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An Evaluation of Southeast School District's Special Education Program's Compliance

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AN EVALUATION OF SOUTHEAST SCHOOL DISTRICT'S SPECIAL

EDUCATION PROGRAM'S COMPLIANCE

A Dissertation

Presented to the

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Jennifer A. Tingley

August 2017

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Acknowledgments

A dissertation is an enormous undertaking, and I would never have finished this project without significant support. I am tremendously grateful to the following people:

To my chair, Dr. DiPaola, for guiding me through this process and offering me timely and direct feedback every step of the way;

To Dr. Constantino for sharing her insight and expertise in the field of special education, to Dr. Grant for her in-depth, methodical instruction in program evaluation, and to Dr. Stronge for all of his help getting me started on my first three chapters;

To the Fall 2012 William and Mary cohort for traveling on this whole educational leadership journey with me, especially Anna Thomas and Jay Samant;

To all of the staff members from Southeast who participated in this project for their time and effort, and to the leadership team in Southeast for being willing to undertake this immense project;

To Fern Marx, my supervisor at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women who gave me my first experiences in qualitative research;

To Steve Gallas, for being a strong mentor, a courageous leader, and a true friend;

To my parents, Suzanne and Larry Tingley, for their unwavering love and support, and for being my first models of courage and grace;

And lastly, to my wonderful husband, Rob, for unselfishly holding down the fort and for being my true partner in life, and to my lovely children, Cate and Maddy, for cheering me on every day – I love you with all my heart.

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Abstract

This study is a program evaluation of a small, rural school district's special education program's compliance with key processes, including the child study, eligibility, and individual education plan (IEP) processes. The goals of the evaluation were to identify potential weaknesses in the special education program implementation, and to provide suggestions for improvement. The program evaluation model used is the Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) model, which was developed by Daniel Stufflebeam. The research questions assessed the alignment of the school district's special education handbook with federal and state guidelines for special education, as well as the implementation of the special education processes and procedures as intended, including the use of standards-based IEPs. Additionally, the evaluation focused on factors that either contributed to or inhibited the successful implementation of the special education program. The study used a mixed methods approach with three data sources, which included document analysis of student files, focus groups, and interviews with key staff members. Results indicated that the school district's handbook was generally compliant with state and federal guidelines, and that the vast majority of students' IEPs were standards-based. The district was less compliant with documenting research-based interventions during the child study process and with documenting eligibility decisions. The hiring of a compliance specialist was seen as a positive factor in successful program implementation, while high staff turnover appears to be a barrier.

AN EVALUATION OF SOUTHEAST SCHOOL DISTRICT'S SPECIAL

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CHAPTER 1

In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if

he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has

undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms.--

Chief Justice Earl Warren, Brown v. Board of Education (1954), p. 493.

Background

Although Chief Justice Warren was referring to educational equality in terms of

race in his iconic quote from 1954, the same concept can be applied to the education of

students with disabilities in the modern era. In 2013–14, the number of students served

under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) throughout the United

States was approximately 6.5 million, or 13% of total public school enrollment (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2016a). There are complex federal laws, including IDEA,

governing the education and civil rights of students with disabilities. At both the state and

local levels, boards of education are tasked with interpreting IDEA in order to implement

special education programs in local school districts. Additionally, with the passage of No

Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 and, subsequently, the Every Student Succeeds Act

(ESSA) in 2015, school districts are being held accountable for the achievement of

students with disabilities as one of the key subgroups required to make Adequate Yearly

Progress, which impacts schools' accreditation. Although school districts can face unique

challenges in educating students with special needs, these students have the right to be

educated in the least restrictive environment, preferably with typical peers, and to achieve educationally and behaviorally at rates commensurate with typical peers.

While educating students with disabilities (SWD) can be challenging for any school district, rural school districts face their own unique set of additional challenges. Although rural school districts are not the majority of school districts across the United States, they do make up a substantial portion. Approximately 20% of all public school students were enrolled in districts classified as rural in 2010-11 (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014, p. 7). Parsley and Barton (2015) place the percentage of rural schools even higher, stating, "Approximately one-third of U.S. schools, which enroll nearly a quarter of the nation's students, are classified as rural" (p. 191). Therefore, although rural school districts may fall in the minority of districts overall, they are fairly common across the United States in that one out of every three to five school districts could be considered *rural*, and the numbers of rural school districts are growing. According to Johnson et al. (2014), "Growth in rural school enrollment continues to outpace non-rural enrollment growth in the United States, and rural schools continue to grow more complex with increasing rates of poverty, diversity, and students with special needs" (p. 28).

More specifically, rural districts often struggle with a lack of resources. In discussing rural educators, Berry and Gravelle (2013) note, "Teachers may need to make do with fewer materials and resources due to budget constraints" (p. 2). Budgetary issues are also impacted by special education requirements. "Students with Individualized Education Plans require additional services only partly supported by supplemental federal funds, placing additional responsibilities on state and local funds" (Johnson et al., 2014,

p. 12). Since rural districts already struggle with limited funds, the financial requirements of educating students with special needs can place even greater stress on tight budgets.

Another significant problem facing rural school districts is high staff turnover. Oftentimes, rural school districts hire new teachers; however, once they gain a few years' experience, they tend to move on to larger school districts that offer higher pay and greater amenities. "For many small rural school districts across America, the effort to attract and retain quality teachers continues to be a major concern" (Lowe, 2006, p. 28). "Schools and districts that struggle to retain teachers incur large costs when they must repeatedly recruit, hire, induct, and develop replacement teachers" (Simon & Johnson, 2015, p. 6). Compounding this problem is the chronic shortage of special education teachers across the country, most particularly in rural schools (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011; Johnson & Strange, 2007).

This study is focused on the special education program in one such school district, which is located in a small rural county. They are also dealing with the pressure of a tight budget, as well as high staff turnover across the district. Yet at the same time, the school leadership in this district is dedicated to improving services and outcomes for their students with special needs, which is why they decided to implement a program evaluation of their special education department at this time.

Program Description

Southeast School District (a pseudonym for the school district) is a small, rural school district in Virginia. Over the past several years, their special education department has gone through various changes with different school leaders. Similar to many other school districts in Virginia, the achievement of special education students in Southeast

has been weak; however, the school district has shown improvement over the past few years.

Southeast School District has emphasized the achievement of all students in their strategic plan. In fact, the first goal in Southeast's strategic plan states, "All students will meet high standards of achievement by demonstrating excellence in the skills and knowledge necessary to compete and participate in the global community" (Southeast Strategic Plan, 2012, p. 11)[1]. More specifically, the strategic plan states that the school district also will "reduce the achievement gap for students from all backgrounds" (2012, p. 17).

Context. The Southeast School District is a small, rural school district located in Central Virginia. Southeast serves approximately 800 students, which are split between two schools (a Pre-K through 6th elementary school and a 7th through 12th high school). In terms of race/ethnicity, 58% of students are Black, 32% are White, and 6% are American Indian. Slightly over half of students fall into the category of economically disadvantaged (Virginia Department of Education, 2016a).

Description of the program. The special education department operates under the Office of Student Services. There are 10 special education teachers, and they are evenly split between the elementary school and the secondary school. Additionally, Southeast has three paraprofessionals, one speech therapist, one school psychologist, and one school social worker. Occupational therapy and physical therapy services are contracted out by the school district; these therapists spend approximately one day per week providing services in the schools. The special education program serves approximately 100 children, which equates to 14% of their student population. Only 3%

of special education students are served in alternate placements with the vast majority of students being served within the school district. The primary disability categories with the highest numbers of students are specific learning disability and other health impairment, which correspond to almost 60% of the students in special education (33% and 23%, respectively). The breakdown of students in the other disability categories is as follows: Speech and Language Impairment 16%, Developmental Delay 10%, Autism 5%, Intellectual Disability 4%, Emotional Disability 4%, and Multiple Disability 1%.

Overview of the Evaluation Approach

This section will provide more information on the type of program evaluation model being used. Additionally, I will explain the purpose and focus of the evaluation. Finally, the specific evaluation questions will be reviewed.

Program evaluation model. The program evaluation model used in this study is the Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) model, which was developed by Daniel Stufflebeam. Stufflebeam believes that:

> Evaluators should have a more expansive role-one that starts with a critical evaluation of the program's objectives, what is needed to make the program work, the extent to which the program is being implemented as planned, and what the outcomes are. (as cited in Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 92)

The first part of this model is context, which includes the needs, problems, assets, and opportunities in a program. The second portion involves input. Input includes alternative approaches, competing action plans, participant characteristics, staffing plans, and budgets. The third piece is the process, and this means the implementation of plans. Finally, there is the product. In the product portion, we are looking at the identification

and assessment of intended and unintended outcomes, in both the short-term and long-term (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 97).

This program evaluation was focused on the process component of the CIPP model. In a process evaluation, which is sometimes referred to as an implementation evaluation, the focus is on "the appropriateness and quality of the project's implementation" (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 106). Therefore, this program evaluation focused on the processes involved in the special education program in the Southeast School District.

The CIPP model can be found in the pragmatic paradigm as part of the Use branch. The pragmatic paradigm emphasizes usefulness to stakeholders as its primary tenet. In this paradigm, "evaluators test the workability (effectiveness) of a line of action (intervention) by collecting results (data collection) that provide a warrant for assertions (conclusions) about the line of action" (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 90). The primary form of data collection in the pragmatic paradigm is mixed methods.

Key aspects of Southeast's special education program can be represented in a logic model (see Figure 1). The logic model has three main components: Inputs, Outputs (which includes Activities and Participation), and Outcomes. In this way, the various aspects of the program can be outlined clearly using a visual model, and the relationships between the various aspects can be defined.

Southeast's Special Education Program Logic Model

Situation:
The leadership of Southeast School Division has requested a program evaluation of their special education program. The evaluation should include strengths as well as areas for improvement. The overall goal is to assess compliance and to increase staff capacity, which in turn should positively impact student achievement.

Inputs	Outputs		Outcomes -- Impact		
	Activities	Participants	Short	Medium	Long
General education teachers Special education teachers Administrators Specialists (such as School Social Worker, School Psychologist, Speech Pathologist, School Counselor, Occupational Therapist, etc.) Professional development/training for staff Program funding Educational materials and supplies Classroom space	Child Study process Eligibility meetings to identify students for the program IEP services and supports	Students with disabilities Students suspected of disabilities Family members of students with disabilities	Students with disabilities begin receiving special education services and supports; services are implemented to meet their specific needs	Students with disabilities improve their achievement in academic coursework and pass their SOL tests	School division closes the achievement gap; Improves accreditation

Assumptions
Policies and procedures are aligned with state and federal guidelines; staff members are following district policies

External Factors
School funding; Increase/decrease in school enrollment; Families with special needs moving into the school division; School Board changes; Federal and state education legislation

Figure 1. Logic model of the Southeast School District's special education program. The logic model includes inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

The inputs of the special education program mainly involve school staff, professional development and training, educational materials, and budgeting needs. In terms of staff, special education teachers, various specialists (such as a speech therapist and school psychologist), and paraprofessionals work directly with students with disabilities. Additionally, in most cases, general education teachers also work with students in special education. Administrators supervise staff and are ultimately responsible for ensuring that guidelines and legal requirements for special education are followed. Additional inputs include transportation to and from school, as well as the school facility where the program is housed. There are also costs associated with running

the special education program so the program has a budget. Finally, the school district's special education handbook is considered an input, as are federal and state guidelines for special education.

The outputs of the special education program include both activities and participants. There are three major activities carried out in the special education program. First, students who are suspected of having a disability are referred to the child study team. The team meets within 10 days of the referral and decides on a course of action, which may include a referral for special education testing. The second activity of the program is conducting evaluations and then having an eligibility meeting to determine whether students are eligible for special education. Participants in this process include the following: parent or guardian, teacher, specialist(s), and an administrator. Finally, if the child is found eligible for special education, the third activity of the program begins. The last step in the special education program is for the special education teacher/case manager to develop the student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) and then to implement the supports and services in the IEP. In this stage, the participants include the student, the special education teacher(s), the general education teacher(s), and any specialists providing additional support services.

The final component of the logic model is outcomes. There are three types of outcomes: short-term, medium-term, and long-term. The short-term outcomes happen immediately once the students' IEPs are implemented; students with disabilities begin to receive specially designed instruction and supports to meet the needs required by their disabilities. Ideally, the achievement of SWDs begins to improve on daily academic tasks

such as classwork, tests, and quizzes due to the additional support they are receiving through their IEPs.

The logic model also has a few medium-term outcomes. These outcomes will happen by the end of the first year that the IEP was implemented. At this point, SWDs should be making progress toward the goals within their IEPs. Also, students will be improving their overall academic achievement in terms of their end-of-year grades and will also be passing at greater rates on the Standards of Learning tests (SOLs).

The logic model also has several long-term outcomes. The first outcome is that once students with disabilities are receiving specially designed instruction and improving their levels of achievement, the achievement gap between typically developing students and SWDs will begin to close. Additionally, SWDs will improve their graduation rates, and will improve their post-graduation outcomes in terms of college acceptance and/or employment. Finally, if SWDs begin to achieve at rates commensurate with their non-disabled peers, then it will have a positive impact on Southeast's accreditation.

Purpose of the evaluation. In compliance with a request from the leadership of Southeast School District, the problem investigated in this study was to conduct a full program evaluation of their special education department and services and, based on the findings of the program evaluation, recommend improvements in practice. In evaluating the processes within the special education department, I had two main goals: 1) To identify potential weaknesses or gaps in the special education program implementation, and 2) To provide suggestions for improvement. These gaps may have involved compliance issues, such as a failure to follow local, state, or federal guidelines in special education. The gaps may also have identified areas of need within staff training and/or

staff development. In terms of the second goal, it was important to me to not only identify areas of concern, but also to offer concrete, reasonable actions to address the weaknesses in order to improve the program overall. Ideally, if the processes within the special education department are improved, then the achievement for students with disabilities within the Southeast School District should also improve.

Focus of the evaluation. This evaluation was primarily focused on the processes (i.e., activities) involved in the special education program in the Southeast district. This program evaluation assessed issues of compliance with federal, state, and local guidelines for special education. Specifically, the evaluation focused on: a) the child study process, b) the eligibility process, and c) the process for developing and implementing IEPs. Additionally, the evaluation focused on the use of standards-based IEPs for educating students with special needs as outlined by the Virginia Department of Education, and provided recommendations to improve practice.

Evaluation questions. The evaluation questions for this study are as follows:
1) To what degree does the special education handbook of the selected Virginia school district align with federal and state guidelines for special education?
2) To what degree are the special education processes and procedures being implemented as intended in a selected Virginia school district with regard to their special education handbook?
3) To what degree are standards-based IEPs being implemented successfully with regard to the technical assistance and guidance documents for students with disabilities as outlined by the Virginia Department of Education?

4) What contributes to, enhances, or inhibits the successful implementation of the special education program with regard to the Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP processes in order to ensure compliance with federal, state, and local guidelines for special education?

Definition of Terms

The following specific definitions are presented as guidance.

- Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): a measurement indicating whether a school, district or the state met federally approved academic goals required by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act/No Child Left Behind Act (ESEA/NCLB) (Virginia Department of Education, 2017).

- Best practice: The consistent and effective implementation of successful methodologies (Hadaway & Brue, 2016).

- Child study team: This team is a part of the child find screening process. A child study team is established in each school to review records and other performance evidence of the children referred through a screening process, or by school staff, the parent or parents, or other individuals. The team shall include: (1) The referring source, as appropriate (except if inclusion of referring source would breach the confidentiality of the child); (2) The principal or designee; (3) At least one teacher; and (4) At least one specialist. The purpose of the meeting is to identify and recommend strategies to address the child's learning, behavior, communication, or development (Virginia Department of Education, 2015).

- Collaboration: Interaction among professionals as they work toward a common goal. Teachers do not necessarily have to engage in co-teaching in order to collaborate (Virginia Department of Education, 2010).

- Individual Education Plan (IEP): a written plan created for a student with disabilities by the student's teachers, parents or guardians, the school administrator, and other interested parties. The plan is tailored to the student's specific needs and abilities, and outlines attainable goals (Virginia Department of Education, 2017).

- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (U.S. Department of Education, 2016a).

- Related services: As defined by the Virginia Department of Education Regulations (2010), related services "means transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education and includes speech-language pathology and audiology services; interpreting services; psychological services; physical and occupational therapy; recreation, including therapeutic recreation; early identification and assessment of

disabilities in children; counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling; orientation and mobility services; and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes. Related services also includes school health services and school nurse services; social work services in schools; and parent counseling and training" (p. 9).

- Rural: Rural is defined as a place with fewer than 2,500 people or a place with a zip code designated as rural by the Census Bureau (U.S. Department of Education, 2016b).

- Special education: According to the Virginia Department of Education (2010), special education is defined as "specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parent(s), to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in a classroom, in the home, in hospitals, in institutions, and in other settings and instruction in physical education" (p. 11).

- Special education eligibility: According to the Virginia regulations the eligibility process ensures that the decision regarding eligibility for special education and related services is made. The procedures include timelines including IEP development (if the child is found eligible), test administration and data collection and review, eligibility committee composition, and the procedures for determining eligibility under a disability category. The determination of eligibility is made during the Eligibility Committee Meeting (Virginia Department of Education, 2013).

- Special education procedures: There are seven areas in the Virginia Regulations that require local procedures, and they are as follows: Child find,

Screening, Referral, Referral for initial evaluation for special education, Evaluation and reevaluation, Eligibility determination, and Assignment of surrogate parents (Virginia Department of Education, 2009). Each school district in Virginia must develop standard local procedures for each area, which are consistent with regulatory language and require review of the Local Advisory Committee and approval of the local school board.

- Special education processes: According to the Virginia Department of Education Parent's Guide to Special Education (2010), there are five steps in the special education process: 1) Identification and referral; 2) Evaluation; 3) Determination of eligibility; 4) Development of an individualized education program (IEP) and determination of services; and 5) Reevaluation.

- Standards-based IEPs: According to the Virginia Department of Education (2016c), a standards-based IEP describes a process in which the IEP team has incorporated state content standards in its development. The IEP is framed by Virginia's course content Standards of Learning (SOL) for the grade in which the student is enrolled or will be enrolled.

