees express concern about the practice. “I think you need to look at the kid and then develop the IEP, not see the IEP and see how you can change that to accommodate how we as a school, what supports we have in place,” says an elementary school special education teacher. An elementary school service provider also comments, “I don’t feel like we can give children what they need. The IEP process – the purpose of that, was to help these children who need help and now – it doesn’t matter what the test results show. You can’t recommend that because you don’t have that. So what’s the purpose?”

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➤ **Finding 16:** Schools experiencing success in providing targeted, appropriate services make it a priority to know their students well.

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In schools that believe their approach to targeting services is successful, there is a system in place to ensure that everyone knows the students well, incorporates that knowledge into their role in the school and decision making and collaborates on how the students’ needs are being met. Principals do this through personalized observation and interaction with the students as well as through the heavy use of the students’ data in team meetings. Other key personnel in the school such as the special education coordinators/liaisons help teachers know their students. Special education coordinators/liaisons are members of team meetings, including the Pupil Personnel Team (PPT) which focuses on discussing intervention prior to referral for specific students, and the SAT (school assessment team), a smaller core team within the school that helps the principal design effective programs for each student with an IEP. In this way, in reviewing student IEPs, there is regular collaboration between the principal, the planning teams and the teachers.

However, it is not enough to just have the required teams in place or appoint a staff member responsible for overall coordination. Principals and staff describe being confident that students receive services based on their needs when:

- a) Consistent and substantive time for the team meetings is a priority and the use of student data and anecdotal knowledge about students is part of discussions. In the words of one principal, “I meet every week with a pupil personnel team...we always come together and start talking about what the students need as far as testing accommodations, academic management needs. I have an SAT team that really helps me design the programs...we sit down and start looking at what would be the best setting for this group of children for next year.”
- b) Clear responsibilities are created and sustained to ensure at least one or two staff members also have an in-depth understanding of the needs of students with disabilities in the school, advocate for them, and assist in communicating with the teachers and service providers about how the IEP is being met, and

- c) Programming decisions are based on constant monitoring, reflecting, and revisiting of the students' progress.

Time constraints are a common struggle for schools, but principals are willing to apply their resources to help. "Occasionally we have to pay per session for the teachers to meet and to discuss these kids' progress and performance," explains an elementary school principal, "we don't have enough time in the school day. The data are a big part of it and we cannot rush when we are looking at students' work." They also experience many struggles associated with budgetary challenges, staff organization and attitudes, and the availability of appropriate classes. However, adherence to the above mentioned structures and practices help.



"I think one of the greatest successes is getting our general education teachers to really look at the IEPs. They understand that there is a process," says an elementary school principal. According to a middle school service provider, "Teachers have to be exposed to the IEP. The IEP teacher, the principal, the assistant principal, we all work together to make sure the information gets there to the teachers and they're aware of who has the disability and how to address them in the classroom." "You have to actually look at them and see where their strengths and weaknesses are, looking at the IEP...With the data...Everything is based on the data through the informal and formal assessments," says an elementary school general education teacher. As an elementary school principal puts it, "We go with what the child needs, not what the school wants."

Overall, interviewees describe a high level of scrutiny during initial referrals of students by parents or their teachers. The use of evaluations, case conferencing and Response to Intervention strategies at the elementary school level, and pre-referral interventions at the middle and high school level, are among some of the steps taken before a student is designated in need of an IEP. As a high school IEP coordinator describes, "I think the biggest evolution has been that students were more easily placed into special education than they are now. And, I think there is more focus on really targeting needs as opposed to just throwing them in with a bunch of varying kids with a bunch of problems kind of put together. So, I think a student in special education today has a better chance of their needs actually being addressed more specifically. I think there is more accountability for that than there used to be." In addition, interviewees mention other school-wide strategies such as Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) to address behaviors, as a way to reduce the need for referrals.

### **Challenges Associated with Targeting Services**

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- **Finding 17:** Most administrators and staff believe they are not provided adequate tools to learn on their own how to serve a greater number of students with disabilities with a wider range of needs ushered in by the Reform.
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In discussing strategies associated with targeting services in their school, interviewees express an overall feeling of disappointment with the level of effectiveness their flexible programs are offering to the students who need them. Many indicate that while they are doing their best to meet the needs of more children with more needs, the schools'

available service options, even after significant shifts in staffing and programming, are not providing the right level of support. Interviewees believe they do not have sufficient resources and information about how to make flexible programming successful.

“You put a kid in a less restrictive environment only to discover that she wasn’t quite ready. So that, to me, isn’t success, if you haven’t been able to figure out where they need to be. So do you run a certain class for one, or do you run a class for two? And from a principal’s perspective, it’s not an economically viable model. So what we had said is let’s go ahead and see how much service we can give them there, and limp along, which is a horrific thing to do when you have children and their education,” says a high school principal.

Any flexible program, however, is only as effective as those carrying it out and many teachers believe that they are not given enough support or information, to know their students well enough to teach them effectively. There is an overwhelming request for more professional development, even from the teachers who received a great deal of information from their network about the goals of the Reform, because it did not address their questions about how to do so. Teachers want to know how broad, systemic new policies such as the Reform and Common Core translate into the classroom, so there is more clarity around what teaching practices should look like. They want specific teaching strategies, models, ideas, tools, and overall more knowledge about the greater number and variance of students with disabilities they now have in their classroom.

“I would like for more instructional support,” says a special education teacher, “so it was really nice to hear about the theories and the models of UDL, and inclusion and ICT, but it’s all very...fluffy. I want handouts, I want projects, I want materials and tools...With regard to my content area...that link to the real world that supports our students so much.” A general education teacher says, “We get a very good general picture of what we need to do and how to differentiate...but a lot of time it’s left up to the individual content teacher to then take that knowledge and then kind of somehow work it into your content to make it accessible...more professional development could help...science-specific, history-specific, with math...”

Teachers believe that they are not receiving supportive information that takes into account both the Reform and other concurrent policy shifts such as the implementation of Common Core Standards. A middle school UFT chapter leader says, “What are you going to do to help us get teachers and paras and everyone involved, be able to reach the goals that they want us to reach?...with the Common Core standards and everything, and putting all these mandates in...they’re like ‘okay, good luck, have a nice day.’” An elementary school UFT chapter leader also says, “a blocked out time where you do sit and talk about the Common Core standards and how it does apply to Special Ed and implementation of it, what it looks like in real life.”

What all this looks like when it is put together in a classroom, and how that translates into effective instruction for every student, is puzzling for many. “What can we do for students like J. who I’ve had for two years and she still can’t form a proper sentence?” says a middle school special education teacher. “I have absolutely no clue on how to really do that. I show her, I model it, I teach it, but it’s still not working. So now what strategies can I learn exactly that will make her actually form a proper sentence? I don’t know how to do that. And that bothers me...because these are things I want to know.”

## Tracking Database for Special Education Services: SESIS

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- **Finding 18:** Administrators and staff are increasingly relying on the IEP for informed decision making about students. Therefore, the idea of an interactive electronic database for all IEPs is viewed positively, but SESIS is overwhelmingly riddled with technical, time consuming glitches.
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Teachers are increasingly using the IEP to differentiate instruction. Interviewees support students' access to easily view and edit IEPs through a streamlined computer-based system. However, responses are overwhelmingly negative about the use of the database. Challenges include:

- a) the existence of multiple systems that do not communicate. As an elementary school principal describes, "...the different systems that we use to collect data do not speak to each other. So the ATS, which is our computer-based program for attendance does not speak to SESIS, which is the new program that you write your IEPs on, and doesn't speak to SEC, which is the state program that keeps track of our children and does not speak to CAP, which is a program that is specialized just for special ed information and programs. We're spending a lot of time keeping track of paperwork. That's interrupting the instruction." Another elementary school principal says, "Everything is on computers and systems, not that they talk to each other. We monitor all the systems, ATS, CAP, SEC, SESIS. They all have different reports." A middle school principal also says, "...things don't align with CAP and SESIS. And then we get ourselves non-compliant because of that...they say oh, don't worry, just ignore it. Ignore it? You can't ignore non-compliance."
- b) the amount of time spent making up for time consuming glitches and the maintenance of backup systems. As a psychologist explains, "The system is filled with flaws and glitches. And that makes my job as a psychologist very challenging." An elementary school principal says, "there are many glitches...very tedious minor details can mess up the entire process. So now you're out of compliance. You're constantly trying to prove to people that you're doing your job."
- c) the quality of the IEPs, now that they are so widely shared and easily accessed between various schools and their personnel. "I don't necessarily think that the quality of the IEPs have improved based on the Reform...the requirement of using SESIS, it asks for more information...it's all who writes it and who reviews that (makes) the quality. It is how well do you know your student, how do you know how to break things down and write goals that align," says an elementary school special education teacher. "We find that the quality of the IEPs that we receive for our students from other schools is abysmal. They are filled with mistakes that impact the services the students get. We rely on the students' folders to find out," says a high school principal. As a result, services are delayed. There are also some examples of disagreement with the assessment/placement from a prior school, such as a sudden move to a less restrictive environment just prior to leaving a Phase One school, making the enforcement of quality, accurate IEPs based on student assessments and data all the more important.

In coping with these challenges, schools revert back to paper filing methods of documentation as a precautionary measure to provide evidence to dispute SESIS' sometimes mistaken out-of-compliance reports. Interviewees feel that the time spent on these administrative duties is taking away from class preparation and essential co-planning time. "A lot of the data that we have access to the network has access to... so, no one really comes here to monitor what we're doing. Everything is monitored through the programming. It's monitored through ATS and SESIS, so the network has external measures of monitoring that they can use without our awareness," says a high school principal.



## **REFORM GOAL 4: Students with disabilities are able to attend their “Zoned Schools” or the school of their choice, while still receiving the supports they need to succeed.**

The Home Zone provision – a zoned school is a neighborhood public school for all students who live within the designated area or zone – provides more neighborhood schooling options for families with students with disabilities which often results in crowded elementary and middle schools. Interviewees feel an overall increase in the number of students with disabilities entering Home Zone schools contributes to capacity filled classrooms. This crowding challenges school psychologists who are struggling to manage the increasing number of *Turning Five*<sup>27</sup> evaluations. Positively, the decrease in busing seems to be resulting in a reduction in problems with bullying.

### **Crowding**

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- **Finding 19:** Overall, the Home Zone provision results an increase of students with disabilities in Phase One elementary and middle schools. As a result, many interviewees report schools are crowded and classrooms filled to capacity.
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Many school staff believe the Home Zone provision contributes to overcrowding in their elementary and middle schools. An elementary school psychologist expresses concern about this issue, “I feel like it’s more overcrowded, now; the school definitely, just because around here, there are so many kids, and we have to house all these zone children, and I have not seen the support for special education services that we were initially promised when the whole Reform happened. We were promised that we would get more services, and it hasn’t happened, it hasn’t.”

As DOE officials usher in the Home Zone provision, neighborhoods expand and more local families look for seats in ever-more crowded zone public schools closest to their homes, schools grapple with overcrowding. An elementary school principal shares, “What we were most concerned about was that it was going to make an impact on our student population because I neighbor a community that is heavily populated with students who cannot go to their zone school because the zone school is full. And so we – we would sort of be like the school to compensate the overflow...”

The plan to send more students with disabilities to their zoned schools brings more students to already crowded classrooms. A high school paraprofessional stated, “...We’ve seen a population increase. We have some classes with above 30, and the classes have gotten larger. There is I think a bigger ratio of kids who have some kind of behavioral problems...So, in some cases there is a third of the kids who are exhibiting some kind of behavioral issues, be it calling out, not being able to sit down, there is academic – that’s not talking about academic problems, needing support.”

This middle school teacher had a similar comment, “You have a hard enough time with 30 kids, and a lot of times there’s over 30, and to put in more, you know, special ed kids, they’re afraid that the behavior is going to be affected, and the learning is going to be affected.”

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<sup>27</sup> *Turning Five* refers to the transition from preschool to school-age programs for students receiving special education services that are entering Kindergarten. (Source: Advocates for Children’s *Turning Five: A Guide to the Transition from Preschool Special Education to Kindergarten* October 2010 p. 4)

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- **Finding 20:** Interviewees report charter schools turn down and redirect students with disabilities towards community schools. Often, these students have more severe disabilities than community schools are prepared to handle, resulting in more self-contained and ICT classes.
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Students with disabilities, once placed by central or district administrators to balance classrooms, are now enrolling in their local schools and some schools struggle to prepare for the programmatic changes. A middle school special education teacher describes, "...due to the Special Education Reform...the sort of open door policy where, like, you can't turn away any students has caused the influx of the ICT kids that then created the class that I'm now teaching." In this school, the influx results in the addition of an ICT class.

