



# Results of the Ohio Department of Education's Statewide Survey Improving the Educational Outcomes for Students with Disabilities: March 2019

## Executive Summary

Ohio educators, administrators and service providers were invited to respond to an online survey soliciting input on current strengths, opportunities, challenges and additional supports needed to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. The online survey was developed by professionals in the Ohio Department of Education's Office for Early Learning and School Readiness and Office for Exceptional Children, with input from stakeholders representing various centers within the Department and key experts in the field. Eight focus areas were addressed in the survey: (1) Culture of High Expectations; (2) Literacy Practices; (3) Professional Development; (4) Evaluations to Determine Eligibility; (5) Providing Services in the Least Restrictive Environment; (6) Recruiting and Retaining Professionals; (7) Use of Technology; and (8) Transitions. The survey, conducted during the second half of March 2019, was completed by 7,156 educators, administrators and service providers working in 88 counties across Ohio.

Two major findings emerged from the 2019 Statewide Survey on Improving the Educational Outcomes for Students with Disabilities. The first finding was that the most significant impediment to improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities is the demanding caseload experienced by intervention specialists. Intervention specialists have the knowledge and skills to be effective, however, they are stretched too thin in many schools across Ohio to provide the instructional and behavioral supports students need to be successful in their least restrictive environments. Service demands and scheduling constraints routinely result in grouping multiple students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Consequently, survey participants report their general education classrooms have significant proportions of students with complex learning and behavioral needs. Staffing shortages and heavy caseloads contribute to staff burnout and further exacerbate the situation by impeding schools' abilities to recruit, hire and retain intervention specialists. Survey results indicate school districts in rural regions have staff shortages that are particularly severe. Intervention specialists with expertise serving students with complex/multiple disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder, are in the greatest demand. Schools across Ohio need to build their capacities to meet the needs of students with disabilities to offset the impact of high caseloads.

The second finding pertains to school-level capacity to improve special education service delivery. Improving educational outcomes for students with disabilities requires schools to build their capacities to provide a continuum of supports. The survey results point to four areas in which the capacity of the school can be strengthened to benefit students with disabilities. These are:

- a. Advancing general education teachers' professional knowledge and skills to serve students with disabilities;
- b. Strengthening schools' implementation of a multi-tiered system of supports framework;
- c. Securing an adequate number of trained paraprofessionals; and
- d. Ensuring adequate support from an array of service providers.

Survey participants identified a need for general education teachers to advance their instructional practices to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Specifically, general education teachers would be better equipped to support a wide range of learner abilities if they had access to high-quality training in how to differentiate instruction. Evidence-based literacy instructional practices also were identified as a priority for professional development among general education teachers.

Building the capacity for effective service delivery also involves strengthening a school's multi-tiered system of supports, a data-driven framework in which students are matched to a level of instructional and intervention supports proactively based on student need. Survey participants indicated both a need to strengthen their schools' multi-tiered system of supports implementation and a perception that a multi-tiered system of supports was key to reducing the over-identification of students by race, gender or economic disadvantage.

Survey participants identified a need for adequate staffing of paraprofessionals to provide support to students with disabilities within general education classrooms. Paraprofessionals need to be well prepared to not only bolster students' instructional skills but also help support their social, emotional and behavioral skill development within the general education classroom.

A variety of service providers are needed to improve schools' capacities to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Survey participants emphasized the need for behavior interventionists, school psychologists and Board Certified Behavior Analysts to provide the supports needed to serve students in their least restrictive environments.

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The Ohio Department of Education invited Ohio educators, administrators and service providers to respond to an online survey soliciting input on current strengths, opportunities, challenges and additional supports needed to improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities. The invitation to respond to the survey was disseminated electronically on March 12, 2019. The deadline for responding to the survey was March 31, 2019.

### **Sample**

The survey was completed by 7,156 respondents working in 88 counties across Ohio. Given the option of selecting all the roles in which they serve in Ohio's education system, the greatest percentage identified themselves as intervention specialists (37 percent); followed by general education teachers (31.1 percent); service providers who work directly with students with disabilities (11.7 percent); district administrators (6 percent); disabilities coordinators, administrators or supervisors (5.2 percent); and principals/assistant principals (4.9 percent). "Other" was selected as a response by 17.4 percent and included service providers who determined they did not work directly with students with disabilities (for example, school counselors, school nurses, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language pathologists), as well as "specials" teachers (art, music, physical education, media/library) instructional coaches, Title I reading teachers, and educators working in vocational and career-technical education programs. Eleven percent (11.4 percent) of those responding to this question identified themselves as serving more than one role.

When asked to identify the age levels of the students they serve, the breakdown was as follows: Birth to age 3 (3.3 percent); Prekindergarten: Ages 3-5 years old (19.2 percent); Kindergarten to grade 3 (43.6 percent); Grades 4-8 (56 percent); Grades 9-12 (40.1 percent); and College (1.1 percent).

