

Preliminary Review of  
Special Education Programming  
in the Wayland Public Schools

Prepared for the Wayland School Committee

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## Overview

In May 2015, the Wayland Public Schools engaged Dorsey Yearley and Robert Gass to review special education programs and services. The basic charge of this review was to do a preliminary assessment of special education in Wayland to determine if there are any discrete program areas that might warrant further review. By design, this review was limited in scope and focused on gathering overarching data and impressions about the district as a whole in order to offer suggestions for more in-depth future investigations of selected programs regarding program effectiveness and/or cost savings. Both reviewers have extensive experience in special education administration in a variety of settings as well as in conducting program reviews in both public and private settings.

Based upon conversations with the Superintendent and Director of Student Services, the following guiding questions for this review were identified:

- 1) How do the special education programs and services in Wayland compare to similar communities based upon benchmark data?
- 2) What are the identified concerns related to special education programs and services from a variety of stakeholders?
- 3) Are there any specific programs or service delivery models that warrant closer evaluation, based on cost efficiency and educational effectiveness, and if so, what might be the focus of such an evaluation?

## Format

In order to respond to the guiding questions, the reviewers first gathered qualitative information by interviewing key stakeholders. Interviews were conducted in June 2015 with the exception of the Parent Focus Group, which was conducted in October 2015, and followed a structured interview protocol, allowing for comparison of responses among stakeholders. The following groups and individuals were interviewed:

Central Administration:	Superintendent Assistant Superintendent Director of Student Services School Business Administrator Student Services Coordinator Early Childhood Inclusion Coordinator Director of Technology METCO Director
Building Based Staff:	Principals Special Education Staff Related Therapy Staff Special Education Teaching Assistants Guidance Staff Preschool Staff
Parents:	SEPAC Chairpersons Parent Focus Group

It is important to note that because of the timing and limited scope of this project, the reviewers were not able to interview or survey several stakeholder groups, including general education teachers and students. Prior to completing the data analysis, the reviewers had brief individual conversations with members of the school committee to solicit their questions or concerns regarding the review.

As part of the initial information-gathering phase, the reviewers also took a brief tour of the district with a specific focus on visiting the special education programs within each school. However, again because of timing and resources, more extensive observations of programs were not possible.

Subsequent to these interviews, the reviewers focused on an analysis of publicly accessible information concerning programming and financial data related to special education. Districts chosen for comparison include Weston, Wellesley, Needham and Lexington, which the Wayland administrative team identified as districts that are generally selected for comparison, as well as Westwood, which is identified by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) as a comparable district. In addition, the Wayland administrative team made a variety of additional documents available for review, including the Superintendent's Proposed Budget documents, other special education program review documents, and various materials presented to the School Committee regarding special education.

### **Qualitative Data: Findings from Interviews**

There are several consistent themes that emerge from the interviews with all stakeholders. First is the overarching commitment to inclusive programming. Each stakeholder group identified inclusion as the belief system and the priority of the district. Most groups were able to describe inclusive educational practices with consistency and clarity, although parents seemed not as clear as staff in both identifying and describing the overall philosophy of the district related to special education. All groups talked about the importance of maintaining collaborative working relationships, both among various staff groups within school and with parents. This was particularly evident in the central administrative and building based leadership, who set the context and provide the supports for the continued commitment to inclusion.

Second, there was high praise from all stakeholders for the quality and professionalism of the staff, including the quality of the teaching assistants. This was supported by comments from several stakeholders who stated that Wayland does an excellent job of hiring and supporting high quality staff. It was also noteworthy that most stakeholders acknowledged the skills and expertise of the Director of Student Services, who is described as available, knowledgeable and invested in the success of each student with special needs in Wayland. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this view was not shared by the limited number of parents who have had disputes with the district regarding special education services for their children, and who therefore described the Director as concerned with managing the resources of the district and serving in a gate-keeping role.

Third, stakeholders described the system as student-centered, allowing teachers to respond flexibly and creatively to student needs and to suggest and experiment with a variety of practices in order to provide appropriate supports to at-risk and disabled students. It was evident to the reviewers that the special education administration values and nurtures a culture of responsiveness, flexibility and creativity in order to serve students well.

Finally, there was wide support for the preschool programming in its current model. Several stakeholder groups acknowledged both the quality of the program and the focus on inclusion as significant strengths. They also commented on the successful transition planning between preschool and elementary school, which helps parents maintain trust and confidence in the school system and in the district's model of inclusion.

When stakeholders were asked more specifically about program effectiveness and about potential cost efficiencies, a wider array of issues emerged. One theme that was generally supported by a variety of stakeholders was that students with emotional and behavioral issues would benefit from more structured support, including a better-articulated program of supports across levels. While it was accepted that the model of service could vary appropriately from level to level, there was agreement that issues related to staffing, structure and transitions from elementary to middle school and middle to high school were impacting the capacity of the district to maintain these students in within-district programs. Parents also identified students with specific learning disabilities as a group that could benefit from more programmatic support and expertise.

A second issue that emerged was the relationship between Response to Intervention (RTI) and special education. RTI is a general education initiative that has been embraced in Wayland as an important structure for supporting at-risk students. While there is general support for RTI in the district, there were varying issues and concerns related to its implementation from stakeholders at elementary, middle and high school levels.

A related issue was the impact of the various scheduling constraints on the delivery of special education services. In special education, the master schedule is frequently the tail that wags the dog in terms of service delivery, so this is not a new or unique issue. In Wayland, the specifics of the scheduling concerns varied from level to level. For example, at the elementary level, it was the apparent prioritization of RTI services first and special education services and related therapies second that created concerns. Additionally, some parents commented upon the time required at the beginning of the year to get the schedule in place in order for some services to begin and on the disruption of services at predictable times, such as the administration of district and state mandated testing. At the middle school level, it seemed the master schedule itself created inflexibility in the service delivery. Related to the scheduling of services in general, several stakeholders, including the central office staff, spoke highly about all aspects of the special education department but worried that because the staff is so tightly scheduled, there is often little flexibility to be responsive to unanticipated demands for services or programs.

Another issue that was consistently raised was the impact on the delivery of services due to the increasing number of student evaluations. Because of the legal requirement to complete evaluations within mandated timelines, priority must be given to testing over direct service, and counseling staff sometimes has to reallocate time away from student support in order to complete the formal testing. In some cases, the counseling role was described as having moved from prevention and developmental counseling to test completion and crisis intervention. It is important to add that parents commented on the quality of the evaluation reports, highlighting that the concern is not in the quality but rather in the quantity of evaluations done annually.

Additionally, there was broad acknowledgement among stakeholders that the teaching assistants in Wayland are clearly respected and viewed as skillful; however, there were varying reports about the extent to which teaching assistants can participate in meaningful planning with teachers and special educators and avail themselves of professional development. The specific nature of the concerns varied by level, but in all cases, staff valued the services of the teaching assistants and were eager for suggestions about ways to support them more effectively.

Finally, parents made an observation about their involvement in the IEP process related to the fact the special educators serve as the liaison with parents for the students in their caseloads. Parents acknowledged the importance of the liaison in supporting the home-school relationship by building trust, maintaining communication, and problem solving when appropriate. While they described their relationship with liaisons as mostly positive, they commented that their experience could be uneven, finding some liaisons more skillful than others in this very crucial position.

