



Fairfax County Public Schools Special Education Comprehensive Review

Interim Report Presentation

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Agenda

1. Introduction to the AIR Team
2. Project Overview
3. Phase I Methodology
4. Summary of Emerging Strengths and Areas of Focus
5. Planning for Phase II



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Introduction to the AIR Team

Meet the Presenters



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Project Overview

Background of Comprehensive Review

- In December 2019, there was a School Board forum topic requesting Office of Auditor General (OAG) to amend the annual audit plan to facilitate a review of FCPS special education services.
- In May 2020, FCPS issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) to solicit proposals for the provision of a comprehensive review of FCPS special education services. The evaluation committee of the RFP unanimously recommended contract award to American Institutes for Research (AIR).
- OAG serves as the project liaison of this review.

FCPS Goals of Comprehensive Review



1. Evaluate the system's design, structure, and established processes.



2. Evaluate the adequacy of human capital resources.



3. Analyze the alignment of services with evidence-based practices.

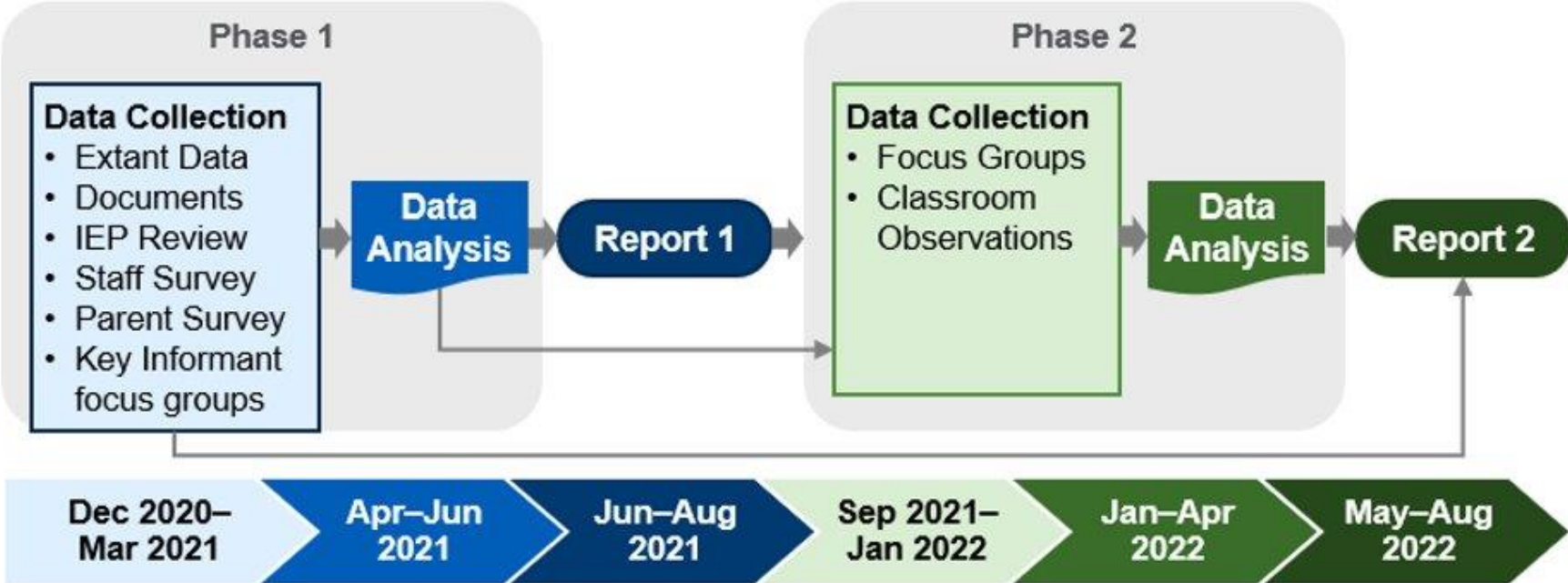


4. Evaluate the effectiveness of communication with stakeholders.

AIR's Goals

- Balance a collaborative approach with the independence of an expert, third-party review.
- Maintain sensitivity to the current education landscape in Fairfax County.
- Generate recommendations for changes that are actionable, evidence-based, and will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of services for FCPS students with disabilities (SWDs) and their families.