Chapter 2

In this section, I will review two major topics: special education and program evaluation models. Regarding special education, I will provide an historical overview and describe key legislation that drives the special education process. Next, I will review the technical assistance and guidance documents for students with disabilities as outlined by the Virginia Department of Education. I will also identify and describe some best practices in special education. Finally, I will describe selected program evaluation models that have been applied to special education programs, specifically the CIPP model and the Discrepancy Model.

Special Education History and Legislation

The overall goal of special education is to educate children who have been formally identified as having a disability related to their learning. Although the goal seems fairly straightforward, the special education process is not. In the past 100 years, the education of children with special needs has undergone dramatic and significant changes. "The history of special education has been influenced by changing societal and philosophical beliefs about the extent to which individuals with disabilities should be feared, segregated, categorized, and educated" (Rotatori, Bakken, & Obiakor, 2011, p. 2).

The families of students with disabilities have been a driving force pushing for equal access to public education for their children. "In response to the deplorable conditions that their children with special needs had to endure in school, as well as the

increasing exclusion of children with disabilities from school, parents began to band

together" (Yell, Rogers, & Rodgers, 1998, para. 19).

Special education in the mid-1900s. Legislators and policymakers took actions

to specifically assist families of children with disabilities and to provide some legal

protections. In 1935, the Social Security Act was passed, which included a provision

providing grants to states to aid handicapped children (Grossberg, 2011). With the

passage of this act, Congress put forward much needed funding to assist states in serving

children with disabilities.

One of the biggest historical events impacting special education in the 1950s and

1960s was the Civil Rights Movement (Rotatori et al., 2011; Yell et al., 1998). Initially,

people were advocating for equal opportunities for African-Americans; however, as the

movement wore on, disability advocates saw parallels between this movement and the

movement to ensure equal rights for students with disabilities. There were also a few key

cases and laws passed at this time that also helped to solidify rights for all people.

Brown vs. Board of Education. In this case, the plaintiffs were Black elementary

school children in several states, including Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and

Delaware who had been denied admission to schools attended by White children since

they were segregated by race. In providing the majority opinion of the Supreme Court,

Chief Justice Warren (1954) stated, "We conclude that, in the field of public education,

the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are

inherently unequal" (para 12).

As described by Rotatori et al. (2011):

This landmark civil rights case, establishing that "separate but equal is not equal," became the foundation for legal actions brought by families of children with disabilities to guarantee that their children had the right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). (p. 7)

In addition, even though the ruling in this case specifically referred to the rights of Black children, the legal mandate of Brown v. Board of Education set a precedent for the extension of educational access to all children, including those with disabilities (Alexander & Alexander, 2009, p. 563). Advocates for students with disabilities used a two-prong argument in claiming that students with disabilities had the same rights as students without disabilities: 1) They stated that there was an unacceptable level of differential treatment within the class of children with disabilities, and 2) they argued that some students with disabilities were not furnished with an education, whereas all students without disabilities were provided an education (Yell et al., 1998).

Special education in the 1960s and 1970s. Although limited progress had been made, the majority of students with disabilities continued to be excluded from the public education system. "Until the mid-1970s, laws in most states allowed school disctricts to refuse to enroll any student they considered 'uneducable,' a term generally defined by local school administrators" (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996, p. 25). This meant that services for students with special needs varied greatly from state to state. "From state to state, the laws that affected special education exhibited varying degrees of precision" (Giordano, 2007, p. 193). By the mid-1970s, it was estimated that over one million

children in the Unites States were being excluded from public education due to their disabilities (Switzer, 2003, p. 61).

With the onset of the civil rights movement, people in the United Stated were also beginning to see the education of students with disabilities as a civil rights issues. "Intellectually disabled children like others with disabilities became the objects of new policies of protection that sought greater inclusion and acceptance, such as increasingly successful demands for deinstitutionalisation and mainstreaming educational and treatment programmes" (Grossberg, 2011, p. 731).

Special education legislation history. "Since the 1960s and 1970s, special education has undergone significant growth and changes that has been marked by the legalization of the field" (Rotatori et al., 2011, p. 7). While various states began to pass laws offering protections to students with disabilities, the coverage offered was a patchwork and not comprehensive. Therefore, Congress decided it was time to act.

Education for all Handicapped Children Act. In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, PL 94-142, which was the original special education law. "The EAHCA provide[d] extensive, detailed procedural and substantive educational rights and protections to handicapped children and their parents" (Guernsey, 1989, p. 565). Switzer (2003) describes the key elements of this law as follows:

A key phrase in the statute guaranteed all children with disabilities a "free, appropriate public education," regardless of the nature of extent of their disability. School districts were required to integrate disabled children into mainstream classrooms and to train their teacher staffs to accommodate the needs of disabled children. Procedurally, each child was to be provided with an individualized

education program, drawn up by the child's teachers and parents, that eliminated

the one-size-fits-all approach that had characterized disabled education prior to

1975. (p. 62)

Additionally, the EAHCA set up specific mandates for students with disabilities,

including that these students be evaluated using nondiscriminatory tests and that they be

educated in the least restrictive environment, as well as guaranteeing procedural due

process rights and a free and appropriate education (Yell et al., 1998).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. P.L. 94-142 has been amended

multiple times since 1975. The original Education for All Handicapped Children Act was

amended in 1978, 1983, 1986, 1990, 1997, and 2004 (Alexander & Alexander, 2009).

The law is now called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 2004,

"Improvement" was added, which causes the new acronym to be IDEIA; however, most

people still refer to this law as IDEA.

The goals of the amendments added in 1997 were primarily to improve the quality

of special education. Congress sought to improve the quality by including four different

requirements: inclusion, parent empowerment, individual education plan agendas, and

school administration/personnel improvements (Annino, 1999). In 2004, amendments

were added again with the primary purpose of improving outcomes for special education

students. Key changes included the following: emphasizing the substantive requirements

of the special education process; aligning IDEA with No Child Left Behind legislation to

include the provisions of adequate yearly progress, highly qualified teachers, and

evidence-based practices; and changing eligibility requirements (Yell, Shriner, &

Katsiyannis, 2006). The concept of substantive grounds means that when hearing officers

are making rulings in due process hearings, they need to examine the results of a student's special education program, rather than simply focusing on whether or not the child was given access to the educational program. Additionally, significant changes occurred in terms of requiring goals in IEPs. Yell et al. (2006) explain that the IEP now requires "a statement of how the child's progress toward the annual goals will be measured, including quarterly or other periodic reports, concurrent with the issuance of report cards, that delineate the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals" (p. 5).

Additional clarifications were also provided in terms of the type and the scope of the assessments in order to determine special education eligibility. Rotatori et al. (2011) described these changes as follows:

> Each student suspected of having a disability will have nondiscriminatory evaluation in all areas of suspected disability. It must be conducted by a team of evaluators who are knowledgeable and trained in the use of the tests and other evaluation materials and capable of gathering relevant information from a variety of sources. The evaluation materials and procedures selected must be administered in ways that are not racially or culturally discriminatory. The child cannot be subjected to unnecessary tests and assessments. (p. 32)

The amendments also provided additional guidance regarding behavioral and discipline issues for students with disabilities. The 1997 amendments required that behavioral problems should be dealt with proactively no matter the type of disability, and that the IEP team needed to consider a variety of strategies to address behavioral problems, such as positive behavioral interventions and supports, behavior management plans, and functional behavior assessments (Yell et al., 1998, para. 58). However, the

1997 amendments also allowed students to be removed from their current educational placements for up to 45 days for violation of school regulations, such as bringing a weapon to school and/or possessing or selling illegal drugs; under IDEIA, students could also be removed if the student inflicted serious bodily injury on another person while at school (Alexander & Alexander, 2009, p. 572). These amendments sought to give additional support to students with behavioral needs; however, they also increased protections for all students' safety and well-being in the school environment.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. There are two other major pieces of legislation that provide protections for students with disabilities: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Section 504 (1973) provides:

> No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States…shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. (para 1)

More specifically, "five mandates included in Section 504 pertain directly to the educational needs of children with disabilities: (1) location and notification; (2) free appropriate public education; (3) educational setting; (4) evaluation and placement; and (5) procedural safeguards" (Alexander & Alexander, 2009, p. 627). Section 504 covers students with disabilities whether or not they are found eligible for special education services (McLaughlin, 2009).

Americans with Disabilities Act. "In 1990, Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which expanded the rights of people with disabilities by

outlawing discriminatory practices in employment, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunications" (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996, p. 29). The protections for students under Section 504 and under the ADA are very similar. As stated by Weber (2012):

> Under section 504 and the ADA, disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of an individual, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment. (p. 616)

Virginia Department of Education Technical Assistance and Guidance Documents

While the implementation of special education programs is left up to local school districts across the state, the Virginia Department of Education does provide guidance and support through technical assistance and guidance documents. These documents are for the purpose of providing guidance to address the regulatory requirements and instructional elements needed for students' free appropriate public education (FAPE) (Virginia Department of Education, 2017). Although there are several guidance documents on the Virginia Department of Education's website, I will focus on the following two documents: 1) Guidance on Evaluation and Eligibility for the Special Education Process (2013), and 2) Standards-Based Individualized Education Program (IEP): A Guide for School Divisions (2016b). The first document listed provides information on regulations and best practices regarding the child study and eligibility processes, while the second document is focused specifically on the IEP process.

Guidance on evaluation and eligibility. According to the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) (2013):

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The process for determining whether a student is eligible for special education

involves reviewing information and observations about the student, determining

the need for individual assessments and observations, reviewing and interpreting

the results of any assessments, and making an eligibility determination. (p. 4)

Additionally, each step of the process must be documented along the way. The VDOE

emphasizes that "school staff and families should collaborate during the evaluation and

eligibility process" (p. 4). In addition, school staff need to use language that is easily

understood by parents and families and avoid jargon and technical terminology.

Collaboration, as defined by the VDOE (2010), means the interaction of

educational professionals as they work toward a common goal. In order for students with

disabilities to be educated effectively, many different people need to work together,

including the following: general education teachers, special education teachers,

administrators, paraprofessionals, specialists, parents, guardians, outside providers, and

students. McLaughlin (2009) states, "Collaboration is a central feature in many of the

new IDEA provisions, because collaboration can result in better outcomes for students

with disabilities" (p. 86).

Since the passage of the original IDEA, increasing numbers of students with

disabilities have been educated in regular education classrooms as compared to separate

locations. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016a), in 2012,

95% of 6- to 21-year-old students with disabilities were served in regular schools, while

only 3% were served in a separate school for students with disabilities. One of the models

for special education that involves collaboration is the inclusion model. In this model,

students with disabilities are served in the general education classroom with supports and

services within the classroom. "Of course, the critical feature of successful inclusion is what happens (i.e., services and evidence-based practices provided) more than where it occurs (i.e., placement or setting in which instruction is provided)" (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012, para 4).

Parental rights and procedural safeguards. The VDOE (2013) states that procedural safeguards, which describe parental rights, must be provided to parents at least once per year, and then again at specific times. There are six additional events that require a school district to provide an additional copy of the procedural safeguards, and these are as follows: 1) at the time of initial referral for special education, 2) when the eligibility team proposes to change a student's special education identification, 3) when requested by parents, 4) when the first state complaint is filed during the year, 5) when the first request for due process is made during the year, and 6) when a decision is made to make a disciplinary removal that constitutes a change in placement because of a violation of the code of student conduct.

Procedural safeguards are grounded in the 5th and 14th amendments of the Constitution of the United States, and these rights guarantee that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without the due process under the law (McLaughlin, 2009). According to the U. S. Department of Education (USDOE) (2009), school districts must provide procedural safeguards notice to parents because this document explains their rights under Part B of the IDEA. "Part B emphasizes the importance of including parents in decisions regarding the education of their children" (USDOE, 2009, p. 1). The procedural safeguards for parents and families are intended to give parents information

about their rights in order for them to be full partners in the special education process for their children.

Prior written notice. The Virginia special education regulations require that parents receive a form called a *Prior Written Notice* (PWN) within a reasonable amount of time when school districts either propose or refuse to conduct an evaluation, and/or when they initiate or change a student's special education identification, educational placement, or the provision of FAPE (2013). This form is completed by the school district and is given to parents/families, and then becomes a part of the student's school record. The USDOE Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) notes that the purpose for providing prior written notice to parents is to ensure that parents understand the special education and related services that are being proposed or refused for their students; as such, if parents are unable to understand the services being proposed, then it follows that the parents could not have agreed to the proposed services (USDOE, 2007).

Additionally, it is important that the PWN is written in language that is understandable to the general public. Also, the PWN must be provided in the native language of the parents and families. This requirement is especially important since there are increasing numbers of students identified as English language learners (ELLs) within public schools. In the 2013-2014 school year, there were an estimated 4.5 million students in the United States who were identified as ELLs as compared to 4.2 million students in 2003-04 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016c).

Referral for evaluation. In Virginia public schools, a referral for a special education evaluation can be submitted from any person (such as the child's teacher, parent, pediatrician, etc.) who has a legitimate standing with the child. "The evaluation

and eligibility process begins at the point the student is suspected of having a disability that requires specially designed instruction" (VDOE, 2013, p. 5). A referral for an evaluation can be made three different ways: in writing, orally, or by using electronic communication. However, no matter the method used, the referral must be documented and included in the student's education record; the documentation needs to include the name of the referring source, the date, a description of the concerns, and information regarding strategies that have already been attempted (VDOE, 2013).

Once the referral is made to either the special education director or the designee, the timeline begins. The school district then has 65 business days to complete the evaluation for special education. If the referral is made directly to the special education administrator or designee, then that person has three business days to decide among one of the following options: 1) begin the evaluation procedures, 2) refer the child to the school-based team (such as the child study team) to review and respond to the request, or 3) deny the request, and provide a prior written notice stating the reasons why the request was denied. If the referral is made to the child study team, then that team has 10 business days to meet. The child study team follows the same process: if the team decides to move forward with an evaluation, then they must notify the administrator of special education within three business days; however, if the team does not suspect a disability, then they need to document the decision in a prior written notice to the parent.

If the decision is to conduct an evaluation for special education, one of the first components that is necessary is for the team to review the existing data available (VDOE, 2013). This is true whether a student is undergoing an initial evaluation or a re-evaluation. The team reviews the following: information provided by the parent(s) of the

student, the student's educational record, and observations by teachers and related service providers (such as reading specialists, school counselors, etc.). Upon reviewing the existing data, the team can either decide that the information at hand is enough to make a decision regarding eligibility for special education, or the team may decide that additional evaluations are warranted.

"If the team determines that additional data are required, they must document the types of data to be gathered and obtain informed parental consent" (VDOE, 2013, p. 7). It is important to gather information from a variety of sources in order to "ensure that no single measure or assessment will be the sole criterion for determining whether a child is a child with a disability" (p. 7). According to the United States Department of Education, under Section 300 of IDEA 2004, it states that each public agency must gather information from a variety of sources (such as standardized tests, parent input, and teacher recommendations), as well as information pertaining to a child's social and cultural background, physical condition, and adaptive behavior; additionally, all information must be documented and considered.

It is required that data be considered from multiple sources and from multiple people in order to best assist educational teams in making appropriate placement decisions regarding special education eligibility. However, even when educational professionals follow these guidelines, problems still occur. For several decades, disproportionality and the overrepresentation of minority students have been well-documented, significant issues in special education (Ford, 2012; National Research Council, 2002; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006). Research has shown that there are several intersecting factors that contribute to

disproportionality, including the following: cultural differences, discipline policies, teacher expectations, and socioeconomic issues (Ford, 2012; Kea & Trent, 2013; Voulgarides & Zwerger, n.d.). There are often cultural differences among public school teachers (who tend to be White, middle class, and female) and their students (who are increasingly racially, ethnically, and linguistically different).

Additionally, low-income students and students who are English language learners have also tended to be overrepresented in special education (DeMatthews, Edwards, & Nelson, 2014; Park, Turnbull, & Turnbull, 2002; Sullivan, 2011; Tournquist, 2005). Students living in poverty often do not have access to the same resources or educational opportunities as their peers in families with higher levels of income, which in turn can cause their educational achievement to suffer. Similarly, students who are English language learners also do not consistently have access to educational supports and services, which can also negatively impact their levels of achievement. In both cases, lower levels of achievement can trigger referrals to special education services.

Eligibility. The eligibility team must include the following people: the parent, the special education administrator or designee, school personnel from disciplines providing the assessments, a special education teacher, the student's regular education teacher (or a regular education teacher qualified to teach students the child's age), and a specialist who is qualified to conduct diagnostic examinations of children (such as a school psychologist, occupational therapist, or reading specialist; VDOE, 2013). It is also important to note that school staff participating in the eligibility meetings can serve multiple roles at the same time; in other words, each of these roles does not have to be filled by separate people to remain compliant.

In order for a child to receive special education and related services, he or she must first be found eligible as a child with a disability under IDEA. The eligibility team must determine that the child meets the Virginia criteria for a specific disability area, which includes documentation of the following: 1) the presence of an impairment, 2) an adverse impact on educational performance, 3) the need for specially designed instruction, and 4) any specific criteria from Virginia regulations (VDOE, 2013). Each disability category is defined by IDEA; however, Virginia also has regulations, which include specific criteria for each category of disability. The eligibility team must document their discussion and decision, as well as the reasons behind the decision. In addition, the team must develop and provide a prior written notice of the decision to the parent.

Meeting timelines. There are numerous legal timelines that are part of the special education process. These include timelines for child find, child study, eligibility, IEPs, and discipline. In the *Parent's Guide to Special Education (2010)*, which was developed by the Virginia Department of Education, there are specific headings under each section which explain the timelines for each specific process. Table 1 summarizes key timelines according to the VDOE (2010).

Table 1

Timelines in the Special Education Process

Process	Timeline
Child Find	<u>Screening</u>: Vision and hearing must be screened within 60 days of the start of school in Grades 3, 7, and 10. <u>School-based team</u>: Must meet within 10 business days after receiving a referral; Referral must be made to the special education administrator within 3 business days following determination from school-based team that a student is suspected of having a disability
Special Education Referral and Evaluation	After the special education administrator receives the referral for evaluation, an evaluation must be conducted and eligibility determined within 65 business days.
Eligibility Determination	Written copies of all evaluation reports must be made available to parents at least 2 business days before the eligibility meeting.
Individualized Education Program (IEP)	The IEP must be developed within 30 calendar days of the initial determination of eligibility. A copy of a student's IEP must be provided to the parents at the IEP meeting, or within a reasonable period of time, not longer than 10 calendar days after the meeting.

