SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT

Special Education District of Lake County

Report Date: June 30, 2023

Executive Board Presentation: July 27, 2023

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General Information

Exceptional Learning Solutions was engaged to provide a Special Education Program Review for the Special Education District of Lake County (hereinafter "SEDOL") in 2023. Founded in 2009, Exceptional Learning Solutions is comprised of a team of experienced education professionals focused on providing schools and school districts nationwide with analysis of organizational, pedagogical, and leadership practices affecting student academic achievement, while providing sustainable, research-established supports affecting employee performance in education. Reliable, results-driven methods are crucial to achieving and sustaining organizational effectiveness; practical, research-tested tools, strategies and protocols are pivotal; and Exceptional Learning Solutions seamlessly provides those necessities to all schools and districts it serves.

Exceptional Learning Solutions' services began with a dedicated team of experienced professionals clinically analyzing school needs and current practices through a detailed and systematic evaluation, then ultimately building—with substantial client input and clear concurrence—specific management, education, organizational and leadership recommendations in a written report, exclusively tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the district. Exceptional Learning Solutions recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to mastering the complex issues schools, administrators, building leaders and teachers face each day. All evaluations and recommendations are based on sound research and proven methods. Systems within the district and schools are also evaluated and recommendations are suggested as needed to improve school delivery of services to special needs students. Exceptional Learning Solutions' approach of creating partnerships with teachers and school leaders allows for meaningful reforms, based on the evaluation and analysis, that become embedded in the school culture to remain long after the Exceptional Learning Solutions team completes its onsite responsibilities.

Exceptional Learning Solutions' evaluation and recommendations to provide superior educational opportunities to special needs students, including supporting compliance issues, have realized great success throughout the United States. States, districts, and schools confidently rely on Exceptional Learning Solutions to provide consistent, high-quality evaluative services that ultimately allow schools and districts to train teachers and building leaders, improve educational services to special education students, and deliver increased student achievement for all students.

Exceptional Learning Solutions is comprised of a diverse and skilled group of team members who bring the following (collective) qualifications to our organization and this work:
- School superintendent experience
- Director-level special education experience and district and state department of education levels
- United States Department of Education leadership experience
- Instructional and organizational performance auditing experience
- High school principalship experience
- Teaching at elementary, middle school, high school and college teaching experience
- Law firm, legal staff, state legislative policy, and student/family advocacy experience
- School transformation and academic turnaround experience
- School reconstitution and new school launch leadership experience
- Community organizing, community capacity-building facilitation and leadership experience
- Teaching quality research, training, and professional development experience
- Public school labor negotiations experience

Specifically for SEDOL's Special Education Program Review, Exceptional Learning Solutions engaged two primary Exceptional Learning Solutions team members assigned to this project: Dr. Bambi Lockman and Todd Zoellick. Both bring tremendous knowledge, unique experience, and a depth of background in special education at various levels in school districts and government entities. A brief summary is provided below.

Dr. Bambi Lockman—Senior Advisor for Special Education. Lockman currently serves as a nationally recognized special education consultant and works with schools and districts throughout the United States. She has served as an Educational Policy Consultant for the Office of Early Learning, Florida Department of Education. From 2011-2014 she was the Deputy Superintendent for Instructional Services for Volusia County School District in Central Florida. Within her scope of work, she was responsible for the planning and coordination of PreK-12 curriculum and school improvement programs; federal and state grant funded programs, assessment and accountability, professional development, career technical education, online learning, alternative education, athletics and safety as well as exceptional student education and student support services, as well as Volusia's Race to the Top grant. Prior to Volusia County, Lockman served as Chief of the Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services in the Florida Department of Education from 2004-2011. During this time, she was responsible for Florida's implementation and general supervision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004), initiated postsecondary programs for students with significant cognitive disabilities, coordinated Florida's State Performance Plan and Annual Performance Report, and managed the distribution of IDEA Part B and Part B Preschool grants. Lockman has been instrumental in Florida's implementation of a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. Lockman also has extensive experience in Santa Rosa County School District, Milton, FL where she served as a classroom teacher and both a school based and district level administrator.

Todd Zoellick, Esq.—Chief Engagement Officer. Zoellick is an author, educator, and attorney. He has served in leadership roles in multiple education consulting firms and is the founder and president of an education advocacy organization for K-12 and higher education institutions that works to improve educational opportunities for students by providing support for administrators, teachers, and parents. He is also a university professor and lecturer on education, law, and public policy topics. Formerly, Zoellick served as the Deputy Regional Secretary at the United States Department of Education (2005-2009). Appointed by President George W. Bush, he served as one of Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings' top officials in the Midwest, visiting thousands of schools throughout the region and actively engaged students, teachers, parents, administrators, business and civic organizations, and government officials to explain education policy and to build bridges between practitioners and policy makers. Zoellick specializes in special education evaluations and development of support systems for schools and districts throughout the United States.

In today's educational climate, reliable, results-driven methods are crucial to achieving and sustaining organizational effectiveness. Practical, research-tested evaluations, tools, strategies, and protocols are pivotal. And seamlessly providing them is what the Exceptional Learning Solutions' special education team does.

Methodology and Process

For the district and schools within the district, Exceptional Learning Solutions provided a systematic, thorough, and comprehensive special education evaluation of programs, systems, and personnel; this site-specific process established baseline data upon which Exceptional Learning Solutions' analysis, determinations, and ultimate recommendations are based. Determinations were rendered solely upon the basis of validated and documented evidence and in accordance with clearly articulated criteria. Further, Exceptional Learning Solutions identified educational standards and compliance issues achieved and not achieved at the school and district levels, which are contained in this report.

Crucial to Exceptional Learning Solutions' approach is the collaborative involvement of school and district leaders and staff at the central office and each building in which our team works. Longitudinal studies by Exceptional Learning Solutions and efficacy researchers nationwide establish that effective interventions and sustainable change occur only if those affected "own" and participate in implementation. Consequently, Exceptional Learning Solutions maintains a rigorous focus on collaboration, professionalism, respectfulness, and sensitivity in all of its evaluative work. Issues are explored and probed *with* stakeholders—not independently or in isolation. High standards and high expectations are not compromised by collaboration; instead, opportunities for necessary change and sustained growth are data-proven to be enhanced.

The Special Education Program Review was divided into three phases: Pre-Evaluation, Program Evaluation Site Work, and Post-Evaluation.

Phase One – Pre-Evaluation: During the Pre-Evaluation phase, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team gathered information from a multiplicity of sources, including the district office and all relevant departments within it, as well as publicly accessible data. Additionally, the team analyzed a comprehensive range of statistics and information regarding special education services at SEDOL. Much of the information gathered from the district was through electronic records, district documentation, district policies, and discussions with district personnel.

SEDOL was asked to provide documents and information about special education and support services. Because we met with both SEDOL and member districts, the information request was divided into two sections. We asked for the member districts' special education systems/processes/procedures that were district-specific. The information request included, but was not limited to, the following:

 SEDOL Information Request

- Organizational chart for the district
- Organizational chart for the special education team in the district
- Job descriptions for all special education personnel at the district level and the school level (i.e., district administrators, teachers, related services personnel, paraprofessionals, etc.)
- Copy of the special education handbook
- Copy of the special education budget (as much as you are able to share with an external vendor)
- If applicable, copy/description of your overall special education program/model/framework. Does this vary by building and/or classroom?
- Copies of any current special education grants awarded or applied for
- Copies of any special education audits conducted by ISBE or other oversight organizations
- Copies of any board policies related to special education in your district

- Description of all special education-related professional development sessions. Were they mandatory or optional? Who attended?
- Description of any training provided to special education parents/family members
- Number of special education students who receive specialized transportation services
- Description of your discipline plan for special education students
- Description of the process for providing a behavior intervention plan, if needed
- The name of your data management system for special education students
- The name of any assessment systems that are used for special education students
- Describe the district's RtI/MTSS program, including processes and procedures. What is the referral process? Is there an intervention form and who manages it? What type of progress monitoring is in place?
- Describe any summer programming for special education students in the district
- Number of students currently in special education by grade level, age, race, socio-economic status, and identification (i.e., OT, PT, behavior, etc.) district-wide and at each school
- Number of students with 504 plans district wide and at each school
- Number of overall students in the district
- Number of students in each grade level by school and classroom
- List of special education teachers by school building, including certification(s)
- List of special education paraprofessionals by school building
- List of special education support staff by school building (i.e., school psychologist, social worker, nurse, etc.)
- Daily schedule for each building as it relates to special education students (i.e., who is in what classroom at what time with what teacher)
- Curriculum framework or description of academic program
- Five-year view of special education student academic progress

 Member Districts Information Request

- Job descriptions for all special education personnel at the school level (i.e., teachers, related services personnel, paraprofessionals, etc.)
- Copy of the special education handbook
- Copy of the special education budget (as much as you are able to share with an external vendor)
- If applicable, copy/description of your overall special education program/model/framework. Does this vary by classroom?
- Copies of any current special education grants awarded or applied for
- Copies of any special education audits conducted by ISBE or other oversight organizations
- Copies of any board policies related to special education in your district
- Description of all special education-related professional development sessions. Were they mandatory or optional? Who attended?
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- The name of any assessment systems that are used for special education students
- Describe the district's RtI/MTSS program, including processes and procedures. What is the referral process? Is there an intervention form and who manages it? What type of progress monitoring is in place?

- Describe any summer programming for special education students
- Number of students currently in special education by grade level, age, race, socio-economic status, and identification (i.e., OT, PT, behavior, etc.) at each school
- Number of students with 504 plans at each school
- Number of overall students in the building
- Number of students in each grade level by classroom
- List of special education teachers by school building, including certification(s)
- List of special education paraprofessionals by school building
- List of special education related services personnel and support staff by school building (i.e., school psychologist, social worker, nurse, etc.)
- Daily schedule for each building as it relates to special education students (i.e., who is in what classroom at what time with what teacher)
- Curriculum framework or description of academic program for special education students
- Five-year view of special education student academic progress

Once onsite, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team also requested to see a random sampling of Individualized Education Programs (hereinafter, IEPs), as well as special education student data needed to complete the analysis. No IEP or student data was sent prior to being onsite in the district to avoid violation of FERPA guidelines.

Phase Two – Program Evaluation Site Work: The district and school site work provided the Exceptional Learning Solutions team the opportunity to learn more about the district. Key interviews were arranged and conducted with all special education personnel at the district level, as well as other district leaders. Special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related service staff members, and other staff at each school building, were provided an opportunity to meet with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team during one-on-one sessions, group sessions, and/or open "office hours." The Exceptional Learning Solutions team also met with building leadership in each of the district buildings. The same process for meeting with district leaders, building leaders, and staff was followed for Member District Sector Schools. Additionally, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team visited a sampling of Member District that utilize SEDOL services but do not contain any Sector Schools within their district. Exceptional Learning Solutions team members visited special education classrooms in each of the buildings and observed nearly special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and other staff members at work teaching and supporting students in both SEDOL schools and in Member District Sector Schools.

Additionally, Exceptional Learning Solutions conducted two virtual meetings with parent and community stakeholders, one on April 27, 2023 and one on May 2, 2023. For both meetings, all SEDOL parents and/or family members were invited via email to attend. These meetings provided Exceptional Learning Solutions with an opportunity to explain the purpose and scope of the Special Education Program Review and for parents and/or family members to share their perceptions of the strengths and challenges at SEDOL.

Exceptional Learning Solutions also provided both parents and SEDOL staff members with an opportunity to provide their thoughts and feedback through a confidential survey that was emailed to them. The surveys for SEDOL parents were sent in both English and Spanish. Additionally, SEDOL Member District superintendents, business officers, and special education directors were provided a confidential survey to contribute their perspective on working with SEDOL.

From the site work, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team formulated hypotheses about the district that were tested during the program review, analysis, and final report write-up.

Phase Three – Post-Evaluation: The Exceptional Learning Solutions team drafted this comprehensive report for the district that includes strengths and the areas for improvement identified during the onsite visits and throughout the Special Education Program Review process. Included in this report are findings/observations, commendations, focus areas, and recommendations, together with an implementation timeline for the recommendations contained in this report. The contents of this report can be integrated with the district strategic plan, as well as school improvement plans, and can be used as a basis for continuous improvement. This report is a snapshot of the state of special education services at SEDOL at the time that the Special Education Program Review was conducted and reflects the Exceptional Learning Solutions team findings based on data reviewed, as well as interviews and observations of district leaders, building leaders, teachers, staff, and other district personnel.

Findings and Observations

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team was onsite at SEDOL from April 20, 2023 through May 19, 2023. During that time, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team visited six SEDOL schools: Gages Lake School, Cyd Lash Academy, Fairhaven School, Laremont School, John Powers Center, and South Pre-Voc Center, as well as the Central Office. Additionally, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team visited five Member Districts: District 46, District 116, District 117, District 24, and District 41, including multiple schools within each of the Member Districts.

SEDOL staff were integral in the completion of the Special Education Program Review. Staff members at each SEDOL school, Member District/Sector Schools, and the Central Office were invited to meet in person with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team during "office hours" to provide their thoughts and feedback on their experiences at SEDOL. Additionally, all SEDOL staff received a confidential Staff Survey sent by Exceptional Learning Solutions. The Staff Surveys were sent to 689 staff email addresses provided by SEDOL district leadership. There were 204 responses to the Staff Survey.

Parents played an important role in the Special Education Program Review process. Two virtual Parent Meetings were offered to parents for participation in the Special Education Program Review process. The Parent Meetings occurred on April 27, 2023 and May 2, 2023 and invitations were sent in both English and Spanish to 935 parents. Three parents chose to attend the virtual Parent Meetings. Throughout this report, there are references to a parent survey. Exceptional Learning Solutions also sent confidential Parent Surveys to 935 parent email addresses. There were 59 survey responses to the Parent Survey.

Likewise, Member District representatives were invited to participate in the Special Education Program Review through a Member District Survey. SEDOL district leadership provided 31 superintendent email addresses, 34 business manager email addresses, and 52 coordinator email addresses. Of the confidential Member District Surveys sent to Member District representatives, Exceptional Learning Solutions received 22 survey responses.

Category #1: Central Office Administration

Commendations

- The Superintendent and Executive/Governing Boards are committed to ensuring the success of SEDOL, as evidenced by their willingness to seek outside support and direction to lead genuine change within the district.
- There is an upcoming reorganization of the administrative team, creating the new position of Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Assessment, which is designed to strengthen the implementation of curriculum within SEDOL.
- The reorganization provides the opportunity to hire new staff, to redesign the roles and responsibilities within the organizational infrastructure, and to provide leadership to enhance service delivery to students and member districts.

Focus Area 1.1

For over six decades, SEDOL has had a long and significant tenure as a mainstay for special education in Lake County, Illinois. What started as a small cooperative with a big vision became a nationally recognized special education district, serving the needs of special education students in a variety of ways. This forward trajectory was based on providing high quality services to member districts and meeting the individual needs of students by placing them in appropriate educational settings with highly qualified staff members.

In more recent decades, SEDOL has shrunk in size, offerings, and student population. More importantly the essential services provided to students are not as clearly defined or as effective as in the past. The shining star of SEDOL that was a national beacon for special education has dimmed. While evolution and change naturally occurs in every organization, organizational stagnation and/or deterioration sets in when the vision and mission are neglected.

The mission of SEDOL is summed up in one concise phrase: *Exceptional Services for Exceptional Students by Exceptional Staff.* To understand SEDOL currently, it is helpful to unpack and analyze each component of the mission:

- ***Exceptional Students.*** SEDOL has truly exceptional students. They are exceptional by definition because they have special and individualized needs. But much more than that, they are exceptional because each of them is a vital and important component that makes up SEDOL. Each one of these students, even on the most difficult of days, must be celebrated and recognized for the contribution they make to the tapestry of SEDOL. To have a district that is a shining star, every student must receive the appropriate individualized services that they deserve and are legally required based on their IEPs.

- ***Exceptional Staff.*** There are many exceptional staff members throughout SEDOL: exceptional building leaders and Sector supervisors, exceptional teachers and paraprofessionals, and exceptional staff from the central office to related services/itinerant personnel. These men and women have incredibly difficult jobs with very challenging student populations. Every day they come to work, often still exhausted and battered from the previous day, to provide high quality service to the students they serve. But, not every staff member is exceptional. Some choose not to be, seeing SEDOL as a job rather than a calling. Others could be exceptional with the right

support and training. In order to have a district that is a shining star, every staff member must be present and committed to consistently being and/or becoming exceptional.

- *Exceptional Services.* SEDOL is no longer providing universal exceptional services to all of its students. While there are pockets of greatness where students are thriving and receiving the services needed, many are not, based on insufficient staffing, inappropriate placement, and inadequate decision-making. Exceptional services should not be the goal of a special education district like SEDOL; it should be the minimum standard. Students with special needs require and deserve exceptional services. That means providing qualified staff for every single classroom in every building by beginning staff recruitment/hiring ten months in advance rather than ten weeks in advance, and that every staff member has the certifications, training, and support to do the job they are hired to do. That means placing students in appropriate settings that meet their needs rather than placing a student in a program that has extra space, regardless of needed services. And that means making decisions that are in the best interest of students by providing services that member districts needs for their students; by giving principals and building leaders the autonomy to budget, purchase, and make timely decisions; and by creating a central office leadership team that supports and guides what is happening on the front lines of education at SEDOL rather than dictating from afar. In order to have a district that is a shining star, SEDOL must reorient itself to be focused on exceptional services in every program and in every classroom for every student.

Looking to the past is important to understand the rich and successful history of SEDOL, but dwelling in the past will not generate progress. Throughout the meetings and surveys, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team heard time and again that SEDOL staff, stakeholders, and member districts all want SEDOL to become a shining star once again. It is possible. And not only is it possible, it is also probable if those interested parties are committed to true reform and collectively have the singular focus of ensuring that every student has access to the most exceptional services available provided by the most exceptional staff to meet their individualized student needs.

> **Recommendation 1.1: Develop a working group of SEDOL team members representing central office, each SEDOL school, the sector programs, itinerants, and member districts who will meet regularly and work together with an outside monitoring team (see "Implementing and Monitoring" section) to prioritize and implement the recommendations contained in this report.**

Focus Area 1.2

The organizational structure for any entity, including a school district, is very important to understanding the functionality and operations of an organization. SEDOL currently has a fairly traditional organizational structure, with the Superintendent leading the organization and assistants and/or directors reporting directly to her. For the 2022-2023 school year, the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, the Chief School Business Official, and the Director of Innovation and Technology all report directly to the Superintendent (See SEDOL-created Chart 1.2.1). Additionally, Principals/Supervisors, the Director of Special Services, and the Director of Instructional Services all report to the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. While on its surface this may seem like a logical and likely operational reporting structure, there are some inherent issues with not only the structure, but also with some of the personnel in place.

