



Waterloo Region District School Board

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**Operational Review of  
Special Education Service  
Planning and Delivery**

**Final Report  
September 8, 2010**



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The review has been a collaborative effort. Staff of the Waterloo Regional District School Board (WRDSB) have been welcoming and have facilitated the task of the review. Their desire to provide helpful information is very much appreciated. Their commitment to achieving excellence in providing quality education, especially for those with special needs was evident throughout the review. We acknowledge that there are initiatives underway that align with the recommendations arising from this report and that the board is committed to obtaining equitable and effective outcomes.



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Executive Summary is provided as a separate document.

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT**

PMC Inc was retained by the Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB) to examine existing services, programs and delivery approaches related to special education services with a focus on enhancing efficiency while ensuring equity in provision of those services. This report builds on earlier reports concerning resource allocation within the board.

The review examined services delivery of special education from both the provincial and local perspectives. PMC consultants noted the existing challenges facing special education provincially and locally.

This report's findings are organized across four quadrant areas that formed the framework for the review. The four quadrants are as follows:

1. Policy and Program Design
2. Planning for Service Delivery
3. Implementation of Service
4. Securing Accountability

Within each quadrant, the findings from the data analysis are described, followed by the list of opportunities for improvement. These relate specifically to the finding and the quadrant.

Four cross quadrant or overarching themes also were identified. These four themes are planning, capacity-building, data and communication and are elements that exist in varying degrees within each quadrant.

A conclusion section of this report provides a summary of the opportunities for improvement with a suggested timeframe for short-term and longer-term implementation.

Additionally a chart is provided to link the findings and opportunities for improvement back to the RFP questions for the review. Appendices provide background data that was relied upon in support of this important review.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE REPORT**

### **PROVINCIAL CONTEXT**

Education is complex and school boards are increasingly held accountable for demonstrating improved learning outcomes across an increasingly diverse range of students, including those with special education needs. This emphasis on accountability requires school boards to develop innovative approaches to understanding student needs and to design relevant and effective programs and services to meet those identified needs within resource allocations that are available. To ensure improved outcomes for students, school boards must align and coordinate the design and delivery of these programs and accompanying services. A critical consideration is the effective use of appropriate business improvement tools to increase effectiveness and efficiency.

There are 190,700 students in Ontario who are formally identified as requiring special education programs and services and that amounts to approximately 9% of the total student population. Another 4.4% are served through special education programs and services but not formally identified and additionally, 5,000 students are in Section 23 classes. Of all students identified as belonging to the 12 recognized exceptionalities, 44% have learning disabilities and may also be diagnosed with additional associated issues. Of those, over 80% are in regular programs or integrated into the regular classroom for more than 50% of their school day (Barry Finlay, August, 2009).

Since 2002-2003, the Ministry of Education has increased special education funding by \$2.5 billion (Finlay, 2009) yet many school boards continue to experience fiscal challenges. This is due in part to an imbalance in the requirements for specialized programs and services and the available funding for special education. While the number of school-aged students is declining, the number of students requiring special education programs and services is increasing (Finlay, 2009). School boards have suggested that a combination of better diagnostics, the availability of health facilities in the GTA and the lack of accessible adolescent mental health facilities have contributed to this increase in demand for special education programs and services. Ontario school boards have expressed concerns regarding the increasing numbers of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and serious mental health issues. Recently ten large school boards approached the Ministry of Education requesting a change in the way that special education is funded to address these concerns (Globe and Mail, February 18, 2010, p.A12).

### **WATERLOO REGION DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD – LOCAL CONTEXT**

More than 500,000 residents live in the seven municipalities (Kitchener, Waterloo, Cambridge, North Dumfries, Wellesley, Wilmot and Woolwich) that comprise the Waterloo Region. This is one of Ontario's fastest growing areas.

The Waterloo Region District School Board (WRDSB), located in southwest Ontario, is one of the larger district school boards in Ontario serving approximately 60,000 students across the Region of Waterloo. WRDSB operates 101 elementary schools and 16 secondary schools. As

the largest public employer in the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, it has approximately 3,500 teaching staff and 2,000 support staff offering educational programs and services.

The WRDSB is committed to improving learning opportunities for all learners. The vision for WRDSB is one of “engaged learners, and engaged communities” and the board’s stated mission is, “We strive to deliver an exemplary public education through diverse and inclusive environments that engage learners in developing their potential and pursuing their aspirations; and being participating community members”.

The WRDSB’s special education program is founded on the philosophy that every student is entitled to an education in the most beneficial learning environment available. Programs range from those that provide support for students in regular classrooms to those offered in congregated classes. More than 13,800 students in WRDSB currently receive some form of special education service or programming.

Three areas of focus posted on the board’s web site are: learning, caring and connecting. Within these three areas WRDSB maintains its commitment to “providing learning opportunities and supports” especially for “vulnerable learners”. The aim is to serve learners in a safe and secure environment embedded within “caring and supportive school cultures and communities”. WRDSB also recognizes the importance of providing “quality information for planning, decision-making, and accountability” as well as “operational effectiveness and efficiency”.

## **THE SPECIAL EDUCATION OPERATIONAL REVIEW**

A Request for Proposal (RFP) inviting submissions for a Special Education Services Review was issued by the WRDSB on August 18, 2009. The stated purpose of the review was “to examine the services, resources, processes and roles involved in providing services to students with special needs and to develop recommendations to refine this service” (p.2). The expectations for the results of the review were:

- Improved services and outcomes for students receiving special education services
- Improved equity of access to special education services
- Greater clarity and consistency in the referral process for special education services
- More effective and efficient utilization of special education funding.

The request for a special education review identified designated areas for emphasis. The request for review identified 13 areas where data were to be gathered. Additionally, the request asked the consulting team to: identify effective practices in providing special education services, identify areas of concern in providing special education services and develop recommendations and an initial plan to reinforce effective practices and address areas of concern in providing special education services.

The 13 areas designated for data gathering were subdivided into 20 specific goals to guide the review. Investigating these areas, the reviewers focused on identifying effective practices and issues of concern in the provision of special education services. The aim is improved effectiveness obtained through exploring and gathering data on the following areas outlined in the RFP:

- A. Processes to identify students in need of special education services
- B. Processes to identify how students with special needs receive school based supports
- C. Processes to identify how students with special needs access supports beyond the school
- D. Criteria used to identify students who need an Individual Education Plan (IEP)
- E. Processes for formally identifying students as exceptional and for their placement in programs
- F. Rationale for the number and type of congregated classrooms
- G. Roles and responsibilities of staff who deliver special education services
- H. Training and capacity building for providing special education services
- I. Communications on special education services to various audiences
- J. Ministry expectations concerning special education supports and services
- K. Partnerships in providing special education services
- L. Transportation of special education students
- M. Renovations to facilities to meet the needs of special education students.

It is worthy of note that special education often is one of the most politicized aspects of the delivery of services and programs to Ontario students. Traditionally it remained the purview of staff who had obtained additional qualifications and training in special education. Although the Ministry continues to emphasize 'Learning for All', there is a tendency for administrators and teachers to refer any special education issues to what they consider to be the appropriate staff. This means that administrators in special education may feel isolated from their peers. The alignment process underway in the WRDSB Learning Services department is one way to ensure that all staff assume responsibility for improved learning outcomes for all students.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **OVERALL APPROACH**

The data collection approach for this review represents a mixed method approach “inquiry model” featuring complementary quantitative and qualitative methods. Along with the use of an analytical framework and process mapping tools, described, below, this methodology ensured that the collection of data was reliable, valid and authentic.

Data was collected and analysed using two or more consultants in all instances. By using multiple sources of data collection and a process of "cross examination" of findings across the consulting team the review ensured that a high level of data integrity on both the required process map product and the identification of key issues and findings was an integral feature of the review.

As well as collecting data about the special education processes, every attempt was made to be responsive to the needs of the participants. As a result, review activities were designed to provide meaningful professional development, to encourage professional conversations and to increase sharing and understanding of the special education program and processes.

### **ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE REVIEW**

The scope of work for the special education review encompassed a broad set of objectives, goals and subject matter. These included the gathering of data on special education processes, identifying best practices, identifying issues of concern and developing recommendations for moving forward.

In order to conduct the review in a meaningful way and encompass the project’s objectives and goals, PMC Inc determined that a useful framework should be developed within which data could be collected and analyzed. The organizing framework was designed around four process groups or “quadrants”. As indicated in Figure 1, each quadrant is interdependent and decisions and actions in one inform decisions and actions in the others. The four quadrants are:

1. Policy and Program Design
2. Planning for Service Delivery
3. Implementation of Service
4. Securing Accountability

This framework enabled effective and focused dialogue with staff and ensured that “conversations with a purpose” were held.

The framework is useful and relevant in two ways:

1. It encompasses the objectives and subject matter of the review
2. It provides for a dialogue on special education processes at all strata of the special education planning and program cycle. This framework permitted discussion of not only the detailed service delivery aspects of special education but also the broad strategic

and policy dimensions, both of which are crucial to understanding and improving the program in an organization improvement context.

**Figure 1**

### WRDSB Special Education Review Framework



## APPROACH TO DATA COLLECTION

Meetings were held at project inception between PMC Inc consultants and Waterloo Region District School Board representatives to discuss the nature and scope of the project. During these meetings the background for the review was discussed and the proposed methodology examined. The design of the review included ongoing consultation with designated board staff.

Two internal committees (the Operational Working Group and the Reference Group) were constructed to provide input and guide the review. The respective terms of reference for the two committees can be found in Appendix A.

The design of the data collection instruments and the scheduling of the interviews and focus groups were a collaborative effort between PMC Inc and the operational committee. To ensure that data was examined, “in some other school boards” (RFP page 4) for benchmarking purposes, the PMC Inc team looked at four comparable school boards. All are public boards

with a range of special education placements from self-contained through congregated. All are medium to large boards in terms of their student populations. For reasons of confidentiality they will not be identified but instead referred to in this report as school boards A, B, C and D. Data concerning these comparative boards can be found in the Findings section for Quadrants Three and Four.

The data collection activities were designed and delivered to provide a positive experience for participants and to ensure that the evaluation focused on key practical and big picture issues. The data gathering tools and techniques encouraged participants to consider ways to move forward and options to improve the special education process rather than looking backwards at what did not work.

Ten onsite focus groups were conducted with a variety of stakeholders including Executive Council, Learning Services, Professional Support (Psychological Services, Social Work, Speech and Language), Consultants, Operational Supports, and selected representatives from the four families of schools;

The focus groups began with an introduction to the scope of the project and the PMC Inc team. Participants introduced themselves and described their roles within the WRDSB. The concepts of process mapping as a tool and the four-quadrant structure were shared and explained to ensure understanding and to build comfort levels with the process. In the focus groups, the detailed inquiry questions with the groups were guided by both the analytical framework for the review and the following key questions:

- Is the process appropriate/relevant?
- What are key issues?
- What are the key gaps?
- What are the opportunities for improvement?

Following the focus groups, two sessions were held with a group of administrators and the Operational Working Group. Additional meetings were held in April with the Reference Group and the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) to gather feedback on the initial findings.

The qualitative data was coded and analyzed for trends and patterns. Emerging from the data analysis was the development of a draft of the required process maps which formed part of the review design.

The draft process maps were constructed to reflect the flow of decision-making processes as they emerged from the data analysis. The draft process maps were found to be extremely useful in helping PMC Inc gather feedback on some initial findings and provided a common base for understanding by the client and the consulting team of the scope of the review. Based on input from the groups, the process maps were refined and completed.

## **DATA SOURCES**

Staff involved in all functions, processes and at the various levels of decision making in the WRDSB were involved in the review and were organized into focus groups based on their roles within WRDSB.

The Operations Working Group was comprised of the Learning Services and Special Education Executive Superintendents, Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents. This Group provided oversight, guidance and input during the review.

A Reference Group comprised of key internal stakeholders for special education received information, assisted in the communication process, provided input for the review and provided feedback on the draft findings. They also assisted in the development of opportunities for improvement in moving forward.

Data was also obtained through interviews, focused conversations and review of documents as further described below.

## **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

Five primary data collection methods were used in the review:

1. Data and document review
2. Ten focus groups
3. Process map tool
4. A series of on-site interviews
5. Additional consultations to review findings

### **Data and Document Review**

The following were examined as part of the quantitative data gathering:

- The website of the WRDSB
- The WRDSB Special Education Plan
- The variety of process maps that influence the provision of services
- Special Education Plans for the four similar school boards for benchmarking
- School Board data from EQAO for Grades 3, 6 and 9 and the OSSLT provincial assessments
- Professional delivery sessions held involving special education staff in the WRDSB
- Professional delivery sessions held involving special education staff in the four similar school boards for benchmarking
- The CD ROM provided to assist WRDSB teachers in delivering effective practices
- Data regarding the number of students identified and in regular and congregated settings in the WRDSB

- Data regarding the number of students identified and in regular and congregated settings in the four similar school boards for benchmarking
- A Needs-Based Data Driven Model for the Allocation of Learning Services Resources in Elementary and Secondary Schools
- Waterloo Region District School Board Secondary Resources Utilization Review
- The Student Success Framework
- Websites of the Comparator School Boards used for Benchmarking

### **December 2009 Focus Groups**

A schedule of focus groups and interviews was established to gather qualitative data. Questions were designed to promote 'conversations with a purpose'. The questions were designed to probe and elicit further conversations and engage participants in dialogue. The questions were organized around the quadrant design and modified for each of the different stakeholder groups to ensure drilling down of information. A series of ten onsite focus groups were conducted over a two-day period in December 2009. The focus groups were organized into functional groupings that included:

- A senior management and policy group
- A specialized services group (e.g. speech/language, psychological services)
- An operational leaders group (e.g. transportation, facilities, co-ordinators)
- An accountability and data managers group (e.g. senior managers, co-ordinating principals, finance)
- Four school level groups (organized around family of schools including administrators, teachers, and education assistants)
- A focus group with the Executive Council
- A SEAC group

The purpose of the focus groups was to:

- Provide information about the process for the review
- Seek stakeholders' perspectives and inputs into the review
- Build the required process maps for each of the four process group quadrants reflecting the important actions, decisions and information related to WRDSB's special education program and services

Detailed questionnaires were developed for each of the focus groups. Each focus group discussed all of the four quadrants but emphasized the process group quadrant(s) that were most related and relevant to the work of the staff in the group. The focus groups were co-led by two consultants. Both consultants for each focus group recorded information. A third consultant attended the focus groups on a sample basis to independently observe and document responses. This ensured that data collected had peer review and that findings were developed using multiple sources of data input.

The qualitative data was coded and analyzed for trends and patterns. It was used to give context to the quantitative data. Process maps, which formed part of the review design, were developed from the data analysis. Draft process maps were constructed to reflect the flow of decision-making processes as they emerged from the data analysis. The draft process maps were used to gather feedback on some initial findings and refined based on input from the stakeholder.

## **The Process Maps**

Development of process maps was a requirement of the RFP for the special education review. Process maps are a current business improvement tool that serves as a visual means to bring forth a clearer understanding of a process or series of parallel processes. When used properly they serve as a foundation for gaining control over, and developing, a shared understanding of the relevant processes and stimulate thinking on pathways to achieve improvements in both the efficiency and effectiveness of a program.

Based on the review framework organized around the four quadrants, PMC Inc developed a customized process map tool suitable for, and relevant to, the process groupings. The process map tool designed for the review is primarily of the “decision flowchart” type. It focuses on key decision points and the flow of *decisions* in each of the four quadrants of the framework since that served as the best means for identifying, and having a constructive dialogue on, key issues. In quadrants that touch on more operational elements of the program (e.g. Quadrant 3 – Implementation of Service) certain of the key activities, steps and tasks in the process were documented because this helped the focus groups to capture and discuss some of the more detailed operational issues impacting special education service delivery.

The final process map product is presented in Appendix B. It is recommended that the process map product be distributed and used within the board as a working tool by staff at all levels. The process maps may be accessed at <http://www.wrdsb//specedprocessmaps/pmcinc.ca>.

## **Interviews**

Interviews were held with certain key informants to the special education program and processes:

- Ongoing conversations with the Assistant Superintendent for Special Education
- Ongoing conversations with members of the Operational Group

The interviews served as an independent source of data collection and to clarify questions and issues pertaining to specific aspects of the review.

## **Additional Principals’ Focus Group**

An additional focus group comprised of principals was held in February 2010. This focus group was an important addition to the methodology as it allowed for a confirmation of some early trends and a clarification of the data.

## **Additional Consultations with the Reference Group, SEAC and Operations Working Group**

Meetings were held with each of the three groups in March and April 2010 to permit sharing of initial findings, obtain feedback, provide deeper context and fine tune the process map product to ensure full accuracy and definition of the issues arising from the review.

Three follow-up focus groups provided a means of testing and validating the process map product and related findings to date and assisted the consultants in honing and clarifying key issues and opportunities for moving forward. This section also identifies the processes, tools and instruments used in the review.

## **STANDARDIZED DATA COLLECTION PROCESSES AND INSTRUMENTS**

The consulting team developed standardized processes and instruments which were approved for use by the board lead. These included:

- Processes and protocols for contact by the consulting team with participants and other key stakeholders
- Focus group agendas, protocols and recording format
- Focus group questionnaires

## **ASSURING DATA INTEGRITY**

The matrix below (Figure 2) is a graphic representation of the elements that formed and guided the data collection and findings process by ensuring the alignment of the requirements as set out in the Special Education Review RFP to the methodology used in process mapping.

This alignment provided for a confirmed scope for the review and integrity of data collected as well as a comprehensive analysis.