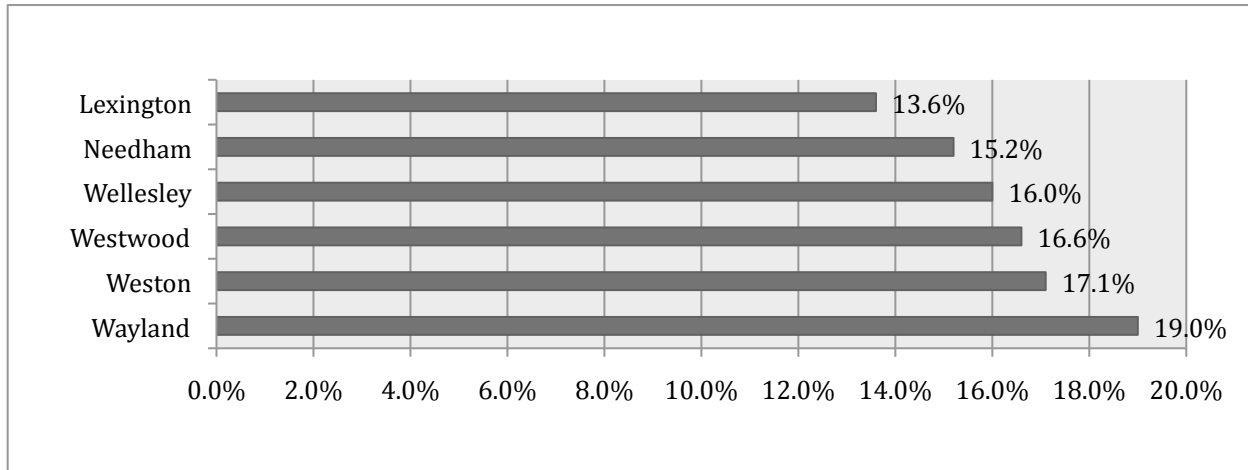
### **Quantitative Analysis: Findings from Data Review**

Using publicly available data from the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), special education programs and services in the Wayland Public Schools were compared to selected districts using a variety of indicators. The data has been organized into two broad categories: programmatic data and budget data.

#### ***Programmatic Data: Eligibility Rates***

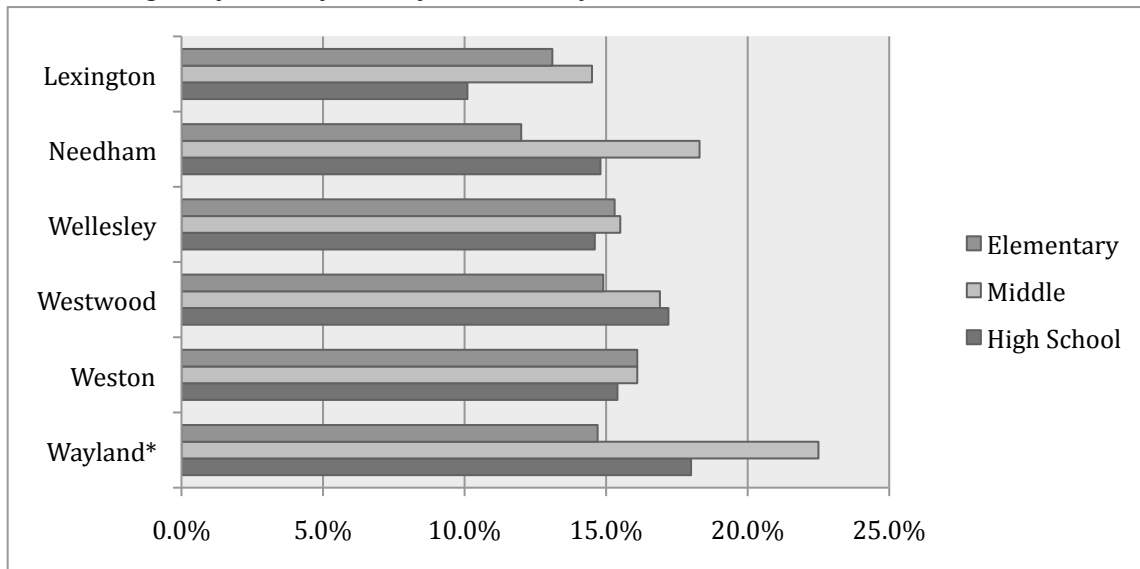
The Wayland Public schools has the highest percentage of students found eligible for special education when compared to the selected districts based upon the information available in the DESE School/District Profiles. This data is for the 2015 school year, based upon the 2014 October 1 Report and is calculated using within-district students only. The chart below shows the district eligibility data for Wayland and selected comparable communities.

Table A: Percent of students eligible for special education by district as of Oct. 1, 2014



In addition, of note is the variability of the eligibility rate among levels within Wayland, with the Middle School rate being the highest at 22.5%. While it is typical for the highest percentage of eligible students to be found at the middle school level, the variation by level seen in Wayland is somewhat unusual when compared to the selected districts.

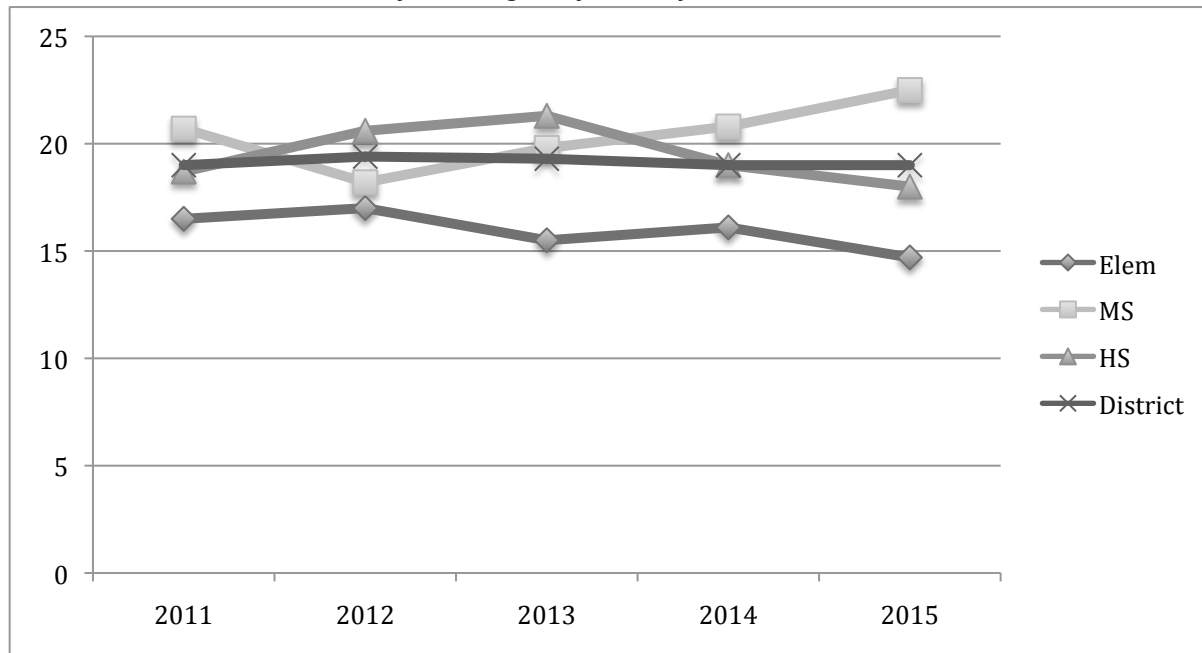
Table B: Eligibility rates by level by district as of Oct. 1, 2014



\*All districts except Wayland include preschool students in the elementary data. Preschool students are not counted in Wayland data because they are categorized as out-of-district placements.

Finally, the eligibility trends for the Wayland Public Schools over the past five years were examined and are represented by Table C based upon the eligibility rate of within-district students from the DESE District/Profiles information. The graph shows that eligibility rate for the district has been fairly consistent, with a net decline at the elementary level and a net increase at the middle school level.

