

Newark SEPAC Annual Report

2017 - 2018



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May 19, 2018
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The Newark Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) provides education to parents and stakeholders on topics relating to special education and special education law/policy. Newark SEPAC hosts events to support and foster a strong network/community of engaged parents and professionals who collaborate to bring excellence to education in Newark Public Schools.

Newark SEPAC celebrates the accomplishments of extraordinary families in the district and honors the hard work of professionals dedicated to student success. They also identify systemic challenges within the district and make formal recommendations to resolve them.

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NEWARK SEPAC ANNUAL REPORT 2017-2018

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May 19, 2018

Summary

Comprised of parents and caring professionals, Newark Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) serves all parents of students identified with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), 504 plans, and any classification with entitlement to special education services, such as Emotional Behavioral Disorders, in Newark Public Schools.

The state of New Jersey mandates that all school districts have a SEPAC: "Each board of education shall ensure that a special education parent advisory group is in place in the district to provide input to the district on issues concerning students with disabilities." (N.J. Admin. Code § 6A:14-1.2(h)).

The mission of Newark SEPAC is to serve Newark Public Schools special education population by engaging parents, gathering data and advocating for policy adherence and improvements to ensure excellence in education for all students. We provide meaningful input to the Newark Board of Education regarding professional development and parent concerns related to special education. We promote effective communication between SEPAC members, local, state, and national organizations, councils and groups to maintain an environment of continuous improvement.

Vision

It is the vision of Newark SEPAC that:

All special education students, parents, teachers, and administrators will be engaged in a comprehensive educational community to best serve the needs of Newark Public School students.



Table of Contents

Summary.....	4
Vision	4
Introduction.....	6
2017-2018 Parent Engagement.....	6
Compliance.....	7
<i>Newark SEPAC Findings: Procedural Safeguards.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Newark SEPAC Recommendations: Procedural Safeguards.....</i>	<i>8</i>
Communication	9
<i>Newark SEPAC Findings: Communication</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Newark SEPAC Recommendations: Communication.....</i>	<i>9</i>
Transportation.....	10
<i>Newark SEPAC Findings: Transportation.....</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Newark SEPAC Recommendations: Transportation</i>	<i>10</i>
School Climate.....	11
<i>Newark SEPAC Findings: School Climate</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Newark SEPAC Recommendations: School Climate.....</i>	<i>13</i>
Conclusion.....	14
References.....	15

Introduction

To assess special education programs and services rendered by Newark Public Schools (NPS) during the 2017-2018 school year, we asked 437 parents to provide assessable feedback about their experiences. Formal surveys were distributed in person and online.

In the surveys, respondents were asked a series of questions to gather standardized, qualitative responses. Additionally, Newark SEPAC hosted focus group sessions with NPS parents, caregivers and district professionals to identify successes and challenges. Key survey data is presented herein to summarize measured results. Parent quotes are also included where concerns were related to systemic issues as identified during focus group sessions. We present findings and recommendations on matters affecting recipients of special education services within the district of Newark Public Schools. Matters range from transportation and access to appropriate education; to trauma-informed classrooms and IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) compliance.

Additionally, Newark SEPAC works collaboratively with the Newark Public Schools Office of Special Education (OSE) to identify systemic challenges and create strategies for resolution and improvements. Newark SEPAC and OSE have also partnered to create new means for recognizing extraordinary inclusion and special education NPS teachers to foster an environment of continuous improvement and educational excellence. We also partner with the Office of Family and Community Engagement (OFACE) to create a continuum of parent-facing activities designed to support the district in meeting the needs of the population receiving special education services from NPS. We continue to partner with PTAs and the Secondary Parent Council to build a community committed to educational excellence.

2017-2018 Parent Engagement

This school year, we focused heavily on caregiver skill development and capacity building to help parents better support their children and manage their education plans. We enhanced our services to support Spanish-speaking parents and added another 2 monthly sessions; thereby increasing parent engagement by over 40%. We also facilitated important interactive Workshops and activities including but not limited to:

- ✓ Adolescent Self Advocacy with Robin Roscigno, Divergent Minds
- ✓ Inclusive Education with Fred Buglione, NJ Coalition on Inclusive Education
- ✓ Parental Rights in Special Education with Kasey Dudley, SPAN NJ
- ✓ Caring for the Caregiver, Saafir Jenkins and Anfal Muhammad, Newark SEPAC
- ✓ Biomedical treatment of Autism with Dr. Genevieve Kumapley, MyGOAL Autism
- ✓ Disproportionality in Discipline and Special Education with Monique Dujue, SPAN NJ
- ✓ Power of Parent Voices (Leadership & Communication), Anfal Muhammad, Newark SEPAC
- ✓ Hosted Parent Excursion to 2018 Autism NJ Transition Conference
- ✓ Participated in "Parents as Partners" conference
- ✓ Conducted Site Visits around the district

Compliance

Subpart E of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (hereinafter, IDEA) contains Procedural Safeguards designed to protect the rights of parents and their differently-abled children. Therein, several methods are provided for families and school districts to utilize to find resolution when disputes arise.



