

Evaluation of the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School Special Education Programs

Department of Special Education

Martha's Vineyard Regional School District

Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts

Conducted:  
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Submitted by:  
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## *I. Introduction*

The Superintendent of Schools, Matthew D'Andrea, requested that James A. Shillinglaw conduct an evaluation of the special education programs for Martha's Vineyard Regional High School (MVRHS). The overall focus of this review is to gain a greater understanding of the status of special education programs and services within MVRHS, identify the strengths of the existing programming, and determine what issues need to be addressed to enhance current programming. The administration wants to procure recommendations that will assist them with addressing future program needs, the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classes and activities, and the instructional supports that may be required to ensure greater access to the general curriculum for students with special needs.

### *A. Purpose*

The purpose of an independent evaluation of a specific program and service is to provide a school district with an objective report that identifies areas of strengths, needs, and recommendations. An independent evaluation allows for the district to be examined from the perspective that looks at what is working well in the district, but also speaks to areas that need to be strengthened. This evaluation is focused on the specific domain of programming and services that serve students with special needs.

The review process is designed, through a multi-step approach, to assist the school district's leadership team and the school-based special education personnel in having a guided and focused discussion that will enable effective short and long-range planning to occur while recognizing and addressing issues such as:

- Determining the effectiveness and utilization of current special education personnel and their roles and responsibilities with respect to serving students on Individualized Education Programs within the MVRHS
- Determining if MVRHS provides a continuum of services to meet the diverse needs of the special education population
- Determining the efficacy of the current models (inclusion classes, specialized programs) to maximize access to the general education curriculum
- Determining what strategies and professional development resources are needed to enhance the current special education model
- Identifying staffing and resources that reflect student needs
- Creating a long-range plan that addresses the agreed upon needs of the student population
- Establishing a comprehensive approach to program and service development that is linked to the budget planning process

- Determining the need to develop capacity to provide support to students who require more intensive services to make effective progress

This review process brings forth information that will enable the district administration and the school-based special and general education personnel to develop an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective approaches for serving the students at MVRHS.

It is important to recognize that, for the information contained in this report to be beneficial to the school district and special education services, the stakeholders must come together to discuss the findings and recommendations. Through a deliberative process, the administration and the school-based special education and general education personnel can develop short and long-range action plan(s) that will address the agreed upon issues.

#### *B. Reviewer*

Mr. James A. Shillinglaw, CAS, an independent Special Education Consultant, has thirty-nine years of public school experience. He has been a teacher and building coordinator. Mr. Shillinglaw was an Administrator of Special Education and Director of Pupil Personnel Services for thirty years for the Provincetown Public Schools, Provincetown/Truro Public Schools, the Barnstable Public Schools, the Hanover Public Schools, and the Duxbury Public Schools. Mr. Shillinglaw has been an Adjunct Professor for Lesley University and Framingham State College, as well as a presenter at numerous conferences. He was also the president and a member of the executive board of the National Association of Pupil Service Administrators for six years. Most recently he was the Southeast Region Associate Manager for the Walker Partnerships. He has conducted over sixty-five independent program evaluations and conducted numerous professional development sessions for school-based personnel.

## *II. Methodology*

This program evaluation was conducted based on a three-step approach:

1. A review of written documentation pertaining to this evaluation was conducted of the following:
  - Data, census, program descriptions and statistics provided by the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School Special Education Department
  - Data and statistics provided by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
  - District procedures related to the special education process
  
2. Small group and individual interviews and discussions were conducted with individuals occupying the following positions:
  - Superintendent
  - Assistant Superintendent
  - Co-director of Special Education, 1
  - Principal, 1
  - Assistant Principal, 1
  - Special Education Teachers, 9
  - School Adjustment Counselors, 2
  - School Psychologist, 1
  - Director of Guidance
  - Students, 8
  - Parents, 20 (three parents attended two sessions)
  
3. Observations of programs and classrooms were conducted of the following:
  - Navigator Program
  - Compass Program
  - Two general education co-taught classrooms
  - Five academic support classrooms

The interviews/discussions that were conducted with individuals were 30-45 minutes in length. Emphasis was placed on the focus of the service and program under review. Questions and discussion focused on the following:

- What is your role and what are your responsibilities to the program being reviewed?
  
- What are your main concerns?
  
- What is working well?

- What program strengths can you identify?
- What trends are you experiencing in the program?
- What changes do you believe need to occur?
- What topics of professional development need to be addressed?
- What practices need to be in place to enhance the program?
- How has the program benefitted you in your efforts to make effective progress?

These questions varied, somewhat, depending on the specific role of the individual who was interviewed. Discussion expanded beyond these specific questions based on the experiences of these individuals within their respective role, their experience in the field of education, the length of time that they have been in their current position, and any other factors that emerged from the interview process.

### *III. Commendations*

This section of the report is for recognizing the efforts put forth by the district and the administration in their plan to meet the needs of the students. Special education is a complex mandate for public schools to meet. There are competing interests that continue to place a significant pressure and financial burden on the school district. Martha's Vineyard Regional High School has recognized its responsibility to meet the needs of the students.