Table C: Five-Year Trends in Wayland Eligibility Data by Level-Oct. 2010 to Oct. 2014

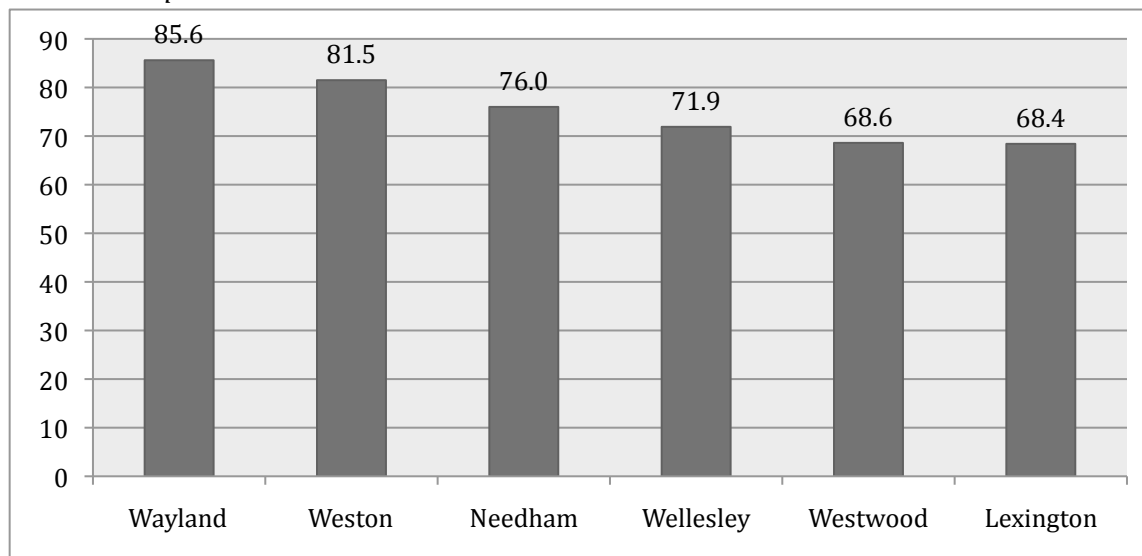


Note: Oct. 1 figures are used for the final report of that school year, e.g. Oct. 1, 2014 figures are reported for the 2015 school year report.

**Programmatic Data: Placement Patterns**

Based upon the required data reported for the 2014 Special Education Report, Wayland has the highest percentage of special education students educated in inclusive environments. For reporting purposes, full inclusion is defined as a program in which a student spends 80% or more of his/her time with typical peers. This data supports the reported beliefs and priorities of stakeholders when describing the commitment to inclusive programming.

Table D: Percent of Students with IEP's Educated in Full Inclusive Environments, 2014 Special Education Report





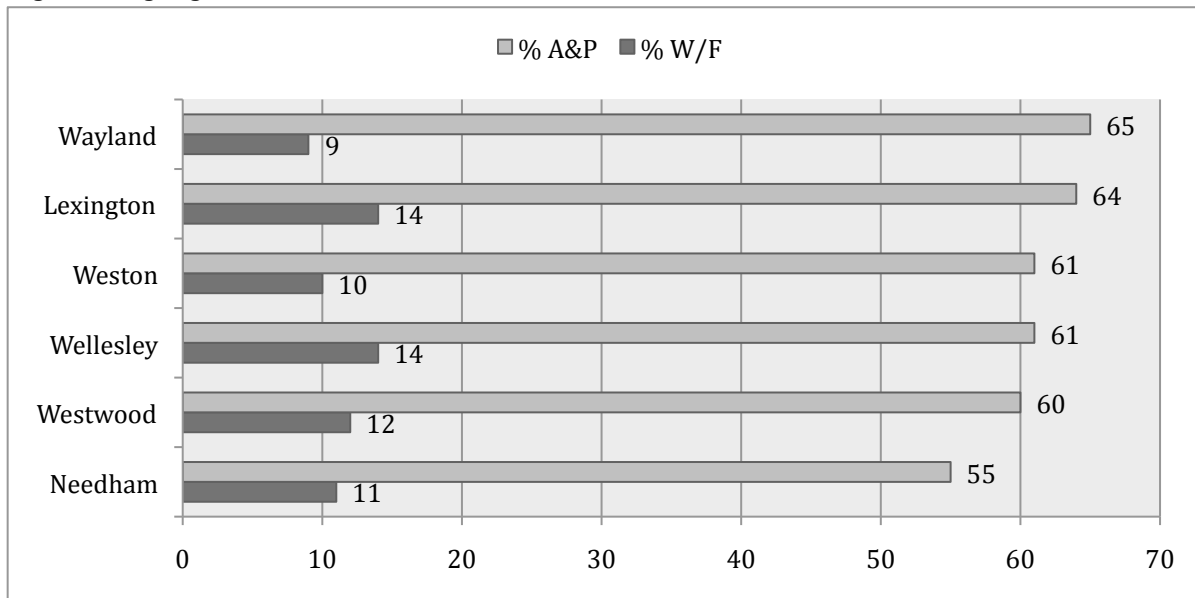
**Programmatic Data: MCAS Patterns**

Special education students in Wayland perform comparably or better than special education students in the identified districts as measured by MCAS. This information aligns with the findings from the 2014 Synthesis Report to the DESE by Hehir and Associates, which found that “students with high incidence disabilities who had full inclusion placements, on average, performed higher than students with high incidence disabilities who were in substantially separate placements in traditional public schools.” (Hehir, 2014, p. 8).

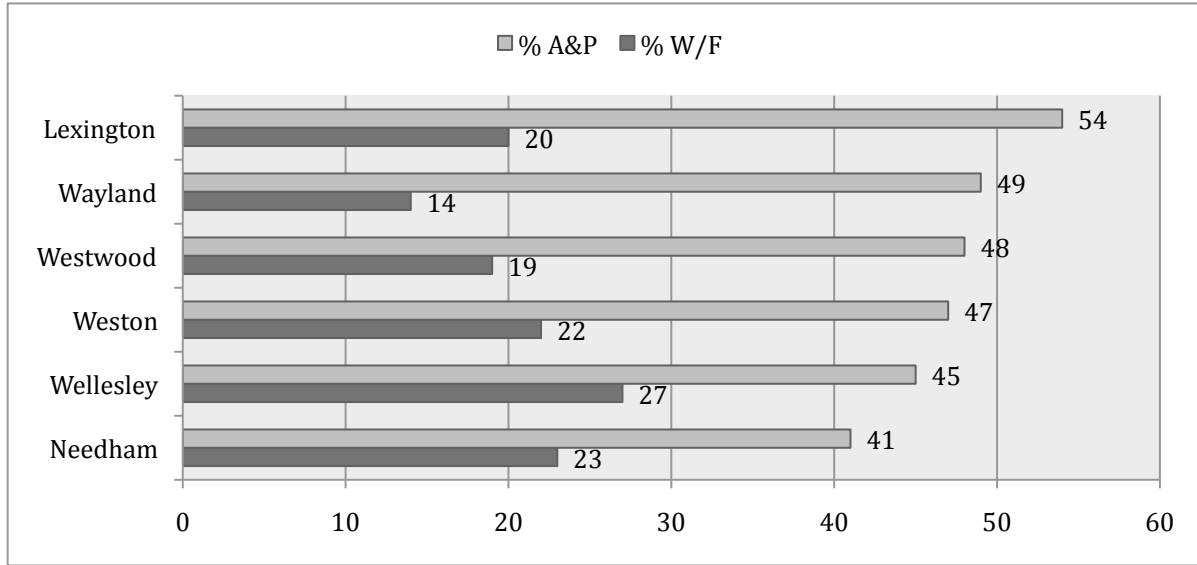
For this report, MCAS scores have been compared using two measures: the percent of all students with IEP’s within a district receiving Advanced and Proficient on MCAS in both English Language Arts and Mathematics, and the percent of all students with IEP’s within a district receiving Warning or Failing in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Both sets of data are useful because they indicate not only the effectiveness of the programming related to high achievement but also to the effectiveness of the program in granting a diploma to students with disabilities.