School districts must demonstrate compliance with IDEA and the provisions under Subpart E, Procedural Safeguards. At the state level, “The New Jersey Department of Education Office of Special Education Program (NJOSPEP) conducts a variety of monitoring activities to address the United States Department of Education (USDE) federal priority areas and ensure compliance with IDEA and N.J.A.C. 6A:14” (State of New Jersey Department of Education).

How NPS Measures Up

Respondents were asked a series of questions to determine whether procedural safeguards were followed during the school year.

When asked, “Are your child’s teachers aware of his or her needs”, over 90% of parents responded affirmatively.

Educator Awareness of student's needs

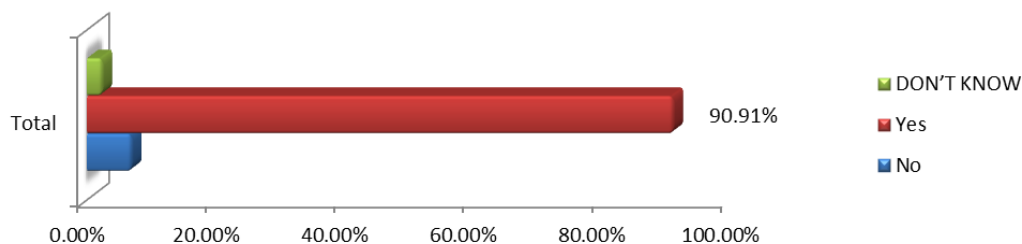


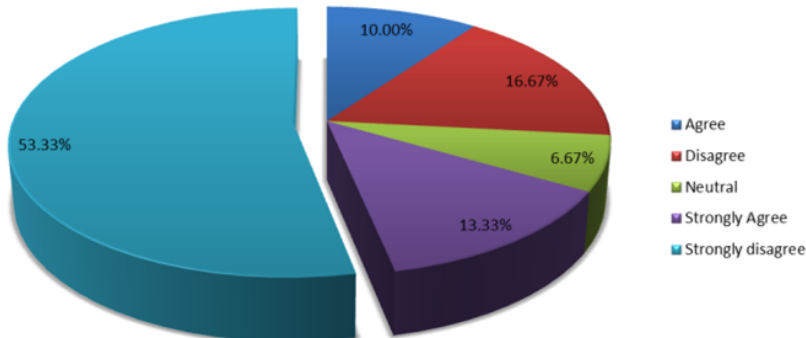
Figure 1
(Newark SEPAC, 2018)

“Are your child's teachers aware of his or her needs?”

Meanwhile, however, over 63% of the same parents say that not all of their children's Special Education service providers are present at IEP meetings.

Figure 2 (Newark SEPAC, 2018)

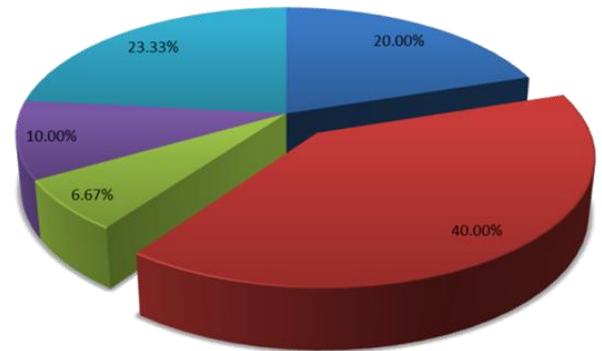
IEP Implementation



"My child receives all of the services required by his/her IEP"

Figure 3 (Newark SEPAC, 2018)

Effective IEP Planning



"All my child's Special Education service providers are present at IEP meetings."