#### *Specific Commendations*

- Superintendent Matthew D'Andrea is commended for commissioning this review to gain insight into program/service enhancements and improvements for the district's special education programs.
- The high school administration has provided commitment and support for the special education programs in each building.
- There is a very high level of dedication and commitment by school-based personnel to fulfill the requirements of special education students' IEPs.
- The district is commended for its commitment to develop the Navigator and Compass programs to provide an opportunity for students with significant disabilities to remain in the least restrictive environment.
- The special education co-director is commended for her commitment to enhance special education programming at the high school.
- The commitment of the special education staff to develop and implement a comprehensive learning strategies course is recognized. Having had the opportunity to evaluate many high school programs, this evaluator finds this curriculum to be exemplary.
- The administration has made efforts to develop program descriptions for special education programs at the high school. The descriptions clearly delineate the mission, eligibility criteria, and the process for consideration into the programs.
- The high school administration is commended for developing a co-teaching model. Although implementation is in the early stages, there is a commitment for ongoing professional development and extending the model to the eleventh and twelfth grades.
- The high school recently instituted Flex Time which provides a scheduled time for students to seek additional help.
- The high school has demonstrated commitment to provide technology that enhances student ability to access curriculum, test preparation, classroom assignments, and study guides.

- The high school has taken the initiative to implement and train teachers in restorative justice practices as an effective alternative to discipline.
- General and special education teachers spend an extensive amount of time preparing students for mid-term examinations.
- Multiple opportunities are scheduled by the district to assist with transition from the middle school to the high school. Some of the planned activities include the following:
  - Meeting with eighth grade counselors that involve the high school administration, special education department, high school guidance, and an English as a Second Language (ESL) representative
  - Career Technical Education tour of the high school
  - Special Education Parents' Night
  - Transition meetings with all special education teams
- As part of the process for developing a format for the program evaluation, great effort went in to ensuring that there were multiple opportunities for parental input.



#### *IV. Factors Affecting the Implementation of Programming and Services*

##### *What is Co-teaching?*

Among the many options that professional educators are developing to better help increasingly diverse students reach their potential, co-teaching is emerging as an innovative and potentially effective approach. Co-teaching occurs when two professionals, typically a general education teacher and a special education teacher, partner to deliver instruction. It is a way to ensure that students with disabilities or other special needs have access to the same curriculum with opportunities to succeed in their general education setting. Although the research on co-teaching is still emerging, it suggests that co-teaching is far more complex to implement effectively than it might seem at first consideration. Challenges to co-teaching that have been identified and must be addressed include: arranging time for co-planning, building positive working relationships between co-teaching partners, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and ensuring administrative support. When creative strategies for arranging common planning time, building understanding and collaboration between co-teachers, planning and delivering instruction, and enlisting the support of principals and other administrators are implemented, the potential for co-teaching to improve student outcomes is significant.

Friend, Marilyn (July 2008). "Co-Teaching: A Simple Solution That Isn't That Simple After All." *Journal of Curriculum and Instruction*.

##### *Benefits of Full Inclusion*

In 2011, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Dr. Mitchell D. Chester, commissioned Thomas Hehir and Associates to conduct a review of special education in the Commonwealth. The purpose of this review was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the identification, placement, and academic performance of students with disabilities in Massachusetts and to recommend strategies that the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education might use to improve outcomes for students with disabilities. The following are several of the findings and recommendations that have come from the culmination of the three reports that Dr. Hehir conducted. MVRHS should be commended for their efforts in implementing a co-teaching model. One of the overarching findings of the review by Dr. Hehir found the following:

*Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements appeared to outperform similar students who were not included to the same extent in general education classrooms with their non-disabled peers.*

*Across each of our studies, we found evidence suggesting that students with disabilities benefitted from being included in the general education classroom with their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities who had full inclusion placements (spending 80 percent or more of the school day in general education classrooms), on average, earned higher MCAS scores, graduated high school at higher rates, and were more likely to remain in their local school districts than students who were educated in substantially separate placements (spending less than 40 percent of the day in the general education classroom).*

*Like students across the country, the proportion of time Massachusetts students spent being educated in classrooms with their non-disabled peers varied for students with different disability designations. For example, students with disabilities in the high incidence categories had full inclusion placements with their non-disabled peers at higher rates than students with other disability classifications. Students with intellectual disabilities, autism, multiple disabilities, and emotional disturbance had higher rates of substantially separate placements than students with other disability classifications.*

*Review of Special Education in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts: A Synthesis Report*

#### Indicator 5 - Educational Environments for Students Aged 6 - 21 with IEPs

*For 2015-16, the state target for % of Students with IEPs served in **Full Inclusion** is 61%; the target for % of Students with IEPs served in **Substantially Separate** placements is 14.5%; and the target for % of Students with IEPs served in **Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital** placements is 5.5%.*

	Enrollment	District Rate	State Rate	State Target
Enrolled students with IEPs	132	--	--	NA
Full Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 80% or more of the day)	81	61.4%	71.9%	61.0%
Partial Inclusion (inside the general education classroom 40%-79% of the day)	36	27.3%	16.2%	NA
Substantially Separate (inside the general education classroom less than 40% of the day)	10	7.6%	7.5%	14.5%
Separate Schools, Residential Facilities, or Homebound/Hospital Placements (does not include parentally-placed private school students with disabilities)	5	3.8%	4.4%	5.5%

#### *Transition*

In 2004, Congress again reauthorized IDEA. One of the important issues was the focus that was placed on transition. Prior to 2004, transition services focused on students with significant cognitive and mental health issues. The transition process would start when a student was sixteen, with the intention of beginning to link the student and family with the appropriate human service agency to ensure that a plan was in place once a student turned twenty-two and was no longer entitled to special education services. The reauthorization in 2004 broadened the scope of transition to all students once they were 14 years old.