In 2014, more of Wayland’s students with IEP’s achieved Advanced or Proficient ratings on the English/Language Arts MCAS than their counterparts in the selected districts, and fewer received Warning/Failing ratings than their counterparts in these districts (see Table D). Similarly, on the 2014 Mathematics MCAS, students with IEP’s performed very well in the Proficient and Advanced categories and fewer received Warning/Failing ratings than their counterparts in selected districts (see Table E). This pattern holds true over time, with the five-year average performance of Wayland students with IEP’s showing similar high achievement in the Advanced and Proficient categories and consistently low numbers in the Warning/Failing categories when compared to selected districts.

*Table E: Percent of students with IEP’s with Advanced/Proficient and Warning/Failing in the 2014 English Language Arts MCAS*



*Table F: Percent of students with IEP's with Advanced/Proficient and Warning/Failing in the 2014 Mathematics MCAS*

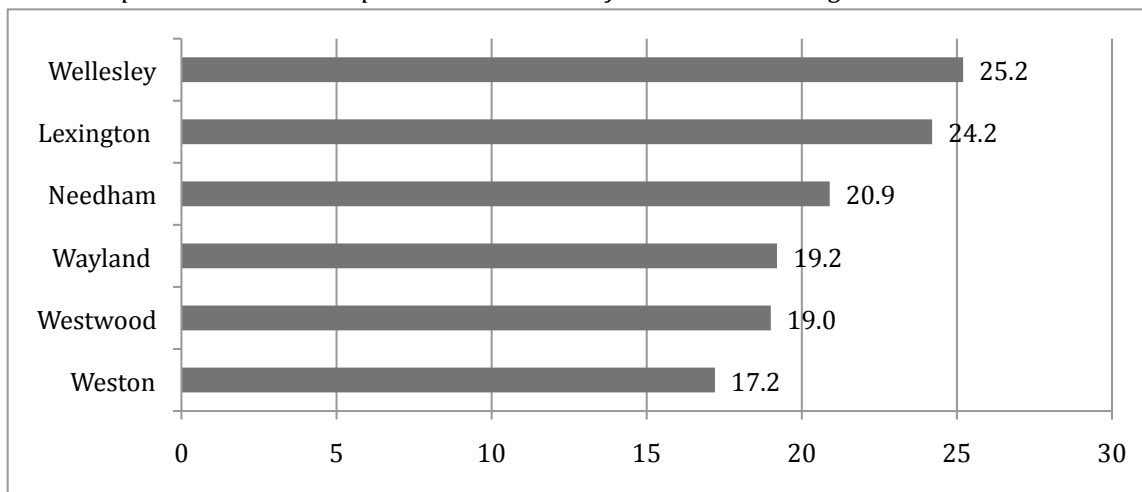


**Financial Data: Overall Special Education Expense**

Comparative financial data regarding special education is compiled annually by the School Finance Department of the DESE. Because of the timing of the deadline for filing the annual End of Year Financial Report and the time required to analyze this data, at the time of this writing, the most recent financial comparisons related to special education expenditures from the School Finance Department are from FY 2014. All of the data listed below is available on the DESE website, School Finance Statistical Comparisons.

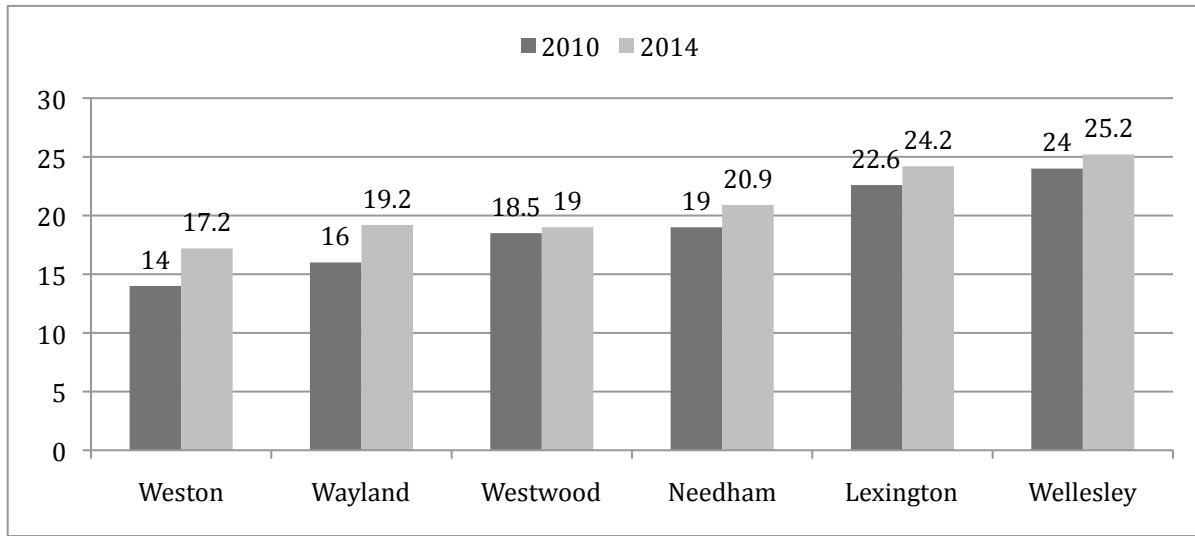
When compared to selected communities, Wayland was in the lower half of the cohort of schools, spending 19.2% of the total budget on special education expenses in FY14.

*Table G: Special Education Expense as a Percent of Total School Budget in FY14*



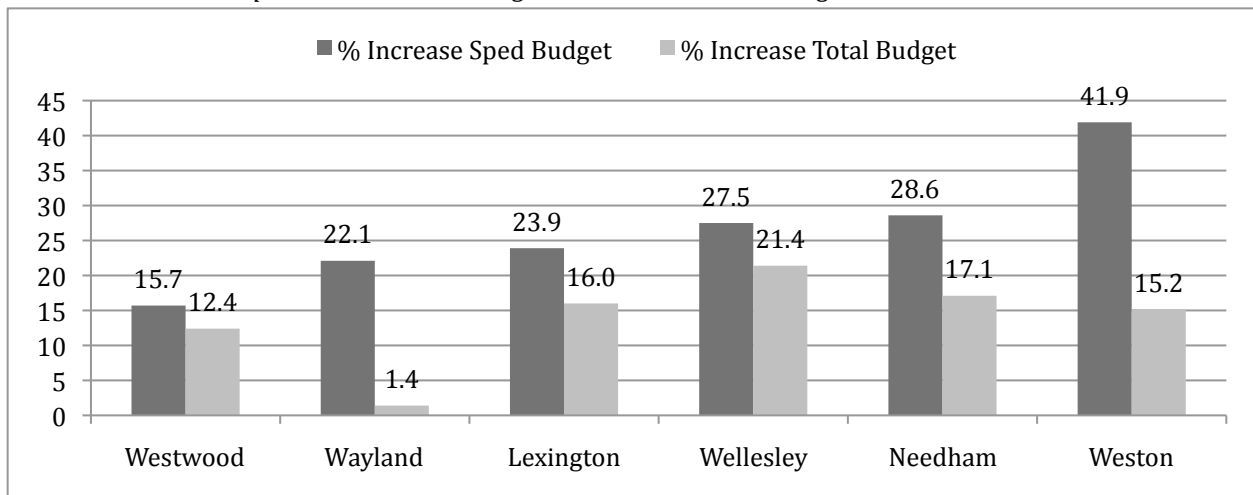
There are two ways to analyze the increase in special education costs over time. The first is to examine the change in the special education expense as percent of the total school budget. Using this comparison, the five-year trend in special education expenditures increases for all of the selected districts. Table H shows these changes. It is interesting to note that two of the districts with the lowest proportionate special education expenses, Weston and Wayland, have experienced the largest increases over time.

