

Three-Year Plan for Special Education in Hamilton County Schools

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Introduction

The Three-Year Plan for Special Education in Hamilton County Schools is the outcome of a year-and-a-half long collaboration between the Hamilton County Department of Education, community organizations, experts, and parents, who came together to assess shortcomings in our approach to special education and to identify best-practice solutions for the education, socialization, and post-secondary transition of students with disabilities in our community. The result of this collaboration was a shared desire to reshape special education around the concept of *evidence-based inclusion*, properly supported, with all the attendant benefits for students with disabilities, their typically developing peers, families, and community that purposeful inclusion entails. The Three-Year Plan will directly impact the lives of some 6,000 students in Hamilton County with IEP, 504, and ISP plans—about 13 percent of children in our community.

This process began in early 2016 with the formation of the Chattanooga Inclusive Education Working Group—a collaboration of area disability nonprofits, families of children with disabilities, teachers, and related professionals who recognized systemic problems in the approach to the education and post-secondary transition of students with disabilities (whether from birth or acquired through

illness or injury) in Hamilton County Schools. The Chattanooga Inclusive Education Working Group now includes more than a dozen area nonprofits, as well as several critical partners at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. In May 2016 the Working Group authored a white paper documenting these problems and outlining evidence-based solutions, entitled, "A Model for the Education of Children with Exceptional Needs and their Peers: Evidence-based Inclusive Education for Chattanooga & Hamilton County."

In the Spring of 2016, this white paper became the foundation of a partnership between the Working Group and the Hamilton County Department of Education, which was then in a period of leadership transition. This partnership quickly bore fruit in improved district-community relationships, and most especially in a series of initial improvements directly impacting students with disabilities in our community. With the main problems identified, the Working Group and HCDE quickly embarked on an exploratory phase to see how other districts have addressed similar problems in the past. Then, in July 2017, the Working Group and HCDE partnered with Chattanooga 2.0 to help implement the district's transition to evidence-based inclusion. This partnership became the "Inclusive Education and Opportunities Action Team," one of Chattanooga 2.0's primary implementation committees tasked with reforming and reinvigorating public education in our community. Finally, in September 2017, HCDE's Dr. Justin Robertson and the Working Group's Dr. Cale Horne presented an overview of problems and solutions to the Hamilton County Board of Education, and received the Board's endorsement to develop a plan for change.

The Three-Year Plan presented here is the outcome of this dense web of partnerships. Continued collaboration and monitoring by the invested parties will be critical to the Plan's success.

Rather than special education being a place where students are sent, evidence-based inclusion re-conceptualizes special education as a continuum of services to guide students with exceptional needs to academic, social, and behavioral success. *All* students are given access to the academic curriculum, placed in classrooms by age rather than by ability, given need-specific supports, and provided opportunities for socialization. With inclusion as our centerpiece, we envision a future where our schools are characterized by:

- presumed competence and high expectations of students with disabilities,
- measurable change through a narrowed achievement gap, higher graduation rates, and post-secondary transition and success,
- equitable conditions for students with disabilities in traditionally underserved communities and demographics, and
- a cultural shift among educators toward empathy and acceptance of students with disabilities. They are no longer seen as "those children," but as "our children."

Ultimately, this is a project about human flourishing.

We are aware, however, that a shift toward inclusion without proper planning and support can and will fail. The Three-Year Plan is our effort to make the transition to inclusion a success for our students, families, teachers, and community. The idea for a *three-year* transition plan came from two school districts we have

worked with over the past year and a half, both of which employed three-year plans in their successful transitions to inclusion and recommended a similar approach for Hamilton County.

A particular area of concern for the Plan's authors are those students who are *doubly* disadvantaged: Students who are not only challenged by a disability, but who face one or more compounding disadvantage by virtue of their race, ethnicity, native language, socio-economic status, educational history, or other quality historically associated with inequity. The priority of the equitable education of such doubly disadvantaged students is reflected throughout the Three-Year Plan, particularly in: (1) targeted audits of diagnoses and services, (2) a high-level review of policies and practices with respect to students with significant behavior problems, (3) special attention from the district's new, independent Family Liaison, and (4) the overarching commitment to give every student with a disability access to their zoned school or school of choice available to other students, and always in the least restrictive environment.