***Transition services** --- The definition emphasizes that transition services are a coordinated set of activities "designed to be within a **results-oriented** process that **is focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate the child's movement from school to post-school activities.**"*

The emphasis on transition has placed an added demand on special education staff to develop a comprehensive plan that clearly articulates goals and objectives that will lead students to post-secondary activities.

There are potential legal ramifications for school districts that do not understand the importance of the transition process and have not developed transition plans that clearly articulate a post-secondary vision. A disturbing trend has emerged in recent years with parents unilaterally placing their child in residential programs that provide a comprehensive college-like environment. In many cases, the school district is not able to take legal action because they have not met the standard in developing an adequate transition plan.

Why did Congress feel that transition needed to be such an important part of the reauthorization in 2004? They were very concerned about the high drop-out rate and low employment rate of students with disabilities. They did not pass the original law with the intent that students would receive special education services throughout their school years and not be able to transition into meaningful life activities.

#### Common Characteristics of a Student at the High School Level who may Require a Language-based Program

Students at this stage are expected to analyze and synthesize information in written form as well as acquire factual information. Although many individuals with dyslexia may have compensated for some of their difficulties with reading, others may continue to have problems with automatic word identification.

- Continued difficulties with word recognition which significantly affects acquisition of knowledge and ability to analyze written material
- Slow rate of reading
- Continued difficulties with spelling and written composition
- Difficulties with note taking in class
- Trouble learning a foreign language

## V. Findings

### *Specific Findings*

Through the review process, it was apparent that the administration is very aware of the needs of the regional high school. Although considerable effort has been put forth to develop and implement quality programming for students with disabilities, there are a number of issues that have been identified and will need to be addressed over a reasonable period of time. The following findings are provided to assist the district with the work that needs to be completed. These findings are presented in no particular order of priority.

#### Navigator Program

- The Navigator Program serves students aged 14-18 who have substantial multiple disabilities. These disabilities may include, but are not limited to, autism, cognitive intellectual impairment, physical and sensory, and/or medical.
- There is one teacher and three educational support personnel (ESP) in the program. Currently, there are four juniors in the program that will become seniors in the 2018-2019 school year. Plans are in place for the development of a transition program (Voyager) that will focus on skills to support them as they transition to post-secondary life. Ongoing meetings to discuss the development of this program have included parents, special education teachers, and administrators. Tentative plans are to locate this program to an off-campus site. A draft program description has been developed.
- Curriculum for the Navigator Program is individualized and based on student need. The focus is on modified curriculum to functional academics, pre-vocational skills, and activities of daily living (ADL). Assessments such as the Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLBS) are used to determine a student's strengths and weaknesses.
- As the four juniors age out of Navigator, the focus of the program will need to be modified to adapt to incoming students from the Bridge Program at the middle school. Many of the incoming students have a profile typical of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Their programming at Bridge has a heavy emphasis on applied behavior analysis (ABA). Teachers from both programs (Bridge and Navigator) are observing students to ensure a smooth transition.
- Students in the Navigator Program begin accessing career technical education (CTE) in the ninth grade, exploring different vocational options. Career exploration increases through the next three years until they are placed in off-campus worksites for a majority of their school day.
- The Navigator incorporates a sampling of community job sites that provides students exposure to different vocations. Job sites include: the movie theater, Thimble Farm, the library, Clothes to Go, Big Dipper (ice cream store), MSPCA, Meals on Wheels, and daycare through the YMCA.

- As the program increases its census, there is concern about classroom space.
- As part of their IEP, Navigator students have an extended-day-program three times a week.
- The district's special education programs have maintained a long-term relationship with the Center for Children with Special Needs (CCSN) located in Connecticut. The agency has been instrumental in the development of, and on-going consultation for, the district's low incidence students. Consultations include Skype sessions as well as on-site visits. At the high school, fourteen Skype sessions and four on-site visits are dedicated to the Navigator Program as well as the Compass Program (students with social/emotional issues).

#### Compass Program

- The Compass Program was initially developed in 2014 with extensive support from James Levine and Associates who continue to provide consultation services to the district. The program has transitioned from being called the Therapeutic Support Program/LINKS to Compass. The program is designed to "assist students in obtaining the necessary social, emotional and academic skills to successfully re-enter their grade level general education classroom."
- Conceptually, it is a two-tier program located in adjoining classrooms. Tier 1 is the most restrictive, designed for students who require a substantially separate setting. As students make progress and are included in three general education classrooms, they are transitioned to Tier 2 where they receive academic and therapeutic support.
- There is a SAC assigned to the program to provide therapeutic support to students. This SAC also services VINE, the alternative education program at the high school.
- There are currently ten students in the Compass Program. Nine of the students are in Tier 2.
- Due to the profiles of the students in the program, there is an emphasis on executive functioning and issues related to chronic anxiety. Workbooks on each issue are provided to students and are part of the daily instruction.
- Each student has an individual behavior plan (IBP) with data sheets that track their progress. Each student has individual goals as well as classroom goals and expectations.
- Goal Seeker software is used to track, chart, and dissect performance measures.
- There are four ESPs in the program. The teaching staff meets with the ESPs on a weekly basis to review student progress and provide ongoing feedback. All ESPs are trained in de-escalation techniques (Safety-Care). ESPs are not assigned to individual students. Attention is given to fading ESP support when a student becomes more independent.