*Table H: Change in Percent of Special Education Expense as Part of Total School Budget from FY10 to FY14.*



A second way to analyze the changes in special education expense is to examine the increase in the special education budget against itself over time. Table I shows this analysis. In this analysis, Wayland has the second lowest increase over time.

*Table I: Increase in Special Education Budget and Total School Budget 2010-2014*



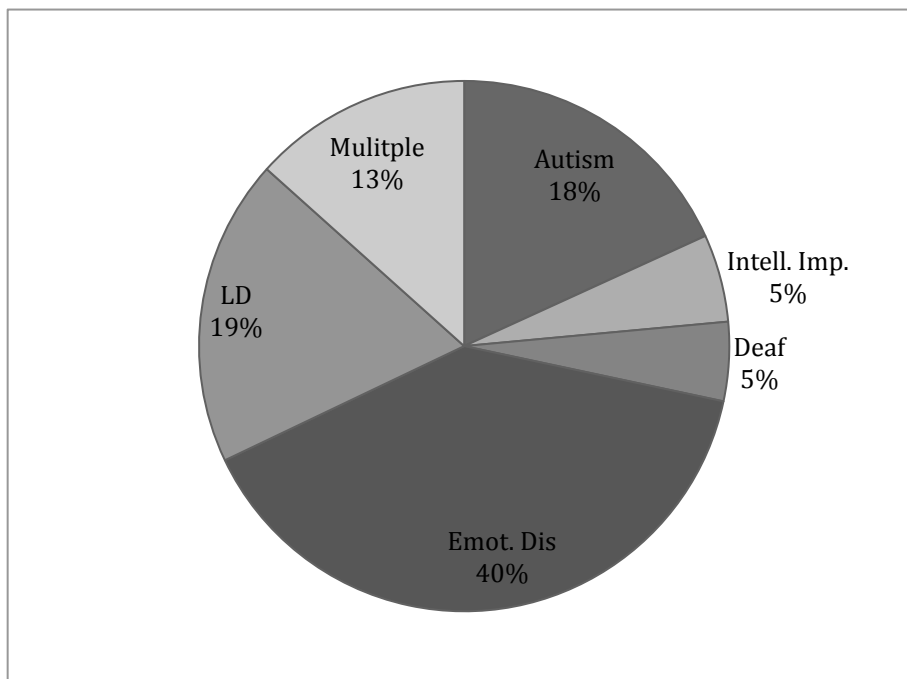
**Financial Data: Out of District Tuition Costs**

In addition to comparisons with identified communities, five-year trends in Wayland’s out-of-district tuition budget were analyzed. This analysis does not include preschool students placed in the Children’s Way Program, although for accounting purposes these students are considered tuitioned-out students.

Over the past several years, the number of students placed in out-of-district programs has remained steady in the range of 34 to 37 students, with the exception of SY 2015, for which the headcount was 40 students.

Because the actual number of students placed out each year is small, the distribution by disability type over five years of placement patterns, using an average figure, was analyzed. Given the small sample size ( $n = 36.4$ ), the most notable figure is the percent of out-placed students with emotional disabilities. The average distribution by disability type over the past five years is described in Table J.

*Table J: Wayland Five-Year Average Distribution by Disability Type of Out-of-District Students, 2011-2015*



The distribution of students out-placed in Wayland follows state patterns for the most part, as described in a report focusing on out-of-district placements prepared by Hehir and Associates for DESE (Hehir, 2013). For example, overall in the state, approximately one third of all students in out-of-district placements were identified as having an emotional disability. Note that because of the very small sample size in Wayland in the comparable time period, a change of one or two students reflects a very large percentage difference.

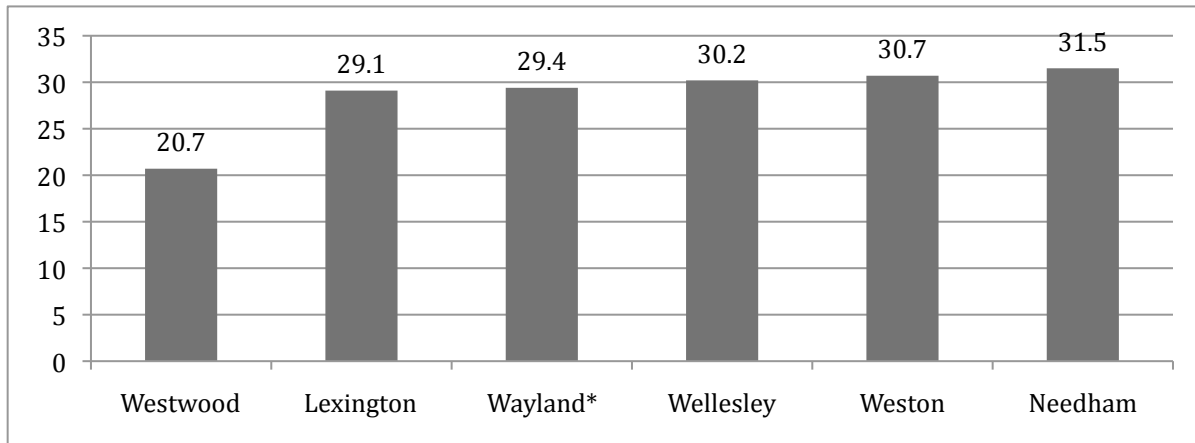
*Table K: Comparable Disability Distribution of Out of District Placements for SY 2012*

Disability	Wayland 2012	State 2012*
Autism	13.5%	19%
Intellectual Impairment	5.4%	9%
Deaf/Blind	5.4%	1%
Emotional Disability	40.5%	33%
Learning Disability	24.3%	7%
Multiple Disabilities	10.8%	13%
Total Number of Students	36	16,713

\* State data includes other disability categories not found in Wayland

In order to determine the comparative budget impact of the out-of-district placements on the overall special education budget, this budget was analyzed as a percentage of the entire special education budget and compared to selected communities, using the FY14 budget figures available from DESE.

*Table L: Percentage of Total Special Education Budget Spent on Out-of-District Placements FY14*

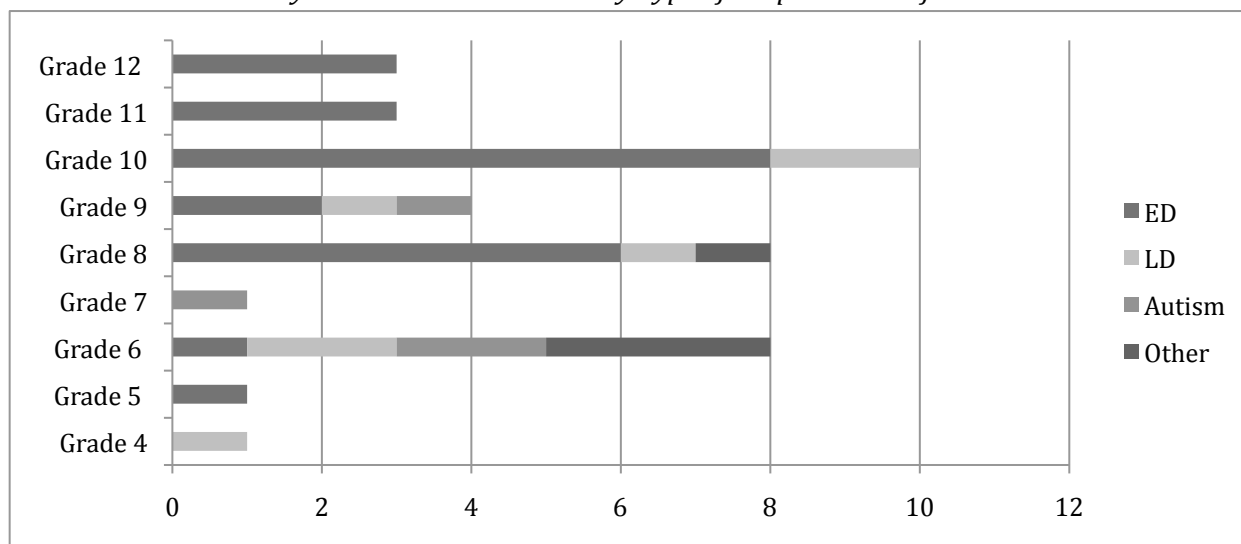


\* Wayland includes preschool students in the Out-of-District Tuition Budget.