Project Timeline





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Phase I Methodology

Interim Report Limitations

- The interim report summarizes **emerging themes** from Phase I data collection activities, including areas of strength and areas of focus, based on data collection activities conducted in the first year of a two-year review.
- These emerging themes are intended to guide data collection efforts in Phase II, which will include focus groups and classroom observations.
- We stress that these are emerging themes that may change based on data collection activities in Phase II. **These are not final findings or conclusions.**

Extant Data Analysis

AIR reviewed existing publicly available and FCPS-provided data to:

- Gain a contextual understanding of key special education indicators.
- Investigate trends over time in the district.
- Examine differences among demographic groups.
- Data sources included:
 - Student-level demographic data
 - Outcome data for students with and without disabilities
 - Special education compliance data
 - 504 plan data
 - FCPS employee data (e.g., staff placement, certification, attrition)

Document Analysis

- AIR reviewed school and district documents to learn more about special education programming and procedures.
- Reviewed over 200 documents and web-based resources including the following:
 - Policy guidance documents
 - Instructional materials
 - Professional development offerings
 - Strategic planning documents
 - Comments from School Board members and parent advocacy group members collected via Google form (16 responses)

IEP Review

- AIR review a randomly selected, representative sample of 300 IEPs to:
 - Determine the extent to which FCPS is complying with IDEA procedural requirements, including the timeliness of the referral and eligibility processes.
 - Determine the extent to which the IEPs demonstrate quality and meaningfulness.
- Full history reviews were conducted for a randomly selected, representative subsample of 50 IEPs.

Staff Survey

- AIR conducted an online survey of all instructional staff in FCPS in March 2021.
- Survey items were aligned to the four goal areas of the review:
 - Special education design, structure, and processes
 - Human capital resources
 - Evidence-based practices
 - Communication
- Survey included Likert-scale items and three open-ended response items.
- Response rate was 32% (6,308 responses).

Parent Survey

- AIR conducted an online survey of all parents of students with IEPs and 504 plans in FCPS in March 2021.
- Survey items were aligned to the four goal areas of the review.
- Survey included Likert-scale items and one open-ended response item.
- Survey was administered in nine languages.
- Response rate was 55% (18,547 responses).

Key Informant Focus Groups

- AIR conducted two hour-long focus groups in December 2020 with key FCPS leaders to collect important information to guide the context of the review:
 - Administrators (5 participants): 4 principals and 1 region assistant superintendent
 - FCPS central office staff (6 participants): 4 representatives from the Department of Special Services, 1 representative from Career and Transition Services, and 1 representative from Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports

Summary of Emerging Strengths and Areas of Focus

Goal 1: Special Education Design, Structure, and Processes

Goal 1 Summary

Strengths:

1. FCPS is meeting targets for compliance timelines related to referral, eligibility determination, and IEP development processes.
2. The FCPS Department of Special Services has established guidance, procedures, and leadership related to special education programming and instruction.

Areas of Focus:

1. FCPS staff and parents expressed concern about the degree to which special education policy and programming decisions reflect their needs and input.
2. Suspension and expulsion rates vary based on demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity).
3. Additional resources are needed to support dually identified students, specifically ELs with disabilities and twice-exceptional (2e) learners.
4. SWDs, their families, and their educators need additional support to prepare for postsecondary transitions.
5. IEPs do not include sufficient data-based information to guide individualized educational planning.

Strength #1

FCPS is meeting targets for compliance timelines related to referral, eligibility determination, and IEP development processes.

- Compliance rate with annual IEP timelines was 94.12% for 2018–19.
- On the staff survey, 87.27% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that FCPS has effective processes for identifying SWDs.
- In 2018–19, 87% of parents reported that FCPS schools facilitated parent involvement as a means to improve services and results for SWDs (State Performance Plan Indicator 8).

Data Sources: Extant data analysis, staff survey, parent survey

Strength #2

The FCPS Department of Special Services has established guidance, procedures, and leadership related to special education programming and instruction.

- FCPS Strategic Plan promotes inclusive culture.
- FCPS has comprehensive written documentation of policies and procedures related to special education, including public resources on their website.
- The Department of Special Services has a robust leadership structure with regional support staff.

Data Sources: Document analysis, key informant focus groups

Area of Focus #1

FCPS staff and parents expressed concern about the degree to which special education policy and programming decisions reflect their needs and input.

- Common themes in parent feedback that merit further exploration include lengthy timelines for testing and eligibility decisions; difficulty getting appropriate services; and a lack of transparency and accountability about IEP goals and progress.
- Common themes in staff feedback that merit further exploration include the difficulty of initiating testing and eligibility procedures; ensuring SWDs are included when planning new programs and services; and limited collaboration between special education and general education.
- Both staff and parents reported concerns with inconsistent interpretation and/or implementation of special education policies at the school level.