One of the most important things for both school district personnel and parents to remember is that the special education process is a legal process. Therefore, there are very specific guidelines that need to be followed in order to follow the law and to protect the civil rights of the student. Additionally, parents are a critical component in the special education process and their participation is necessary in order to make educational decisions. "The law requires that parents and school personnel work together to provide children with appropriate educational services" (VDOE, 2010, p. 4). Additional information in the parent's guide includes a description of the special education process and what is required from parents during each step of that process, with important timelines highlighted in each section (VDOE, p. 4).

Since the special education process is a partnership, the timelines act as a contract between the school district and the family so that both sides understand what will happen and when. Timelines can also be considered a piece of procedural safeguards. McLaughlin (2009) describes procedural safeguards as follows:

> Procedural safeguards are the protections in IDEA that ensure that students with disabilities and their parents or guardians are meaningfully involved in all decisions related to the student's special education and that they have the right to seek a review of any decisions they think are appropriate. The procedural safeguards are grounded in the 5th and 14th Amendments of the U.S. Constitution, which guarantee that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty, or property without due process of the law. (p. 19)

When school districts do not follow mandated timelines, they are not following the law. Additionally, since school districts are required to identify and serve children within their districts that are eligible for special education, if they are not following appropriate timelines, they are running the risk of not allowing students with disabilities their rights to a free and appropriate education.

Evidence of Effective Practices in Special Education

While special education programs must follow federal, state, and local legislation, school districts have broader leeway in terms of instructional and behavioral practice within their own schools. Although there is a wealth of research documenting instructional and behavioral practices that are effective for students with disabilities, for the purposes of this evaluation, I will narrow my focus to the use of standards-based IEPs.

Standards-based individualized education program (IEP). According to the guidance document provided by the VDOE (2016b), the purpose of the document is to assist IEP teams "in developing a meaningful individualized program that facilitates a student with a disability access to curriculum and instruction based on the Virginia Standards of Learning and grade appropriate content while continuing to address the student's individual educational needs" (p. 3). The standards-based reform movement in education has encouraged schools to establish high standards of achievement and accoundability for all students, including students with disabilities. "In order to ensure that students with disabilities access the general curriculum and achieve at higher levels, an IEP development process called a 'standards-based IEP' was recommended" (VDOE, 2016b, p. 6). The VDOE modified their recommendations for standards-based IEPs after receiving guidance from the United States Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) in November 2015. In their letter, OSERS emphasized the concept of holding students with disabilities to high academic standards because they can learn grade-level content with appropriate instruction, services, and supports (2015).

Initially, the families of children with special needs were simply fighting for access to educational programs for their children. However, the focus over the past several years has been on closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities, which is a key concept in the No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation. The stated purposes of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) are many, but the following specifically relate to students with disabilities:

1) meeting the educational needs of low-achieving children in our Nation's highest-poverty schools, limited English proficient children, migratory children, children with disabilities, Indian children, neglected or delinquent children, and young children in need of reading assistance;

2) closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers;

3) holding schools, local educational agencies, and States accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students, and identifying and turning around low-performing schools that have failed to provide a high-quality education to their students, while providing alternatives to students in such schools to enable the students to receive a high-quality education; and,

4) promoting schoolwide reform and ensuring the access of children to effective, scientifically based instructional strategies and challenging academic content.

As Spaulding (2009) states:

Hence, the fundamental challenge in special education is determining which instructional interventions, services, and programs most effectively and efficiently achieve this federal mandate of meeting the unique needs of students with disabilities, with the natural corollary of reducing the achievement gap. (p. 3)

Overview of the IEP team. Once a child is found eligible for special education, then the school district must write an IEP within 30 calendar days. Although a special education case manager is assigned to every student with an IEP, the development of the IEP is a team process. The IEP development must include the following people: a regular

education teacher (if the student will be participating in the general education environment), a special education teacher, a representative of the local education agency (such as a school administrator), the parents, the student (as appropriate), and a person who can interpret the evaluation results (VDOE, 2016b). In addition, other people may be invited at the discretion of the parents or of school personnel.

Components of a standards-based IEP. "Virginia requires that all IEPs contain a present level of academic achievement and functional performance, commonly referred to as the present level of performance (PLOP), goals statement, accommodations and/or modifications and service statements" (VDOE, 2016b, p. 10). In addition, the IEP must also address levels of participation/nonparticipation with peers in the general education setting (i.e., least restrictive environment), as well as how the student will participate in state assessments, and methods of assessing and reporting student progress (VDOE, 2016b).

Least restrictive environment. The least restrictive environment (LRE) is a concept that has been in place since 1973 in the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, as well as in the initial Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. These laws affirmed that students with disabilities have the right to be educated in the same settings as their non-disabled peers. By being in the same classroom as nondisabled peers, students with disabilities have the same access to the curriculum as all students, which provides them the best chance to master the core content curriculum (Watson & Beaton, 2007). School districts appear to be moving toward more inclusion for students with disabilities in general education settings as opposed to self-contained settings. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2016a):

Among all students ages 6–21 who were served under IDEA, the percentage who

spent most of the school day (i.e., 80 percent or more of time) in general classes

in regular schools increased from 33 percent in 1990–91 to 62 percent in 2013–

14. (para. 6)

Embedded in the concept of the least restrictive environment is the concept of a

continuum of services. This means that students with disabilities have a variety of

classroom locations in which to receive their education. "These settings include regular

classrooms, special classrooms, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in

hospitals and institutions" (McLaughlin, 2009, p.10).

The decision of LRE for each student is an individualized decision made by the

student's IEP team. McLaughlin (2009) describes the process for determining LRE:

The basic legal standard for determining the LRE requires that a student's IEP

team first determine what constitutes an appropriate education for a student and

then consider how to provide the special education and related services in the

regular classroom within the school the student would have attended if he or she

did not have an IEP. Removing a child from this setting can only occur when the

nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular class cannot

occur even with the use of supplementary aids and services. (p. 10)

This means that schools need to determine educational placements for students with

disabilities on a case-by-case basis. Therefore, it would not be appropriate, for example,

for school districts to decide that all of their students with reading disabilities will be

educated in a special education classroom rather than in a general education setting with

supports. Nor would it be appropriate for school districts to decide that a student who

needs specialiazed instruction in math due to a learning disability needs to stay in a

general education classroom because they do not have a special educator available to

teach him in an alternate setting. To summarize, each IEP team needs to first determine

what would constitute an appropriate education for the particular student with a

disability, and then develop the IEP to meet those needs with supports and services.

Selected Program Evaluation Models Applied to Special Education Programs

Program evaluation is important because it helps us evaluate whether the

programs we are running are effective or not. Although one could argue that some

programs in public K-12 school districts are mandated by federal, state, and local

governments, that does not mean that all programs are run equally well, or that they are

delivering good outcomes. In fact, some programs that are implemented may not even be

delivering the appropriate outcomes, based on the intention of the program. However, if

programs are not evaluated, then their value and usefulness can never be measured, nor

improved upon if necessary. "Evaluations are conducted on the merit and worth of

programs in the public domain, which are themselves responses to prioritized individual

and community needs that resulted from political decisions" (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p.

11).

The CIPP model. This model was developed by Daniel Stufflebeam, which he

first presented to the evaluation community in 1968 (Mertens & Wilson, 2012, p. 92). As

stated previously, the CIPP model includes the following components for evaluation:

Context, Input, Process, and Product. According to Stufflebeam (2012), he first

developed this model as an attempt to evaluate projects that had been funded through the

Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). While the ESEA provided

billions of dollars to school districts for the purpose of improving the education of disadvantaged students, the act also required school districts to evaluate the programs funded with these monies. Stufflebeam (2012) noted, "This requirement created a crisis, since educators were not prepared to design and conduct evaluation studies" (p. 119). The original CIPP model came out of work done through the Ohio State University Evaluation Center in the late 1960s.

At that time, Stufflebeam noted that when he and his team visited education programs and tried to evaluate them, the current evaluation tools that school staff were using were lacking, and they were primarily focused on the outcomes once a program had been fully implemented. Stufflebeam (2012) describes his experience as follows:

> While I expected to find the projects being implemented across schools and classrooms with some degree of consistency, I found nothing of the sort. Instead there was widespread confusion on the part of the teachers concerning what they were supposed to be doing. Most of them had not had an opportunity to read the proposal that they were supposed to be implementing. Many of those who had seen the proposal were in disagreement with it or confused by it. Not surprisingly, the activities within a given project were not consistent across classrooms, and these activities bore little resemblance to those that had been described in the funding proposal. As I considered this situation, the outcome data that my staff and I were planning to collect seemed of low importance. (p. 120)

After analyzing these experiences, Stufflebeam decided to create a broader definition of evaluation rather than simply focusing on objectives. He decided that evaluations would be more useful if they focused on managing and improving programs.

Stufflebeam (2012) states, "It seemed to me that the best hope of doing this would be to supply the school administrators, project directors, and school staff with information they could use to decide on and bring about needed changes in the projects" (p. 120). Hence the focus of evaluations changed from a purely summative model to include formative evaluation components as well. Described another way, "the most important purpose of program evaluation is not to prove but to improve" (Stufflebeam, 2012, p. 117).

The CIPP model can be used to evaluate many different types of programs. According to Stufflebeam's CIPP Evaluation Model Checklist, Second Edition (2007), the checklist has been used with the following types of programs: science and mathematics education, rural education, educational research and development, achievement testing, state systems of educational accountability, school improvement, professional development schools, transition to work, training and personnel development, welfare reform, nonprofit organization services, community development, community-based youth programs, community foundations, personnel evaluation systems, and technology. The model has been used extensively in both educational and human service settings.

The four components of the CIPP model, namely Context, Inputs, Process, and Product, can also be considered in question form. For example, the four parts of an evaluation respectively ask: What needs to be done? (Context); How should it be done? (Inputs); Is it being done? (Process); and, Did it succeed? (Product; Stufflebeam, 2007). Asking these questions at the most basic level can help guide the evaluation process.

When using the CIPP model for evaluation, it is recommended that the evaluation be conducted using multiple methods. Stufflebeam (2003) states, "The CIPP Model

requires engagement of multiple perspectives, use of a wide range of qualitative and quantitative methods, and triangulation procedures to assess and interpret a multiplicity of information" (p. 14). He notes that since these types of evaluations are not able to be thoroughly controlled as in a laboratory setting, "consequently, the evaluator has to be resourceful in compiling a wide range of reasonably good information that in the aggregate tells a consistent, truthful story" (p. 14).

The discrepancy evaluation model. While Daniel Stufflebeam and his colleagues were developing the CIPP model in Ohio, Malcolm Provus and his colleagues were developing their own evaluation model in Pittsburgh for the same reasons—as a reaction to the lack of effective evaluation models in education at the time. "Because Provus' model is particularly attentive to the discrepancies between posited standards and actual performance, it is generally referred to as the *Discrepancy Model* of educational evaluation" (Rao, 2007, p. 263). In the introduction to his discrepancy model in 1969, Provus stated, "In most public school systems, evaluation consists of preemptive applications of quasi-experimental designs and abortive efforts to improve programs which were poorly designed and installed and remain poorly administered" (p. 1).

Provus (1969) continues as follows:

Ultimately programs will improve only if teachers, administrators, and students in most of America's classrooms become involved in a comprehensive effort to review and improve their own work. Such an effort requires careful study by school staffs of their program operations, a detailed analysis of program inputs and processes, and the verification that programs are in fact operating as people believe them to be operating. (p. 1)

In the 1960s, Provus was working on a model that would help school staff be able to evaluate new programs implemented due to the influx of money from ESEA, especially in inner-city schools. Provus (1969) stated, "The Discrepancy Evaluation Model…is the result of an attempt to apply evaluation and management theory to the evaluation of programs in city school systems" (p. 8). He noted, "Evaluation at its simplest level may be seen as the comparison of performance against a standard" (p. 9). Consequently, when you are using this model, you are looking for places where the program is or is not meeting the original standard set in place when the program was implemented. As McKenna (1981) states, "Provus considers discrepancies to be the essential clue in program evaluation. Discrepancies point out differences that exist between what program planners think is happening in the program and what's actually happening" (p. 10).

In using the discrepancy model for a program evaluation, Provus lays out four different choices to be made using the information gathered through the course of the evaluation. "The program can be terminated; it can be modified; it can continue or be repeated as is; or the standards can be changed" (Nyre & Rose, 1979, p. 192). Additionally, Nyre and Rose describe the five different stages of the model as follows:

> The first stage focuses on the design and refers to the nature of the program – its objectives, students, staff and other resources required for the program, and the actual activities designed to promote attainment of the objectives. The program design that emerges becomes the standard against which the program is compared in the next stage. The second stage, installation, involves determining whether an implemented program is congruent with its implementation plan. Process is the

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third stage, in which the evaluator serves in a formative role, comparing

performance with standards and focusing on the extent to which the interim or

enabling objectives have been achieved. The fourth stage, product, is concerned

with comparing actual attainments against the standards (objectives) derived

during Stage 1 and noting the discrepancies. The fifth and final stage is concerned

with the question of cost. A cost-benefit analysis is made of the completed

program and compared to other programs similar in nature. (p. 193)

In considering all of the stages of the Discrepancy Model, the first three stages of

the model are intended to be formative, while the last two states are summative. All of the

stages in this model seek to provide direct and useful feedback to the people actually

involved in implementing the program. According to Mathison (2005):

The value of the discrepancy model of evaluation is that it makes explicit what

may otherwise be implied; that is, it clearly and explicitly states what the

objectives are, what the expected outcomes are, and measures the distance

between the two. (p. 117)

Evaluation models applied to special education programs. While there are

several examples in the literature citing the use of the CIPP model and the Discrepancy

model in the evaluation of special education programs, I will only review a select few

here in order to provide some illustrative samples. These models are often used in

educational program evaluations because they lend themselves easily to the K-12

educational setting. In addition, both models were developed through the authors'

experiences evaluating K-12 educational programs.

Lusby (2005) conducted an evaluation of an alternative program in secondary special education. The purpose of this study was twofold: 1) to determine the adequacy, quality, and effectiveness of the alternative program, and 2) to formulate recommendations for program improvement. Lusby used the CIPP model as one of four primary sources to inform his evaluation. He focused primarily on the process and product components since he was interested in assessing the day-to-day operations of the program, as well as the program outcomes. Lusby used a mixture of qualitative data, descriptive data, and quantitative data to conduct his study. Overall, he determined that the alternative program was providing satisfactory educational services to the students it was serving in the majority of the evaluation criteria areas. He reported that the program goals were found to be the weakest aspect of the program, while strengths included student-teacher ratios, curriculum materials, and staff qualifications.

Another example of a program evaluation that used the CIPP model is Simeon's (2014) program evaluation of a reading program for students with disabilities in a particular school division. In this study, Simeon examined the intended purposes, actual uses, and benefits of the Reading Plus program on reading skills for students with disabilities in elementary, middle, and high school. She used data from both qualitative and quantitative sources. Simeon noted that the CIPP model was chosen as an evaluation tool in order to provide guidance to the leadership of the school district so that they could determine whether they should continue, modify, adopt, or terminate the Reading Plus program. The focus of this evaluation was on the product phase of the CIPP model. Results indicated that the Reading Plus program was both cost effective and appropriate for students with disabilities across all grade levels included in this study.

Gwynne-Atwater (2011) evaluated a special education preschool program serving children with autism using Provus' discrepancy model. She used the discrepancy model to examine the program and to evaluate whether its implementation was consistent with the program's design, specifically in the area of professional development. Gwynne-Atwater used a mixed methodology for this study. The qualitative data was obtained by conducting interviews with central office administrators of the preschool program, and then analyzing the transcrips of these interviews, as well as the analysis of training documents. The quantitative data were obtained through surveys given to preschool special education teachers.

Regarding her findings, Gwynne-Atwater (2011) determined that five key areas of professional development emerged from the interview sessions with the program managers, namely communication, behavior, academic, self-help, and social skills. Next, she assessed teachers' perceptions regarding whether or not they received effective professional development in each of the five areas named. In the discrepancy analysis, Gwynne-Atwater determined that a noticeable discrepancy occurred between the program managers' expectations and teachers' perception in only one area, which was the area of self-help skills. The other four areas assessed did not show discrepancies between the program standards and the teachers' expectations. Limitations of this study included that the researcher only conducted two interviews with program administrators. Additionally, since the study was conducted in one particular school district, the results may not be generalizable to other school districts with preschool autism programs. However, the program evaluation did appear to provide useful information to the program

administrators regarding the overall effectiveness of their staff development program, as well as offering suggestions for areas of improvement.

Klein-Lombardo (2012) also completed a program evaluation using the Provus' Discrepancy Model. In her study, she was evaluating a special education day school by comparing the program to a set of best practice standards for school programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. More specifically, Klein-Lombardo compared four aspects of the program (academic, social skills, mental health, and sustainability) to seven standards. She used both qualitative and quantitative data in her study. Students in the program were administered individual achievement tests upon entering the program, and then again upon their discharge. Klein-Lombardo also used descriptive data from school records, such as behavior sheets and progress reports. Klein-Lombardo acknowledged that she also was the director of the program at the time of the evaluation; therefore, she cited the fact that she was not able to represent an objective, outside perspective (such as from an external evaluator) as a limitation of the study.

Results indicated that students attending this day school made significant academic gains, based on the results from the pre- and post-achievement testing. However, the results in the social skills domain were somewhat mixed; some students made gains in this area, while others did not. The author noted that the staff members could improve their skills in terms of differentiating among social skills acquisition, performance, and fluency (i.e., being able to perform a skill appropriately and consistently), as well as improving treatment integrity. Regarding mental health care at in the program, the author identified the fact that some students who needed community mental health care did not always receive consistent and timely support as a reason for

the inconsistent results in this area. Finally, regarding sustainability, the evaluation found that many of the students in the program were able to transition successfully back to public school. Overall, Klein-Lombardo (2012) stated that prior to this evaluation, the program had never been evaluated before; therefore, the results would be helpful to make improvements to the program.

Summary

The education for children with disabilities has made tremendous progress since the early 1900s. The progress has mainly been a result of the efforts of parents and families of children with special needs who have pushed for equal access to education. In addition, the rights of children with disabilities was also positively impacted by the civil rights movement, including the decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*. Then, once students with disabilities gained equal access, families and educators advocated for setting high educational standards for these students, in order to close the achievement gap between these students and their nondisabled peers.