Out-of-district data was also analyzed for both the grade level and type of disability at the time of the initial outplacement. Of the 39 students placed between SY2011 and SY2015, the majority of students (31 out of 39) were placed out between grades 6 and 10. Additionally, the majority of students (24 out of 39) were identified as having an emotional disability; seven students were identified as having a learning disability; and five students were identified as being on the Autism Spectrum.

Table M shows the distribution by grade level and disability type between SY 2011 and 2015. During this five-year period, no student below grade 4 was placed out of district, although there were a small number of preschool and elementary students who had been placed out of district prior to this period and are included in the overall census.

Table M: Distribution by Grade Level and Disability Type of Outplacements from 2011 to 2015



Finally, the distribution of potential placements, including approved private special education schools, collaborative programs and other public schools, was examined in order to determine if there might be any potential cost-efficiencies in changing placement patterns. Over the five-year period, Wayland used neighboring public school programs and collaborative placements, which are demonstrated to be more cost efficient, 28% of the time. Wayland belongs to the TEC Collaborative and as such participates in all of its programs at a discounted member rate. The tuitions for other collaborative programs, while still cost competitive when compared to private schools, charge non-members a 10% to 25% increase over their member rate. In this five-year period, when Wayland placed a student in a public or collaborative placement, the placement was either at the TEC Collaborative or in a public school program 50% of the time, which represent the most cost efficient out-of-district placements for the district.

The implications of this data will be discussed in conjunction with the findings from the qualitative data in the next sections of this report.

## Commendations

Based upon our analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, it is our opinion that overall the Wayland Public Schools special education program represents a successful model of full inclusion. Wayland began the commitment to inclusion over 20 years ago, when inclusive practice was considered a new and promising practice to support special needs students. In a 1993 monograph titled “Integrating Students With Significant Needs in the Mainstream: Developing Practices That Work”, then Director of Special Education, Alan Oliff, states:

“Inclusive schools provide stimulating classroom environments and facilitate educational excellence by the very nature of their structure. Within the inclusive school, students acquire the knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes that will enable them to solve

problems, think creatively, continue learning, and develop their maximum potential for a productive and fulfilling life. Inclusive schools create a sense of ‘belonging’ and community for all students, with and without disabilities, and encourage and foster the acceptance of individual differences. In such environments, students become more deeply invested in each other and also in the learning process.” (Oliff, p. 2)

There is now a body of research about both the key attributes and positive outcomes of effective inclusive schools (Hehir, 2012; Hehir and Associates 2014). Based upon our interviews and visits to schools, Wayland scores high in each of the identified attributes, and all of the instructional staff described their beliefs and instructional practices in ways that value diversity and show a commitment to giving all students, whether high achieving or at-risk, the supports they need to be successful. All stakeholders also value building and maintaining collaborative relationships. While reports from parents identify some areas for improvement, there is a shared sense of responsibility among all stakeholders for maintaining a strong home-school partnership. Additionally, it is clear that the district and building-based leadership play a critical role in maintaining the culture and supports that allow for effective inclusion. Our findings are supported by the quantitative data, as not only does Wayland have the highest percentage of students in inclusive settings compared to the selected districts, it also has commendably high outcomes based upon MCAS performance.

Additionally, available financial data shows that Wayland is one of the more cost efficient districts among the selected communities in terms of managing its special education programs, even accounting for increases over time. Our impression is that support staff and professional staff are used flexibly and in response to student needs; costs are reviewed annually for inefficiencies; and administrative tasks required for IEP compliance are managed with a minimal number of dedicated staff.

Finally, Wayland has a very unique preschool structure that has been examined in detail recently. The model has a long history in Wayland and commands the trust and confidence of the general parent community and enjoys a highly collaborative relationship with the elementary staff. This program was commended in the 2012 Special Education Coordinated Program Review. Preschool represents the entry point for families with special needs, and although there are individual cases in which parents and the school department do not agree about the placement, in general, the program has the capacity to support a wide range of children. In addition, the program supports the district’s commitment to inclusion in such a way that parents both understand and value the services that are offered to them when they transition to the elementary level. It is the opinion of these reviewers that this model represents both a cost effective and an educationally effective program for preschool students in Wayland.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of engaging outside reviewers at this juncture, as reported by various stakeholders, was to determine if there are ways to maintain the quality of special education programming while addressing the rising cost of special education services. The

scope of this review is narrow, with the intention of identifying areas for further investigation rather than providing solutions to potential areas of cost inefficiency or ineffective practice. All stakeholders were open to considering change and learning from other communities or new evidence-based practice, which would be the focus of a subsequent, more in-depth study.

As context for the recommendations below, we looked for consistent qualitative and quantitative data to identify potential areas for further review. We considered these recommendations within a framework of analyzing the major drivers impacting the increase in a special education budget, namely within-district personnel costs and out-of-district tuitions. There is evidence that improving the capacity within-district by creating more intensive programming for students with significant needs does help manage the overall special education expense to a district, both in terms of actual cost savings, which can be calculated, and in terms cost avoidance, which is difficult to calculate but which is equally real. There is also evidence that increased capacity to monitor the ongoing operations and decision-making concerning all aspects of special education programming yields cost efficiencies in the longer term. Both of these areas are explored further in the recommendations that follow. Finally, we suggest that any savings realized by special education cost efficiencies should be reinvested into increased general education supports because of the complementary nature of strong general education interventions and lower special education identification rates.

It is our belief that there are two additional variables in managing special education costs: (1) the extent to which the staff and programs enjoy the trust and confidence of the parents of special needs students and (2) the extent to which there is shared ownership and true collaboration between general education staff and special education staff in support of students with special needs. Based upon our conversations and impressions, the Wayland Public Schools currently enjoys the confidence of most parents and the cooperation of the broad majority of the general education program. The competing pressures of addressing the need for cost efficient programming and maintaining trusting collaborative relationships must be considered in any recommendations for change.

## **Recommendations for Further Investigation**

### ***1. Eligibility Rate of Students Receiving Special Education***

There are three aspects of the eligibility process that warrant further investigation. First, the actual eligibility rate in Wayland is high compared to the selected comparable districts; second, the variability in eligibility between the elementary and middle school levels warrants examination, and third, based upon teacher report, the number of evaluations performed at each level seems high compared to the actual number of students receiving service, including students who qualify for both 504 and special education plans.

The identification process for students eligible for special education includes two basic components: the general education responsibility for providing instructional support prior to consideration for special education, and the evaluation and eligibility determination process after a referral to special education is made. There are several variables that affect



both of these processes, including the formal structures and procedures used in the district, the culture of the school and of the community regarding special education, and the actual demographics of the student population.