### Academic Support

- For students on IEPs, academic support (AS) is provided outside of the general education classroom in designated resource rooms. The focus of this support is to provide students with skills in the areas of executive functioning, self-advocacy, test taking, learning, and organizational strategies. All freshmen recommended for AS attend a structured course on learning strategies. Much of the course is designed around the research of Dr. Lynn Meltzer's evidence-based research program, SMARTS (Strategies Motivation Awareness Resilience Talents Success).
- For eighth graders transitioning into the high school, taking the strategies course is difficult. They are accustomed to using AS for doing homework and other assignments. They are resistant to the structured strategies course.
- After freshmen year, the focus of AS is to assist students in applying learning strategies to daily and long-term assignments.
- Students are graded for their participation in AS utilizing a Scaffolding of Student Expectations rubric. There are three components to the rubric: (1) organization/assignment notebook, (2) work habits, and (3) behavior.

### Reading Resource Skills

- Students who require a more structured approach to improve their reading skills attend Reading Resource Skills. Student progress is monitored through Informal Reading Inventory, Gates McGinitie, and the SRA Reading Laboratory. Data is collected from varied testing tools. It is unclear how the data is used to improve student progress in the area of reading.

### Transitional Planning and Implementation Program

- The Transitional Planning and Implementation Support Program (TPIS) was developed to assist students with the transition to post-secondary life process. Transitional planning is required to be part of the student's IEP starting at the age of fourteen and should be reviewed annually as part of the IEP meeting until the student graduates, turns twenty-two, or successfully meets the transitional goals. Instruction in this program includes support in the following areas: independent living skills, career exploration, and understanding of individual learning styles. Students will develop a resume, participate on job interviews, and complete applications for employment. Students will also have field experience in the school and community. The program is new this school year. Effort will continue as the program structure evolves.
- The special education program has been proactive in outreach to community resources to link students with these resources. These resources include:
  - Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC)---Transition to Adulthood Program (TAP)

A representative from MRC comes to the high school once a month to assist students with the transition process, starting at age fourteen. Students learn skills and self-confidence to better prepare for independence.

- Martha's Vineyard Community Services---School to Employment Program (STEP)

This program is designed "to reflect the wide variation of skills, interests, and goals of students. Serving as a bridge to the island community, STEP allows students to gain community-based work experience through structured and paid internships."

- Cape Organization for Rights of the Disabled (CORD)

This Hyannis-based agency offers a Transitional Internship Program (TIP) that prepares youth and young adults for their first work experience.

#### Co-Teaching Model

- MVRHS began the implementation of a co-teaching model during the 2016-2017 school year. Co-teachers were identified in February 2017. Professional development half-days in March and June were used to establish teacher relationships, train, and develop co-teaching techniques for identified teams.

Currently, the focus is to provide co-teaching in the ninth and tenth grades in core academic areas. Future plans are to extend the model to the eleventh grade in 2018-2019; the eighth grade is a possibility as well.

- The district contracted with a consultant to train co-teachers. Revitalizing (Inclusive) Instruction for Students and Educators (RISE) was the curriculum the consultant developed to provide a theoretical and practical framework for the professional development.
- Utilization of special education teachers at the early stages of co-teaching closely resembles the Supportive Co-Teaching Approach. *Supportive co-teaching is when one teacher takes the lead instructional role and the other teacher rotates among the students to provide support. The co-teacher, taking the supportive role watches and listens as students work together, stepping in to provide one-to-one tutorial assistance when necessary while the other co-teacher continues to direct the lesson. This is one of the two co-teaching approaches often favored by teachers who are new to co-teaching.* (A Guide to Co-Teaching, Villa, Thousand, and Levin)
- Special education teachers appear to have a good understanding of the curriculum in the classes where they co-teach. It appears that special education teachers are selected based on their knowledge of the subject area.
- There were several issues raised that are impacting the potential success for co-teaching at the high school.
  - Special education teachers are not listed as co-teachers as a function of scheduling.

- Special education teachers do not have access to student grading.
- Common planning time is not consistent with all co-teaching teams.
- General education teachers have a difficult time *giving up the chalk* and sharing teaching responsibilities.
- The compatibility of some co-teaching teams is more of an *arranged marriage*.
- Special education teachers are being pulled from their co-teaching responsibilities for IEP meetings.

### Student Interviews

- Having the opportunity to interview students provides a unique perspective to understanding their experience through the special education process and programs.
- The Compass Program provides support for students who have significant social/emotional disabilities. Many of the students have experienced issues with severe anxiety, depression, and mood disorder.
- Three students in the Compass Program participated in the interview. They openly discussed how the program supported them to become successful in high school. The following responses reflect their experiences.
  - Having frequent breaks and the ability to take walks to refocus scheduled into their day
  - Being able to participate in their IEP meetings
  - Accessing extra-curricular activities such as the Drama Club to feel successful
  - Utilizing the school adjustment counselor assigned to the program to deal with anger issues
  - Having access to technology, e.g., typing notes

Two of the students were accepted and will be attending Cape Cod Community College next fall.

- The Navigator Program serves students who have substantial multiple disabilities.
- Two students from this program participated in the interviews. Both students enjoyed the program, especially the community work experiences and going to the YMCA to participate in the swimming program. The YMCA is conveniently located across the street from the high school.
- Three students from the AS program were also interviewed. One of the students required extensive access to technology to successfully access the curriculum. Software programs such as Drop Box, Google Doc., Google Classroom, and Dragon have greatly benefitted this student. His knowledge of software that would assist him also played a part in being able to self-advocate. He applied to colleges based on the support services they could provide. He recently completed an assistive technology evaluation provided by the MVRHS special education department.