**Data Set Column:** represents the 13 data sets described in the Special Education Review RFP

**Goal(s) Column:** represents the 20 goals as they relate to each of the data sets

**Quadrant Column:** represents the data sets and goals as mapped to each of the 4 quadrant process maps

**Figure 2: Matrix Framework Aligning the Data Sets, Goals and Quadrants**

Data Set	Goal(s)	Quadrant
<b>A. Processes to identify students in need of special education services</b>	1. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to identify when a student requires special education supports.</i>	<b>3. Implementation of Service</b>
	2. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to identify when a student requires an IEP (modified or accommodated)</i>	
<b>B. Processes to identify how students with special needs receive school based supports</b> (i.e. intervention by classroom teacher, SERT support, EA time and use of special programs such as Early Literacy Intervention or Empower)	3. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to <u>determine when an identified student</u> (i.e. deemed in need of special education services) <u>receives supports within the school</u></i>	<b>3. Implementation of Service</b>
<b>C. Processes to identify how students with special needs access supports beyond the school</b> (e.g. itinerant support, SLP and psych, Assessments and congregated settings)	4. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to <u>determine when an identified student</u> (i.e. deemed in need of special education services) <u>receives supports beyond the school</u></i>	<b>3. Implementation of Service</b>  <b>Input to:</b> <b>(1. Policy &amp; Program Design – congregated model and placements)</b>
	5. Identify the factors considered <i>and the degree to which these factors are consistently <u>utilized by schools</u> in requesting an assessment, itinerant support or congregated placement for an identified student</i>	
	6. Identify <i>the process and criteria, and the degree to which the process and criteria are consistently <u>utilized by 'program leaders'</u> in providing services to an identified student particularly in a <b>placement in a congregated setting</b></i>	
<b>D. Criteria used to identify students who need an IEP</b> (modified or accommodated)	7. Establish the degree to which schools use <i>the criteria <u>outlined by the MOE</u> to determine when a student is in need of an IEP (modified or accommodated)</i>	<b>3. Implementation of Service</b>
<b>E. Processes for formally identifying students as exceptional and their placement in programs</b> (including use of Local IPRC committees, IPRC parent guide and IPRC procedures and related forms)	8. Identify <i>the processes and the degree to which the processes are consistently utilized by schools to:</i>	<b>Input to:</b> <b>(1. Policy &amp; Program Design – categories and definitions)</b> <b>(4. Securing Accountability)</b>
	a. Formally identify a student as exceptional using MOE's categories and definitions b. Determine an appropriate placement for the student	

Data Set	Goal(s)	Quadrant
	9. Identify <i>the processes used by <u>some other school boards</u> and the <u>degree of alignment between the WRDSB and these other school boards</u> in use of processes to:</i> a. Formally identify a student as exceptional using MOE's categories and definitions b. Determine an appropriate placement for the student	
<b>F. Rationale for the number and type of congregated classrooms</b>	10. Identify <i>the processes and the degree to which the processes are consistently utilized by '<u>program leaders</u>' to include students in <u>congregated programs</u></i>	<b>3. Implementation of Service</b>  Input to: <b>(1. Policy &amp; Program Design – congregated programs)</b>
	11. Identify <i>the number, type and rationale for <u>congregated programs</u> in <u>some other school boards</u> and <u>degree of alignment between WRDSB and other school boards</u> in number and rationale for congregated programs.</i>	<b>4. Securing Accountability</b>
<b>G. Roles and responsibilities of staff who deliver special education services</b> (e.g. classroom teachers, Special Education Resource teachers, paraprofessionals such as Educational Assistants and child and youth workers, itinerant teachers or EAs, special education consultants, psychologists, speech and language pathologists and social workers)	12. Establish the degree to which staff delivering special education services <i>conform to the description of roles and responsibilities as outlined in the <u>Special Education Plan</u></i>	<b>3. Implementation of Service</b>  Input to: <b>(4. Securing Accountability)</b>
<b>H. Training and capacity building for providing special education services</b>	13. Identify <i>types of professional development opportunities, criteria for offering professional development, delivery methods for professional development opportunities, degree to which board staff access opportunities to engage in professional development related to special education</i>	<b>Support to:</b> <b>3. Implementation of Service</b>
	14. Identify <i>the alignment between <u>WRDSB and some other boards</u> in providing professional development opportunities</i> (in areas identified in #13) for staff related to special education services	

Data Set	Goal(s)	Quadrant
<b>I. Communications on special education services to various audiences</b> (e.g. role of committees such as WREA executive, WREA Learning Services, SSPA, SSVP, Special Education Subject Association, Special Education Advisory Council, etc)	15. Identify <i>the methods and effectiveness for informing different audiences</i> about special education issues	<b>4. Securing Accountability</b>  Input to: <b>(1. Policy and Program Design)</b>
<b>J. Ministry expectations concerning special education supports and services</b> (e.g. Learning for All, Special Education Transformation document, etc.)	16. Identify <i>the key expectations in key MOE documents related to special education or other services and investigate ways in which these models may be applied to improve the resource allocation involved with all special education services</i>	<b>1. Policy and Program Design</b> Input to: <b>(2. Planning for Service Delivery &amp; 4. Securing Accountability)</b>
	17. Identify <i>existing and potential models</i> (e.g. psych services) <i>for resource allocations related to special education or other services and investigate ways in which these <u>models may be applied to improve the resource allocations</u> involved with special education services</i>	
<b>K. Partnerships in providing special education services</b> (e.g. community agencies such as Community Care Access Centre or Development Services Access Centre of Waterloo region)	18. Identify <i>community agency support for students with special needs and <u>how well these supports are integrated with supports provided</u> for students using special education services in WRDSB</i>	<b>3. Implementation of Service</b>  Input to: <b>(1. Policy and Program Design &amp; 4. Securing Accountability)</b>
<b>L. Transportation of special education students</b>	19. Identify <i>the <u>conditions under which transportation is provided</u> for special education students and <u>types of transportation utilized</u></i>	
<b>M. Renovations to facilities to meet the needs of special education students</b>	20. Identify <i>the <u>conditions under which recommendations are made to renovate facilities to support students with special education needs</u></i>	

## **FINDINGS**

The consultants wish to acknowledge the collaboration of the staff of the WRDSB at all levels. The participants were open and candid in their responses. There is clearly a shared strong commitment to special education and to the values of equity and inclusion. The commitment and good will serve the board well as it moves forward in the improvement process.

The Learning Services Division of the WRDSB is in the early stages of implementing a change to both special education processes and organizational structures. Their aim is to increase efficiencies and effectiveness. The consultant team was informed of the development of a Learning Services binder, internal processes to ensure greater alignment across the four components of Learning Services and the creation of a revised Student Success Framework to support at-risk learners among other initiatives. Participants in the focus groups saw the proposed changes as positive in terms of their potential to improve the outcomes for students with special needs. Because the change process is at its beginning, the review was an opportunity to gather feedback about the impact of the changes so far.

The school board deserves recognition for commissioning this review prior to the full implementation of the change. The review identified a number of suggestions to help move the change process forward.

### **Organization of Findings**

As mentioned in the methodology section, the four quadrants formed the framework for the review. Figure 2 illustrates how the themes, goals and quadrants interconnect. The findings have also been grouped under the quadrant headings and the suggestions for improvement are embedded within each of the quadrant findings. The quadrants are inter-related and what happens in one informs the other three. Together, the four quadrants reflect the continuous cycle of program delivery. The organization for the presentation of the findings from this review includes a description of each quadrant, a discussion by topic and a discussion of each key finding and its associated opportunities for improvement. The opportunities for improvement are indicated by italics within the relevant section. The summary section at the end of this report will provide an organization of the opportunities into immediate and long term suggestions for action and improvement.

A number of key themes emerged from the analysis of the data. These include: system and school planning, capacity building and modeling best practices, the effective use of data and the importance of clear communication to stakeholders. These themes reached across all four quadrants and have implications for change. They are primary focus areas for refinement and improvement.

## **QUADRANT ONE – POLICY AND PROGRAM DESIGN**

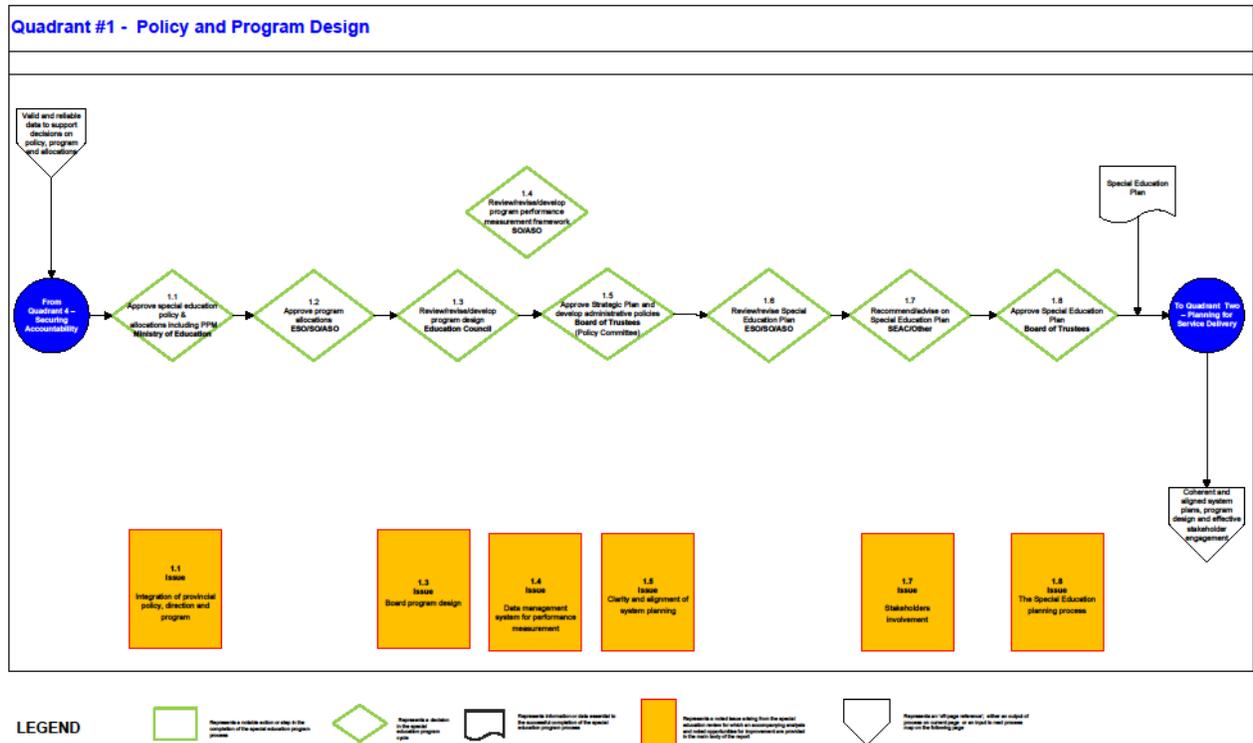
**This quadrant addresses the way in which policy and direction are established and programs designed to achieve the intent of policy. Guided by provincial policy and direction and the board’s mission and vision statements, this quadrant articulates the framework for the parameters for special education, the priorities, the planning processes and the provision of services. A clear and coherent framework enables the alignment of programs, policies and services to actualize the provincial and board direction and forms the first critical part of an effective cyclical management process.**

Participants were asked to consider three questions during the discussion of Quadrant One:

- How are ministry policy and direction interpreted and how do WRDSB system policies, procedures and processes then flow from the Trustees and Executive Council through to the various staff at the school board?
- How do special education directions and priorities fit in with WRDSB system-wide policies and procedures?
- How are special education directions and priorities established and implemented system-wide?

In structuring the discussions for Quadrant One, the PMC Inc team was cognizant of two linked and yet separate policy and program development and design functions. One concerns provincial policy programs and direction originating from the Ministry of Education and the second relates to the mission, vision and direction internal to WRDSB. Figure 3 illustrates the linkages between the two.

**Figure 3**



## I. Integration of Provincial Policy, Direction and Program

There was agreement among the focus group participants that authority, provincial policy and direction flow from the Ministry of Education through the Director of Education to the Executive Superintendents. The province has an enormous influence on special education at a board level, providing the five components of special education funding, policy program memoranda and policies and directions as well as specific, targeted initiatives. A common perception shared by focus group participants was that the WRDSB appears to exert little corresponding influence on the ministry, so that for participants, the arrow appears to flow in a single direction from the ministry to the board.

In terms of interpreting, integrating and implementing ministry policy, direction and programs, the process is neither clear nor transparent to the system. One member of a focus group speaking for the others noted, “We assume someone understands what it means to the system and memos are sent out”. This has implications for the degree to which process and criteria are consistently understood, integrated into the current structure and then implemented by program leaders (Figure 2, Goal 6). There did not appear to be a single or consistent path for transmission of information or provincial policy direction.

The various internal stakeholder groups shared differing descriptions of how the process worked and how ministry policy, programs and direction are received and interpreted. For instance, school-based administrators told us that they gain information from their respective associations. Information is shared through the Education Committee and then is transmitted by

the principal representatives to their peers. Sometimes Policy Program Memoranda (PPMs) are sent directly to the school administrators. Each administrator is then left to filter the messages slightly differently and present this re-filtered message to their teachers whose understanding was mediated by their own experience as well as informal and formal communication from the federations.

The result is that the key messaging to the teachers differs in its interpretation and thus implementation varies significantly across the system and its schools. Provincial policy has the potential to become fragmented in terms of what each school and/or department chooses to interpret as the appropriate direction. This can lead to a sense of being overwhelmed and overloaded at the school level. The lack of clarity and of an understanding as to how provincial policy integrates into the current framework can be critical factors and add to the sense of overload and confusion.

Another complicating factor is that, although coordination has occurred within Executive Council and between programs and special education at a system-level, this coordination is not yet being experienced at the school level. Members of Executive Council function as an integrated whole and collaboration between them is evident. The department-to-department alignment is not always clear. School-based staff shared that they have difficulty in understanding how ministry direction is aligned to the district mission and direction and, more specifically, to their own school's vision and SMART goals. Administrators said that they feel overwhelmed by what they refer to as "money bombs" from the ministry and that they react to, rather than being part of a rational process of implementation. As a result, new initiatives are viewed as fragmented and unaligned with either ministry or system direction because they have not been presented with a strategic and clear interpretation of the fit. Comments heard from special education staff include, "We are not always included in ministry training on new initiatives in literacy," and, "I don't always see where I fit into the larger picture". The provincial focus on improved student achievement for all students did not appear to apply in the same way to students with special education needs.

The reality of different filters for the information and the perception of multiple pressure points may explain why diverse views of ministry policy, programs and direction arose in focus group conversations. In interviews, the concern that, "even when the board or ministry has a policy, it is not applied evenly" was a consistent refrain. This gave some staff the impression of ad hoc and questionable decision-making.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

*The current state provides WRDSB with an opportunity to add a more rational element to the process of dealing with ministry-led initiatives. A clear understanding of how ministry policy integrates with the board's direction and strategic planning may lessen confusion and fragmentation. Suggestions include:*

- i. *A more deliberate and transparent alignment of provincial direction to the board's strategic plan at the senior management level with a clearly articulated communication strategy to engage the whole system. The development of the next board strategic plan would be a key opportunity to integrate ministry direction within the board's strategic plan.*
- ii. *The establishment of a coherent process for the dissemination of provincial policy and direction across the system that includes special education. Provincial initiatives such as Learning for All are currently not seen to apply system-wide involving all students, K-12. A*

*review of the provincial initiatives that are aligned, and structuring them in the plan so that they are seen as coherent across the system, would provide greater alignment and clarity.*

- iii. The board should consider its role in terms of increasing its ability to influence provincial direction and policy. This can be done once there is an alignment of provincial direction to the board's strategic plan. The expertise and reputation of the board and the innovations they are embracing mean that WRDSB is poised to serve as a model for future direction. This can be through presentations to the ministry and minister and its role within the Regional Special Education Council.*

## **II. Board Program Design**

One of the system directions is the support for placements of choice within the board for students with special needs. The WRDSB affirms its belief that “every person can learn, has unique abilities and needs, and is deserving of respect” in its Special Education Plan. According to Section 2 of the WRDSB’s Special Education Plan “the board strives to provide educational opportunities that encourage all students to develop their individual potential in the most enabling setting”. The WRDSB adheres to the Ministry of Education’s Categories of Exceptionalities and Definitions (1999). The Special Education Plan affirms that the school board provides a broad range of services, programs and educational settings, from inclusionary to congregated placements. Placement in a regular class setting remains “the placement of first choice”. Participants talked with pride about the board’s support for the range of placements within the WRDSB. Congregated class settings were seen as “an added opportunity” for students and provided “intensive support”.

In regard to the board’s position on congregated classes, the reality of congregated placements is taken for granted. It was not clear to WRDSB staff how the policy and design elements for congregated and inclusionary placements had evolved. Participants, including SEAC, view the choice between congregated and inclusionary as an either/or decision. For example, congregated placements are not seen as part of a continuum of services and the criteria for placement did not appear as clear and obvious to focus group participants. Several comments from participants, including from SEAC, suggested that the design setting fits the student into what exists and that there is no sense of the student shaping the placement options. There was a lack of clarity about the design and impact of congregated settings.

Goals Number 10 and 11 of the RFP are concerned with the board’s rationale and placement of students in congregated settings. While there were some issues concerning ambiguity in the schools regarding the placement process and resulting inconsistencies in its application, there is clarity from the central staff regarding the process. According to them, “the descriptions for all congregated classes are that students are integrated for less than 50% of their time”. Placement in the congregated classes “is in accordance with parental wishes and allows for the continuation of a positive learning environment”. Guidelines are in place and these are included in the Special Education Plan. Processes are outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart, the Early Identification and Intervention Flowchart and the Special Education Process Flowchart, to direct identification of special needs and the appropriate delivery of services and programs.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Consider revisiting the rationale for the design of special education programs and services for the number, location and types of congregated settings based on performance measures of effectiveness. This will require the gathering of specific data sets to provide relevant information in order to analyze the effectiveness of the current congregated model as compared to one that offers alternative choices within the continuum of inclusion to congregated settings.*
- ii. *Expand the involvement of SEAC and other stakeholders in the design of the special education program. Consider a process to gather input as part of the design process. SEAC can reflect concerns and ideas from parents and the agencies earlier in the process rather than react to programs that are presented as fully-developed.*
- iii. *Provide increased clarity regarding the design of options within the range of placement settings and the criteria for placement in the various setting options by ensuring that the placement options reflect the current continuum of placements supported by ministry.*

### **III. Data Management System for Performance Measurement**

Data – both quantitative and qualitative – are important to plan and manage systems effectively. This has recently been an area of review as indicated by two seminal reports: Childress' 2010 report *Investing in Improvement: Strategy and Resource Allocation in Public Schools* and Guthrie & Peng on [www.eduweek.org/links](http://www.eduweek.org/links).