Chart 1.2.1

Organizational Chart 2022-23
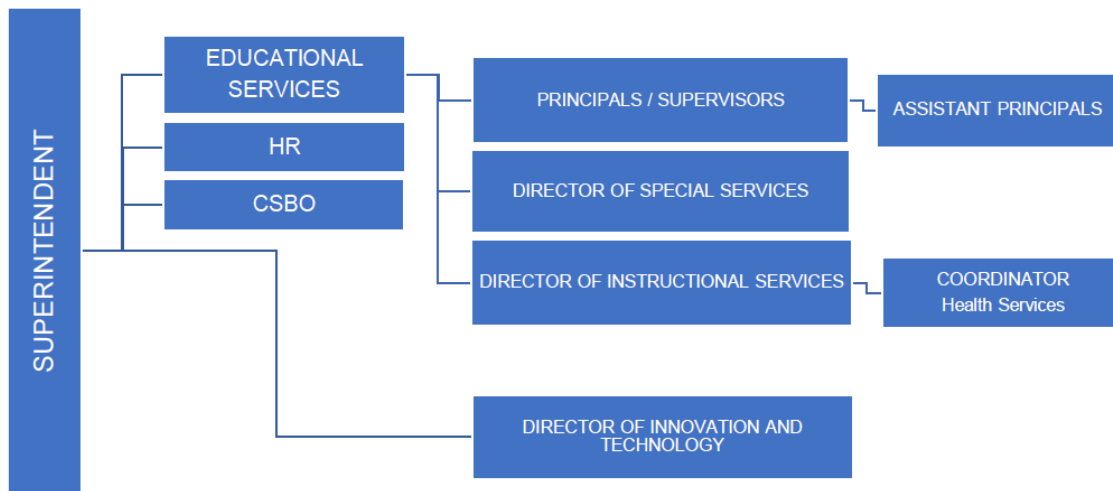
The Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services has a tremendous amount of responsibility in the 2022-2023 Organizational Chart created by SEDOL. Essentially, all aspects of education at SEDOL flow through that position before reporting to the Superintendent. This is a very heavy lift for one person in an organization to supervise Principals/Sector Supervisors, the Director of Special Services who currently oversees all related services personnel and some additional personnel, and the Director of Instructional Services who is currently responsible for curriculum/instruction and assessments. As a result, during the 2022-2023 school year, the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services was not able to adequately fulfill his role in large part due to the supervisory duties that were assigned to him. Additionally, because these duties were not being adequately fulfilled, the positions reporting to the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services were not sufficiently supported. This created an environment where the Superintendent did not have full faith in the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. Because of that, the Superintendent often stepped in to directly oversee those who were supposed to be reporting to the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services (e.g., Principals and Sector Supervisors). While the Superintendent certainly has the authority and ability to interact with any staff member at anytime, this creates hierarchical reporting confusion and operational uncertainty for staff at all levels of the organization.

The Superintendent and SEDOL leadership made the decision to alter the organizational chart for the 2023-2024 school year. SEDOL recognized that the role of Assistant Superintendent of Education Services as it is currently structured is untenable for one individual. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team commends the Superintendent and district for recognizing this and creating the new position of Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Assessment, which will remove the curriculum and assessment, as well as supervision of Principals, out of the Assistant Superintendent for Education Services role and add it to a separate role that is being newly created. While we commend this organizational change, there are also some recommendations related to that change that the Exceptional Learning Solutions team makes below. As a result, in the "2023-24 SEDOL Organizational Chart – DRAFT" that was created by the SEDOL leadership team, there are three assistant superintendents and two director-level positions that all report directly to the Superintendent (See SEDOL-created Chart 1.2.2).

Chart 1.2.2

2023-24 SEDOL Organizational Chart - DRAFT
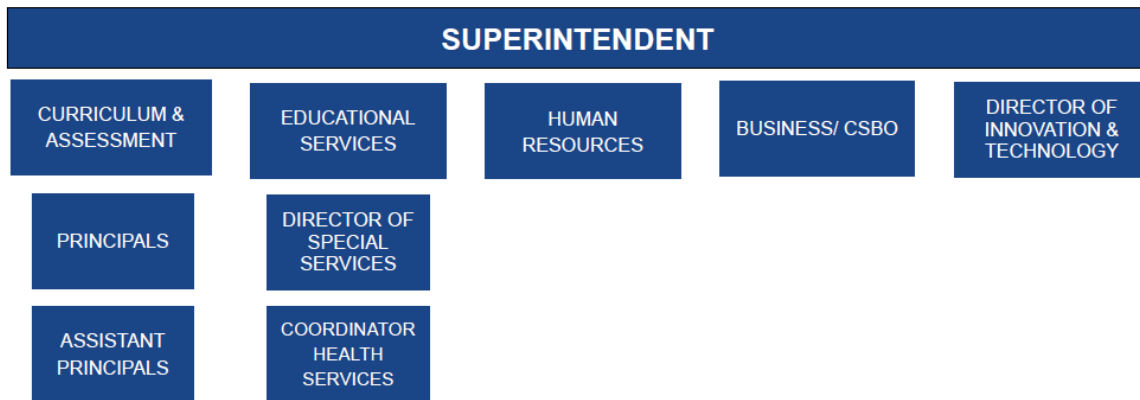
The Exceptional Learning Solutions team respects the organizational changes SEDOL is making to strengthen the reporting structure and supports for staff at all levels within SEDOL. However, it is the opinion of the Exceptional Learning Solutions team that the "2023-2024 SEDOL Organizational Chart – DRAFT" is insufficient to meet the needs of SEDOL during the 2023-2024 school year and beyond. It is important to remember that altering an organizational chart is not something that should happen on an annual basis. Rather, an organizational structure should be determined based on the needs of the organization, the organizational chart should be developed to define the reporting structure, and the district should operate within that structure until the needs of the district change or the mission of the district is altered. As such, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team has developed a Proposed SEDOL Organization Chart that, if implemented in its entirety, will meet both the current and future needs of SEDOL under its current mission (See Chart 1.2.3).

Chart 1.2.3

Proposed SEDOL Organization Chart[1]
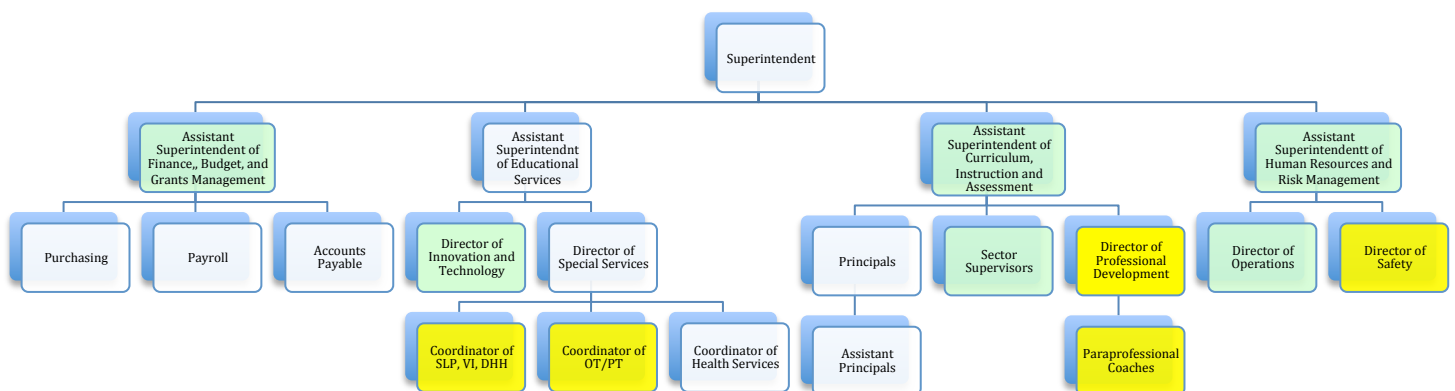
The primary difference between the proposed SEDOL-created "2023-2024 SEDOL Organizational Chart – DRAFT" and the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organization Chart are the individuals

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[1] The yellow highlighted positions represent new proposed positions under the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organization Chart. The green highlighted positions represent existing positions that are changing in some way, either by a title change or a reporting change.

who report directly to the Superintendent. In the proposed SEDOL-created chart, there are three assistant superintendents and two directors who report directly to the Superintendent. In the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organization Chart, there are four roles that report directly to the Superintendent and all four are assistant superintendents. Three of those four titles change under the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organization Chart. The change of titles is not merely semantics but rather it establishes the district leadership team who, along with the Superintendent, will drive the educational, financial, and personnel needs of the district.

The first assistant superintendent-level role is the proposed Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management. District finances are currently managed by the position of Chief School Business Official. That role will be changing in the coming school year as the current Chief School Business Official has resigned and a new person has been hired. However, more than just a change in personnel, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team proposes a change in the structure and responsibilities of that role. Instead of the current director-level position, the recommendation is to change the title and responsibilities to the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management. This change in title alone formally elevates the role to that of a member of the leadership team, as is appropriate for SEDOL's structure. Most of the current responsibilities will stay the same (i.e., payroll, accounts payable, accounts receivable, etc.), but there will be some alterations and additions to the current responsibilities.

As will be discussed in Focus Area 1.3 below, Principals and Sector Supervisors will have new and increased autonomy over their school buildings and sector programs. Because of this new autonomy, budgeting, purchasing decisions, and overall school decision-making and management will occur at the school building level and not the district level. As a result, the role of the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management and her team will still oversee the SEDOL budget but will also support the Principals and Sector Supervisors in the development, maintenance, and reporting of their budgets. This means that the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management and staff in the future will spend significant amounts of time in schools with Principals and Sector Supervisors. During the budgeting process, Principals and Sector Supervisors will need support (especially in year one) to develop their school budget. There will also need to be monthly financial reporting that will be sent to the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management. This reporting can be accomplished at the school level by current staff or support staff or outsource the tasks to a third party provider. While the budget for the 2023-2024 school year has already been set prior to this new process being implemented, it is imperative for the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management and staff to begin the gradual release of the budget and financial management over to the Principals and Sector Supervisors during the 2023-2024 school year.

In addition to the budget and finance, the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management also will have the responsibility of managing grants for SEDOL. In the opinion of the Exceptional Learning Solutions team, SEDOL has not done a sufficient job of identifying and applying for grants related to the operations and/or special projects for SEDOL. New initiatives and innovative programs can be created and/or expanded if there are additional grant dollars obtained by the district. One of the reasons that SEDOL has not obtained the level of grants that it could is that the responsibility for managing grants has not had a firm home within the district. By bringing this responsibility under the purview of the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management, there will be a dedicated department that is responsible for grants. Along with the Superintendent and educational leaders, this department can help identify and apply for these grants to benefit students and programs within SEDOL. This work can be accomplished by internal staff already in place or can be outsourced and supervised by the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management.

The second assistant superintendent-level role is that of Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. The role of the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services will be changing, as described above, by removing the direct responsibility for curriculum and assessment and creating a new assistant superintendent position. In the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart, the title of Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services stays the same and continues to have the Director of Special Services reporting to that role. However, an important change is who reports to the Director of Special Services. In the SEDOL-proposed chart (Chart 1.2.2), the Coordinator of Health Services reports directly to the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. In the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart, the Coordinator of Health Services reports to the Director of Special Services. Additionally, two new positions are created that also report directly to the Director of Special Services: Coordinator of Speech and Language Pathology, Visually Impaired and Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Coordinator of Occupational and Physical Therapy. Currently, the Director of Special Services oversees all Speech and Language Pathology, Visually Impaired, Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Occupational Therapy, and Physical Therapy. While the current individual in this role does an excellent job of balancing and coordinating due to her many years of familiarity with SEDOL and its programs, there are simply too many responsibilities for one person to coordinate. Instead, the three coordinators will each oversee their respective personnel and teams and report back to the Director of Special Services who will continue to report to the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services.

The Director of Innovation and Technology currently reports directly to the Superintendent and also does so under the SEDOL-proposed chart for the 2023-2024 school year. Director level roles should not report directly to the Superintendent, but instead should report to an Assistant Superintendent. In the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart, the Director of Innovation and Technology will report to the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. There are some proposed changes to the Innovation and Technology Department contained in Focus Area 1.6 below.

The third assistant superintendent-level position is the proposed Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Curriculum and Assessment has historically fallen under the responsibility of the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services. However, the Superintendent and district leadership has wisely decided to create a new proposed position called the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Assessment. While the Exceptional Learning Solutions team fully endorses this change, we believe it is important to consider a title change for this role to accurately reflect the responsibilities of the position. The Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart proposes the title be changed to Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. As will be discussed later in this report (See Category #4, Category #5, and Category #6), instructional services at SEDOL have been and continue to be severely lacking in rigor. That is one of the reasons the Exceptional Learning Solutions team believes that the creation of this new assistant superintendent role is so vital. However, if the new assistant superintendent will be overseeing curriculum and assessments, that person also needs to be responsible for instruction. Solid instruction is vital for any school district, including SEDOL, with curriculum and assessments supporting instruction. To have an assistant superintendent who is responsible for curriculum and assessments without responsibility for instruction compromises the functionality of the overall instructional program. As such, this new position should be called Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment and should be responsible for all three components.

The "2023-2024 SEDOL Organizational Chart – DRAFT" created by SEDOL has Principals and Assistant Principals reporting to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Assessment (or as proposed by Exceptional Learning Solutions the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and

Assessment). The Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart also places the Principals and Assistant Principals under the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Additionally, the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart also includes the Sector Supervisors as reporting to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. These individuals are in similar roles to building Principals as they supervise the Sector classrooms and programs contained within member schools. They should be treated similar to Principals for reporting and organizational purposes.

Under the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, the Exceptional Learning Solutions Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart has two newly created positions. The first is the Director of Professional Development. As discussed throughout this report and specifically in Focus Area 8.2, SEDOL lacks appropriate professional development and training for its staff. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team recommends a significant increase in professional development and training for teachers, paraprofessional, and other staff members to ensure that they have the knowledge and understand best practices when working with students with special needs. Coordination of the professional development will be a monumental task, primarily because what is currently in place is so inadequate. This role will need to develop professional development curriculum and work with district leadership and building/Sector leadership to have time for professional development sessions with staff either individually or in small/large groups. Some of the professional development should be internal and provided by the Director of Professional Development in conjunction with other staff members.

Exceptional Learning Solutions also recommends the new positions of Paraprofessional Coaches, with one coach assigned to each of the five SEDOL Schools. Paraprofessional Coaches with lower caseloads will also be assigned to the Sector programs so the paraprofessionals there will also have coaches. The purposes of the Paraprofessional Coaches is to provide onboarding and training to new paraprofessionals at the beginning of the school year, as well as any new paraprofessionals who are hired during the school year, and provide ongoing coaching and updated training to all paraprofessionals, regardless of tenure, throughout the school year. These Paraprofessional Coaches will report to the Director of Professional Development (See Focus Area 8.3 for additional information).

The fourth and final assistant superintendent-level position is the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources who oversees a Human Resources staff of three individuals. Currently, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and the staff report directly to the Superintendent. While this structure is of no concern, there needs to be some reorganization and defining of roles within the Human Resources Department. The Human Resources Department should have the singular focus of addressing the personnel needs of SEDOL. This includes recruiting new staff, working to retain staff, providing employee information and resources to current staff (e.g., personnel forms, time reporting, employee complaints, etc.), and supporting the district during union negotiations. At no time should the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources or any human resources staff member be directly or indirectly involved in educational decisions (e.g., student placement, curriculum and instruction) or in the determination of the staffing needs at the school building or district level. Staffing needs must be made based on the physical and/or educational needs of students, which is determined by building Principals, Sector Supervisors, and those in the organizational chart to whom they report. The Human Resources department role is to receive the staffing needs of the organization, fulfill those staffing needs, and support/retain the staff once they are hired (See Category #3 for additional discussion of the Human Resources department).

Exceptional Learning Solutions proposes a title change for the current role of Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources to more accurately reflect the roles and responsibilities of the position: Assistant

Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management. The Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management will continue to manage all human resources services, as outlined in Category #3 below, but will also have two new reports: the Director of Operations and the Director of Safety.

The Director of Operations is a role that currently exists in SEDOL and has the important responsibility for maintaining all facilities within SEDOL. There is a large team of employees who support the Director of Operations in this role, and through observations and conversations, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team believes that this team performs very well for the district. There are no recommended changes to the Director of Operations or his team, but it is unusual that a district organizational chart either currently in place or proposed by SEDOL would not include this important position. As a result, the Director of Operations needs to report to an assistant superintendent-level position, and the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management is an appropriate supervisor. In the new role, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management not only manages human resources within the district but also oversees all risk management. Building facilities maintenance and development are important components of risk management, and as such, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management should supervise that department.

Exceptional Learning Solutions also recommends a new position under the purview of Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management and related to risk management: Director of Safety. As a cooperative that serves solely special needs students, SEDOL has unique safety risks and considerations. These range in scope from building/structural safety for students with various special needs to emergency operations and planning to safety training for administrators and staff. The details of this position are discussed in Category #2 below. As the Director of Safety should report to the position overseeing risk management, in this case the Director of Safety should report to the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management.

Recommendation 1.2: Adopt the Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart developed by Exceptional Learning Solutions, rename and/or restructure the existing positions under new supervisors, and hire the new positions as soon as practicable.

Focus Area 1.3

SEDOL has historically utilized a top down management structure, meaning decisions are made at the central office and pushed down to the buildings and/or Sector programs. There appears to be little opportunity for input from building-level leadership and personnel. This is particularly true of senior leadership at SEDOL, specifically the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents. While a top down approach can be necessary in certain situations, such as during a crisis, it is the opinion of the Exceptional Learning Solutions team that SEDOL is not currently in that situation. When the current Superintendent and administrative team joined SEDOL, the district was in crisis followed closely by a global pandemic. The leadership style that was adopted was a top down approach that was needed to right the ship from crises and reorient the district during and immediately following the pandemic. The top down leadership style continues to be utilized at SEDOL. The top down approach is not currently effective for SEDOL. It is impeding progress at the school level, and it is damaging morale of building leaders, teachers, and staff.

School autonomy can be a powerful management structure. To be clear, school autonomy does not mean that district leadership turns everything over to schools and watches from afar. There still need to be processes, procedures, and systems in place. School leaders and staff still have accountability to district

leadership, but the decision-making and direction of the school is left to the building leadership team. This is a significant shift for a district like SEDOL. It is a shift in thinking by the Superintendent and district leadership team, and it is also a shift for building leadership teams to assume additional responsibility. Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends that SEDOL allow schools and building leaders to have autonomy in decision making, budgeting, and purchasing.

Autonomy in decision-making is essentially school-based management. That means the Principal and building leadership have the primary responsibility for making decisions that impact the staff and students and effectively managing the school. For example, a building may need to adopt a new or alternate intervention for a particular group of students. Currently, in order to do this, the Principal would need to reach out to a district administrator who would in turn need to get approval from the Superintendent. These types of management decisions should be made at the building level. If the Principal believes that a programmatic change needs to be adopted, as long as it is in line with the Superintendent's overall vision for the district, the building Principal should make the necessary decision. District administration should establish an accountability procedure whereby they know what unilateral decisions the Principals are making, but this should be a reporting process that is adopted rather than a permission process. The building Principals and the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment who the Principals report to directly should develop a decision-making reporting process.

Autonomy in budgeting for schools is another important shift for SEDOL to make. Currently, the district budgets for the schools are determined with little input from Principals or school-based staff. Money is allocated and/or spent when the Principal makes a school request to district administration. A solid understanding of how much money is allocated and/or remains in the school's budget throughout the year is nonexistent. The school budgeting process should be transferred to the Principals. Principals should work closely with the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management to develop their own budgets and to understand how the budgeting process works. Allocated funds would be managed and maintained by the school Principal and the principal's administrative staff. Spending would be accounted for on a monthly basis and reported back to the finance department. It would be the responsibility of the school Principal to manage money throughout the school year so that the budgeted funds last as long as needed. If funding is needed at the school level, the Principal would be the person to determine if the expenditure is appropriate, within the budget established for the school and in accordance with budget guidelines.

Autonomy in purchasing is another critical aspect for schools. School-based leaders, teachers, and staff know what they need to support their students and the building. If a teacher needs a particular item or intervention in the classroom, the teacher would make a request to the Principal to have it purchased. Currently, the Principal needs to submit this type of request to district administration and wait for a response, which can take weeks or even months. The decision-making authority should rest with the Principal to determine if the item is needed and if it is within budget to make the purchase. This autonomy, however, is not without limits. For example, purchases over $5,000 (or whatever dollar amount is determined by district leadership) would need to gain approval from the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment and the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budgets, and Grants Management. This procedure establishes a system of checks and balances on spending for larger purchases and gains additional input on the necessity for larger expenditures.