The federal and state governments have passed numerous legislation outlining the special education process in schools. Although laws have changed over the years, key concepts continue to involve parental participation, education in the least restrictive environment, and procedural safeguards to protect the rights of students and parents. In addition to simply following federal, state, and local guidelines regarding special education, it is also important for school districts to be able to determine whether their special education programs are working effectively in meeting the needs of their students with disabilities. To determine the effectiveness and compliance of programs, program

evaluation models such as the CIPP model and the Discrepancy model have been widely

used in the educational environment.

Chapter 3

For this study, I completed a program evaluation of the compliance of the special education program in Southeast School District. I used the CIPP evaluation model with a specific focus on the Process component. More specifically, the evaluation focused on the Child Study process, the eligibility process, and the IEP process (development and implementation). Since the paradigm is pragmatic, the data sources were collected from a mixed methods approach. The evaluation questions are as follows:

1) To what degree does the special education handbook of the selected Virginia school district align with federal and state guidelines for special education?

2) To what degree are the special education processes and procedures being implemented as intended in a selected Virginia school district with regard to their special education handbook?

3) To what degree are standards-based IEPs being implemented successfully with regard to the technical assistance and guidance documents for students with disabilities as outlined by the Virginia Department of Education?

4) What contributes to, enhances, or inhibits the successful implementation of the special education program with regard to the Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP processes in order to ensure compliance with federal, state, and local guidelines for special education?

Participants

There were two groups of participants in this evaluation study: 1) educators (including general education teachers, special education teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals) who participated in focus groups, and 2) educational leaders who were interviewed. The focus group participants included general education teachers, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and specialists in the Southeast School District. There was one focus group for secondary school staff and one for elementary staff. They had the right to refuse to participate. Although I had planned for each focus group to have eight participants, one group had five participants and one group had six participants. The numbers changed slightly based on who was available for each group. For example, one of the general education teachers who was supposed to attend the secondary school group had planned to come, but was unable to due to unforeseen circumstances. However, I was able to get input from each type of educator I had intended either through focus groups or interviews.

In addition, I conducted one-on-one interviews with key staff involved in the special education program in Southeast. I had initially decided to interview staff members in the following positions: the Director of Student Services (who oversees the special education program), the Compliance Officer, principals, assistant principals, and Child Study chairs. However, I was not able to interview the Director of Student Services since her position was eliminated during the course of the study. Additionally, after conversations with the leadership of Southeast, we determined that it would be most useful to interview the administrators at each school who were responsible for special education in their respective schools since they would have the most information about

the implementation process. Therefore, I only interviewed one administrator from each building. One administrator also was the Child Study chair for the building as well. The other child study chair participated in one of the focus groups. In addition, I interviewed the lead special education teachers at both schools because they also were able to provide key information about the special education programs at their schools.

Data Sources

There were three main sources of data for this program evaluation: focus group data; individual interviews with key staff; and document analysis. Since this program evaluation used a mixed methods approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed.

Focus groups. I conducted two focus groups with a cross-section of staff involved in the special education program in Southeast. One group included staff members from the secondary school and the other focus group included staff members from the elementary school. The staff members from both groups included the following: general education teachers, special education teachers, specialists (such as the school psychologist, school social worker, and speech pathologist), and paraprofessionals. As stated previously, although I initially intended to have two representatives from each group listed in both the elementary and secondary school groups I was not able to achieve that within both groups. Instead, the following numbers of participants were included across both groups: five specialists (one was a former special educator), two paraprofessionals, and four general educators.

Focus group questions were developed based on the research questions in the study (see Appendix A). The questions focused on the implementation of the three major

processes in the special education program: Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP development. The focus group questions were reviewed by two special educators prior to initiating the focus groups in order to gather feedback on the clarity and suitability of the questions. I then reviewed the expert feedback and made changes as necessary.

The focus group sessions were scheduled for approximately 30-45 minutes per session. The session times were scheduled at mutually agreed upon times that was conducive to staff participation (i.e., directly after school). The focus groups were also scheduled on-site in order to make it most convenient for school staff. Focus groups were scheduled for the spring of 2017.

Administrator interviews. I also conducted one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with key staff members who supported the special education program. Interviews were conducted with two administrators responsible for special education in their buildings (one from the elementary and one from the secondary school), the Compliance Specialist, and the lead special education teachers at both schools. Interviews were scheduled at times that were mutually convenient to me and the interviewee and were scheduled on-site to make it most convenient for school staff. Interviews were scheduled over two days in spring 2017.

The interview questions were developed based on the information needed to answer the research questions (see Appendix B). The interview questions covered the Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP processes within the special education program. Similar to the process used to develop the focus group questions, the sample interview questions were reviewed by two special education administrators in order to gather feedback regarding the clarity and appropriateness of the interview questions. Once these experts

provided their feedback, I made the necessary changes in order to improve the interview questions for the study.

Document analysis. A document analysis was also completed in May and June 2017. I compared Southeast's Special Education Handbook with specific student files using a discrepancy analysis model via a checklist. The checklist was grounded in the guidance documents from the Virginia Department of Education. They were specifically focused on the Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP processes. Once the sample checklists were developed, I asked two special education supervisors to review the checklists in order to ensure their accuracy. I then made the necessary changes to the checklists based on the feedback I received from the special education experts.

I randomly chose 20 special education files (10 each from the elementary school and the secondary school). I used a random numbers table to ensure that the selection of files was random. I reviewed the child study paperwork, the eligibility paperwork, and the most recent IEP for each student. Then, I compared these documents with the procedures/guidelines outlined in the special education handbook. In addition, in order to assess whether IEP services were following best practices in terms of instructional delivery, I also compared the IEP services to guidelines offered by the Virginia Department of Education for standards-based IEPs. In addition, I took qualitative notes during my document analysis. These notes helped me provide specific examples of any strengths or weaknesses in the compliance process.

Data Collection

For the focus groups, I solicited volunteers from both the elementary school and the secondary school. I requested participants from specific areas, including general

education teachers, special education teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals. Each focus group had one or two participants from each staff category so that the groups were diverse, yet still small enough to have active participation and discussion. Both focus groups had the same set of questions. Each volunteer was offered a $5.00 gift card from Starbucks as an incentive to participate.

The focus groups were videotaped and the tapes were transcribed. Once the tapes were transcribed, I summarized the transcripts and then offered the focus group participants the chance to review the summaries in order that they could be member-checked before I began the data analysis. After that, I coded the transcripts by themes.

The inteviews were conducted with key stakeholders in Southeast's special education program. These stakeholders were selected since they were able to provide important insight into the processes within the special education program. Additionally, the interview particpants were able to share information relating to compliance and the implementation of the special education program. Each interview was audiotaped, and then I transcribed the tapes. I provided the transcripts to the interviewees so that they had the chance to verify what they said during the interview. I also provided $5.00 Starbucks gift cards to the interviewees to thank them for their time and participation.

Data Analysis

Since this evaluation used a pragmatic paradigm, the data was analyzed using a mixed methods approach. The mixed methods approach required both quantitative and qualitative data. The data analysis for each measure (i.e., focus groups, interviews, and document analysis) will be described below. The data analysis will also be summarized in Table 2.

Focus groups. The data obtained from the focus groups was analyzed using a qualitative approach. The focus groups were videotaped and then transcribed by me. I first watched the videos to gain an overall sense of what the respondents were saying. Then, I began the transcription process by hand. As I was transcribing, I kept notes for myself regarding concepts or themes that I noticed in the data. I used these notes to help myself develop codes as I analyzed the data and generated themes. Since the same questions were used for both focus groups, the transcripts were compared and contrasted between the secondary school and the elementary school.

Interview protocol. The interviews with each staff person were audiotaped. Additionally, I took notes during the interviews. Once I completed the interviews, I read through all of my notes to get initial impressions and to provide myself a chance to reflect on the data. Then I transcribed the interviews by hand. As I transcribed the data, I made notes to myself about significant ideas or themes that were generated. Next, I coded the data by themes. This involved taking the text data and segmenting it into categories, and then labeling the segments with terms. I looked for similar themes among the responses from the interviewees and allowed the codes to emerge during the data analysis.

Document analysis. The 20 student files were chosen randomly, 10 from each school. The documents were analyzed using a checklist created from Southeast's Special Education Handbook. The data were analyzed using a discrepancy model, which identified whether or not the documents complied with the standards set forth by the handbook. Then I created a table to compare the files with the required components set forth in the handbook. Additionally, descriptive statistics were used to analyze the extent to which the 20 sample special education files complied with the standards. I also took

qualitative notes while I reviewed these files. The notes were used to provide specific

examples of compliance strengths as well as areas for improvement.

Table 2

Data Sources Organized by Evaluation Questions

Evaluation Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
Question 1: To what degree does the special education handbook of the selected Virginia school district align with federal and state guidelines for special education?	Documents: Special education handbook; Technical assistance and guidance documents from VDOE	Checklist to audit for accuracy and compliance; Descriptive statistics; Qualitative notes
Question 2: To what degree are the special education processes and procedures being implemented as intended in a selected Virginia school district with regard to their special education handbook?	Documents: 20 Special Education files (10 elementary and 10 secondary school); Child Study minutes; Eligibility documents; IEPs; Federal and state special education guidelines	Checklist to audit for accuracy and compliance; Descriptive statistics; Qualitative notes
Question 3: To what degree are standards-based IEPs being implemented successfully with regard to the technical assistance and guidance documents for students with disabilities as outlined by the Virginia Department of Education?	Documents: 20 Special Education files (10 elementary and 10 secondary school); Child Study minutes; Eligibility documents; IEPs; Special education handbook; Technical assistance and guidance documents from the VDOE	Checklist to audit for accuracy and compliance; Descriptive statistics
Question 4: What contributes to, enhances, or inhibits the successful implementation of the special education program with regard to the Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP processes in order to ensure compliance with federal, state, and local guidelines for special education?	a) Interviews b) Focus groups	a) Qualitative; Coding by themes b) Qualitative; Coding by themes

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Assumptions. When staff members participated in the focus groups, I assumed that they responded accurately and honestly. I also assumed that the people that I interviewed for the study were also honest and replied accurately. In addition, I assumed that Southeast's Special Education Handbook complies with federal, state, and local guidelines.

Delimitations. This program evaluation was only conducted in one school district, the Southeast School District. The purpose of the study was to evaluate this particular program at the request of the school district. I chose to evaluate the specific areas of interest to the leadership of Southeast School District. Additionally, I chose to focus on the processes of the special education program, as opposed to the context, inputs, or products. If the school district was interested in another aspect of the special education program, I would have changed the focus and evaluation questions of this study.

Limitations. This study involved one specific school district's implementation of their special education program; therefore, the results are not generalizable to other school districts. However, other small, rural school divisions in Virginia may be able to gain insight from the findings of this evaluation. In addition, the information gathered from the focus groups and the interviews are the self-perceptions of the participants, which will be subjective.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting any type of research, one of the most important pieces to consider is ethics. In the field of program evaluation, a set of ethical guidelines have been

developed and these are called the Program Evaluation Standards. The four main tenets of the standards are propriety, utility, feasibility, and accuracy (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2009).

Propriety relates to being responsive to one's community and stakeholders. "Propriety refers to what is proper, fair, legal, right, acceptable, and just in evaluations" (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011, p. 106). As the evaluator, it is important for me to protect the rights and dignity of the participants in the evaluation, especially since the study involves the education of children with special needs. I also needed to ensure that the language in my final report is clear and understandable to all stakeholders. Finally, I needed to be aware of my own biases in conducting this research.

The second tenet, utility, emphasizes that evaluations need to be useful and valuable to stakeholders. In describing the importance of utility, Yarbrough et al. (2011) note that "useful evaluations lead to descriptions, insights, judgments, decisions, recommendations, and other processes that meet the needs of those requesting the evaluation" (p. 5). By adopting the pragmatic paradigm, I believe that I was working to ensure that the focus of the program evaluation will be useful to the stakeholders. I solicited their input for the final evaluation questions for this study in order to make sure I am answering questions that they would like to know. In addition, I periodically checked in with the staff of Southeast to ensure that the evaluation was meeting their needs.

The third tenet, feasibility, speaks to the need for evaluations to be practical and efficient. According to Yarbrough et al. (2011), "evaluations are feasible when they can

take place with an adequate degree of effectiveness and efficiency" (p. 72). In my role as evaluator, I needed to be cognizant of my demands on participants' time and availability to participate in the study. I also needed to plan my evaluation using data that were readily available to me.

The last tenet of the Program Evaluation Standards is accuracy. "Accuracy is the truthfulness of evaluation representations, propositions, and findings, especially those that support judgments about the quality of programs or program components" (Yarbrough et al., 2011, p. 158). To maintain accuracy, I checked to make sure that my results were valid before reporting them. I also needed to design my program evaluation using sound theory and practice with input from experienced professionals. In addition, I needed to test my logic model theory with stakeholders familiar with the special education program.

Prior to beginning the program evaluation study, I gained approval through The College of William and Mary's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The College mandates that any studies involving human subjects must be submitted to the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at the College of William and Mary for either exemption or approval. I submitted a protocol to the IRB that included the following: a brief rationale for the study, full procedures, description of the participants, copy of all tests, questionnaires, all interview questions, the informed consent form, and other pertinent information (College of William and Mary, 2015).

In order to gain approval to conduct this study within the Southeast School District, I submitted a written prospectus to the Superintendent of Southeast School District for approval prior to initiating the study. The prospectus included a cover letter,

which included an overview of the proposed project, as well as the research methodology

and testing being used. I also submitted the IRB Committee approval documentation.

Once the proposal passed the initial review, then the Superintendent contacted the

principals of the secondary school and elementary school to set up the participants in the

focus groups and the interviews.

Chapter 4

In this section the results of my program evaluation of the special education program of the Southeast School District are reported. I first describe the samples used in this study. Next, I will review the statistical analysis I used for the quantitative methods in the study. I will also review and describe the data analysis I used for the qualitative interviews and focus groups I ran. Finally, I will report on the findings for each research question.

Sample

I used three different sets of samples for this study. The first sample included special education files from Southeast School District. The second sample was the staff members who participated in one-on-one interviews with me. Finally, the third sample included staff participants in two different focus groups.

Special education files. The special education leadership from Southeast School District determined that the best method for me to gain access to the special education files, while at the same time maintaining the confidentiality of their files, was to provide me copies of forms from their electronic special education system. The compliance specialist from Southeast School District printed off copies of the child study minutes, the eligibility minutes, the prior written notices, and the most recent IEP for each file included in the study. Then, the student names and any other identifying information (such as home address, home phone number, student ID numbers, and parent names) were redacted.

I reviewed 10 files from the elementary school and 10 files from the secondary school for a total of 20 files. Every file had eligibility minutes and an IEP; however, for two of the secondary school files, the child study minutes were not available.

Out of the 20 files selected, 15 files were associated with male students and five were associated with female students. In terms of race, 12 students were Black and eight students were White. Students' grade levels ranged from pre-kindergarten to 11th grade. The specific breakdown of grade levels is as follows: Pre-kindergarten-2, Second grade-1, Third grade-1, Fourth grade-1, Fifth grade-4, Sixth grade-1, Seventh grade-2, Eighth grade-2, Ninth grade-2, 10th grade-3, and 11th grade-1.

There were a variety of disability categories represented. The most common category was Specific Learning Disability (8 students), followed by Other Health Impairment (4 students) and Speech/Language Impairment (3 students). Additionally, two students fell into the Developmentally Delayed category. The other few students fell into low-incidence categories.

Interview participants. I conducted five individual interviews. I interviewed an administrator at the secondary school and the elementary school, as well as the special education lead teachers at both schools. In addition, I interviewed the Compliance Specialist for the school district. One interviewee was male, and the other four were female. Three of the interviewees were fairly new to the district in that they had only been working in the district for one or two years. The other two interviewees had been with the district for at least five years.

Focus group participants. There was a total of 11 participants in the two focus groups, and the numbers were evenly split between the secondary school group and the

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elementary school group. Nine participants were female and two were male. Participants included general education teachers (4), specialists (5), and special education instructional assistants (2). Six participants had been with the district for three years or less, while the other five participants had been with the district eight years or more. All participants had at least three years of experience in the field of education.

Quantitative Analysis

I used six different checklists in this study. Three checklists were used to analyze Southeast's compliance with state and federal standards through the child study, eligibility, and IEP processes. The other three checklists were modified to assess Southeast's special education handbook in terms of its compliance with federal and state standards for special education in terms of the child study, eligibility, and IEP processes. For each checklist, questions could only be answered "yes" or "no." Therefore, results were tallied in terms of a frequency chart for each question.

Qualitative Analysis

After the interviews and focus groups were transcribed, I coded the responses based on themes I generated from the research questions. I began coding with 15 different codes, and then eventually added six additional codes as I worked through all of the transcripts (see Appendix C). From the outset, I organized the codes based on the research questions I was asking. Broadly speaking, codes mainly fell into three categories: positive comments about what is working well regarding the district's special education program; comments regarding barriers in the special education program; and suggestions/ideas for improvement.

Evaluation Question One

The first evaluation question is as follows: To what degree does the special

education handbook of the selected Virginia school district align with federal and state

guidelines for special education? To answer this question, I reviewed Southeast's Special

Education Handbook and compared it to three checklists I developed to address key areas

of compliance in the child study, eligibility, and IEP processes.

Child study compliance. In six out of seven areas assessed, the special education

handbook is clearly aligned with federal and state guidelines for special education. These

areas include the following: the 10-day timeline, the referring source's participation in

the meeting, the inclusion of a prior written notice, obtaining parental consent, providing

procedural safeguards to parents, and the discussion of pre-referral interventions during

the child study process.

On the other hand, the one area that was not explicitly defined in Southeast's

handbook was the specific components that need to be included in the prior written notice

(PWN) to parents when the child study team makes a referral for a special education

evaluation. The handbook does state that "prior written notice indicating that the child

has been referred for an evaluation and the purpose of the evaluation along with the

procedureal safeguards notice will be provided to the parent" (Southeast School District,

2016, p. 7). Interestingly enough, the handbook does specify all of the necessary

components of the prior written notice to be given to parents if the child study team

decides *not* to refer for testing. However, if the team decides to make a referral for special

education testing, the handbook does not explicitly state that the PWN needs to include

these components (which are specified in federal and state guidelines): a description of

any other options the team considered and reasons why; a description of each evaluation procedure, assessment, record, and report the district used as a basis for the decision; and a description of any other relevant factors.