Both emphasize the importance of making business and educational decisions based on relevant student data. No discernable framework for the delineation, gathering and analysis of special education data to impact decision-making was presented to the reviewers. When asked about system direction to identify, gather and analyze special education relevant data to inform decision-making regarding special education, most participants commented, "We are not sure," or "We haven't heard about this". The consultants were informed that the greatest source of data for special education resides in the individual students' IEPs. It currently is not in a format that allows for aggregation, disaggregation and analysis.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Develop comprehensive performance measures with regards to special education within the context of the board's broader performance measurement system. Review the targeted areas on which the board currently gathers data, as illustrated by the Needs-Based Data Driven allocation model. Consider developing a framework similar to the one for Student Success. Once the targeted areas are identified, i.e. results on EQAO, credit accumulation, suspensions and use of assistive technology among others, SMART goals can be established to assess these targeted areas.*
- ii. *Determine what related data should be gathered and analyzed. These should link to the strategic goals and priorities and provide some measureable indicators of success. This design element would include developing a data strategy and a system architecture and design to enable the gathering, storing, aggregation and disaggregation of data to enable analysis to inform future decision-making.*
- iii. *Ensure that data management is an inherent component of ongoing program review and design.*

#### **IV. Clarity and Alignment of System Planning**

A parallel policy and design process exists within the WRDSB. There is a strategic system plan incorporating the vision and mission of WRDSB posted on the board's web site and system-level administrators assume that the mission and vision are understood.

In response to perceived concerns about "silos and fragmentation across the system", integration currently occurs through Executive Council and the three executive superintendents who have collective responsibilities for programs, services and operational functions of the school board. To assist with integration across departments, the system superintendents report to the Executive Superintendents and meet with them on an ongoing basis. Four assistant superintendents report through the Superintendent of Learning Services. Their responsibilities include: Special Education, Programs, School Effectiveness Assessment and Equity and Inclusion. This lends itself to a coordinated approach in the design and direction and system-level initiatives.

The administrators, other board staff and SEAC were not always clear as to how the plan was developed and its priorities established. At a school level there appeared to be some issues concerning clear communication of direction. The administrators were aware of the system plan but shared that they did not see how the board's strategic plan relates to their own school plans or the Special Education Plan. Initiatives appear fragmented since the school-based administrators perceive that they lack the framework to interpret and consolidate ministry and board direction. This is not unique to special education and similar issues were referenced in the other reviews. Clarity and alignment are more systemic issues.

#### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *The current state provides WRDSB with an opportunity to add a rational element to the planning process by aligning the system planning process including the special education plan to the board's strategic planning process. It will help staff to see change as part of a larger framework and not the disconnected initiatives that many currently perceive.*
- ii. *Align the templates for school planning with the board's next iteration of the strategic planning process.*
- iii. *Have Executive Council continue to model alignment and coordination in very specific and concrete ways as part of a comprehensive capacity building strategy. The alignment at Executive Council can serve as a model for establishing protocols and modes of operation as departments work collaboratively on the planning and implementation of initiatives such as transportation, staff development and technology.*

#### **V. Stakeholders Involvement**

The Special Education Advisory Committee is a mandated committee for all school boards (Regulation 464/97). Its purpose is to advise the school board on issues pertaining to special education, including the special education plan. The Standards for School Boards' Special Education Plans (2000) suggests that "with the assistance of SEAC, public consultations with stakeholders including members of the community must be "maintained on a continuous basis". The purpose of this addition to the Education Statutes and Regulations was to enhance and clarify SEAC's role. The SEAC committee, through its representation of parents and agencies, reflects the nature and culture of special education and provides local context to provincial

direction. It acts as an advocacy agent for students and parents/caregivers. SEAC is an agent of accountability.

In the focus group sessions, many participants did not understand SEAC's purpose or role. They were not perceived as an "active player" in special education and participants did not know how SEAC members influenced decision-making in terms of special education.

SEAC members regard themselves as recipients of information and not agents of change. There was a sense from them that they are informed of decisions once they already have been made and so their role as an advisory body appeared in question. They were eager to become more involved and to assist the board in improving outcomes for students with special needs.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Review the current role of SEAC to provide a clearer articulation of the purpose and role. Consider expanding SEAC's leadership in seeking stakeholder input to the design and development of the Special Education Plan and the specific programs contained within the Special Education Plan. This could include gathering input into proposed design for programs and services, forms and flow charts, and the development of relevant Questions and Answers. This recognizes SEAC's role as an advisory committee to the board.*
- ii. *Communicate the role and responsibility of SEAC more clearly to the system and as a link to the community.*

## **VI. The Special Education Planning Process**

The design and development of the WRDSB's Special Education Plan resides in Quadrant One. As with the strategic plan, many focus group participants were not clear how the Special Education Plan was developed and framed. There is consensus among the various focus groups, including SEAC that, as it currently exists, the Special Education Plan is not directly aligned to the system's success planning which guides strategic improvement directions.

As is the case with most school boards' special education plans, WRDSB's Special Education Plan is a description of the current services and programs, and modes of delivery offered by WRDSB, rather than a strategic action plan with goals, targeted actions and measurable outcomes that are aligned to the system plan. SEAC members stated that they see the Special Education Plan as part of a "reporting function and not future-focused". The perception across the focus groups, including SEAC, is that SEAC, among the various stakeholders, is not actively involved in influencing design and direction of the shaping of programs and services but rather that SEAC is advised after the design of programs and services have been completed. According to the Standards for School Boards' Special Education Plans, stakeholders include parents, members of school councils, community organizations and students.

Due to the provincial announcement that future special education plans will be aligned with the district improvement plans, this board – and the other 71 public school boards – are waiting for further clarification from the Ministry of Education. It should be noted that senior WRDSB staff are already anticipating this move and meeting to work out what a fully integrated improvement plan – of which special education forms a component – might look like. SEAC members have expressed their willingness to collaborate on this new direction for the development of the plan.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

*While the current special education plan conforms to current ministry reporting requirement, it does not currently provide the required strategic direction and focus.*

- i. Develop a Special Education Strategic Plan that is concise, clear and transparent, provides direction and is aligned with other system planning initiatives.*
- ii. Engage SEAC more purposefully in the consultation process with stakeholders regarding the development of the Special Education Plan.*
- iii. Communicate the revised Special Education Plan so that it is understood and accessible to the various system stakeholders.*

### **Quadrant One Conclusion**

If the opportunities for improvement for Quadrant One are implemented then the desired outcome will be more effective aligned system plans, clarity and transparency to the program design, an effective and strategic Special Education Plan and an engaged SEAC. This will position the board for success in Quadrant Two.

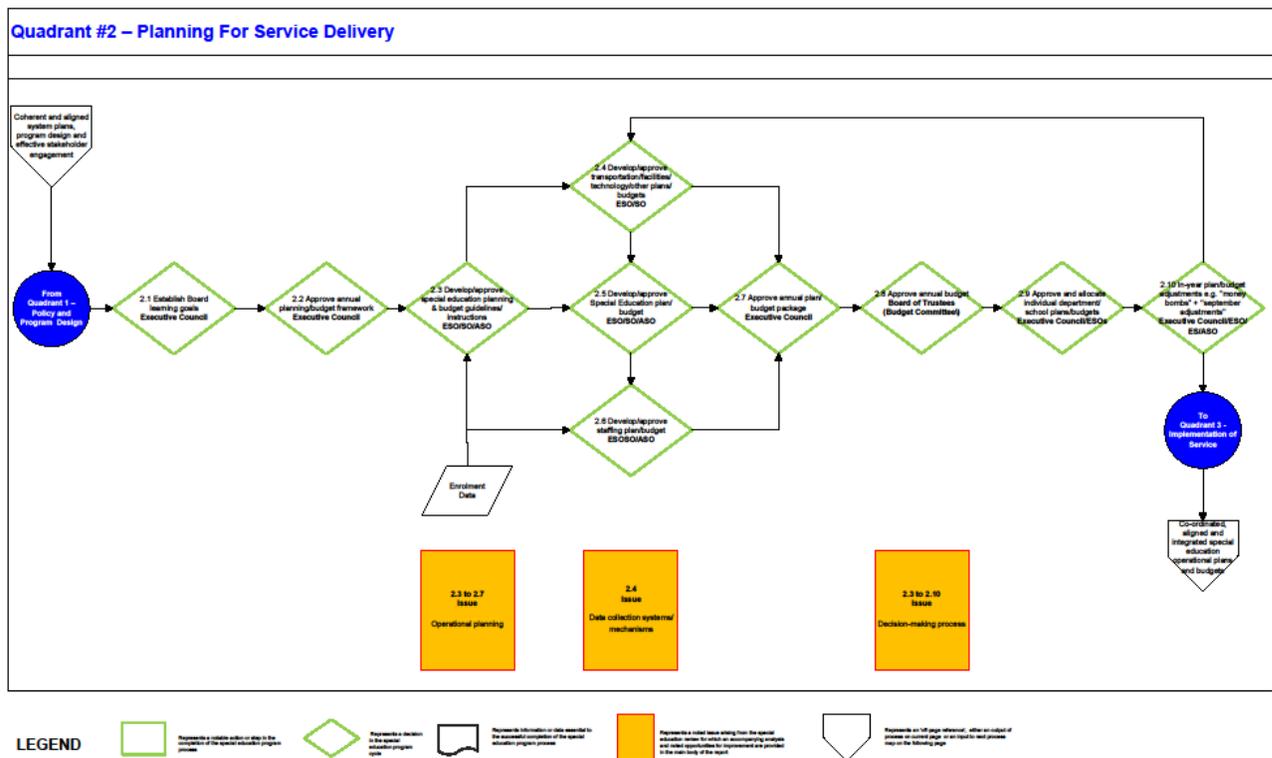
## QUADRANT TWO – PLANNING FOR SERVICE DELIVERY

This quadrant focuses on planning across and within departments and articulates how the financial, staff and community resources of the board are aligned with the needs and priorities for special education services.

The key questions for consideration by focus group participants were:

- Is planning for special education service delivery integrated and comprehensive?
- What are the key issues?
- What are the key gaps?
- What are the opportunities for improvement?

Figure 4



### I. Operational Planning

Planning occurs across the system at the three key levels: within the system's strategic plan, by means of the specific action plans of each department and through individual school improvement plans. Participants shared that they were not currently sure how the three planning functions align. If the connections are not clearly articulated, then a greater challenge is posed by inconsistencies in approach and implementation. This is another opportunity to introduce efficacy and coordination.

Executive Council and the three executive superintendents have collective responsibilities for the programs, services and operational functions of the school board. Their aim is to achieve integrated planning and delivery of services and programs. The feedback derived from the interviews and focus groups indicates that the on-the-ground reality may differ from the plan for integration and alignment. Business functions, including transportation, facilities, technology and human resources impact and influence the design of special education; however the avenues for close integration across these functions with special education appear to the stakeholders to be limited. One anecdote told of a less-than-accessible design in a new school facility and there was a sense that this could have been avoided if there had been better coordination. Another concerned transportation routes that are set in April and have to be re-done in August/September because of the mobility of students and the locations of the congregated classes. This is cited as a reason that taxi transportation is over utilized resulting in greater costs.

The current school improvement plans do not have a special education component and the school plans are disconnected from the Special Education Plan. In the focus groups, participants told us they did not see how the two were related. These two planning instruments need to be aligned.

Part of the issue is that the system lacks the specific types of data regarding special education that can be aggregated and disaggregated to assess the efficacy of interventions, services and programs. There is no process to gather, store, aggregate and disaggregate data to assess efficiencies and inform future decisions.

WRDSB is working on addressing these planning issues. The members of the consulting team were given copies of the Needs-based Data Driven Model for the Allocation of Learning Services Resources in Elementary and Secondary Schools and the Secondary Resource Utilizations Review. Both these internal reviews were focused on finding “the appropriate use of resources to most effectively meet student needs”. In both, the inconsistency of implementation is acknowledged as well as a lack of access to the data needed to drive decision-making. Another issue that was raised across the review is the need for informed leadership, monitoring and professional learning to ensure that effective practices can be adopted.

Planning at a school level involves the school improvement plans, which are a function of current provincial direction aligned to the School Effectiveness Framework. School-based administrators didn’t see how their school improvement plans aligned to the system’s directions. This minimizes the influence these plans can have in achieving coherent system results. The school staff needs to see how their plans connect to the system while retaining some control to allow for local contexts.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Build upon on the current integration processes at Executive Council to ensure greater system-wide, integrated operational planning processes, which will ensure the coordination and integration of planning efforts at all levels across the system.*
- ii. *Enhance school-based administrators’ participation within the operational planning cycle to assist with integration and alignment of the school and system plans.*
- iii. *Special education needs to be integrated as a component within the schools’ planning process and reflected in the schools’ improvement plan.*

- iv. *Coordinate planning from the individual department' responsibilities (transportation, IT, human resources, facilities and special education) to construct a more system-wide and integrated plan This also will allow for clearer alignment between the board's learning goals for all students, including special education within Learning Services.*

## **II. Data Collection Systems/Mechanisms**

There is a perceived lack of meaningful special education data availability to influence planning. This lack of meaningful data relevant for programming decisions makes planning difficult and compromises effective achievement of results. Planning for the gathering and analyzing of useful student data needs to become an integral part of the planning process. To ensure system accountability, structures regarding the gathering, storing and analysis of student data sets need to be established.

The Needs-Based Data Driven Model for allocation of learning services resources in elementary and secondary schools presented the case for a statistical, needs-based model for allocation. This initiative would assist the board in responding to the perceptions that the allocation process was neither equitable nor data-driven. The following variables were included in the proposed allocation model:

- Family income based on the 2006 census data
- Parental education based on the 2006 census data
- Percentage of students residing in lone/single parent households based on 2006 census data
- Transiency levels of students within schools from 2007-2008 and 2008-2009
- School achievement results from the 2007, 2008 and 2009 EQAO provincial assessments
- The percentage of students who were unsuccessful or who did not write the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) averaged over 2007-2009
- Enrolment as a full-time equivalent statistic (FTE).

A number of other factors were considered, including the percentage of students in the school with an IEP, the results from the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and the density of students within a specific school catchment area. Based on the factors, a formula was derived for the number of psychological assessments, speech and language assessments and occasional teacher day allocations allotted to a specific school. All of the above use data appropriately in the way the review is suggesting as the norm for decision-making.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Develop the processes and mechanisms to support the data management system, and gather, store and analyze data pertaining to all facets of special education. This will require a strategic and systematic approach.*
- ii. *Continue with the implementation of the internal-based reviews to ensure equity and data-driven criteria for allocating services more effectively. Use this as a model for other similar services for students with special needs and then use the data in the planning process for distribution of services and programs. This would support an equitable, effective and transparent planning process.*

- iii. *Ensure that the formula used to provide professional support services is transparent and that variables established are clearly rationalized and communicated to the system. Continue to collect data in terms of the variables in order to keep the formula current and aligned to the system's needs.*

### **III. Decision-making Process**

There are a variety of components to ensure effective decision-making. Planning decisions impacting special education are not always transparent to school-based and some central office staff and SEAC. Part of the perceived ambiguity and inconsistencies are related to staff not having the 'big picture' and so not seeing how the separate components align. To assist with clarity and transparency, effective decision-making is impacted by access to meaningful data, the ability to use the data, timely decisions, coordination, alignment, communication and the capacity of staff to make the types of decisions required for ongoing improvement.

There have been discussions of the issues raised by the lack of access to meaningful data and of mechanisms to identify, gather, store and analyze the data. Timing as another component in the decision-making process impacts the planning for professional service delivery such as psycho-educational services. Participants reported that schools currently receive two or three assessments per year but, if a larger number of students requiring assessments arrive in a school, mid-year assessments should be considered. This would support an equitable, effective and transparent planning process.

The planning of the location of special education classes and of the required student transportation routes is another area for review. Currently decisions are made in the spring and there are often subsequent changes in students' home addresses or the location of classes. These transportation decisions need to occur closer to September in order to help reduce the need for changes to schedules in September and the resulting overreliance on taxis.

Staff need to understand how to make effective decisions. This requires both capacity building and coordination across functions within the system. The planning for targeted professional learning is part of this quadrant. Timely access to and analysis of relevant data can be used to direct professional learning to make it more targeted. Adding this component to the planning process will enable development of the skills and knowledge needed to improve student outcomes. To rationalize planning in Quadrant Two, the coordination and linkages of professional learning as they relate to special education and the provincial direction regarding improved learning outcomes for all can be better integrated into the system initiatives and priorities within a framework of Universal Design.

#### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Consider a greater coordination of planning cycles at the school and system level connecting both plans and budgets.*
- ii. *Develop a mechanism to enable a more coordinated, coherent and timely planning across the relevant departments in order to improve efficiencies of service and programs for students with special needs within Learning Services. This would include professional development, data gathering, storage and analysis, and the delivery of targeted professional services linked to the performance measurement goals.*
- iii. *Once the board receives the budget from the Ministry, the board-specific decisions regarding special education should continue to be shared. Try and make the budget*

*process timelier, more widely understood and more transparent as they impact the delivery of programs and services for students with special education needs.*

- iv. *Consider offering specific professional development sessions on effective planning for service delivery that will encourage planning literacy. Developing capacity around planning can assist staff as they align the current plans in use in across the board at the system and school levels.*

### **Quadrant Two Conclusion**

Implementation of the opportunities for improvement for Quadrant Two will support desired outcomes of coordinated, aligned and integrated special education operational plans and budgets. This will position the Board for more effective service delivery to special education students.

