

Improving Educational Experiences and Outcomes for Students with Disabilities Report on Virtual Teacher Focus Groups: May 2019

Teachers working with students who have disabilities have an important perspective to inform the work to improve educational experiences and outcomes. In spring 2019, the Ohio Department of Education invited teachers to participate in a virtual online focus group to identify the priority and actions needed to positively impact students in Ohio schools. From the more than 7,100 respondents to a statewide survey, more than 1,000 educators self-identified as interested in participating.

The Department invited 430 teachers from this group to participate, stratifying the invitations to teachers by role and tenure. At the end of the 10-day focus group period, 74 Ohio teachers participated in one of nine focus groups. The participants represented all grade levels from prekindergarten-grade 12 and all Ohio county types (urban, rural, small town, Appalachian).

Role	Tenure	Number of Teachers
General Educator	1-5 years	6
	6-10 years	9
	11-20 years	6
	More than 20 years	9
Special Educator	1-5 years	11
	6-10 years	16
	11-20 years	11
	More than 20 years	6
Total		74

Focus Group Questions

An external facilitator posed two questions in each 60-minute discussion:

- What do you think Ohio needs to focus on first in order to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities?
- What actions should the Department take to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities?

What We Learned

In asking what Ohio needs to focus on first to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities, common themes emerged, including staffing, equity, professional development and confusion about inclusion. These commonly identified topics occurred across all groups, regardless of the experience of the teachers and types of school in which they were teaching. Text in blue boxes are quotes from participants that illustrate the theme.

Focus on First: Staffing

Nearly all teachers either made comments about overwhelming caseloads or workloads or agreed with another person's comment about them.

"We want the Department to know we all work really, really hard. It might not show in test results, but we [work] every day to differentiate and modify and build our students' skills."

This theme emerged as the most passionately discussed across the nine focus groups. Most believed that their districts need more intervention specialists and paraprofessionals.

My caseload is 43 students! There are tons of kids going unidentified because we know we can't provide services.

Almost every group produced stories about the impossibility of meeting all the procedural requirements and paperwork and finding time to effectively teach children. Some mentioned peers who had left the teaching profession because of these obstacles.

"I see everyone work sooooo hard, and I just feel that if there were smaller class sizes and more staff you could reach more kids. Kids are struggling so hard because teachers aren't able to get to them."

Most relayed experiences were accompanied by suggestions to increase staffing, reduce procedural requirements or both.

"We have such a huge influx of kids with disabilities but not enough people to serve them. There are many kids we are keeping in Response to Intervention (RTI), because we don't have enough intervention specialists to serve or even identify them. I have had kids sit in RTI for three years. They can't learn the current standards, but we don't have the manpower to put them on IEPs yet."

Focus on First: Equity

A group of experienced teachers discussed that equity issues for students with disabilities echo issues of resource equity among districts. In this group of the most experienced teachers, several participants had worked in multiple districts with varied resources and student demographics. These teachers compared the lack of resources in rural districts to the relative abundant support in suburban and urban districts. Equity for high school students with disabilities could be increased if more career programs were available.

"Vocational school has shifted to a college prep type programming; the number of students who can get into non-college prep spots is limited. Ohio needs to expand work training."

A specific example around technology was given by one of the teachers in the following quote:

"Our district has moved to one-to-one technology, but it doesn't include special education students. All regular classrooms get a tablet for each student; we get one for the entire special education classroom. The district won't give special education classes the same technology as regular classrooms. We have to have those resources to integrate technology into our work. Don't our students deserve the same that other students get? They need to know how to type and use software too. I am not in a low incidence classroom. My students have to learn the same (academic content) as other kids, but don't get the same resources."

Focus on First: Professional Development

General and special education teachers alike described a need for increased familiarity with effective ways to teach students with disabilities. They acknowledged that providing techniques for meeting the needs of students with the existing wide range of disabilities will require ongoing professional education, beginning during the preservice college coursework. Both general and special education teachers identified a need for general education teachers to learn about providing interventions and supports. They indicated that most general education teachers are unprepared for special education students in their classrooms. Intervention specialists observed that most existing professional development omits any references to the needs of their students. They also called for increased access to specific techniques to address mental health and behavioral issues. Some suggested that specific training on co-teaching would be valuable.

"I wish we could have one day that is about co-teaching or trauma. So many kids are coming in with some kind of trauma, but the teachers aren't equipped to handle it. All PD is about academics, but we need more about social well-being. If a student acts out or has a meltdown, teachers don't know how to handle it, so student has to go home."

Focus on First: Inclusion Confusion

Inclusion was mentioned in nearly all sessions, and it was clear that all levels of educators, from general and special education teachers to district superintendents, need clarification of requirements and best practices for inclusion. Participants' descriptions illustrated that inclusion is implemented inconsistently from district to district. Comments indicated the widespread desire for more guidance about how placement decisions should be made and what supports should be available for students with disabilities placed in general education classes.

"The picture of what inclusion looks like is very different between classes and subjects. One teacher is unclear as to what she should be doing and resistant to trying inclusion; another teacher is practically co-teaching."

In many districts, the administration assumes that the state's goal is inclusion for all students, but they seem inexperienced about the need for individualized supports when students with needs are educated in regular education settings. Participants argued that unless principals or district staff members have special education backgrounds, they are usually unfamiliar with requirements for placing children in the least restrictive environment.

All participants also were asked about actions the Ohio Department of Education could take to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students with disabilities. Here were the most frequently provided responses:

Action Recommendation: Communicate

The Department has prepared many supports, services and documents that do not trickle down to the teachers. This idea was mentioned in comments about equity, professional development, assessment, community connections and inclusion. Teachers often don't hear about Department resources or decisions; training opportunities are not communicated effectively; and a lot of valuable information may be posted on the internet but does not get to the educators.

Action Recommendation: Change How We Assess

Special education teachers identified a mismatch between contents of IEPs, grade-level standards and testing requirements. Specifically, these educators expressed concerns for students whose abilities exceed qualifying to take alternate assessments but significantly increase the amount of time and effort needed to acquire academic skills. They long for assessments that would show student growth over time, as illustrated by this participant:

"Many special education students are making progress on their own growth clock. Some grow slower than others. Yet we have set learning standards we want all kids to rise to on a yearly timeline. Year after year students on a slower "clock" fall farther behind the yearly grade-level standard. Can they make a middle ground? There is a huge gap between students making growth and achieving at grade-level standards."

Action Recommendation: Reduce Paperwork

The paperwork, documentation and process burdens were well cited by intervention specialists in each of the focus groups. For example, one said the following:

"We go into special education because we want to help students, but so much of the job is paperwork. I can't be the best teacher if I was up to 1 in the morning doing IEPs. ODE could streamline the paperwork so I can do things that are useful to serving students. I don't think the paperwork helps students. I have so many colleagues that left special ed because of the paperwork."

Conclusion

The virtual focus groups allowed Ohio to hear teachers in their own words. Teachers described their everyday experiences in both general education and special education. We learned that staffing, equity, professional development and confusion about inclusion are top priorities to focus on, while some tangible actions can be taken by the Department to improve communication, assessments and the paperwork burden.