- Two other students discussed how AS provided them with an opportunity to do their homework in a structured setting. One of the students is involved in sports. The ability to access assignments on his iPhone or notebook gave him the opportunity to complete work during the extensive amount of time athletes have to travel to events as a result living on the island.

#### School Adjustment Counselors/Wellness Programs

- There are two School Adjustment Counselors (SACs) who service the high school. One SAC is assigned to the Compass Program and Project Vine, the alternative school within the high school. The other SAC is the Wellness Program coordinator.
- During the past two years, the high school has implemented Restorative Justice Practices as their Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) curriculum. Thirty teachers have been trained through the Suffolk University Center for Restorative Justice. The program incorporates circles in the classroom as an opportunity to provide a structured process for organizing effective group communication.
- Other initiatives started through the Wellness Program include:
  - Peer Outreach
  - SWEAR (Stand with Everyone Against Rape)
  - Race Culture Retreat
  - STING (Smoothly Transitioning into Ninth Grade)
  - Gym Class Heroes
- Both SACs discussed the lack of availability of qualified mental health providers on the island. The high school does have a good relationship with Martha's Vineyard Community Services (across the street from the high school). Students can walk to the center and counselors come to the school to meet with students.
- The school is attempting to develop more positive alternatives to discipline. Currently, if students are suspended they have the option to do community services after school. Alternatives to detention include participation in mindfulness classes or yoga.

#### General Education Instruction and Support

- The high school recently instituted Flex Time. This is a class period built into the daily schedule for students having difficulty with a subject area. Flex Time allows students the *flexibility* to go to that specific teacher to receive additional help. Students sign up for Flex Time; in some cases, teachers determine where a student goes based on their judgement.
- It was very impressive to observe the level of effort general education teachers provided for students in preparation for the mid-term examinations. Teachers developed comprehensive study guides, utilized technology (Google Class, Quizlet), graphic organizers, and provided extensive overviews of how the exams would be structured and how each section would be graded.

- Support for mid-terms also extended into AS classes. Students completed self-advocacy sheets that assisted them in identifying strengths and weaknesses and determining what accommodations they would benefit from in different subject areas. They also completed planning sheets which aligned with the dates and times of the mid-terms. Test taking strategies were also reinforced.
- A reoccurring issue that was expressed throughout the interviews was the number of accommodations listed on student IEPs. Making arrangements for mid-terms to ensure coverage and compliance with IEP and 504 accommodations was a logistical nightmare. In one case, a special education student had 58 accommodations on their IEP.

#### Special Education Expenditures for MVRHS from FY 06 - FY 15

Fiscal Year	-- In-District Instruction--		- Out-of-District Tuition -		Combined Special Ed Expenditures (A+B+C+D)	Total School Operating Budget	Special Education Percentage of Budget (E as % of F)	State Average Percentage
	Teaching	Other Instructional	Mass. Public Schools and Collaboratives	Mass Private and Out-of- State Schools				
2006	759,480	379,676	54,114	587,029	1,780,299	12,486,543	14.3	19.1
2007	761,224	433,993	42,323	904,796	2,142,336	13,223,704	16.2	19.4
2008	857,238	461,682	44,287	924,776	2,287,983	13,959,953	16.4	19.8
2009	921,969	488,818	56,223	958,231	2,425,241	13,862,354	17.5	20.1
2010	885,547	511,613	107,259	893,032	2,397,451	14,614,503	16.4	19.8
2011	840,169	488,310	94,284	628,632	2,051,395	14,393,457	14.3	19.9
2012	920,125	515,136	125,459	900,903	2,461,623	14,929,401	16.5	20.5
2013	1,112,157	656,588	77,459	940,036	2,786,240	15,967,962	17.4	20.9
2014	1,201,483	544,773	82,127	965,441	2,793,824	16,176,851	17.3	20.9
2015	1,376,818	542,427	66,516	473,031	2,458,792	16,922,671	14.5	21.0

- The spiraling cost of special education is a concern in most school districts. As pointed out in a previous program evaluation, the school district has done a commendable job of containing costs while providing programs that maximize student progress. Martha's Vineyard Regional High School is consistently below the state average in the percentage of special education expenditures versus the overall regional district budget.

#### Parent Concerns

- As part of the process for developing a format for the program evaluation, great effort went into ensuring that there were multiple opportunities for parental input. The district should be recognized for its efforts to make this a transparent and inclusive opportunity for parental input. There was a morning focus group and two afternoon/evening focus groups were scheduled into the two days. There were also two individual interviews and one parent contacted the evaluator through email. Overall, 20 parents participated in the interview process. The concerns that follow were selected to represent common issues expressed by parents.