Our Three-Year Plan is designed as a living document, which can adapt to meet unforeseen circumstances that can occur as part of any major organizational restructuring. This implies ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the Plan by HCDE and the community partners who created it and public reporting of progress, with particular supervisory and reporting responsibility residing with the Director of Special Education.

The Plan is organized around five primary goals:

1. To maximize evidence-based inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom;
2. To eliminate cluster sites, placing every student with a disability in their zoned school or school of choice available to other students, and always in the least restrictive environment;
3. To improve communication and relationships with the families and caregivers of students with disabilities, and community partners serving these families and students;
4. To develop services and opportunities for successful transition for students with disabilities, to include independent living, community involvement, employment, education, and post-secondary training;
5. To provide all necessary training and support for current and future teachers, administrators, and staff to make the transition to inclusion a success.

At the conclusion of the Three-Year Plan, the major organizational changes for successful conclusion will be in place, though it will likely be many years until we fully realize the lofty vision outlined above. An implementation and evaluation committee will be formed at the beginning of Year 1 to monitor the roll-out of the Three-Year Plan, document progress and problems, and to work with the school district on adjustments when needed. At the conclusion of Year 3, this committee will examine and report on changes in levels of inclusion, graduation rates, post-secondary access, and provide suggestions for appropriate next steps.

1. Year 1 (2018-2019 academic year):

1.1. Inclusion

- 1.1.1. Every student, with rare exception,¹ will begin the day in the general education setting.
- 1.1.2. Continue to insure and expand an inclusive setting in pre-K.
- 1.1.3. All kindergarten students will be in gen ed kindergarten classes (i.e., no more self-contained settings for kindergarten students), with gen ed teachers as the instructor of record, with appropriate supports for students and teachers.
- 1.1.4. Replicate the Hixson HS IGNITE program in more area high schools.
- 1.1.5. Audits will be conducted in areas of special concern:
 - 1.1.5.1. The effective implementation and utilization of Child Find with a focus on Opportunity Zone and on-the-cusp schools.
 - 1.1.5.2. By disability category: i.e., are students in particular disability categories (autism, intellectual disability, emotional disturbance) disproportionately placed outside the gen ed environment (compared to state averages, similar/peer districts, and high-performing/aspirant districts by Indicator 5)?
 - 1.1.5.3. The results of audits will be used to redress areas needing improvement, including professional development, retraining, parent education, and review of placement decision processes.
- 1.1.6. Provide clarity to building administrators, lead staff, and teachers on eligibility for special education services under IDEA and 504.
- 1.1.7. Provide clarity to building administrators, lead staff, and RTI coordinators on eligibility of all students for RTI services, regardless of placement or disability.
- 1.1.8. Explore options alongside community partners to support all students and schools regarding significant behavior issues, including issues related to truancy and juvenile justice referrals. A committee will explore services provided to students with significant behavior issues and make recommendations regarding supports, interventions, and placements. At a minimum, this committee will include the Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, the Director of Special Education, the district family liaison, representatives from Helen Ross McNabb and Prevent Child Abuse-Tennessee, as well as other relevant behavioral, sensory, and mental health specialists.

1.2. Clusters

- 1.2.1. The district's operations office will investigate the most efficient means of phasing out cluster sites, integrating gen ed and SPED bus operations, and implement this phase-out in coordination with the

¹ Rare exceptions being some medically fragile students or other extremely rare cases.

Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction and the Director of Special Education, with the goal of maximizing the continuum of services in every school.