## **QUADRANT THREE – IMPLEMENTATION OF SERVICE**

**Students are at the heart of any school system. Student needs and the focus on improved learning outcomes form the core responsibility for Ontario school boards. Quadrant Three is concerned with the actual delivery of services and programs to students at the system, school and community levels. This quadrant focuses on the processes and the provision of board and community resources to recognize and respond to the special education needs of individual students. This is why Quadrant Three is the most complex.**

Quadrant Three examines the implementation of programs and services to students with special needs in the WRDSB. Given the perception noted in Quadrants One and Two of a lack of transparency and the lack of a consistent application of the processes and services, it is no surprise that the actual delivery of services and programs is perceived to be inconsistent and unevenly applied. As mentioned before, this is more systemic and not unique to special education. Implementation of services and programs directed to students with special needs can only be as effective as the information and knowledge shared on the ground. To ensure equity and equality, a more strategic and coherent response is required. Input to impact implementation will need to be structured, planned, managed and consistently shared so that all stakeholders have a common understanding.

Participants in the focus groups were asked to consider the following key questions:

- Who are the students with special needs and how are they being served?
- Does implementation of service and programs reflect the design?
- What are the key issues?
- What are the key gaps?
- What are the opportunities for improvement?

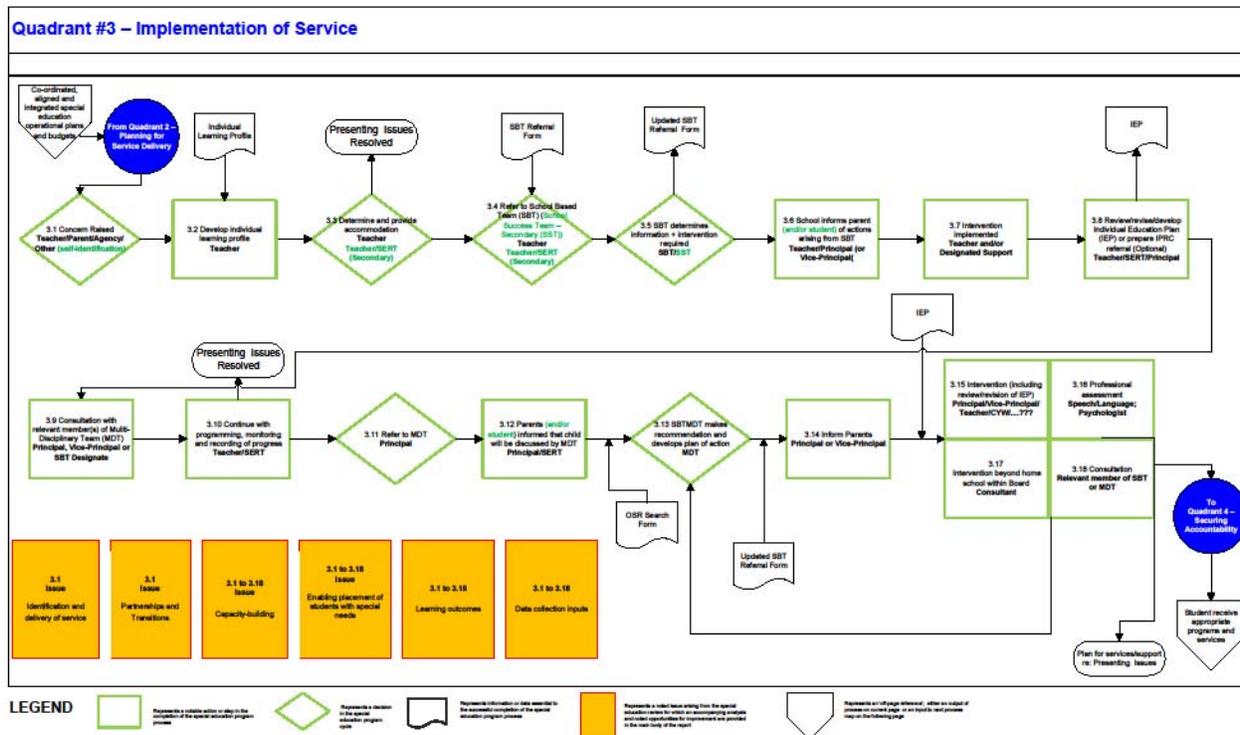
### The Students

Of the 60,000 students currently enrolled in schools and programs within WRDSB, approximately 13,800 receive some level of special education services or programming. This accounts for approximately 23% of the total student population, a comparatively high figure in relation to the provincial norm of 12-14% and in relation to the comparator boards referred to later in the analysis of this quadrant. The following is an analysis by panel according to the September 2009, provincial OnSIS data:

**Elementary Panel:** There are 7,723 students identified as having special needs and 771 of those, i.e. 10.6%, are in congregated classes. Of the identified students, 1,168 are male and 465 are female. This follows the provincial trend of more males being identified than females. The main exceptionalities in the school board are learning disabilities (409), multiple exceptionalities (358 of which only 104 students are female), autism (243 of which 40 are female), behaviour (138 of which 8 are female) and mild intellectual disabilities (140 of which 59 are female).

**Secondary Panel:** There are 3,431 identified students of which 373 are in congregated classes and 61 are partially integrated. The largest exceptionality is learning disabilities (587), followed by multiple exceptionalities (384), giftedness (158) and language impairment (131).

**Figure 5**



## I. Identification and Delivery of Service

There is a perceived lack of clarity noted by focus group participants in terms of the process for decision-making to meet the needs of students with special needs and how those needs are met. Goals Number 1 through 12 as stated in the RFP are concerned with issues relating to the identification, placement and provision of services and programs for students with special needs. To direct a coherent approach by staff to the identification and placement of students, WRDSB developed a series of flowcharts for special education programs and services which are contained within the Special Education Plan. Several pathways to identification of student needs are outlined in the board’s flowcharts.

The focus group participants were asked about their understanding of the flowcharts for the implementation of services and programs (Goals Number 1 and 2). Participants in the focus groups reported that there was inconsistency in how schools are alerted to the challenges experienced by students. Some students are identified by school staff as they experience learning difficulties, some are identified by parents or guardians and some come with formal identification from the pre-school community agencies and/or from other school boards.

It was clear across the focus groups that school-based teams (SBTs) form the first level of response and the multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) form the next level of response. The degree

of alignment with these flowcharts formed Goal Number 1 in the RFP. Teachers, in consultation with parents, provide examples of student work and behaviour to the SBT. The team meets to suggest strategies and resources that are within that school's purview to deliver. At this point students may be given an IEP to direct how the teacher(s) will accommodate the student's needs. There was a consistent understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the school-based teams, "It may be identified by a teacher or parent but once we realize that a student is floundering the SBT is used". Across the focus groups, participants could describe how early identification should work to trigger supports.

When the programs and services at the school are no longer able to meet a student's needs, MDT personnel are consulted and the process moves to the next level. If the student's needs cannot be met by school-based resources alone then, participants informed the review team, there is consideration of convening an Identification Placement Review Committee (IPRC). There was general agreement that IPRCs were for students in congregated settings and that those in inclusionary classes have IEPs. This is not delineated in the flow charts.

For a student to be placed in a congregated setting, the assumption is that parents are involved in a "collaborative decision-making process" according to the Special Education Plan. There was a consistent belief that an IPRC is convened and the IEP examined in terms of the student's strengths and challenges and the strategies needed to facilitate learning. The steps outlined in the flowcharts to determine identification for the provision of special education programs and services and, if needed, admission to congregated classes, were an area of ambiguity for many in the focus groups.

Although the process flowcharts are contained in the Special Education Plan which is accessible through the WRDSB website, comments received in the focus groups would suggest that these charts are understood by central staff but that they are not clearly understood by all of the school-based administrators and teaching staff charged with implementing the processes to obtain services and programs. There was a perception that some schools accessed the MDTs earlier and more effectively than others and this was articulated by the consultative staff and senior management involved in special education.

It was reported that the quality of the SBTs' understanding of the issues facing the student and their ability to access services from the MDTs also varied from school to school and family of schools to family of schools. An administrator's ability to understand special education needs, programs and services was an enabling factor. "If you know who to call and how to access the system, it makes all the difference" or "Sometimes I am not always sure what to do", represented some of the feedback from administrators. This encouraged the perception that who you know and being a squeaky wheel make a difference. The perception that some school-based administrators are more knowledgeable and skilful about accessing services was confirmed in the Secondary Resource Utilization Review.

This led to perceptions of ambiguity and confusion as to how students progressed or should progress through the system based on the flowcharts. The central staff are developing criteria to make the process more transparent. For them the processes are clear. For instance, clear directions are provided regarding the Phoenix Class admission criteria, which include rules for 2010-2011 admission. The process for entry to the Phoenix Class can serve as an exemplar to make sure all criteria for admission to specialized programs are transparent and clear and that the steps necessary to proceed are obvious to all. Currently, the data from the focus group indicate that what is clear to central staff may not be clear to all. There was no clear

understanding among school-based staff as to how students were selected for the Phoenix Class. One said, "I made a phone call to a friend and advocated and the kid was accepted." The processes need to be clearly communicated across the system and enforced so that the perception that some can access services and others cannot is reversed.

There was a perception shared by administrators and other school-based staff that the skills and expertise of the consultative staff, including MDTs, varied. If the consultative staff were experienced and knowledgeable, the perception was that the quality of service was increased and that the student and his family could access programs and services faster. This included the ability to access placements in the congregated classes. It may be that if the school has expertise in using MDTs, the process and timeliness are impacted. This indicates the need for clear and transparent processes, understood by all.

In terms of congregated classes, the graduated continuum of programs and services was not fully understood. Many, including SEAC members, saw it as an either/or issue "there are only two real options," i.e., either inclusionary placement or self-contained. Some SEAC members indicated that parents perceived that placement in congregated settings was not optional but a decision, while others talked about being consulted and feeling like "a partner in the process". Clarifying the processes in the flowchart to make them transparent and ensuring the messaging is more coherent may assist with some of the misperceptions.

The staff in special education are aware of the need for clarity and coherence. The consultation team was informed that some board staff are in the process of developing a Learning Services manual to make more explicit the process of targeting programs and services to students at risk, including students with special needs. The consultation team was informed that Learning Services are examining ways to increase efficiencies across the system using data. The individual superintendents responsible for families of schools are expanding their role in terms of special education. All are positive moves.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

*The focus group results indicate that while the criteria for placement and programs are understood by central staffs they are not as well understood by school-based staff. There is a need to develop coherency, transparency and a shared understanding of issues regarding programs and delivery of services across the WRDSB regarding identification and placement.*

- i. *The Learning Services manual under development by Learning Services is a key tool. Once it has been vetted and released ensure this manual will be web-enabled and user-friendly and that it is effectively communicated and distributed to the system.*
- ii. *Augment the current decision-making flowcharts with the process maps developed as part of this project. Identify areas that often result in ambiguities and conflicts and provide greater clarity within the charts and indicate relevant contacts at each level if issues arise.*
- iii. *Develop and post Questions and Answers on the internal web site, WaterWorks, for administrators and teachers regarding the flowcharts and processes for identification and placement. School-based staff and SEAC can be of assistance in the creation of commonly raised questions. These charts can be accompanied by a manual posted electronically with searchable features for just-in-time use.*

- iv. *Consider specific annual training for all new administrators and refresher training for existing administrators to ensure the board vision, direction, programs and processes are understood. These could be done centrally or in the family of school groupings, either face-to-face or electronically.*
- v. *Ensure that special education is a topic for all system school administrator and family of school meetings so that everyone will be given a common message and be current with ministry updates and direction as they impact students with special needs.*
- vi. *Re-examine the forms in use for special education to ensure they align with current ministry direction regarding the full range of the continuum of services. Involve SEAC and other stakeholders in the process. Ensure changes are communicated and that the changes become part of the Questions and Answers under development.*
- vii. *Ensure the forms are designed to support relevant data collection and extraction.*

## **II. Partnerships & Transitions**

Goal Number 18 concerned the involvement of and outreach to agencies and social services in the community as a way to use resources more creatively. The agencies are largely organized under Access Waterloo Region, formerly Community Connections. *There are seven social service and community agencies that serve students, parents and guardians in the Waterloo region. To assist with partnerships, the two school boards host a parent information night to link the agencies with potential clients who could access their services. Some of the agencies are represented on SEAC. There are close links with the consultative staff in special education who try and facilitate timely programs and services. Additionally, Access Waterloo Region publishes a booklet and maintains a website with a database ([www.accesswaterlooregion.ca](http://www.accesswaterlooregion.ca)) to provide current information regarding the provision of services and programs. There are some partnerships regarding shared professional development as indicated in the section on Capacity Building. There is much that is working well.*

Transitions were raised as an area of concern that overlaps the community agencies and the school board. Perceptions are that the initial transition from daycare or specialized pre-school programs is working well. Concerns were raised about students entering kindergarten directly from home with a variety of undiagnosed learning needs. When these students enter the school system, there is a time-lag before the needs are identified and programs and services are put in place. It also impacts planning for the next year because the schools cannot anticipate the needs of students when there has been no information or communication from the home settings.

Transition as an issue impacting student learning was raised in discussions in this quadrant. Protocols already exist for transitions from Grade 8 to Grade 9 for students within WRDSB and staff were complimentary that the process is working well and those transitions are smoother given the communication in advance of the student's entry into the WRDSB system. This feeling was echoed by SEAC whose members shared some specific personal stories about the care taken to involve them as parents in the decisions and the transition process. Participants in the focus group felt that the process is understood by school staff and that most parents are accommodated with visits to the high school and meetings with relevant special education staff.

Issues regarding elementary school settings involved the transition from elementary school to middle school. The board has elected to have elementary schools that are mainly K-6 and then middle schools for Grades 7 and 8. There did not appear to be consistent transition planning

these students. Some concerns were raised by SEAC that the two transitions for elementary students are disruptive, although no data is being collected to confirm or challenge that perception.

Concern was also expressed about students from other school systems, including the co-terminus board, entering WRDSB's classes without adequate identification and information to facilitate a seamless transition. Only as the students experienced extreme difficulties and behavioural issues, were staff at WRDSB alerted to some of the potential underlying issues. Given the lack of information regarding the students' needs prior to their entry, valuable learning time was lost until assessments were made and programs and services could be provided. The main transitional challenge is from WRDSB classes to the world of work and/or community placements. Currently there is a dearth of supports for many of these high-needs young adults in the general community for these young adults when they leave WRDSB at age 21. The school board cannot provide effective transitions when limited opportunities for these young adults exist.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *With the community agencies and SEAC's assistance identify areas for improvement in transitional planning for students. Continue with inter-agency and community planning. One priority area identified in the focus groups for consideration is working with community agencies on strategies to improve the transition from home to school, when the student has not been served in a daycare or community agency.*
- ii. *Include the topic of transitions from one school board to another as part of the Regional Special Education Council (RSEC) agenda and ask the regional office to gather examples of best practices from across the province.*
- iii. *Consider developing frameworks for some formalized transition planning for students moving from Grade 6 to middle school. Consider the option for some parents to elect to stay longer at the middle school since students in congregated classes in high school may be with the same teacher for seven years.*

### **III. Capacity Building**

Research demonstrates that as staff increase their knowledge and skills student outcomes improve. The National Council of Staff Development supports professional learning that is job-embedded, targeted to specific goals indicated by student data, ongoing and collegial. In a speech in October 2009 to Ontario Administrators as part of the Leadership Framework, Doug Reeves suggested that teaching staff require approximately 45 hours of focused professional learning for coherence in a school or system. Goal Number 13 of the review inquired about the types of professional development opportunities related to special education. The Special Education Plan identifies two purposes for supporting professional learning for special education. The first is to maintain expertise in relationship with Ministry of Education policies, regulations and directions and the second is to maintain "best practice as it relates to current research in the field of special education". SEAC is kept abreast of staff learning initiatives as they apply to special education. Focus group participants indicated that they would like to attend some of the professional learning opportunities. The focus groups commented positively on WaterWorks, the internal electronic communication system.

The consultant team was informed of a recent initiative that blends research and practice. New students with learning disabilities will be screened for audiology issues. There will be some training associated with this initiative.

The WRDSB has provided teachers and consultative staff with CDs containing a variety of discrete resource materials for teachers, including profile charts to track students and suggestions for prompts for comprehension and decoding strategies. Each individual resource was useful, such as a chart that illustrated types of cross-curricular connections that could be made. However, in the package provided to the reviewers, there was no unifying or common messaging regarding Learning for All that could help direct teachers' use of the materials. In the focus groups, staff indicated that differentiated instruction and assessment were neither well understood nor coherently implemented school-to-school and class-to-class. Closing achievement gaps such as exist for students with special needs requires coherent and intentional evidence-based interventions, e.g. differentiated instruction and the use of assistive technology (Murphy, 2010).

An analysis of the professional learning offerings indicates that emphasis has been on ensuring appropriate skill and knowledge levels with ministry direction such as IEP overview training, IEP standards training and the use of the IEP writer. Ministry-supported training regarding autism was offered throughout the school year. A review of the materials provided concerning professional development courses from August 2009 through June 30, 2010 indicates that there were 56 course offerings through Learning Services spaced throughout the year. Most were aimed at teachers or school teams that included Education Assistants. The courses were attended by over 80 administrators and over 800 teachers and may include the same person attending multiple courses.

Technology and special education was a dominant theme. This emphasis was supported by the positive comments heard during the focus groups regarding SEA and assistive technology provided for identified students through targeted ministry grants. The following is a breakdown of the types of professional offerings available to staff:

- 13 courses involved IEP writer
- 14 course offerings on Kurzweil
- 9 courses on Boardmaker
- 8 courses on Clicker 5
- 7 courses on Writing Interventions using Co-writer and Write Aloud
- 5 courses on Classroom Suite Beginner
- 3 courses on Dragon Speaking Naturally
- 3 courses involved PPM 140 and another 3 with an added ASD focus
- 3 courses were aimed at increasing administrators' knowledge of IEPs

Area network meetings where issues were raised regarding special education were included on the professional learning calendar. In these meeting the following are noted:

- 3 were focused on Corrective Reading

- 2 targeted the provincial New Teachers' Initiative (NTIP) with one offering on differentiated instruction per panel

Some of the professional development available to WRDSB staff is shared with partners including:

- PHAST and EMPOWER with the Hospital for Sick Children
- Segregated Assessment Partnership Project with the Grand River Hospital
- Autism Spectrum Disorder training with ErinOaks

Concerns were raised in the teacher and administrator focus groups about the increasing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) with potential special education needs. WRDSB has a referral form but teachers and administrators indicated they were unsure how to assess effectively. The consultation team was informed of a recent initiative to develop a resource guide that blends special education and ESL issues. This is a proactive development and Learning Services should be congratulated.