Recently, SEDOL has given Principals some purchasing autonomy by providing them with a small staff appreciation budget for "gifts" or tokens of appreciation for staff. While this concept is good, the budgeting and purchasing process should be turned over to the building Principals for all expenditures in

the school building. That will create additional responsibility for building Principals, but it will also expedite purchasing and decision-making at the school level.

Recommendation 1.3:   Establish school-based management at all SEDOL schools by giving Principals the autonomy to make decisions and operate their buildings, and transfer school budgeting and purchasing from district administration to Principals and building leaders.

Focus Area 1.4

The culture and climate of every school district is vitally important to maintain positive morale among staff and an effective environment to meet students' physical and educational needs. The current culture and climate at SEDOL is not healthy. Rather than working as a collaborative team, school building and Sector-based administrators and staff are at odds with the Superintendent and the district leadership team. Through Exceptional Learning Solutions interviews and observations, there are three main reasons for this unhealthy culture. Building leaders and staff have a lack of trust in the Superintendent and other district administrators, micromanagement by the Superintendent and district administrators, and lack of visibility of the Superintendent and district administrators in the school buildings and Sector programs.

SEDOL has a strong and capable Superintendent. The Superintendent is generally knowledgeable regarding special education and has years of practical experience as a special educator and administrator. Through the Exceptional Learning Solutions' interviews with teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and others in the school buildings, a majority of those interviewed indicated that they had professional respect for the knowledge, experience, and credentials of the Superintendent; however, nearly every interview discussed a lack of trust in the Superintendent and other district administrators.

A lack of trust can be a challenging obstacle to overcome. It is not something that can be altered quickly or ignored with the hope that it will improve over time. Trust must be earned, and when there is a lack of trust, whether warranted or not, it can severely impeded the progress of a district. One advantage that SEDOL has is that there will be major changes to the administrative team in the coming school year. Three of the five senior leaders will be new in their roles, which provides a blank slate for those individuals to build trust and rapport with staff. However, both the Superintendent and the current Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources will be returning, so the issue of trust will still exist and will need to be addressed.

Examining why there is a lack of trust based on conversations and interviews, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team believes it is due to a lack of transparency. It is important for building administrators, teachers, and staff to understand that while they may desire to know every detail of what happens at the central office and among senior leaders, they are not entitled to know everything. Senior leaders and the board of education often make decisions based on what they believe to be in the best interest of the district. Staff members may not always agree with those decisions. However, it is important, to the extent possible, decisions are shared with building administrators and staff in an open and honest way. Transparency does not necessarily mean sharing every detail of the operations of the district—some details are not able to be shared for legal and/or confidentiality purposes—but when new initiatives are announced or when decisions are made that directly impact building-level administrators and staff, they should be shared openly and honestly. Administrators and staff do not want to only hear that they need to do something, but they want to hear the "why" of new initiatives and "how" those initiatives will be rolled out. This transparency allows building-level administrators and staff to understand the Board of Education

and/or the Superintendent's vision for the district. Building-level administrators and staff members can process what is happening in the district, understand the rationale for the decisions, and realize why they are being asked to do something. If providing the "why" and the "how" is done consistently when new initiatives are rolled out and/or changes are made to existing protocol, over time building administrators and staff will begin to get an understanding of the vision of the district. That also builds rapport and trust between district leadership and staff over time. The lack of trust must be repaired in order for SEDOL to progress and move forward.

Another issue impacting the culture and climate within SEDOL is micromanagement from the Superintendent and other district administrators. Micromanagement can dramatically impact the morale of a district. At SEDOL, micromanagement is impacting morale because administrators, teachers, and staff are not treated as the experts that they are. Rather, there are obvious signs of micromanagement and indications of lack of trust for building administrators and staff to make independent decisions.

There are a few things that must be done in order to address micromanagement within SEDOL. First, the role and responsibility of the Superintendent is to establish the vision for the district and ensure that the mission of the district is being fulfilled. Once that mission and vision are established and communicated effectively, it is the responsibility of other administrators, teachers, and staff to implement that vision and ensure the mission is being met. One person alone cannot accomplish this. It is a collective effort of everyone in the district working together to implement the vision and the mission of the district.

SEDOL has a new organizational chart that is proposed by Exceptional Learning Solutions (See Focus Area 1.2 above). In that chart, there are four assistant superintendent-level senior leaders who report directly to the Superintendent. It is the Superintendent's responsibility of holding those senior leaders accountable for implementing the mission and vision of the district. In turn, those Assistant Superintendents are responsible for managing the staff members who report to them, like principals or Sector supervisors. There should not be a situation where the Superintendent is directly managing individuals below the assistant superintendent-level. That is the responsibility of the Assistant Superintendents. Likewise, Assistant Superintendents should only be managing the staff members under their purview in the organizational chart. For example, the Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Risk Management should never be managing Principals or Sector Supervisors. If there is an issue with Principals or Sector Supervisors, the Superintendent and/or other senior leaders should address that with the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. There is a hierarchy in place established by the organizational chart that everyone in the district must respect and adhere to in order for the proper reporting structure to be effective. When a senior leader does not adhere to the hierarchy and attempts to directly manage others within the organizational chart, that creates a sense of micromanagement, which is inappropriate in a school district setting.

Additionally, as discussed in Focus Area 1.3, Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends school building autonomy in the areas of decision making, budgeting, and purchasing, whereby the school Principal is directly responsible for those areas. If this recommendation is adopted with fidelity, micromanagement of Principals and Assistant Principals will cease to exist because those individuals will make their own building-specific choices and be held accountable for those choices by the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

The culture and climate of a district can also hinge on the perceptions of the Superintendent and senior leadership team. The Superintendent is the face of the district both to the staff and to parents of special needs students. To be optimally successful the Superintendent needs to hold the trust and respect of the district administrators and staff. In order to build a relationship with administrators and staff alike, the Superintendent must be visible in the district. Visibility of the Superintendent in the school buildings is not as frequent or

meaningful as it could and should be. The Superintendent is in buildings as needed for administrative meetings and significant issues involving students, as well as guest tours and publicity opportunities. However, the Superintendent is not regularly present in classrooms and in the halls of the school buildings. This should be a regular occurrence. The Superintendent should conduct these visits with the school-based administrator, not independently. This will allow the administrator to further educate the Superintendent on activities occurring within the school, build relationships, and enable staff to observe unified support. Teachers and staff should regularly see the Superintendent in the building and in their classrooms interacting with staff and students to have a true understanding of the daily occurrences in the schools. There should be regular onsite visits to observe in special education classrooms in non-evaluative ways, simply to check in with special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and related services personnel. It is important to see first-hand how initiatives are working, what challenges educators are facing in the classrooms, and provide an opportunity for personal interaction between the Superintendent and the special education practitioners. These visits do not need to be lengthy but should occur regularly. Being a visible presence in the school buildings so that team members develop a relationship with the Superintendent is essential. Not only will this help with visibility in the building, but it will also assist in developing greater trust between the Superintendent and staff. The Superintendent should coordinate with the school-based administrator and carve out a few hours from her schedule each week for in-person, onsite visits in each of the SEDOL schools and Sector classrooms. Visits to the schools and a few classrooms each week should be done on a rotation so that all schools and classrooms in each building are visited.


Recommendation 1.4: Address the culture and climate issues at SEDOL by re-establishing trust through transparency of initiatives, discussing the "why" and "how" of changes; end micromanagement through the Superintendent holding the Assistant Superintendents accountable for their direct reports and allowing Principals autonomy to operate their schools independently; and increase Superintendent visibility by carving out a few hours each week for in-person, onsite visits, selecting a few classrooms in each building to be visited in rotation.

Focus Area 1.5

Communication is a critical component for SEDOL, especially regarding the Superintendent and other district administrators. Currently, communication is a source of frustration for SEDOL staff. They do not feel that they receive the information that they needs in an accurate or timely manner. Inadequate communication from leadership, whether district leadership or building leadership, can be detrimental to the balance of trust and respect within an organization. When there is not regular and reliable communication, staff lacks guidance in their direction and lacks confidence in their leadership. As a result, there is a lack of transparency and trust is eroded between leadership and staff.

Throughout Exceptional Learning Solutions' school visits and conversations with staff, one of the recurring comments from all parties is the lack of adequate communication from the Superintendent and other district administrators. The results of the Staff Survey also reflect this. In the survey, staff were asked, "How would you rate communication from SEDOL district administration?" Of those who responded to this question, 3.5% indicated Excellent, while 16.1% indicated Good. That means less than 20% of the staff who responded to the survey believe that there is adequate communication from district administration. Over 80% of the respondents to the survey indicated that communication from district administration was Fair or Poor, with 36.2% stating Fair and 44.2% indicating Poor (See Chart 1.5.1). These are shockingly low numbers for satisfaction with communication from district administration.
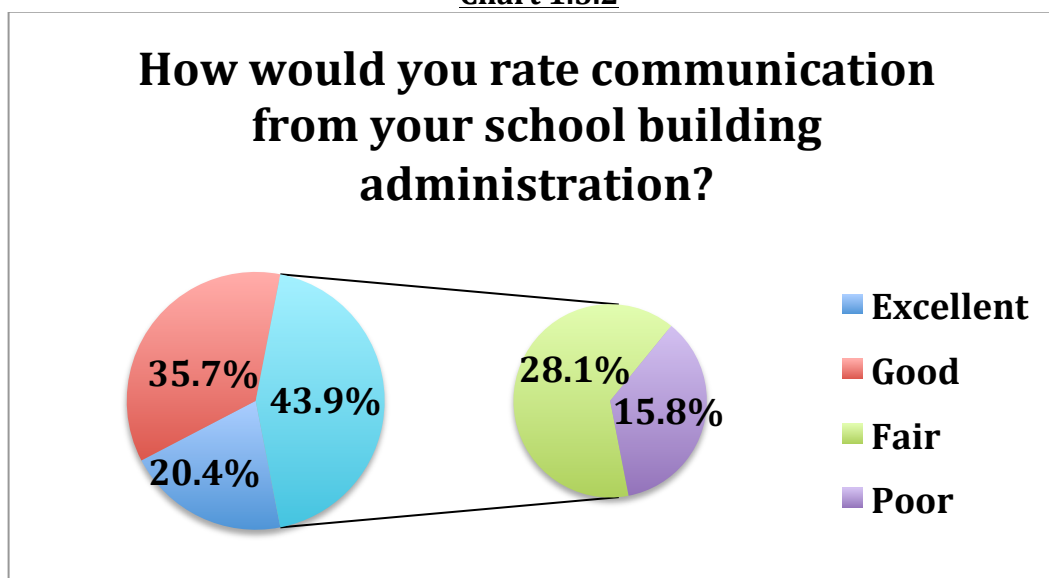
Chart 1.5.1

How would you rate communication from SEDOL district administration?

16.1%   80.4%

3.5%

36.2%

44.2%

■ **Excellent**

■ **Good**

■ **Fair**

■ **Poor**
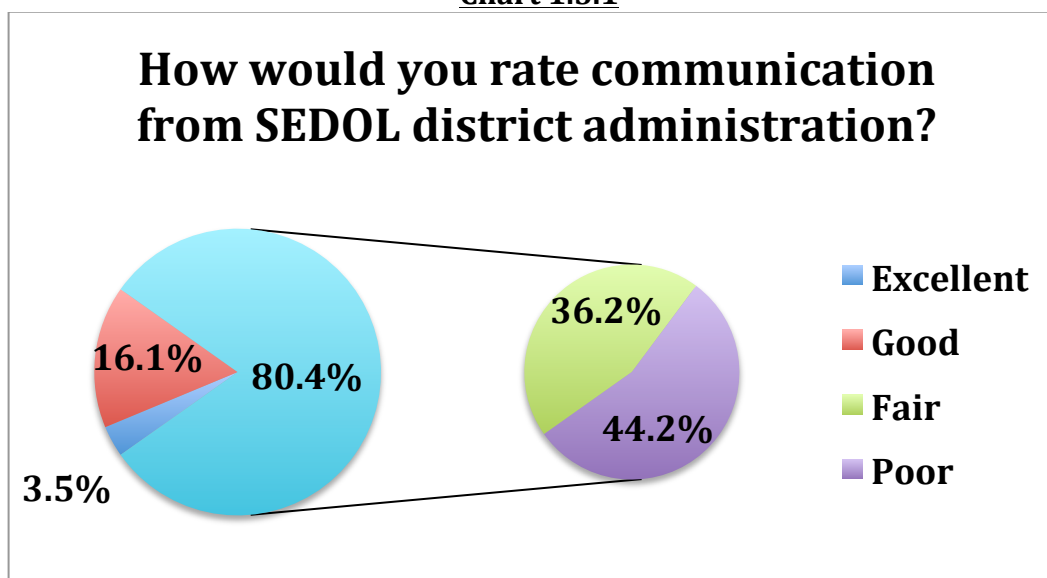
Communication with staff should not only occur when there are issues to report, changes in initiatives, or staffing updates. The communication from district administration, particularly from the Superintendent, must be regular and reliable. To be fair, there is communication from the Superintendent and district administration; however, both the quantity and the quality of the communication are insufficient for a vast majority of the staff to find useful. The Superintendent should provide regular and reliable communication to staff in the form of a weekly email newsletter sent to all SEDOL staff. That newsletter should be a clear and concise document that provides updates on the district that staff would want and need to know. The information must be valuable and worth the time to read. There should not be merely superfluous information like the number of staff vacancies listed each week. Staff members in the buildings already understand there is a shortage of staff. Provide instead updates on what is being done to combat the staff shortage (e.g., posting positions earlier, recruitment from new universities, etc.). Also, provide updates on special education law or rules/regulations that directly impact teachers and staff. Be a resource of information for the SEDOL staff. The newsletter should not be lengthy, but it should be substantive. In order for staff to respect district administration, the district administration must treat them like knowledgeable experts and as valuable components of the SEDOL team.

Communication between school building and staff is slightly better based on the Exceptional Learning Solutions team's conversations with staff, which is confirmed in the Staff Survey data. The Staff Survey asked, "How would you rate communication from your school building administration?" Of those who responded to the Staff Survey, 56.1% indicated that communication from school building administration was sufficient, with 20.4% stating the communication was Excellent and 35.7% stating that communication was Good. There were 28.1% of the respondents who indicated that the communication with school building administration was Fair and 15.8% indicating that it was Poor, totaling 43.9% sharing that the communication is inadequate (See Chart 1.5.2). Similar to district administration, school building administration must also provide regular and reliable communication to their building staff. This communication may come in the form of a weekly newsletter and/or it may be in shared during a weekly building staff meeting. However and whenever school building administration communicates with staff, it must be substantive and productive. Principals, particularly when the new school building autonomy measures are adopted, can no longer just regurgitate what is being shared by district administration. There needs to be regular and reliable updates and useful information about the school building from Principals to staff, which should not include excuses like the district is making me do something.

Chart 1.5.2

How would you rate communication from your school building administration?

- **Excellent**
- **Good**
- **Fair**
- **Poor**

35.7% 43.9% 20.4% 28.1% 15.8%

Communication was also a topic in the Member District Survey. Member District respondents were asked, "How would you rate communication from SEDOL district administration?" Of those who responded, 9.1% stated that communication from SEDOL district administration was Excellent, while 31.8% indicated that the communication was Good. In total, 40.9% stated that communication was adequate by either choosing Excellent or Good. Conversely, 59.1% of Member District respondents stated that communication with SEDOL district administration was either Fair (36.4%) or Poor (22.7%) (See Chart 1.5.3).

Chart 1.5.3

How would you rate communication from SEDOL district administration?

- **Excellent**
- **Good**
- **Fair**
- **Poor**

31.8% 59.1% 9.1% 36.4% 22.7%
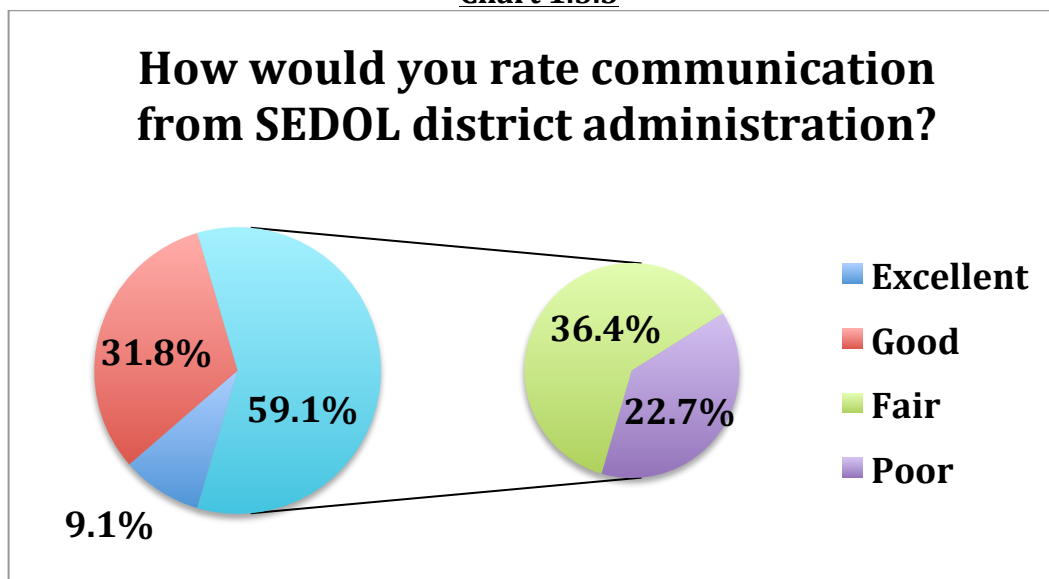
Responses to the Member District Survey regarding communication with building administrators were better. Of those who responded to the survey, 86.3% indicated that communication from SEDOL building administrators was either Excellent or Good at 31.8% and 54.5%, respectively. Only 13.6% indicated that communication with SEDOL building administrators was Fair and no one indicated that the communication was Poor (See Chart 1.5.4).

Chart 1.5.4

How would you rate communication from SEDOL building administrators?
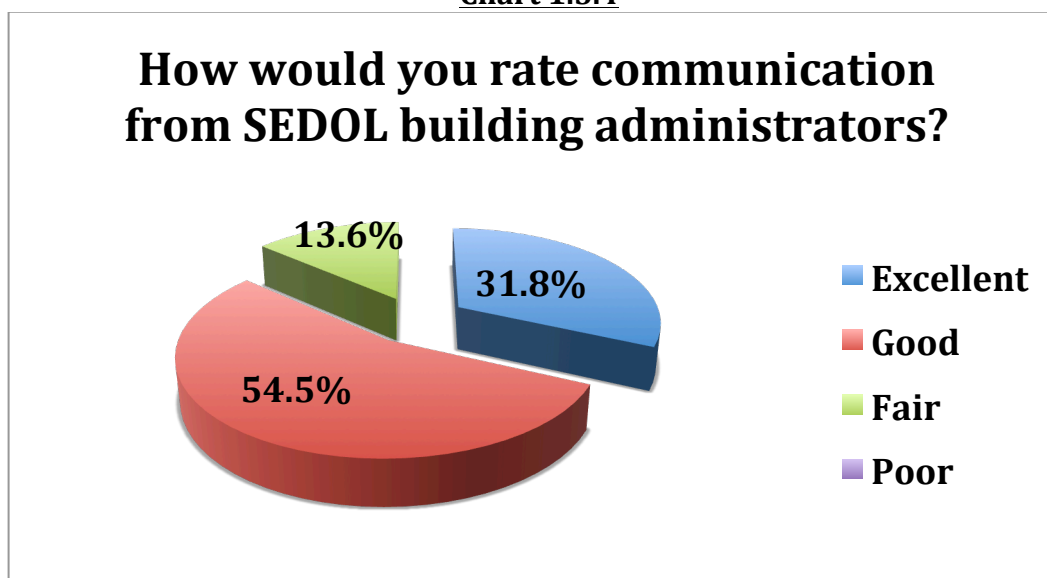
There were two areas that stood out when the Exceptional Learning Solutions team spoke with Member District representatives and received comments in the Member District Survey. First, Member District appreciated that they could pick up a phone and call the Superintendent or building Principals and speak with one or both when they had questions or concerns. Most of the Member Districts indicated that that this was a positive experience for them. Second, Member District indicated that quarterly Governing Board Meetings were not frequent enough for adequate communication. Many districts indicated that they wanted more regular communication from the Superintendent in between the quarterly meetings, which may account for a portion of the dissatisfaction with communication from district administration.