Eligibility compliance. The handbook does adequately address the seven different areas assessed for eligibility compliance. More specifically, the handbook states that initial evaluations must be completed within 65 business days, which complies with federal and state guidelines. In addition, the handbook notes that "school personnel will ensure that tests and other evaluation materials will be completed" (Southeast School District, 2016, p. 11) as they were initially requested in order to determine eligibility for special education. The handbook also addresses the need for the eligibility team to use a variety of sources to make their decision; the handbook states, "No single measure will be used as a sole criterion for determining whether a child is a child with a disability and for determining an appropriate educational program for a child" (Southeast School District, 2016, p. 13).

The handbook also addresses the need to follow eligibility criteria set forth by the state of Virginia in that a child will only be found eligible if he/she is determined to both have a disability and as a result, needs special education and related services. In addition, the handbook notes that the eligibility team must document all of the information presented at eligibility and also must provide a summary of their deliberations, which will include the basis for the determination of eligibility. Finally, the handbook also states that the eligibility team "will provide the parent with procedural safeguards in accordance with the Virginia Regulations, 21 at 8 VAC 20-81-170, including the notice requirements, when determining eligibility and in ensuring the confidentiality of records"

(Southeast School District, 2016, p.18). This portion of the Virginia Regulations clearly articulates all of the components that must be included in the Prior Written Notice to parents, as well as the parental rights afforded to parents in special education.

IEP compliance. In this section, I addressed four main areas of compliance: 1) That initial IEPs or IEPs representing a change in eligibility status must be written within 30 calendar days of the eligibility meeting; 2) That the IEP must be standards-based; 3) That the parent must be provided with a PWN; and 4) That the parent must be offered a copy of their parental rights. The handbook is clearly compliant with the last three areas, and partially compliant with the first area. The handbook does state that an initial IEP must be written within 30 calendar days of the eligibility meeting; however, the handbook does not address the 30-day timeline if an IEP must be written due to a change in eligibility status.

The handbook does offer clear guidance on creating standards-based IEPs and notes that the goals must be based on current grade level standards. Additionally, the handbook offers specific guidance for each component of a standards-based IEP, including the following: present level of performance; measurable, annual goals; accommodations and/or modifications; service statements; the least restrictive environment; state assessments; and methods of assessing and reporting student progress. Additionally, the handbook states that the Prior Written Notice must be completed at the IEP meeting, and also provides guidance for each mandated component of the PWN. Finally, the handbook notes that parents must be offered procedural safeguards and that this should be documented in the PWN as well.

Evaluation Question Two

The second research question is as follows: To what degree are the special education processes and procedures being implemented as intended in a selected Virginia school district with regard to their special education handbook? In order to answer this question, I reviewed my sample of 20 special education files, including the Child Study minutes, the Eligibility documents, and the IEP documents. I compared each file against checklists that I developed based on Southeast's special education handbook.

Child study processes. Out of the 20 special education files I used for the study, two files did not contain child study minutes; therefore, no evidence was provided in these two files regarding child study compliance. The results of the child study analysis is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Results of Child Study Compliance with Southeast's Special Education Handbook

Question	Yes	No	Inconclusive	No evidence provided	Not applicable
1. Once the referral to child study was made, did the child study team meet within 10 business days? (use referral date on Child Study minutes)	17	0	1	2	0
2. Did the child study team include the referring source, as appropriate (except if inclusion of a referring source would breach the confidentiality of the child)?	8	0	10	2	0
3. If the team made a referral for a special education evaluation, was a prior written notice provided to the parent?	18	0	0	2	0
4. Did the PWN include the following components: a.description of action proposed/refused;	16	1	1	2	0
4b. explanation of action;	15	2	1	2	0
4c. description of any other options team considered and reasons why;	15	2	1	2	0
4d. description of each evaluation procedure, assessment, record, report the district used as a basis for decision;	13	4	1	2	0
4e. description of any other relevant factors?	11	6	1	2	0
5. Did the team obtain parental consent to pursue an evaluation?	17	0	0	2	1
6. Did the team provide a copy of parental rights/procedural safeguards to the parents?	18	0	0	2	0
7. Did the team discuss pre-referral interventions, documented strategies, and/or information from Response to Intervention (RtI) processes?	8	10	0	2	0

Note. PWN = prior written notice

In almost all cases (17 out of 18), the child study team met within the 10-day timeline after the initial referral. In the last case, I was unable to determine if the deadline was met since the student was referred before winter break and the meeting happened after break, and I did not know the dates of winter break for that year. Therefore, it is possible that the child study team met on this student within the appropriate time frame as well.

Regarding the referring source being included in the meeting, in the majority of cases, I was unable to determine if that was the case. This was mainly due to the fact that the referring source was often not listed on the child study paperwork. In a few cases, although the referring source was not listed, in the minutes there was a reference to the parent being the referring source; therefore, in those cases I gave credit to the referring source being present at the meeting. In the other cases, however, it was not possible to determine from the paperwork if the referring source was present at the meeting.

Regarding the PWN, in all cases that had child study minutes, the PWN was provided to the parents. However, at times, the child study team did not completely fill out the PWN with all of the necessary components. The areas of greatest compliance included listing a description of the actions proposed, as well as an explanation of those actions and a description of any other options the team considered. On the other hand, the child study teams seemed to be less consistently compliant when they had to describe each evaluation procedure, assessment, record, or report the district used as a basis for their decision. In some cases, the team only listed "input" from staff members as a basis for their decision rather than identifying any evaluation procedure, assessment, or report, which does not meet the standard. In addition, the team also had difficulty in terms of

describing any other relevant factors in their decision. Of the six files that were not

compliant in this area, two files did not have anything written at all, while another two

files listed "n/a," and the final two files had incomplete sentences that I was not able to

interpret.

In every case where the child study team decided to pursue special education

testing, the team obtained parental consent. In one case, the team decided not to evaluate;

therefore, they did not need to obtain parental consent. Additionally, in all cases with

child study minutes, the team provided copies of parental rights/procedural safeguards to

parents.

In contrast, the area of most difficulty in terms of compliance appeared to be the

child study team's discussion and documentation of pre-referral interventions, strategies,

and/or Response to Intervention (RtI) data. Out of the 18 files with child study minutes,

10 of them (56%) did not meet this requirement. In all cases that were rated as not

compliant, the child study team did not provide any information in this section of the

child study minutes; in other words, this section was left blank. It is also important to

note that for the eight files that were listed as compliant, the child study team did discuss

interventions that had been attempted, but none of the files provided any data or specific

information regarding student progress in terms of the interventions/strategies.

Eligibility processes. For this section, I used a checklist with seven main

questions. The questions included the following topics: evaluations being completed

within 65 business days, all evaluations being completed as reqested, the use of a variety

of sources to make an eligibility decision, the use of the state criteria for the decision,

documention of the decision, the provision of a PWN, and the provision of parental

rights. In three areas, the files were 100% compliant; these included the team using the

state criteria for eligibility, the provision of a PWN, and the provision of parental rights.

Results are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4

Results of Eligibility Compliance with Southeast's Special Education Handbook

Question	Yes	No	Inconclusive	No evidence provided	Not applicable
1. Was the evaluation completed within 65 business days?	16	1	0	2	1
2. Were all evaluations completed that were initially requested?	12	4	1	2	1
3. Did the eligibility team use a variety of sources to make their eligibility decision (such as standardized tests, parent input, teacher input, information pertaining to the student's social and cultural background, physical condition, and adaptive behavior)? [at least 3]	16	2	2	0	0
4. Did the eligibility team use the VA state criteria for eligibility (including the following: a) presence of a disability,	20	0	0	0	0
a) an adverse impact on educational performance,	20	0	0	0	0
b) the need for specially designed instruction)?	20	0	0	0	0
5. Did the eligibility team document their discussion and their decision, as well as the reasons behind the decision?	6	14	0	0	0
6. Did the team provide a prior written notice of the decision to the parent?	20	0	0	0	0
6a. Actions proposed/refused?	20	0	0	0	0
6b. Rationale for why actions were proposed or refused?	19	1	0	0	0
6c. Other options considered?	20	0	0	0	0
6d. Reasons why options were rejected?	20	0	0	0	0
6e. Description of any assessment data or reports used to make the decision?	19	1	0	0	0
6f. Other factors relevant to proposal or refusal?	20	0	0	0	0
7. Did the team provide a copy of parental rights?	20	0	0	0	0

In all cases where the data were available, except for one, the evaluation was completed within the 65-day timeline. In the last case, permission for testing was granted in the fall of the school year, but the testing was not completed until the spring, well outside of the 65-day timeline. There was not a justification given in either the eligibility minutes or the PWN for this file; therefore, I am unsure of the reason for the noncompliance.

The eligibility team appeared to have slightly more difficulty sustaining compliance with completing all of the evaluations that were initially requested, however. Out of the 16 files that could be evaluated in this area, four were missing at least one evaluation that had been requested (which equates to 25%). In three of the four files, there was only one evaluation component missing; however, in the fourth file there were two components missing. In all four cases, there was no mention of the missing evaluation in either the summary of deliberations or the PWN. Additionally, in another file, there were several evaluations that had been completed for eligibility for which the parent had not signed permission.

In the vast majority of cases, the eligibility team did use a variety of sources to make their eligibility decision. For the purpose of this study, I applied criteria that the team had to use at least three different sources in order to be compliant. However, there were two files that did not meet this criteria, and they both involved eligibility for speech and language impairment. In both cases, the team appeared to only rely on one source of data, which was standardized testing for speech/language concerns.

The eligibility teams were 100% compliant in terms of using the Virginia state criteria to determine eligibility, which includes a) the presence of a disability, b)

documentation of an adverse impact on educational performance, and c) a demonstrated need for specially designed instruction. Every file that was reviewed indicated that all three components of the criteria were met as part of the decision.

Although the eligibility teams clearly indicated that the criteria had been met in order to find students eligible, they demonstrated difficulties in terms of documenting these decisions. Out of 20 files, only six of them (30%) included documentation of the eligibility decision, as well as the reasons behind the decision. In the other 14 cases, approximately half did not provide either a summary of the decision, nor the reasons behind the decision, while the other half simply offered the decision without any explanation of the decision.

In all cases, the eligibility team did provide a PWN. Additionally, the teams were consistently compliant with documenting the actions proposed, the other options considered, the reasons why the options were rejected, and the other factors relevant to the proposal. In one case, the team wrote "n/a" as their rationale for why the student was found eligible for services; therefore, the component was not marked as compliant. However, in all other cases, the team completed this section of the PWN appropriately. In addition, in one file the team wrote "n/a" when asked to describe the assessment data or reports used to make the decision; therefore, this component was also marked out of compliance. However, all other files were compliant on this component of the PWN.

Finally, all files also documented that the eligibility team had provided a copy of parental rights. Therefore, the files were fully compliant in this area as well.

IEP processes. The files that were reviewed were consistently compliant in terms of following the processes relating to the development of IEPs. In this section, there were

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four main areas that I reviewed. These included the following: writing the IEP within 30 days of the initial eligibility meeting, developing a standards-based IEP, providing parents with a PWN, and providing parents with a copy of their parental rights. I will focus on the standards-based IEP data in the next section of the results. The results of the other three areas are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

Results of IEP Compliance with Southeast's Special Education Handbook

Question	Yes	No	Not applicable
1. If the IEP was an initial IEP or if there was a change in eligibility status, was the IEP written within 30 calendar days of the eligibility meeting?	2	0	18
2. Were parents provided with a prior written notice?	20	0	0
2a. Actions proposed/refused?	20	0	0
2b. Rationale for why actions were proposed or refused?	20	0	0
2c. Other options considered?	20	0	0
2d. Reasons why options were rejected?	19	1	0
2e. Description of any assessment data or reports used to make the decision?	20	0	0
2f. Other factors relevant to proposal or refusal?	19	1	0
3. Were parents offered a copy of their parental rights?	20	0	0

Note. IEP = Individual Education Plan

There were only two files out of 20 that were initial evaluations that happened within the past school year. In both cases, the IEPs were written within 30 calendar days of the eligibility meeting. Therefore, in most cases, the IEPs being reviewed were not under the 30-day timeline.

Similar to the data gathered during the eligibility process, all files had PWNs included as part of the IEP process. In almost all cases, each component of the PWN was completed. In one file, the eligibility team had written "n/a" for two components, namely reasons why any options were rejected and other factors relevant to the proposal. In order

to maintain compliance, each component needs to be completed; therefore, "n/a" is not considered to be an acceptable response. Finally, each file included documentation that parents had been offered a copy of their parental rights.

An emergent finding in reviewing the 20 special education files was that in many cases, the writing in the sample files reviewed was not at a professional level. For example, at times sentences in the documents were fragments rather than complete sentences. In addition, there were grammatical and spelling errors in many documents. In some cases, I found it difficult to understand what the writers of the documents were trying to communicate.

Evaluation Question Three

The third research question is as follows: To what degree are standards-based IEPs being implemented successfully with regard to the technical assistance and guidance documents for students with disabilities as outlined by the Virginia Department of Education? To research this question, I used a checklist and analyzed the most recent IEPs from the 20 special education files from Southeast.

Out of the 20 files analyzed, 19 (95%) qualified as being standards-based. This means that the IEPs followed the guidance offered by the Virginia Department of Education in that the goals in the IEP included state content standards in their development. A summary of the results can be found in Table 6.

Table 6

Southeast's IEPs Compliance with Standards-based IEP Guidance from VDOE

Question	Yes	No
Is the IEP a Standards-based IEP?	19	1
a. Present level of performance?	19	1
b. Measurable, annual goals?	19	1
c. Accommodations and/or modifications?	20	0
d. Service statements?	20	0
e. Least restrictive environment?	20	0
f. State assessments?	20	0
g. Methods of assessing and reporting student progress?	20	0

In almost all cases, the IEPs from Southeast met the requirements for standards-based IEPs. In general, their goals were aligned with state content standards and/or referenced grade-level requirements. For the one IEP that was not determined to be standards-based, the goals did not reference any grade level standards or grade-level curriculum.

Regarding the present level of performance, all IEPs except for one, met this standard. The one IEP that was not in compliance was a transfer IEP and for some reason, the IEP had goals, but did not have a present level included. However, all other IEPs included the present level at the beginning of the IEP.

The IEPs from Southeast were also consistently compliant in developing annual goals that were measurable. They achieved a 95% compliance rate on this measure. In terms of the one IEP that was not rated as compliant on this measure, the goals were not written in a manner to be easily measurable. In addition, one goal on this IEP referenced the student completing work at home with parental assistance, which does not meet the requirements of goal statements in a standards-based IEP.

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For the last five components of the standards-based IEPs, the IEPs were 100% compliant in all areas. For example, all 20 IEPs included statements regarding accommodations and/or modifications. Additionally, they all included statements regarding the level and type of special education services that would be provided, as well as a description of the least restrive environment for the students. All 20 IEPs also included information regarding state assessments and the accommodations needed for the students to participate in those assessments. Finally, all 20 IEPs also included information regarding the methods of assessing and reporting student progress. In all cases except for one, student progress was to be reported at either 4.5-week intervals or 9-week intervals. One IEP goal was written as being reported yearly, but that was an exception. The others were evenly split between 4.5-week and 9-week reporting periods.

Evaluation Question Four

The fourth research question is as follows: What contributes to, enhances, or inhibits the successful implementation of the special education program with regard to the Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP processes in order to ensure compliance with federal, state, and local guidelines for special education? To answer this question, I conducted two focus groups and several interviews with key staff members in Southeast School District. I asked all interviewees and focus group members the same set of questions. Then I coded all of the responses based on themes.

In general, many participants identified the fact that the staff in Southeast is warm and caring as a positive contributor to the successful implementation of the special education program. One participant noted, "[Staff] go in with the mindset of the kid needs help." In addition, participants also identified the close relationships staff members

have with students and families in the district as another positive factor. As one participant stated with regard to the families with whom she works, "They're familiar with you and know that you're on their side because you talk to them about their kid all the time." Finally, many participants also identified the hiring of the compliance specialist within the past year as a positive move that has been helpful in terms of implementation of the special education program across all processes. One participant summed up the new position as follows, "We've got a gatekeeper now to enforce timelines."

Regarding barriers to implementation, high staff turnover was mentioned frequently as a challenge to program implementation. As one participant stated, "We're tiny so when one person leaves, it kind of throws everyone else off." An additional inhibiting factor identified was a lack of training among staff, as well as some confusion over processes and procedures, especially in years past. One staff member noted, "We've had some hiccups this year, but I think that's just getting faculty and staff aware of the procedures because it's been such an ambiguous area for a while that I think there'll be some growing pains."

Participants also talked about difficulties in terms of collecting and reporting data. According to one staff member, "Teachers aren't really well at documenting or keeping any data on what strategies they've tried—and they're not really used to even tracking data on these things." In addition, participants mentioned the ineffective use of both resources and time as an inhibiting factor toward successful program implementation. For example, one respondent noted that eligibility meetings often "run 90 minutes to two

hours", while another staff member noted that while sometimes meetings lasted for one hour, "we're almost always over an hour."

Feedback on the child study process. The first set of questions in the interviews and focus groups related to the child study process. Participants were asked about what is working well, and also what the barriers are to successful implementation of the child study process. Respondents tended to be very willing to share both positive and negative feedback, as well as suggestions for improvement.

Contributing factors to the success of the child study process. In many cases, participants reported that they had seen a positive change in the most recent school year in terms of child study. A common theme that was voiced by several participants was that "this year has worked better than last year." They noted several reasons for the change. Some participants stated that the child study process appeared to be running more smoothly due to some changes in staffing in that new staff members seemed to have a better understanding of the process than staff in the past. According to one staff member, "You know, our person that runs Child Study right now, she really knows what she's doing and she does it well." Other participants attributed the positive change to more clearly outlined procedures for child study, including both the referral process as well as the process for when the team needed to make a referral for special education. As one respondent stated, "There's more of an understanding of what you're looking for—how the process works." Yet other participants noted that the positive changes were due to greater consistency and clarity among staff roles and responsibilities. For example, one staff member stated, "Everyone knows who to go to to make that referral."

Additionally, staff members noted that they appreciated having consistency on the child study teams because certain staff members were in regular attendance. The consistency of the make-up of the child study teams appeared to make some staff members feel more comfortable and confident in the process. In addition, some respondents noted that the consistency of having some of the same people meeting together regularly was helpful in creating a stronger team approach in that staff members seemed to be working better together. For example, one staff member noted, "Feeling like I am part of a team really helps me to contribute more to the child study process." Participants also noted that they appreciated the different voices and perspectives that staff members brought to the table during child study meetings. As one respondent stated, "One of the things that works well right now is that I have a lot of voices around the table and so we're able to ask good questions and get good information."