Districts are required by regulation to provide general education instructional supports prior to a referral for special education services (603 CMR 28.03.3.a). DESE currently is endorsing a version of RTI, called the Massachusetts Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), to provide “high quality core educational experiences” and “targeted interventions and supports for students experiencing difficulties” as the recommended way to meet the requirement for general education supports (Mass Tiered System of Support Overview, DESE, [www.mass.gov/ese/mtss](http://www.mass.gov/ese/mtss)).

Wayland is in the process of implementing RTI. At the elementary level, Wayland has chosen to implement RTI in a somewhat cost-neutral way by using special education staff as well as other staff to provide tiered support. This has resulted in some strain on the schedules of special education staff. Parents, in particular, have noted that special education services sometimes do not start promptly at the beginning of the school year, presumably because of the complexity of getting the schedules set. The early elementary data, however, is promising in terms of lowering the eligibility rate for special education. It is important to continue to refine the RTI model at the elementary level with the intent of maintaining support while relieving the scheduling burden.

Because both the curricular and instructional models at the secondary level differ from those at the elementary level, the implementation of RTI at the secondary level also takes a different form. Currently in Wayland, there is no formal implementation of RTI at the middle school level, and there are various general education structures and interventions that align with a secondary RTI model to address the needs of at-risk students at the high school level. It is our recommendation that the district continue efforts to develop and refine RTI models at all three levels, both because the model is evidence-based and supported by the DESE, and because it provides a clear structure to the general education responsibilities for academic support, which may impact special education eligibility rates over time.

Once a student is referred for an evaluation, it is the responsibility of the special education staff to decide which evaluations are required to determine eligibility, to obtain consent from parents, and to complete the evaluation and Team meeting process within required timelines. Wayland currently relies on special education professionals to manage the IEP process for the students in their caseload. Based upon the DESE Coordinated Program Review in 2012 and Mid-Cycle Review in 2014, Wayland’s procedures support a high degree of compliance with laws and regulations, although reports from staff indicate that meeting timelines is challenging because of the current number of evaluations. Parents reported that liaisons perform an essential role in their child’s educational program but also reported that there was some variability in the skillfulness of the staff related specifically to the responsibilities required of the liaison.

Wayland has a very lean administrative structure in special education, which will be discussed later in this section. It is possible that the lack of oversight from building or level based administrative staff due to limited capacity is leading to inconsistent decision making practices regarding eligibility, and that these practices could be contributing to the higher identification rate at different levels across the district. It is also possible that the formal evaluation procedures used by the district could benefit from more centralized oversight by gathering accurate data about all aspects of the evaluation process, including the nature and the number of formal evaluations, in order to determine if resources are being directed unnecessarily towards evaluations. Finally, more building based oversight could provide greater supervision and support to liaisons, ensuring a consistent level of skillfulness.

It is important to state that the goal of examining the eligibility process in general is to assure that students with disabilities are properly identified and supported, and that at-risk students who do not have specific disabilities have access to appropriate general education supports. It is clearly beyond the scope of this review to make predictions regarding the specific issues related to the eligibility rate, but it is our recommendation that this broad area be examined further for both educational effectiveness and cost efficiency.

## ***2. Increasing Within-District Capacity***

Based upon both qualitative and quantitative evidence, there is a need to examine the transition and program issues related to moving from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school for students with more significant emotional disabilities. The outplacement data is one indicator of this need, in that there are significant outplacements between sixth and tenth grade, and there are a significant number of students with emotional difficulties that require placements. Various stakeholders also reported a need for greater articulation among the levels and more structured support for students with emotional difficulties.

Currently, there are programs at the Middle School and High School that meet the needs of many students with emotional issues. However, several stakeholders suggested that increasing the capacity and structure of the middle school program might help to address the needs of the more fragile students and prevent outplacement in both middle school and early high school. It is important to point out that students who represent significant safety issues to themselves or others may require the type of highly structured therapeutic environment that is difficult to provide in a public setting. Having said that, if increasing program capacity within the district could prevent even a portion of these outplacements over time, the resulting savings in tuitions, even after reinvesting in within-district programming, could realize an overall cost saving to the district.

Based upon a review of the various public and private schools accessed for placement, we recommend that Wayland look first to the TEC Collaborative to explore the option of partnering on a program for middle school students with severe emotional disabilities that could be developed within-district, perhaps with the more intensive supports provided by the collaborative, as well as considering other models, such as working with a private therapeutic school in a consulting/service provision relationship.

In addition, it would be useful to explore successful models used in other public settings to support the transition of students with significant needs from one level to another. One such model offers specialized opportunities and summer contact for selected students focusing specifically on transition issues for both students and families. Any effective model serves to increase both the confidence and the knowledge base of families and staff prior to the opening of school and continues during the beginning of the school year, thus supporting a smoother transition.

As part of an ongoing effort to manage tuition costs, the patterns of out-of-district placements should be analyzed annually in an effort to continually identify within-district programs that need refinement. For example, in addition to the current need for supports for student with emotional difficulties, the district has a disproportionately high number of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) in out-of-district placements. Parents, in particular, questioned whether SLD students could benefit from increased support within the district. The challenge of program development for this group of students relates to the fact that the actual number of students is small, and the distribution of these students across several grade levels does not create an obvious cohort for program development at any given level. However, this data requires ongoing monitoring, including reviewing both actual and potential outplacements, to ensure that the district is responding to the need for capacity building within district and that tuition costs are being well managed.

Finally, the district has just recently added a BCBA to the staff, to replace the fee-for-service contracts with outside individuals for these same services. Parents as well as administration have noted the need for more consistent BCBA support. Replacing fee-for-service providers with in-house staff is another effective way to increase capacity. Currently, this position is part time, but the need for additional time should be carefully reassessed, especially in light of the benefits of full time staff who can be available on call, as well as for scheduled interventions, to the children with behavioral needs who are particularly unpredictable.

It is our recommendation at this time that the district engage in further investigation of programmatic supports for students with emotional disabilities, starting with the potential focus of creating more robust programming at the middle school level. Additionally, the district should create the capacity to carefully monitor the pattern of out-of-district placements to determine if further program development is warranted in the future and should carefully monitor the use of fee-for-service consultants to determine if school employees providing the same service would be both more educationally effective and cost effective. This recommendation is not intended to contradict the commitment to inclusion, but rather to create a more structured continuum of services for a very limited group of students. It is also not intended to suggest that the staff in the current elementary, middle school and high school programs is not skillful and that students are not well served; rather we are suggesting that making structural changes could increase the capacity of these programs to support students within district.

### ***3. Administrative Restructuring***

Currently, the Wayland Public Schools has arguably the leanest administrative structure supporting its special education program when compared to the selected districts. In all of the comparable districts, there is dedicated central office or level-based administrative staff in addition to the Director to oversee the IEP process and to support effective case management.

It is clear that the current structure in Wayland meets the needs of students, in part due to strength of the current Director and in part due to the commitment and professionalism of the staff. However, there may be some unintended consequences related to the lack of opportunity for closer monitoring, as suggested in the discussion concerning the eligibility rates, testing patterns and the need for continued analysis of the out-of-district placement patterns. In our experience, it is difficult to sustain consistent decision making standards related to all aspects of special education identification and service provision across a district without specific administrative support at the building level to work closely with the direct service professionals. In addition, there may be an impact on the management of complex cases because it is simply impossible for the Director to be available in the early stages of every disagreement between a parent and the school, a reality that may affect the nature of pro-active and collaborative problem solving with parents at the building level.

Finally, in our opinion, there is significant risk to the future of the special education budget in Wayland because of the extent to which the current success of the program is dependent upon a single individual. The current Director, who is well respected and skillful, is not only almost solely responsible for all critical decisions regarding special education, but she also serves as the institutional historian of the culture and programming for special education in the district.