- Concerns were collected from IPAC meetings, parent interviews, conversations with school district staff/administration, and extensive internal discussion.
- Several concerns were expressed about the continuity of special education programming from the middle school to the high school. The Bridge Program at the middle school level is structured primarily for students with ASD, although there are other students with low incidence disabilities in the program.
- The current structure at the high school (Navigator) has been more of a life skills program. Parents who still have students in the Bridge Program are concerned how Navigator will adapt to the incoming ASD cohort. The first two students from Bridge transitioned to the high school during the current school year.
- How will the program at the high school accommodate high needs students within the block schedule of seventy-four-minute classes? Will there be meaningful inclusion? How will high functioning students with ASD integrate and be supported in general education classrooms?
- Bridge teachers and ESPs have been trained in applied behavior analysis (ABA) which relies heavily on consistent data collection. Will staff at the high school be prepared for these requirements?
- Will there be adequate support/consultation for high school staff?
- Will there be sufficient technology in the Navigator Program?
- Other concerns expressed by parents revolved around the lack of mental health and emotional/behavioral supports at the high school.
- There are parents who are not aware of their rights under IDEA (the federal special education regulations) and Massachusetts special education law. There is also a general lack of awareness of who they should contact at the state level to address their concerns.
- Concern was expressed by parents and special education staff that general education teachers did not have a good understanding of student IEPs, and, in some instances, were not aware that the student was even on an IEP.
- Two consistent themes with several parents were the punitive nature of discipline and the role of the school resource officer (SRO). Depriving students of participation in extra curricular activities was mentioned several times.
- Some parents felt that there was a lack of consistency in the transition process from the high school to post-secondary life. There was a consensus that the district relied too heavily on outside agencies to take leadership and provide resources.

## *VI. Recommendations*

The following recommendations are a direct outcome of the review process that was recently completed for Martha's Vineyard Regional High School. The findings listed in the previous section are the foundation for the following recommendations. Each recommendation is followed by an explanation that is intended to further expand on the rationale for the recommendation. These recommendations are intended to provide insight and direction for the administration and school personnel in making decisions regarding the direction they determine to follow with respect to the existing programs and services. These recommendations should be viewed as a point of departure for involved personnel to engage in discussions that will lead to the development of programs and services that truly meet the needs of the student population.

There will be a need for the stakeholders to come together and develop an action plan that is comprised of short and long-term steps. Budget implications, as well as structural and organizational issues, need to be well understood so that appropriate program development can be instituted. Through an inclusive process of discussion, a plan will emerge that is comprehensive, meaningful, and purposeful.

### **1) Professional development activities for the teachers of the co-teaching model need to be ongoing.**

#### **Explanation:**

- The high school administration should be commended for their efforts to initiate and develop a co-teaching model. It appears that co-teaching will continue to evolve and expand. In order to continue this progress, professional development will need to be continued.
- The model of training needs to have options for the various staff based on their exposure and experience with the model.
- The regular education teachers for the co-teaching model must have a foundation of knowledge and information regarding specialized instruction in the same way the special education teachers do. This will become an important factor as the school integrates special education students into higher level courses.
- Special education teachers must have a foundation of knowledge regarding subject area content related to the curriculum frameworks to effectively participate in the co-teaching model. They will not be able to incorporate effective learning strategies if they do not have a clear understanding of the content being taught.
- The content of the training program needs to cover the range of issues that the teachers identify, as well as some standard topics that are relevant to the shared teaching experience. Both teachers need to know what their co-teacher knows, what they are comfortable doing, and how they plan to conduct their assignment.

- Training should focus on developing a continuum of co-teaching models. Currently, the prevalent model is *supportive co-teaching*. This is when one teacher takes the lead instructional role and others rotate among the students to provide support. In most observations, the lead instructor was the general education teacher. As co-teaching evolves, the model should move towards *complementary co-teaching*. This occurs when co-teachers do something to enhance the instruction provided by the other teacher(s). Ultimately, a *team-teaching* approach occurs when both teachers plan, teach, assess, and assume responsibility for all the students in the classroom.
- Coaching should be available for the team so that teamwork skills can be critiqued in order to gain greater insight into sharing the teaching responsibilities.
- An annual orientation for all new staff should occur prior to the opening of school. A full explanation of the model should be presented to new staff by teachers of the model. This may encourage new staff to consider participating in the model in the future and give them the opportunity to follow up with their colleagues.
- There are current staff members who may be able to provide many of the training experiences in which this group of teachers needs to participate. In addition to occasional outside presenters, it would be beneficial to engage current staff in the design and implementation of training for the teachers within the model.
- Common planning time for teachers of the co-teaching model must be in place and conducted on a scheduled basis.
- The expectation is for teachers to work effectively and share the responsibilities of the classroom. To do this, they need to be able to meet and plan their lessons.
- Co-teaching teams should be determined prior to the end of the school year. Providing time over the summer would give teachers an excellent opportunity to begin the planning process for the coming year. Teachers should be aware of the special education students that will be in their classrooms. This will give both teachers an opportunity to understand each student's learning profile and differentiate the curriculum to accommodate particular learning needs.
- To assist teachers in the planning process, they should be encouraged to use *The Co-Teaching Lesson Plan Book*. This book was developed by Dr. Lisa Dieker who is nationally known for her work in developing effective co-teaching models. The benefits of the book include clarified roles of both teachers, ownership of planning, and improved documentation of the development and use of specific accommodations for reporting IEP progress.
- Depending on the teachers and whether they have teamed together in the past, the planning time may not need to be as frequent if they have had previous experience together.