Other positive comments related to the school district doing a good job of adhering to timelines in the child study process. Additionally, staff members noted that child study teams seemed to be meeting on students more quickly than they had in the past, which both general education and special education teachers appreciated. For example, one staff member stated, "And I think this year too, we've moved the child study team process along"; another staff member added, "So, it's a much quicker process, sometimes."

Finally, respondents also talked about the high levels of staff members' care and concern for their students. Participants noted that due to the small size of the district, staff members tended to know students and families well, which was seen as a positive. As one staff member stated, "They're invested in these kids—they want them to be

successful." Another staff member noted, "There's already been relationships developed and it can be helpful."

Inhibiting factors to the success of the child study process. One of the biggest factors inhibiting success in the child study process appears to be the high turnover of staff. Participants noted that in the past when certain staff members left, they may have taken time to replace them, which in turn caused other staff members to have to take on additional job duties. One participant described the issue of turnover this way: "You know, in a small district like this, we all wear many hats and so it becomes triage, and you don't pull someone…from one job and put them on another without some type of triage going on." Additionally, respondents noted that new administrators at times have their own ideas about how processes should work so there is often a learning curve. One staff member noted, "It was timelines, but what kind of happened with a new person coming in is that they wanted to implement a new step, and in implementing that new step, it really caused a lot of confusion for everyone."

Some staff members also discussed that the constantly changing members of teams make it difficult for all staff to "be on the same page" or working toward the same goal at the same time. In addition, it appears that when new staff members come into a team, it also takes time for the group to develop trust in one another, and to sort out each person's role on the team. As one staff member reported:

> Sometimes it's hard to keep up and some people get used to the way things have been, and then you have people who come in as well who have different perspectives; there's no guarantee that any of them are right.

Another barrier that was reported by staff members is the lack of training and/or the lack of clarity at times regarding processes and procedures. One staff member described the confusion as follows, "I think the child study team or student assistance team was not clearly delineated—I think the people who implemented it understood it, but I don't know if there was mass understanding among the faculty." Unfortunately, one of the side effects of the high staff turnover appears to be frequent new hires coming into the school district on a fairly regular basis; therefore, new staff members do not always have the training needed to be able to follow the processes and procedures in the Southeast School District. In addition, many respondents noted that staff training and development is an area that needs improvement in the district. One respondent stated, "I think definitely reestablishing a process every year of expectations and what needs to be happening and just knowing overall the goal of the process because I feel like at the high school…that's lacking."

For example, in the child study process, some participants noted that general education teachers are not always familiar with research-based strategies to address student weaknesses. In addition, they may not know how to collect data during the intervention process, and therefore are not able to report on the data when they come to the child study team. One participant explained some of these issues as follows:

> An impediment for me is interventions because a lot of the time at Child Study the decision we make is that we need to go back and do further interventions and, number one, the interventions that I have outside the classroom are kind of limited. Second of all, I'm not sure that…teachers really have the ability to implement interventions and collect good data on them so I get a lot of—yeah, I

tried that preferential seating and it didn't go very well. That's not quite the information that I needed.

The lack of data also causes difficulties in the process because then it is not clear to the child study team whether struggling students may actually have a disability or whether they may not have been taught with effective, research-based interventions. As one respondent reported, "I think too many kids are weak in math and English and when they have a weakness it's interpreted as there's a disability."

Another inhibiting factor in the successful implementation of the child study process appears to be the lack of parental knowledge about the process, and about special education in general. Participants noted that at times, parents ask for testing for their children and do not understand that the child study team must follow a certain process before they move forward with an evaluation. As one staff member noted, "Just for example, parents will come to me saying my child needs an IEP, not saying something's happening or their grades are going down—that's the first thing these parents have to say." Additionally, participants noted that because of the close relationships they have with parents, they feel that parents sometimes come into the process with an expectation that the staff will comply with any request that is made, and that is not the case. One participant described the conflict as follows:

> And then I'd also go back to that relationship thing, you know, so-and-so knows this parent went to school here, grandma and grandpa went to school here, and they know whomever at school and so I'm just going to call up so-and-so and get myself an IEP. It can be a barrier because you want to do things in the correct process, but you also have developed the relationships.

Feedback on the eligibility process. The second set of questions in the interviews and focus groups related to the eligibility process. Participants were first asked to describe factors that were contributing to their ability to successfully implement the eligibility process. Next, they were asked to review barriers that prevented them from being successful in this process.

Contributing factors to the success of the eligibility process. One of the consistently positive comments made about the successful implementation of the eligibility process involved the new position of the compliance specialist this past year. For example, one respondent noted, "So, [the compliance specialist] runs our eligibility process and she greatly contributes to our school's ability to successfully implement the process because it's well organized." Participants reported that having someone specifically overseeing compliance and managing the eligibility process has been very helpful. One staff member reported, "It centralized the process for me, which was incredibly nice." Another staff member stated, "The meetings are run in a similar way every time – we go through the same reports in the same order." In addition, respondents noted that the compliance officer has been instrumental in getting the district to consistently adhere to timelines. For example, one participant explained, "And the constant follow-up in making sure that we had one person who collected it all, and made sure everything was disseminated the way it was supposed to be—that has been incredibly helpful this year to me."

Another factor that has contributed to greater success in the eligibility process has been to make the process more formalized in terms of using the eligibility worksheets offered by the VDOE. Respondents noted that by using the worksheets, they were able to

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keep the eligibility discussion focused and to make their decisions more objective. As one staff member reported, "So, I think we've really formalized the process and we really do just follow the paperwork, follow the steps and go through it in an orderly fashion—and I think that makes it successful." The worksheets also have helped eligibility teams clearly identify the criteria for eligibility for each category, which have helped the eligibility teams make better decisions. Regarding the checklists, one participant stated, "I think that's helpful too because it helps you visualize what you need, and you see where you need the interventions—you see what you need to qualify and so I think having those visible is really helping."

Inhibiting factors to the success of the eligibility process. One of the barriers cited by several respondents involved a lack of understanding of the eligibility process, from the perspective of both parents/families and general education teachers. Participants noted that parents do not have a clear sense of what is going to happen at the eligibility meeting. As one participant stated, "The conception here right now is—I'm going to come to a meeting and a lot of people are going to talk at me about my kid." Another participant stated, "I think some of them come and they just don't really know what to expect at all." Therefore, unclear expectations from parents are an inhibiting factor.

In addition, participants discussed that at times, general educators also have misperceptions about the eligibility process. For example, there is a perception that students cannot be referred for testing or found eligible if the district already has too many students in special education already. One staff member described her perception of testing as follows, "We really don't want to keep testing kids because we already have so many sped kids…And it see it like for our community, there are a number of factors

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playing in." Participants cited a need for additional training for general educators about the eligibility process. They noted that this would also help teachers understand the kind of data and documentation needed to find children eligibile for special education services. As one staff member stated:

> That goes right back to the fact that we need to explain to people that you do have to have interventions; you do need to have test results and a combination of the two to qualify a child for sped [special education].

Another inhibiting factor for eligibility success appears to be high staff turnover. Participants noted that one of the difficulties they face is "having everyone on the same page." They reported that since many new people come into the eligibility team each year, there are differing ideas about how eligibility meetings should be run and/or how the process should work based on the different experiences of each team member. One participant described the difficulty as follows, "And then people come in from different areas or people come in brand new and it may have worked this way there or this way there and we're having to create a new team every year." Therefore, each school year it takes time and effort to get the team functioning together effectively as a unit.

An additional barrier cited by several respondents was staff members not turning their reports in on time. When the reports aren't turned in in a timely fashion, it also impacts the school being able to get reports to parents before the two-day window that is required by law. Furthermore, if parents do not have adequate access to the reports ahead of the eligibility meeting, then the meeting sometimes takes longer because parents are hearing the information for the first time and therefore, may need additional explanations. One staff member described these issues as follows:

There are people that require multiple reminders and still have difficulty getting

their reports in in a timely manner, which impedes the ability to get the reports

home to the parents in a timely manner, which in my mind makes eligibility more

difficult because the parent hasn't had an opportunity to read the reports.

Additionally, it negatively impacts other staff members in that they have to scramble to

track down the reports and spend additional time taking care of this issue. According to

one staff member, "There have been a lot of situations where some reports are not turned

in on time, having to chase teachers down for reports or attendance at meetings has been

a concern."

One of the other inhibitory factors cited by a few different staff members was the

length of the eligibility meetings. Participants noted that the meetings can easily run over

an hour per meeting. They discussed that the length of time is a hardship for parents as

well as other staff that have other responsibilities during the day. Regarding staff

members' presenting their reports during meetings, one participant stated, "So, some

folks are fine; other folks are very lengthy and I think that's just not respectful of

everybody's time." Additionally, staff noted that it is hard for everyone to stay focused

and attentive when meetings take that long. As one respondent reported:

I sit in a meeting and I cringe because it's like over and over we talk for an hour

about—oh, this is what I think…We just want to know what the facts are and we

want to kind of move on.

Feedback on the IEP process. The last set of questions during the interviews and

focus groups related to the IEP process. First, participants were asked about factors that

contributed to the success of the IEP process. Then, they were asked about factors that inhibited the process, or acted as barriers to successful implementation.

     Contributing factors to the success of the IEP process. One of the most significant factors that participants mentioned as contributing to the success of the IEP process is ensuring that IEPs have been sent home ahead of the IEP meeting, with at least a week in advance. As one staff member noted, "I even had some parents tell me they like getting that document to look over at home well in advance of their meeting." Participants noted that this helped the IEP process in several ways. First, parents had the chance to read and review the information ahead of time; therefore, if they had questions or concerns, in many cases those issues could be addressed and resolved ahead of the actual IEP meeting. For example, one participant reported:

> So, they get to go through it and look at it in advance and then if they need to call
> somebody or if they want something changed they can bring those questions to
> the meeting and then meetings are going much more quickly because the parents
> know what's there.

     Additionally, respondents reported that IEP meetings this past year were running more smoothly since many issues had been worked out ahead of time. Not only that, but staff members reported that IEP meetings were taking less time because parents had already seen the information and therefore, staff did not need to read over each individual section of the IEP during the meeting. Instead, the meeting could focus on parent questions, or on any proposed changes. As one respondent noted, "The meetings are going much better—instead of an hour, an hour and a half, they're taking 20 minutes to a half hour to get the IEP signed." Finally, staff members noted that they felt that special

education teachers tended to write better IEPs since they knew that parents would be reviewing them ahead of time. One staff member related the experience to being in college, stating, "It's just like in college if you had a professor who's not really reading Comp 101—did you really bust it for them?"

Another factor that was mentioned several times is that the handbook clearly spells out timelines and gives straightforward information regarding how staff should be writing IEPs. Staff members reported that this was helpful for special educators in terms of having a model to use, as well as sample language to write. Additionally, they noted that it helped with consistency across the district. As one participant stated:

Ok, so first we have a special education handbook that's on a flash drive that basically has a guide that I would call 'IEP writing for dummies' so all the teachers have a resource that really shows them exactly how we want IEPs written.

Staff members also noted that they have been successful this year in terms of meeting timelines for IEPs. They noted that the process in place this past year has contributed to the success of consistently being able to meet timelines. One staff member noted, "We haven't missed one deadline or timeline all year."

An additional factor that has contributed to the success of the IEP process is the training that has been held for special education staff regarding writing IEPs. Participants mentioned that there is a range of levels of experience among staff, which has caused varying degrees of skills in IEP-writing. Therefore, the special education department has been offering training regarding writing the present levels of performance, as well as goal-writing. Several staff reported noticing improvements in these areas. For example,

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one participant reported, "I've seen the present level of performance improve over the past year, that's something that we've focused a lot on as far as training." Additionally, the participant noted, "I've seen a little bit of improvement as far as goals go, and then just making sure that the goals match the PLOP match the accommodations."

Inhibiting factors to the success of the IEP process. One of the most consistent inhibitory factors participants mentioned is the lack of general educator participation in the IEP development process. One general education teacher described a recent IEP meeting she had attended as follows, "I was just at one—they never even asked me anything." Participants noted that although the district has a form for which general education teacher input is requested, completing the form is not enough for regular educators to have full participation in the process. As one general educator noted, "I can answer these questions for her and write it all out and give it to her, but that doesn't really give her a clear understanding of what I meant." In addition, as another staff member noted, "Not everybody's using that form."

Respondents noted that when general education teachers participate, they can offer good information about areas of need in the classroom, as well as what types of accommodations and modifications might be necessary. For example, one participant reported, "But when I get an IEP that I'm supposed to follow I like to know what is going on with that child." In addition, participants noted that general education teachers are instrumental in helping IEP teams determine which accommodations are realistic and are able to be implemented in the regular classroom setting. As one general educator reported, "Sometimes I get IEPs and there aren't true expectations—they're not."

Another factor that appears to be a barrier is the lack of resources within the school environment, including services, materials, technology, and staffing. In terms of technology, one staff member reported, "The software's so old, you can't use it." In addition, a participant reported, "Our online system is not ideal – I mean, it has its quirks and has its little things that we have to deal with."

Participants noted that at times, they wish that more services could be included in an IEP; however, they noted that they are also constrained by the realities of a small, rural district. For example, a staff member reported, "You can't provide the amount of services for the amount of kids that we have." Another respondent described her struggle as follows:

So, there are definitely times where when you're sitting in an IEP meeting and you're thinking about service times and you're really supposed to be thinking about the needs of the child and I'm also thinking about the fact that I only have two and a half people and I could write three hours a day, but who in the heck is going to give that to him?

Staff members discussed the challenges of serving students with disabilities in the secondary school setting with block scheduling, for example. As one respondent noted:

It's more of a scheduling nightmare at the high school that it is at the elementary school because typically students at the elementary school are in one class, one or two teachers all day long, whereas high school students change every hour.

Some staff members noted that they wished that some students performing below grade level due to specific learning disabilities would have access to a self-contained classroom for certain classes; however, other staff members noted the challenges in having enough

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special education staff to cover those classes. One respondent reported, "So, we've got kids in collaborative classrooms right now that should not be in collaborative classrooms…but we don't have [self-contained classrooms]." This staff member further noted, "And these kids become frustrated and they act out." Regarding the availability of self-contained classrooms, another participant noted, "You will never have that—it's impossible in a small school. We just don't have the space you need to make it work."

An additional concern mentioned was that special education staff did not always access some of the services that are available in the building, such as counseling services that could be offered by some of the specialists in the division. A respondent reported, "Whether that's the counseling staff, the school social worker, the school psychologist, who are all qualified to provide services, to address those other needs—we don't use those."

A third inhibitory factor that was mentioned involved writing manageable IEPs that focused on services and accommodations that were necessary, as well as standards-based. Some staff members noted concerns about special education teachers putting in too many goals for students as well as too many accommodations, which in turn makes the IEP difficult to enact with fidelity. As one respondent noted, "But then we still have some people who are putting like five things in an objective and I'm like—really, if you're putting five things in one objective, then that's a goal!" Another respondent reported, "I think sometimes we check every accommodation that's available…I'd like them to be more meaningful." Similarly, participants noted that some IEPs have goals that are not specific and/or measurable. For example, one staff member noted, "You kind of really have to make it very clear so that somebody outside of this area knows it, or if

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you're not the person implementing the IEP anymore, that they can understand it as well." Another staff member described some of the barriers as follows:

It doesn't seem to me that the needs of the student are actually taken into consideration unless there's a parent who is a very strong advocate. So, we get collaborative math, collaborative reading—no matter what the need of the child is—if their reading level is above, but their math is below—it just seems like it's very cookie cutter. And I say that for two things: I do think it's due to a lack of resources and I think that sometimes that the teachers who are writing the IEP don't really know what else to do.

Finally, respondents noted concerns with transition planning in IEPs, as well as making sure that progress notes are being completed. Regarding transition planning, one staff member noted, "And another thing with the IEP process, once students become 14 years of age making sure that transition is included because they need to start thinking about career goals or life after high school." One participant reported, "As far as an area for growth, progress updates is somewhere where we really struggle—completing them, as well as using effective and real data, not just subjective thoughts on that." These are both areas that were identified as areas of concern; however, respondents also noted that they have seen improvements in these areas over the past year.

Summary of Findings

I will discuss the findings of each research question individually. Overall, across the board the findings were that the Southeast School District is generally compliant with most of their practices, except for a few areas. In most cases, the handbook complies with state and federal guidelines.

Research Question 1. This question related to the level of compliance Southeast School District's special education handbook had with both state and federal guidelines. I evaluated the handbook in terms of three different processes: child study, eligibility, and IEP development.

Regarding the section of the handbook relating to the child study process, Southeast School District was found to be compliant in six out of seven areas assessed. These areas included the following: holding a meeting within 10 days of the referral; including the referring source in the meeting; proving a prior written notice to parents; obtaining parental consent for evaluations; providing procedural safeguards to parents; and discussing pre-referral interventions.

The one area that needed more explanation was that the handbook did not specifically delineate the specific areas that needed to be included in the PWN if the child study team decided to refer a child for a special education evaluation. Since this is an area that is specifically outlined by the VDOE, I determined that Southeast's special education handbook was not compliant in this particular area.

In terms of the eligibility processes, I assessed seven different areas. These included the following: that evaulations must be completed within 65 days of referral; that all evaluations must be completed that were initially requested; that the team must use a variety of sources to make eligibility decisions; that the team must provide prior written notice as well as parental rights; that the team must follow the state criteria for eligibility; that they must document their discussion and provide a summary; and that they must provide procedural safeguards. Southeast's special education handbook was found to be compliant in all of these areas.

Finally, I reviewed the IEP processes in the handbook. For this area, I evaluated four different areas, including the following: that IEP meetings must be held within 30 days of an initial eligibility meeting or a change in eligibility status; that the IEP must be standards-based; that the team must provide a prior written notice; and that the team must provide parents a copy of their rights. The handbook was found to be fully compliant in the last three areas and partially compliant on the first area. In other words, the handbook did state that IEP meetings must be held within 30 days following an initial eligibility; however, it did not state anywhere that a new IEP had to be developed within 30 days after a change in eligibility.

Research Question 2. For the second research question, I evaluated the level of compliance the Southeast School District maintained with their own stated processes set forth in their special education handbook. Again, I reviewed the child study process, the eligibility process, and the IEP process.