Data Sources: Parent survey, staff survey, document analysis

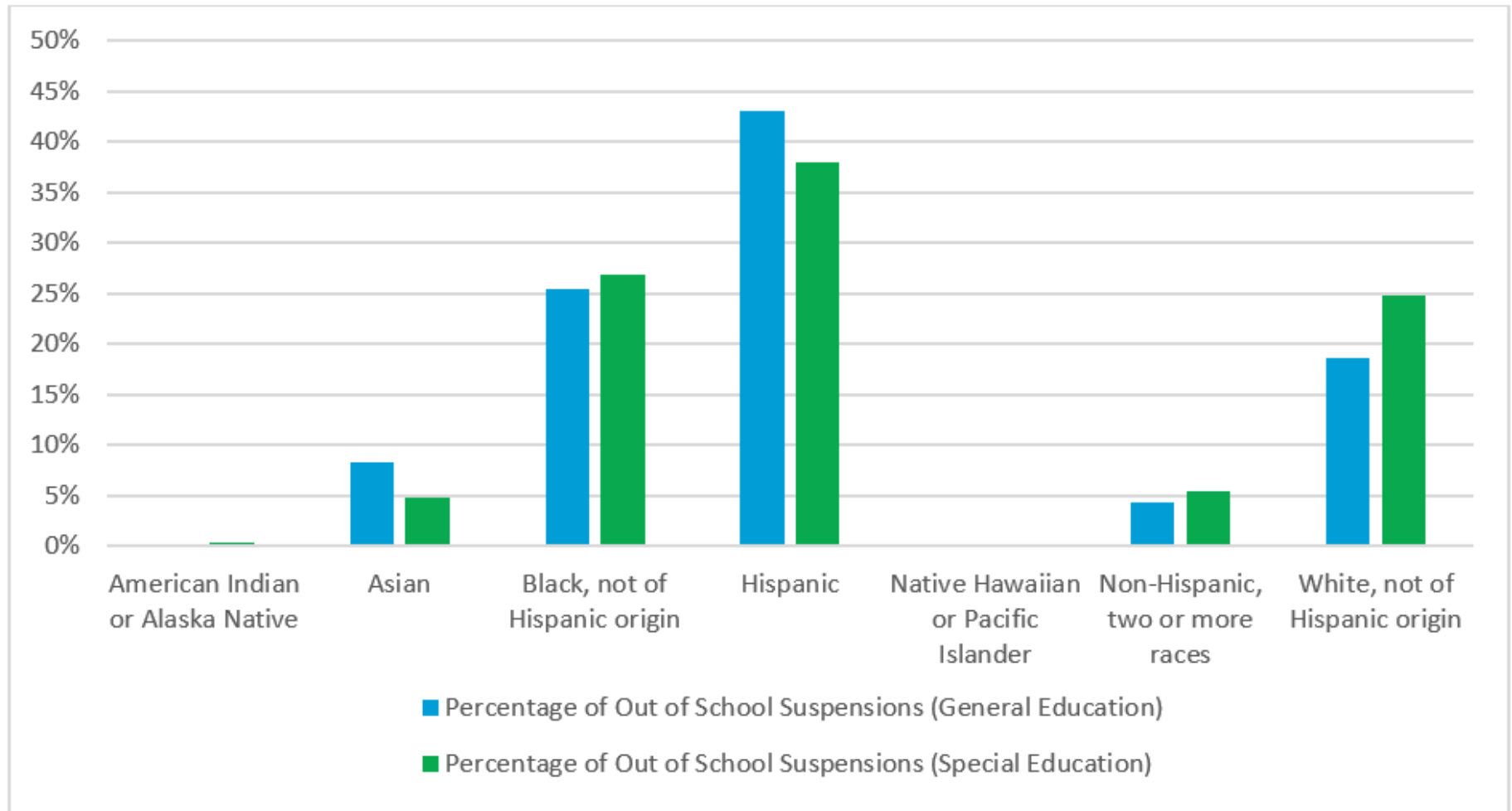
Area of Focus #2

Suspension and expulsion rates vary based on demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity).

- During 2018–19, FCPS was identified as a division having significant discrepancy in the rate of long-term suspensions and expulsions of greater than 10 days in a school year for children with IEPs (State Performance Plan Indicator 4a).
- In 2016, 2017, and 2018, FCPS was identified as having a significant discrepancy by race or ethnicity in the rate of long-term suspensions and expulsions greater than 10 days in a school year for children with IEPs (State Performance Plan Indicator 4b).
- Although FCPS was found to have significant discrepancies in these areas, the FCPS Special Education Performance Report for those respective years indicates a response of “no” to the following prompt: “The VDOE concluded that the policies, procedures[,] or practices contributed to the significant discrepancy and do not comply with requirements relating to the development of IEPs, the use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, and procedural safeguards.”