- Staff schedules will have to be aligned with each other to ensure that teachers have the same open periods. Currently, common planning time is sporadic, based on the teachers' schedules.
- Common planning time is currently scheduled three times a week. Two teachers who have worked together for a number of years may use only one period a week.
- School administrators will need to develop the common planning time schedule prior to the close of the school year and before the student assignments are completed.
- In order to ensure that the co-teaching model is effective, close consideration should be given to the individual skills and effectiveness of the special education staff.
- Special education teachers should be selected to provide support. based on their knowledge of the curriculum and content area. Special education teachers who have a good knowledge of the curriculum should be utilized in these roles.
- Successful co-teaching models will take time to evolve and develop as teachers begin to feel more comfortable with the concept and have an opportunity to spend planning time together. In order to develop continuity, it would be beneficial for the general and special education teachers to be committed to work together for several years.
- Some classes will not require a co-teacher. This is based on the ability of the general education teacher to differentiate instruction, provide organizational strategies, and incorporate accommodations.
- An effective co-teaching model will require clear and explicit understanding of each teacher's role and responsibilities.
- Special education teachers must share in the responsibilities that are aligned with successful co-teaching models. At this point, because they are not considered equals, their role with students and parents is undermined. Special education teachers should also have access to grading and be listed as a co-teacher.
- Special education teachers have many responsibilities to ensure compliance with regulations and procedures. Adequate time should be built into the teachers' schedules to ensure that there is not a conflict with their classroom responsibilities.
- It is important that support in the classroom is based on the academic needs of the students. In some cases, the general education teacher may not require additional support if this individual is capable of implementing required accommodations and ensuring access for all students.
- As the co-teaching model evolves, it will improve the utilization of special education staff.

**2) Consideration should be given to reorganizing academic support after freshman year.**

**Explanation:**

- As mentioned in the *Findings* section, the special education department has developed an exemplary curriculum that supports student understanding of executive functioning, organization, learning strategies, and self-advocacy. This is mandatory for all freshmen on an IEP.
- After the freshman year, the focus of AS changes. Conceptually, students are encouraged to take the skills they learned as freshmen and apply them to completing homework and other assignments during the academic support period. In reality, it appears that students utilize a majority of the time to do homework with support from the special education staff.
- The block period is seventy-four minutes. This seems like an inordinate amount of time to spend only finishing homework.
- Consideration should be given to continue instructing students with the primary principles of what they learned as freshmen. These valuable skills will need to be continually reinforced and will be just as valuable when they are seniors. There can still be time set aside during the block period to assist students with assignments.
- Eighth grade students should be introduced to the learning strategy concepts that they will be exposed to when they enter the high school. This may lessen the resistance to participation in a structured academic support class.

**3) The district should establish a district-wide task force of the key stakeholders to review how students are identified as high-risk for reading difficulties, and vertical alignment of reading intervention services should be instituted.**

**Explanation:**

- It is apparent that there are inconsistencies throughout the region on how students are identified for reading difficulties, which interventions are utilized for instruction/remediation, and how these services are provided. In one region, students are taken out of social studies/history class to receive reading intervention. This impacts their ability to be successful in this subject once they reach the high school.
- Because of the inconsistencies of the different approaches, a cohort is created of students who experience significant difficulty being able to read a novel, create outlines, pick out critical information, and write effectively at that high school level.

#### **4) Is the current Reading Resource Skills program the most effective model for students with reading disabilities?**

##### **Explanation:**

- Taken from the Course of Study: *The course focuses on reading skills improvement with the consideration of the individual student's educational needs. This will include instruction in reading and listening comprehension, decoding and encoding strategies, and vocabulary.* If the intent is to provide evidence-based instruction to students with reading disabilities, this program may not be as effective.
- The difficulty in finding an effective model to provide reading instruction to students at the high school level is that many of the methodologies focus on students at the elementary level. Incorporating a reading approach such as Wilson or Orton Gillingham requires intensive small group or individual sequential instruction to be effective. Project Read is an evidence-based, multisensory approach that “integrates the five critical components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension along with the dimensions of spelling, writing, oral language and listening comprehension within each lesson.” (*Florida Center for Reading Research*)
- Project Read has been incorporated in high school special education programs and has been shown to be effective in teaching students to learn to read in order to access curriculum.
- With the availability of current staff conducting the Reading Resource Skills classes, a language-based approach such as Project Read may be more effective to instruct students who exhibit significant reading and/or language disabilities.
- This could be done one period a day in place of the current program. Eligibility for this program could include the following criteria:
  - Students who exhibit a primary diagnosis of a LBLD which may include dyslexia, reading disability, disorder of written language or expression, dyscalculia, expressive/receptive language.
  - Students who have not met with success with supports in the general academic setting.
  - Students who have average to above average cognitive abilities.



**5) A systematic approach to understanding the use of accommodations on IEPs needs to be developed that is consistent throughout the school district.**

**Explanation:**

- A re-occurring theme throughout the evaluation process was the overuse of accommodations on student IEPs.
- As discussed in the *Findings* section of this evaluation, scheduling staff and classrooms to comply with student accommodations is a difficult challenge.
- This is a systematic issue, not a high school issue. It is not unusual to see accommodations start at the elementary level and continue to accumulate over the course of a student's academic career.
- Reviewing accommodations should be a mandatory part of every annual IEP meeting. Does the student still need that accommodation? Hopefully, as they grow more independent, certain accommodations will not be necessary. A majority of accommodations are just good teaching methods and do not need to become part of the IEP. Once an accommodation is listed, it can be very difficult to remove.
- As a rule, there should not be more than five accommodations on an IEP. Obviously, there are exceptions based on student needs.

**6) For students currently in the Bridge Program, the transition process to the Navigator Program will need to continue throughout the current school year.**

**Explanation:**

- The current census of students in the Navigator Program will be changing as students from the Bridge Program transition to the high school and students in the Navigator Program age into the proposed Voyager Program.
- The district has been proactive by putting a year-long transition process in place to ensure that incoming students will have the appropriate supports.
- Transition activities include some of the following:
  - Weekly visits occur with the Bridge staff observing the Navigator Program as well as regular visits of Navigator staff observing the Bridge Program.
  - Assistants from Navigator have observed students at the Bridge program.
  - Staff from the Center for Special Needs Students in Connecticut has provided training to Navigator staff on data collection, prompting, and behavior support.
  - Added consultation time has been provided to the Navigator staff.
  - Students from Bridge are visiting the high school for orientation.