In terms of child study, Southeast School District appeared to consistently hold their child study meetings within the 10-day timeline of the referral. However, it was often difficult to determine whether the referring source was included in their meetings since the referring source was often not listed on the referral form (in 66% of cases). While the referring source may have been included, I was unable to determine that based on their paperwork.

On a positive note, the prior written notice was included in all the files that had child study paperwork. However, although the form was completed, it was not always completed correctly. Areas of concern included the following: a description of the evaluation procedures and assessments used to make the child study decisions, as well as

a description of the relevant factors in the decisions. Additionally, Southeast School District consistently obtained parental consent to evaluate and also consistently provided procedural safeguards to parents.

On the other hand, in a majority of cases (56%) Southeast School District did not include documentation in their child study minutes of pre-referral interventions and/or response to intervention data. This section of the child study minutes was often left blank.

Regarding their eligibility processes, in many areas the Southeast School District was 100% compliant with their special education handbook. For example, the eligibility teams consistently used the state criteria to make eligibility decisions. They also consistently provided PWNs and parental rights to parents. Additionally, in all cases but one, the eligibility team met within the 65 day timeline after making the referral for testing. Also, in all files evaluated, except for two, the teams used a variety of sources upon which to make their eligibility decisions. In the two cases that did not meet the criteria, both were speech and language evaluations.

In contrast, in 25% of cases, the eligibility team was missing at least one evaluation report that had been initially requested. In addition, another area of concern was that the eligibility teams did not consistently document their decisions. In only 30% of cases was documentation provided regarding the team's discussion and summary of their decisions.

Finally, in terms of the IEP processes within student files, Southeast School District was generally compliant with their own handbook. Parents were offered a copy of their parental rights in all cases. In addition, in all cases a PWN was provided. There were only two instances in which questions on the prior written notices were not

completed correctly; therefore, in the vast majority of cases, these forms were completed correctly.

Research Question 3. For this research question, I assessed whether the 20 student files included IEPs that were standards-based, as required by Southeast's special education handbook. In 95% of the files, the IEPs qualified as being standards-based. For the one file that did not meet this criteria, the goals did not connect to any grade-level standards for the student; therefore, it could not be rated as compliant.

In addition, there were two IEPs that were rated overall as being standards-based, but were non-compliant in specific areas. In one IEP, it was missing the present level of performance. In the other, the goals were not determined to be measurable, annual goals.

Research Question 4. For the last research question, I analyzed the factors that either contributed to or inhibited the successful implementation of Southeast's special education program with regard to the Child Study, Eligibility, and IEP processes. To generate these factors, I completed interviews and focus groups with staff members in Southeast.

In terms of factors that contribute to the success of the special education program, staff members reported that in general they felt they knew families well due to the small size of the district, and that they had good relationships with families. They also noted that staff tended to be warm and caring toward both students and their families, which was a positive factor. Staff members also noted that the hiring of a compliance specialist this past year had been extremely helpful to the program in terms of having one person to oversee the whole process and to help them meet timelines consistently. Additionally,

staff members generally noted that changes made in the special education program this past year had made things better than they had been in previous years.

Regarding inhibitory factors, staff members cited a variety of issues. One of the most frequent barriers cited is the high level of staff turnover. Staff members also noted the lack of staff training, as well as confusion regarding processes and procedures as other inhibiting factors to their success. In addition, staff members reported that they struggled at times with a lack of data in the special education process. Finally, participants noted that the ineffective use of resources and time was another barrier to successful implementation of the special education program in Southeast.

Chapter 5

In this section, I will discuss the implications of the findings, as well as suggestions for practice. Then I will suggest ideas for future research.

Implications of Findings

In this section, I will address the implications for each research question individually. I will review both the positive aspects in terms of the research findings, as well as address any areas of concern.

Implications for Research Question 1. Overall, Southeast's special education handbook is closely aligned with both federal and state standards. The handbook was consistently compliant, except for a few minor areas. Also in these few instances, the information is not included in the handbook, which appears to be an oversight rather than providing incorrect or non-compliant information to staff.

The strong compliance of the handbook suggests that Southeast's special education program is based on a solid foundation and is clearly aligned with both federal and state standards. This means that Southeast staff currently have a valid, accurate resource on which to rely (since the handbook was revised during the summer of 2016). Staff members have a guidance document that provides clear, reliable information regarding special education processes within the school district. Moving forward, if staff members regularly refer to their special education handbook, then this practice will also help them provide consistency across the district since they are all working from the same

set of information. In addition, having the handbook as a reference tool for new staff will also help mitigate the challenge of high staff turnover.

Implications for Research Question 2. Overall, in reviewing the special education files, Southeast was generally compliant with their own handbook, which is closely aligned with state and federal standards. This means that Southeast staff members generally are clear on what is required during the various special education processes, and that they are following guidelines established from the district. However, there were a few areas in which Southeast did not demonstrate compliance with their own handbook.

Implications for the child study process. One of the findings in this area was that it was difficult to determine if the referring source was a participant in the child study meeting since the referring source was not listed on the child study paperwork in most cases. Since the referring source is a required participant (unless there are extenuating circumstances), it should be made clear whether that person is or is not included in the child study meeting. Although it is possible that Southeast is regularly meeting this requirement, since it is not clearly defined in their paperwork, compliance cannot be determined in this area. This may cause problems for the district if a parent files a due process complaint regarding child study. The district would have to prove that the referring source did actually participate since the paperwork was unclear. In addition, referring sources are the people who are initially suspecting a disability; therefore, their participation in the child study process is most relevant since they likely have information to share with the team regarding their concerns. If the referring source is not participating, then the district may be violating child find procedures in order to determine whether children in their district are suffering from disabilities.

An additional concern regarding the child study process was the completion of the prior written notice once the team made the decision to evaluate. In all cases, the child study team did include the prior written notice, which is important. However, in some cases, specific questions on the form were not completed correctly. The prior written notice is part of the procedural safeguards offered to parents about what the district is proposing to do and why; therefore, it is important that the form is filled out completely and clearly so that parents understand what is happening. Each question should be answered on the prior written notice and "not applicable" is not an acceptable response, according to the VDOE. At times, teams seemed unclear about the justification for their decision to evaluate, which is partially due to the lack of data presented during the child study meetings. In this case, the decision to evaluate could be more easily justified if the team were able to review data relating to interventions that had already been tried in the classroom.

Finally, the last major implication from the findings of the child study process evaluation relates to the lack of documentation of the pre-referral interventions and/or response to intervention data in the child study minutes. If the child study teams were able to review data regarding interventions, it seems likely that the teams would make better referrals for special education evaluations. In other words, if teachers could try some research-based interventions and collect data on those interventions, then the child study teams would have a better sense if the child was not being successful due to a potential disability as compared to some other reason. Using a response to intervention approach may also reduce the numbers of students in special education, as well as improve student achievement for struggling students. Also, if the team could review data,

they could better define the learning and/or behavior problem within the child, which could in turn lead to a more focused assessment during the special education evaluation process. As a final point, teams could make educational decisions based on data, which will improve student outcomes overall.

Implications for the eligibility process. In terms of Southeast's eligibility compliance, overall they are meeting the standards set forth in their handbook in most cases. For example, the teams are using the state criteria for eligibility. Additionally, eligibility teams are providing parents with PWNs as well as their parental rights. By using the state criteria for eligibility, Southeast is helping to ensure that they are making valid decisions regarding finding students eligible for special education. They are also making certain that their eligibility decisions are consistent across the district. Additionally, by consistently providing the prior written notice to parents and the copies of parental rights, Southeast is ensuring that they are not only meeting the requirements of the law, but also ensuring that parents are involved in the process and are being afforded their rights in the special education process.

One concerning implication is that although almost every file showed that the student's initial special education evaluation was completed within the 65 day timeline, there was one file that did not meet the standard. In addition, there was not a reason provided for the noncompliance. At times, although very infrequently, there are situations that arise that make it difficult for a school district to complete an evaluation within the set time frame; these may include the student being absent, moving in the middle of the process, or the family not making the student available for testing. However, these issues need to be documented within the prior written notice. If a child is suspected of having a

disability and is therefore referred for an evaluation, not completing this process within the legal time frame can be considered a denial of FAPE, which is a key tenet of federal special education law.

Another finding after reviewing the selected sample of student files is that in one-quarter of the files, all of the evaluations that were requested were not completed for eligibility. During the child study process, the team determined that specific evaluations were needed in order to make the decision during eligibility whether a student qualified for special education services or not. If all of the evaluations are not completed, then theoretically, the team should not be able to make the decision since they do not have all the data required. However, in all of the cases where the evaluations had not been completed, there was no mention of the missing evaluations in either the eligibility minutes or the PWNs, and the teams went ahead with the eligibility process. If the teams do not actually need all of the evaluations requested in order to make their decisions, then the evaluations should not have been required in the first place; this is not an efficient use of staff time and resources to complete unnecessary evaluations. However, there are also cases where specific evaluations need to be completed in order to consider certain categories; for example, in order to find a student eligible for a specific learning disability, you must complete an observation. If the observation is not done, then this category cannot be considered during eligibility. The lack of consistent compliance in this area may suggest that there is not clear communication with the staff members completing the evaluations, or that there is a disconnect at times between the child study teams and the eligibility teams.

Another important implication of the research findings in terms of the eligibility process relates to the use of a variety of sources to make eligibility decisions. In all but two cases, Southeast's eligibility teams are using multiple sources. However, in reviewing two student files, I found that the team did not use a variety of sources to determine speech/language eligibility. In both cases, the teams were only able to use data from the results of speech/language testing. According to Southeast's handbook, the team is required to use a variety of sources. When teams use multiple data points, it helps to ensure the team is making valid decisions in terms of finding students eligible for special education. This helps to make certain that no one source of data is used exclusively to make such an important decision that has lasting educational consequences for students.

Finally, another important finding in terms of the eligibility process that merits discussion is the lack of documentation of the eligibility teams' discussion and summaries as part of the eligibility minutes. Although it is listed as being required as part of Southeast's handbook, in the majority of cases the decisions were not well-documented. It is important for the team to document how they came to their decision, and what pieces of evidence led to those decisions. If a student is found eligible, the summary helps the case manager write the student's IEP, especially if the case manager was not part of the eligibility meeting. In addition, the summary helps other staff members when they are completing file reviews and helps the student's future IEP teams determine whether additional testing is needed when it is time for the student's triennial evaluation. In addition, it is helpful for the IEP team to know whether the team discussed different eligibility categories before they made their final decision. The summary

provides important information for other staff members as they continue to work with the student over time.

   Implications for the IEP process. The findings relating to the IEP process showed that the Southeast School District consistently follows their own process for IEPs based on the guidelines in their special education handbook. All files included prior written notices. In addition, parents were consistently provided copies of their parental rights. These findings illustrate that staff members have been provided clear guidance as to what is expected in the IEP process, as outlined in the handbook. By providing both sets of documents to parents on a regular basis, Southeast is able to ensure that parents are kept involved in the special education process, and that they understand what services are being provided to their children. Staff members are also ensuring due process is being followed by consistently providing parents with a copy of their rights.

   Implications for Research Question 3. This research question related to the development of standards-based IEPs for students. As previously stated, 95% of the files assessed met this requirement, which is outlined in the special education handbook. Since this has been the mandate from the VDOE since 2015, it is imperative that all IEPs at this point are standards-based. The reasoning behind the standards-based movement is that it promotes grade-level achievement standards for students in special education. This practice ensures that students in special education are achieving at rates commensurate with typical peers in the same grade level and that achievement standards are not modified due to the fact that students have special needs.

   Implications for Research Question 4. There were a number of findings from the last research question, which involved asking staff about factors that either enhanced

or inhibited processes in the special education program in Southeast. First I will review some of the factors that staff noted were contributing factors to the success of the program. Next, I will review the implications of some of the inhibiting factors in the program.

Implications for contributing factors. One factor that was consistently mentioned by staff as a positive for the special education program was the fact that staff members are warm and caring. When staff members have good relationships with students and families they serve, then they are able to develop an atmosphere of trust, which has a positive impact on student achievement. Additionally, teachers and parents can partner together to enhance students' education and academic success.

Staff members also mentioned that they felt that this past year had been better than years past. These comments seemed to at least partially be driven by the new hire of the compliance specialist, which was generally seen as a positive factor in the special education program. As one staff member noted, "We've got a gatekeeper now to enforce timelines." When staff members feel that they are seeing improvements in their educational programs, they in turn feel more positive about their work environments. Additionally, the compliance specialist has appeared to help Southeast stay within compliance, especially with regard to timelines. Maintaining compliance is not only important in adhering to the letter of the law, but also following the spirit of the law. When teams are able to stay within mandated timelines, then they are able to ensure the provision of a free, appropriate public education for all students. The compliance specialist has also helped streamline some of the special education processes in that they funnel through her as part of central office as opposed to being spread out among various

staff members. This has helped the program work more efficiently, which allows staff members to be more productive.

Another finding relating to the success of the eligibility process is the fact that the eligibility teams are consistently using the worksheets offered by the Virginia Department of Education. As participants noted, by using the worksheets, it has helped make the process more formalized and consistent. As one participant stated, "It keeps everybody on the same page." Also, the decisions are based on more objective criteria as opposed to more subjective opinions or ideas about eligibility.

In terms of the IEP process, staff members reported several positive factors that are enhancing the special education program. First of all, it appears that sending IEP drafts home at least a week in advance has been a very positive change in the program. When the IEPs are sent home well in advance of the IEP meeting, parents have ample opportunity to review the drafts ahead of time. This allows them time to look at the goals and services ahead of time, and to ask any questions in advance of the actual meeting. As one staff member noted, she has had parents tell her "they like getting that document to look over at home well in advance of their meeting." Additionally, if there are areas of concern, they can also be addressed and changes can be made in advance of the meeting. This allows meetings to run more smoothly and to take less time, which is helpful to working parents as well as staff members who also have other job duties.

Another contributing factor to the special education program's success appears to be the IEP information in the special education handbook. As one participant stated, "So all the teachers have a resource that really shows them exactly how we want IEPs written." Many staff members noted that the handbook clearly spells out guidelines and

expectations for IEP development, as well as offering suggested language to be used in the IEP and prior written notice. This allows special education staff to be more consistent with their IEPs across the division. It is also a good resource for new staff, providing clear guidance if they have questions about the process.

Finally, respondents noted that the training that special education leadership has offered has been helpful, especially with IEPs. Staff members noted that they have seen improvements this past year in IEPs. As one respondent reported, "I've seen the present level of performance improve over the past year and that's something that we've focused a lot on as far as training." This is important because a student's IEP is what drives his/her individual education program. If the IEP is not written well or the goals or services are unclear, then the IEP team has difficulty implementing the plan as intended. Additionally, if IEPs are written more consistently across the school district, then students will have an easier time transitioning from one grade level to the next.

Implications for inhibiting factors. One of the most significant inhibiting factors mentioned by staff members was the high amount of staff turnover. When staff members are not staying consistent from one year to the next, then staffing is in a constant state of flux. It becomes more difficult for teams to unify and work together because team unity and trust with each other takes time to develop. Additionally, it appears that new administrators come in and want to make changes to processes, which is understandable, yet it causes staff members to be confused about the new processes. Also, when new staff come on board, they may have different expectations and understandings about the way processes should work, and these ideas may or may not be consistent with the processes already in place in Southeast. As one participant noted, "I think we've implemented a lot

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of strategies that have the potential to fix a lot of areas of weakness and so I don't think it's time to stop that." Therefore, staff members seem to spend a lot of time learning new processes and procedures each year, only to have to learn new systems the next year.

This issue leads into another inhibiting factor, which is a lack of training on processes and procedures in special education. Participants noted that they felt that people needed more training across the board. They cited the fact that new staff members were often coming into the school district as one reason that training was needed. Also, when staff members do not have the training they need, then they can become frustrated. As one participant noted after she turned in her child study paper work in previous school years, she "never heard back who it went to or what was happening." In addition, staff spend time trying to figure out what they need to do rather than being able to complete tasks and move on to something else. Additionally, when staff don't have proper training, it is easier to make mistakes because people do not know what to do.

Other barriers mentioned by respondents included a lack of data, as well as a lack of research-based strategies in the child study process. These two factors are tied together and influence one another. As one participant noted, "I would like [teachers] to come to meetings with test scores and more hard data." For example, when staff do not use research-based strategies and then collect data on these strategies, then it makes it difficult for the child study team to make effective decisions regarding whether a child may have a disability or not. If a student is struggling in reading, the issue can be caused by myriad factors. The student may have decoding weaknesses, difficulty with comprehension, phonological processing issues, attention issues, or may not be motivated to read; however, until the teacher investigates further and collects data, the team is

simply making an educated guess as to the problem, and this "guess" may or may not be accurate. If general educators can attempt research-based strategies in the regular education classroom, then Southeast may be able to reduce their numbers of referrals for special education.

An additional barrier reported by staff members related to an inefficient use of resources and time in Southeast. As participants noted, many times meetings run over an hour. During eligibility meetings, for example, there are typically at least five staff members present (chair, administrator, general educator, special educator, and specialist), and if these meetings are lasting two hours, that is encumbering 10 hours of staff time for one student on one day. When staff members are sitting in meetings, they are not able to provide other direct services to students and/or families; therefore, this may not be the best use of staff time. Similarly, when staff members are not turning in reports on time, it forces other staff members to spend time tracking down the reports, which is also not the most efficient use of their time either. As a consequence, if reports get to parents late, the district could be out of compliance, and parents may not have enough time to review the reports before the eligibility meeting, which also can cause meetings to run long.

In addition, another inhibiting factor mentioned by respondents was the lack of parental knowledge, and sometimes general educator knowledge, about the special education process. When parents do not completely understand the special education process, it is difficult for them to be true partners with school personnel in the education of their children. For example, one respondent explained that parents "come in with this mindset of I've asked for testing and my kid's going to be found eligible later on, but that's not necessarily the case." Also, parents may not understand the best way to

advocate for their children, or may not even know what questions to ask. Additionally, if parents are confused about the process, then they may be frustrated about the pace of the assessment process or may not understand the limits of what the school can do for their children. Similarly, if general educators are confused about the special education process, then they may get frustrated with the length of time it takes to move children through the process. They may also be mistrustful of their special education colleagues when they say that a child is not eligible for services if they think that there is a limit on the number of children allowed into special education for the district.