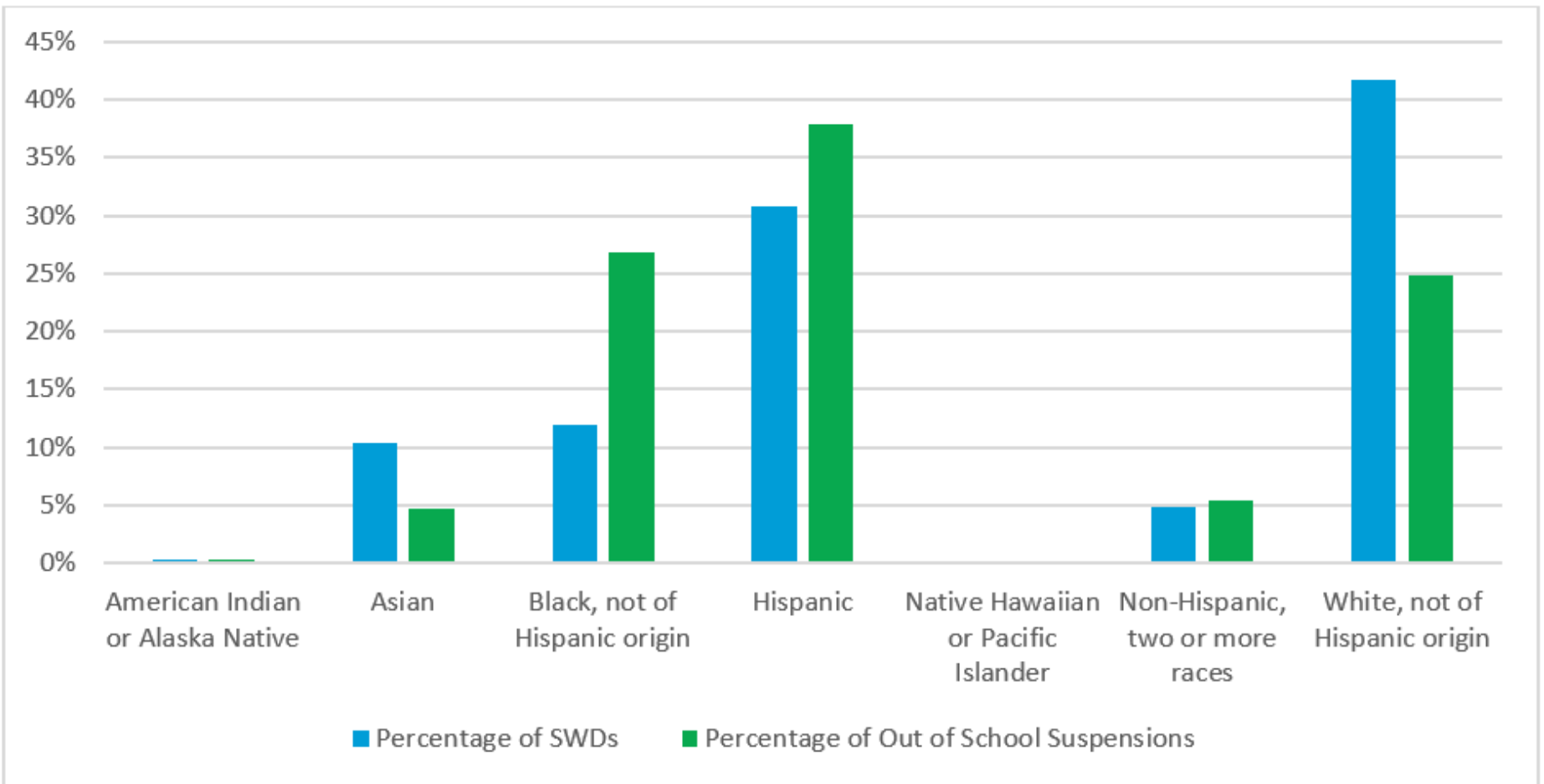
Data Sources: Extant data analysis, document analysis

Exhibit B8. Percentage of Suspensions, by Race, Special Education Versus General Education, FCPS, 2018–2019



Note. Graph created from FCPS student rates of attendance, suspensions, expulsions, and grades (promotion or retention) for students with and without disabilities, 2016–2019.

Exhibit B9. Percentage of SWDs and Suspension Rates, by Race, FCPS, 2018



Note. Graph created from FCPS student rates of attendance, suspensions, expulsions, and grades (promotion or retention) for students with and without disabilities, 2016–2019.

Area of Focus #3

Additional resources are needed to support dually identified students, specifically English Learners (ELs) with disabilities and twice-exceptional (2e) learners.

- Within FCPS, 41% of students receiving special education services also are ELs, compared with 28% of the general education population.
- Stakeholder feedback indicates a need for further exploration around referral/identification practices and staff supports for ELs.
- Parents expressed concerns with the quality of instructional programming and placements for 2e learners, particularly related to the rigor of instruction and the ability to take classes that meet their needs.

