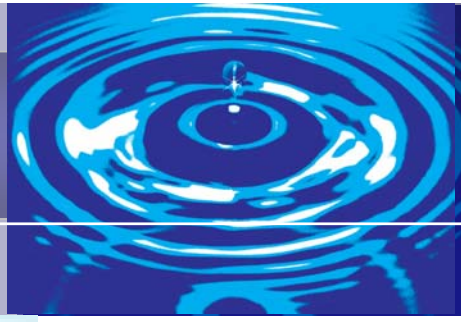


Customers
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**PRESCOTT
UNIFIED SCHOOL
DISTRICT
SPECIAL NEEDS
TEACHERS
FOCUS GROUP**

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Desired Outcome: To generate discussion and gather input on a variety of topics related to Prescott Unified School District Special Needs Students from the teacher's perspective. Then, to take those findings and present them to the School Board and District Administration to assist them in developing future plans based on real concerns and ideas from those attending the district's schools.

Special Needs Educators Focus Group

January 14, 2008

Report of Findings

Participants

A total of 10 staff members participated for a one time, two-hour session of a focus group for Prescott Unified School District in Prescott, Arizona. Topics were given to participants several days before the focus group to allow them to gather thoughts on topics to be discussed. These were very generic, so as to allow for spontaneity during the discussion. At the focus group, there was a good representation from different grade levels of gender, academic and physical abilities. The participants included staff members dealing with children in elementary, middle and high school. They included educators of children with a wide range of disabilities, including, but not limited to, children with severe physical disabilities, autism, terminally-ill, learning disabilities and fetal alcohol/drug syndrome.

Shelly Norwood, facilitator from Customers Count, moderated the focus group on behalf of PUSD. Amy Wilson, employee of Customers Count, took notes of the entire session. There was no media or audience observers present at the meeting.

Process

After introductions, an overview of ground rules for the discussion and a review of the purpose of the focus group, participants were facilitated through a process during which they discussed the following questions:

1. If you knew someone who wanted to send their special needs child to PUSD, how would you describe it to them? What adjectives would you use to describe it to them or that they have used to describe it to you?
2. How do you feel about your participation in the IEP process? Do you think parents fully understand the process? When students are evaluated and tested, are the resources available to meet the IEP needs? How does the testing address social/academic goals?
3. Tell us about the availability of the director and administration for meeting your requests and needs? What level of training would you like to see given to all teachers about special needs kids?
4. What percentage of your student's day do you feel they are engaged and productive? How would you describe the programs offered? What about the social needs of the student's education?

5. How would you describe your communication with parents about issues concerning students? What about district administration? How do you feel the district does in explaining procedural safeguards and options for you and your students?
6. What are your thoughts about the way the district is setup to handle special needs students at the different facilities? How do the facilities, including transportation, provide safety and security for these students?
7. If a parent/administration group could be formed to address special education issues, what would be your thoughts on that? What would you like to see them do?

Questions were formatted to closely resemble those of an earlier parent of special needs students' focus group. All responses were documented by the note taker for accuracy of the findings report. For each response, the facilitator asked others on the panel if the statements reflected their beliefs, and if not, how was it different?

The findings in this report reflect the ideas held by a majority of the group.

Findings

The summary below represents the collective input from the participants of the Focus Group. The meeting notes are available, upon request by client, for a fee. All names have been omitted and replaced with number identifiers to ensure anonymity of the participants.

Two major themes permeated the focus group discussion. One was the feeling of a shortfall of communication and interest about special needs from PUSD School Board members and administration, leading to an air of distrust by parents and special needs staff. The other was a high level of dissatisfaction with the district's training and priority on creating knowledgeable staff about special needs. These two issues influenced responses to questions concerning curriculum, the IEP testing and evaluation process and safety and security in the schools.

- The educators felt the school board and upper-level administration is “out of touch” with special needs students. All believed administrators and board members would benefit from some time spent in the classroom to better understand the issues and challenges facing them and their students.

Participant 4 expressed a perception that there is a lack of knowledge and interest from district administrators on needs. This disinterest manifests itself to parents, mostly, and causes a high level of distrust from staff and parents about special needs issues.

In this area, all participants agreed there is a breakdown of communication across the board, which leaves teachers and parents feeling that special needs students are given the least amount of priority by the present School Board.

The school board may want what is best for the kids, but they lack the information and desire to understand what is important, and are not on the same “wavelength” as teachers, stated Participant 7.

Other participants agreed that no one knows about the achievements and special needs programs. Their concern was that since board members don't know special needs programs, they can't know how to decide programs and funding.

- The discussion continued with ways the school board and high level administrators could take steps to become more informed about special needs.

Members of the group suggested upper-level administration and school board members could spend a day in the classroom to better understand and identify some of the issues facing teachers, students and parents of special needs.

There prevails a feeling among parents and staff of a “gulf” between regular and special needs priorities, said Participant 3. A good indicator of commitment to change to all involved would be a more active participation from administration and board members in the classroom.

The majority of participants believed this would be “eye-opening” and a goodwill gesture from board members and administration.

- Participants found that most district personnel are described by parents as caring, but lacking in accurate information about special education. This frustrates parents and educators, because parents are given incorrect or little information about additional avenues for finding answers to their issues.

Participants described parents who are frustrated with asking for help, but being directed to the wrong department or told “that’s just the way it’s done”, instead of realizing there are other avenues and resources available to them.