Charter schools in New York enroll fewer students with disabilities than traditional public schools.<sup>28</sup> Interviewees feel that charter schools often lack resources or placement options for students with disabilities and redirect them to other schools. A middle school IEP coordinator voices her concern, "Another two children I think we had come from a charter school that they flunked out of because there were certain things going on in their behavior. The charter school said, 'I don't have to deal with you, so go back to your zone school.' And therefore we inherited that issue and we have to now develop a plan how can we deal with that." A middle school special education coordinator describes his experience of a charter school not providing the required services, "I had a student who was trying to enroll just yesterday and Friday, and her mom showed us the IEP. The child was designated ICT and SETSS services, and she wasn't receiving her SETSS. And she hadn't been the whole time at the charter school."

### **Benefits of a shorter commute time**

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- **Finding 21:** A consequence of the Home Zone provision is decreased busing and commute time, which interviewees report result in less bullying and students coming to school less tired and better prepared to learn.
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Issues around school busing are complex and challenging. A recent challenge is that buses can provide an ideal space for bullying in that they are small, there is minimal supervision and the recipient of the bullying has no place to retreat. Further, long bus rides, early morning departures, and fatigue were well-documented problems for schools. The Home Zone provision limits the need for transportation of students who enroll in their neighborhood school.

Interview data suggest that reducing the time students spend on school buses has positive benefits. In some schools, reported incidences of discipline are reported to be declining and students are arriving at school less tired. This elementary school principal finds that "...our kids are not coming to school tired anymore, because they're not riding the bus all day...last year practically every day the matron from the bus would come in and complain about what's happening on the bus with the kids not getting along. With the Reform, because we have our own kids, I have not received a complaint since last year."

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<sup>28</sup> See CRPE report by Lake, Gross, and Denice. New York State Special Education Enrollment Analysis. November 2012

## Evaluation delay

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- **Finding 22:** Elementary school psychologists are overwhelmed by additional *Turning Five* evaluations as a result of the Home Zone provision.
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Interviewees indicate that the Reform results in an increase for elementary schools of children receiving preschool special education services needing evaluations by an IEP team for their community school. The increase has created a backlog for elementary school psychologists in particular, “If a child is in your Home Zone then you’re responsible for doing their *Turning Five* meeting. So that’s why we have such a high number of cases. Some other schools don’t have that. And it is usually the elementary schools that end up being given that responsibility of the *Turning Fives*.”

This elementary school IEP coordinator/psychologist shares details about her heavy workload, “In order to do a thorough job in working on an IEP when we’re working on any case it is difficult when you don’t have time. I don’t like to feel like I’m rushing...right now I have about 16 *Turning Five* students...from preschool...different preschools all around the Bronx. I have about nine re-evaluations. Initial [evaluations] I think right now I have 13. And triennials I started the year with I believe 35 and now we’re down to somewhere in the 20s.”

Parents expressed a desire for more predictable and dependable information about *Turning Five* and the transition from Pre-K to Kindergarten for students with special needs. As a parent describes, “...this notion of home zone schools, everybody changes their mind at the last minute, particularly in kindergarten...people don’t know in April where they’re going. They haven’t made up their mind. You’re still doing your IEP things...so they haven’t evaluated our daughter for *Turning Five* for kindergarten. That’s just our mess, but this is so common.”

## SECTION TWO: REFORM IMPLEMENTATION

### DOE CENTRAL OFFICE, CLUSTER, AND NETWORK MESSAGING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION REFORM

Although principals and school staff expressed being well informed about the Reform goals, many also reported receiving contradictory messages about goal expectations, implementation, professional development and resources. The Reform did not come as a surprise to some Phase One schools as they have been experimenting with ways to educate students using flexible programming in more inclusive classroom settings. However, many schools indicated that their ability to meet Reform expectations without adequate supports has been challenging and stressful.

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- **Finding 23:** There is widespread agreement among interviewees with regards to the philosophy of the Reform goals. Most school staff report receiving general messages about the push toward less restrictive environments, flexible scheduling and general education inclusion.
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Messaging expectations can help schools create a culture which supports changes in practice and ultimately student performance. Interviews reveal schools did receive general messages from DOE leaders about Reform goals and expectations for implementation. It was believed by most school staff that a significant part of the Reform involved some combination of flexible programming, fewer self-contained classes, more mainstreaming and movement from more to less restrictive environments and a re-examination of the individualized educational plan for students. This elementary school principal shares a perspective about the Reform goals, “My understanding of the Reform is to allow students with all disabilities into the least restrictive environment, and how to do that best is up to the schools to figure out how to best support them in terms of their instructional needs, their academic, social, emotional needs, so that’s what we have been doing.”

An elementary school special education teacher tells of being well informed about the Reform goals, “Well, I know that the students are to be taught the same Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) as the general population, which is long coming. I know that every student should be able to, we should be able to address those CCLS through the special education program. And we’re working for a less restrictive environment for these children.”

Recognizing the importance of principal leadership, part of the Reform roll-out involved messaging to principals early on. Principals point to their networks as the main source of information about the Reform, as partners in disseminating the Reform goals and in the development of a collaborative school culture. An elementary school principal says, “Our network leader at the time presented this to us, to a group of principals. They provided us with a wealth of information that was coming both from the state and the city.”

Many administrators, teachers and staff report unclear and contradictory messages from the DOE about Reform goals and expectations. Most often, interviewees express concerns that DOE policies and directives regarding funding send an unstated message that is in conflict with the Reform’s goals and purpose. For example, this high school principal says, “So we have a lot of collaborative team teaching going on. One of the things that I find contradictory, though, is that, while we’re pushing towards this, our school has lost funding because we did not have enough special education resources...We try to comply with the Reform act and with Phase One of this, and

we're providing less restrictive environments...and yet, because we're not providing a multitude of special education resources, we're now losing money from it."<sup>29</sup>

Teachers and staff hope for more information about the Reform's goals and expectations for schools and themselves. An elementary school psychologist asks, "I would like changes such as more workshops and clarification of what is expected of this educational Reform and more effectiveness in the dynamics of the whole Reform and the whole Department of Education."<sup>30</sup>

A few parents raise the issue of contradictory and incorrect information on the DOE website. "I go there at 8:30 today, and I'm told – with all the documents that is required to put my kid on a waiting list ... this information is incorrect, and that they have no such waiting list. So why you have this on your website for months?" Inconsistent information leaves many parents unsure about what is happening and what to expect under the Reform.

While the majority of interviewees know about the Reform, many school staff, including teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers, indicate having no knowledge or very little knowledge about the Reform. For example, this elementary school general education teacher says she knows little, "... The only change is that Common Core Standards sheet that we have to fill it out...it's like a checklist... And I didn't get any training on it. They [the school based support team] just gave me the paper and that was it...And I feel that it's a lot of work, and I don't mind the work...(but) if I understood it more, how it's been done; how do you math the Common Core to their goals, because their goals are what you have to go by. You're mandated to go by what their IEP says. How do you switch that over to the Common Core with the expectations? I'm on my own with that." There is a strong sentiment that informal knowledge passed around by colleagues was not enough. When asked to describe what exactly she was told formally about the Reform and from whom, a middle school paraprofessional responds "I've been hearing it for – since I've been here, in this school, that they're trying to phase out the program. But just through my co-workers."

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- **Finding 24:** Most schools report already implementing some aspect of the Reform, although most do not have a written plan that communicates and explains Reform implementation to staff and parents.
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Many schools indicate they are already on the path to educating students with disabilities more flexibly and in more inclusive classrooms as well as encouraging more teacher support and collaboration. An elementary school general education teacher says, "Based on what I know of the Special Ed Reform, I feel like our school is currently already doing a lot of what the push is for the Special Ed Reform. We have the collaboration. We have the Special Ed students with the Gen Ed students, allowing them to mimic their peers and have the role models in the classrooms and have a lot of push in support versus pull out support." A high school principal describes that the school is already advancing some aspects of the Reform in saying, "...this is about serving the needs of the students as flexibly as you can and making sure that as many of them get a high school diploma, Regents...or have some type of post-secondary plan that would best suit their needs. And it needs to start in ninth grade and move on. Not very different from what we were doing, so it wasn't that big a shock, but there were lots of nuances we weren't aware of."

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<sup>29</sup> Finding 13 under Reform Goal 2 elaborates on this challenge in reference to flexible programming and ICT specifically, and Finding 32 under the School Budget section elaborates on how funding has been an overall challenge for Reform implementation.

<sup>27</sup> Finding 20 under Reform Goal 3 elaborates on school staff requesting more help with knowing Reform expectations and effective means of accomplishing the goals.

Most schools could not reference annual plans or other written communication to explain their schools' effort to implement related to Reform. Nevertheless, many schools believe there has been little or no change in their practices due to the Reform, either because the Reform reflects the schools' current practices or beliefs, or because they feel few changes are needed. "And I know you're here to talk to us specifically about the Special Ed Reform ... The only real change for us, I feel that happened with it was that we started having the flexibility to offer kids ICT and SETSS," said a high school special education teacher.

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- **Finding 25:** The expectation for principals and teachers to meet Reform goals without adequate supports has been stressful and overwhelming for many, especially teachers who feel they will be blamed if Reform fails.
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Despite the consensus among teachers and school staff about the promise of Special Education Reform, unfortunately many teachers suggest the Reform is not being realized in many schools. Teachers describe Reform as being inadequately funded - from the organization of school and classroom structure to the development and training of staff - and are frustrated when they feel scapegoated and blamed for poor student performance. "I feel like I need more help, like in what the Special Education Reform really entails. And it's almost like, the help needs to be help...That's the frustrating thing about it, is that it's almost like, 'we gave you this, this and that, and now you're a bad teacher because you're not helping these kids,'" explains the UFT chapter leader at a middle school.

Well-intentioned teachers are frustrated when they feel all eyes are turned to teachers, with harsh judgment, to fix all problems in education. A secondary school special education teacher acknowledges that she wants support, "The Reform is saying, here it is, but I'm going to punish you if you don't do it well. Whereas I feel like the Reform and the DOE and the City and the State and the government should be saying, 'Ok, you didn't do it well. How did we fail you in supporting you to be able to do it well?' And I don't think that's what the Reform does, unfortunately." Another special education teacher, this one from a K-8 school, expresses dissatisfaction that the *us v. them* perspective doesn't help the situation, "I just wish the perspective from the DOE wouldn't be so harsh...on the teachers. I feel like it's them against us." Teachers feel blamed for perceived failures and want more supports from the local, district and state levels in order to have successful Special Education Reform implementation.

## PARENT VOICES

The voices of parents are a critical component of this study. Parents offer insight into the successes and challenges of the Reform within the school system, and also what actions they take as parents in response to the experiences of their children. We interviewed small groups of parents of students with disabilities and, separately, small groups of parents of general education students during our school visits. We also conducted three focus groups of parents of students with disabilities. Our findings are grouped into three areas: parents' expectations, access to equitable programs, and systemic flaws necessitate advocacy as quality control.



## Parents' Expectations

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- **Finding 26:** Parents have a positive opinion about schools, or targeted programs such as NEST<sup>31</sup>, that share a general philosophy of successful inclusion, have small class sizes, and/or have a “family-like” feeling.
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Parents with positive opinions of their child’s instruction describe a school wide philosophy and structure that make each child feel special, target classroom instruction according to their needs, and provide specific opportunities for students to show their skills and to pursue interests. For example, a student excelling in a certain area of science can present a project to a younger class being introduced to the topic. In this way, students are growing in their overall confidence even as they may continue to work on other subject areas that are more of a struggle. As an elementary school parent describes, “the whole school works to make these kids feel special in different ways...my daughter is going to be a guest lecturer for the kindergarteners...they’ve really isolated something she is good at and they’re making her feel great about it, they’re making her talk to kids, which is in line with her IEP. They’re making her communicate.”

Another elementary school parent, in describing her experience with a child in the NEST program for students with autism spectrum disorders says, “The classroom teacher is very good about sending home emails, as well as the cluster teacher<sup>32</sup>. She [the cluster teacher] goes with them to art, gym, science, anything that’s a cluster, anything that the classroom teacher is not there. They’re never alone.”