Goal Number 14 is another goal that asked the reviewers to examine the alignment with other school boards' professional learning opportunities as they apply to special education. In some of the comparator school boards there was a greater alignment of course offerings on improving learning outcomes and special education. In many of the comparable school boards, differentiation and "a continued focus on literacy and numeracy for students with special needs" remain district-wide initiatives. These boards are emphasizing the use of high yield strategies "using Learning for All as the guiding framework" and the in-service is offered to school teams that include special education and regular classroom teachers. The aim is "team building and knowledge sharing across the disciplines". These school boards' course offerings, including those for special education educators, focus on raising literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students through the use of high yield strategies such as the Marzano Nine in addition to the ones focused on IEPs, and the effective use of assistive technology. Some of the comparator boards used a webinar format based on Adobe Acrobat, which is licensed by the Ministry of Education for use in schools. Providing in-service capacity-building to school teams is an effective strategy. Some concerns were expressed in focus groups that Education Assistants are not included, oftentimes because of a lack of funds to provide their release.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

*Build on current professional learning opportunities and align these to the system priorities.*

- i. *Consider establishing criteria for professional development for special education aligned to best practice as represented by organizations such as the National Staff Development Council ([www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org)).*
- ii. *As part of the suggested data management system, provide a mechanism to centrally gather and disseminate information regarding research-informed strategies and best practices as they apply to improved student outcomes especially for students with special needs, such as the recent research project underway involving learning disabilities and speech and language audiologists to show how research can impact practice.*
- iii. *Include special education educators in all the course offerings that target improvement to better align special education within the focus for increasing student achievement.*

*Emphasize differentiated instruction, differentiated assessment, universal design and assistive technology as key focus areas.*

- iv. *When possible use electronic formats such as searchable e-manuals, webcasts and DVDs for training. Whenever possible capacity building can occur in schools, administrators and teachers don't have to attend off-site and school-based teams can learn together. These can be made more precise when the student data is aggregated and disaggregated.*
- v. *Provide dedicated in-service on the release of the Special Education/ESL resource. Consider developing a strategy to assist in the assessment of students with both ESL and special education needs. Have centralized assessments by staff with both special education and ESL qualifications. Consider targeting training towards meeting the needs of students with both special education and ESL issues and share best practices. This could include sharing of current research, case studies, best practices and innovative approaches to improve the capacity of staffs to respond to the needs of ELL students.*

#### **IV. Enabling Placement for Students with Special Needs**

Enabling placement of students involves other departments beyond special education including transportation, facilities, technology, human resources and finance. The RFP requested feedback concerning transportation and accessibility.

##### **A. Transportation**

Inquiring how transportation is provided for special education students and the types of transportation involved forms Goal Number 19. In 1996, WRDSB and the Waterloo Catholic DSB approved a cooperative student transportation agreement to provide linked service "to reduce operating costs and provide more efficient transport". This consortium, known as Student Transportation Services of Waterloo Region (STSWR):

- Provides and monitors transportation for 25,000 regular students and students with special needs
- Uses local providers, six taxi companies and the Grand River Transit system as well as vehicles with wheelchair lifts
- Ensures all vehicles have two-way radios, first aid kits and fire extinguishers
- Coordinates the Standing Safety and Bus Patrol programs and other programs that highlight bus safety including those for students with special needs.

In the focus groups, we consistently heard issues raised regarding transportation of students with special needs. As a member of SEAC indicated, "Transportation drives access and not the other way around". Theoretically students with special needs should be transported with the regular runs, however we were told that the placement of classes and subsequent planning of the transportation routes happened in April and were then changed due to moves and other factors. We heard similar feedback across the teacher and administrator focus groups and from SEAC. It is perceived that this contributes to the high use of expensive taxis although the aim is to have students with special needs on regular buses, "if they have appropriate access to the route and are capable of handling this type of transportation". The late changes are cited as reason for the large number of taxis and small buses used and the accelerating costs of transportation. There are a small number of students transported to and from Section 23

placements (Bloorview, KidsLink, Lutherwood CODA) without any provincial funding and some transportation is also provided for students to summer school programs, all of which is expensive.

In theory, according to special education and transportation staff, transportation for special needs occurs in consultation with parents and with sign-off from special education staff. The first type of transportation considered concerns the regularly scheduled buses. There were examples cited during the consultations of exceptions to the rule in terms of the increasing use of taxis. For cases of extreme behaviour, dedicated staff are used to assist with safety elements during the transportation of students and this also adds to the costs.

Additionally inequities, such as bussing not being provided for Grade 7 and 8 gifted students, were raised as potential issues by SEAC and in the focus groups for consideration.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

*Coordination can enhance service delivery. Ensure more collaboration in terms of planning and decision making between the transportation and special education departments.*

- i. Gather data and review the location of congregated classes to see if efficiencies regarding transportation can be realized and consider locating classes to reduce the transportation burden. Monitor for improved outcomes including financial.*
- ii. Gather data to allow an analysis of special education classes linked to home addresses to indicate possible areas for greater efficiencies in terms of future locations of these classes.*
- iii. Facilitate enhanced coordination between transportation and special education in terms of planning. Setting up transportation routes during the summer closer to the start of school year may eliminate some of the current and expensive use of taxis and small buses. This may require some staff to work for part of August or the use of temporary contract staff.*
- iv. Develop clear criteria for the use of taxis and dedicated staff to support students with behavioural needs on transportation vehicles. Post these electronically for staff and add them to the Questions and Answers that it is suggested the board develop in conjunction with SEAC. Present information on the use of specific types of transportation for students with special needs as a topic for administrators at their first fall meeting.*

## **B. Accessibility**

Goal Number 20 requested feedback concerning the accessibility of school facilities and the conditions that trigger renovations to improve accessibility. Approximately \$130,000 per year is allocated within the annual budget for special education renovations and another \$200,000 per year for accessibility retrofitting. According to the Special Education Plan, the Superintendent of Learning Services and the Principal of Special Education are members of the board's administrative planning committee. This enables coordination. Additionally the board has developed a multi-year capital expenditure plan that recognizes accessibility issues.

The Special Education Plan listed renovations for 2008-2009. The renovations ranged over a wide variety of exceptionalities including renovations for showers and washrooms and the creation of a calming room. When the school has limited accessibility, students are accommodated at an alternate community school.

However, issues do arise. We heard from one principal in a new school where the congregated class required facility changes that were made after the school was built and opened. We heard comments questioning the perceived lack of coordination in terms of placement of students. Congregated classes are placed in schools that are in decline and have space. This places additional pressures on transportation and creates the perception that students with special needs are not placed close to their home school locations.

The consultant team was informed of several new positive initiatives regarding facilities and universal design. Full sound systems will be built in all new schools. Allocations for major renovation changes must be vetted across the departments.

Technology is associated with accessibility. Accessing funds for students who require technology or equipment through the Special Equipment Amount (SEA) funding was not uniformly understood. A complicating factor will be that the latest technical paper (<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/funding.html>) talks about moving the individual student allocation to a single SEA Per-Pupil Amount which will alter the opportunities. There was agreement that there were long waiting lists for assessments to trigger the applications for SEA. The perceptions that inequities exist and of “squeaky wheels getting the grease”, have been raised earlier in this paper. The reviewers heard that parents who could afford it had their own private assessments done to move the process forward. This becomes an equity issue for parents who do not have the additional funds to access external assessments. The issue of equitably allocating professional support services was one of the triggers for the review of Learning Services resources to find a more responsive and data-driven formula to allocate assessments.

Additionally, in WRDSB, SEA technology does not currently go home with students. The focus groups raised issues involving the feasibility of licensing equipment to allow it to be used at home. Many other school boards in Ontario make provision for SEA equipment to go home and have parents sign insurance and release forms to ensure safe and secure use.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

*The focus group discussions raised these issues:*

- i. Collect data about types, numbers and location of congregated classes to assist in decision-making about placements.*
- ii. Consider providing for specialized congregated classes on the main floor in all new schools since these will already meet accessibility codes and will comply with fire regulations for transporting students with special needs.*
- iii. Consider re-visiting the feasibility of permitting students to bring their SEA equipment home by exploring the protocols in place in other Ontario school boards.*

## **V. Learning Outcomes**

One of the measures of improved student outcomes can be derived from the provincial assessment data. The reviewers were not provided with other measurements such as PM Benchmarks or CASI scores for the general student population and students with special needs. The EQAO data were obtained from the EQAO public website. Reference has been made in Quadrants One and Two to providing a system for data gathering, storage, aggregation and disaggregation, and analysis to impact decision-making in Quadrant Four.

In the Grade 3 EQAO assessments for 2008-2009, WRDSB reported that 15% of their students had special needs as compared with 11% in 2004-2005. The percentage of students reported as having special needs has increased by one percent every year. The proportion of ELLs for the same period has increased from 9% to 13%.

In the Grade 6 EQAO assessments for 2008-2009, WRDSB reported that 19% of their students had special needs as compared with 11% in 2004-2005. The percentage of students reported as having special needs has increased every year. The proportion of ELLs has increased from 5% to 7%.

For the 2008-2009, Grade 9 Mathematics EQAO assessments, the board reported that 13% of students had special needs as compared to 10% in 2004. WRDSB reported that 10% of their students were given accommodations on the EQAO assessment as compared with 9% in 2004-2005 and this percentage has remained fairly stable over the last five years. The proportion of ELLs has increased slightly from 3% to 4% for the same period with less than 1% receiving special provisions. More students with special needs wrote the Grade 9 applied mathematics assessment (25%) than the academic assessment (5%).

For the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) for first time participants, 13% were identified as having special needs and 10% received accommodations. Of the first-time eligible students, 52% identified as having special needs were successful as compared to 47% province-wide and there was no difference between students with only IEPs and those with IEPs and IPRCs. Both of these are lower than the provincial result. Only 11% of students in locally developed courses were successful on the OSSLT and 50% were deferred as compared to the provincial rate of 30%. This ratio is similar for ELL students where 68% were deferred as compared to 51% province-wide.

For those students previously eligible in 2009, 20% were successful, 34% were not successful, 12% were absent, 16% were deferred and 19% participated in the OSSLC instead. Of those fully participating 35% were successful. Slightly more students who had both an IEP and IPRC (35%) were successful as opposed to those with only an IEP (29%). These are slightly less favourable than the provincial results.

WRDSB has gender-specific initiatives linked to the learning needs of boys. These align with current ministry direction but were not seen in the focus groups as specific and/or related to boys with special needs. This was described by one participant as “good for everyone and critical for a few”. However, this is not clearly defined for students with special needs and its application as a strategy in the provision of programs is fragmented.

Given the gender imbalance in identified students, and in order to align to current provincial direction and focus on raising student achievement and closing gaps as outlined in Learning for All and other provincial directions/resources, consider implementing boy-friendly strategies specific to special education as part of an integrated approach to improving learning outcomes system-wide with specific emphasis on the research regarding special education. Continue with the initiatives regarding an increased use of assistive technology.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

*Develop your data collection processes at the school level to gather data accurately and efficiently and to input into your system measurement.*

- i. *Consider the inclusion of a SMART goal linked to improved learning outcomes for students with special needs in the upcoming strategic plan.*
- ii. *Consider an emphasis on the use of high-yield strategies such as differentiation and assistive technology in both capacity-building and within the individual school improvement plans.*
- iii. *Expand the boy-friendly strategies already in use in the WRDSB and ensure that these also target students with learning disabilities and behavioural needs. Share best practices with other school boards who are focused on gender-specific strategies.*

## **VI. Data Collection Inputs**

Feedback from the focus groups indicated that there is a lot of data gathered but it is currently not aggregated or disaggregated in a systematic way. For special education it is mainly individualized. Much of the special education data resides solely in IEPs, where it is not easily accessible. It is not standardized input but rather often anecdotal.

There are data sets gathered that impact special education, such as socio-demographic data, the number of identified students and the number of students with IPRCs as opposed to simply IEPs. By emphasizing a systematic process for data gathering, the WRDSB will have access to a potentially rich and relevant data set to impact positive decisions to drive Board improvement and student achievement. This data set form the key inputs to the suggested overall data management system and serve as the primary information sources to report on Board performance measures.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Ensure that data collection and inputs are standardized at the school level. This would include deciding on the types of information required, electronic and paper forms design/revisions and clear and documented procedures for collection and input of data. Standardized data collection and inputs performed in an effective and efficient manner are critical elements to ensure appropriate inputs to system measurement and overall data integrity of the suggested data management system.*
- ii. *Specific suggestions for the mechanisms and/or types of data to be collected follow:*
  - a. *Provide a mechanism to gather student achievement data and for the aggregation and disaggregation of those data to identify under-achieving cohorts and target research-informed interventions.*
  - b. *Consider ways to gather data from the IEPs in terms of which interventions are showing more progress and success than others with specific cohorts.*
  - c. *Continue to use the student achievement data to monitor implementation and service delivery. This should include the use of instructional/learning walks to gather observational data as well as the other forms of achievement data (running records, CASI, PM Benchmarks, EQAO, report card data and other diagnostic assessments).*
  - d. *Consider surveying school-based staff about the exceptionalities that are growing in student numbers and the staff's perception of expertise in having the skills and knowledge to effectively serve students' needs. Look at developing some targeted professional learning or accessing external agencies that can be supportive.*



### **Quadrant Three Conclusion**

If the opportunities for improvement for Quadrant Three are implemented then the desired outcome will be that students with special needs receive appropriate programs and services. This will position the Board for success in Quadrant Four.

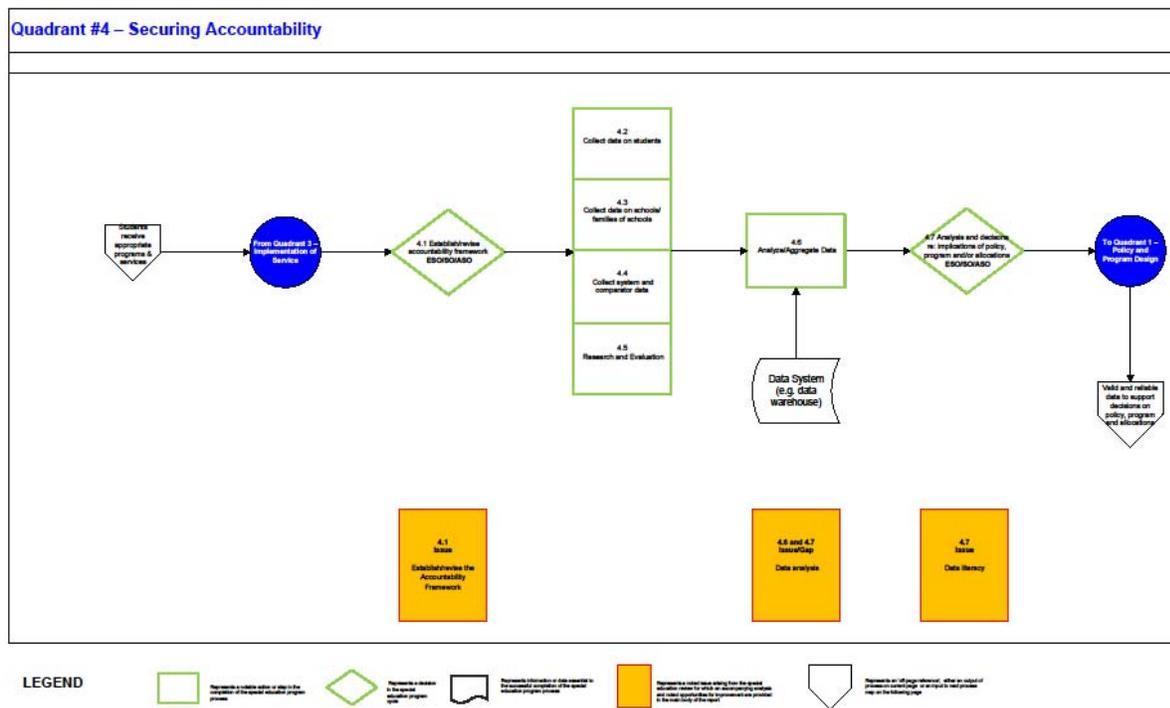
## QUADRANT FOUR – SECURING ACCOUNTABILITY

This quadrant focuses on determining documented and data-driven program successes, needs, challenges and opportunities and the assessment and evaluation of the planning and delivery of programs and services, including the alignment of data sets that demonstrate the effects of these services and programs on individual students and on the collective groups of students, and subsequent revisions based on the analysis of data to improve the system.

The key questions for consideration for this quadrant were:

- What data are gathered, analyzed and used to inform the board’s decisions as they apply to special education?
- What are the key issues?
- What are the key gaps?
- What are the opportunities for improvement?

Figure 6



### I. Establish/Revise the Accountability Framework

The first step in securing accountability in order to take advantage of opportunities for improvement is to establish an accountability framework for WRDSB. An accountability framework is an inter-related set of definitions, procedures, standards and reporting dates which

specify how WRDSB will provide accountability. The accountability framework uses several existing key data sources, including student outcomes, surveys, data from the Board's central data system and student enrolment.

A key component of a WRDSB accountability framework is the performance measures established to assess the achievement of goals and objectives. The first key component of an accountability framework is the establishment of definitions and specifications for each of the performance measures, including context information, detailed information about the data sources that will be relied upon for performance information and the level of detail required in reports. These performance measures and related specifications enable the Board to fully understand and embrace its roles and responsibilities for data collection and reporting. The performance measures are a key aspect of the strategic planning and program design described in Quadrant One.