More importantly, 70% of the parents said their children do not receive all of the services required by their Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

Newark SEPAC Findings: Procedural Safeguards

Teacher Understanding of Student Needs is Satisfactory

We have found that, in general, NPS teachers effectively demonstrate understanding of students' needs as documented in their Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

IEP Compliance is Inconsistent and Lacks Internal Governance

We have found that IEP planning meetings often exclude crucial members of the IEP Team. As documented in NJAC 6A:14-2.3(k)9-10, "IDEA provides that the excusal of an IEP team member from a meeting can occur only when the parent is in agreement" (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2018).

Also, in many cases, IEP adherence is inconsistent throughout the school year. When IEPs are implemented, all required services are not provided. These matters are interconnected in that effective planning, implementing, and adherence to IEP goals require collaboration of the entire IEP Team.

Newark SEPAC Recommendations: Procedural Safeguards

We recommend that NPS strengthens procedural controls at the district level to foster accountability at the school level. Since 70% of respondents say that students do not receive the services required by their IEP throughout the school year, we highly recommend that NPS implements a **Pay-for-Performance (P4P)** pay structure for Administrators, Principals, and Case Managers. An effective P4P structure incorporates base pay and merit-based payments like incentive bonuses. A portion of total compensation for these target positions should be dedicated to non-discretionary payments where specific criteria is predetermined and payment,

or any portion thereof, is only made once criteria has been met. One such example would be to make Case Managers accountable for achieving 90% delivery rate of related services as required by student IEPs. Then, upon attainment of this goal, CMs would receive 100% of their target incentive payout. However, if 50% of the goal is achieved, then 0-50% of their target payment will be issued. Furthermore, when goals are not met, appropriate disciplinary action plans must be in place to ensure the provision of services are prioritized and effectively documented.

As shown in the example above, incentive pay structures should be directly linked to the achievement of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) including, but not limited to, IEP implementation & Adherence and qualitative feedback from parents.

Communication

Parent partnerships are essential to student progress toward meaningful IEP goals.

Communicate often and communicate effectively to foster effective partnerships with parents.

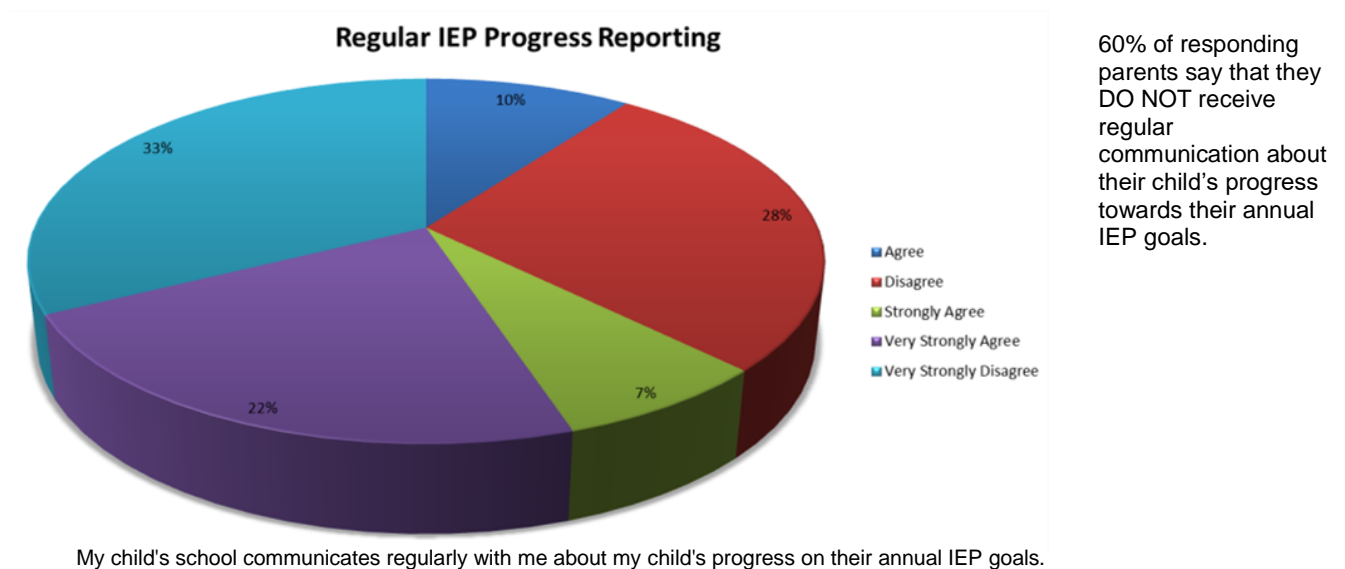


Figure 4 (Newark SEPAC, 2018)

Newark SEPAC Findings: Communication

We have found that Parent Communication is *Inconsistent*. Parent feedback reveals that Teacher-Parent communication is inconsistent and varies widely from teacher to teacher in the perceivable absence of formal district-wide communication guidelines. This adversely impacts parents' ability to be engaged in their child(ren)'s education as well as the students' ability to generalize skills.