Several parents perceive smaller class sizes and family-friendly school cultures effective supports for the educational outcomes and social growth of their children. Parents also value efforts of school staff that help students advance towards their individualized goals, which often occurred in this setting. As an elementary school parent states, “This school meets my expectations and exceeds them with my kid every year. They know her very, very well. We just had her IEP meeting and also parent teacher conferences and the goals that they set for her for next year are exactly what we would have hoped for and maybe even more.” Another elementary school parent puts it, “It’s been successful so far because he gets that one-on-one attention that he needs. When he’s in a large group with other children he’s distracted and he wants to play with other kids so when he has that one-on-one time...he excels.” The following elementary school parent is a true believer in the small school philosophy, commenting, “I love the smallness of the community and I think for my child, he gets very overwhelmed with large groups and because the class sizes are so small and the school itself is so small, one or two classes per grade, I think that that really caters to him being comfortable.”

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<sup>31</sup> The ASD Nest program is a program for high functioning students with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) that takes place in an integrated co-teaching class in a community school. The ASD Nest program helps children learn how to function well academically, behaviorally and socially in school and in their community.. (Source: NYC DOE DSWDELL)

<sup>32</sup> Each ASD NEST classroom has two teachers, both trained in effective instructional and behavioral strategies for children with ASD. In addition, an “ASD Cluster Teacher” facilitates the students’ adaptation to the non-classroom parts of the day – lunch, recess, and “specials” like art, music, and science. (Source: NYC DOE DSWDELL ASD NEST Program Family Handbook, September 2011)

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- **Finding 27:** Overall, parents of students with disabilities are pleased with the quality of the home-school relationships. Parent expectations for student success vary by school level/grade.
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Parents of children with disabilities experience different issues as their child moves from elementary to middle to high school. In elementary school, parents express that having teachers who are attentive, flexible, and understand the child's academic and social strengths is a critical factor in their satisfaction with the school and their child's progress. An elementary school parent shares, "And the teachers here and within the program are just very attentive, they're good teams, they really work with the therapists...some of the things they're also working with him on are social." As a middle school parent describes, "Although he had significant delays and was classified on the Autistic Spectrum at two years old, as you work with the children through Special Education a lot of those issues begin to resolve themselves. And by the time you get to the junior high level a lot of those issues have resolved themselves, but the confidence level, the stigma is still there. And the school was instrumental in removing those barriers."

Once in high school, confidence, life-skills and transitioning to life after high school become a higher priority. A mother is pleased her child's high school is offering college alternatives, "they have something with the services I saw going on and other vocational things that they might want to get into. Like if they wanted to get into the Army or the Navy or stuff like that, I saw different things they were sending home. So they had an alternative if they didn't want to go to college..."

### **Access to Equitable Programs**

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- **Finding 28:** Parents overwhelmingly believe that schools are not familiar enough with the disabilities they are expected to handle, and as a result their child's specific needs are not noticed, understood, or accounted for.
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Parents agree with the perception of administrators and teachers<sup>33</sup> that, with parental agreement, schools are modifying IEPs and offering comparable plans with services based on what they have available, not based on what the student truly needs. This is not necessarily associated with a more or less restrictive setting, but rather the desire for a more targeted, informed strategy for educating based on the student's specific needs. Parents feel that schools have not been given the help that they need to be adequately prepared for educating their kids well. Parents want their children placed in, and continually moving towards, the least restrictive environment academically appropriate, with the ability to transition out of needing support services. Nevertheless, they believe that the program at their child's school is preventing them from advancing and being able to more successfully mainstream.

Examples given by parents are often associated with the creation of ineffective comparable plans, or a lack of attention to utilizing specific information in the student's IEP. "We've been in ICT classes since the first grade. She's now in sixth grade, and she's still on a second to third grade level as far as reading and math. That doesn't

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<sup>33</sup> See finding 18

sound like it's working," says one middle school parent. Parents also feel that teachers do not adequately understand the complexity of struggles associated with having a disability and how they impact a child's perspective in the classroom. Parents are concerned that since effective teaching and grading is contingent upon knowing students well, then their child's needs are not being addressed fully.

In describing how these complexities of various disabilities that may be overlooked, a middle school parent conveys the kinds of detailed concerns of many parents, "A speech delay may not be what you think a speech delay is. He may be receiving a certain kind of therapy with that or they may have found by that point anxiety is what is feeding this speech delay. Okay, so we need to reduce anxiety, which then reduces the speech delay. And the IEP can give that teacher an insight as to why." This parent adds, "for example, my son received occupational therapy, so if he wasn't writing, if he was only writing a sentence and you're going to fail him on an essay because he's been taught to write notes, not paragraphs, you're judging him on what kind of writing – If you knew, if you looked at the IEP and part of it was to build his sentence structure you would then know, well maybe this is why, but if you don't read the IEP...you might just be assuming he has bad handwriting because of the OT issue, not the other part of it, 'well I hate to write, because it hurts when I write and I can't write well and I don't like the way it looks.' There is a whole bunch involved with that, but if you don't read the IEP – these are some of the things that can happen."

Another high school parent describes a similar situation in which specific kinds of support are helpful, "He's able to write, it just takes him a lot longer than somebody else." She adds that he has extended time, and elaborated, "it is not enough, it's not even the time. It's just, he needs to – he needs someone to say, 'focus,' literally, that's what I do. I say 'focus' or 'how's it going' or you know, 'how much have you written?' and it's a struggle...his success depended greatly on his teachers...obviously, the teacher can't spend all her time with him. But it's hard for him to express himself sometimes." In regards to a lack of sufficient support, another middle school parent says, "I think they're more attentive to behavior than they are to actual learning. So, a kid that sits in class and is quiet and nice, that's good. They are lost; that's why they're quiet; that's why they're not saying anything. They don't know what's going on."

Many parents believe that administrators and staff do not understand parents' experiences in raising a child with a disability. Parents feel they are educating school staff about how to teach students with disabilities overall, not just introducing them to the specific needs of their own child. As a result of this missing knowledge base, recommended services or comparable plans do not always make sense given the needs of the student.

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➤ **Finding 29:** While not specifically related to the Reform, parents express a desire for access to supplemental activities such as music, art and sports.

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Many parents, of general education students and students with disabilities, also express a desire for increased opportunities for their children to participate in arts, music, and sports programs within the school. Parents believe that creative forms of expression and activity are good for their child's growth. Parents feel that supplemental activities are essential compliments to academic success that would benefit their child's advancement, especially for parents of students with unique learning strategies.

“Academically the school has always done very well, but that’s where they drew the line. We have no specialized programs...we’ve brought up music, we’ve brought up art...I mean, there’s no sports programs here,” laments an elementary school parent. “I wish sometimes they had more programs in their school as far as music programs, better art program. You know, little outlet, you know, something, track or field, maybe some baseball, sports,” says another. “I would love if they can give the school some more money so they can open at least a music program. They don’t have music. They have gym only once a week...I think arts, music, more exercise, more sports, more field days. I mean, it’s something that they should think about. Because kids need that,” says another elementary school parent. However, the issue of whether or not a parent can just supplement the school’s available programs with outside extracurricular activities is mentioned. “We’re in a situation now where it’s going to be up to the parents to be on their toes and be aware of other options outside of the school,” said a high school parent, and added,” but that is difficult for parents who can’t afford – I mean there are some people in this school who can’t.”

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- **Finding 30:** Some parents believe that their Home Zone school does not have sufficient knowledge and training in disabilities and therefore is not as well equipped as other schools to meet the needs of their child and it should be to be considered a comparable option.
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Though their community school may be required to admit the child, parents do not feel that programs offered by the school are rooted in sufficient knowledge or training about their child’s disability. Parents continue to prefer other options despite associated challenges such as travel time for their child. Some parents have been able to seek out other options and enroll their child in a more preferable setting.

An elementary school parent with two children, one in the community school in their Home Zone without an IEP, and another with an IEP in a different school, describes the reasons for why he decided to place his child with a disability in another school. “My son goes to a different school, our zoned school, he’s a gen ed kid, and it’s a great school, I absolutely love it, it’s perfect for him, he can tolerate bigger classes. But I see the kids with the IEPs there and they don’t get the kind of attention that the kids here get with IEPs. The school does not have the staff. It has therapists who are great, but one of each. This school is thinking about every kid, whether it’s Gen Ed or IEP, and how they’re fitting into the classroom, what strategies they can rework for the kids to make them more successful in the classroom. And the whole staff is just trained to think that way about all the kids. My zoned school doesn’t have those resources to do that. So those kids with the IEPs are not getting the same kind of services, the same overall services as they would get if they came here.”

Other parents express a similar opinion about the school in their Home Zone, and their decision to send their child with an IEP elsewhere. Another elementary school parent in that discussion says, “There is no way that even with Special Ed Reform that our Home Zone school could be as positive an experience for my daughter, just because here they have such extensive staff and therapists and knowledge and training.” An elementary school parent from a different school says, “If you want my son to go to that school they need to make it that it’s – gives them the same services, that he feels just as comfortable as he did here; a loving environment, a safe environment.”

Overall, parents believe that the decision to send their child to another school results in a better outcome for their education. “If I didn’t send him downtown he still probably would have this behavior problem...if I would have kept

him in that environment and not put in complaints and so forth that would have continued messing with him mentally. But now it's like I gave him a second chance of life because now he's in this new school and he's a totally different child. He doesn't have that behavior. He's happy all the time. He wants to go to school," says elementary school parent.

Many parents believe that schools do not have a process that allows them to adequately prepare for the needs of incoming children. As a parent explains, "He didn't get any of his services started until December last year...so he spent the first three months at school without the supports that the Board of Ed has agreed to give him because the school didn't have – they had to readjust their resources. And it's a great school. I love the school. I love the principal, I love the teachers. But this part of it is not – It's really hard to accommodate. If you've got one or two kids, or not a full ICT class, how do you deal with them?" In general, schools are also not given much time between notification of their incoming students with IEPs and the first day of school, so they are not able to coordinate the staff and program all the students to ensure service provisions until after school has already begun.

An elementary school parent who was able to navigate a complicated and extensive process for enrolling her child in a NEST program and matching the IEP to their services provides an example, "I kept getting notices from the zoned school, you haven't enrolled your child, you haven't enrolled your child. I got a final notice of recommendation in September that my child was going to the zone school. So there was a disconnect somewhere...I had never enrolled him at the zone school. I don't know if they just wanted my child there...and I finally said to them, 'Listen, you can't service my child, you don't have the means necessary...You just don't have the necessary services in place...Even if I put my child in your ICT class, even though they have four, they're overenrolled.' The school is just way too big."

### **Perceived Systemic Flaws Necessitate Advocacy as Quality Control**

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- **Finding 31:** Parents feel that they have to be strong advocates for their children in order to get appropriate services in the school and in the system as a whole.
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Parents' primary piece of advice for other parents was to be involved, to educate themselves, to participate in every step of the process, and have the confidence to stand up for their child's needs when they disagree with a recommendation or placement. Parents feel so strongly about the necessity of advocacy, given what the school system would otherwise provide, that they also volunteered as advocates for others. "If you're not comfortable, don't sign that," said one high school parent, "Do not sign it. If I'm in the building, and it's something that you feel that maybe needs to go on, come and get me. I'll be your advocate. Don't sign it. I'm really asking parents not to do it, especially those that are not up to date with all the changes that are going on."

Transparent and regular communications are strongly encouraged as a necessary means of ensuring that the student's needs are being met. Parents feel that they have to exercise quality control over the processes and the services, otherwise specific details about their child's situation necessary to making informed decisions about their programming, and the teacher creating effective lesson plans, would be ignored.

Despite continual research, documenting, and following up, parents still express frustration over feeling that they have to settle for an inadequate program. They feel stuck between options with varying levels of restrictiveness on the continuum of services, but none of which truly provide the right setting or the right kind of targeted, quality support. For the most part, this was not attributed to a lack of responsiveness from the teachers or the principal. "I think this school has tried their best with helping or trying to get what these children need, but I



think that they just don't have the resources and they can't do it. The staff has been helpful, when it came to my son and what he was required to get and also trying to help me battle with the Board of Ed," says an elementary school parent, and added, "They (the school/staff) just need more help." Parents face a much broader systemic issue at hand where schools being told to accommodate all students were inadequately prepared to do so.