An important communication item for both SEDOL staff and Member District representatives was communication surrounding the rollout of new initiatives or changing services. One of the reasons not all of the changes at SEDOL have been embraced is the process by which new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures have been rolled out. New initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures cause tremendous stress and change of daily routine for teachers and staff on the ground in school buildings and can have significant implications for Member Districts. Rollout of change is critical for the success of new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures. Ideally, educators in the school buildings and/or Member District representatives would be a part of the development of those changes to ensure buy-in and a willingness to adapt to new ideas. Whether that occurs or not, the rollout of new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures should be explicitly communicated at district-wide meetings and include representatives from Member Districts. These rollouts should include an explanation of what changes are being made, why they are being made, and how those changes will positively impact students. There is no doubt that SEDOL administration has thought through the "what," "why," and "how" questions while developing initiatives or changes, but both SEDOL staff and Member District representatives reported to the Exceptional Learning Solutions team that those explanations are not being communicated effectively. As a result, new changes or initiatives are not always fully adopted, effectively administered, or completely understood in SEDOL schools or in Member Districts. SEDOL district administration should ensure that they collaboratively develop new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures with the SEDOL school teams and Member District representative to the greatest extent possible. There should also be an opportunity for input and full explanation of the purpose and benefit for students and/or teachers for changes being made within SEDOL.

Effective communication is a two-way street, meaning that those receiving the information must be engaged to hear it and must have an opportunity to respond to it. There needs to be rapport building with SEDOL staff in order for them to hear and respond to communication from the district administration. One of the easiest ways to do this is to initiate district-wide staff meetings. There should be one large kickoff meeting at the beginning of the school year where the Superintendent and senior leadership methodically lay out the vision for SEDOL for the coming school year. This should be done in conjunction with welcoming the staff and celebrating district successes and individual contributions, all with the goal of creating a team mentality within SEDOL. This initial kickoff meeting will be particularly important at the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year. The district is being reorganized, with new senior leadership positions, roles, and responsibilities. The SEDOL staff (and Member District representatives) should hear directly from the Superintendent what her vision is for the incoming district administrative team and how these new roles will benefit staff and students. Additionally, the results of the Special Education Program Review and the contents of this report will be final, public, and in the process of being implemented at the beginning of the school year. SEDOL staff made considerable contributions of time and shared experiences with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team. Many of the results of the Program Review will drive SEDOL policy in the near term and for years to come. That needs to be communicated from the Superintendent. The Superintendent needs to let the staff know that they were heard throughout this Program Review process and that their input did not fall on deaf ears. Because of their contributions changes are being made within SEDOL. The kickoff meeting cannot be about the Superintendent or how the Superintendent wanted to drive change; it must be focused exclusively on the vision and changes coming to SEDOL and how that was driven by staff input to benefit the district and students.

Additionally, district-wide in-person meetings should occur throughout the school year, at least once per quarter. These meetings should have a twofold purpose: 1) to allow the Superintendent to provide updates and rollout new initiatives and 2) to allow time and space for staff members to provide feedback, ask questions, and address challenges. Staff members want to have a voice in initiatives and directives. They want to hear the "why" of new initiatives and "how" they will happen, thus providing a vision for SEDOL that all staff members understand and embrace. This is the type of rapport building that needs to occur within SEDOL and the type of communication that staff desire and deserve to understand the direction of the district and how it serves students.

Recommendation 1.5: Develop a regular and reliable communication plan with the following components:

- **Plan for an annual summer in-person school year kickoff staff meeting for SEDOL where the vision for the school year will be articulated and the staff accomplishments can be celebrated;**
- **Schedule in-person SEDOL-wide quarterly meetings throughout the school year to discuss new initiatives, explain the "why" and "how" of changes to district policies and procedures, and provide an opportunity for staff members to ask questions and actively engage in discussion;**
- **Send out a substantive weekly email newsletter that addresses changes at SEDOL and includes updates and information that is relevant and useful for administrators, teachers, and staff members; and**
- **Create a process for rolling out new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures at SEDOL that includes in-person meetings, educator involvement in the development, and an explanation of the benefits for students and teachers.**

Technology at SEDOL is an important component of district success. SEDOL currently has an Innovation and Technology Department that is led by a skilled Director and has capable staff for data and technology needs. The Innovation and Technology team has developed a five-year technology budget, and a long-range technology plan ensures that the district considers technology needs before they become an issue both from a budgetary and implementation perspective. As a component of the long-range technology plan, the Department is in the process of refreshing the wireless network throughout the district. Additionally, the Department is efficient with their use of resources and limiting full time employee head count by outsourcing their break/fix support, network support and maintenance, and other technology needs. This is an example of efficiency within the district that can serve a model for outsourcing other aspects of support for SEDOL.

There are, however, some areas of technology that need to be revisited. First, the Student Information System (SIS) currently in place, SDS, is insufficient for SEDOL. It is not user friendly for staff and it has not been properly updated with the latest version. Typically, Exceptional Learning Solutions' recommendation would be to update the software with the latest version for optimal functionality and user experience; however, the Director of Innovation and Technology has indicated that a component of the long-range technology plan is to move away from SDS and invest in a new SIS. If this is the case, the transition should be made as expediently as possible to minimize the issues with the current system. However, if the district is not able to quickly implement a new SIS, then the current system should be updated in the interim for greatest functionality and ease of use.

The Innovation and Technology Department currently has very capable data support from one individual. However, there is only one person currently providing data support to the entire district from a technology standpoint. While this has been sufficient in the past, to have all of the data support knowledge limited to one individual is both overwhelming for that team member, as well as inefficient if the one person providing support is unavailable or leaves the district. It is our recommendation that the Director of Innovation and Technology consider adding a second data support specialist as part of the technology budget and long-range technology plan.

Assistive Technology is a vital support that SEDOL provides to students. SEDOL students have a variety of assistive technology needs, and the district provides an assortment of equipment for students, such as "talkers," audio aids, and other assistive technology devices. However, many of the support options for students in the classroom are low-tech in nature. While the low-tech supports may be appropriate for some students, it is important for SEDOL staff to work closely with the Assistive Technology team to utilize supports based on best practices. High tech solutions are often considered best practice and should be considered by SEDOL staff in consultation with the Assistive Technology team to ensure that each student is getting the appropriate level of technology support.

Currently, the Assistive Technology team is housed within the Special Services Department, along with other special services that the district provides. As a component of the long-range technology plan, it is the recommendation of the Exceptional Learning Solutions team that SEDOL considers moving Assistive Technology services under the Innovation and Technology Department. This will consolidate all technology services under one department and shift responsibilities from the Special Services Department and the Director of Special Services.

Recommendation 1.6: Expedite the purchase and implementation of a new SIS or update the existing SIS to its full functionality, add another data support person to the technology budget and long-range technology plan, and move Assistive Technology oversight from the Special Services Department to the Innovation and Technology Department.

Category #2: Safety and Security

Commendations

- SEDOL's Emergency Operations Plan is a thorough and comprehensive document that adequately describes general policies and emergency operations for a variety of scenarios.
- The majority of school-based staff appears to be safety conscious and focused on the well-being of students under their care and/or supervision.
- The logistics of the arrival and dismissal process for students with severe and profound disabilities at Laremont School is outstanding due to the bus drivers, private transportation providers, and school staff who ensure safety for students.

Focus Area 2.1

SEDOL has unique safety needs and requirements as a special education co-op that exclusively serves students with special needs. It was apparent during the Exceptional Learning Solutions Special Education Program Review that safety is an important consideration for administrators and staff throughout SEDOL. The district should be commended for efforts to keep students safe within classrooms and buildings, and staff members are cognizant of student safety needs and responsive to students whose safety may be at risk.[2]

In a unique setting like SEDOL, there are often additional needs that are not necessarily required in a traditional school district. One of those needs is a Director of Safety. While district administration, building administrators, and SEDOL staff are no doubt all committed to student safety, it is not the role of administrators or staff members to be solely responsible for the safety of students. A Director of Safety would have the singular focus of student and school safety and would be the primary point of contact for all safety-related issues within SEDOL. There are four primary areas of focus for the Director of Safety: student safety, building safety, safety planning, and safety training.

Student safety is a concern for all special educators and administrators. While special educators and related services personnel have knowledge and understanding of students with special needs under their care in a classroom setting or therapy setting, there are broader student safety concerns for special needs students. For example, students transitioning from one location to another location within a building is a great concern. It is important to assess whether there are the necessary supports in the hallways for students to transition. Not all buildings have hallways that are safe for all of the students within that building. A Director of Safety would assess these needs based on student population and ensure that all aspects of transitioning students are safe and acceptable.

Safe buildings and safe classrooms are paramount when housing special needs students during the school day. Buildings and classrooms must be a safe and appropriate space for students. While individual teachers and staff members will determine the appropriate educational space for students in the classroom, the Director of Safety would have the responsibility to ensure that every building and every classroom meets the safety standards set by the district. Building safety is discussed in more detail in

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[2] The Exceptional Learning Solutions team had the opportunity while onsite at Gages Lake School to witness a fire alarm and the evacuation of students from the school. Fortunately, this was not an actual fire emergency, but it afforded the Exceptional Learning Solutions team the opportunity to witness how well prepared the students and staff were for this type of a potential emergency. The students exited the building a relatively orderly fashion and knew exactly where to go once outside. The staff did an exceptional job of addressing the needs of students who struggled with the change of routine and also managed the rest of their students.

Focus Area 2.2 below; however, the Director of Safety must evaluate each space occupied by students to determine if safety needs are met and if adjustments are required.

A Safety Plan is an important component for SEDOL and would be compiled, maintained, and updated by the Director of Safety. While SEDOL has an appropriate Emergency Operations Plan that is required of school districts, the Plan (discussed in more detail in Focus Area 2.3 below) is not sufficiently detailed to meet the unique needs of SEDOL students nor is it sufficiently detailed to address the varying student needs within each building within SEDOL. For example, the Emergency Operations Plan indicates where students go in varying types of emergencies (e.g., fire, tornado, school lockdown, terrorism threats, etc.), which is detailed enough to meet all requirements of an Emergency Operations Plan. However, it does not address how students with mobility issues at Laremont School, for example, would be evacuated or relocated nor does it address the various types of medical equipment that would need to accompany the student. A similar process would be very different for students with behavior issues at Gages Lake School. A Director of Safety would be responsible for developing a Safety Plan for each school and/or student population that would be built from the Emergency Operations Plan, therefore providing a detailed, cohesive plan for all eventualities that may occur in a school setting and the unique responses needed to ensure the safety of special needs students.

The Director of Safety would also be responsible for training administrators and staff on safety requirements and safety procedures in individual buildings and district-wide. Ongoing safety training is an important but missing element in SEDOL. Once the Director of Safety compiles a Safety Plan for each building and the district, the Director of Safety would have the responsibility for training all staff on appropriate procedures for addressing student day-to-day safety needs and student safety needs in the event of an emergency. The Director of Safety would also conduct regular walk-throughs of each building and each classroom within the building. If the Director of Safety identifies areas of concern, then staff and/or administrators would be educated on why something is unsafe, and the Director of Safety would work alongside them to rectify the safety issue. This is an important informal training component that educates staff on potential areas of concern and provides them with the knowledge to address the issue.

Recommendation 2.1: Recruit and hire a Director of Safety who has the primary responsibility for maintaining a safe environment throughout SEDOL, focusing on student safety, building safety, development of Safety Plans, and safety training.

Focus Area 2.2

SEDOL has some excellent school buildings throughout the district. Several of the schools, particularly those on the "main" campus (i.e., Gages Lake School, Cyd Lash School, and Laremont School) were wholly or partially designed for students with special needs. This is a tremendous advantage for a district exclusively serving special needs students. For example, Laremont School has lifts installed in classrooms to assist with non-mobile students and classrooms/student spaces that were planned for the population of students serviced within the school. Similarly Gages Lake School and Cyd Lash School buildings have many components that are designed for special needs students, yet both schools potentially require some updates for optimal usage.

All schools within SEDOL need to be evaluated to determine their adherence to safety standards. This job would be the responsibility of the Director of Safety and the safety determinations would be made together with the building administrative team. For example, in most SEDOL buildings there are doors that are not handicap accessible. While in some situations, there are concerns about student elopement,

doors and other egress options, it is obvious that there is still a need to have proper accessibility for students and/or staff in case of an emergency. The Director of Safety along with building leadership and staff would make determination on how to make the building accessible while still maintaining a safe environment for students who may attempt to elope. Another example of a potential safety risk is at John Powers Center where the classrooms are not able to use the intercom system to contact the school office. The communication is only one way; that is, the school office can utilize closed caption to contact classrooms using the television screen for announcements or other information, but staff cannot contact the school office using the same technology. The inability to communicate with the school office can be dangerous if there is a student or staff emergency that requires additional intervention. Without a two-way communication system, precious time can be lost in an emergency while sending someone to get a message to the school office. These are the types of situational circumstances that should be evaluated by a Director of Safety, who would in turn present those findings, based on observations and staff input, to the building administration and/or district administration to address the safety issues in a timely fashion.

There are also buildings within SEDOL that were not built specifically for special needs students. Fairhaven School is a prime example. Fairhaven School was first leased during the 2020-2021 school year and purchased in 2023. While it is certainly understandable that the district would want to take advantage of purchasing an available school, especially when the need existed for a new home for Fairhaven School, it is puzzling to the Exceptional Learning Solutions team why SEDOL acquired this specific school building. Fairhaven School was not designed to accommodate special needs students, as is typical for most traditional school buildings. Moreover, Fairhaven School has many aspects that are completely inadequate for a school serving special needs students. A few examples are as follows:

- The gymnasium has multiple doors that exit directly outside, which provides students with elopement issues many options for egress, and requires an adult to stand at every door to ensure student safety when the gymnasium is in use.
- De-escalation rooms are safe spaces for students having significant behavior issues and provide the student with an opportunity to calm down outside of the classroom with adult supervision. Many students needing to de-escalate have high adrenaline and/or violent outbursts. Typically de-escalation rooms are secure spaces with only one entrance. Some of the de-escalation rooms at Fairhaven have multiple doors and/or very large windows that pose a significant safety issue if a student were to throw an object or themselves against the windows in a violent outburst.
- The physical location of Fairhaven School is also problematic, as a number of the students at the school are prone to elopement. Fairhaven School is positioned between a busy road with many cars traveling at fairly high rates of speed, train tracks, and houses that are adjacent to the school property. While the train tracks are fenced, it is a potentially dangerous situation if a student were to attempt to scale the fence or find a way through the fence. The physical location provides students with several dangerous alternatives it they elope from within the school building.

The challenge for SEDOL is that many of these structural components of the building cannot be altered without violating local fire codes or other building codes. The use of Fairhaven School feels like trying to put a square peg in a round hole as a school building for students with special needs. While a Director of Safety may not be able to immediately fix all of the issues with Fairhaven School, it would be incumbent upon that person to work with building administrators, staff, and local code enforcement officials to provide workable solutions that meet code requirements while creating a safe environment for students at Fairhaven School.

> **Recommendation 2.2: Evaluate each school building within SEDOL, led by the Director of Safety, to determine safety deficiencies and develop a plan to address the safety deficiencies to ensure that students and staff are safe and secure within the school buildings.**

Focus Area 2.3

SEDOL currently has an Emergency Operations Plan that was created for the district. The current plan is dated November 2017, but there are indications within the Plan that it was most recently updated for the 2022-2023 school year. District administration currently works with law enforcement, other first responders, and local officials to develop a workable Emergency Operations Plan that seeks to address many emergency situations that could occur within SEDOL. In future years, the Director of Safety would have the responsibility to coordinate the development of the Emergency Operations Plan with outside individuals and organizations to amend the document to include all reporting requirements and detailed plans for SEDOL.

The Emergency Operations Plan currently in place sufficiently meets the purpose of such a document. The Plan addresses a variety of emergencies and potential hazard/threat issues (e.g., active shooter, bomb threats, fire, terrorism, etc.). While the Emergency Operations Plan is thorough and includes all necessary areas of concern, the issue is that it is not specifically developed for special needs students. To be fair, the purpose of an Emergency Operations Plan is not intended or designed to address student-specific needs but rather global issues that could impact individual school buildings and/or the entire district. As a result, SEDOL needs a Safety Plan that address the unique needs of its students in cases of emergency and would serve as a companion document to the Emergency Operations Plan.

The Director of Safety would be responsible for the development of the SEDOL Safety Plan. The Plan should address all areas included in the Emergency Operations Plan but provide specific details on how those processes and procedures are specifically tailored to students with special needs. Complicating the development of a Safety Plan further are the diverse special needs student populations served by SEDOL. The Safety Plan cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to buildings within SEDOL. There are divergent student needs throughout the district, and a Safety Plan would need to address each of the SEDOL buildings, as well as potentially address the various needs of students within those buildings. For example, sheltering in place can be very challenging for a Laremont School student on a ventilator or a Gages Lake School student with severe behavior outbursts, particularly if the shelter in place order is given due to imminent danger in the building or on campus. There needs to be accommodations made so that these varying students could shelter in place safely.

Once the Director of Safety develops a Safety Plan, with significant administration and staff input, it would be the responsibility of the Director of Safety to train administrators and staff on the implementation of the Safety Plan, should an emergency arise. These trainings must be done regularly and should be school-specific, as no two schools within SEDOL are exactly alike. Specific time should be set aside for safety training, either within the school day or outside of the school day at designated safety trainings. As needed, safety training for staff should be updated as new staff are hired throughout the school year or as safety-related needs change.

> **Recommendation 2.3:   Develop a SEDOL-specific Safety Plan to augment the Emergency Operations Plan that is developed by the Director of Safety to reflect the specific needs of SEDOL's student population in the event of an emergency in one or more SEDOL schools.**

Category #3: Human Resources

Commendations

- SEDOL has caring, dedicated staff that is committed to the safety and welfare of students within the school sites.
- The interest-based bargaining methodology utilized in the most recent union negotiations was effective in expediting the negotiation process and strengthening relationships between the district and the union.
- The new contract negotiated for paraprofessionals includes a pay increase, which should assist with retention and recruitment.

Focus Area 3.1

The Human Resources Department at SEDOL is one of the most challenging departments in the district. There are two main reasons for this. First, this is a very difficult time to be hiring teachers, related services personnel, and education staff. There is a nationwide shortage of education professionals, and that shortage is even greater within special education. This issue is not only impacting SEDOL but school districts and special education cooperatives throughout the United States. As such, the national education shortage is a fact; it cannot be an excuse. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team recognizes and acknowledges that it is difficult to find highly qualified educators in the current hiring environment. However, throughout this report, there will be identified areas for improvement and related recommendations that can limit the impact on SEDOL and provide SEDOL with the best opportunities to find the most qualified staff.

The second challenge in the SEDOL Human Resources Department is more SEDOL-specific. The Human Resources Department at SEDOL is weak.   The individuals who work in the Human Resources Department are capable professionals and well-meaning in their efforts to support the district. However, the support is not sufficient for current SEDOL employees, for prospective recruits, or for incoming hires. Throughout the interview process conducted by the Exceptional Learning Solutions team, we heard from many SEDOL employees that there is a lack of respect in the department and that the department needs to be more user friendly for employees. While this is only anecdotal data, it is important to note that this is the perception of a significant number of SEDOL employees. The Human Resources Department should be easily accessible and provide support and information to SEDOL employees when needed, either individually or collectively.

The Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources is an educator and understands the impact on both students and staff members when there is a lack of highly qualified staff versus a full roster of staff. There is not clear evidence that the department as a whole understands that impact, nor is there a sense of urgency to address staffing needs at SEDOL. Hiring highly qualified staff does not begin at the end of the current school year for the upcoming school year. At that point, it is typically too late to find excellent candidates to fill positions. The hiring process is a year-round event, and if done properly, there should be little scrambling to fill positions mere months before the school year begins. Recruiting and hiring should begin no later than nine months prior to the beginning of the year. Delayed action in recruiting and hiring staff has a direct and detrimental impact on students who do not have the necessary supports to be safe, cared for, and well educated at SEDOL.

Recommendation 3.1: Develop new processes and procedures for staff within the SEDOL Human Resources Department to ensure staff interaction with current SEDOL is positive, to make certain the department is more accessible and user friendly, and to implement new personnel recruitment and hiring practices.

Focus Area 3.2

Recruitment and retention are both serious problems at SEDOL. As discussed in Focus Area 3.1 above, recruitment is currently difficult for school districts and educational organizations throughout the United States. SEDOL, however, has an even greater deficit because of inadequate recruitment processes and lack of staff retention. The recruitment processes are inadequate because they begin too late in the school year, they are not advertised to a wide enough audience, and the job descriptions/job explanations lack informative details and clarity. Retention is difficult because when individuals are hired at SEDOL, there is not always a clear understanding of the job responsibilities or hires simply do not have the qualifications for the job.

During the 2022-2023 school year, the Human Resources Department recruited and hired 203 employees for a variety of jobs at SEDOL. These positions included teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, administrators, and other staff needed to operate SEDOL. While on the surface, that number is an impressive hiring number, a closer examination reveals some additional issues. At the time of the Special Education Program Review and throughout the 2022-2023 school year, there were approximately 690 total employees within SEDOL, and of those, 203 were new hires. This demonstrates that nearly 30% of the SEDOL employees during the 2022-2023 school year were new hires within the school year. That is a significant percentage of new employees for any organization, but it is particularly problematic for a special needs school district with a student population that warrants specialized support and a continuity of services.

Complicating the issue further is the number of resignations and retirements that occurred during the 2022-2023 school year. The district saw 139 staff members either resign from their positions or submit their intent to retire (See Chart 3.2.1). While those two groups do not contain all of the same individuals, there is some overlap, as will be discussed in later Focus Areas.

Chart 3.2.1

2022-2023 Hires vs. Resignations/ Retirements

	Hires	Resignations/Retirements
	203	139
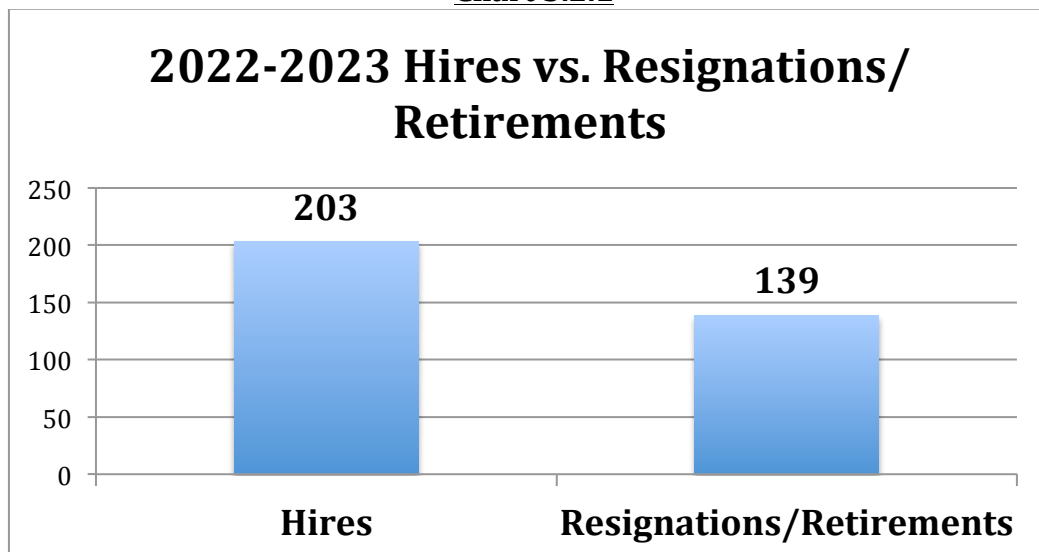
The new hires vs. resignations and/or retirements provide a net gain of only 64 employees. This is also problematic because it demonstrates that SEDOL is not retaining staff at a sufficient level. Even though the district hired a significant number of employees during the 2022-2023 school year, that number represents too large of a percentage of new staff (nearly 30%) and it demonstrates that new hires are not sufficiently offsetting the resignations and retirements.

SEDOL also struggles with vacant positions throughout the school year. Vacancies at SEDOL ebb and flow throughout the school year, with some positions being filled while others become vacant. Some new positions that are filled become vacant relatively quickly because the employees may not fully understand the depth and breadth of the position. Any time there are vacancies within a school or district there are challenges that accompany those vacancies. Someone needs to cover the responsibilities of the vacant position and still provide the needed services that position is responsible for performing. This is very difficult in a district like SEDOL where many of the positions require specialized knowledge or skills to fulfill the demand. On May 17, 2023, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team received data requested from the Human Resources Department. At that time, SEDOL still had 38.2 vacancies for direct student contact positions, just two weeks before the end of the school year. Chart 3.2.2 below lists the positions, locations, and number of vacancies at that time.

Chart 3.2.2

Position	Location	Number of Vacancies
APE teacher	Varied Locations	0.6
Audiologist	Admin	0.6
BASE/Behavior Specialist	RSSP	1
Paraprofessional	Laremont	6.5
Paraprofessional	Gages Lake	3
Paraprofessional	John Powers	1
Paraprofessional	Fairhaven	9
Paraprofessional	Sector	5
Social Worker	Sector/Fairhaven	2
Speech Pathologist	Sector	1
Teacher	Gages Lake	1
Teacher	Fairhaven	2
Teacher	John Powers	1
Teacher	Sector	2
Teacher (.5 FTE)	Laremont	0.5
Vocational Facilitator	Varied Locations	2
TOTAL		**38.2**

While 38.2 positions may not seem like a lot for a district the size of SEDOL, it does create tremendous difficulties for schools and/or programs with large numbers of vacancies, particularly among paraprofessionals. For example, Fairhaven School had 9 vacancies, Laremont School had 6.5 vacancies, and the Sector schools had 5 vacancies. When a paraprofessional position is unfilled, that does not mean

that the service obligation to those students suddenly disappears. Instead, someone needs to fill those vacant positions each school day. Similarly, teacher positions need to be filled and students must be taught even if there is a vacancy. Some of these vacancies can be covered by long term or short-term substitute teachers, but there are simply not enough substitute teachers to cover all the vacancies, which also include other staff absences for illness or personal emergencies. That means the district is moving staff from other places, including district administrators, to cover direct student contact positions within the district. This shuffling of staff is inadequate and unsustainable to meet the needs of students. There will always be resignations in a school district during the school year and vacancies will occur from time to time. But the volume of resignations and the number of vacancies is debilitating for some SEDOL schools and an impediment to services afforded to some students. To combat these impediments, SEDOL, and particularly the Human Resources Department, must address recruitment and retention of staff.

There must be a multi-pronged approach to recruiting quality staff for SEDOL, including both job postings and in-person events. Posting jobs for SEDOL must be done deliberately and carefully in order to attract appropriate staff members that will be assets to SEDOL and are qualified to provide the needed services for students. The critical components of job postings are timing, placement, and language.

Timing for postings is critical to attract the best candidates for open positions. Most highly qualified candidates are recruited long before the end of the school year. While every open position for the subsequent school year may not be known early, the district should have a good idea of its hiring needs for the next school year. Recruiting should begin for the next school year around December of the current school year, approximately nine months before the beginning of the next school year. The Human Resources Department should look at historical data and hiring needs to make realistic projections of upcoming needs, as well as take into account impending retirements and/or known staff losses. Currently, SEDOL typically waits to begin recruiting for the next school year in late spring. While there may be a more complete picture of the openings for the next school year, that is simply too late to recruit most high quality candidates. Many have already committed to other positions, which leaves SEDOL with open positions or positions filled by individuals who are under qualified to fulfill them. Additionally, timing in the frequency of posting positions is important. It is not sufficient to post a position once and wait for candidates to respond. Depending on the search engine being used, posting the same position multiple times if it is not fulfilled refreshes the post and moves the posting higher up in the search results. The typical practice at SEDOL seems to be that the Human Resources Department posts an open position once and does not revisit it on a regular (monthly) basis. Recruiting requires action. It is not sufficient to post a job and hope someone qualified sees it and responds. If there is no response, then it needs to be reposted more frequently and possibly in other locations.

Placement of job postings is another important aspect of recruiting qualified candidates. According to the Human Resources staff, SEDOL primarily uses two job posting sites, Frontline and Indeed. Frontline is a very acceptable job posting site for education professionals. Many school districts utilize it, and many candidates view opportunities there. Indeed can also be a good job posting site for some positions, such as clerical staff, but not all positions. SEDOL currently utilizes Indeed for posting direct student contact jobs, such as paraprofessionals. While Indeed will reach a broader pool of candidates, it is important to recognize that those candidates may need some additional screening and interviewing to ensure that they are a good fit for SEDOL and not simply looking at the pay scale as a reason to apply. For example, when a non-educator applying for a paraprofessional position is told they will be working with special needs students, that person may not fully understand what that means in the SEDOL context. They may not fully understand that the position may require them to work with students with extreme behavior needs or to change diapers of high school students. If SEDOL is going to recruit from non-education sites,

then it is important to make sure that the candidates applying are qualified candidates and have a full understanding of their roles and responsibilities at SEDOL.

SEDOL should expand its job postings beyond Frontline and Indeed. There are a myriad of education job posting sites that can generate candidate leads. The district needs to cast a wide net to recruit candidates. Frankly, postings have not historically generated enough candidates to fill the positions and/or the best candidates for the positions, so it is important to post in other locations, as well. There is not a limit to the number of places job openings can be posted. There may be a cost to posting in many of the other job posting sites; however, that should be budgeted by the Human Resources Department so that they can have multiple postings for all available positions. Whatever the cost, it is minimal compared to the cost of not having sufficient staff to serve the students in SEDOL.

The final aspect of job postings is the language in the postings themselves. Language matters when posting for open positions. A job posting should inform the potential applicant about the district and the job itself. There should be an explanation of what SEDOL is, who SEDOL serves, the mission of the district, and how the open position is important to achieve that mission. Additionally, there should be detailed information on the position itself, including the basic details of the position, what the position entails/employee expectations, and an accurate description of the working environment. These are standard components of job descriptions for most districts and organizations. However, that is typically not the case in SEDOL. The typical job posting for SEDOL is vague, provides little understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the position, and provides little or no discussion of the district and who the district serves.

The following is a job posting on Frontline to fill the role of a paraprofessional for the 2023-2024 school year entitled "District Wide – Paraprofessional Openings (2023-2024)":

Description:
Special Education Paraprofessionals support teachers in carrying out assignments with special education students as part of the daily routine. We have several openings for a paraprofessional in a variety of programs and grade levels. The paraprofessional supports the classroom teacher with instructional and emotional growth.

Type of Employment: 2023-2024 School Year - full time

Qualification: Educator License with Stipulations Endorsed as Paraprofessional Educator

Salary Range: $16.72 with no experience, up to $17.14hourly with experience.
Bachelor's degree - $17.77 to start and up to $19.84/hr. Additional compensation for experience working with children.

The Type of Employment, Qualification, and Salary Range components of the post are clear and concise and provide the necessary information. The Description, however, is wholly inadequate. There is no description of what SEDOL is or who SEDOL serves. This is important context for a potential job seeker to understand, along with the mission of the district. Even the description itself is insufficient to adequately describe the position. There is nothing inaccurate in the posting, but of the three sentences included, only two provide even a vague description of the position. If SEDOL is seeking to hire paraprofessionals for long-term employment, then the language in the description needs to reflect the nature of the role and not just vague statements as seen in this example. Unfortunately, this example is not an outlier of the type of postings for positions on Frontline. This type of generic post is a typical representation of the type of postings that SEDOL is using to recruit candidates.

The postings for more senior level administrative positions are not much more detailed. The following post is for the Principal at Cyd Lash Academy and is titled, "Principal for Cyd Lash Academy beginning 07/01/2023":

Description: The Principal of Cyd Lash Academy is a 12 month full time administrative position with total responsibility for the day-to-day supervision of the Special Education District of Lake County's Emotional and Behavioral Needs Program. Cyd Lash Academy is a therapeutic day school for 6-12th grade students who have significant emotional and behavioral needs. The focus of the program is to provide therapeutic interventions to help students manage their social emotional needs while developing their academic skills. A full complement of support staff are available on site to meet the social/emotional/prevocational needs of the students.

Start Date: July 1, 2023

Position application deadline: Until Filled

Qualifications:

- Valid Administrative License - GADM or PRIN
- LBS-I Illinois Licensure
- Minimum of three (3) years of applicable teaching experience for the assigned program
- Previous experience in special education and working with the severe/profound population

Salary/Benefits: SEDOL offers an excellent salary and fringe benefits package.

Again, the Start Date, Position Application Deadline, Qualifications, and Salary/Benefits are sufficient and provide the requisite information. However, the Description is again insufficient for the position. While this post provides a small amount of background on Cyd Lash Academy, there are few details about the school or about the roles and responsibilities of the Principal. This is not the type of job posting that attracts top-tier candidates for the Principal role. Most candidates expect more information in a job posting about the school, the roles/responsibilities of the building leader, and the expectations of the district.

Insufficient and vague job postings do not attract top talent. Job postings that are not clear and provide incomplete information will result in candidates who may not have a full understanding of the position and choose to leave the role after a year or prior to the expiration of the contract. SEDOL has a responsibility in its job postings to provide the information that a potential candidate would need to make a well-informed decision about applying for and accepting a position with the district.

In addition to job postings, SEDOL needs to strategize a robust outreach plan to recruit qualified educators and related services personnel into the district. Particularly in a difficult job market, job postings alone have proven to be inadequate to recruit top candidates and ultimately hire qualified team members. The SEDOL Human Resources Department staff indicated that SEDOL attends between two and four job fairs per year. While this is a good start, SEDOL needs to actively engage the special education community in job fairs throughout the state of Illinois, as well as throughout the Midwest region. The job fairs chosen should be strategic to ensure that the candidates attending have special education backgrounds and/or the credentials needed to support SEDOL students. Similarly, SEDOL should utilize and access colleges and universities to recruit students early in their education and develop a pipeline to employment with SEDOL. This can include accepting student teachers and recruiting them to stay at SEDOL. In Illinois alone, there are a number of colleges and universities with excellent education programs that could be a tremendous pipeline of future SEDOL employees. SEDOL already has relationships with some colleges and universities, including but not limited to Southern Illinois University through the College of Lake County for tuition reimbursement for courses of study for SEDOL

staff; Carthage College and the College of Lake County for nursing; and Southern Illinois University, Dominican University, Grand Canyon University, Northern Illinois University, and Illinois State University for paraprofessionals and student teachers. The Human Resources Department staff who are responsible for recruiting and hiring should not be confined to their offices but should be out developing relationships with potential employees, regularly attending job fairs, and actively seeking qualified employees rather than waiting for potential candidates to find SEDOL.

Retention of staff is also an issue for SEDOL. The process of retaining employees begins even before the staff member is hired. There needs to be a clear job description, as described above, together with honest and complete discussion of the job roles and responsibilities during the interview process. Without this, potential candidates do not have a complete picture of the job they are taking, which may lead to frustration, burnout, and resignations. This is discussed in more detail regarding paraprofessionals in Focus Area 3.4 below. Once employees are hired, they must be supported in their jobs in order to retain them. SEDOL should implement a mentoring program for all new staff for the first two years of their employment. Some positions and some schools have this, but it is not universal or consistently implemented for all roles and all locations within SEDOL. Exceptional Learning Solutions has recommended the creation of Paraprofessional Coaches, who would be responsible for mentoring Paraprofessionals. However, a robust mentoring program should be implemented SEDOL-wide. There are many experienced and knowledgeable staff members in every building who could mentor new employees and assist in the transition of SEDOL staff members. The Human Resources Department should collaboratively develop the mentor program, and the Department should assist in the implementation of the program along with the building Principals.

> **Recommendation 3.2: Rewrite job postings that are clear, accurate, and detailed to fully describe the position being filled; expand outreach by attending additional job fairs and developing relationships with strategic colleges and universities in the Midwest; and develop a robust mentoring program where every new direct student contact staff member receives a mentor for support for the first two years of employment.**

Focus Area 3.3

Staffing is a challenge at SEDOL. SEDOL has struggled with staffing challenges over the past few years. In large part, this is due to the nationwide shortage of education professionals, particularly special education personnel. As discussed throughout this report, finding qualified special education professionals is not unique to SEDOL. This is true throughout the country and planning for staffing challenges is something that SEDOL must do. However, even though SEDOL has not created the underlying problem of a nationwide educator shortage, there are decisions that have exacerbated the staffing challenges for SEDOL.

Determining staffing needs is critical for a district. The current process for determining staffing needs at SEDOL is antiquated and is not a best practice for staffing a school district. The "Staffing Model" that was shared with the Exceptional Learning Solutions team is a spreadsheet that uses a staffing formula that is not intuitive or user friendly. The Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources explained the spreadsheet and formulas; however, there appears to be a combination of basing staffing needs on prior year numbers, a gut feeling about what staffing should be, and a determination of what the budget will allow. Principals at each school have an opportunity to suggest their staffing needs to the Assistant Superintendent, but ultimately the staffing model is primarily administered in the central office, particularly in the Human Resources Department. Each school building in SEDOL is different, with

different student populations and staffing needs. Based on the "Staffing Model" and formulas currently used, there seems to be a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing staffing requirements rather than utilizing the varying student needs and services provided in the school buildings to determine staffing decisions. Human Resources should not be determining what the staffing needs are for school buildings. That is the responsibility of the building administrators who know their needs and the issues they face in their individual buildings. The Human Resources department has the responsibility to work with the building administrators to fully understand the individual building needs and then fully staff the building with the appropriate personnel to meet those needs.

There is also an additional staffing issue within SEDOL. There are open positions throughout SEDOL that have not been filled, which is particularly true among paraprofessionals as is described in Focus Area 3.4. Many of the positions have not been filled at all during the school year, while others are vacant because of resignations during the school year. The paraprofessional positions are very important and are required on many students' IEPs. However, the solution to the paraprofessional shortage at SEDOL when substitutes are not available is to have administrators from central office "substitute" in the paraprofessional positions. There are a number of issues with this approach. First, administrators may not have the specialized training or knowledge to provide the necessary supports in the classroom. At that point, they are not a helpful addition to the classroom, and in most cases are just an extra body in the room which creates further complications. Second, administrators all have important jobs to do at SEDOL. By taking the administrators away from their assigned duties to be substitutes in the classroom, important work within SEDOL is being left undone while the administrators are away. In some cases, administrators have been "substituting" in classrooms for 60 days or more throughout the school year. SEDOL cannot continue this dysfunctional practice. Appropriate staffing needs must be assessed and positions must be filled by using more strategic methods and starting recruitment earlier in the year, as discussed in Focus Area 3.2. Utilizing an appropriate staffing model and allowing the building administrators to determine the staffing needs at each school is an important step to correcting staffing shortfalls and the use of administrators as substitutes.