Data Sources: Document analysis, staff survey, parent survey, key informant focus groups

Area of Focus #4

SWDs, their families, and their educators need additional support to prepare for postsecondary transitions.

- Between 2016 and 2018, most SWDs from FCPS (73%–75%) were enrolled in higher education, enrolled in some other postsecondary education or training program, competitively employed, or in some other employment within one year of leaving high school.
- Parent feedback suggests that the process by which student input is gathered for IEP transition plans may be driven by compliance rather than student needs.

Data Sources: Extant data analysis, document analysis, staff survey, parent survey

Area of Focus #5

IEPs do not include sufficient data-based information to guide individualized educational planning.

- Only 26% of the IEP sample included data in their present level of performance summaries, and most relied on reporting subjective data rather than objective, measurable data.
- Annual goals and short-term objectives frequently included a measurable and observable behavior but were less likely to specify an appropriate and/or differentiated condition or criterion for measuring performance.
- Only 36% of the IEP sample included a detailed rationale statement explaining why the selected placement was appropriate for the student's needs.
- Full history reviews revealed inconsistent documentation of the information and data used to make eligibility decisions.

Data Sources: Extant data analysis, IEP review

Summary of Emerging Strengths and Areas of Focus

Goal 2: Human Capital Resources

Goal 2 Summary

Strengths:

1. Parents of students with IEPs are generally satisfied with the quality of the FCPS instructional staff.
2. FCPS offers a wide range of professional development activities for staff supporting SWDs.
3. FCPS has consistently maintained a lower student to special education teacher ratio than the state average.

Areas of Focus:

1. Novice teachers, especially those who are not fully licensed, lack preparation and professional development supports targeted at working with SWDs.
2. Staff report difficulty managing their special education-related workloads.
3. The FCPS staffing allocation formula may be driving decisions to inflate service hours on students' IEPs rather than considerations of student need.

Strength #1

Parents of students with IEPs are generally satisfied with the quality of the FCPS instructional staff.

- A significant majority of the parent survey respondents (87.04%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the quality of teaching staff in their child's school.
- In addition, 84.67% of the parent respondents believe that school staff did a good job delivering the services written on their child's IEP.
- Parents who left positive comments about the quality of FCPS instructional staff frequently cited the caring nature of FCPS staff members, often expressing appreciation for the staff of specific schools or specific staff members.

Data Source: Parent survey

Strength #2

FCPS offers a wide range of professional development activities for staff supporting SWDs.

- FCPS offers a range of both synchronous and asynchronous professional development opportunities.
- Professional development offerings include trainings on specific intervention platforms, instructional practices by content area, and strategies for specialized populations of learners (e.g., preschool students).
- MyPDE system links professional development and employee performance evaluations.

Data Sources: Document analysis, staff survey

Strength #3

FCPS has consistently maintained a lower student to special education teacher ratio than the state average.

- The ratio of SWDs to special education teachers in FCPS held steady at 10 students per special education teacher from 2016-2017 to 2019-2020 and decreased to 9 students per special education teacher in 2020-2021.
- The ratio of SWDs to special education teachers in FCPS was consistently lower than the Virginia state average during this same time period (approximately 15 students per special education teacher).
- The ratio of SWDs to instructional assistants in FCPS remained relatively consistent from 2016-2017 to 2020-2021 at approximately 10 students per instructional assistant.

Data Source: Extant data analysis

Area of Focus #1

Novice teachers, especially those who are not fully licensed, lack preparation and professional development supports targeted at working with SWDs.

- In 2020, FCPS employed 447 provisionally licensed special education teachers and 2,756 fully licensed special education teachers.
- In the 2018–19 school year, 2.3% of special education teachers in FCPS were provisionally licensed, which was higher than the Virginia state average (1.9%) and the rates in neighboring Virginia school divisions.
- Emerging themes suggest that novice teachers lack preparation to work with SWDs.
- Only 63.42% of staff survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that teachers new to the profession or new to teaching SWDs received additional, specialized professional development supports for teaching SWDs.

Data Sources: Extant data analysis, document analysis, staff survey

Area of Focus #2

Staff report difficulty managing their special education-related workloads.

- Although the FCPS student to special education teacher ratio is lower than the state average, many staff members reported feeling unable to provide SWDs with sufficient individualized support in classroom settings.
- Many staff survey respondents reported feeling overwhelmed by case management, meeting, and paperwork duties.
- Although 72.44% of the staff respondents believe that FCPS is effective at recruiting high-quality personnel to serve SWDs, only 56.47% believe that FCPS is effective at retaining those personnel.