"It's emotionally draining. You're fighting City Hall for your services sometimes. They're not just given to you. You are really fighting for them. You go into these IEP meetings dreading it. You're fighting for your child as much as you feel like you're fighting for your life sometimes...because your child is your life. And if you feel your child needs these services you need your documentation, you need your doctors' letters, you need letters from your teachers, you need everything," says an elementary school parent. In describing how a third party advocate was necessary, a middle school parent says, "When you're just a parent, you're heard but nobody's listening. But when you have somebody looking in, now you're being watched. I get real people talking to me, not just the runaround." Another parent feeling ignored by the system said, "You don't ask for these challenges; everybody thinks their child is gifted and talented because it's their child...You come in to navigate a system and you're penalized for advocating for your child. Everybody wants you to believe that your child is a bad seed, and when you don't buy into that you and your child are a problem. That can't be right."

Part of the reason parents feel the system necessitates their strong advocacy is because of the confusion they experience. For example, an elementary school parent who encountered confusion during the referral process for recommended services says, "The district administrators were confused, the parents were confused, the social workers were confused, the teaching personnel were confused...Just what they were allowed to offer. Were they allowed to give it at school level, were they allowed to give it outside of school level, could they give an RSA, could they not give an RSA. I have to check with my supervisor, I don't know if I can give you this many units of OT, I don't know if I'm allowed to give you this many pullouts, I don't know if I'm allowed to have you out of the classroom this many times a day...I don't know if I'm spending too much money. It was just like a comedy of errors."

For all parents, the primary concern is how well the school knows their child, and if their needs are being met. "Make sure that the school has the services that your child needs. That's a main thing, because not all schools have the services," says a parent. Another adds, "and a lot of parents don't realize once you're told no they just leave it at that. You've got to fight for your child."



## SCHOOL BUDGETS

If there is one topic raised by almost every interviewee and focus group, it is the impact of resources on their school's attempts to implement Special Education Reform. Similarly, securing resources to provide support to teachers and students with disabilities was the greatest challenge identified by principals in our survey<sup>34</sup>. Concerns about resources are mentioned often in our findings. For example, in the section on messages, we discuss that DOE messages encourage schools to promote the Reform are perceived to be in conflict with the schools' reality of reducing school budgets as students were moved into less restrictive environments. In the section on Goal 2, we discuss our finding that the lack of funding and human resources hamper implementation of flexible programming, in particular ICT implementation. In this section, our findings focus on the funding challenges school face, and their cause.

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➤ **Finding 32:** Almost every interviewee mentioned funding is inadequate to fully implement the Reform.

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It comes as no surprise that school budgets, along with other New York City municipal budgets, have been reduced in the past few years. To us, this finding means more than simply stating the current situation which many consider to be the obvious. The finding represents two realities for schools. The first reality is the one most prevalent in our interviews – schools want the Reform to work, however, they believe they have inadequate resources to do so. As a high school principal describes, "...on the one hand it's great because it's a front and center stance that students are different and that all special education services are not analogous and that schools have to get smarter about making sure that everyone working with children has a handle on the individualized learning plan. ...But I think asking schools leaders to work with such limited resources, given that we all want to do this work, is fraught [with problems] ... school leaders and educators, to keep this afloat is unsustainable."

Likewise, the perceptions of teachers are reflected in the thoughts of a special education coordinator who explains, "We will continue to be flexible and will continue to try to get students into the least restrictive environments. But that doesn't change the fact that we are still going to have a cohort of students who need a full range of services. We want to make sure we have the financial resources to maintain our current level of staff... we still need to have a core number of staff to be able to service all of our kids properly." Similarly a UFT chapter leader says, "If people knew how to use [the Reform] correctly, and if everyone was trained on how to use it correctly and detach the money part of it, then I think you'd see it work perfectly. Again, I think that the money part has to disappear because it is a disincentive for any leader of a building ... [who is trying] to maximize the budget."

The second reality is that a reduction in resources during a period of transition reinforces concerns that the DOE is not serious about the Reform<sup>35</sup>. For example, interviewees question the purpose of Reform when resources they consider to be important to the Reform's successful implementation are reduced. As a middle school principal describes: "What is the intent? ...One half of my brain is thinking, 'This is just all about saving a buck.' So, there's a

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<sup>34</sup> Perry and Associates, Inc. June 2013. *A View into New York City Public Schools' Implementation of Special Education Reform: Survey of NYC Public School Principals of Phase One Schools*. [http://fundforpublicadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Principal-Survey-Report\\_7-2013.pdf](http://fundforpublicadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Principal-Survey-Report_7-2013.pdf), p.4

<sup>35</sup> See also finding 1.

devil and there's an angel. And the other half of my brain is saying 'You know what, this does give me some flexibility.' ... it really did bring about a paradigm shift in terms of how we're looking at special education."

Further, interviewees question DOE's commitment to the Reform implementation when they perceive resources necessary to serve students are reduced or inadequate for success. "So you can get something that's quality and not cost you a lot of money, but that's going to take time. ... You want to have quality across the board. But how can you have quality if the funding is not involved?" wonders an assistant principal.

The message from schools is that they can and will achieve the purpose of the Reform, if they have adequate resources. The overwhelming sentiment is that they do not.

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- **Finding 33:** There is a widely held belief that the current per capita funding formula contributes to a reduction in services to students.
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Changes in DOE's funding formula are part of Special Education Reform. Prior to the Reform, DOE allocated funding to schools based on a classroom model. Schools that had self-contained classes received funding for the teachers to staff the class even if the class was not full. To make efficient use of the allocation, DOE assigned students to unfilled seats in self-contained classrooms based on seat availability, rather than based on the proximity of the school to the student's home. During Phase One, schools received a per pupil allocation and transition funding to cover the cost of unfilled seats.

For the 2012-13 school year, DOE changed the funding formula from classroom funding to a weighted formula that provides funding on a per pupil basis. For Phase One schools, DOE provided transition funding to schools to cover the cost of unfilled seats in self-contained classroom. However, in 2012-13, transition funding was reduced as was the amount allocated for each student in a self-contained classroom<sup>36</sup>. For example, in 2011-12, a high school student who was in an ICT classroom for 60 percent or more of the school day had a weight of 2.10. In 2012-13, the same student had a weight of 1.74, which represents a 17 percent reduction in DOE funding for a student who has no change in services. Concurrently, the funding for a student who was served in a self-contained class from 21 to 59 percent of the day nearly doubled from a weight of 0.68 to 1.25. These changes, while part of DOE Fair Student Funding Resource Guide, surprised and disappointed some principals, including a middle school principal who says, "So, from my understanding and conversations with previous principals who have been part of the Reform, was that they felt there were being punished for adhering to the mandate set by the Reform."

The formula provides a powerful incentive for schools to serve students outside of self-contained classrooms. It would appear that the incentive is intentional, and it is working. There are many – administrators, teachers and parents – who believe that schools cannot readily serve students in self-contained classrooms because of the lack of resources. As a secondary school teacher explains, "my principal is getting rid of things. We won't have self-contained at all next year for middle or high school because we don't have enough staff to do SETSS at every grade and ICT at every grade ..."

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<sup>36</sup> For a detailed description, see Perry and Associates, Inc. August 2012. *Educating All Students Well: Special Education Reform in New York City Public Schools* <http://advocate.nyc.gov/special-ed>, p.27

Furthermore, even though the weight for students served in a less restrictive environment has increased, by moving students into ICT or general education classes, the amount of money allocated to the school is reduced which provides principals with less fiscal flexibility. This reality “hit home” when in January, principals realized that DOE adjusted their budgets to reflect the movement of students out of full-time self-contained classrooms. Interviewees reported their school faced mid-year budget cuts well beyond \$100,000, some in the hundreds of thousands. Only reconsideration by the DOE, and careful analysis of placement, eased the impact for 2012-13.

Reductions in school budgets, the mid-year readjustment of funding levels, and formula changes based on incentives contribute to the wide-spread belief that schools can no longer fund the services students need. As one special education teacher summarizes: “we did the flexible program, like they told us to. They pushed hard for it. We did diagnostics. We sat down and discussed students like they wanted us to. We did it and then they told us that ‘Yeah, you’re not getting funding for those students.’ So you are missing out on hundreds of thousands of dollars. So now we have to go back to the nonflexible program where the kid is in ICT for every single subject, whether they need it or not, just because otherwise we lose so much funding. Just as much as we would love to stay with that model of flexible program, it just obviously is not financially possible...”

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- **Finding 34:** Some principals/schools have been able to fund services for students by eliminating administrative positions, partnering with outside organizations, receiving grants, receiving support/resources from their Networks or spending surpluses. Others are running budget deficits.
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Principals explain that because they believe in the purpose of the Reform, and are aware of the expectation that they implement the Reform, they are making tough decisions about how to spend their resources. Some principals have been fortunate to have external partners who commit resources and/or services to schools. Others are pursuing grants to supplement school funding. A few principals credit their network leaders for providing professional development and other resources which have reduced the impact on their budgets.

Effective partnerships between schools and community-based organizations help schools increase their capacity to better meet the Reform goals. Principals report using these partnerships to strengthen family engagement efforts, provide extracurricular enrichment, contribute to family-like school cultures, and increase available resources. Successful partnerships indirectly support academic engagement and achievement with benefits that extend learning beyond the classroom walls.

Several principals describe making tough decisions about eliminating administrative supports and positions in order to provide more direct instructional supports to students. As a principal explains about being able to hire special education teachers, “The only way that I was really able to was because I had lost an AP that I didn’t replace, so the salary was in the budget.” Other principals describe not anticipating the changes in funding formula and overspending their annual budgets. Some of these principals spent a surplus that they carried forward from previous years, and report that the surplus is depleted. “I manage to get by on grants ... I’m actually tapped out now. This was the last year for it. But when I first took over I had about \$280,000 I was rolling forward...” explains a principal. Others are operating in a deficit, which they expect to impact future allocations. “They saw that I – we used every ounce of our funding for ... direct services to students, so therefore my procurement person in the

network said ‘You have no money to give back. This is going to be moved forward. This debt is moved forward to next year.’”

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- **Finding 35:** Student mobility, particularly having students with disabilities enroll in the school after December 31, impacts the level of support provided to students.
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Student mobility impacts the schools’ ability to provide services to students with disabilities<sup>37</sup>. Schools that have a stable student population, or have students enrolled in a targeted program, are able to better plan to provide services to students in the most fiscally efficient way. Schools that do not know the needs of students who enroll in the school, or have students who enroll in the school during the year are not able to be precise in making staffing decisions and putting supports in place. Interviewees from schools with highly mobile student populations are aware that they do not have the flexibility to respond to shifts in student enrollment as they would like.

Mobility has a financial impact on schools, depending on the time of the year in which students enroll in the school. Special education funding is set based on the special education service category for a student as of December 31. The special education allocation is set based on the December 31 count, and does not change during the year regardless of changes in student population. If students with disabilities enroll in the school anytime later than December 31, the receiving school is expected to provide services to them. The schools’ funding allocation does not change, unless the network can provide additional funding. An influx of students after December 31 means that tight resources must be stretched further.

Interviewees expressed particular resentment toward charter schools, who many believe wait until after December 31 to identify students as having disabilities and redirecting them to traditional public schools. The school does not receive additional funding for these students, which results in fewer resources for all students. The point is made by a middle school principal, “[our school is in a] heavy charter school area and we are now at [a very high] percent of our students are students with disabilities. ... we are overrun right now by charter schools just sending students after the December 31<sup>st</sup> budget deadline. We receive the students, but not the funds. So, that’s how it operates, and that’s how they operate.”

## LEADERSHIP MATTERS

There is a significant amount of research on the principal’s role in leading and sustaining changes in academic programs and school culture<sup>38</sup>. We approached this study with particular attention on gathering what principals of Phase One schools have to say about the implementation of Special Education Reform. We began with a survey of principals which asked about their experiences and for their advice to other principals beginning to implement

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<sup>37</sup> See finding 30.

<sup>38</sup> See for example, Marzano, R.J., Waters, T., and McNulty, B. (2005) *School leadership that works: From research to results*. ASCD and Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning; and Deal, T.E., and Peterson, K.D. (2009) *Shaping school culture: Pitfalls, paradoxes and promises*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Reform<sup>39</sup>. We interviewed principals at the beginning of the school visit so they could set the stage, and at the end of the visit so they could respond to questions raised during other interviews. We conducted three focus groups of principals – one each for principals of elementary, middle and high schools. In concluding this report, we believe it important to call specific attention to our learnings about the principal’s role in leading Reform implementation.