Newark SEPAC Recommendations: Communication

Institute mandatory daily communication logs to include the provision of services for the student so parents are fully aware of services rendered as well as child(ren)'s degree of participation in school activities.

Transportation

During focus group meeting with parents of NPS students with IEPs, parents shared their experiences with transportation services over the course of the school year. Specific quotes are listed herein, but identities are kept confidential to maintain anonymity.

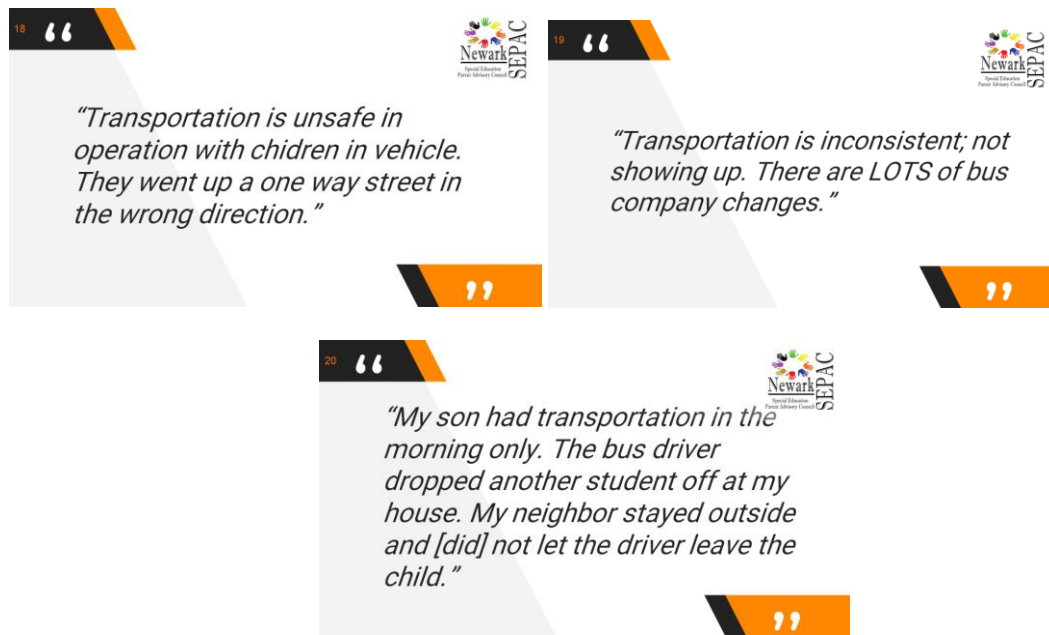


Figure 5 (Newark SEPAC, 2018)

Newark SEPAC Findings: Transportation

Our findings regarding transportation reveal that further, in-depth analysis is warranted. However, a common theme among respondents was that *Transportation is widely Inconsistent and sometimes Unsafe*. Therefore, our assessment is that Transportation practices **Need Improvement**.

Based on parent feedback regarding current transportation practices employed by the district, we have made the following determination. Transportation company changes occur as often as every 60 days; disrupting disabled students' attendance in school (absence) thereby missing crucial instruction time. Students with disabilities are especially vulnerable to the impact of inconsistent scheduling and high-frequency changes.

Newark SEPAC Recommendations: Transportation

Transportation services can benefit from formal **Quality Control** measures. Institute one transportation provider per year for differently-abled pupils;

School Climate

School Climate encompasses the Quality and Character of School Life for students. Student life experiences that often have the greatest impact on school life are traumatic events like community violence, psychological maltreatment, school or domestic violence, loss of a loved one, and neglect; to name a few. According to the National Council of Juvenile Family Court Judges, “few events outside the classroom have as profound an impact on multiple domains of student development as traumatic life experiences” (Pickens & Tschopp, 2017).

The four dimensions of school climate are identified as Safety, Teaching and Learning, Interpersonal Relationships, and Institutional Environment. An effective school climate program considers all factors of these dimensions. To adequately meet students’ needs through a positive school climate, the district must acknowledge that many students typically arrive with a host of individual traumatic experiences.