Recommendation 3.3: Develop a new staffing model that accounts for the uniqueness of the student population within each SEDOL school building, and transition ownership from the Human Resources Department to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

Focus Area 3.4

One of the most significant staffing issues that SEDOL has faced in the 2022-2023 school year is the shortage of paraprofessionals in the school buildings. Paraprofessionals are a necessary and important component of special education school buildings and classrooms. They aid students who have that service as a component on their IEPs and also assist classroom teachers with a variety of supports, including but not limited to helping students with personal hygiene, educational needs, behavior supports, and removing students who need to de-escalate outside of the classroom. There are paraprofessional vacancies at every school within SEDOL, and some schools have as high as nine vacancies at various times of the school year.

In order to make the necessary changes moving forward, it is important to fully understand the depth and breadth of the paraprofessional shortage at SEDOL. During the 2022-2023 school year alone, the Department hired 151 paraprofessionals throughout SEDOL. That is a significant number of paraprofessional hires; however, once hired, these paraprofessionals often do not stay in their positions.

Of the 151 paraprofessionals hired during the 2022-2023 school year, 34.4% of them resigned at some point within the school year, while 65.6% stayed in their position throughout the school year (See Chart 3.4.1). That means that over one third of the paraprofessionals hired during the school year left, creating a huge retention problem.

Chart 3.4.1

Paraprofessionals Hired During the 2022-2023 School Year

- ■ Hired and Retained
- ■ Hired and Resigned

34.4%

65.6%
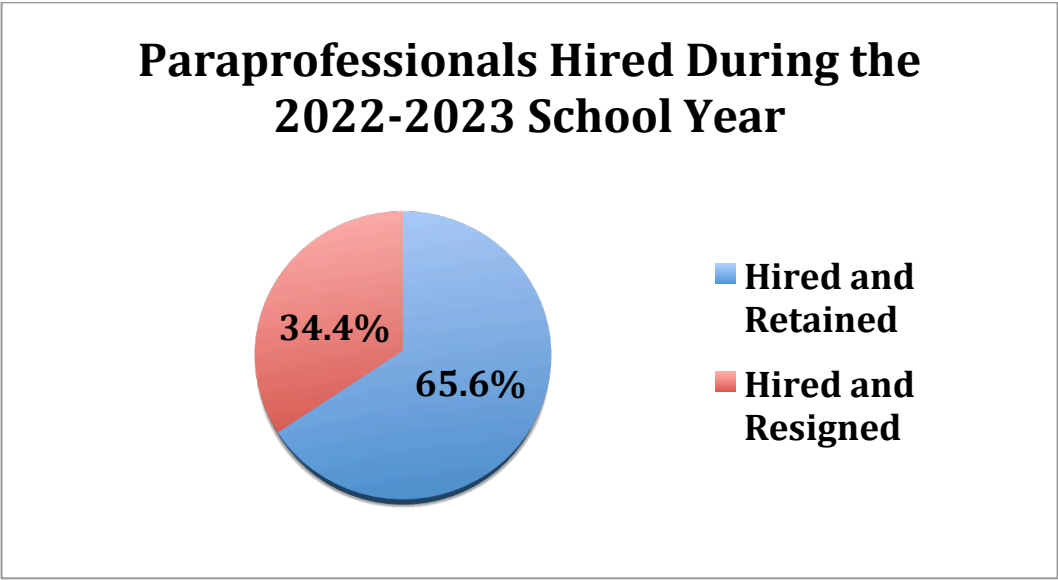
Compounding this retention issue is the longevity of paraprofessionals who were hired and resigned during the 2022-2023 school year. Chart 3.4.2 below shows the range of days that paraprofessionals stayed employed at SEDOL after their hire date during the 2022-2023 school year. Most paraprofessionals resigned from their positions between one and 60 days into their employment.

Chart 3.4.2

Number of Days Paraprofessionals Remained Employed who were both Hired and Resigned during 2022-2023 School Year
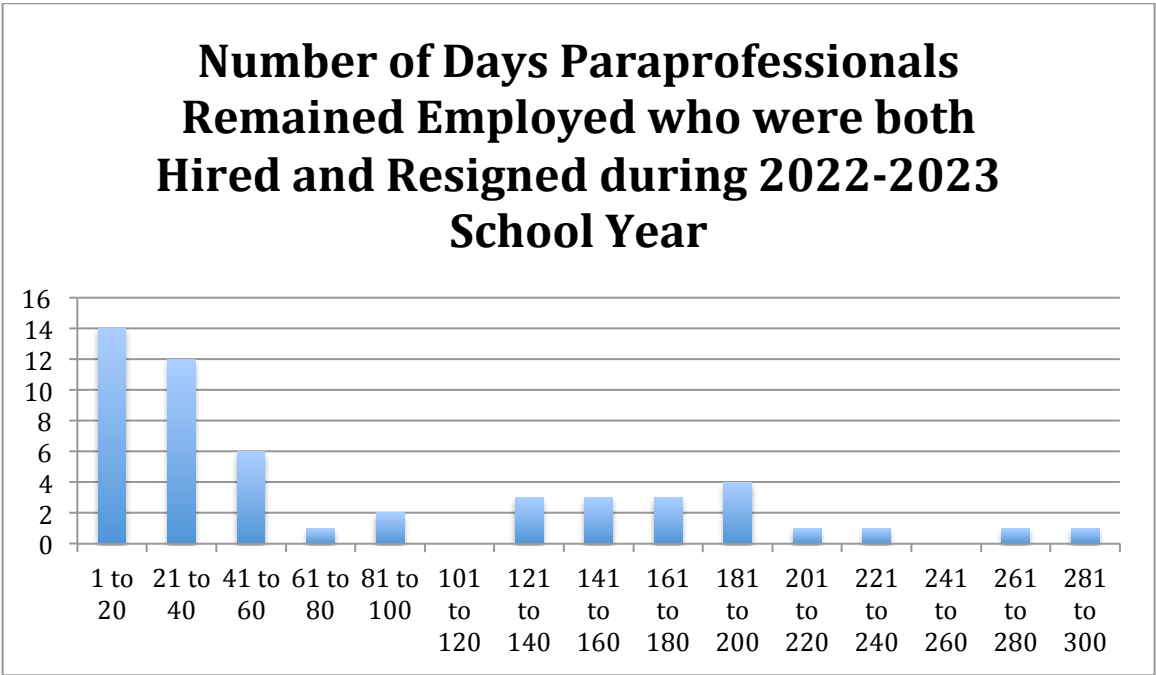
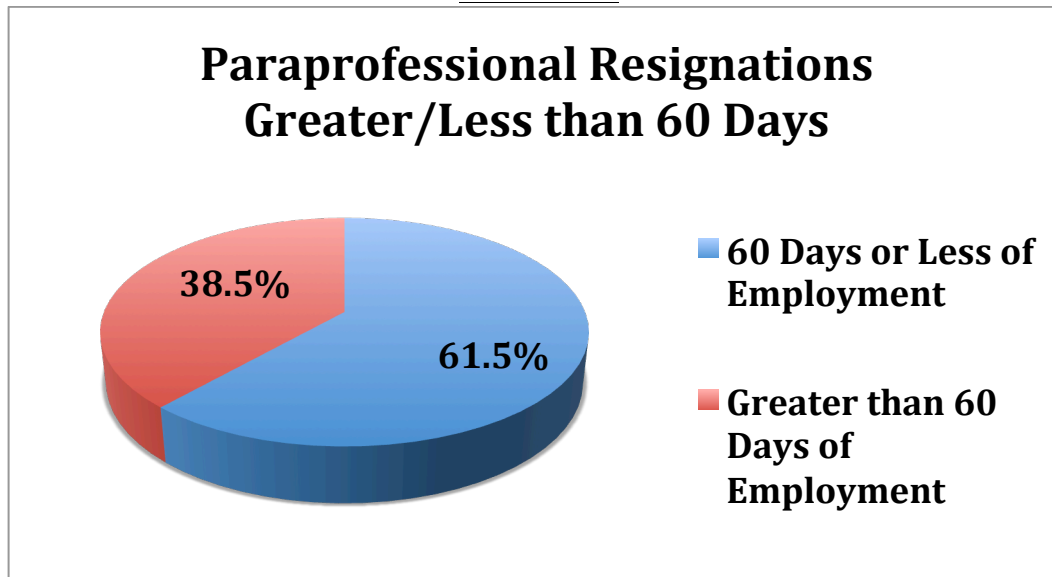Presented a slightly different way, 61.5% of paraprofessionals hired during the 2022-2023 school year who also resigned during the school year stayed in their position for 60 days or less. Only 38.5% of the

paraprofessionals hired remained employed for greater than 60 days during the 2022-2023 school year (See Chart 3.4.3). That means well over half of the paraprofessionals who were hired and resigned during the 2022-2023 school year stayed employed at SEDOL less than two months.

Chart 3.4.3

Paraprofessional Resignations
Greater/Less than 60 Days

38.5%

61.5%

- 🟦 **60 Days or Less of Employment**
- 🟥 **Greater than 60 Days of Employment**

The numbers and charts above demonstrate that there is a paraprofessional staffing issue at SEDOL. There are a number of reasons for this. First, there is a focus on quantity over quality when hiring paraprofessionals. The Human Resources Department strives to fill the vacant paraprofessional positions; however, that does not mean that anyone who responds to a job posting is a good fit for a paraprofessional role at SEDOL. SEDOL is a unique place with many high-needs students who need specialized supports. Not every paraprofessional applicant will have the specialized knowledge or training to support the SEDOL student population. But, paraprofessional applicants need to understand the environment where they will be working and the types of students they will be serving.

The paraprofessional job posting example in Focus Area 3.2 above provides little detail on the day-to-day duties of the paraprofessional, and it does not provide any description of the students being served, other than to say they are special education students. The job posting language is as follows:

> *Special Education Paraprofessionals support teachers in carrying out assignments with special education students as part of the daily routine. We have several openings for a paraprofessional in a variety of programs and grade levels. The paraprofessional supports the classroom teacher with instructional and emotional growth.*

When most non-special educators think about special education students, they draw on their own experiences, possibly with mild students on the autism spectrum or students who are in wheelchairs or students whose behavior needs requires a trip to the principal's office from time to time. Most people applying for paraprofessional positions do not realize or understand the high level of need for many students at SEDOL. Students with behavior needs may have an intermittent explosive disorder that can cause the student to explode in rage without warning, potentially harming themselves, other students, and the adults in the room. Additionally, many paraprofessional applicants may not realize that par of their responsibility may include changing the diapers of high school students who cannot care for themselves in that regard. The job description is so vague that an applicant would never consider these types of daily responsibilities occur at SEDOL.

The job description cannot provide every detail of the paraprofessional role that will vary by school building and programs within buildings. The Human Resources Department staff role should include providing detailed information during the pre-interview process. Currently, most of the paraprofessional interviews are done only by phone. While this speeds up the hiring process, it does a disservice to the applicant, the school, and the students served if the paraprofessional does not have a true understanding of what the position entails. This reflects again a quantity over quality problem. Revisiting Chart 3.4.3 above, a majority of paraprofessionals are leaving after less than two months because the job they were hired to do does not match the advertised position or their expectations.

Part of this problem is a lack of understanding within the Human Resources Department about the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals. Based on our conversations with Human Resources Department staff, they spend little or no time in the school buildings to understand the role of the paraprofessional. Moreover, the paraprofessional role is not a one-size-fits-all role. A paraprofessional supporting a student with extreme behavior needs at Gages Lake School has a completely different role than a paraprofessional supporting a nonverbal student on a ventilator at Laremont School. The Human Resources Department staff needs to have an understanding of the different roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessionals in different school buildings and programs. Because the Human Resources Department solely conducts the interview and hiring process, the applicants do not have any real world context prior to starting in their role. When the Exceptional Learning Solutions team met with paraprofessionals, nearly every one of them indicated that they had not been presented with a full and accurate description of their job responsibilities prior to accepting the position. During the interview process, the Human Resources Department needs to fully disclose that parameters of the position, based on the school building and program position that the paraprofessional is being hired to fill. Prior to hiring, paraprofessionals should interview with building administration and be provided an opportunity to visit the school and see where they will be working and the student population they will be supporting prior to accepting a position.

The Human Resources Department does a good job of providing basic onboarding once the applicant has been hired by providing the necessary forms and information for payment, benefits, etc. However, there is nothing provided to the paraprofessionals at SEDOL beyond that. Paraprofessionals do not receive any meaningful training that will help prepare them for their job responsibilities and how to support students and teachers in the classroom. This is a basic responsibility of the district: provide training so that paraprofessionals are fully equipped to fulfill their job responsibilities and contribute to the mission of SEDOL. Paraprofessionals should have two full weeks of training prior to the beginning of the school year to ensure that they are prepared to support the students and teachers. Currently, the only training the paraprofessionals receive are eight Infinitec videos that cover a variety of topics, including blood borne pathogens and safety issues among others. While this is important, it is not training that paraprofessionals need to understand their roles and responsibilities. Paraprofessionals must be equipped with the knowledge and understanding of their role in order to feel comfortable in the role and remain in the role. More details regarding training are in Category #8: Training and Professional Development.

> **Recommendation 3.4: Provide Human Resources Department staff with the knowledge and tools they need to accurately describe the role of the paraprofessional during the interview process, as well as provide onsite school visits and robust training so that paraprofessionals fully understand their job responsibilities, thus increasing longevity at SEDOL.**

Category #4: Programmatic Offerings and Continuum of Services

Commendations

- The Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) program at John Powers Center provides exemplary services for DHH students, which includes a strong curricular framework guided by a principal with DHH expertise; inclusionary opportunities for students within Hawthorne District 73; and an educational environment that prepares DHH students for future success.
- Physical therapists at Laremont School are being recognized for their forward-thinking approach to enhancing student mobility and are working with school-based administration and Rifton/MOVE International to pursue the possibility of becoming a model site for implementation of the MOVE curriculum.
- The vocational program housed at South Pre-Voc Center and at the remote job sites is an excellent vocational model, currently serving over 100 students, providing dynamic training and job coaching at the Center and within the community job sites.

Focus Area 4.1

It is important for stakeholders at SEDOL, educators, parents, and community members alike, to understand the nature and design of a special education system for students with special needs. Special education is a service for students with special needs, not a static service but a service that changes and adapts to meet the needs of special education students at various times over the course of the student's educational career. As a result, special education is considered a continuum of services.

A continuum of services for students with special needs utilizes different service delivery models to provide individually designed instructional strategies to students with disabilities. Students are each unique and have varying specialized needs. It is both the role and the obligation of SEDOL to provide services to the student in a manner and setting that meets those individualized student needs.

The continuum of services in special education is critical to the educational development and support for students with special needs. A continuum is a sequence or progression of elements, and in the context of services for students with special needs, that varies by degree depending on the severity of the disability and its impact on student learning. Every student at SEDOL finds himself or herself somewhere on the continuum due to the fact that SEDOL is a special education school district. It is the duty of the school district to work collaboratively with the Member Districts to develop the IEP, identify where each student is on the continuum, and determine placement to meet the individual needs of the student (i.e., IEP goals, FBA/BIP, etc.) at that point in time.

A continuum of services, as the name implies, specifically means *services* that are provided to students. At SEDOL the notion of providing "exceptional services", as the mission statement indicates, has not always been clear or fully executed. Administrators and educators at SEDOL can get so focused on attempting to meet the individual needs of students that the concept of special education as a service is often ignored. Instead, there is a focus on programs that can be used as interventions to assist students. While programs and interventions are critical to meeting the needs of students at various points on the educational spectrum (i.e., continuum of services), there is a danger of abandoning the concept of special education as a service and primarily focusing on fitting students into programs rather than first identifying where a student is on the educational continuum and then identifying

programs and interventions to support that student. Special education is not a place; it is a continuum of services to support students with special needs.

At the time of the Special Education Program Review, the concept of special education at SEDOL being recognized as a continuum of services has not yet been conceptualized. Based on classroom observations and conversations with administrators and educators in the district, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team perceived that student supports at SEDOL are primarily program-driven rather than service-driven. This is evidenced by the volume of programs and interventions available to SEDOL staff. While having an abundance of resources can be wonderful, it creates a risk of further driving support away from the services and toward a particular program and an assignment for the student. Instead, teachers and administrators should evaluate students to determine where they are on the continuum and support those students in accordance with the IEP. SEDOL should not let the programs and interventions available dictate the needs of the student; rather, the needs of the student must determine which interventions are most appropriate and how they are utilized.

SEDOL has a multitude of programs and inventions available for teachers to support their students. However, simply having programs and interventions is not sufficient to provide teachers with the necessary information that they need to make informed decisions for their students. There must be a genuine understanding of the utility of a particular intervention and how it is most effectively used to meet the identified needs of the student on the continuum. Based on the Exceptional Learning Solutions team's conversations with SEDOL teachers, not all teachers have a strong understanding of the programs and/or interventions available to them or how to appropriately implement those programs and/or interventions. Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends that SEDOL provide teachers with the resources and training to understand how to appropriately use programs and interventions to support students with special needs, evaluate teacher's understanding following the training, and provide additional training as needed for optimal implementation to meet student needs (additional information regarding this and other training is contained in Category #8: Training and Professional Development).

> **Recommendation 4.1: Develop a student instructional model that provides a clear framework for establishing special education as a continuum of services, jointly developed by district administration, building leaders, special education teachers, and related services personnel, as well as outside supports as needed.**

Category #5: Curriculum and Instruction

Commendations

- SEDOL provides onsite vocational training, such as woodworking and food preparation, as entry-level programs for career exploration.
- There are a variety of life skills training opportunities within SEDOL, such as household cleaning, laundry services, money management, stocking shelves, school store management, and independent living skills to prepare students for their individualized transition needs.
- The Early Childhood Program has a curriculum in place that integrates basic skills, socialization, and play-based learning which provides a foundation for students' cognitive and social/emotional development, while evaluating and determining the best placement for students.

Focus Area 5.1

Strong curriculum and sound instruction are at the heart of any successful district. The educational opportunities for students are built upon this foundation. Generally, SEDOL has struggled with the utilization of a cohesive curriculum and there are many classrooms in the district where instruction is lacking. SEDOL leadership has recognized this, and beginning in the 2023-2024 school year, a new administrative position focusing on curriculum and assessment has been created. As discussed in greater detail in Focus Area 1.2, Exceptional Learning Solutions has recommended that the new position be titled Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. This new role will be an excellent addition to the SEDOL leadership team and comes with tremendous responsibility. This is due to the fact that curriculum, instruction, and assessments all need to be completely revamped. This will not be a small task, and there will need to be significant professional development for teachers and staff to accompany these changes.

The Proposed SEDOL Organization Chart created by Exceptional Learning Solutions reflects the desire of the Superintendent and district leadership to have Principals, Assistant Principals, and Sector Supervisors all report to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Exceptional Learning Solutions proposes two new positions under the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment: Director of Professional Development and Paraprofessional Coaches. The Paraprofessional Coaches are discussed in greater detail in Category #8: Training and Professional Development.

The new role of Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment will lead the work to reform curriculum, instruction, and assessments in the district. As discussed in Focus Area 5.2, there is no structured or meaningful curriculum currently used in SEDOL. Some teachers have cobbled together various forms of curricula that they utilize in their classroom, but many teachers simply resort to a series of interventions rather than true curricula. Currently, curricula reside in a closet due to a lack of training or are unavailable due to a lack of license renewal. Addressing curricular issues will be a priority for the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Additionally, instruction is lacking in most classrooms within SEDOL. Of course, instruction looks different in each classroom based on the SEDOL program and student population, but there should be evidence of adapted instruction occurring in every classroom in SEDOL. That is not currently the case. Instructional deficiencies are discussed in greater detail in Focus Area 5.3. Finally, there are assessments that are used by SEDOL, which are discussed in greater detail in Category #6: Assessments and Data. The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment has an opportunity to examine the current assessments in place,

ensure that the assessment data is both accurate and accessible, and make adjustments to the assessments and data collection, which will support and inform instruction in the classrooms.