In reviewing the data and the findings in the previous sections, we conclude that *all principals “got the message” from the DOE that they should be implementing the Reform, and they were taking actions to do so*. We report on the specific actions taken by principals in implementing Reform in the other sections of the study. Specifically, we report that principals do some or all of the following: (1) set and communicate expectations for Reform to staff and students, (2) design and/or lead implementation, data and monitoring teams, (3) supervise the IEP review process and/or program changes, (4) schedule time for teachers to plan and collaborate, (5) create more opportunities for flexible scheduling, (6) encourage and develop collaboration among and between special needs and general education teachers, (7) facilitate professional development, and (8) secure resources to provide support to students and teachers. Analyzing data by school level reveal that there are more commonalities in the approaches than differences among the elementary, middle and high school principals. For example, principals at each level describe the importance of creating teams and point persons to plan, guide and execute the implementation. However, the team and point persons vary by school level. Likewise, principals describe their role in promoting and improving ICT classes. However, their approaches to flexible programming are different depending on their school level, size and available resources. It is clear that all Phase One schools are taking the Reform seriously, and altering their practices according to what they think is best at the time for their school.

In addition, we conclude that *most principals are supporting inclusion by pushing to serve students in different placements than those they had considered prior to the Reform*. We describe the shifts in placements from self-contained classes to ICT classes and general education classes (with and without SETSS support) as further evidence that principals are taking actions and changing the delivery models for students with disabilities. It is clear to us in analyzing the interview and focus group data in particular, that principals are aware of the challenges in implementing a co-teaching model, and are thoughtful about the teachers they pair together. They encourage, monitor and provide supports to teachers. They know there is more work to be done before the ICT classes are true models of collaboration, and serve all students well. Many principals describe ICT classes as a work in progress.

Most principals oversee the placement of students into less restrictive environments. They encourage moving students into general education classes for non-academic subjects and for academic classes when students are able to keep pace with their non-disabled peers. Many ensure that monitoring systems are in place. Principals talk with parents about the placement of students. Middle and high school principals, in particular, mention the importance of gradually releasing support for students so students are prepared to independent upon graduation. Many consider students’ socio-emotional well-being as part of their placement, and their continuous assessment of student progress.

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<sup>39</sup> Perry and Associates, Inc. June 2013. *A View into New York City Public Schools’ Implementation of Special Education Reform: Survey of NYC Public School Principals of Phase One Schools*. [http://fundforpublicadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Principal-Survey-Report\\_7-2013.pdf](http://fundforpublicadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Principal-Survey-Report_7-2013.pdf)

We conclude that *only a few principals interviewed have used the Reform as a means to transform their schools into places committed to educating all students to meet high standards. These few principals understand the Reform as more than reassigning students, or simply complying with DOE's expectations for changing services for students. They view the Reform as consistent with their beliefs and practices in dealing with students.* As a middle school principal explains, "...we all believe that children, be they be in special needs programs, or not, can be successful given the proper strategies, instruction, program, methodologies, meeting their learning styles. We're constantly exploring avenues to help. The Reform itself isn't going to fix all schools unless the people within the school understand the realm of possibilities and that each child has individual needs that need to be met. And there are things out there that will meet the specific children's needs. You have to be kept abreast of research and programs and technologies. It's a combined effort in the school." These principals individualize and personalize the learning and monitor the success of every student.

What distinguishes these principals from other principals in the study are the structures, routines and practices they have in place are an extension of their beliefs, and that they take personal responsibility for the success of each individual student. A middle school psychologist who serves several schools describes one of these principals, "I have a couple of principals ... who just don't care about anything but compliance because that is what they are weighted on, and that is what they care about, what their school looks like on paper. But... he is not like that...He really wants to make sure that he is doing what's in the best interest of students."

These few principals lead schools in which they know their students and serve them well. For these principals, success of all students is possible. These principals accept responsibility for providing students with the right supports and individual attention. Interviewees suggest success follows more often than not.



PART TWO:  
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our recommendations are presented in four sections. Messaging that is consistent with the Reform's goals and effective pathways for communication are essential to successful citywide policy implementation. Section One offers three recommendations to strengthen and deepen communications to clarify expectations about the Reform. The Reform's central philosophy of inclusion and access must be the driving force behind the approach taken toward school culture and processes. Section Two recommends six budget neutral actions that can be taken to strengthen Reform implementation. We believe that schools and DOE must work in concert in acting on these recommendations.

Professional development and training is necessary to support administrators and teachers change their practices. Section Three provides six recommendations for rethinking professional development across all levels of the system, and installing an infrastructure of shared learning that supports Reform growth. Finally, we heard near unanimous agreement that the progress of Special Education Reform is dependent on an investment or realignment of financial resources. Section Four suggests consideration of seven changes in funding specific structures, programs and services that would help move the Reform along toward greater progress.

## **COMMUNICATIONS AND MESSAGING**

**Recommendation 1: *All direct and indirect interaction with schools about the Reform should reinforce its central tenants and DOE's commitment to Reform's long-term success.*** The DOE needs a comprehensive strategy for communicating the purpose of the Reform to principals and schools, and throughout the system. The strategy should align the multiple ways that messages are sent, including directives, accountability systems, professional development, funding, and use of time, with making feasible Reform implementation a priority. This approach should clarify expectations between central DOE and principals, and between principals and their staff for achieving the goals of the Reform. Further, the strategy should be intentional about engaging parents and advocates who can be helpful in reinforcing expectations for schools.

**Recommendation 2: *Communication about the Reform should be two-way, with schools offering DOE decision makers suggestions for achieving the Reform goals.*** School administrators, staff and parents should provide regular and continuous feedback to the DOE that is acknowledged, respected, and responded to. In order to accomplish this, there needs to be a clear and fluid communication pipeline between the central office and the schools. This communication structure needs to focus primarily on interactions that lead to a deeper understanding of promising practices and adequate supports. Teachers and parents must also be included in this reciprocal form of communication so that their input is heard as a central aspect of DOE communication.

**Recommendation 3: *School experience and expertise must be recognized and shared across all levels of the DOE.*** In order for schools to learn effective practices as locally as possible, communication systems among schools must be organized by the DOE. At these meetings, administrators, teachers and staff can learn from each other about solutions that have worked for their peers in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Emphasis should be placed on "seeing successful practice" in meeting Reform goals and having opportunities for collegial conversations that enable administrators and teachers to discover solutions for effective teaching, planning, programming and budgeting.

## APPROACHES AND ATTITUDES

**Recommendation 4: *All schools should continue to strengthen and maintain rigorous curriculum and make it a priority to empower their students, especially at the middle school and high school level, by communicating high expectations for successful achievement and college access.*** Rigorous curriculum must be taught within attainable goals that motivate students and foster confidence, while advancing their potential and academic growth. Students must be exposed to various communities, potential fields of interest, and college options beginning in middle school so they are considering post-secondary options and what it takes to get there.

**Recommendation 5: *Each school must intentionally create an atmosphere and culture of inclusion, which requires mutual respect, tolerance and appreciation.*** Reform changes must be deeper than simply fine-tuning administrative systems so that movement towards less restrictive environments truly coincides with increased access to rigorous curriculum and greater potential for academic success. Flexible programming as an administrative tool must be housed within a deeper, philosophical mission that perpetuates a school atmosphere with an inclusive nature and family-like feeling. Doing so will allow programs to thrive that are designed to create quality, inclusive educational experiences for students with disabilities to fully participate and progress.

**Recommendation 6: *Schools should incorporate multiple post-graduation pathways and options into their counseling of students about plans and goals for their future with integrated access to career training and job placement.*** Students need to graduate high school with a plan for their next steps in life, whether they will be starting college or beginning their career in another way. Schools should encourage all students to apply to and attend college directly after high school, and recognize that students may choose not to do so. The process needs to begin early, and at the latest, middle school. Counselors should discuss students' interests, goals, and concerns with them and provide information about resources that can help them achieve those goals. For students who will not attend college right after high school graduation, guidance and assistance must be provided to access their options including field requirements, job applications, training and hiring processes.

**Recommendation 7: *Schools should be accountable for meeting the needs of each student, and compliance should be defined as such.*** The DOE needs to improve its approach to monitoring to ensure that a school in compliance is utilizing the continuum of services to support successful mainstreaming and access to rigorous curriculum, not to create comparable plans that may not offer the appropriate level of support. In particular, that IEPs accurately reflect students' needs must be carefully monitored so that compliance means a school is offering what is in the best interest of the child. Schools should be held accountable for this by first ensuring that the IEP matches the students' needs, then checking for the provision of those services, evaluating that the services offered are of high quality, and lastly, monitoring student progress.

**Recommendation 8: *Network teams must be held responsible for responding to schools' and parents' concerns when they are struggling to meet students' needs in ways that does not pressure administrators to create ineffective "comparable plans" for students' IEPs.*** The network needs to fulfill its responsibility to work with principals to identify a solution to a school-level problem when administrators need assistance in providing what is best for the child. Schools need to be honest with their supervisors, and staff need to be honest with their principals and parents, about exactly when and how services are *not* matching students' needs, why doing so is a challenge, and how the issue can be solved.

**Recommendation 9: *Parents' input needs to be prioritized at IEP meetings and parents should be made aware of their right to bring someone who can help them.*** The parents' seat at the table should be elevated beyond the legal requirement of their signature that requires their presence. Parents know their children best and therefore their insight must be sought after, thoroughly understood and prioritized in the discussion about their child. The assistance of an informed advocate should help ensure that communication is honest, open, and effective for all parents at these important meetings. They can also assist in coordinating proactive communication with hard to reach parents/guardians.

## **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING**

**Recommendation 10: *Principals need more opportunities to learn from others about their critical role as a leader in Reform success. Principals need to take actions consistent with the best practices.*** Achieving all four goals collectively is essential to the success of the Reform. The best practices that principals report using<sup>40</sup> to deepen implementation need to be reinforced across schools. Principals need help in sharing the ways they are applying the practices in their schools, and need to receive support for their use. Principals also need to be given more information and training about how to make their administrative decisions within the context of the Reform, including budgetary and programmatic choices that make it possible to create flexible programs that are in the best interest of their students.

**Recommendation 11: *DOE should re-align support to schools in ways that provide more time, resources and access to dynamic and meaningful professional development for school staff specific to translating the implementation of both the Reform and Common Core Standards into differentiated classroom instruction.*** School-based professional development must include teaching strategies, models and ideas including those from District 75 schools that provide clarity around what successful implementation of all these measures looks like, as well as more knowledge overall about the disabilities that teachers are most likely to encounter, specifically emotional disturbances, learning disabilities and autism. In particular, more school-based professional development should be provided about:

- a) Background information on specific disabilities and what may be expected from students with various classifications.
- b) Strategies for differentiating instruction and managing the classroom in an inclusive setting. This includes specific methods of differentiating the academic content for every subject area and managing the social and behavioral aspects of each student.
- c) Models of successful ICT implementation that break down the ideal structure of the co-teaching model including collaborative planning and effective co-teaching.

**Recommendation 12: *Provide school-based professional development for integrated co-teaching to general education, special education and paraprofessionals together working in teams.*** Expectations for general and special education teachers and related service providers working together collaboratively should be clear and

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<sup>40</sup> See the eight leadership practices in the second paragraph of Section H

demonstrate a shared sense of responsibility for student success. The roles and responsibilities of teachers and providers should be realistic and reflect supports and resources available at each school. Plans for school-based professional development should include time within the school day that teams have to plan and analyze lessons, review data, discuss student progress, and examine and plan differentiated instructional strategies.

**Recommendation 13: DOE should provide schools with information to understand and appropriately classify students with emotional disturbance and monitor their appropriate placement.** Schools need to be given clear directives and supports to improve understanding and define behavioral challenges for all students. Monitoring should ensure that students with emotional disturbance receive effective services, programming and teaching that includes them in the movement towards placement in less restrictive environments.

**Recommendation 14: School staff should be trained and expected to be proactive and conscious about racial advocacy and justice work in schools.** Schools must pay particular attention to the presence of racial stereotypes and stigmas in order to prevent personal bias and misunderstandings that negatively influence school climate, teaching, learning and how students are treated. Schools need to be aware that racial and cultural biases affect referral and placement of African American and Latino boys in special education. Schools should not shy away from naming racial concerns/disparities. Schools should monitor overrepresentation and seek out models of equitable discipline approaches.

**Recommendation 15: Psychologists require additional supports that ensure they have ample time and training to provide updated, authentic assessments and special education service recommendations that are in line with the Reform goals.** Psychologists need to have the tools and training to assess students and provide service recommendations based on current policy changes including the Reform and Common Core. Psychologists must remain key participants in IEP team meetings and the range of recommended services must not be narrowed to what is readily available at the school. Their case load must ensure each student receives enough time for detailed assessments.