Data Source: Staff survey

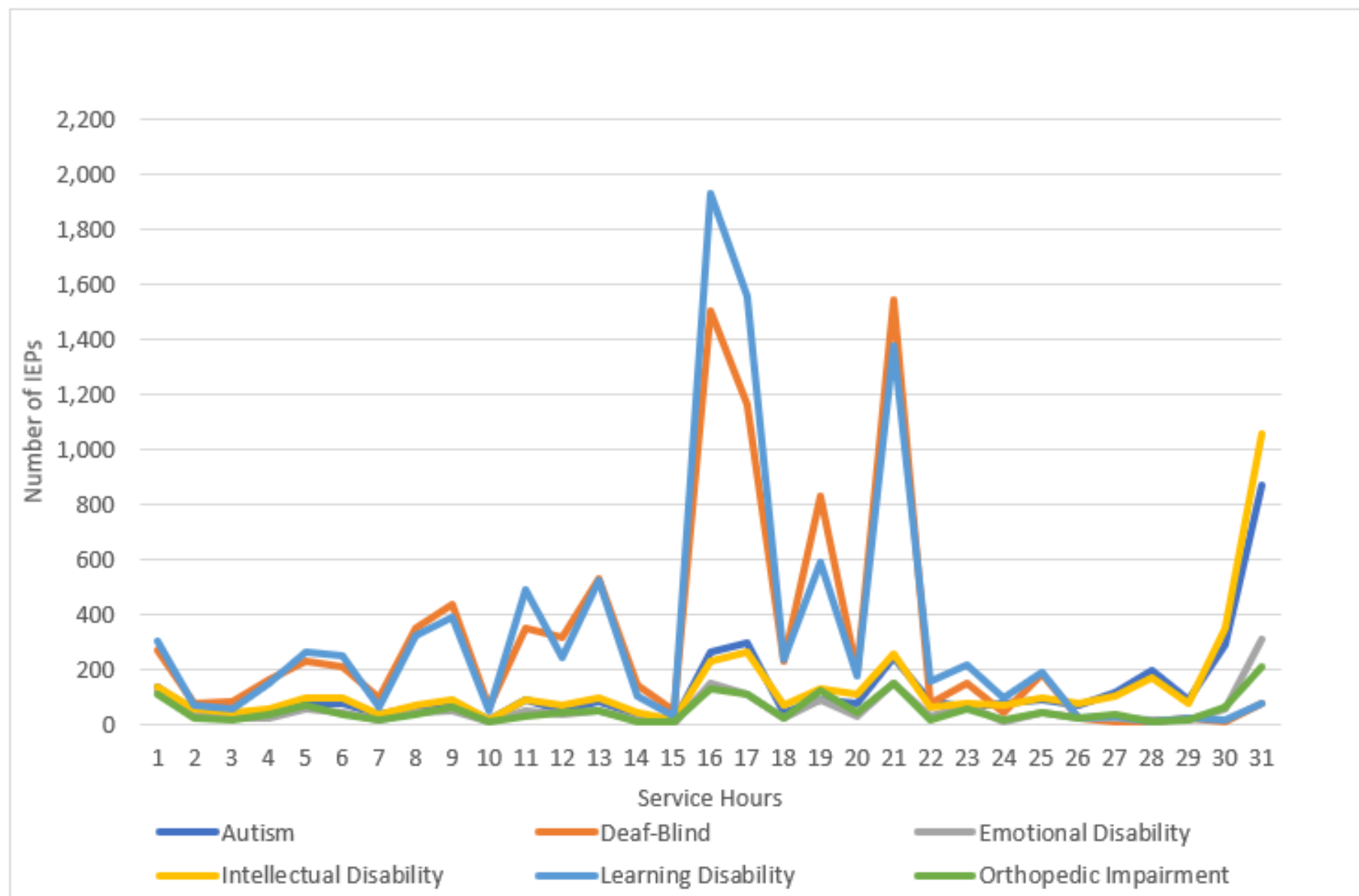
Area of Focus #3

The FCPS staffing allocation formula may be driving decisions to inflate service hours on students' IEPs rather than considerations of student need.

- Staffing allocations at the school building level are determined by the number of Level 1 students (less than 16 hours of specialized instruction per week) and Level 2 students (16 or more hours).
- A review of frequency distribution data for IEP service hours shows a sharp increase in the number of students receiving 16 hours of service on their IEP, which corresponds with the Level 1/Level 2 distinction.
- This pattern also appeared when the data were disaggregated by disability category.