The second part of a functioning accountability framework is to establish how WRDSB generates reports and other management information and makes decisions to drive changes and improvements and who, in the evolving leadership structure, is accountable for achievement of the desired results.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *As a first element of the suggested accountability framework for special education, consider developing indicator and outcome performance measures prior to the creation of the new strategic plan and embed these in the plan. This could involve the development of a logic model for special education. The ability to access relevant data sets will connect current and future learning. The current school effectiveness framework could provide a model for school accountability.*
- ii. *Build on the development of indicators that model the indicators used for the needs-based, data-driven resource allocation model. Link the performance measurement indicators to student outcomes whenever possible. Develop pre- and post-indicators. Use the data to track changes and efficiencies.*
- iii. *Establish criteria for determining the types of student data to be collected at school and system levels.*
- iv. *Aggregate and disaggregate data to enable analysis. Use these data to inform decision-making, policy, planning and coordination of services and programs at a school and system level. This would allow for improvements to the timeliness of service and the location of programs.*

## **II. Data Analysis**

In the consultations, this quadrant was the one on which participants provided the least information and the fewest anecdotes and comments. It is also the flowchart for which the review team had the least amount of recorded data. As several participants mentioned, accountability did not appear to be a major consideration in the current decision-making process. When participants were asked for evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of a program or service the response was largely anecdotal information. The consulting team acknowledges that this would be true for most school boards in the province. There does not appear to be a well-established research function to gather data from the literature of best practices and high-yield strategies or benchmarked data from other school boards. Most

participants did not express a comfort level in terms of data literacy, especially as it applies to special education.

Strength in this quadrant can support a more thoughtful and intentional approach to improvement that is based on analysis from multiple data sources. Neither the indicator nor outcome measures appeared to us to be well-developed. If there are not data sets to analyze then it is difficult to ensure that new initiatives or existing programs and services will be either efficient or effective. Monitoring and evaluation must occur at both the system and school levels and they must be aligned. This will ensure more coherence and transparency.

If quadrant four is operating effectively, then relevant data have been gathered and analyzed to inform thoughtful decision-making demonstrating the key performance indicators. Securing accountability would ensure that the quadrants loop so that the system is working on continuous improvement to ensure WRDSB designs and delivers “what really matters most to students”. Data as mentioned in the exploration of the other quadrants does not appear to have been a prime factor in decision-making regarding special education services and programs. There are some encouraging trends such as the two WRDSB internal reviews previously mentioned.

Goals Number 9 and 11 from the RFP asked for some benchmarking to other similar school boards. In the focus groups, participants noted that they did not have a lot of information about how special education is organized and how programs and services for special education are delivered in other school boards across the province. The central staff involved in RSEC had been involved in sharing best practices within the London region. The one board participants did feel confident to comment on was the co-terminus board where the perception was that WRDSB has become the board of choice for the most complex students with special needs within the Waterloo Region.

The school boards selected as comparator boards are all public boards that offer a range of placements including congregated classes, and are mid-size to large school boards with urban components. School board A is an urban board with 70,000 students. There are approximately 1,550 students in congregated classes with approximately half of those identified as gifted, 1,220 elementary students are in congregated settings including gifted. The school board is investigating reducing the number of students with developmental delays in congregated classes. The board has 724 education assistants.

School board B has 70,000 students and 10,354, or approximately 14.5% of the total population, receive special education programs and services. In this board 5,636 elementary students are identified and 2,266 are in small class settings, while 4,718 secondary students are identified and 1,180 are in small class settings, including gifted. These small class settings may have students in specialized settings for less than 50% of their school day. These boards, like WRDSB, define congregated as more than 50% of a student’s school day.

School board C states that “programming for special needs students is the shared responsibility of the principal, regular class and special education teachers, parent, student and support services.” The Special Education Plan states that school board C has 19,000 students receiving some form of special education programs and services. About half were deemed exceptional through an IPRC. However, in the materials supplied by staff, those figures appear lower. Their statistics noted that 4,879 students are identified as exceptional of which 2,324 have IEP but have not had an IPRC. In 2009, 9.9% of the elementary population was considered exceptional. The three main exceptionalities are learning disabilities, developmental delays and giftedness.

In the secondary panel, 17.2% of students are deemed exceptional and 1,665 have only an IEP. There are over 1,200 secondary students identified with learning disabilities.

School board C aims for “regular and coordinated in-service... to facilitate the understanding of issues and current research.” They want to develop “the capacity of staff to provide the best possible learning experience for students”. SEAC is involved in determining some of the priorities. There is a board-wide emphasis on boys’ literacy.

School board D has over 100,000 students. In the elementary panel 1,869 students receive 50% of their school day or less in withdrawal or resource support and are partially integrated for remainder of their day. There are 2,944 students who are in congregated classes for more than 50% of their school day.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. ***Data must be gathered, analyzed and linked*** across the system to measure success, i.e. the effectiveness of the current model for congregated classes. WRDSB needs to clarify what standards and indicators it wishes to be benchmarked against other district school boards. Data gathered should include socio-demographic factors and relevant information about families and communities that impacts student data. This will require a research function and an understanding of effective practices.
- ii. Consider gathering statistics on comparator school boards from the Regional Special Education Council meetings. In this way the London region, facilitated by the ministry’s Regional Office, can explore the benchmarks and think about outliers and common trends. Develop key performance indicators that measure improvement in achieving the benchmarked standards.
- iii. Establish a representational committee under Learning Services that can gather onsite data on comparator school boards. This can be established prior to the creation of the new strategic plan. Consider taking a team of special education administrators and consultants to visit other boards to explore how similar boards approach issues and challenges with a focus on integration, congregated classes and capacity building for professional learning. Have those teams report back to Learning Services.
- iv. Following the external visits, consider establishing an internal board committee to consider benchmarking data, visit existing special education placement options, analyze the transportation data and present options in terms of the number, type, location and size of the congregated classes.

### **III. Data Literacy**

In the focus groups, the consultants did not find a well-developed system for gathering and effective utilization of data to inform the decisions board staff make regarding special education. Staff felt less confident about discussing special education data, how it is used and how it should be used to assess and inform programs. This requires both the knowledge and use of data to secure accountability. As long as the majority of special education data resides in individual special education plans and is linked to individual students’ services and programs then the data cannot be aggregated, disaggregated and utilized effectively. Data literacy for special education is still in an early phase. There has been an emphasis on data literacy in terms of EQAO and similar data as it impacts learning outcomes.

When participants were asked, “How do you know if the programs and services provided are effective? or, “What effective strategies can be shared across the system?” there were very few responses. This was consistent across the various departments and between system and school based staff. There is a need to provide professional learning to build staff capacity regarding the importance and use of data literacy. Align this initiative with the current provincial initiatives regarding accountability for improved student outcomes. Data provides a link between what we know and what we do. Data can serve to measure the actual degree of coherent implementation of initiatives in schools and across the system.

### ***Opportunities for Improvement***

- i. *Establish a plan for capacity-building to increase data literacy for all staff in using special education data in particular and student data in general to make effective decisions. This could include examining practices in some other boards which currently embed data as part of their ongoing processes. The capacity-building should include: looking for trend data and outliers, identifying patterns and anomalies, working collaboratively in teams to examine data, utilizing data in the planning cycle and using data to monitor implementation at a school and system level.*
- ii. *Design and deliver capacity-building sessions that will build data literacy capacity across the system. Ensure that there are common and clear messages that align across the system. Data literacy is systemic and not unique to special education. Building from the ongoing work, analyze current professional learning offerings to see if exemplary models currently exist in other departments and then expand those to include Learning Services.*

### **Quadrant Four Conclusion**

If the opportunities for improvement for Quadrant Four are implemented then the desired outcome will be valid and reliable data to support decisions on special education policy, program and allocations that will ultimately support system improvement and student achievement. This will position the board to respond proactively and effectively to challenges, issues and opportunities across all four quadrants.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The review of delivery of special education by the WRDSB identified a number of challenges, issues and opportunities for improvement. Many of these are not unique to the WRDSB and are in fact reflective of the experiences of many of the other 71 school boards. Many result from the manner in which provincial policy is developed, mandated, funded and communicated. The critical issues relate to alignment, communication, stakeholder involvement and funding approaches. A critical concern is the effective measurement of special education results. There are many opportunities to make the provincial system work better.

Many of the challenges identified in the review of special education at the WRDSB are not solely related to the delivery of special education but are systemic in nature. This finding is corroborated in the findings from other reviews conducted by the board.

The broader WRDSB system issues relate to overall alignment of policies and programs, effectiveness and coordination of planning processes, communication strategies to ensure consistency of messages and a more consistent level of implementation. The alignment of policies, programs, services and planning processes is a critical priority and attention paid to this will lead to a more coherent and aligned approach resulting in a more consistent, transparent and effective delivery of special education services to board students.

The findings from the review underline the value of WRDSB becoming a knowledge-based and knowledge-driven organization. This will require greater system-wide engagement and coordination around the WRDSB strategic and operational planning processes, a clearly articulated and monitored accounting framework and alignment of service delivery processes.

The following is a summary of the opportunities for improvement suggested through the analysis of the data from this review. Additionally a review chart is provided which links the opportunities for improvement to the overall review questions posed in the RFP.

## **SUMMARY OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The following provides a summary of the opportunities for change identified through the review and discussed under the findings section of the report.

Quadrants one, two and four address broad strategic and operational planning aspects of the delivery of services to students with special needs. As such, the implementation of improvements noted through the review related to these three quadrants is longer term in nature. A strategic starting point to begin work on the suggested improvement areas would be the board's next planning cycle. The findings from the review could be used to provide a catalyst and context for a broader and more comprehensive strategic planning process. The development of an accountability framework would be the front end of such a process aimed to bring clarity and focus to the development of the strategic plan. A key requirement would be broad system engagement to ensure buy-in by all key stakeholders.

Quadrant three addresses more immediate and specific delivery issues and as such a number of the opportunities identified for improvement are achievable in the shorter term. A good

starting point would be the review of activities related to planning and scheduling of student placements in September 2010. Implementation of these improvements could reduce levels of change and costs.

## **QUADRANT ONE – POLICY AND PROGRAM DESIGN**

### **I. Integration of Provincial Policy, Direction and Program**

The current state provides WRDSB with an opportunity to add a more rational element to the process of dealing with ministry-led initiatives. A clear understanding of how ministry policy integrates with the board's direction and strategic planning may lessen confusion and fragmentation. Suggestions include:

- i. A more deliberate and transparent alignment of provincial direction to the board's strategic plan at the senior management level with a clearly articulated communication strategy to engage the whole system. The development of the next board strategic plan would be a key opportunity to integrate ministry direction within the board's strategic plan.
- ii. The establishment of a coherent process for the dissemination of provincial policy and direction across the system that includes special education. Provincial initiatives such as Learning for All are currently not seen to apply system-wide involving all students, K-12. A review of the provincial initiatives that are aligned, and structuring them in the plan so that they are seen as coherent across the system, would provide greater alignment and clarity.
- iii. The board should consider its role in terms of increasing its ability to influence provincial direction and policy. This can be done once there is an alignment of provincial direction to the board's strategic plan. The expertise and reputation of the board and the innovations they are embracing mean that WRDSB is poised to serve as a model for future direction. This can be through presentations to the ministry and minister and its role within the Regional Special Education Council.

### **II. Board Program Design**

- i. Consider revisiting the rationale for the design of special education programs and services for the number, location and types of congregated settings based on performance measures of effectiveness. This will require the gathering of specific data sets to provide relevant information in order to analyze the effectiveness of the current congregated model as compared to one that offers alternative choices within the continuum of inclusion to congregated settings.
- ii. Expand the involvement of SEAC and other stakeholders in the design of the special education program. Consider a process to gather input as part of the design process. SEAC can reflect concerns and ideas from parents and the agencies earlier in the process rather than react to programs that are presented as fully-developed.
- iii. Provide increased clarity regarding the design of options within the range of placement settings and the criteria for placement in the various setting options by ensuring that the placement options reflect the current continuum of placements supported by ministry.

### **III. Data Management System for Performance Measurement**

- i. Develop comprehensive performance measures with regards to special education within the context of the board's broader performance measurement system. Review the targeted areas on which the board currently gathers data, as illustrated by the Needs-Based Data Driven allocation model. Consider developing a framework similar to the one for Student Success. Once the targeted areas are identified, i.e. results on EQAO, credit accumulation, suspensions and use of assistive technology among others, SMART goals can be established to assess these targeted areas.
- ii. Determine what related data should be gathered and analyzed. These should link to the strategic goals and priorities and provide some measureable indicators of success. This design element would include developing a data strategy and a system architecture and design to enable the gathering, storing, aggregation and disaggregation of data to enable analysis to inform future decision-making.
- iii. Ensure that data management is an inherent component of ongoing program review and design.

### **IV. Clarity and Alignment of System Planning**

- i. The current state provides WRDSB with an opportunity to add a rational element to the planning process by aligning the system planning process including the special education plan to the board's strategic planning process. It will help staff to see change as part of a larger framework and not the disconnected initiatives that many currently perceive.
- i. Align the templates for school planning with the board's next iteration of the strategic planning process.
- ii. Have Executive Council continue to model alignment and coordination in very specific and concrete ways as part of a comprehensive capacity building strategy. The alignment at Executive Council can serve as a model for establishing protocols and modes of operation as departments work collaboratively on the planning and implementation of initiatives such as transportation, staff development and technology.

### **V. Stakeholders Involvement**

- i. Review the current role of SEAC to provide a clearer articulation of the purpose and role. Consider expanding SEAC's leadership in seeking stakeholder input to the design and development of the Special Education Plan and the specific programs contained within the Special Education Plan. This could include gathering input into proposed design for programs and services, forms and flow charts, and the development of relevant Questions and Answers. This recognizes SEAC's role as an advisory committee to the board.
- ii. Communicate the role and responsibility of SEAC more clearly to the system and as a link to the community.

### **VI. The Special Education Planning Process**

While the current special education plan conforms to current ministry reporting requirement, it does not currently provide the required strategic direction and focus.

- i. Develop Special Education Strategic Plan that is concise, clear and transparent, provides direction and is aligned with other system planning initiatives.
- ii. Engage SEAC more purposefully in the consultation process with stakeholders regarding the development of the Special Education Plan.
- iii. Communicate the revised Special Education Plan so that it is understood and accessible to the various system stakeholders.

## **QUADRANT TWO – PLANNING FOR SERVICE DELIVERY**

### **I. Operational Planning**

- i. Build upon on the current integration processes at Executive Council to ensure greater system-wide, integrated operational planning processes, which will ensure the coordination and integration of planning efforts at all levels across the system.
- ii. Enhance school-based administrators' participation within the operational planning cycle to assist with integration and alignment of the school and system plans.
- iii. Special education needs to be integrated as a component within the schools' planning process and reflected in the schools' improvement plan.
- iv. Coordinate planning from the individual department' responsibilities (transportation, IT, human resources, facilities and special education) to construct a more system-wide and integrated plan This also will allow for clearer alignment between the board's learning goals for all students, including special education within Learning Services.

### **II. Data Collection Systems/Mechanisms**

- i. Develop the processes and mechanisms to support the data management system, and gather, store and analyze data pertaining to all facets of special education. This will require a strategic and systematic approach.
- ii. Continue with the implementation of the internal-based reviews to ensure equity and data-driven criteria for allocating services more effectively. Use this as a model for other similar services for students with special needs and then use the data in the planning process for distribution of services and programs. This would support an equitable, effective and transparent planning process.
- iii. Ensure that the formula used to provide professional support services is transparent and that variables established are clearly rationalized and communicated to the system. Continue to collect data in terms of the variables in order to keep the formula current and aligned to the system's needs.

### **III. Decision-making Process**

- i. Consider a greater coordination of planning cycles at the school and system level connecting both plans and budgets.
- ii. Develop a mechanism to enable more coordinated, coherent and timely planning across the relevant departments in order to improve efficiencies of service and programs for students with special needs within Learning Services. This would include professional development, data gathering, storage and analysis, and the delivery of targeted professional services linked to the performance measurement goals.

- iii. Once the board receives the budget from the Ministry, the board-specific decisions regarding special education should continue to be shared. Try and make the budget process timelier, more widely understood and more transparent as they impact the delivery of programs and services for students with special education needs.
- iv. Consider offering specific professional development sessions on effective planning for service delivery that will encourage planning literacy. Developing capacity around planning can assist staff as they align the current plans in use in across the board at the system and school levels.

## **QUADRANT THREE – IMPLEMENTATION OF SERVICE**

### **I. Identification and Delivery of Service**

The focus group results indicate that while the criteria for placement and programs are understood by central staffs they are not as well understood by school-based staff. There is a need to develop coherency, transparency and a shared understanding of issues regarding programs and delivery of services across the WRDSB regarding identification and placement.

- i. The Learning Services manual under development by Learning Services is a key tool. Once it has been vetted and released ensure this manual will be web-enabled and user-friendly and that it is effectively communicated and distributed to the system.
- ii. Augment the current decision-making flowcharts with the process maps developed as part of this project. Identify areas that often result in ambiguities and conflicts and provide greater clarity within the charts and indicate relevant contacts at each level if issues arise.
- iii. Develop and post Questions and Answers on the internal web site, WaterWorks, for administrators and teachers regarding the flowcharts and processes for identification and placement. School-based staff and SEAC can be of assistance in the creation of commonly raised questions. These charts can be accompanied by a manual posted electronically with searchable features for just-in-time use.
- iv. Consider specific annual training for all new administrators and refresher training for existing administrators to ensure the board vision, direction, programs and processes are understood. These could be done centrally or in the family of school groupings, either face-to-face or electronically.
- v. Ensure that special education is a topic for all system school administrator and family of school meetings so that everyone will be given a common message and be current with ministry updates and direction as they impact students with special needs.
- vi. Re-examine the forms in use for special education to ensure they align with current ministry direction regarding the full range of the continuum of services. Involve SEAC and other stakeholders in the process. Ensure changes are communicated and that the changes become part of the Questions and Answers under development.
- vii. Ensure the forms are designed to support relevant data collection and extraction and analysis.

### **II. Partnerships & Transitions**

- i. With the community agencies and SEAC's assistance identify areas for improvement in transitional planning for students. Continue with inter-agency and community planning.

One priority area identified in the focus groups for consideration is working with community agencies on strategies to improve the transition from home to school, when the student has not been served in a daycare or community agency.