## **INVESTMENTS, SUPPORTS, AND STRUCTURES**

**Recommendation 16: Funding mechanisms need to support schools in serving students well while reinforcing the Reform as a DOE priority.** Transition funding that holds schools harmless for shifting students into less restrictive environments should be part of the implementation strategy. Transition funding will help ensure that the Reform is monitored and that the efforts of principals in trying to achieve the goals are not undermined by a lack of supports and resources. Funding formula adjustments should incentivize Reform implementation while also ensuring that there are sufficient resources to provide students with needed supports as defined in their IEP. Schools should be transparent in letting teachers and parents know how transitional funding is spent so they can better understand the schools' efforts in implementing the Reform. The assumption should be that Reform requires personnel and tools, and not less money in the short term.

**Recommendation 17: Access to up-to-date technological tools and fast internet speeds must be supported with continued financial resources and/or partnerships to help make access possible for all students.** All classrooms need to be equipped with tools to provide for access to interactive software and assistive technology for

teaching and classroom assignments as part of the strategies for differentiating instruction and increasing access to rigorous curriculum especially for students with disabilities.

**Recommendation 18: Schools should select, implement and sustain a positive behavior/discipline system or strategy proven effective.** Schools need to be given greater means of implementing these strategies and techniques that support the responsibility of administrators and teachers for the social and emotional health of students as much as their academic advancement. The effective monitoring of these systems should include tracking the number of students referred for special education services.

**Recommendation 19: The DOE should dedicate funding for a Special Education coordinator at all schools.** A person who is familiar with the expectations under the Reform needs to fill the role of coordinating services and monitoring programming to ensure that all students receive services that are aligned with their needs. This person will also check that all staff working with the student, teachers, service providers and paraprofessionals are collaborating and that their roles are synchronized. He/she will also act as a liaison between the principal and administrative team meetings and the school staff so there is established and effective communication in the school about all students with an IEP.

**Recommendation 20: An interactive computer database for IEPs such as SESIS should remain, but the tremendously burdensome technical challenges must be corrected. SESIS should be one of several ways in which schools are considered in compliance.** SESIS needs to be streamlined with the other existing database systems and the software itself must become more user-friendly. An in-depth review and adjustment of its technical glitches is necessary. There should also be clear guidelines and support for writing all IEPs well with specificity and accuracy before they are finalized and shared.

**Recommendation 21: Home Zone should remain in effect and schools should be provided the support they need or allowed to pool resources to reduce crowding and accommodate student's needs.** We recommend that the DOE create a thoughtful process for trying to resolve tensions over student placement and school and classroom crowding. The resolution should involve pooling resources across schools to meet the needs of students in such a way that promotes the spirit of the Home Zone provision. That is, schools should be encouraged to take responsibility for students in their zone and discouraged from removing students from their zone school, but given avenues to utilize additional resources when they cannot sufficiently meet a student's needs.

**Recommendation 22: DOE should increase opportunities for music, arts, athletic programs and afterschool enrichment as a critical component of addressing the needs of all students, especially students with disabilities.** Even in tight budgetary times, we recommend that DOE be serious in its attempt to try to reallocate funding and create opportunities to expand access to instruction in music, arts, athletics and afterschool programs. Schools should not be left on their own to find the funding necessary to support these programs.



# APPENDICES

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research effort is designed to provide key information needed to develop recommendations and plans for implementation in addressing New York City Public School's Special Education Reform. It is a mixed-methods study, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative elements.

### Qualitative indicators

#### *School sample*

In dialogue with the DOE, Perry and Associates Inc. selected 25 Phase One schools for in-depth school visits from within the larger pool of 255 schools implementing the Reform.<sup>41</sup> The 25 schools in the study sample are not selected randomly; they are selected proportionally based on Phase One school demographics. Phase One schools serve higher proportions of Hispanic students, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities. Also, nearly half of Phase One schools are located in the Bronx (see Table 5). Phase One schools have a range of grade levels, with about 46 percent serving elementary school students and 33 percent serving students in high schools. The study sample of 25 schools is proportionally similar to the 255 Phase One schools. Of the 25 schools, 12 are elementary schools, four are middle schools, seven are high schools and two are secondary schools. We also chose a representative number of schools from each borough and network (see Tables 6 and 7). 12 schools are located in the Bronx, six in Manhattan, five in Brooklyn, one in Queens and one in Staten Island.

#### *School interviews*

In-depth, extensive qualitative interviews at 25 Phase One schools were conducted during February through May 2013. At each school we requested to conduct solo interviews with the principal, a special education coordinator (such as an assistant principal), an IEP coordinator (such as a school psychologist), a service provider (such as a guidance counselor or social worker), and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) chapter leader. We also requested small group interviews with special education teachers, general education teachers, paraprofessionals, parents of students with disabilities, parents of general education students, and, at the high school level, students.

A total of 269 interviews were conducted in the schools. P&A ensured that the names of the schools and interviewees would be held in confidence, and interviewees and their schools would not be identified in the report. The school visits were conducted, typically, in a two-day period, by one researcher. Principals were asked to select interviewees that matched P&A's guidelines. Principals were given most flexibility in selecting parents and students. In three schools, interviews of parents proved impossible to arrange. Most interviews were 45-60 minutes. Principals were interviewed twice – at the start and completion of the visit. Interview protocols are found in Appendix Two.

#### *Focus Groups*

11 focus groups were also conducted during March through May 2013. The three focus groups of principals (one elementary school, one middle school and one high school focus group) were convened with the assistance of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators. The three focus groups of teachers, one focus group of paraprofessionals, and one focus group of related service providers were arranged with the assistance of the United Federation of Teachers Special Education Office. The three focus groups of parents were arranged with the assistance of the ARISE Coalition. We were also assisted by the Office of the Bronx Borough President and the

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<sup>41</sup> 100 elementary schools, 60 middle schools and 100 high schools across all five boroughs – participated in Phase One of special education reform in New York City Public Schools.

Brooklyn Center for Independence of the Disabled who hosted focus groups in the Bronx and Brooklyn respectively. Our attempts to organize focus groups of related service providers and high school students proved unsuccessful. Each of the focus groups met for 60-90 minutes. Participants were mostly selected from among Phase One schools that were not schools visited for the study. A few participants were not from Phase One schools. Interview protocols for the focus groups, found in Appendix Two, were consistent with the protocols used for the school visits.

### **Analysis**

A total of 453 people were interviewed in schools and in focus groups. Each of the interviews was transcribed. In turn, the interviews were entered into the qualitative data analysis and research software, Atlas.ti creating a database that was then coded to track findings and trends, and assist in analyzing results. Once responses were coded, analysis of the statements was synthesized by the research team across interviews which led to research findings.

### **Quantitative indicators**

In addition to the geographic, network and school tier criteria, quantitative criteria were used in selecting interview schools representative of Phase One schools. All selected interview schools had at least five percent enrollment of students with disabilities. In addition, the following data were considered:

- A) Number of Students with Disabilities (SwD) tested and proficient in ELA.
- B) Number of SwD tested and proficient in math.
- C) Graduation rates.
- D) Dropout rates.
- E) Percentage of students with IEPs present.
- F) Percentage of students with IEPs absent.
- G) Percentage of student recommendations to Least Restrictive Environments (LRE)
- H) Percentage LRE of School.
- I) Percentage of student recommendations to More Restrictive Environments (MRE).
- J) Percentage MRE of school.
- K) Percentage of students passing regents in Comprehensive English.
- L) Percentage of students passing regents in Integrated Algebra.

The following tables and analysis match 25 Phase One interview schools to Phase One schools and to a set of comparison schools created by DOE in 2011-12 school year. Comparison schools are non-Phase One New York Public Schools that are chosen because their student demographics and performance are similar to those of Phase One schools. Table 1 reports data on all schools, while Tables 2 – 4 report data by elementary, middle and high schools, respectively.

## TABLE 1

Table 1 presents data on students with disabilities in all Phase One schools, comparison schools, and 25 Phase One interview schools on a variety of variables. Data indicate almost no percentage differences between Phase One schools, comparison schools and 25 Phase One interview schools on the following test variables:

- Percent SwD proficient in ELA 2012 – comparison schools (12%), Phase One schools (13%), 25 Phase One interview schools (12%).
- Percent SwD proficient in math 2012 – comparison schools (28%), Phase One schools (30%), 25 Phase One interview schools (29%).

In contrast to proficiency scores on Math and LRE, larger percentage differences are identified for students with disabilities passing regents in Comprehensive English and Integrated Algebra between the 25 Phase One interview schools and the other two school groups:

- Percent SwD passing Regents in Comprehensive English - comparison schools (36%), Phase One schools (35%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**48%**).
- Percent SwD passing Regents in Algebra – comparison schools (24%), Phase One schools (26%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**38%**).

Similarly, data indicate graduation rates in 2010 and 2011 for SwD in the 25 Phase One interview schools are higher than rates in the other two school groups:

- Graduation rates SwD 2010 – comparison schools (42%), Phase One (41%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**63%**)
- Graduation rates SwD 2011 – comparison schools (45%), Phase One schools (39%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**72%**).

Phase One 2011-2012 schools, Comparison Groups, and Interview Schools  
SwD Performance

	Comparison Schools	All Phase One Schools	25 Phase Interview One Schools
Total Enrollment*	159,343	142,182	12,262
Total SwD*	24,623	22,234	2,184
Percent SwD	15%	16%	18%
SwD Tested ELA 2012	11,386	9,146	868
SwD Proficient ELA 2012	1,370	1,195	103
Percent SwD Proficient ELA 2012	12%	13%	12%
SwD Tested Math 2012	11,380	9,148	867
SwD Proficient Math 2012	3,233	2,790	251
Percent SwD Proficient Math 2012	28%	30%	29%
SwD in Cohort (2010)	1419	1367	80
Total Graduates (2010)	590	564	50
Graduation Rate SwD (2010)	42%	41%	63%
SwD in Cohort (2011)	1,518	1,458	65
Total Graduates (2011)	683	570	47
Graduation Rate SwD (2011)	45%	39%	72%
Dropout Rate SwD	20%	21%	N/A
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Present	89%	89%	90%
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Absent	11%	11%	10%
Recommendations to LRE	2,945	2,524	190
Percent LRE of all Recommendations	57%	57%	53%
Percent LRE of School	2%	2%	2%
Recommendations to MRE	2,264	1,927	171
Percent MRE of all Recommendations	43%	43%	47%
Percent MRE of School	1%	1%	1%
<b>Comprehensive English</b>			
Total SwD Taking 2012 Regents	2390	2268	186
SwD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents	1522	1477	96
SwD Scoring 65 or greater on Regents	868	791	90
Percent SwD passing Regents	36%	35%	48%
<b>Integrated Algebra</b>			
Total SwD Taking 2012 Regents	4,052	3,889	327
SwD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents	3,095	2,869	203
SwD Scoring 65 or greater on Regents	957	1020	124
Percent SwD passing Regents	24%	26%	38%

\*Data on enrollment, IEP, LRE, and MRE was based on the Audited Register (AR) for each school year (published: October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011)

\*Data on students with disabilities (SwD) was pulled from the Child Assistance Program (CAP) register data snapshot (published: November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Note: No data available for some sections as indicated with "N/A"

**TABLE 2**

Table 2 presents available data on students with disabilities in elementary schools only.

- The percent SwD proficient in ELA was virtually the same in all three school groups – comparison schools (17%), Phase One schools (15%), 25 Phase One interview schools (16%).
- There were small percentage differences between the school groups in percent SwD proficient in Math - comparison schools (36%), Phase One schools (33%), 25 Phase One interview schools (31%).

*Elementary Schools: Phase One 2011-2012 schools, interview, and comparison groups  
SwD performance*

	<b>Comparison Schools</b>	<b>Phase One Schools</b>	<b>25 Phase One Interview Schools</b>
Total Enrollment*	65,048	63,528	5,665
Total SwD*	9,527	9,888	1,085
Percent SwD	15%	16%	19%
SwD Tested ELA 2012	4,910	5,305	482
SwD Proficient ELA 2012	824	803	76
Percent SwD Proficient ELA 2012	17%	15%	16%
SwD Tested Math 2012	4,906	5,302	482
SwD Proficient Math 2012	1,759	1,756	151
Percent SwD Proficient Math 2012	36%	33%	31%
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Present	92%	92%	92%
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Absent	8%	8%	8%
Recommendations to LRE	1,323	1,243	153
Percent LRE of all Recommendations	55%	52%	49%
Percent LRE of School	2%	2%	3%
Recommendations to MRE	1,065	1,142	157
Percent MRE of all Recommendations	45%	48%	51%
Percent MRE of School	2%	2%	3%

\*Data on enrollment, IEP, LRE, and MRE was based on the Audited Register (AR) for each school year (published: October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011)

\*Data on students with disabilities (SwD) was pulled from the Child Assistance Program (CAP) register data snapshot (published: November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Note: No data available for some sections as indicated with "N/A"



**TABLE 3**

Table 3 presents available data on students with disabilities in Middle Schools only.