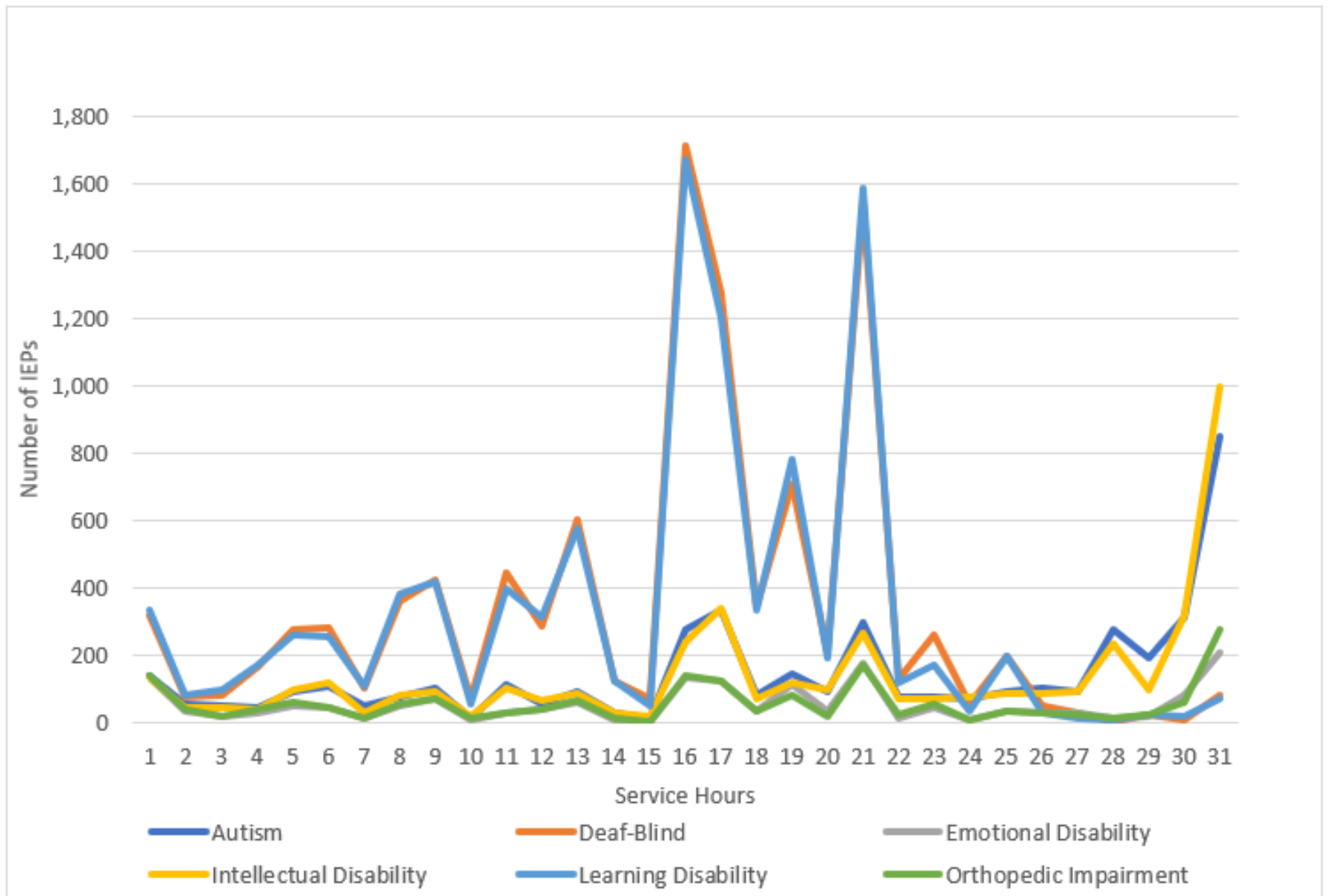
Data Sources: Extant analysis, key informant focus group

Exhibit B15. Number of Service Hours by IEP, FCPS, 2016–2017



Note. Graph created from FCPS special education compliance data, 2016–2021.

Exhibit B16. Number of Service Hours by IEP, FCPS, 2017-2018



Note. Graph created from FCPS special education compliance data, 2016–2021.

Summary of Emerging Strengths and Areas of Focus

Goal 3: Evidence-Based Practices

Goal 3 Summary

Strengths:

1. None identified at this time.

Areas of Focus:

1. There is concern about the quality of inclusive practices in FCPS.
2. The connection between MTSS and special education can be improved.

Strengths

- The AIR research team felt that insufficient data has been collected at this time to identify any clear emerging themes related to areas of strength in the use of evidence-based practices.
- Phase II data collection activities will include classroom observations, which will provide the opportunity to directly observe instructional staff's use of evidence-based practices.
- Stakeholder focus groups also will provide an opportunity to learn more about how teachers select, implement, and assess the effectiveness of evidence-based practices.