Figure 6

Nationally, students classified as “EBD” experience higher rates of trauma. Of 22,766 children/youth treated by Child Mental Health Initiatives, nearly 30% have witnessed a violent crime (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018).

Suicide Thoughts and Attempts are Higher in Children and Youth with SED (also referred to as “EBD”) who have a History of Trauma

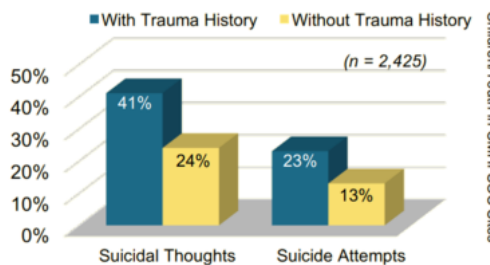


Figure 7 - (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018)

Rates of Traumatic Experiences Are High for Children and Youth with SED (also referred to as “EBD”)

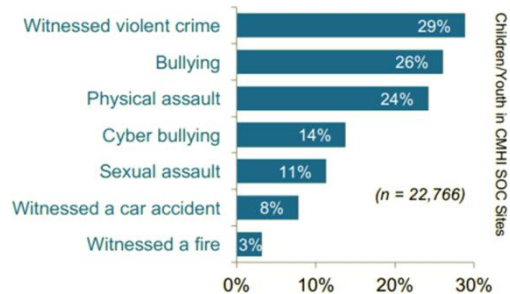


Figure 8 - (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018)

Newark SEPAC Findings: School Climate

Nationally, rates of traumatic experiences are especially high for students with Emotional Behavioral Disturbance classifications. Such students also face higher rates of suicide or suicidal thoughts. Another outcome of trauma is said to be chronic absenteeism; thereby making education less accessible to students.

In an interview with *TAPnto Newark*, Mayor Ras J. Baraka said, “It’s a problem in a city that looks like ours; the issue of trauma that comes with high poverty, unemployment, food insecurity and other stress factors” (Kays, 2018).

In interviews with Newark SEPAC, parents who wish to remain anonymous were quoted as saying:

“My child was forced to sit out [of activities] because of his disability; leaving my son to feel isolated”

“Teachers say that students are just faking their disabilities. [Teachers] need sensitivity training”

Trauma during childhood is associated with a range of physical health and emotional problems. Wherein, it is most tragically associated with suicide.

Our findings indicate that trauma is further exasperated when school climate is plagued by bullying, insensitivity and exclusion. For students with disabilities, this can be a particularly taxing component of accessing education. Consequently, such a caustic school climate can have disastrous effects on student safety, health and well-being.

Among the 10 leading causes of death in the US in 2016, suicide was ranked number 2 for children and youth between the ages of 10 and 24.

A prevalent challenge for NPS is to ensure that Students with EBD classifications receive related services to include *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy* by licensed practitioners throughout the district. While the district currently provides such services for students with diagnoses of mental health conditions, a crucial need exists to expand Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to students with EBD classifications.