1.3. Families

- 1.3.1. District-by-district community meetings to present the Three-Year Plan to families and addressing concerns. Meetings will include the district's Family Liaison team (see below) and representatives from area nonprofits, who can communicate with families on an ongoing basis. This effort should be coordinated with the district's communications specialist.
- 1.3.2. HCDE will establish an independent Family Liaison contract as a critical part of the district's new architecture to transition to evidence-based academic and social inclusion of students with disabilities. Other districts have found this role indispensable in their transition to inclusion in students' zoned schools. The Family Liaison team will:
 - 1.3.2.1. Develop effective means of communication with families of students with disabilities, working to rebuild relationships between these families and the school district.
 - 1.3.2.2. Work to address parent and caregiver concerns regarding the education of student with disabilities, including but not limited to placement, services, IEP goals, transition, and relationships with teachers and administrators.
 - 1.3.2.3. Work with parents, caregivers, and educational teams who need extra help with IEP/ISP/504 development.
 - 1.3.2.4. Contribute to the resolution of conflict at lower levels.
 - 1.3.2.5. Provide or sponsor training opportunities for families on 504/ADA/IDEA, the nature of their child's disability, and continuum of services.
 - 1.3.2.6. Be attuned to the needs of students who are "doubly disadvantaged," including students in Opportunity Zone and on-the-cusp schools, non-native and non-English speakers, and students in rural areas.
 - 1.3.2.7. Make parents and caregivers aware of community resources, training, events, etc.
 - 1.3.2.8. Develop effective means of communication with teachers and administrators regarding professional development opportunities, opportunities for parents, etc.
 - 1.3.2.9. Generate fewer, shorter, more productive IEP (and related) meetings, with less direct involvement of central office staff in these meetings.
 - 1.3.2.10. Work with parents and caregivers on reimbursement for Medicaid services for related services and transportation, when eligible, at the request of HCDE, when reimbursement does not have a negative impact on the family's access to other services.

1.3.2.11. The Family Liaison position is contingent upon external funding for the first three years.

1.3.3. The Director of Special Education and Family Liaison team will communicate the district's plans for special education reform to PTAs and PTOs system wide, with an emphasis on the implications of inclusion and de-clustering for these organizations. PTAs/PTOs will be encouraged to make a special effort to reach out to parents of students with disabilities who may be entering their zoned schools for the first time. This effort should be coordinated with the district's communications specialist.

1.4. Transition

1.4.1. The Transition Academy will continue to be developed with assistance from LifeLine, Inc., with HCDE being able to operate and further develop the Academy independently by Year 3.

1.4.2. HCDE will expand the scope and quality of its transition services:

1.4.2.1. All high school students with disabilities will have transition plans tied to opportunities available to students as a whole, based on individual needs, strengths, skills, and interests;

1.4.2.2. HCDE will collaborate with Vocational Rehabilitation and other agencies to provide all high school students with disabilities opportunities to participate in the following pre-employment transition services: Job exploration, work-based learning, work-place readiness, self-advocacy, and post-secondary counseling and enrollment.

1.4.2.3. Work-based learning opportunities and post-secondary opportunities will have a path for students with disabilities;

1.4.2.4. HCDE will establish a Project SEARCH internship program at BlueCross/BlueShield (Chattanooga). The goal of the internships is to teach competitive, marketable, transferable skills leading to competitive employment.

1.4.2.5. HCDE will develop a partnership with ABLE Chattanooga, an initiative developed by EPB, TVA, and other area businesses to provide post-secondary workforce opportunities for students with disabilities.

1.4.2.6. HCDE will address a range of transportation issues impacting inclusion, zone schooling, and transition opportunities.

1.4.2.6.1. The Director of Exceptional Education will work with the Exceptional Ed staff, families, etc. to accurately assess student transportation needs, with the goals of maximizing inclusion and independence.

1.4.2.6.2. Explore Medicaid reimbursement requirements for transportation. All new transportation contracts should consider a requirement to accept Medicaid reimbursement.

1.4.2.6.3. HCDE's exceptional education transition lead, in coordination with the district's transportation office, will

assess transportation needs and make recommendations, including transport of students to their zoned school, mid-day transport, transportation issues for students transitioning from Dawn School, Washington Alternative Learning Center, and Hixson Elementary Turnaround Class, and transportation software needs.