- ii. Include the topic of transitions from one school board to another as part of the Regional Special Education Council (RSEC) agenda and ask the regional office to gather examples of best practices from across the province.
- iii. Consider developing frameworks for some formalized transition planning for students moving from Grade 6 to middle school. Consider the option for some parents to elect to stay longer at the middle school since students in congregated classes in high school may be with the same teacher for seven years.
- iv. Ensure the forms are designed to support relevant data collection and extraction.

### **III. Capacity Building**

Build on current professional learning opportunities and align these to the system priorities.

- i. Consider establishing criteria for professional development for special education aligned to best practice as represented by organizations such as the National Staff Development Council ([www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org)).
- ii. As part of the suggested data management system, provide a mechanism to centrally gather and disseminate information regarding research-informed strategies and best practices as they apply to improved student outcomes especially for students with special needs, such as the recent research project underway involving learning disabilities and speech and language audiologists to show how research can impact practice.
- iii. Include special education educators in all the course offerings that target improvement to better align special education within the focus for increasing student achievement. Emphasize differentiated instruction, differentiated assessment, universal design and assistive technology as key focus areas.
- iv. When possible use electronic formats such as searchable e-manuals, webcasts and DVDs for training. Whenever possible capacity building can occur in schools, administrators and teachers don't have to attend off-site and school-based teams can learn together. These can be made more precise when the student data is aggregated and disaggregated.
- v. Provide dedicated in-service on the release of the Special Education/ESL resource. Consider developing a strategy to assist in the assessment of students with both ESL and special education needs. Have centralized assessments by staff with both special education and ESL qualifications. Consider targeting training towards meeting the needs of students with both special education and ESL issues and share best practices. This could include sharing of current research, case studies, best practices and innovative approaches to improve the capacity of staffs to respond to the needs of ELL students.

### **IV. Enabling Placement for Students with Special Needs**

#### **A. Transportation**

Coordination can enhance service delivery. Ensure more collaboration in terms of planning and decision making between the transportation and special education departments.

- i. Gather data and review the location of congregated classes to see if efficiencies regarding transportation can be realized and consider locating classes to reduce the transportation burden. Monitor for improved outcomes including financial.
- ii. Gather data to allow an analysis of special education classes linked to home addresses to indicate possible areas for greater efficiencies in terms of future locations of these classes.
- iii. Facilitate enhanced coordination between transportation and special education in terms of planning. Setting up transportation routes during the summer closer to the start of school year may eliminate some of the current and expensive use of taxis and small buses. This may require some staff to work for part of August or the use of temporary contract staff.
- iv. Develop clear criteria for the use of taxis and dedicated staff to support students with behavioural needs on transportation vehicles. Post these electronically for staff and add them to the Questions and Answers that it is suggested the board develop in conjunction with SEAC. Present information on the use of specific types of transportation for students with special needs as a topic for administrators at their first fall meeting.

## **B. Accessibility**

The focus group discussions raised these issues:

- i. Collect data about types, numbers and location of congregated classes to assist in decision-making about placements.
- ii. Consider providing for specialized congregated classes on the main floor in all new schools since these will already meet accessibility codes and will comply with fire regulations for transporting students with special needs.
- iii. Consider re-visiting the feasibility of permitting students to bring their SEA equipment home by exploring the protocols in place in other Ontario school boards.

## **V. Learning Outcomes**

Develop your data collection processes at the school level to gather data accurately and efficiently and to input into your system measurement.

- i. Consider the inclusion of a SMART goal linked to improved learning outcomes for students with special needs in the upcoming strategic plan.
- ii. Consider an emphasis on the use of high-yield strategies such as differentiation and assistive technology in both capacity-building and within the individual school improvement plans.
- iii. Expand the boy-friendly strategies already in use in the WRDSB and ensure that these also target students with learning disabilities and behavioural needs. Share best practices with other school boards who are focused on gender-specific strategies.

## **VI. Data Collection Inputs**

- i. Ensure that data collection and inputs are standardized at the school level. This would include deciding on the types of information required, electronic and paper forms design/revisions and clear and documented procedures for collection and input of data. Standardized data collection and inputs performed in an effective and efficient manner

- are critical elements to ensure appropriate inputs to system measurement and overall data integrity of the suggested data management system.
- ii. Specific suggestions for the mechanisms and/or types of data to be collected follow:
    - a. Provide a mechanism to gather student achievement data and for the aggregation and disaggregation of those data to identify under-achieving cohorts and target research-informed interventions.
    - b. Consider ways to gather data from the IEPs in terms of which interventions are showing more progress and success than others with specific cohorts.
    - c. Continue to use the student achievement data to monitor implementation and service delivery. This should include the use of instructional/learning walks to gather observational data as well as the other forms of achievement data (running records, CASI, PM Benchmarks, EQAO, report card data and other diagnostic assessments).
    - d. Consider surveying school-based staff about the exceptionalities that are growing in student numbers and the staff's perception of expertise in having the skills and knowledge to effectively serve students' needs. Look at developing some targeted professional learning or accessing external agencies that can be supportive.

## **QUADRANT FOUR – SECURING ACCOUNTABILITY**

### **I. Establish/Revise the Accountability Framework**

- i. As a first element of the suggested accountability framework for special education, consider developing indicator and outcome performance measures prior to the creation of the new strategic plan and embed these in the plan. This could involve the development of a logic model for special education. The ability to access relevant data sets will connect current and future learning. The current school effectiveness framework could provide a model for school accountability.
- ii. Build on the development of indicators that model the indicators used for the needs-based, data-driven resource allocation model. Link the performance measurement indicators to student outcomes whenever possible. Develop pre- and post-indicators. Use the data to track changes and efficiencies.
- iii. Establish criteria for determining the types of student data to be collected at school and system levels.
- iv. Aggregate and disaggregate data to enable analysis. Use these data to inform decision-making, policy, planning and coordination of services and programs at a school and system level. This would allow for improvements to the timeliness of service and the location of programs.

### **II. Data Analysis**

- i. **Data must be gathered, analyzed and linked** across the system to measure success, i.e. the effectiveness of the current model for congregated classes. WRDSB needs to clarify what standards and indicators it wishes to be benchmarked against other district school boards. Data gathered should include socio-demographic factors and relevant

information about families and communities that impacts student data. This will require a research function and an understanding of effective practices.

- ii. Consider gathering statistics on comparator school boards from the Regional Special Education Council meetings. In this way the London region, facilitated by the ministry's Regional Office, can explore the benchmarks and think about outliers and common trends. Develop key performance indicators that measure improvement in achieving the benchmarked standards.
- iii. Establish a representational committee under Learning Services that can gather onsite data on comparator school boards. This can be established prior to the creation of the new strategic plan. Consider taking a team of special education administrators and consultants to visit other boards to explore how similar boards approach issues and challenges with a focus on integration, congregated classes and capacity building for professional learning. Have those teams report back to Learning Services.
- iv. Following the external visits, consider establishing an internal board committee to consider benchmarking data, visit existing special education placement options, analyze the transportation data and present options in terms of the number, type, location and size of the congregated classes.

### **III. Data Literacy**

- i. Establish a plan for capacity-building to increase data literacy for all staff in using special education data in particular and student data in general to make effective decisions. This could include examining practices in some other boards which currently embed data as part of their ongoing processes. The capacity-building should include: looking for trend data and outliers, identifying patterns and anomalies, working collaboratively in teams to examine data, utilizing data in the planning cycle and using data to monitor implementation at a school and system level.
- ii. Design and deliver capacity-building sessions that will build data literacy capacity across the system. Ensure that there are common and clear messages that align across the system. Data literacy is systemic and not unique to special education. Building from the ongoing work, analyze current professional learning offerings to see if exemplary models currently exist in other departments and then expand those to include Learning Services.

## DATA SET, GOALS, FINDINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The following chart displays the data sets, goals as set out in the RFP for the Special Education review and correlated quadrant findings and opportunities. The majority of findings and opportunities are located in Quadrant Three: Implementation of Service. In a number of instances, the goals were addressed in more than one quadrant. Discussion of the findings and detailed lists of opportunities reside in the findings section of the report.

Data Set	Goal(s)	Findings & Opportunities Key Finding, Quadrant and Opportunity Reference
<b>A. Processes to identify students in need of special education services</b>	1. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to identify when a student requires special education supports.</i>	<p>The process is not universally understood leading to uneven and inconsistent use of process across schools with resulting perception of inequity and unfairness. Although this implicates Special Education it is seen to be systemic issue.</p> <p>Quadrant and Opportunities: 3. Implementation of Service     3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service</p>
	2. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to identify when a student requires an IEP (modified or accommodated)</i>	
<b>B. Processes to identify how students with special needs receive school based supports</b> (i.e. intervention by classroom teacher, SERT support, EA time and use of special programs such as Early Literacy Intervention or Empower)	3. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to <u>determine when an identified student</u> (i.e. deemed in need of special education services) <u>receives supports within the school</u></i>	<p>Uneven and inconsistent use of process as well as perceptions of differing levels of expertise among staffs across schools with resulting perception of inequity and unfairness</p> <p>Quadrant and Opportunities: 3. Implementation of Service     3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service     3.2 Partnerships &amp; Transitions</p>

Data Set	Goal(s)	Findings & Opportunities Key Finding, Quadrant and Opportunity Reference
<b>C. Processes to identify how students with special needs access supports beyond the school</b> (e.g. itinerant support, SLP and psych, Assessments and congregated settings)	4. Establish <i>the degree to which schools use the process outlined in the Learning Services Support Flowchart to determine when an <u>identified student</u> (i.e. deemed in need of special education services) <u>receives supports beyond the school</u></i>	<p>The process regarding identification is understood and the schools use both the SBTs and MDTs to provide supports and move to identification. Accesses to the services beyond the school are considered to be limited. Expertise and experience of the SBTs and the MDTs. differ and there is a perception of unfairness in accessing these services.</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy &amp; Program</li> <li>3. Implementation of Service:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
	5. Identify the factors considered <i>and the degree to which these factors are consistently utilized by schools in requesting an assessment, itinerant support or congregated placement for an identified student</i>	<p>The result is a perception of unfairness and that certain schools can obtain more assessments and have those completed in a timely manner. This is attributed to varying levels of expertise and experience of the personnel involved and in their resulting ability to get action for their students.</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy &amp; Program               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.2 Board Program Design</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Implementation of Service               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
	6. Identify <i>the process and criteria, and the degree to which the process and criteria are consistently utilized by 'program leaders' in providing services to an identified student particularly in a <b>placement in a congregated setting</b></i>	<p>Some of the criteria and processes are explicit such as entry into the Phoenix classes while others are less precise leading to inconsistencies in the provision of services. With regards to congregated settings there is a perception that the choice is either integrated or congregated. The reality of a continuum of services was not clearly understood or appreciated by all.</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy &amp; Program Design               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.2 Board Program Design</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Implementation of Service               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

Data Set	Goal(s)	Findings & Opportunities Key Finding, Quadrant and Opportunity Reference
<b>D. Criteria used to identify students who need an IEP</b> (modified or accommodated)	7. Establish the degree to which schools <i>use the criteria outlined by the MOE to determine when a student is in need of an IEP (modified or accommodated)</i>	<p>The process for triggering the need for an IEP was understood. There was some uncertainty regarding an IEP and/or an IPRC.</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy &amp; Program Design</li> <li>3. Implementation of Service               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service</li> <li>3.5 Learning Outcomes</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Securing Accountability</li> </ol>
<b>E. Processes for formally identifying students as exceptional and their placement in programs</b> (including use of Local IPRC committees, IPRC parent guide and IPRC procedures and related forms)	8. Identify <i>the processes and the degree to which the processes are consistently utilized by schools</i> to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Formally identify a student as exceptional using MOE's categories and definitions</li> <li>b. Determine an appropriate placement for the student</li> </ol>	<p>There was some uncertainty regarding the current categories and definitions by school-based staffs. Placement depends on the existing placement options and there was a sense by some that students fit the placement and not the reverse.</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy &amp; Program               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.2 Board Program Design</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Implementation of Service               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Securing Accountability</li> </ol>
	9. Identify <i>the processes used by some other school boards and the degree of alignment between the WRDSB and these other school boards in use of processes</i> to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Formally identify a student as exceptional using MOE's categories and definitions</li> <li>b. Determine an appropriate placement for the student</li> </ol>	<p>There are a variety of alternatives in the type of processes used that reflect differences in terms of board capacity building approaches, and board overall policies and processes.</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy &amp; Program</li> <li>3. Implementation of Service               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Securing Accountability               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.3 Data Collection Inputs</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

Data Set	Goal(s)	Findings & Opportunities Key Finding, Quadrant and Opportunity Reference
<b>F. Rationale for the number and type of congregated classrooms</b>	10. Identify <i>the processes and the degree to which the processes are consistently utilized by 'program leaders' to include students in congregated programs</i>	The clearest levels of understanding occur with central staffs in Learning Services. Some feel utilized by school-based staffs differently depending on the expertise of the SBTs.  Quadrants and Opportunities: 1. Policy & Program Design 1.2 Board Program Design 3. Implementation of Service 3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service
	11. Identify <i>the number, type and rationale for congregated programs in some other school boards and degree of alignment between WRDSB and other school boards in number and rationale for congregated programs.</i>	Percentage of students identified and the percentage of students in congregated settings vary. Some comparator boards have fewer congregated options and exercise tight controls on admission requirements.  Quadrant and Opportunities: 4. Securing Accountability 4.2 Data Analysis 4.3 Data Collection Inputs
<b>G. Roles and responsibilities of staff who deliver special education services</b> (e.g. classroom teachers, Special Education Resource teachers, paraprofessionals such as Educational Assistants and child and youth workers, itinerant teachers or EAs, special education consultants, psychologists, speech and language pathologists and social workers)	12. Establish the degree to which staff delivering special education services <i>conform to the description of roles and responsibilities as outlined in the <u>Special Education Plan</u></i>	Staffs could describe their roles and responsibilities, which aligned with criteria set out in the Special Education Plan  Quadrants and Opportunities: 3. Implementation of Service 3.1 Identification and Delivery of Service 4. Securing Accountability 4.1 Establish/revise Accountability Framework
<b>H. Training and capacity building for providing special education services</b>	13. Identify <i>types of professional development opportunities, criteria for offering professional development, delivery methods for professional development opportunities, degree to which board staff access opportunities to engage in professional development related to special education</i>	Current offerings for capacity building appear to focus on technical implementation i.e. developing IEPs and using specific software or techniques. Staff did not feel included in current capacity-building offerings emphasizing improving learning outcomes.  Quadrants and Opportunities: 3. Implementation of Service 3.3 Capacity Building 4. Securing Accountability

Data Set	Goal(s)	Findings & Opportunities Key Finding, Quadrant and Opportunity Reference
	14. Identify <i>the alignment between WRDSB and some other boards in providing professional development opportunities</i> (in areas identified in #13) for staff related to special education services	There is a greater alignment between improving learning outcomes for students with special needs and improving learning outcomes for all and range of system and school capacity building offerings are more available for staffs with responsibility for special education  Quadrants and Opportunities: 3. Implementation of Service 3.3 Capacity Building 4. Securing Accountability 4.3 Data Collection Inputs
<b>I. Communications on special education services to various audiences</b> (e.g. role of committees such as WREA executive, WREA Learning Services, SSPA, SSVP, Special Education Subject Association, Special Education Advisory Council, etc)	15. Identify <i>the methods and effectiveness for informing different audiences</i> about special education issues	The stakeholders' responses indicated a need for greater consistency and clarity.  Quadrants and Opportunities: 1. Policy and Program Design 1.5 Stakeholder Involvement 4. Securing Accountability 4.4 Data Literacy
<b>J. Ministry expectations concerning special education supports and services</b> (e.g. Learning for All, Special Education Transformation document, etc.)	16. Identify <i>the key expectations in key MOE documents related to special education or other services and investigate ways in which these models may be applied to improve the resource allocation involved with all special education services</i>	Inclusion of new technical papers will impact the allocation and delivery of service.  Quadrants and Opportunities: 1. Policy and Program Design 1.1 Integration of Provincial Policy, Direction and Program 1.2 Board Program Design 2. Planning for Service Delivery 2.1 Operational Planning) 2.2 Data collection systems/mechanisms) 4. Securing Accountability 4.2 Data Analysis 4.3 Data Collection Inputs 4.4 Data Literacy

Data Set	Goal(s)	Findings & Opportunities Key Finding, Quadrant and Opportunity Reference
	17. Identify <i>existing and potential models</i> (e.g. psych services) <i>for resource allocations related to special education or other services and investigate ways in which these <u>models</u> may be applied to improve the resource allocations</i> involved with special education services	The needs-based resource allocation model contains criteria which can be modelled for other areas  Quadrants and Opportunities: 1. Policy and Program Design 1.1 Integration of Provincial Policy, Direction and Program 1.2 Board Program Design 2. Planning for Service Delivery 2.1 Operational Planning 2.2 Data collection systems/mechanisms 4. Securing Accountability 4.2 Data Analysis 4.3 Data Collection Inputs 4.4 Data Literacy
<b>K. Partnerships in providing special education</b> services (e.g. community agencies such as Community Care Access Centre or Development Services Access Centre of Waterloo region)	18. Identify <i>community agency support</i> for students with special needs and <i>how well these supports are integrated with supports provided</i> for students using special education services in WRDSB	Transitions and integrations vary. Difficult transitions remain home to school. Board to board and post-21.  Quadrants and Opportunities: 1. Policy and Program Design 1.2 Board Program Design 3. Implementation of Service 3.2 Partnerships & Transitions 3.4 Enabling Placement for Students with Special Needs 4. Securing Accountability 4.1 Establish/revise Accountability Framework

Data Set	Goal(s)	Findings & Opportunities Key Finding, Quadrant and Opportunity Reference
<b>L. Transportation of special education students</b>	19. Identify the <u>conditions under which transportation is provided</u> for special education students and <u>types of transportation utilized</u>	<p>More coordinated planning and use of meaningful data for decision-making should be able to decrease this expenditure.</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy and Program Design</li> <li>3. Implementation of Service               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.4 A Transportation</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Securing Accountability</li> </ol>
<b>M. Renovations to facilities to meet the needs of special education students</b>	20. Identify the <u>conditions under which recommendations are made to renovate facilities</u> to support students with special education needs	<p>More coordinated planning and use of meaningful data for decision-making should be able to decrease this expenditure</p> <p>Quadrants and Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy and Program Design</li> <li>3. Implementation of Service               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.4 B Accessibility</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Securing Accountability</li> </ol>