Area of Focus #1

There is concern about the quality of inclusive practices in FCPS.

- In 2018-19, FCPS did not meet Virginia state targets for Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for students with IEPs ages 6–21 (State Performance Plan Indicators 5a and 5b).
- In 2018-19, FCPS did not meet Virginia state targets for LRE for preschool children with IEPs (State Performance Plan Indicators 6a and 6b).
- Stakeholder feedback reveals a desire for greater consistency in inclusive programming across schools and regions to provide all students with equitable access to academic and social inclusion opportunities (e.g., academies, electives).

Data Sources: Extant data analysis, document analysis, IEP review

Exhibit B5. IDEA Special Education Performance Indicators, FCPS Versus Comparison Districts, 2018–19

Indicators	Description	Fairfax	Prince William	Loudoun	Arlington	Virginia	Montgomery	Wake
Indicator 5a	Students included in regular classroom 80% or more of the day.	54	65.13	68.11	66.52	67.6	67.45	62.93
Target 5a		>70	>70	>70	>70	>70	>70.9	>65
Indicator 5b	Students included in regular classroom less than 40% of the day	11	12.31	9.26	4.48	9.3	14.02	14.92
Target 5b		<8	<8	<8	<8	<8	<10.76	<15
Indicator 5c	Students served in a separate public or private school, residential, home-based, or hospital facility	4	3.56	0.93	2.9	4.39	5.75	0.93
Target 5c		<3	<2.5	<2.5	<2.5	<2.5	<5.44	<2
Indicator 6a	Children aged 3 through 5 with IEPs attend a regular early childhood program and receive the majority of special education and related services in the regular early childhood program	25	19.95	27.05	33.65	31.44	34.61	37.53
Target 6a		>35	>35	>35	>35	>35	>65.1	>38
Indicator 6b	Children aged 3 through 5 with IEPs attend a separate special education class, separate school, or residential facility	46	29.43	30.75	22.62	29.34	48.9	42.28
Target 6b		<17	<17	<17	<17	<17	<17.9	<19.7

Note: This slide describes emerging themes from the interim report based on the first year of a two-year review. These are NOT final findings and are subject to change pending further data collection and analysis in year two.

Area of Focus #2

The connection between MTSS and special education can be improved.

- Staff lack deep understanding of MTSS practices and procedures, including how MTSS processes and special education processes fit together.
- MTSS practices and procedures lack consistency across schools.
- Concerns emerged about the adequacy of supports to school staff providing MTSS interventions to students exhibiting extreme behaviors in both general education and self-contained environments.
- There is a need to further explore the effectiveness of Tier 2 and 3 intervention practices and procedures.

Data Sources: Document analysis, staff survey, IEP review, key informant focus groups

Summary of Emerging Strengths and Areas of Focus

Goal 4: Communication

Goal 4 Summary

Strengths:

1. FCPS has taken actions to improve communication with school staff.

Areas of Focus:

1. The amount and quality of communication between parents and school staff varies by school.
2. Parents and staff have differing opinions about the collaborative process to develop IEPs.

Strength #1

FCPS has taken actions to improve communication with school staff.

- Examples of actions taken include:
 - Prioritizing communication with school staff about special education processes.
 - Appointing an assistant ombudsman for special education in 2019.
 - Providing written documentation to support referral and eligibility procedures.

Data Sources: Document analysis, staff survey

Area of Focus #1

The amount and quality of communication between parents and school staff varies by school.

- Lack of consistency in school-level practices related to special education may contribute to school-parent communication challenges.
- Staff survey respondents were more likely to agree that school-level staff provided helpful information about services for SWDs than parent survey respondents.
- Challenges in school-parent communication are especially prevalent during transitions between schools (e.g., elementary to middle school).

Data Sources: Parent survey, staff survey, key informant focus groups

Area of Focus #2

Parents and staff have differing opinions about the collaborative process to develop IEPs.

- Although approximately 94% of the parent survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had adequate opportunities for input into the development of their child's IEP, 38% of the IEPs reviewed in the sample did not include any written evidence of parent input.
- Survey responses further suggest that although parents may have opportunities for input into the development of their child's IEP or Section 504 plan, they are not satisfied with the quality of these opportunities.

Data Sources: Parent survey, staff survey, IEP review



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Planning for Phase II

Phase II Next Steps

1. Hold stakeholder focus groups targeted to the improvement areas identified in this report (20 groups with 6-8 participants each).
2. Conduct classroom observations with a focus on evidence-based practices (100 on-site observations across 20 schools).
3. Continue to perform extant data analysis as needed, especially for subgroups within the special education population.



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Questions



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