Finally, respondents also mentioned several barriers in the IEP process. One of the most consistent themes mentioned was the need for more general educator participation in the special education process in terms of writing IEPs. As one respondent succinctly stated, "Gen ed teacher input in the IEP is an area that we're lacking." This is important because general educators sometimes have the most information about what the student can and cannot do in the classroom; therefore, general educators can provide valid information about what the student's goals should be, and also what types of accommodations may be necessary. General educators can also provide input on whether specific accommodations are reasonable.

An additional barrier in the IEP process is related to a lack of resources, specifically in the areas of technology and staffing. Some staff members noted that they do not have access to updated technology, especially for students with communication needs. An impact of this type of barrier is that students with communication needs do not have access to some services or assistive technology that could help them achieve their goals and/or improve their levels of achievement. In terms of staffing, when an IEP team

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has to modify a student's IEP based on what they can offer rather than what the child truly needs, then the school district is not creating an individual plan around the needs of the student first, which is the whole point of an individualized education program. In addition, it appears that the school district is also not taking advantage of some of the counseling staff services that could be provided. If IEP teams are not addressing behavioral needs and supports in their plans, then students are not able to benefit from services and supports in these areas. When staff members can adequately address students' emotional and behavior needs in the school setting, then this can also positively impact student achievement and reduce time out of class for disciplinary issues.

The last issues mentioned by participants in terms of the IEP process in Southeast related to IEP goals, accommodations, and transition planning. In terms of IEP goals, respondents noted that sometimes case managers write in too many goals, objectives, and accommodations. For example, one participant gave the example of IEPs for students with attention deficit disorder and noted, "Some of our people write 15 goals for it." IEPs need to be written based on providing students FAPE—not what is the best out there or what may be helpful to them. Staff members can run into compliance issues if there are too many goals and/or accommodations because the IEP becomes unmanageable to implement with fidelity. Regarding transition planning, this is an important part of the IEP because when students graduate, they need to have meaningful opportunities as they transition to life after high school. Transition planning needs to start at age 14 so that students and their families have time to plan for the future. Students may need additional classes or experiences in high school in order for them to graduate and be able to have successful lives post-graduation.

Suggestions for Practice

Based on the results of the study, I will offer several suggestions to improve practice in the special education program in Southeast. I have tried to make the suggestions manageable, as well as practical. Some suggestions may be relatively quick and easy to implement, while others may take more time and effort.

In reviewing the specific recommendations listed here, it is important to keep in mind that the special education program has numerous intersecting components, and these components impact one another in both the home and school environments. Therefore, rather than viewing each recommendation as a separate entity to address, it would be more helpful to consider all of the recommendations as being contingent upon each other. (An analogy might be the moving parts of a car engine where each part of the engine needs to be functioning correctly for the car to run.)

For example, at the beginning of the special education process, teachers notice that a student is struggling and make a referral to the child study team. If the team simply refers the student for a special education evaluation without attempting interventions and/or collecting any data, then the evaluators are trying to made an educated guess about the source of the student's problem, which may or may not be accurate. Also, this student is now considered to have a potential disability, when in fact the issue may be something else entirely. Then if evaluators do not turn in reports to the Compliance Specialist on time, the reports may be delayed getting home to parents. While this is a compliance issue, it also means that parents may not have enough time to review the reports ahead of time; consequently, eligibility meetings run for two hours because parents are hearing the information in the reports for the first time. When several staff members must spend two

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hours in one meeting for one child, then they do not have time to carry out other duties in the special education program, such as providing specialized instruction to students with IEPs. In these examples, one can see how compliance issues are closely intertwined with solid instruction practices.

Although Southeast's special education handbook is compliant in most areas assessed for this study, there are a few minor changes that could be made to the handbook that would make it more compliant with federal and state guidelines for special education. First of all, the handbook should specifically list the components that need to be included in the prior written notice if the child study team decides to refer a student for testing for special education (VDOE, 2013). Additionally, the handbook should also add a direction that IEPs must also be updated within 30 days if students' eligibility determinations are changed during an eligibility meeting.

In terms of child study, there are a few recommendations I would make. It would be helpful to add a line in the child study paperwork for the referring source. This way, it would be easy to determine if the referring source was present at the child study meeting, and it would also make it clear to the chair to be sure to invite this person as well. It may also be helpful to provide some additional training to staff on completing the prior written notice paperwork after child study meetings. Staff may benefit from sample language to use for each question. Additionally, staff may need training to avoid the use of "not applicable" for the various questions on the prior written notice (VDOE, 2013).

Regarding professional development and staff training, it may be worthwhile to offer a "refresher" at the beginning of each school year for all staff in order to review all of the special education processes and procedures. This could be helpful since there are

often new staff members each year due to the high staff turnover. The training could

ensure that all staff members are hearing the same information at the same time.

Additionally, this training may offer an opportunity for some of the specialists on staff,

including the school psychologist and school social worker, to introduce themselves and

to describe some of the services they could offer, such as counseling and social skills

training. Another option may be having a special education mini-refresher at each

school's monthly staff meetings. This could help staff members keep up to date with any

changes in processes or procedures. It could also help staff members not to get

overwhelmed with too much information at the beginning of the year.

Additionally, a team could come together to write a handbook for research-based

strategies on key learning issues, such as reading, math, writing, attention, and behavior.

This could help child study teams in being able to offer suggestions for research-based

interventions during the child study process (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). Staff may

also benefit from training in data collection. This type of training could be offered during

the school year, for example, on a professional development day. Additionally, staff

could reach out to additional resources offered through the Virginia Department of

Education and/or Virginia's Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T/TAC).

I can also offer a few suggestions to make the special education program run more

efficiently. First, everyone could benefit from reducing the amount of time spent in

meetings. Child study, eligibility, and IEP meetings should be limited to one hour. Staff

may need training in terms of how to keep their report presentations to five to eight

minutes, for example. Administrators will need to support and enforce this change as

well. Additionally, it may be helpful to set specific days for eligibility meetings at the

beginning of the year. Of course, if families have specific conflicts, teams can work around those, but it would seem that it would help specialists be able to plan their schedules better if they knew they had to work around certain days. In addition, this would use staff time more effectively in that staff members outside of the building would reduce their travel time and down time in between meetings if meetings were scheduled on the same day, back-to-back. Another suggestion I heard from a few different specialists is that eligibility meetings should be scheduled in order of when the referral was received. For example, if a referral for testing was received in December and then another was was received the first week in January, the December student's eligibility meeting should be scheduled first; that will help staff members' doing the evaluations plan their schedules in advance. Finally, it will also be important for administrators to enforce turning in reports on time (VDOE, 2010). When this process breaks down, there are many negative consequences to both staff members and parents. Additionally, if reports are consistently turned in on time, then the district has some leeway in case they realize that a report is missing and needs to be completed quickly in advance of the eligibility meeting.

Based on the overwhelmingly positive responses of participants in the study, it also appears that Southeast should continue to have the position of Compliance Specialist. This new position appears to have helped Southeast meet timelines across the board. Also, the position has offered staff members a central point of contact for special education, which has been helpful. The position has also provided clarity in the special education process, which staff members have also appreciated. Having someone in this position also seems to have mitigated the impact of staff turnover in that there is a

constant in the process who is managing compliance and keeping everyone aware of timelines.

Another suggestion that some respondents mentioned during the focus groups was creating a parent resource center that could offer information for parents regarding the special education process. Staff members noted that the school district has tried applying for grants, but has not yet been successful. While the parent resource center seems like it could be a very helpful resource in the future, in the meantime, staff members may be able to offer some parent workshops that could address various topics of interest to parents whose children are in special education. The parent workshops could be offered on a monthly basis and could alternate between the elementary and the secondary school. Different staff members could present on different topics so the workshops would not be the full responsibility of any one staff member.

In order to help reduce the impact of the high staff turnover, one idea may be to focus on building trust within teams. Team-building activities may need more emphasis since teams have to get started anew every year with a continually changing staff, and some of the naturally occurring comraderie that develops over time is not able to happen in this district as easily. Therefore, administrators and other team leaders (such as child study chairs) may want to devote some time at the beginning of each school year to team-building activities in order to create stronger teams more quickly. In addition, since Southeast appears to have a long history of high staff turnover, the district may want to create a systemic plan for the induction of new professionals to the district, especially with regard to special education compliance and their responsibilities within this process.

The last set of recommendations involves finding ways to increase the participation of general education teachers in the special education process (VDOE, 2016b). First of all, if there is a form that the district has generated in order to solicit teacher input, then all special educations teachers should be using it consistently across the district. Additionally, it also seems that the form may not be enough in some cases; in these cases, it may also help to have a discussion between the general educator and the special educator prior to the IEP being written. If meeting times can be reduced, then this may free up some additional time during the week to have these types of conversations. Additionally, if general education teachers are able to collect data and present the data at child study meetings, then they may naturally have a stronger voice in this process. Also, if child study teams are using a response-to-intervention model, then special education numbers may decrease over time, which would then reduce caseloads of special education teachers thereby potentially allowing them more time to manage individual students.

Suggestions for Future Research

One of the biggest areas for future research in the Southeast School District would be investigating ways to reduce staff turnover. Although this was a concern frequently mentioned by participants in this study relating to the special education program, it also seems likely that staff turnover impacts many other areas of the school district as well. By finding ways to reduce staff turnover, the district may be able to strengthen its special education program.

Another direction of future research could be getting feedback from parents and families about areas in which they desire more information about special education. If

Southeast does develop a parent resource center, it would be helpful for the district to know in advance about what types of information families are seeking. This may also help the district determine the best method of providing information and training to families so that it will be well-received.

An additional area of research that could build on this study would be to gather student feedback about their experiences in the special education program in the Southeast School District. Students could provide input on what they feel is working well, as well as areas in which they would like to see improvements. Students may also be able to provide suggestions to the district on ways to improve their learning experiences.

Appendix A

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group. You have the option to end your participation at any time. Please feel free to respond openly and honestly. Every effort will be made to protect your identity and responses will be reported as themes from the group rather than attributing specific comments to specific people. The group should last for 30-45 minutes.

The Child Study Process

1. What contributes to and/or enhances your ability to successfully implement the Child Study process here?

2. What inhibits your ability to successfully implement the Child Study process? In other words, what are some of the barriers you face in the Child Study process?

3. What suggestions do you have to improve the Child Study process?

The Eligibility Process

4. What contributes to and/or enhances your ability to successfully implement the Eligibility process?

5. What inhibits your ability to successfully implement the Eligibility process?

6. What suggestions do you have to improve the Child Study process?

The IEP Process

7. What contributes to and/or enhances your ability to successfully implement the IEP process?

8. What inhibits your ability to successfully implement the IEP process?

9. What suggestions do you have to improve the IEP process?

Additional Comments/Concerns/Suggestions

10. Are there any other thoughts, concerns, or suggestions you would like to share about the special education program?

Appendix B

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this study. You have the option to end your participation at any time. Please feel free to respond openly and honestly. Every effort will be made to protect your identity and responses will be reported as themes from the group rather than attributing specific comments to specific people. This interview should last for approximately 30 minutes.

The Child Study Process

1. What contributes to and/or enhances your ability to successfully implement the Child Study process here?

2. What inhibits your ability to successfully implement the Child Study process? In other words, what are some of the barriers you face in the Child Study process?

3. What suggestions do you have to improve the Child Study process?

The Eligibility Process

4. What contributes to and/or enhances your ability to successfully implement the Eligibility process?

5. What inhibits your ability to successfully implement the Eligibility process?

6. What suggestions do you have to improve the Child Study process?

The IEP Process

7. What contributes to and/or enhances your ability to successfully implement the IEP process?

8. What inhibits your ability to successfully implement the IEP process?

9. What suggestions do you have to improve the IEP process?

Additional Comments/Concerns/Suggestions

10. Are there any other thoughts, concerns, or suggestions you would like to share about the special education program?

Appendix C

Transcription codes:

1. Positive comments

2. Caring staff

3. Lack of training

4. Turnover

5. Compliance specialist

6. Process/procedures

7. Timelines

8. Relationships with families/students

9. Barriers

10. Suggestions

11. Standards-based IEPs

12. RtI (Response to Intervention)

13. Lack of documentation/data

14. Things getting better this year

15. Lack of trust within team

16. Lack of leadership

17. Technology

18. Communication

19. Effective use of resources and time

20. Lack of parental knowledge

21. Staff not open to training/learning

Footnotes

[1]Retrieved from Southeast's Strategic Plan 2012. Southeast is a pseudonym in order to protect the identity of the school district during this evaluation.

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JENNIFER TINGLEY, ED. S., NCSP

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE
GLOUCESTER COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Special Education Coordinator   *8/17-Present*
Communicate with out-of-division placements. Develop and implement division-wide training. Monitor Individual Education Plans for compliance. Analyze regulatory information and chair eligibility meetings. Develop, implement, and evaluate programs and services for students with disabilities. Oversee related services personnel. Assist principals in supervision of special education instruction through classroom visits and consultation.

PROCARE THERAPY
School Psychologist   *8/16-6/17*
Worked at preschool, elementary, middle, and high school levels. Active member of child study team, eligibility team, crisis management team, PBIS team, and division-wide VTSS committee. Provided individual and crisis counseling services. Consulted with teachers, administrators, and parents. Provided preschool screenings for special education services.

WILLIAMSBURG-JAMES CITY COUNTY SCHOOLS
School Psychologist   *8/01-8/16*
Worked at preschool, elementary, middle, and high school levels, as well as with alternative education program for middle and high school students. Active member of child study team, eligibility team, crisis management team, division-wide discipline committee, and response-to-intervention committee. Provided individual, group, and crisis counseling services. Consulted with teachers, administrators, and parents. Wrote articles for school newsletter and provided parenting presentations.

COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
Adjunct Faculty   *8/14-5/15*
Co-taught school psychology practicum class.

COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
Adjunct Clinical Faculty   *8/07-6/16*
Supervised school psychology practicum students for twelve hours per week, which included at least one-hour per week of face-to-face supervision. Participated in twice-yearly group supervision cohort meetings at William and Mary.

MIDDLESEX COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
School Psychologist   *8/00-7/01*
Served all schools in the district, which included one high school, one middle school, two elementary schools, and a pre-school program. Completed assessments at all grade levels. Active member of child study team, eligibility team, and crisis management team. Provided individual and group counseling services. Taught reading in after-school tutorial program.

WILLIAMSBURG-JAMES CITY COUNTY SCHOOLS
School Psychology Intern   *8/99-6/00*
Completed assessments for high school, elementary school, and preschool students. Active member of child study team and eligibility meetings. Counseled students and provided crisis management services. Consulted with teachers and other school personnel. Taught third graders in after-school tutorial program.

OTHER EXPERIENCE
OFFICE OF STUDENT VOLUNTEER SERVICES, COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
Coordinator, Project Phoenix   *8/97-5/99*
Coordinated group mentoring program for students in grades 6-8 who were struggling academically and/or socially using college volunteers. Supervised 13 college student leaders and an assistant coordinator. Co-wrote character education program curriculum, *Building Character, Building Community*. Received Greater

Williamsburg Association for Volunteer Administration Government Group Award, 1998. Received recognition award from Williamsburg-James City County School Board, 1999.

HAVEN FAMILY CENTER, NORFOLK, VA
Children's Activities Coordinator   *2/97-9/97*
Coordinated children's activities at transitional living program for formerly homeless families. Tutored children, planned after-school and summer activities, and organized field trips in the community.

LIFESTYLES CENTER, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT OSWEGO
Graduate Assistant   *10/96-1/97*
Coordinated the Combined Red Ribbon Campaign, a week-long series of events aimed to raise awareness about both drinking while driving and AIDS. Taught classes to peer educators about domestic/dating violence and different types of abuse. Member of the Violence Task Force on campus which included key members from the college and the community at large.

CATHOLIC CHARITIES, WATERTOWN, NY
Maternity Caseworker, Youth Worker   *4/96-10/96*
Case managed approximately 30 young mothers. Completed home visits and accompanied women to doctors' appointments and WIC meetings. As a Youth Worker, case managed children and adolescents in the runaway and homeless youth program.

JEFFERSON COUNTY WOMEN'S CENTER, WATERTOWN, NY
Teen Violence Prevention Program Coordinator   *8/95-4/96*
Taught in local schools and community groups on issues related to teen violence. Developed a Teen Violence Workshop curriculum. Provided short-term crisis counseling to adolescent clients on such topics as abuse, dating violence, and rape/sexual assault. Maintained statistics on services provided. Developed project evaluation plan.

HARVARD COMMUNITY HEALTH PLAN, BOSTON, MA
Project Assistant, Teaching Programs   *10/94-6/95*
Coordinated "Caring for Patients" program which paired pregnant teenagers and first-year Harvard medical students. Developed and implemented an evaluation process for the program. Scheduled speakers and staffed faculty meetings.

HARVARD COMMUNITY HEALTH PLAN FOUNDATION, BOSTON, MA
Program Assistant, AIDS Prevention Project   *6/93-9/94*
Developed an AIDS education kit for teenagers. Ran focus groups with teenagers to get their ideas about materials for the kit. Trained teen peer leaders to use the kits in their own programs. Managed database of kit donations.

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN, WELLESLEY COLLEGE, WELLESLEY, MA
Data Coordinator   *6/93-9/94*
Coordinated and tracked data for Boston After School Experiences Study. Organized and edited measures. Processed check requests and time sheets.

EDUCATION
COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY, WILLIAMSBURG, VA
Pursuing Ed.D., K-12 Administration, Expected graduation December 2017. GPA: 3.85.

COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY, WILLIAMSBURG, VA
Ed.S., School Psychology, May 2000.
Participated in study abroad program in Ghana, West Africa during July 1999.

COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY, WILLIAMSBURG, VA
M.Ed., School Psychology, May 1998. GPA: 3.85.

State University of New York at Oswego, Oswego, NY
Completed 12 credit hours in School Psychology Program. GPA: 3.91.

Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA
BA, Psychology, May 1993.
Graduated cum laude. Received First Year Distinction.

Professional Organizations
Member of Kappa Delta Pi
Member of Golden Key Society
Member of National Association of School Psychologists

Additional
Received National Certification in School Psychology, January 2001
Wrote an article on utilizing volunteers in schools, "When Good Intentions Aren't Enough," published in *Educational Leadership,* April 2001.
Received Executive Leadership Award, December 2014 at the College of William and Mary.
Obtained Administration and Supervision PreK-12 Endorsement, March 2015