- Proficiency rates for middle schools in ELA are low across all three groups – Percent SwD proficient in ELA 2012 – comparison schools (6%), Phase One schools (8%), 25 Phase One interview schools (5%).
- Proficiency rates for middle schools in Math are consistent and low across all three school groups – comparison schools (20%), Phase One schools (22%), 25 Phase One interview schools (22%).
- In the 25 Phase One interview schools, the percent of students recommended to the least restrictive environment (LRE), was strikingly higher than in the other two school groups – comparison schools (52%), Phase One schools (58%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**72%**).

*Middle Schools: Phase One 2011-2012 schools, interview, and comparison groups  
SwD performance*

	<b>Comparison Schools</b>	<b>Phase One Schools</b>	<b>25 Phase One Interview Schools</b>
Total Enrollment*	26,609	15,908	2,203
Total SwD*	5,005	2,889	409
Percent SwD	19%	18%	19%
SwD Tested ELA 2012	4,348	2,333	307
SwD Proficient ELA 2012	270	186	15
Percent SwD Proficient ELA 2012	6%	8%	5%
SwD Tested Math 2012	4,354	2,329	307
SwD Proficient Math 2012	882	506	67
Percent SwD Proficient Math 2012	20%	22%	22%
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Present	89%	90%	87%
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Absent	11%	10%	13%
Recommendations to LRE	795	391	21
Percent LRE of all Recommendations	52%	58%	72%
Percent LRE of School	3%	2%	1%
Recommendations to MRE	738	278	8
Percent MRE of all Recommendations	48%	42%	28%
Percent MRE of School	3%	2%	<1%

\*Data on enrollment, IEP, LRE, and MRE was based on the Audited Register (AR) for each school year (published: October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011)

\*Data on students with disabilities (SwD) was pulled from the Child Assistance Program (CAP) register data snapshot (published: November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Note: No data available for some sections as indicated with "N/A"

**TABLE 4**

Table 4 presents available data on students with disabilities in high schools only.

- High school graduation rates for SwD in the 25 Phase One interview schools are consistently higher than rates in Phase One schools and comparison schools in 2010 – comparison schools (40%), Phase One schools (41%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**63%**).
- Increases in graduation rates for SwD in high schools are sustained in 2011 – comparison schools (44%), Phase One schools (39%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**72%**).
- The percent of SwD passing Regents in Comprehensive English are higher in the 25 Phase One interview schools than in Comprehensive Schools and Phase One schools – comparison schools (36%), Phase One schools (35%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**48%**)
- The percent of SwD passing Regents in Integrated Algebra are higher in the 25 Phase One interview schools than in comprehensive schools and Phase One schools – comprehensive schools (22%), Phase One schools (26%), 25 Phase One interview schools (**46%**).

*High Schools: Phase One 2011-2012 schools, Interview, and comparison groups  
SwD performance*

	<b>Comparison Schools</b>	<b>Phase One Schools</b>	<b>25 Phase One Interview Schools</b>
Total Enrollment*	41,212	41,299	3,271
Total SwD*	6,045	6,214	538
Percent SwD	15%	15%	16%
SwD in Cohort (2010)	1226	1247	79
Total Graduates (2010)	492	509	50
Graduation Rate SwD (2010)	40%	41%	63%
SWD in Cohort (2011)	1305	1275	65
Total Graduates (2011)	574	492	47
Graduation Rate SwD (2011)	44%	39%	72%
Dropout Rate SwD	21%	21%	N/A
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Present	81%	82%	87%
Percentage Students w/ IEPs Absent	19%	18%	13%
Recommendations to LRE	411	497	16
Percent LRE of all Recommendations	63%	63%	73%
Percent LRE of School	1%	1%	<1%
Recommendations to MRE	242	297	6
Percent MRE of all Recommendations	37%	37%	27%
Percent MRE of School	1%	1%	<1%
<b>Comprehensive English</b>			
Total SwD Taking 2012 Regents	1,978	1,928	174
SwD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents	1,270	1,244	90
SwD Scoring 65 or greater on Regents	708	684	84
Percent SwD passing Regents	36%	35%	48%

<b>Integrated Algebra</b>			
Total SwD Taking 2012 Regents	3,467	3,130	253
SwD Scoring Less than 65 on Regents	2,714	2,328	136
SwD Scoring 65 or greater on Regents	753	802	117
Percent SwD passing Regents	22%	26%	46%

\*Data on enrollment, IEP, LRE, and MRE was based on the Audited Register (AR) for each school year (published: October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011)

\*Data on students with disabilities (SwD) was pulled from the Child Assistance Program (CAP) register data snapshot (published: November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Note: No data available for some sections as indicated with "N/A"

# APPENDIX ONE

## DOE TERMS AND EXPLANATIONS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

### What is Special Education?

Special Education services are provided to students with a disability that impact their ability to access the curriculum and ability to learn.

### What are the Steps in the Special Education Process?

1. Referral – begins the evaluation and placement process to determine whether your child has a disability and should receive special education services;
2. Evaluation
3. IEP team meeting;
4. Determination of your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) – the programs and services that will help him or her achieve
5. Provision of programming and services;
6. Review of IEP (these occur annually and are referred to as an "Annual" or "Mandated Three Year Reevaluation")

### Who is on the IEP Team?

The IEP Team consists of parents, school personnel who know your child, and additional individuals with knowledge or special expertise about your child.

### Determining Eligibility

The IEP Team will decide whether your child is eligible for special education services. A School-age student is eligible for special education services if the student:

- Meets the criteria for one or more of the disability classifications; and
- The student requires approved special education services and programs

The disability classifications are: Autism, deafness, deaf-blindness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, learning disability, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment.

### What is an IEP?

The IEP is created at the IEP team meeting. It documents your child's eligibility for special education services and formalizes, in writing, the Department of Education's plan for providing your child with a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). LRE means that your child will be educated alongside his or her peers to the maximum extent possible.

### What is in the IEP?

The IEP must contain detailed information about your child and the education program designed to meet his or her unique needs. This information includes: Present level of performance, measurable annual goals,

recommended special education programs and services, participation in state and district-wide assessments, promotion criteria, diploma objective, dates and places, and reporting progress to parents language of instruction.

## APPENDIX TWO

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR SCHOOL VISITS

#### Interview with the Principal

##### Reform Goals

- In your understanding, what are the goals of this special education Reform? Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share your school's plan for achieving those goals.
- With whom have you shared the goals of this special education Reform? What have been their reactions?
- With whom was your school's plan developed? Were parents, teachers or other administrative staff involved?

##### Students with Disabilities

- How many students with disabilities are there in your school (confirm from database)? Has this number as a percentage of your students changed in SY 2010-11? In SY 2011-12? If so, why do you think the percentage changed?
- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities in this school. What kinds of disabilities do students have? What is the gender breakdown of SWD? What is the racial breakdown of SWD?

##### Reform Implementation

- What are some successes as a result of this Reform?
- What are some obstacles in implementing this Reform?
- What, if any, impact has assigning students to a school in their home zone had for your school?
- How has your staffing changed as a result of this Reform?
- How did you make budgetary decisions related to this Reform?
- How has your school's approach to meeting the needs of SWD changed as a result of this Reform?

##### Reform Support

- Has training and support associated with this Reform been available to your school staff? What type of training was it? Who has provided this training?
- Was this training helpful for you and your teachers to implement the curricular, instructional and scheduling changes needed to ensure student success? Were there any gaps?
- What additional information and training/support do you need to improve your ability to support students with disabilities and teachers?

##### Reform Accountability/Changes

- How do you monitor progress of students with disabilities (academic, discipline, other)? If yes, what data/information do you gather to monitor progress?



- How do you collect feedback on implementation from teachers? What questions or concerns have been raised?
- How has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD? What stood in the way of making these changes before this Reform? Were the goals of this Reform already being implemented?

Other

- What advice would you give to other schools as they implement this Reform?
- Are there questions I should have asked?
- Is there additional information regarding this Reform you would like to share with me?

High School Principals are asked an additional question:

- How is each student with an IEP being prepared for college and/or career opportunities beyond high school? Is a plan for this written into their IEP?

### **Interview with the Person Responsible for Coordinating Special Education: such as - Assistant Principal**

Reform Goals

- What have you been told about this special education Reform? In your understanding, what are the goals of this special education Reform?
- Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals.

Students with Disabilities and Eligibility

- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities in this school. What kinds of disabilities do students have? What is the gender breakdown of SWD? What is the racial breakdown of SWD?
- What factors determine decisions about students' services and program recommendations?
- Walk me through the process by which a student is diagnosed as having a disability.

LRE

- Walk me through the process by which the least restrictive environment (LRE) for a student with disabilities is determined and services provided.
- Do you think that all of your students with disabilities are spending as much time as appropriate, given their individual needs, in classes with their non-disabled peers? What obstacles have you overcome and do you still face?
- Do you have students in self-contained classes? If those placements are in the student's best interest, do you have plans for integrating these students into less restrictive environments? What obstacles have you overcome do you still face?

IEP

- Has the quality of student IEPs improved in your school? Are functional assessments of the students' academic, social, physical and management needs being considered? How do you know?

- How do you ensure that students receive the services as specified in their IEPs?
- How do you monitor student progress? What data/information do you use?

#### Reform Changes

- How has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD? What stood in the way of making these changes before this Reform? Were the goals of this Reform already being implemented?
- Are students doing better as a result of this Reform?

#### Other

- Are there questions I should have asked? Is there anything else regarding the Reform that you would like to share with me?

### **Interview with the Person Responsible for Coordinating IEP Teams: such as - School Psychologist**

#### Reform Goals

- What have you been told about this special education Reform? In your understanding, what are the goals of this special education Reform?
- Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals.

#### Students with Disabilities and Eligibility

- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities in this school. What kinds of disabilities do students have? What is the gender breakdown of SWD? What is the racial breakdown of SWD?
- What factors does the IEP team consider in making decisions about students' services and program recommendations for students with disabilities? Has the school's plan for serving SWD had an impact on the recommendations?
- Walk me through the process by which a student is diagnosed as having a disability.

#### IEP

- Has the quality of student IEPs improved in your school? Are functional assessments of the students' academic, social, physical and management needs being considered? How do you know?
- How do you ensure that students receive the services as specified in their IEPs? What is your role in this process?

#### Reform Accountability and Support

- What data do you use to monitor the progress of students with disabilities?
- What training and support associated with this Reform has been available to you and other staff? Who has provided the training?
- What additional information and training/support do you need to improve your ability to support students and teachers?

### Reform Changes

- How has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD? What stood in the way of making these changes before this Reform? Were the goals of this Reform already being implemented?

### Other

- What would you change in how you work with schools to best utilize your knowledge and skills?
- Are students doing better as a result of this Reform?
- Are there questions I should have asked? Is there anything else regarding the Reform that you would like to share with me?

## **Interview with a Service Provider: Social Worker or Guidance Counselor**

### Reform Goals

- What have you been told about this special education Reform? In your understanding, what are the goals of this special education Reform?
- Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals.

### Students with Disabilities and Eligibility

- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities in this school. What kinds of disabilities do students have? What is the gender breakdown of SWD? What is the racial breakdown of SWD?
- What factors determine decisions about students' services and program recommendations?
- Describe your role in assisting students with disabilities?

### IEP

- Walk me through the process by which a student is diagnosed as having a disability. Has the quality of student IEPs improved in your school? Are functional assessments of the students' academic, social, physical and management needs being considered? How do you know?
- How do you ensure that students receive the services as specified in their IEPs?

### Reform Changes

- How has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD? What stood in the way of making these changes before this Reform? Were the goals of this Reform already being implemented?
- Are students doing better as a result of the Reform?

### Other

- Are there questions I should have asked? Is there anything else regarding the Reform that you would like to share with me?

## Interviews with Teachers

### Background

- Tell me about your background and experience teaching in NYC public schools.
- Tell me about your experience teaching in special education / working with students with disabilities? (if applicable)
- How long have you worked at (current school)?

### Reform Goals

- What have you been told about this special education Reform? In your understanding, what are the goals of this special education Reform?
- Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals.