One person cannot implement the changes to curriculum, instruction, and assessment. School building leaders, teachers, and staff all need to embrace the changes set forth by the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment and implement them with fidelity in their schools and classroom. In order to do that successfully, there will need to be significant upfront and ongoing professional development regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessments/data. As a result, Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends hiring a Director of Professional Development who will report directly to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. The Director of Professional Development will lead the work around providing formal and informal professional development sessions for school building leaders, teachers, and staff to effectively implement changes to curricula, instruction, and assessment/data usage. Without providing the professional development and training, any new curricula, instructional practices, and data from assessments will not be properly implemented and/or utilized in the classrooms. The students at SEDOL are entitled to a high-quality education, complete with appropriate curricula that is suited for their needs, instruction that is delivered confidently and with fidelity, and assessments/data that measure progress and indicate areas of needed support. The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment must be given the authority, resources, and district support to make the necessary changes to curricula, instruction, and assessments within SEDOL in order to provide an appropriate education for the students served by the district.

Recommendation 5.1: Require the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment to develop a plan with detailed action items, benchmarks, and goals/objectives to create curriculum frameworks, instructional strategies/training, and assessment/data usage protocols at SEDOL.

Focus Area 5.2

There does not appear to be a curriculum framework in place in SEDOL or any meaningful curricula being utilized in the SEDOL schools. It appears that there generally is a fundamental misunderstanding of curricula among educators at SEDOL. There are myriad definitions of curricula circulating in education, but its most basic definition is what the school is attempting to teach students academically and behaviorally. It is simply a map for what the district and school want teachers to teach and students to learn. Without a solid curriculum in place, classrooms operate like a rudderless ship traveling with no direction or guidance. When there is no meaningful curriculum in place, teachers and staff are left on their own to develop some curricular structure for their classrooms. While some SEDOL teachers have successfully accomplished this, others lack the direction that a curriculum provides. Therefore, what is being taught to students, even students within the same program, can vary dramatically from classroom to classroom. SEDOL needs to develop a curriculum framework for each of its programs and hold teachers and staff accountable for utilizing the prescribed framework.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team heard from administrators and teachers during interviews and onsite visits that SEDOL has a curriculum framework in place. The team was directed to the SEDOL website, specifically to the Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment page where there is a link to "Curriculum Framework." Therein are the following subject areas: Early Childhood Two-Year Cycle, English Language Arts, Mathematics, Physical Health and Development, Science and Social Studies, and Social Emotional Learning. Searching through these resources provides generally disappointing results

and most do not reflect a curriculum framework. Science and Social Studies is the only subject area that has the semblance of a curriculum framework, with Early Childhood Two-Year Cycle and Physical Health and Development having a rudimentary framework that needs to be further developed. English Language Art and Mathematics do not have a curriculum framework. The resources contained on the website are a collection of assessments, materials, and interventions and do not comprise or align to a curriculum framework. This is evidence of a fundamental lack of understanding of what curriculum and a curriculum framework is. Materials and interventions are not curricula. A curriculum is what we want and/or are required to teach students and is supported by materials and interventions that can help students who need additional reinforcement to understand the concepts. Some of the interventions provided could be helpful to teachers, but this is not the appropriate place to house interventions.

There is not a one-size-fits-all curriculum that will be appropriate for all of SEDOL. SEDOL has many varying programs that differ from school to school and within the Sector Schools. The variances within SEDOL require curriculum frameworks that are tailored to meet the needs of the individual programs and provide teachers within those programs the direction they need to instruct students. Curriculum frameworks should be developed collaboratively with teachers and administrators through curriculum committees to ensure that frameworks meet the needs of students and are workable in the classroom. Additionally, for the Sector Schools, SEDOL staff should meet jointly with Member District staff to collaboratively develop curriculum frameworks that are appropriate for SEDOL but also meet the needs of the Member District.

> **Recommendation 5.2: Form curriculum committees to formally develop curriculum frameworks for each SEDOL program and/or subject area and provide training to teachers on the use of the curriculum frameworks in their classrooms.**

Focus Area 5.3

Classroom instruction throughout SEDOL varies widely depending on classrooms, programs, and the experience of the classroom teacher. There are classrooms at SEDOL with experienced and well-trained teachers, and in those classrooms, the Exceptional Learning Solutions team observed strong instructional practices being implemented. There are glimpses of instructional excellence occurring throughout SEDOL every day. Instructionally strong and experienced teachers should be celebrated and used as models for instructional excellence within the district.

There are many teachers within SEDOL who do not have the experience or the training to provide strong instruction in their classrooms. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team observed many more teachers who were instructionally weak than instructionally strong. This is a significant problem in the SEDOL Schools and in the Sector Schools. Good instructional practices are not an option when teaching students, and those strong instructional practices can be even more important when addressing the needs of students with special needs. For example, there are many classrooms throughout SEDOL that have students with significant behavior issues. One of the ways to combat some of the behavior issues is to engage the students in what is being taught in the classroom through creative instructional practices. If students who have behavior issues are bored in the classroom, inappropriate behaviors continue to manifest because of lack of engagement in the material being presented. Strong, engaging instructional practices can and will draw students into the lesson.

Many teachers in SEDOL do not have the experience or the knowledge to adapt their instructional practices without assistance. Therefore, it is vitally important to provide teachers with professional

development around strong instruction. As curriculum frameworks are developed and teachers receive professional development regarding how to integrate the curriculum frameworks into their classrooms, there also needs to be simultaneous professional development focused on improving instructional practices in the classroom. The Director of Professional Development, in conjunction with building principals, teachers, and the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, should determine the instructional needs of classroom teachers in each building and develop a building-specific professional development curriculum that addresses the instructional needs of each SEDOL school building and Sector School. The instructional professional development needs to be ongoing at SEDOL throughout the school year. There are too many SEDOL teachers who are lacking basic instructional strategies that one professional development session at the beginning of the year will not be sufficient to address this deficiency and ensure student success. There should be ongoing, coordinated professional development and coaching from the Director of Professional Development, school Principals, and Sector Supervisors. As a school district, SEDOL has an obligation to make certain that all students make progress toward achieving their IEP goals. That cannot be done in a meaningful way without curricular frameworks in place and without strong and consistent instruction occurring in every classroom.

Recommendation 5.3: Conduct a review of instructional practices throughout SEDOL to determine programs and classrooms where instructional improvement is warranted, and provide targeted professional development, customized to each school building and/or program to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need for instructional excellence.

Category #6: Assessments and Data

Commendations

- SEDOL administers assessments in the form of NWEA MAP Assessments, Illinois Assessment of Readiness and Dynamic Learning Maps Assessments to measure student growth and achievement, which demonstrates diverse and appropriate assessments for the SEDOL student population.
- SEDOL is currently administering Fall MAP Testing and Spring IAR Testing, with the goal of expanding MAP assessment to include Winter and Spring Testing.

Focus Area 6.1

Assessments and data are very important to determine individual student growth and progress, as well as to determine the efficacy of instruction at SEDOL. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team explored the data being collected and utilized within SEDOL. Based on observations in classrooms and conversations with district administrators, school building leaders, and teachers, it appears that data utilization is generally inadequate at the school level and at the district level within SEDOL. It is apparent that there are some teachers and staff members who are not entirely familiar with methods of progress monitoring and data collection. It is important to note that this does not suggest that data is not being collected. Progress monitoring seems to be occurring in many classrooms; however, teachers and administrators are generally not actively utilizing the data collected. Data does not always appear to be driving decision-making for IEP goals, student placement, and/or progression within programs. There is no evidence that indicates there is a deliberate goal to ignore or underutilize student data. Rather, there appears to be a lack of training, understanding, and confidence among staff on the process of data collection, data analysis, and data utilization.

SEDOL needs to ensure that all personnel are sufficiently trained in the collection, analysis, usage, and storage of student data. While some data training has occurred within the district, not all teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff are following the training. As a result, there are inconsistencies in the understanding of data collection and usage. There should be consistent expectations for data collection and usage among all staff in every school building and in every program in the district. The new Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment and the Director of Professional Development need to provide training for all staff regarding progress monitoring and data. A consistent policy from the central office to all staff regarding data is necessary so that SEDOL obtains and treats data similarly for every student. Training should inform educators on the proper methods of data collection, but more importantly, what to do with the data once it is collected. Data must be used to determine student placement, inform classroom instruction, and drive interventions and supports.

Recommendation 6.1: Provide special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and staff with consistent professional development on how to accurately collect data, how to analyze data, how to utilize data in the classroom, and how to preserve data as a vital component of the student's records for IEPs, placement, and future decision-making.

SEDOL district administration recognizes the importance of student assessment data. There are a variety of assessments that are used district-wide to assess student growth and achievement. Currently, SEDOL is utilizing three primary assessments: NWEA MAP Assessments (hereinafter, "MAP Assessments"), Illinois Assessment of Readiness Assessments (hereinafter, "IAR Assessments"), and Dynamic Learning Maps Assessments (hereinafter, "DLM Assessments"). All three of these assessments are strong tools to measure student growth and achievement.

MAP Assessments are a phenomenal tool to assess student growth and achievement in reading, mathematics, language usage, and science. The MAP Assessments allows teachers and administrators to identify gaps in student learning to strategically address the gaps with interventions and/or additional instruction. One of the most important aspects of the MAP Assessment is the data and reports received following the administration of the assessment. These are standards-aligned reports that provide teachers and administrators with great insight into student growth and learning. MAP Assessments can be administered in the Fall, Winter, and Spring in order to demonstrate student growth throughout the year and year-over-year. Currently, SEDOL only administers the MAP Assessment in the Fall. While a Fall administration is admirable, the MAP Assessment and the reports/data tools have much more utility if student growth is examined over time through the use of all three assessment windows. SEDOL has plans to expand the MAP Assessment to Fall, Winter, and Spring in coming years. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team strongly recommends that SEDOL utilize all three assessment windows to obtain the most optimal student growth data.

IAR Assessments are the State of Illinois assessment and accountability tool that is administered to students in grades 3-8 in Illinois public schools. As a public school district in Illinois, SEDOL administers this test and reports the results back to the State (See Focus Area 6.3). The IAR Assessment measures student achievement in English language arts and mathematics as they relate to the New Illinois Learning Standards and Common Core. This assessment helps school districts and the State of Illinois to assess student understanding of the New Illinois Learning Standards specifically for English language arts and mathematics. The IAR Assessment is administered once per school year in the Spring during dates set by the Illinois State Board of Education, and SEDOL complies with the required administration of the assessment for relevant students.

SEDOL also administers a third assessment for a portion of its students. The DLM Assessments are designed for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. This assessment is utilized when other state assessments are not appropriate for students, even if the district provides accommodations. Through the DLM Assessment administration, students with significant cognitive disabilities can demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of English language arts, mathematics, and science. DLM Assessments are not only important, but they are also appropriate assessments for students with significant cognitive disabilities, and SEDOL is serving this student population well by administering this type of assessment.

Recommendation 6.2: Continue administering IAR Assessments, DLM Assessments, and MAP Assessments and gradually increase the administration of MAP Assessments to include Fall, Winter, and Spring testing.

The assessments that SEDOL provides are appropriate and beneficial for the student population in the district. The challenge, however, is that while the assessments themselves are appropriate, there in minimal utilization of the data generated by these assessments. All three assessments administered by SEDOL provide valuable student growth and/or achievement data. Through the Exceptional Learning Solutions team classroom observations and conversations with teachers and administrators, there is very minimal, if any, meaningful utilization of student assessment data in the classrooms or in the school buildings by administrators.

The student assessment data from the MAP Assessments is not being utilized by classroom teachers or by school building administrators to examine student achievement building-wide. To be fair, as previously stated, the MAP Assessment has only been administered in the Fall testing window, which limits the utility to demonstrate student growth over time. However, the student assessment data from the single Fall testing window provides a snapshot of student achievement and understanding and should be examined by teachers and school building administrators to determine what supports and/or interventions students may need to grow academically. One potential reason for the limited use of MAP Assessment data is that the reports generated from the testing data can be difficult to understand without training or some prior knowledge of MAP Assessment data reporting. If SEDOL plans to continue to utilize MAP Assessments and expand the assessments to all three testing windows, teachers and administrators must be properly trained on the reading of MAP Assessment data reports, as well as how to utilize that data to inform classroom instruction and student supports/interventions.

There are similar challenges with the DLM Assessment data. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team inquired with SEDOL district administrators, school building administrators, and teachers how the DLM Assessment data was being utilized to inform student instruction and supports. Nearly every person indicated that they do not utilize DLM Assessment data because they do not have access to it. Some inquired to the Exceptional Learning Solutions team where the DLM Assessment data goes currently and who is supposed to receive it. District administrators should be analyzing DLM Assessment data following every test administration to determine how students with significant cognitive disabilities are performing in their classrooms. Likewise, school building administrators and classroom teachers with these students should have access to the assessment data and utilize that data as they continue to teach and support students with significant cognitive disabilities.

SEDOL utilizes the ECRA Group, and Illinois-based consulting company that supports school districts across the state by improving utilization of evidence-based practices. The ECRA Group is a very reputable company, and school districts throughout Illinois utilize their services to analyze student, school, and district data. For SEDOL, the ERCA Group's reporting includes school-specific growth summaries for the Fall MAP Assessments and Spring IAR Assessments. The company analyzes the results of these assessments and compiles them in a report that can be provided to the Illinois State Board of Education for reporting purposes. There are four growth measures: Higher than Expected Growth, Expected Growth, Lower than Expected Growth, and Unsatisfactory Growth.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions Team was provided the School Overall Growth Summary for 2021-2022 for each of the SEDOL schools. Utilizing Cyd Lash Academy data as an example, the Overall Growth Summary indicates that there was Expected Growth for the 2021-2022 school year (See Chart 6.3.1). However, upon closer examination, students did not meet expected growth either in mathematics or reading. The reason that the report indicates Expected Growth can be found in the asterisk next to the "-0.3", which indicates that "Dot color is green for all growth scores that are not statistically significant."

The green dot color indicates Expected Growth. However, because these results are statistically insignificant, by default, the Overall Growth is reported as Expected Growth.

Chart 6.3.1

SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRICT OF LAKE COUNTY
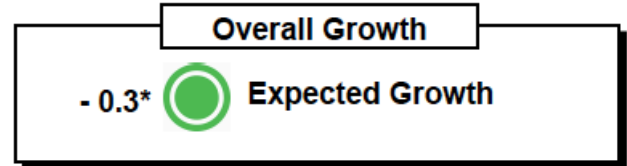
Overall Growth Summary (2021-2022)

School:
CYD LASH ACADEMY

Growth Year: **2021-2022**

Growth Comparison Group: **Illinois IEP Students**

Criteria: **Spring 2022 IAR and Fall 2022 MAP**

Overall Growth

- 0.3* ● **Expected Growth**

Student Growth by Subject

Subject	Student Count^	% Met Benchmark	% High Growth	% Expected Growth	% Low Growth	Growth Effect Size	
Mathematics	9	0%	17%	72%	11%	- 0.3*	●
Reading	7	0%	14%	71%	14%	- 0.18	●
ALL	10	0%	13%	78%	10%	- 0.3*	●
EXPECTED			16%	68%	16%	0.00	

* Dot color is green for all growth scores that are not statistically significant
^ Student count only includes students with at least 2 predictors

**Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding
***Results not reported for groups with fewer than 5 students

Similarly, again utilizing Cyd Lash Academy as an example, Chart 6.3.2 provides the Grade-Level Growth Summary for the 2021-2022 school year in the subject area of mathematics. The Overall Growth is again reported as Expected Growth; however, the same caveat applies that it is listed as Expected Growth because the growth scores are not statistically significant. The default has provided the designation of Expected Growth rather than actual student growth. Moreover, Chart 6.3.2 compares students by grade level. There is one student for Grade 8, two students for Grade 9, four students for Grade 10, and two students for Grade 11 who are being analyzed in this particular report. However, the chart does not have any student data reported, which is again explained by the three asterisks, "Results not reported for groups with fewer than five students." In this case, the student growth data for each grade is not reported because it is not required to be reported for fewer than five students. These same types of results occur in most reports for every SEDOL schools.

Chart 6.3.2

SPECIAL EDUCATION DISTRICT OF LAKE COUNTY
Grade-Level Growth Summary
(2021-2022)

School:
CYD LASH ACADEMY

Subject:
Mathematics

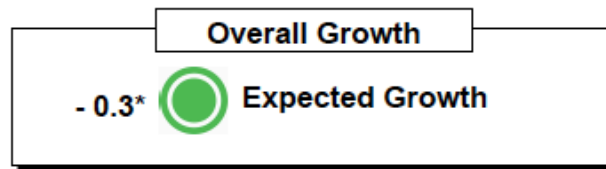| Overall Growth	
- 0.3* ⬤	Expected Growth

Growth Year: **2021-2022**

Growth Comparison Group: **Illinois IEP Students**

Criteria: **Spring 2022 IAR and Fall 2022 MAP**

Student Growth by Grade

Grade	Student Count^	% Met Benchmark	% High Growth	% Expected Growth	% Low Growth	Growth Effect Size
08	1	***	***	***	***	***
09	2	***	***	***	***	***
10	4	***	***	***	***	***
11	2	***	***	***	***	***
ALL	9	0%	17%	72%	11%	- 0.3* ⬤
EXPECTED			16%	68%	16%	0.00

* Dot color is green for all growth scores that are not statistically significant
^ Student count only includes students with at least 2 predictors

**Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding
***Results not reported for groups with fewer than 5 students

These Growth Summaries meet the reporting requirements for the State of Illinois, and the ECRA Group has accurately reported the data for SEDOL based on Illinois requirements. It is not, however, useful assessment data to examine actual student growth, nor is it data that can be meaningfully utilized by classroom teachers or administrators. In fact, at first glance and without deeper analysis one could have the impression that students are meeting Expected Growth standards when an examination of individual student data may not demonstrate that at all. SEDOL needs to provide teachers and administrators with actual student data. There needs to be actual data from the IAR Assessment provided to administrators and teachers of students who take that assessment. Likewise, the actual MAP Assessment data needs to be provided to teachers as well, including growth data once the MAP Assessments are administered three times each year. In order to have a complete and factual understanding of student achievement and/or growth, teachers and administrators must have accurate data that can be utilized in the classroom to inform instruction and interventions.

Recommendation 6.3: Provide MAP Assessment data, IAR Assessment data, and DLM Assessment data to all teachers and administrators with students who took each assessment, and provide training on how to read the data and utilize the data to inform instruction.

Data collection and usage is a vital component in special education and for the district. It is critical that data drives every decision that is made in SEDOL for each of the students. There is evidence of data usage throughout the SEDOL. District leadership utilizes data in its decision-making, and some teachers utilize observational and assessment data to monitor student progress and assess student achievement. SEDOL utilizes data in some classrooms, but full data usage and understanding is still emerging within most classrooms in the district. There is not a well implemented, district-wide standard for data utilization in special education.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions team uncovered through conversations with administrators and teachers that there does not appear to be universal adoption of the data directives from central office administration in all classrooms within the district. Interviews with many teachers during the Special Education Program Review revealed that there is not a strong understanding of the data policies that are in place within the SEDOL. Most have an understanding that data should be collected and maintained for a student file, but there is not a universal standard being utilized district-wide of what data is collected, how that data is utilized, and where data is stored for future use. Data collection, use, and storage for special education varies from building to building and from classroom to classroom. There should be a standard data collection, utilization, and storage policy for special education followed by every teacher, paraprofessional, related services team member, staff member, and administrator in every building in SEDOL. The policy should be a standard that is used for every student who is receiving services.