1.5. Teachers

- 1.5.1. Project Synergy developed and delivered (live) to 1,000 teachers.²
- 1.5.2. Exceptional education teacher in-service days will no longer be separate from in-service training for all teachers.³
- 1.5.3. Co-teaching professional development is designed to provide a best practices model for co-teaching that promotes positive student outcomes. During the first year teachers (general and special education teachers) learn the who, why, what of co-teaching, in partnership with UTC. Specific emphasis will be placed on planning and implementation of co-teaching strategies. Throughout Year 1, implementation and planning data will be collected to identify strengths and weaknesses. Once identified, this data will drive consultation during Year 2.
- 1.5.4. Professional development will be provided to para-professionals to support the transition to greater levels of classroom inclusion.
- 1.5.5. Ensuring that teachers and administrators are aware of support services offered by community partner organizations.

2. Year 2 (2019-2020 academic year):

2.1. Inclusion

- 2.1.1. IGNITE program underway, at various stages of development, in all high schools.
- 2.1.2. Enact committee recommendations regarding students with significant behavior issues.
- 2.1.3. Audits
 - 2.1.3.1. Possible over-identification of students with behavioral problems as having a disability with a focus on Opportunity Zone and on-the-cusp schools.

² Project Synergy is an empathy- and knowledge-building professional development program for teachers and administrators developed by HCDE in partnership with LifeLine, Inc. with a grant from the Tennessee Disability Coalition. Project Synergy will use parents of our children with special needs to teach teachers about family life with chronic conditions, with the goals of creating empathy, understanding, and building our capacity for the successful inclusion of these students in general education classrooms.

³ Exceptions will continue to exist for discipline-specific in-service days.

2.2. Clusters

- 2.2.1. Enact recommendations of the Chief of Operational Efficiencies regarding an inclusive and efficient system-wide transportation plan.

2.3. Families

- 2.3.1. The Family Liaison will continue to develop the work described in Year 1.
- 2.3.2. HCDE will develop and budget for a plan to continue the services provided by the Family Liaison after the conclusion of the three-year contract.

2.4. Transition

- 2.4.1. The Transition Academy will continue to be developed with assistance from LifeLine, Inc., with HCDE being able to operate and further develop the Academy independently by Year 3.
- 2.4.2. Career paths for students with disabilities through Future Ready Institutes.
- 2.4.3. HCDE will establish a community-based transition program based on the Metro Nashville model.

2.5. Teachers

- 2.5.1. Project Synergy included as part of new teacher induction program. Project Synergy is available to all teachers.
- 2.5.2. Co-teaching data collected by UTC during year one will be analyzed and will inform the content of professional development content and support groups. Consultation will be provided for support groups to continue implementation of co-teaching strategies at a deeper level. The goal of Year 2 will be to identify teachers who are highly effective in implementing co-teaching best practices.
- 2.5.3. Gen ed and special ed teachers will receive professional development training on the appropriate use of Child Find.
- 2.5.4. Continued training for para-professionals and training for substitute teachers and SROs.

3. Year 3 (2020-2021 academic year):

3.1. Inclusion

- 3.1.1. IGNITE program is fully implemented in all high schools.

3.2. Clusters

- 3.2.1. Cluster sites are fully dismantled.

3.3. Families

- 3.3.1. The Family Liaison will continue to develop the work described in Year 1.

3.4. Transition

- 3.4.1. HCDE will operate the Transition Academy independently. The Academy will continue to develop and provide a continuum of post-secondary options for students with disabilities.
- 3.4.2. Career paths for students with disabilities are available through *all* Future Ready Institutes.
- 3.4.3. HCDE will establish a second Project SEARCH internship program site. As with all Project SEARCH programs, the goal of the internships is to teach competitive, marketable, transferable skills leading to competitive employment.

3.5. Teachers

- 3.5.1. Project Synergy: *all* teachers and administrators must have completed training by the end of Year 3.
- 3.5.2. Co-teaching professional development will accelerate in collaboration with UTC. The highly effective teachers who were identified in year two will now lead support groups and provide individualized professional development. Teacher and student data will be collected on an annual basis to continue to inform the professional development models. This program is designed to create a stronger, more competent workforce of new teachers to Hamilton County.
- 3.5.3. Continued training for substitute teachers and SROs.