Many parents don’t know to ask for additional help or they remain quiet, because they are not told to continue to ask for help for their issues, according to panel members.

Some of this level of distrust has happened because of the slow-response from administration when needs are identified in the IEP and it takes months to get the needed therapist, explained Participant 1.

The participants agreed this leaves parents “hanging”, with teachers often caught in the middle trying to explain the delays in meeting needs identified in the IEP, without any definitive answer from administration.

- As the discussion progressed, members of the panel felt the district was not utilizing its vast resources of knowledge already available from specially trained teachers in the district.

Participants explained most of the special needs teachers have received extensive training in a variety of topics affecting their educational area, yet district personnel “waste” it by not having those lead training sessions for all district and teaching staff.

Panelist 2 expressed a desire to see the professional development program driven more by teachers. All agreed there are valuable special needs topics which could be included on Wednesday early dismissal and elementary professional development days.

These training sessions could be coordinated with special needs staff members already trained in different specialties for the sessions and cost no additional money or manpower. The majority agreed district administrators should institute using staff for professional development as quickly as possible to help alleviate not only the perception, but the reality, of a lack of training and knowledge about special needs.

- Participants would also like to see a better communication between regular education and special needs teachers, with strong encouragement and support from administration.

Special needs educators went on to describe instances where children are placed in a special needs environment and still need regular classroom work to meet their academic goals, but not receiving it on a consistent basis.

Panelists said the only time there is communication between regular and special education teachers is when they see each other at the school. It is not for reasons of malice or laziness, it is just not made a priority by administration to update and advise regular education teachers of the needs of special education students.

While regular education teachers participating in the group said they had no problem or additional work required to supply the week's work to special needs classes, they had never been asked to and did not always know these children needed it. Therefore, it reinforced the lack of open communication present at the schools being filtered down through the administration.

- The special education teachers described the lack of curriculum and support materials provided by the district as a contribution to students not always meeting their IEP goals.

Regular education panelists were surprised to learn there is no curriculum and materials given to special needs classroom teachers.

Participant 8 explained there is nothing provided by the school or district for curriculum in the classroom. Participant 6 added social studies books in the classroom are from 1976 and there are no language arts materials.

Other participants said if they wanted to set a curriculum they had to "seek it out" by going on the internet and using other resources to create one themselves.

Participants added that the curriculum director needs to make certain special education gets materials for meeting the IEP goals.

- While explaining their difficulties with meeting the IEPs and the testing of students, participants agreed the IEP was flawed in addressing many unique facets of special needs, such as worrying about meeting state and federal standards, instead of meeting social and academic goals.

There seems to be no accountability built into the IEP goals, stated Participant 8. A majority felt there is no requirement for accountability by the district/staff for meeting the IEP goals on a frequent basis and this leaves parents with the feeling that their child isn't being helped toward improvement and eventual "life after high school".

Participant 1 felt the IEP goals should be more closely written with the premise of actually meeting them on a quarterly basis, not yearly.

The regular education teachers agreed that there is not a focus on meeting IEP goals, realistic or otherwise, by the district. Participant 9 noted that an IEP is barely seen by regular education teachers, and it is frustrating for parents and educators. This causes a communication breakdown on meeting the needs of a student.

All participants agreed a stronger emphasis should be placed on making realistic goals, meeting those goals, revising those when necessary and following through on them so there is a good transition out of high school. Participants cited instances when the IEP had not been revised for many years on some students and it was missing goals for life skills after graduation.

- Lastly, these educators talked about concerns raised for the students, and in some cases themselves and aides, about safety and security at the schools and on the bus. Conversation between participants also touched on placement of children at different campuses, especially the high school.

Participant 6 noted that the special education kids, as well as regular education students, are having very long days, because the bus schedules are running too early and late and need to be reviewed.

This further complicates the teachers and aides days, because there is no prep time with the children there early before school and late after school, agreed participants.

The safety question expanded to include concerns for children at the high school. The majority of participants agreed the campus was not a safe campus for all children. They cited too many doors unlocked with multiple access. Participant 1 explained the busses will not drop students at Miller Valley, only at the high school, which for the younger children is unsafe. Participants went on to describe the lack of furniture at the high school that fits the smaller children forced to go there.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were recommended by participants. They are not listed in any particular order.

Communication

- Better communication between administration, parents and teachers on meeting resources and personnel to meet the IEP goals.
- A public relations program targeting press and the school web-site promoting the achievements of special education in the district by teachers.
- Institute a program that provides updates and request for classroom work between regular and special education teachers.

Individual Evaluation Program

- Include more realistic goals, both academic and social.
- Include life skill goals, working toward transition from high school.
- More frequent reviews and revisions of goals and progress toward goals.

Curriculum

- Create a curriculum with curriculum director.
- Provide materials and books to meet curriculum.
- Explore more life skill curriculum and job training programs.

Training

- Teacher led training for all staff regularly on special needs students and issues.
- Having upper-level administration and school board members spend one week a year in the classroom to learn about special and regular education.
- Creating knowledgeable training based on the specialization of educators already employed by the district.

Safety and Security

- Revise bus schedule which requires students to start their day too early and end their day too late.
- Need for a “safe school” administrator for supervising fire drills, bullying, etc.
- Increased vigilance about making Prescott High School a safe campus.

- Supporting teachers and aides against personal and physical attacks by parents and students.