Figure 9

10 Leading Causes of Death by Age Group, United States – 2016

Rank	<1	1-4	5-9	10-14	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Total
1	Congenital Anomalies 4,816	Unintentional Injury 1,261	Unintentional Injury 787	Unintentional Injury 847	Unintentional Injury 13,695	Unintentional Injury 23,584	Unintentional Injury 20,975	Malignant Neoplasms 41,291	Malignant Neoplasms 116,364	Heart Disease 507,118	Heart Disease 635,200
2	Short Gestation 3,927	Congenital Anomalies 433	Malignant Neoplasms 449	Suicide 436	Suicide 5,723	Suicide 7,966	Malignant Neoplasms 10,903	Heart Disease 34,027	Heart Disease 78,610	Malignant Neoplasms 422,927	Malignant Neoplasms 998,038
3	SIDS 1,500	Malignant Neoplasms 377	Congenital Anomalies 203	Malignant Neoplasms 431	Homicide 5,172	Homicide 5,376	Heart Disease 10,477	Unintentional Injury 23,377	Unintentional Injury 21,860	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 131,002	Unintentional Injury 161,374
4	Maternal Pregnancy Comp. 1,402	Homicide 339	Homicide 139	Homicide 147	Malignant Neoplasms 1,431	Malignant Neoplasms 3,791	Suicide 7,030	Suicide 8,437	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 17,810	Cerebro-vascular 121,630	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 154,596
5	Unintentional Injury 1,219	Heart Disease 118	Heart Disease 77	Congenital Anomalies 146	Heart Disease 949	Heart Disease 3,445	Homicide 3,369	Liver Disease 8,364	Diabetes Mellitus 14,251	Alzheimer’s Disease 114,883	Cerebro-vascular 142,142
6	Placenta Cord. Membranes 841	Influenza & Pneumonia 103	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 68	Heart Disease 111	Congenital Anomalies 388	Liver Disease 925	Liver Disease 2,851	Diabetes Mellitus 6,267	Liver Disease 13,448	Diabetes Mellitus 56,452	Alzheimer’s Disease 116,103
7	Bacterial Sepsis 583	Septicemia 70	Influenza & Pneumonia 48	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 75	Diabetes Mellitus 211	Diabetes Mellitus 792	Diabetes Mellitus 2,049	Cerebro-vascular 5,353	Cerebro-vascular 12,310	Unintentional Injury 53,141	Diabetes Mellitus 80,058
8	Respiratory Distress 488	Perinatal Period 60	Septicemia 40	Cerebro-vascular 50	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 206	Cerebro-vascular 575	Cerebro-vascular 1,851	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 4,307	Suicide 7,759	Influenza & Pneumonia 42,479	Influenza & Pneumonia 51,537
9	Circulatory System Disease 460	Cerebro-vascular 55	Cerebro-vascular 38	Influenza & Pneumonia 39	Influenza & Pneumonia 189	HIV 546	HIV 971	Septicemia 2,472	Septicemia 5,941	Nephritis 41,095	Nephritis 50,046
10	Neonatal Hemorrhage 398	Chronic Low. Respiratory Disease 51	Benign Neoplasms 31	Septicemia 31	Complicated Pregnancy 184	Complicated Pregnancy 472	Septicemia 897	Homicide 2,152	Nephritis 5,650	Septicemia 30,405	Suicide 44,965

Data Source: National Vital Statistics System, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC. Produced by: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC using WISQARS™.



(National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC using WISQARS, 2016)

Benefits of school-based CBT Therapy are:

- Accessible
- Preemptive/Proactive
- Whole-Child Focused
- Affordable
- Responsive
- Decriminalize Behavior

Newark SEPAC Recommendations: School Climate

We recommend that NPS institutes a *School Climate Program* to foster an inclusive, healthy, and safe school environment for all students.

NPS should also institute a **Trauma Informed System (TIS)** to provide a continuum of care and services for students and families adversely affected by trauma.

Institute **School-based trauma focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (T-CBT)** provided by licensed mental health practitioners and therapy incorporating a strengths-based approach for students with behavior disabled disturbance as a facet of a tiered system of supports in every building that services such students. An effective program would require a dedicated licensed CBT Therapist in each building servicing EBD students.

For students who are classified as Emotional and Behavioral disabled to receive benefit of enrollment in Newark Public Schools, mental healthcare must be provided on a daily basis and incorporated into the framework of an inclusive, positive school culture and climate.

Diversity Training that includes all aspects of differing abilities will be crucial as the district moves forward with widespread adherence to state inclusion standards of least restrictive environments. Therefore, we recommend that NPS institutes formal diversity training (including levels of ability and cultural differences) for all faculty and students.

Establish and maintain policies, procedures, and resources to make ongoing development of cultural competence and inclusion possible especially when related to students with different abilities including mental health conditions.

Commit the resources necessary to build or strengthen relationships with advocacy agencies representing poor and at-risk youth in special education (i.e. Family Support Organization of Essex County, Mental Health Association of Essex County, etc.).

Conclusion

Our goal with this report is to highlight systemic challenges that exist within the district of Newark Public Schools. As active partners of numerous agencies who support differently-abled students and their families, we are happy to assist with implementing any of the solutions we have identified herein. For more complex matters, we can provide support with strategic planning, technical assistance and implementation.

Some of our partnerships include:

- Family Support Organization of Essex County
- Ironbound Community Corporation
- Rutgers Law
- Abbott Leadership Institute
- The Boggs Center on Developmental Disabilities
- Autism NJ
- Council for Exceptional Children
- SPAN NJ
- Mom2Mom
- NJ Special Education Advisory Council (SEAC)
- Optimum HCS, LLC
- NJ Council on Developmental Disabilities
- NAMI (National Alliance for Mental Illness)
- NJ Institute for Social Justice
- Early Childhood
- NJ SEPAG Parent Leader Coalition

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