



## RECOMMENDATIONS for ROANOKE CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

FEBRUARY 12, 2013

The staff of Futures Education appreciates the opportunity to support special education services in Roanoke City Public Schools (RCPS) through professional development and technical assistance. It is noted that the recommendations suggested herein focus on Division-wide continuity and consistency of practices, programs, services and operations from school to school, level to level, and throughout the Division.

The following recommendations are offered for consideration by the leadership of RCPS.

- 1. Redeploy the two high school department chair positions to become “Special Education Coordinators” reporting directly to the Director of Special Education. This would increase the number of Coordinators to five.**

One option for assigning coordinators could be as follows:

- a. One at each high school – also providing necessary services to the Governor’s School and both alternative programs (Forest Park Academy and Noel C. Taylor Academy)
- b. One for five middle schools
- c. One for 9 elementary schools (including two of the smaller elementary schools)
- d. One for 8 elementary schools
- e. One for Preschool programs

The expanded number of coordinators will allow them to work closely with all teachers and specialists as they develop IEPs for students. The coordinators will be able to participate in IEP team meetings as needed and be involved in guiding the decision-making process of the IEP teams to promote consistency and fidelity of program design and implementation. One component of the teacher evaluation process should include the development of quality IEPs. This will also serve as

embedded professional development and quality control. Having coordinators work closely with teachers to ensure quality IEPs is an important function.

The expanded number of coordinators will also permit these staff to proactively solve issues with principals. *NOTE: These are being addressed as positions rather than individuals.*

Efficiencies: Improved supervision and program support. Coordinators would be able to focus on targeted priorities addressing improved student performance, compliance, program design, and cost effectiveness.

## **2. Redeploy/convert social work positions to a newly defined role with direct student service or as school psychologists.**

It is recommended that the Division revise the practice of writing extensive social histories for initial eligibility evaluations. A brief social history could be included in the psycho-educational evaluation for initial referrals and reevaluations as appropriate. A re-defined role could include educational testing for evaluations and re-evaluations (which requires training, but does not require a particular license). RCPS could consider reassignment of duties to the current social work positions or convert the positions to school psychologist positions. This would more closely align to the NASP recommendation of 1 school psychologist per 1,000 students and would greatly enhance the role of the school psychologist in the Division providing enhanced direct services to students and a more consistent presence in each school. Relieving the special education teachers of some educational testing for evaluations will permit more time for instruction while providing more consistency in test administration.

Efficiencies: Reduction of the time allocated to social histories and assumption of assessment and counseling activities would relieve teachers of eligibility assessment responsibilities and potentially improve student performance. The reduction of time allocated to collecting information for extensive social histories would increase time that these staff can provide family and student intervention and services.

## **3. Addition of an Intern School Psychologist**

As stated in recommendation #4, the Division is substantially understaffed in the area of school psychology. There are several strategies to consider for remedying this situation. One low cost option might be adding a school psychologist intern. Others include the consolidation of school mental health

personnel and role redefinition (school psychologists, social workers, counselors, student services specialists, behavior specialists, etc)

Efficiencies: Efficiencies and improved services will result from the better utilization of staff and consolidation of services.

**4. Develop program descriptions identifying the design, structure, services, and primary focus of all special education programs within the Division.**

This process has already been initiated by Futures as part of the technical assistance provided to the RCPS central office staff and should continue. Clear descriptions of regional classes, self-contained Adaptive classes, and all instructional programs within the Division (resource, remediation, pull-out, push-in, co-teaching, consultation, etc.) will clarify the basis for placements, exiting students, and the continuum of services. This will promote continuity and consistency both horizontally between schools at the same grade levels and vertically from preschool through elementary, middle, and high school.

Efficiencies: Improved utilization of existing resources.

**5. Develop standard Division-wide procedures for developing IEPs and defining prescribed services.**

Clearly specified service time to be provided to students in co-taught and push-in settings where the special education teacher may not need to work directly with every identified student in the class for the full class period will more accurately account for student services needs and the assignment of personnel. The goal here should be to promote independence with a special education teacher (or paraprofessional) available to provide support and direction when needed. A differentiated scale of service time (minutes / hours) per week should be developed for application at IEP meetings. For example, one student with more significant needs might require the attention of a special education teacher or paraprofessional for an average of 20 minutes of a 50 minute class while another student may only require an average of 10 minutes per 50 minutes class. This would then be reported as 100 minutes per week or 50 minutes per week rather than the current practice of reporting 250 minutes per week regardless of the amount of direct student-teacher required.

Not only would this change of practice reflect very positively on the Division with regard to LRE and time with nondisabled peers, it would promote student

independence. Further, this practice would minimize the percentage of time designated as "special education" thereby relieving the "points" constraint for assigning teachers.

Efficiencies: Implementing this procedure will likely bring the Division into compliance with state mandated teacher-student ratios in special education by more accurately representing student point values. If implemented consistently throughout the Division, this could potentially save considerable funds by minimizing the need for additional staff and possibly allowing for the redeployment of existing staff to focus on prioritized student / program needs.

## **6. Restructure Related Services in Specialized Programs**

The provision of related services in separate classes should be integrated into the curriculum and the whole class, which means that the services providers provide extended services to all students as an integral component of the class or program. Communication, behavior, instruction, adaptive skills, etc. could be more integrated and have a more pronounced impact on students if they were provided in an integrated manner throughout the school day versus 30 minutes per week or 30 minutes two times per week.

Integrated services are more closely aligned to classroom based instructional activities and with mandated assessment processes and achievement expectations (state standards of learning).

Efficiencies: Depending upon the specific programs, integrated delivery models for related services may potentially enhance student achievement while minimizing duplication of staffing efforts.