## **APPENDIX A – TERMS OF REFERENCE**

### **OPERATIONS WORKING GROUP**

#### **Mandate**

- Be point of contact between WRDSB and PMC Inc team during the Review of Special Education Programs and Services
- Provide executive oversight, input and guidance to the review process
- Assist in the coordination of communication and logistics

#### **Key responsibilities**

- Maintain ongoing communication between WRDSB and the PMC Inc team during the review
- Provide ongoing communication and direction to the review
- Provide input in shaping the details and parameters of the review
- Give input regarding the formative roll-out of the review including mid-point reviews and the final report before the results are formally consolidated
- Ensure effective communications about the school board's 2008-2009 Review of Special Education programs and services across the system and manage tasks and timelines
- Provide administrative support to the review process
- Provide assistance in organizing the various meeting schedules and communication protocols, book rooms for the focus groups etc. and other operational issues

#### **Membership**

- WRDSB: Jim Berry (lead for WRDSB), Mark Harper, Mary Lou Makie, Pat Pietrek
- PMC Inc: Raf Di Cecco and Bev Freedman

#### **Schedule of meetings**

- Bimonthly face-to-face and/or
- Teleconference

## **REFERENCE GROUP**

### **Mandate**

- Provide stakeholder perspective to the WRDSB Review of Special Education Programs
- Provide input ,feedback and advice to the review process to ensure effective stakeholder involvement in the process

### **Key Responsibilities**

- Receive information about the review
- Assist in communication of review purpose, goals and objectives
- Provide input and feedback regarding the broad parameters of the review and throughout the review as required
- Provide feedback and input to the draft findings formed as a result of phase 1 of the review
- Assist in the review of findings and the development of suggestions for moving forward

### **Membership**

- *To be advised*

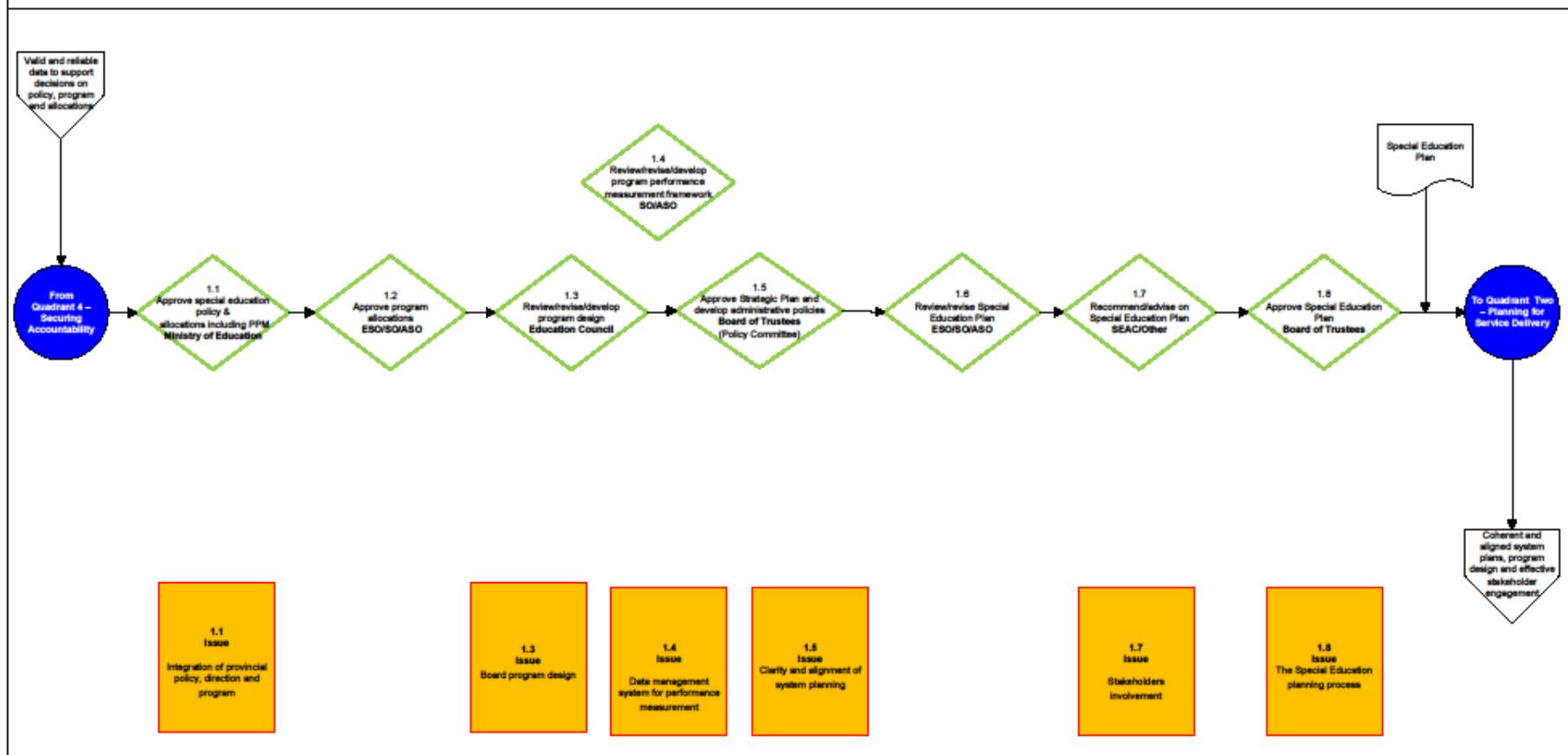
### **Meeting Schedule**

- Three meetings to be held during the review process:
  - Initial information meeting prior to the focus group consultations
  - Information session mid-way through the review February 2010
  - Presentation at the end of the review before the end of May 2010



## **APPENDIX B – FINAL PROCESS MAPS**

Quadrant #1 - Policy and Program Design



LEGEND



Represents a critical action or step in the completion of the special education program process



Represents a decision in the special education program cycle



Represents information or data essential to the successful completion of the special education program process

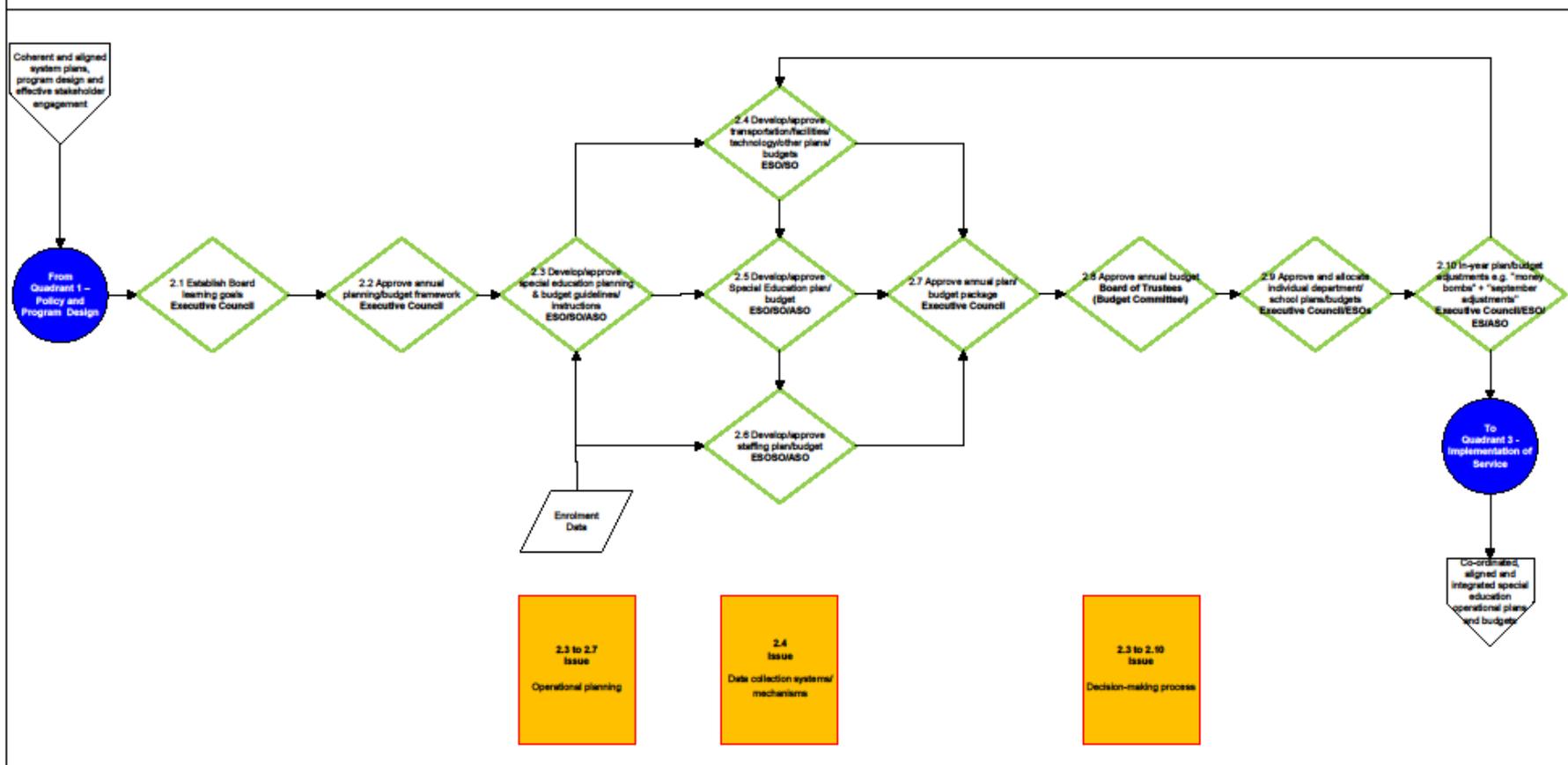


Represents a critical issue arising from the special education review for which an accompanying analysis and related responsibilities for improvement are provided in the main body of the report



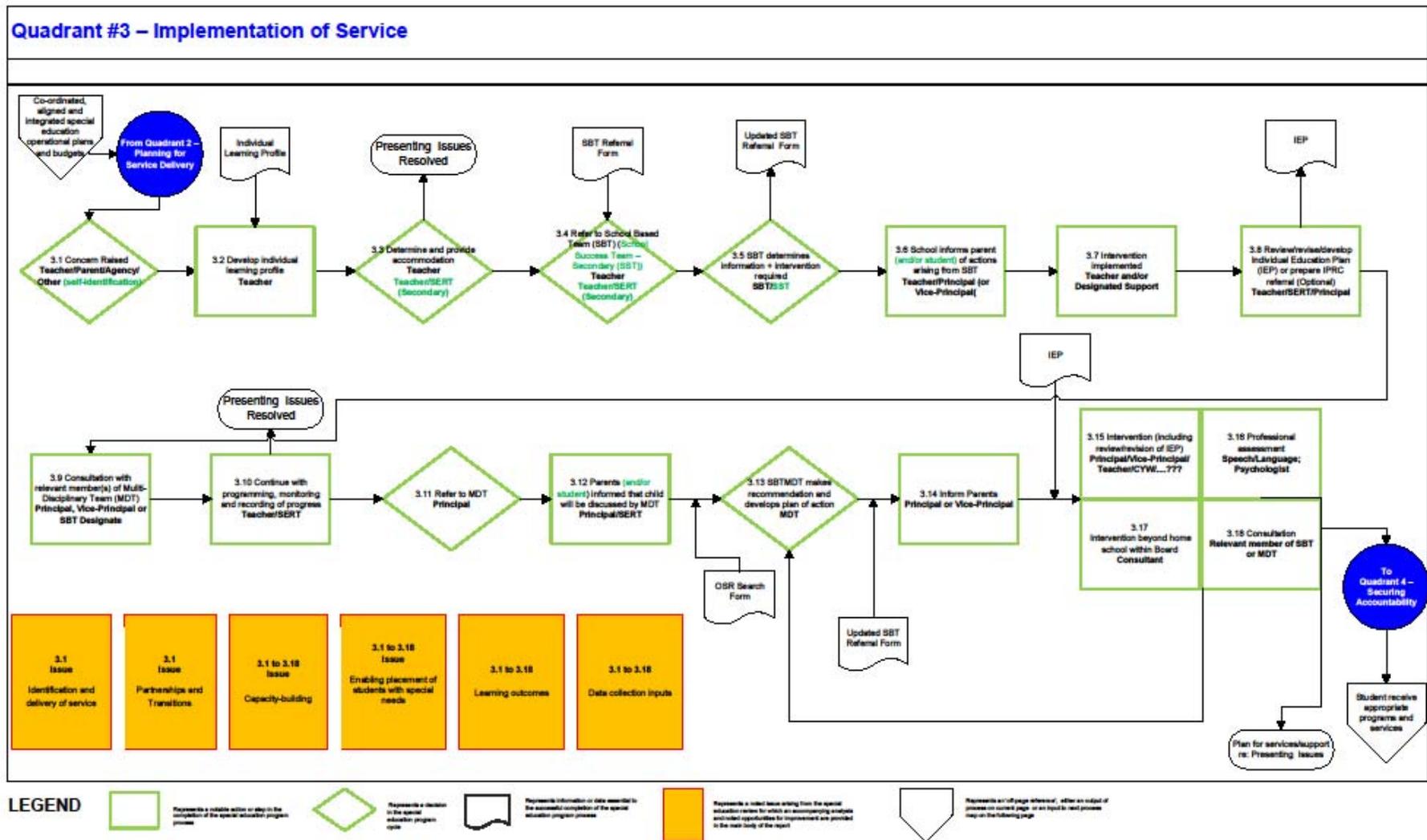
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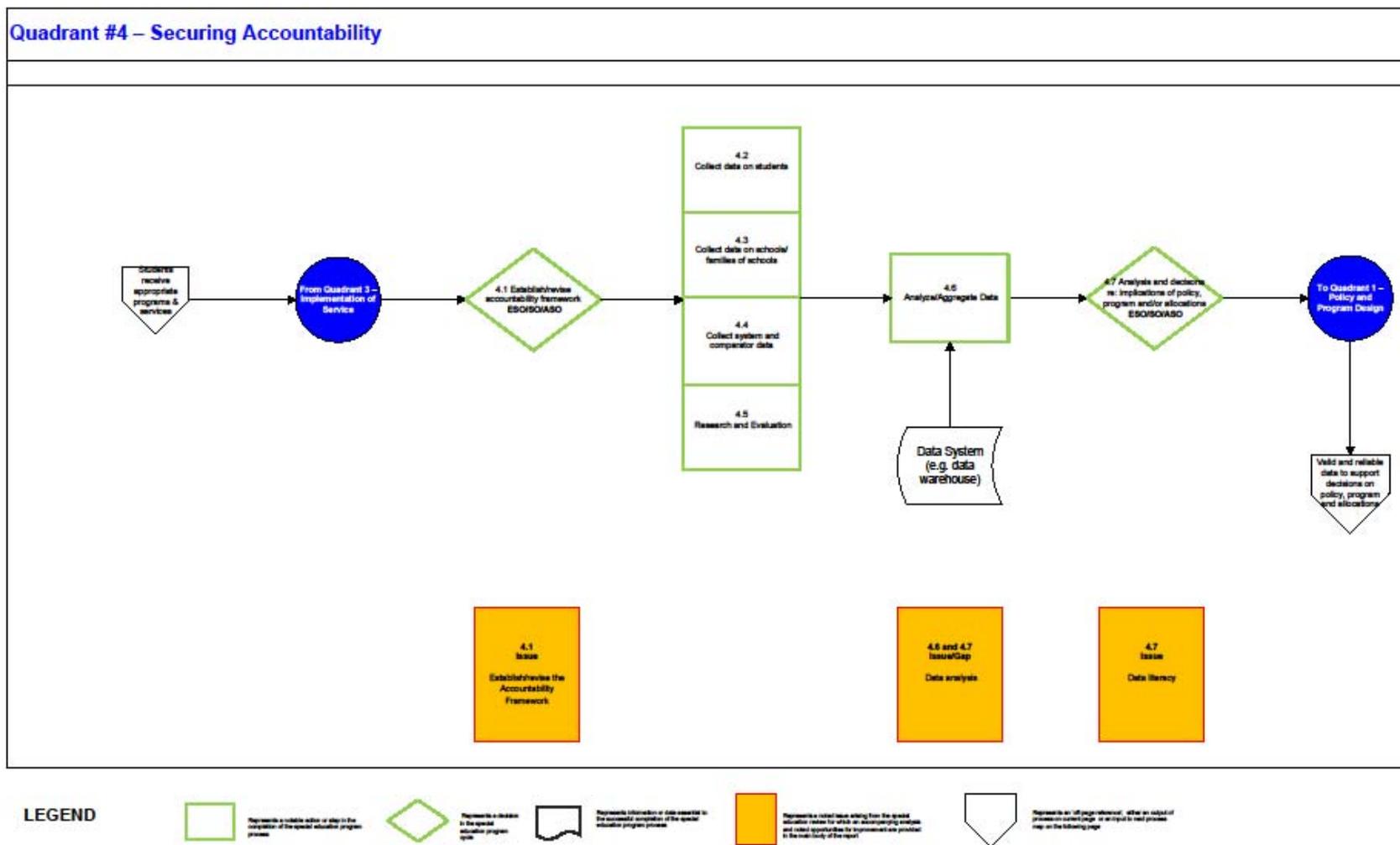
Quadrant #2 – Planning For Service Delivery



LEGEND

-  Represents a viable action or step in the completion of the special education program process.
-  Represents a decision in the special education program cycle.
-  Represents information or data essential to the successful completion of the special education program process.
-  Represents a noted issue arising from the special education review for which an accompanying analysis and noted opportunities for improvement are provided in the main body of the report.
-  Represents an 'off-page reference', either an output of process on current page or an input to next process step on the following page.







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