Developing a plan for creating greater building or central office level capacity through restructuring could serve to increase the oversight and monitoring of the decision-making processes regarding all aspects of the eligibility process, provide support for liaisons, and allow greater focus on specialized program development. There are several models that could be explored, including the creation of an assistant director position or the creation of a level-based administrative position. This increased capacity could also serve as a vehicle for providing eventual transitional support to a new Director.

The cost effectiveness of these positions would have to be monitored over time, but we believe that the investment in restructuring would serve both to provide increased oversight and to support succession planning for the Director position. There are numerous case studies in surrounding communities of the unintended consequences of replacing a long-standing and well-regarded administrator without such planning. Additionally, replacing special education administrators has a unique impact on a school budget because loss of confidence in special education programming can result in the financial burden of litigation, out-of-district placements, or both.

It is our recommendation that the district explore opportunities for restructuring so that greater administrative oversight for special education could be created at either the building or central office level. It is our belief that the benefit of more consistent monitoring and a seamless succession plan would result in a more cost effective model of service delivery across the district.

### **Areas for Further Discussion**

The following areas rose to the attention of the reviewers based upon the qualitative information gathered in the review process. They are worthy of further discussion, most likely through an internal review process, and would enhance the quality of special education programming in the district. However, given the focus of this review on identifying areas for both cost efficiencies and educational benefit, they are not likely to have the same impact on cost efficiencies as the above recommendations.

#### ***Parent Engagement***

All stakeholders spoke eloquently about the importance of engaging parents as partners in the planning and support of their children's special education services. Staff clearly values parent involvement, and parents, with very few exceptions, reported that staff were responsive and invested in maintaining ongoing communication. Based upon both parent input and our overall impressions of the district, we feel that parents are both informed and eager to partner with the special education department and the staff is committed to sustaining strong parent relationships. The suggestions that follow are intended to enhance these relationships: (a) consider doing a regular survey of parents of special education students both to solicit ideas regarding program improvement and to measure the overall satisfaction of parents; (b) make written material about the special education philosophy, service delivery models and programs more readily available through print and electronic means and (c) continue to find creative ways to enhance the capacity of the PAC as both a source of information for parents and for the Director. There is no lack of willingness on the part of staff to support these efforts, rather they are limited by the capacity of the current administrative structure.

#### ***Teaching Assistants***

It was beyond the scope of this project to gather data on the use of teaching assistants in Wayland as compared to selected districts, although based upon the anecdotal information available to the reviewers, it does not seem that Wayland relies excessively on teaching assistants to support students with special needs. In general, teaching assistants were seen as valued partners in the support of students. However, there were a variety of questions across the district related to the use of teaching assistants, including their own professional development, the availability of training for teachers in how to use teaching assistants effectively, and the consistency of the job description and role expectations across the district. Examining the questions raised by the various stakeholders may yield more consistent practice and support across the district. This is a valuable area of focus for review because of the high regard for teaching assistants in the district.

## Summary

In summary, the answers to the guiding questions for this study are below:

### ***1) How do the special education programs and services in Wayland compare to similar communities based upon benchmark data?***

Comparative data with selected districts reveal that the Wayland Public Schools has a successful model of inclusive education. Analysis of cost data shows that overall Wayland uses its resources effectively to support students with special needs, achieving high outcomes for students with a comparatively small allocation of resources, when measured against selected communities. The data review also pointed to a few areas of concern, including high eligibility rates for special education and high out-placement patterns for students with emotional disabilities, particularly in middle and early high school.

### ***2) What are the identified concerns related to special education programs and services from a variety of stakeholders?***

Stakeholders identified a few broad areas of concern, many of which correlate with data findings. First was the need for a better-articulated and structured set of supports for students with emotional problems. Second was the rising number of formal evaluations that are taking time away from the direct service to students. Additionally, there were questions related to the relationship between RTI and special education particularly related to scheduling, questions related to the consistent and effective use of teaching assistants, and questions about the supports provided to students with other selected disabilities.

### ***3) Are there any specific programs or service delivery models that rise to the level of warranting closer evaluation based on cost efficiencies and educational effectiveness, and if so, what might be the focus of such an evaluation?***

The following areas are recommended for further investigation in order to determine if there are enhanced practices and cost efficiencies that can be realized:

1. Examine the eligibility/identification process within the district to better understand the structural and cultural reasons for the high eligibility rate and to assess the testing practices of the district.
2. Review the programmatic supports across levels for students with emotional disabilities and develop a system of monitoring and analysis of both students at-risk for outplacement and of outplacement patterns, including for students with specific learning disabilities.
3. Review the central office administrative model in order to provide more consistent district-wide monitoring and program analysis and to support effective succession planning.

The following areas are identified for further discussion to enhance practice:

1. Consider ways to enhance parent engagement, including regular parent surveys, making current descriptions of special education philosophy, services and programs more available, and enhancing and building the capacity of the PAC.
2. Consider reviewing the district-wide practices related to the use of teaching assistants, include responsibilities and roles, as well as professional development.

While there are benefits to seeking outside consultants in this process, it is our opinion that these issues could also be effectively explored by a group of Wayland professionals, parents and community members under the leadership of the Central Administrative Team.

The Wayland Public Schools offers programs and services that are informed by a long and widely held commitment to inclusion. The special education program embodies the culture and values of the community in terms of respect for differences and helping each child to reach his or her potential. While there are some areas in which further exploration regarding programming may yield some cost efficiencies without sacrificing the district's commitment to excellence, it is our opinion that overall Wayland uses its special education resources effectively and carefully. We do appreciate that the costs of special education are rising, in part because the nature of the needs of students is becoming more complex. We recommend that the School Department continue to seek ways to share information about current student needs and about special education mandates, programs and related cost issues, with a goal of seeking a shared understanding of the challenges that all 21<sup>st</sup> century school districts face.

We enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about the Wayland Public Schools special education programs, and we wish you success in your continued commitment to the students in Wayland.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Gass  
Dorsey Yearley

October 15, 2015

## **Appendix A:**

### **Structured Interview Questions for All Stakeholders**

- 1) How would you describe the current overall focus and philosophy of the special education program in Wayland? Do you agree with this philosophy and approach?
- 2) What are the strengths of the special education programming?
- 3) What are the areas of special education programming needing improvement?
- 4) What are your concerns, if any, regarding specific program effectiveness or efficiency that you would like to learn more about?
- 5) What do you think are the variables that drive the program costs related to special education?
- 6) Do you have any suggestions that you think would make programs either more effective or more efficient?
- 7) What other information would you like for us to know about special education programming?



## Appendix B

### References

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Oliff, Alan, "Integrating Students with Significant Special Needs in the Mainstream: Developing Practices that Work", Wayland Public Schools, 1993

### Data Sources

Massachusetts School and District Profiles

<http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

- Students - Selected Populations (2015)
- Assessment – MCAS Results by Subgroup (2014)

Special Education Report 2014, Indicator 5: LRE Ages 6-21

[http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state\\_report/special\\_ed.aspx](http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/special_ed.aspx)

School Finance Statistical Comparisons: Special Education Direct Expenditure Trends

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/finance/statistics/>

Wayland Public Schools Coordinated Program Review Report of Findings 2012

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/review/cpr/reports>

Wayland Public Schools Coordinated Program Review Mid-cycle Report 2014

<http://www.doe.mass.edu/pqa/review/cpr/reports/followup.html>

Wayland Out of District Tuition Data, 2011 to 2015

(supplied by the Director of Student Services)

Use of Out-of-District Programs by Massachusetts Students with Disabilities, Thomas Hehir and Associates, October 2013

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