## **7. Increase principals' involvement in the special education process**

Now that principals are better versed in Special Education and Section 504 policy and practices, they should be encouraged to take an active role in the management and supervision of special education programs and services. With the redeployment of Coordinators and the increased involvement of school based administrators, program management for special education can be less fragmented and reflect a Division-wide design to effectively and efficiently provide these essential services with high expectations and well designed programs.

*Make sure  
IEP contents*

Efficiencies: Having principals be more involved in the management of special education will provide greater supervision, accountability, and efficiency of operation in all schools and programs. Collaborative and innovative practices for program design, development, and implementation have the potential for minimization of increases in expenditures, better utilization of existing staff, and the possibility of reducing personnel where appropriate.

## **8. Enhance Rtl in all schools**

Increased involvement of administration and a more robust Rtl process will inevitably minimize the number of unnecessary referrals to special education, thereby maximizing the benefits of existing resource to better serve students with disabilities. Schools are encouraged to provide remediation and intervention programs within the general education structure to support struggling students without having to make a referral to special education and identify a student as being disabled in order to get support. This will entail having general education teachers develop more effective skills in the areas of differentiated instruction, diverse teaching strategies, behavior management, curriculum adaptation, and assessment.

Efficiencies: Fewer students identified for special education will result in a proportional reduction in program cost. This would also minimize the potential for inappropriate identification of marginal students who are struggling. Struggling students will perform better with proper general education supports.

## **9. Redefine the eligibility and exit criteria for special education instructional services as well as related services.**

Students who require minor short term interventions in the areas of speech, language, handwriting, self-care skills, etc. may receive these supports through the general education program by specialists and assistants trained to address these developmental issues. Not only will these intervention strategies enhance the development of all students, it will minimize the perceived need to refer students to special education to get support in some of these areas that are quite often only the reflection of the normal developmental process.

Efficiencies: Minimization of referrals and possible inappropriate identification of ineligible students.

*Make sure  
IEP controls*

## **10. Review the role and responsibilities of teacher assistants**

The role and responsibilities of teacher assistants should be reviewed and clearly defined. There is a misconception that teacher assistants cannot function unless under the continuous direct supervision of a certified teacher. This is not required by the Virginia Department of Education and does not reflect best practice or the most efficient and effective use of these staff. Training of both teachers and paraprofessionals is imperative to maximize this significant investment in personnel.

**Efficiencies:** Enhanced utilization of teacher assistants functioning more independently in accordance with best practice and state regulation regarding paraprofessionals. This may result in the opportunity to accrue savings through redeployment of both certified and non-certified personnel. The Division currently spends approximately \$4 million per year on educational assistants. Futures believes there can cost avoidance and/or savings through the implementation of processes to enhance efficiency and effectiveness.

## **11. Review criteria for placement in alternative programs**

It is commonly stated that the (Noel C. Taylor) Alternative Program does not accept students with disabilities. Clarification should be provided regarding the parameters for placement of students in both alternative programs (Noel C. Taylor and Forest Park). While it may be the decision of the administration and the IEP team not to place a student in one or the other of these programs, the criteria should not be whether or not the student has a disability. This issue and the various rationales driving placement decisions should be addressed.

**Efficiencies:** There may be situations where it is appropriate to place a student with disabilities in the alternative program thereby saving costs for other placements and providing opportunities for greater student success.

## **12. Establish two to four regional classes for students with Severe Emotional Disturbance and other disability categories where significant behavior interventions are required.**

This issue was identified as critical by principals and other professional staff. The issue is particularly evident at the elementary level.

Efficiencies: Regional programs are reimbursed by the State and can serve students in the greater Roanoke area. Existing staff can be redeployed to these programs thereby providing qualified personnel and reducing the expenditure of local funds. The movement of students with SED will also reduce the amount of personnel required in local settings.

### **13. Redeploy staff assigned to alternative placements**

There are currently several positions that should be reconsidered as a result of the financial challenges faced by the Division. These include, but are not limited to, two full time professional central office staff members assigned to alternative placements as well as transition and behavior specialists.

It is recognized that all the functions being addressed by these positions are important. The current configuration may not be providing the most cost effective services to schools or students. The development of IEPs and monitoring of students in private alternative placements – or other out of Division placements can be accomplished through other configurations.

Efficiencies: Reduction of staff

### **14. Add certified special education teacher support (central office) personnel proportionally to all schools to be calculated into the point ratio for each school.**

Coordinators and other certified special education teacher personnel providing support services that would otherwise be the responsibility of special education teachers may be legitimately added to the teacher/student point ratios.

Efficiencies: Adding these individuals to the ratio will ensure compliance with the required ratios while more accurately reflecting the actual number of staff employed to serve students in the Division. Paraprofessionals should also be including in this count where allowed by the state.

### **15. Redefine the role and expectations (job description) of special education coordinators.**

The responsibilities of Coordinators should be to focus on teacher support, classroom involvement, instructional methodologies, teaching strategies, specialized instruction, consultation, collaboration with principals, and specifically

identified priorities as indicated by the Director of Special Education to promote Division-wide initiatives and to enhance programs and student progress.

Efficiencies: Better use of Division resources, more accurate identification of students for special education eligibility, improved programming and instruction.

#### **16. Reconsider Behavior Specialist job description and assignment**

These positions should be more coordinated with other intervention services and should be proactively involved in schools rather than utilized on an as-needed basis. The supervision of these positions should also be clarified.

Efficiencies: Maximization of the effectiveness of personnel

Futures Education appreciates the opportunity to work with the leadership, faculty, and staff of Roanoke City Public Schools. We appreciate the professionalism and kindnesses shown to us during our time in schools and the Central Office. If additional consultative support is necessary to assist the Division in the implementation of these proposed actions, the Futures team would be happy to discuss options to provide the necessary assistance to facilitate these changes.