- Transition meetings will take place in the spring.
- The administration is currently investigating outside resources to support programming for Down Syndrome students.
- Special education programs continually need to adapt to meet the diverse needs of students. The design of special education programs will change, based on the cohort of students they receive from year to year.
- Efforts are in place to evaluate the program descriptions of the two programs (Bridge and Navigator) to better facilitate seamless transitions in the future. The Bridge Program will introduce more activities related to pre-vocational skills and life skills to begin preparing students for post-secondary life. The Navigator Program will modify the current structure to incorporate more applied behavior analysis as well as maintain the focus on functional academics and vocational skills.
- The administration should review the current structure of the Extended School Year (ESY). Concern was expressed that the ESY program does not maintain skills that have been reinforced throughout the school year.

**7) The district should continue its efforts to develop a transition process that will support students as they move towards post-secondary life.**

**Explanation:**

- Several parents expressed concern that the transition process depends heavily on outside agencies and does not prepare students adequately for the transition process. It is clear that the district has been proactive in recognizing the need for a seamless transition process. Part of ensuring a seamless transition depends on linking students and families with the agencies they will depend on for support after graduating or turning twenty-two.
- Transitioning from high school to post-secondary life has been an important topic for school districts for several years. At one point, only low-incidence students were considered the primary population of students who required a transition process. It is evident that there are other vulnerable populations of students who will require a thoughtful comprehensive process to ensure a successful transition after high school.
- Martha's Vineyard Regional High School has recognized its responsibility to prepare students for post-secondary life. The Transitional Planning and Implementation Support Program was developed by the special education programs to assist and prepare students for the transition process. This transition program is a work in progress and will continue to evolve.
- The district has also reached out to other agencies to collaborate with and to connect students and families. The district is currently working with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission to coordinate transition activities. There is a representative

from MRC that is scheduled at the high school on a monthly basis to meet with students and their families.

**8) As the district moves forward with planning the post-secondary transition program (Voyager), the program should be designed to provide students with the skills that will assist them in functioning more independently in the adult world.**

**Explanation:**

**Academics**

- English/Language Arts: Providing topics such as effective listening and communication skills as well as reinforcing important writing skills
- Reading: Continuing to build on decoding and comprehension skills; Providing exposure to literature with real life application
- Travel training: Going into the community and practicing skills such as using public transportation, ordering at a restaurant, and identifying safe people to approach
- Money management/Math: Learning to apply budgeting skills and maintaining checking and savings accounts; Continuing to develop functional skills related to activities of daily living

**Personal Skills**

- Self-advocacy
- Relationship skills
- Personal safety and self-awareness
- Social skills and problem solving

**Vocational Program**

- Variety of work settings on campus and in the community to increase student awareness of their personal strengths, skills and interests
- Career awareness to emphasize good work habits

**9) The district needs to design a training program that will increase the general awareness level of all staff members with regards to special education terminology, practices, procedures, and regulations.**

**Explanation:**

- There was concern expressed by parents that general education teachers are not aware of which students in their class receive special education services, or they did not have a good understanding of the IEP requirements and various terms that are used in special education. The administration has provided training to the high school staff to address these issues
- Special education liaisons should ensure that teachers who have students in their class have at least a summary of the accommodations and general information related to the IEP goals.

- Within the first week of the school year, teachers should be required to review the IEP of each student in their class. There should be a form in each child's student record documenting that the IEP has been read by the teacher.

**10) Efforts need to continue in order to establish a consistent approach to high school discipline.**

**Explanation:**

- Discipline at the high school was a concern of many of the parents that attended the three focus groups. It is important to understand that there has been a lack of continuity with the high school administration. During the past five years there have been four changes in the principalship. Different philosophies have led to inconsistent approaches and belief systems. It would appear that several of the parents have experienced that inconsistency and feel strongly that the current expectations are too punitive. In listening to staff and administration, there was a great deal of concern expressed about the need to establish more control and hold students responsible for unacceptable behavior. It was also evident, through the interview process, that attempts to establish positive alternatives through the Restorative Justice initiative are meeting with some success. The administration needs to continue their efforts to communicate with parents about discipline while being receptive to parents' concerns.
- Parents also expressed a lack of understanding by educators for students on IEPs who have accommodations related to social/emotional issues that lead to discipline that conflicts with their disability. The administration should consider a policy that will ensure that a student's special education liaison is involved with any disciplinary action in order to comply with the IEP.

## *VII. Summary*

Matthew, D'Andrea, Superintendent of Schools for Martha's Vineyard Regional Public Schools, requested that James A. Shillinglaw conduct an extensive onsite review of the special education programs at Martha's Vineyard Regional High School. The purpose of the review was to assist the administration and the school district in determining the effectiveness of current programs. The review process identified several needs to be considered and provided recommendations for strategies to improve programs.

Through the review of documentation, onsite visits, and one-on-one interviews, data was collected to formulate the *Findings* and *Recommendations* sections of this report.

The findings and recommendations have been presented and supported with explanations to assist the administration and school-based personnel in formulating an action plan(s) that will lead to more effective programming for special needs students.