### Students with Disabilities

- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities in your class. What kinds of disabilities do students have? What is the gender breakdown of SWD in your classroom? What is the racial breakdown of SWD in your classroom?

### Reform Implementation

- What has changed for you and your students as a result of this Reform?
- What does flexible programming look like in this school?
- How do you design instruction to maximize the learning of all students, including students with disabilities? Have your instruction strategies changed as a result of this Reform?
- When and how often do you collaborate with other teachers, or paraprofessionals, to align and strengthen support to students? Has this changed due to this Reform?

### Reform Support and Changes

- What training or support have you received to better implement this Reform? Who has provided this training? What has been the best support/training you have received?
- What additional information and training/support do you need to improve your capacity to work in classrooms that include students with disabilities?
- How has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD? What stood in the way of making these changes before this Reform? Were the goals of this Reform already being implemented?

### Other

- Are students doing better as a result of this Reform?
- Would you say other teachers share your opinions about this special education Reform?
- Are there questions I should have asked? Is there anything else regarding this Reform that you would like to share with me

## Interviews with Paraprofessionals

### Background

- Tell me about your background and experience teaching in NYC public schools.
- Tell me about your experience teaching in special education / working with students with disabilities? (if applicable)
- How long have you worked at (current school)?

### Reform Goals

- What have you been told about this special education Reform? In your understanding, what are the goals of this special education Reform?
- Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals.

### Students with Disabilities

- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities in your class. What kinds of disabilities do students have? What is the gender breakdown of SWD in your classroom? What is the racial breakdown of SWD in your classroom?

### Reform Implementation

- What has changed for you and your students as a result of this Reform?
- What does flexible programming look like in this school?
- What instructional strategies do you use to maximize the learning of all students, including students with disabilities? Have your instruction strategies changed as a result of this Reform?
- When and how often do you collaborate with other teachers and paraprofessionals to align and strengthen support to students? Has this changed due to this Reform?

### Reform Support and Changes

- What training or support have you received to better implement this Reform? Who has provided this training?
- What additional information and training/support do you need to improve your capacity to work in classrooms that include students with disabilities?
- How has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD? What stood in the way of making these changes before this Reform? Were the goals of this Reform already being implemented?

### Other

- Are students doing better as a result of this Reform?
- Are there questions I should have asked? Is there anything else regarding this Reform that you would like to share with me?

## **Interviews with Parents**

### Student

- How did you choose this school? What was involved?
- Does your child have any special learning needs?
- With whom have you spoken about special education services, how they can support your child and what part you can play in the process?
- Is your child in the appropriate classes? Did you play a role in his/her class choice this year?
- How would you like to see your child progress in school this year?
- What would you like to see continued in your child's education program?
- What would you like to see change in your child's education program?

### Reform Goals

- Have you, in the last year, received any information about the current special education Reform?
- In your understanding, what are the goals of this special education Reform? Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals?
- Were you or other parents involved in developing your school's plan? What role did you play?

### Reform Implementation

- How has this current special education Reform affected your child's education?
- Can you point to any changes in your school's approach to meeting the needs of SWD as a result of this Reform?
- What, if any, impact has assigning students to a school in their home zone had for you or your child?
- What advice would you give to other parents as schools implement this Reform?

### High School Parents are asked an additional question:

- How is your child being prepared for college and/or career opportunities beyond high school? Is a plan for this written into their IEP?

### Other

- Are there questions I should have asked?
- Is there additional information regarding this Reform or your child you would like to share with me?

## **Interview with Students with disabilities placed in a general education class**

### Student and Reform Background Information

- Tell me your name, what grade you are in and how long you have been in this school?
- What kind of transportation do you use to get to school? How long does it take you to get to school?

- Tell me what you know about this special education Reform? How do you think it affects you?
- What have you been told is the reason that you were assigned to \_\_\_\_\_ class? (Need to clarify which school year.)
- Were you involved in the decisions about what classes to take this year?
- Are the classes you are in this year different than the classes you were in last year?

#### Classroom Experience

- Tell me a little bit about your experience in your classes and how they are taught.
- What is your day like?
- Do you work in groups with other students?
- Do you have one-on-one time with teachers?
- Do you have the same tests as other students?
- Last year, were you in classes in which all students were receiving extra/special education support?
- Does the teacher provide any help to you that is different than he/she provides to other students?
- Do you receive special help with your class work from other teachers? When is that help provided?
- If you are having difficulty in your classes, or with your class work after school, how do you get help/support?
- How are you doing in your classes? Is the work harder or easier than the work last year?
- What grade did you receive? What help would you need to have better grades (in this class / in your classes)?
- What can this school do to improve on your education?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

### Questions for Principals

- Introductions – Ask about the principal’s background in NYC schools, the current school and in teaching, and experience in special education.
- DOE began implementing a systemic Reform effort in 2010-11 to improve how schools support and educate students with disabilities. From your perspective, what are the goals of this effort? What would you expect to be different as a result of this effort?
- As principals, what are your specific responsibilities for implementing this Reform?
- What progress have you made in executing these responsibilities? What obstacles have you encountered? How are you overcoming these obstacles?
- What, if any, impact has assigning students to a school in their home zone had for your school?
- How have you used transitional funding?
- What changes in roles or addition of staff has taken place to support this initiative?



- How is your school held accountable for implementing the required process changes? For improving the outcomes of students with disabilities?
- How have parents been involved in planning and implementing this initiative?
- In your view, has this initiative succeeded in better aligning special education policies with broader DOE Reforms?
- Where would you place this initiative in relation to DOE's other priorities? In relation to the other priorities for your school?
- What changes do you recommend to ensure a better implementation of this initiative?
- Is there anything you would like to raise that was not covered already?

### **Questions for Teachers**

- Introductions – Name, current school, grade, general education or special education teacher – experience in special education?
- DOE began implementing a systemic Reform effort in 2010-11 to improve how schools support and educate students with disabilities. What have you been told are the goals of this effort?
- As teachers, what are your specific responsibilities for implementing this Reform?
- What has changed for you and your students as a result of this Reform? Have your instruction strategies changed as a result of this Reform? In SY 2011-12? In SY 2012-13?
- When and how often do you collaborate with other teachers, or paraprofessionals, to align and strengthen support to students? Has this changed due to this Reform?
- What progress/success have you made in executing these responsibilities? What obstacles have you encountered? How are you overcoming these obstacles?
- What training or support have you received to better implement this Reform initiative? Who has provided this training?
- Has your interaction/contact with parents changed as a result of this initiative?
- Are students doing better as a result of the Reform?
- Is there anything you would like to raise that was not covered already?

### **Questions for Related Service Providers (Speech Therapist/OT/PT or Other Service Provider)**

- Tell me about your background and experience working (as a service provider in NYC public schools). How long have you been working as a (service provider)? How long have you been working as a (a service provider) in this school?
- What have you been told about this special education Reform? What is your understanding of the goals of this special education Reform?
- Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals.

- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities in this school. What kinds of disabilities do students have? What is the gender breakdown of SWD? What is the racial breakdown of SWD? From your perspective, what stands in the way of their success?
- Describe your role in assisting students with disabilities.
- Walk me through the process by which a student is referred for services you provide.
- How many new referrals (if any) have you received this year? Is this an increase from the year before?
- What impact, if any, has the special education Reform had on the IEP process at this school?
- How (if at all) has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD?
- From your perspective, what constitutes success for SWD? What stands in the way of their success? [Probe: for which students]
- What training and support associated with this Reform has been available to you and other staff? Who has provided the training? How was it (or was it not) helpful? What additional information and training/support do you need to improve your ability to work with students with disabilities?
- What would you change in how you work with schools to best utilize your knowledge and skills?
- From your perspective, are students doing better, the same, or worse as a result of any of the changes in special education? How so?
- Are there questions I should have asked? Is there anything else regarding the Reform that you would like to share with me?

### **Questions for Paraprofessionals**

- Tell me about your background and experience working in NYC public schools. How long have you been working as a paraprofessional? How long have you been working as a paraprofessional in this school?
- What have you been told about this special education Reform? What is your understanding of the goals of this special education Reform?
- Has your school developed a plan to achieve those goals? Please share what you know about your school's plan for achieving those goals.
- Tell me about the profile of students with disabilities with whom you work. What kinds of disabilities do students have?
- Describe your role in assisting students with disabilities. What specifically do you do in your work with students? [If one-to-one para: Walk me through your day in working with one particular student.] Is there additional work you do in the classroom or to help the teacher?
- From your perspective, what constitutes success for SWD? What stands in the way of their success? [Probe: for which students]
- How do you consult with administration, teachers, staff, and parents regarding your observations, recommendations, issues and concerns?
- How (if at all) has this Reform changed what you do, in practice, to meet the needs of SWD?
- What training and support associated with this Reform has been available to you and other paraprofessionals? Who has provided the training? How was it (or was it not) helpful? What additional information and training/support do you need to improve your ability to work with students with disabilities?

- What would you change in how you work with schools to best utilize your knowledge and skills?
- From your perspective, are students doing better, the same, or worse as a result of any of the changes in special education? How so?
- Any disciplinary changes? Suspensions?
- Are there questions I should have asked? Is there anything else regarding this Reform that you would like to share with me?

### **Questions for Parents**

- Introductions – Ask about the parent’s experience in NYC schools, the current school and with special education.
- What have you been told about the goals of special education Reform and the plans for achieving them?
- Do you feel you and your child are welcomed by the school, by their teachers, and by other students?
- Is your child getting the help you think he or she needs to be successful? Is the curriculum more challenging? Are expectations different?
- Compared with the previous year, do you feel your child is being better prepared for success after high school (or for middle school, or for high school)?
- If your child is in a general education or ICT class, how effective is your communication with your child’s teachers?
- If your child was in a self-contained special education class previously, is the communication with the teachers different now?
- Have you been approached by the IEP team about changing either the placement of your child or the services they would receive? If so, in what school year?
- Has your child’s IEP been changed? If so, how and when?
- Were your opinions about your child’s placement given full consideration?
- Is your child spending as much time with his/her non-disabled peers as you would like?
- Is there anything you would like to raise that was not covered already?

## APPENDIX THREE

### PROFILE OF SCHOOLS PARTICIPATING IN PHASE ONE OF NEW YORK CITY'S SPECIAL EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVE

**TABLE 5**

*Count of Phase 1 2011-2012 schools by borough*

<b>Borough</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Manhattan	54	21%
Bronx	121	47%
Brooklyn	52	20%
Queens	21	8%
Staten Island	7	3%

**TABLE 6**

*Count of Phase 1 2011-2012 schools by network within boroughs*

	<b>Manhattan</b>	<b>Bronx</b>	<b>Brooklyn</b>	<b>Queens</b>	<b>Staten Island</b>	<b>Total</b>
N102	0	0	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
N103	2	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
N105	8	7	4	0	0	<b>19</b>
N107	12	2	4	2	0	<b>20</b>
N109	0	28	1	0	0	<b>29</b>
N204	0	0	0	1	0	<b>1</b>
N211	0	1	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
N402	0	0	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
N403	6	3	6	4	1	<b>20</b>
N405	1	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>
N407	2	11	3	1	0	<b>17</b>
N409	0	0	25	0	6	<b>31</b>
N532	1	4	0	0	0	<b>5</b>
N534	1	21	0	2	0	<b>24</b>
N535	0	0	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
N536	0	1	1	0	0	<b>2</b>
N551	1	0	0	0	0	<b>1</b>

N561	11	0	3	8	0	<b>22</b>
N562	2	0	0	0	0	<b>2</b>
N602	0	0	1	0	0	<b>1</b>
N603	2	17	1	2	0	<b>22</b>
N607	4	21	0	1	0	<b>26</b>
N610	1	5	0	0	0	<b>6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>255</b>

Note: Table 6 reflects network affiliations during the 2011-2012 school year including network changes since the 2009-2010 school year.

## TABLE 7

*Count of Phase 1 2011-2012 schools by school type and borough*

	<b>Manhattan</b>	<b>Bronx</b>	<b>Brooklyn</b>	<b>Queens</b>	<b>Staten Island</b>	<b>Total</b>
Elementary	9	61	21	2	3	<b>96</b>
Middle Grades	3	22	7	3	1	<b>36</b>
High school	30	24	14	13	1	<b>82</b>
Early Childhood	0	3	0	0	1	<b>4</b>
K-8	5	6	7	0	0	<b>18</b>
Secondary School	7	5	3	3	0	<b>18</b>
K-12	0	0	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>121</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>255</b>