Data-driven decision-making should be at the core of SEDOL's approach to the development and/or implementation of a special education data policy. Three conditions are necessary to support data informed actions: 1) usefulness of data, 2) capacity to use data effectively, and 3) a culture that values the regular collection and use of data. Data should dictate the formulation of policy, support the placement of students, determine the evaluation and design of programs, and guide practice by informing the use of appropriate instruction and intervention strategies. These data-driven actions are essential to build a strong district that is sustainable, systemic, and student centered.

> **Recommendation 6.4: Develop and implement a district-wide data policy that creates a standard for student data collection, usage, and storage that is focused on student achievement, placement, interventions, and supports.**

Category #7: Behavioral Systems

Commendations

- Staff works diligently to utilize alternative de-escalation strategies within their individual schools (i.e., sensory rooms, movement rooms, and individual 1:1 supports).
- Introduction of Ukeru® into schools with high-level behavior populations, like Gages Lake School and Fairhaven School, demonstrates the use of progressive de-escalation strategies to ensure student and staff safety while de-escalating students outside of the classroom.
- Implementation of Positive Peer Culture at Cyd Lash Academy effectively provides a peer-helping model designed to improve social competence with an emphasis on the care and concern for others.

Focus Area 7.1

Personnel in SEDOL schools and Sector Schools—administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and staff—are expected to independently fulfill many different roles, beyond their job responsibilities. One of these added responsibilities is addressing student behavioral issues. Most teachers and administrators in SEDOL have extensive training and degrees in special education but do not necessarily have specialized training, certificates, or degrees in behavior management. Most paraprofessionals have even less formal training on behavior management and have mostly learned behavior interventions on the job. In some cases, the related services personnel, specifically school psychologists and social workers, have the most experience addressing behavior issues but may or may not have any formal training. Due to their areas of expertise, they are often called upon to address significant student behavioral issues.

School buildings throughout the district have developed individualized processes for addressing student behavior needs. Some schools within SEDOL have more significant behavior incidents, such as Gages Lake School, Cyd Lash Academy, and Fairhaven School due to their student population and the programs offered at those schools. Each school has identified administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and/or related services personnel who respond to significant behavior incidents that occur within the schools. SEDOL ensures all staff receive Crisis Prevention Institute's ("CPI") Nonviolent Crisis Intervention ("NCI") training, which equips personnel with strategies for safely defusing hostile or violent behavior among students. When a significant behavior incident occurs that cannot be addressed in the classroom, the teacher or other staff member calls for assistance, and available personnel respond to that call. The response team is typically at least one building administrator, related services personnel, and other available staff who have experience with behavior issues (e.g., Rangers at Gages Lake School). These individuals work to diffuse the behavior issue (typically outside of the classroom) using a variety of techniques and available resources at the school. For example, at some schools a select group of administrators, teachers, and staff are trained in Ukeru®, which is an alternative to restraints and seclusion, and utilizes soft, cushioned blocking tools that protect both students and school personnel from student outbursts and violent behavior. The introduction of Ukeru® into SEDOL is a positive and innovative response to violent student behavior and appears to be working effectively in the schools where it is being used. While data from the 2022-2023 school year is still being analyzed, it appears and is reported by school building and district administrators that in schools where Ukeru® is implemented, physical restraints have decreased and the number of minutes students have been out of the classroom has decrease, as well. Ukeru® is a positive addition to the SEDOL tools for de-escalation. However, if SEDOL intends to adopt Ukeru® permanently, staff throughout the building need to be trained in using

Ukeru® rather than only a few select staff members. The Ukeru® system is physically draining for adults and a broader pool of staff should be available throughout the day to implement this behavior intervention.

More generally, SEDOL needs a larger pool of trained staff to address behavior issues. While the personnel responding to behavior incidents are very skilled at addressing student behavior needs, each of them has other primary responsibilities in the schools. When a student behavior call for assistance is made, responders often need to leave the students who they are working with in the classroom or in counseling sessions to respond to the behavior crisis. While the schools make this system work, and have done so very capably, this system disrupts other students' classroom instruction and/or support minutes.

SEDOL needs a dedicated crisis response team in every school so that teachers and related services personnel are not pulled out of classrooms or away from supporting students to address behavior needs. The crisis response team would be thoroughly trained in de-escalation techniques, behavior interventions, and school-specific behavior supports such as Ukeru®. When a behavior incident occurs, the process for engaging the crisis response team should be as follows: the teacher in need of support calls the office, and the alert is sent via radio to the crisis response team members. Depending on the level of the behavior incident, appropriate and available crises response team members would respond via radio and proceed to the incident. Crisis response teams in each building should debrief daily, as well as meet on a regular basis to engage in problem solving and discuss specific student behavior needs and incidents.

Recommendation 7.1: Develop a crisis response team in every SEDOL school building with dedicated and trained staff who respond to significant behavior incidents, and increase behavior training for all school staff on behavior interventions, such as Ukeru® and any other adopted behavior supports.

Focus Area 7.2

The need for having qualified adults and a dedicated crisis response team to address behavior needs of students is compounded by the fact that behavior incidents are on the rise. This is a national trend, seen in nearly every state, and is occurring at SEDOL, as well. Not only are behavior incidents on the rise across the country, but significant behavior issues are on the rise. Behavior incidents include actions that put others (adults and students) in danger, students putting themselves in danger by eloping from school buildings, students engaging in activities that could cause themselves harm, and physical attacks on teachers and/or other students, just to name a few. In order to combat these increased behavior incidents school districts need to have trained behavior management experts on staff to address the needs.

In SEDOL, there is currently one Board Certified Behavior Analyst (hereinafter, "BCBA") for the district who is shared among all of the buildings. The current BCBA is knowledgeable and qualified. However, because the one BCBA is divided among all of the buildings, it is impossible to be onsite at every school for all significant behavior incidents or have meaningful time to coach teachers on behavior management techniques. Often, by the time the BCBA has arrived at a building, the incident has already been addressed. Compounding the issue of access to the BCBA during the 2022-2023 school year is that the current BCBA was often dispatched to a school to cover an open paraprofessional position. While the BCBA was able to assist the one school where she was substituting, she was not able to fulfill her job responsibilities for all SEDOL schools because she was limited to only one building for the day. In SEDOL

where there are many significant behavior needs, the BCBA needs to be available throughout the district. Unfortunately, she is often assigned as a paraprofessional and her much needed skills are severely underutilized.

Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends that SEDOL hire additional behavior specialists for the district as follows: three behavior specialists at Gages Lake School, three behavior specialists at Fairhaven School, three behavior specialists at Cyd Lash Academy, one behavior specialist at John Powers Center who will also serve the Sector Schools, and one behavior specialist at Laremont School. Ideally, SEDOL will hire BCBAs for these positions. However, BCBAs are in high demand in schools across the country and often difficult to hire. As a result, SEDOL may not be able to fill each of these recommended positions with a BCBA but all positions should be filled by a certified behavior specialist, if not a BCBA. An alternative option for SEDOL is to limit new full time positions and to contract for BCBA services with an outside behavior specialist provider.   There are many organizations that specialize in providing behavior support services to school districts, and most of the service providers are BCBAs. The outside providers can dispatch behavior specialists to a school for the entire school year if it proves too difficult to hire BCBAs.

Additional BCBAs at each school site will allow for greater behavior supports in the event of behavior crises.   The BCBAs would lead the crisis response team and coordinate all responses to behavior incidents. BCBAs would also work closely with the Director of Safety to analyze the school buildings and determine what changes are needed to keep students safe during times of behavior crises. The additional BCBAs at each school would also be responsible for providing additional behavior training to all teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, staff, and administrators, which could ultimately reduce the reliance on crisis response teams because behavior incidents could be addressed in the classroom with de-escalation techniques.

> **Recommendation 7.2:   Hire three behavior specialists at Gages Lake School, three behavior specialists at Fairhaven School, three behavior specialists at Cyd Lash Academy, one behavior specialist at John Powers Center who will also serve the Sector Schools, and one behavior specialist at Laremont School to provide onsite behavior supports, lead the crisis response team at each school, and provide behavior training to school personnel.**

Category #8: Training and Professional Development

Commendations

- To ensure student safety, SEDOL provides CPI and NCI training for all staff, as well as required annual renewals.
- SEDOL currently provides a series of required online Infinitec videos for paraprofessionals that deliver foundational information for serving students in schools.
- Building-based leadership offers training opportunities for staff on a voluntary basis.

Focus Area 8.1

Training and professional development are offered at SEDOL, with some training required for certain positions and other training opportunities offered on a voluntary basis. SEDOL also offers some important basic training for all staff, such as CPI and NCI training. However, there are many additional training and professional development opportunities that SEDOL should be offering to targeted staff members. First, there should be targeted professional development for all teachers on instruction. As was discussed in Focus Area 5.3, strong instructional practices are not evident in every SEDOL classroom. In fact, the majority of observed classrooms lacked instructional excellence. Teachers throughout SEDOL need to be trained on the implementation of quality instructional practices, strategies, and intervention for effective classrooms. These trainings cannot be optional. There are some trainings offered by the district and by building administrators that are voluntary in nature. Instruction is critical in a district like SEDOL, and as a result, teachers need to be trained appropriately on instructional practices so they can provide educational excellence to their students.

There is an important educational aspect that impacts every student at SEDOL: the IEP. Each student within SEDOL has an IEP that indicates goals, interventions, and supports for that student. Exceptional Learning Solutions reviewed a sample of the IEPs drafted for SEDOL students. As discussed in Focus Area 9.1 in more detail, there are IEPs that are not drafted correctly or accurately. Some IEPs have important information missing, other IEPs have sections that are cut and pasted from one IEP to another, and yet other IEPs even had different student names used in the document. The core of the IEP is that it is an individualized plan.   Simply cutting and pasting information from one IEP to another is not individualized, nor does it satisfy the requirements of the IDEA. As a result, those teachers and staff members who draft student IEPs or complete a portion of them should be trained on proper development. This training is important so that SEDOL can ensure they are in compliance with the IDEA requirements of the IEP, as well as to ensure that students with IEPs have their goals, interventions, and supports clearly articulated in the document that outlines the services they receive.

Data collection and usage in the school building and classrooms are essential for understanding student achievement and placement. As discussed in Focus Area 6.1, many SEDOL classrooms are not regularly and accurately collecting student progress monitoring data. Those who are collecting data are not always using that data to inform instruction or student support. There seems to be an understanding that data collection, analysis, and informed decision-making based on data are important, but it does not appear to be a priority throughout SEDOL. Specific training on data collection in the form of progress monitoring and/or formal/informal assessments is necessary. Every teacher, paraprofessional, and related services provider should have data collection and usage training, as each should be monitoring and collecting data on students with whom they work. The training and professional development should also include how

to integrate that collected data into the IEP and how that data informs student placement, interventions, and supports.

Paraprofessionals specifically need specialized training. Currently, the paraprofessional do not have mandatory training other than the eight Infinitec modules that they need to complete, as discussed in Focus Area 3.4. These videos, while important for general knowledge and information, cannot be the sole training opportunity for paraprofessionals. Many paraprofessionals hired by SEDOL are new to education and/or new to working the special needs students. Every paraprofessional in the district, both new and returning, should have paraprofessional training at the beginning of the school year and throughout the year during institute days. This training needs to be specific for paraprofessionals targeted to the supports that paraprofessionals are providing and should be separate from classroom teacher training. For paraprofessionals who are new to the district, there should be a two-week training regimen prior to starting their supports in the classroom. The first two days of training should have the paraprofessional in the classroom observing the classroom teacher and students to get a true understanding of the paraprofessional roles and responsibilities. At the end of the two days, paraprofessionals should make a decision if this is a good role for them and if they want to continue with the training. If so, then the remainder of the two weeks will be targeted training for the paraprofessional on how to support students' academic and behavior needs in the classroom and how to ensure students/staff safety. Currently, paraprofessionals throughout SEDOL indicated that they are frustrated with the lack of training and professional development supports that they receive. This should be a requirement for them to work with the students in the classroom.

Safety is of the utmost importance for students, administrators, teachers, and staff. It is always the first priority, and SEDOL personnel are very cognizant of safety issues for students. Throughout the Special Education Program Review, The Exceptional Learning Solutions team witnessed administrators, teachers, and staff appropriately prioritizing student safety above all else. Safety is discussed in detail in Category #2: Safety and Security. Even though most SEDOL personnel are attuned to safety issues for students, safety training should be a required component of the training curriculum for SEDOL personnel. Training should focus not only on safety issues regarding students in the classroom or common areas of the school building, but should also focus on training for emergencies. Focus Area 2.3 recommends the development of a Safety Plan to augment the Emergency Operations Plan to SEDOL. If the Safety Plan is developed and adopted by SEDOL, then all personnel should be trained on its contents in the eventuality of an emergency. This training should occur at the beginning of the school year and reviewed and updated as needed throughout the school year.

Recommendation 8.1: Design and implement a professional development curriculum that contains topics and training dates, including but not limited to:
- **Quality Instructional Practices**
- **IEP Development and Compliance**
- **Data Collection and Usage**
- **Paraprofessional Training**
- **Safety Training**

Focus Area 8.2

Training and professional development is very important and must have a leader to spearhead it within SEDOL. Currently, there is no specific role focused on coordinating training and professional

development, but instead, it is the responsibility of a variety of people and offices including Assistant Superintendents and Principals. Due to the significance of and need for training and professional development for SEDOL personnel, Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends the creation of a new role within the district: Director of Professional Development. As discussed in Focus Area 1.2, the Director of Professional Development will report to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment and will be responsible for creating a professional development curriculum, scheduling opportunities for professional development and training, and working with personnel individually or in small groups to provide the necessary support and training. The Director of Professional Development would be responsible for all of the training recommended in Focus Area 8.1 plus any additional professional development and training deemed necessary by district administration, building administration or staff.

> **Recommendation 8.2: Hire a Director of Professional Development and charge the Director with the development of a district-wide professional development curriculum and the coordination of all professional development and training within the district.**

Focus Area 8.3

Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends the creation of a new role within SEDOL, Paraprofessional Coaches, as discussed in Focus Area 1.2. In addition to the paraprofessional training that is recommended in Focus Areas 3.4 and 8.1, ongoing paraprofessional coaching is also needed. Paraprofessionals are in every classroom within SEDOL yet they are in many ways the most underserved role within the district. As previously stated, there is high paraprofessional turnover, due in part to the fact that paraprofessional do not understand the role they are accepting and do not have adequate supports once they are in the role. Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends one Paraprofessional Coach for each SEDOL school building. For the school buildings with lower numbers of paraprofessionals, those Paraprofessional Coaches would also support the paraprofessionals in the Sector Schools.

The roles and responsibilities of the Paraprofessional Coaches are to support the paraprofessionals and assist them in fulfilling their job responsibilities. Ideally, this should begin with shadowing the Paraprofessional Coaches and then arranging shadowing opportunities with experienced paraprofessionals for new paraprofessionals in SEDOL. This would allow the new paraprofessionals to observe the roles and responsibilities of experienced paraprofessionals firsthand, as well as provide an opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification. The Paraprofessional Coaches would then provide additional support by mentoring, modeling, and/or training the new paraprofessionals as needed. There should be daily check-ins and meaningful interaction with each new paraprofessional throughout the school day. The check-ins do not necessarily need to be lengthy but should be as long as needed to properly support the paraprofessionals.

Even experienced paraprofessionals reported that they need support from time-to-time and there is little opportunity to request real time support from a busy classroom teacher or other paraprofessionals. The Paraprofessional Coaches would also be available to support experienced paraprofessionals throughout the year. The check-ins with experienced professionals could be less frequent, depending on the level of support needed. Whether new or experienced paraprofessionals are being supported, the Paraprofessional Coaches should develop an individualized support plan for each of their paraprofessionals. This would delineate the supports requested from each paraprofessional and allow the Paraprofessional Coaches to chart growth and development among the paraprofessionals, as well as identify additional areas for growth and support. The primary responsibility of the Paraprofessional

Coaches is to provide direct, real time support for paraprofessionals, but the additional benefit is to create an environment where paraprofessionals feel supported and prepared to assist students and classroom teachers.

> **Recommendation 8.3: Hire one Paraprofessional Coach for each of the SEDOL school buildings to provide coaching, mentoring, modeling, and training for both new and experienced paraprofessionals throughout the school year.**

Category #9: Policies and Procedures

Commendations

- SEDOL has a strong Executive Board that ensures the district policies are comprehensive and address the uniqueness of the district.
- SEDOL's "Illinois Council of School Attorneys (ICSA) Special Education Procedures Assuring the Implementation of Comprehensive Programming for Children with Disabilities", were revised September 2021 and were adopted by the SEDOL Executive Board on March 24, 2022.
- Each SEDOL district school has a uniformed Student Handbook, which provides a summary of Board policies governing the district.

Focus Area 9.1

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (hereinafter, "IDEA") guides the special education process. Under this law, eligible students with disabilities are ensured access to a free and appropriate public education (hereinafter, "FAPE") in the least restrictive environment (hereinafter, "LRE"). It is important to remember that every decision a district makes related to special education students must be aligned with IDEA to be in compliance with the federal education law and ensure that funding under IDEA will not be disrupted. Compliance with IDEA is mandatory, as it serves as a gateway for the provision of supports and services to students with disabilities.

Under IDEA, when a request to consider placement of a student in special education comes either from a parent, a teacher, or other personnel within the school, there is an evaluation process that must occur. Data is collected on that student, which can include but is not limited to academic data, behavior data, observational data from teachers and other personnel, and reports from non-school-based providers, among other data points. A meeting is held with all relevant parties, classroom teachers, related services personnel, and administrators to examine all the data and determine if there is an educationally sound reason for determining eligibility, placing a student into special education, and/or ultimately providing them with an IEP for considering a more restrictive change of placement. The critical point is that all data is reviewed and analyzed by the educational experts, not just a third-party provider or a parent, to make these determinations. One of the reasons that IDEA was initially created was to limit or avoid the knee-jerk reaction of simply placing a challenging student in special education to get them out the general education classroom. IDEA provides a process for making that determination in educationally appropriate ways. It was intended to create a partnership among school, district, and parents to determine if a student needs special education services by examining a plethora of data.

The fundamental goals of any district's special education system must be to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their families and to improve student outcomes through the delivery of special education and related services, with a focus on having high expectations for students with disabilities and meaningfully including them alongside their peers without disabilities as appropriate. Currently, SEDOL has inconsistent processes and procedures. Multiple staff coordinate the IEP process and staff are pulled at the last minute to attend IEP meetings. Parent communication is lacking, and parents do not feel as though they receive sufficient communication or clear answers. Without defined roles, responsibilities, and procedures, an assurance of compliance is nearly impossible. It should be noted that procedural compliance without a focus on outcomes is not compliance with the IDEA. Districts must have definitive processes and procedures and develop and implement plans that use the IDEA's procedures to ensure

delivery of effective instructional practices, supports, and services that most impact results and protects the rights of students and their parents.

The Exceptional Learning Solutions Team conducted interviews to obtain input regarding the IEP processes and procedures utilized within the district, as well as reviewed, on-site, a random sampling of IEPs and student data within the Embrace system to preview content, IEP goals and objectives, and appropriateness of data. SEDOL's foundational infrastructure is weak due to lack of clear processes and procedures, lack of effective communication to staff and parents, and inconsistent programmatic decision as indicated by those who responded to the Staff Survey. When staff were asked, "Do you believe that SEDOL has clear procedures in place that all SEDOL schools and/or member districts schools follow?", 22.7% indicated "Yes" while 77.3% overwhelming indicated "No".

Chart 9.1.1

Do you believe that SEDOL has clear procedures in place that all SEDOL schools and/or member district schools follow?

- 22.7%
- 77.3%
- ■ Yes
- ■ No
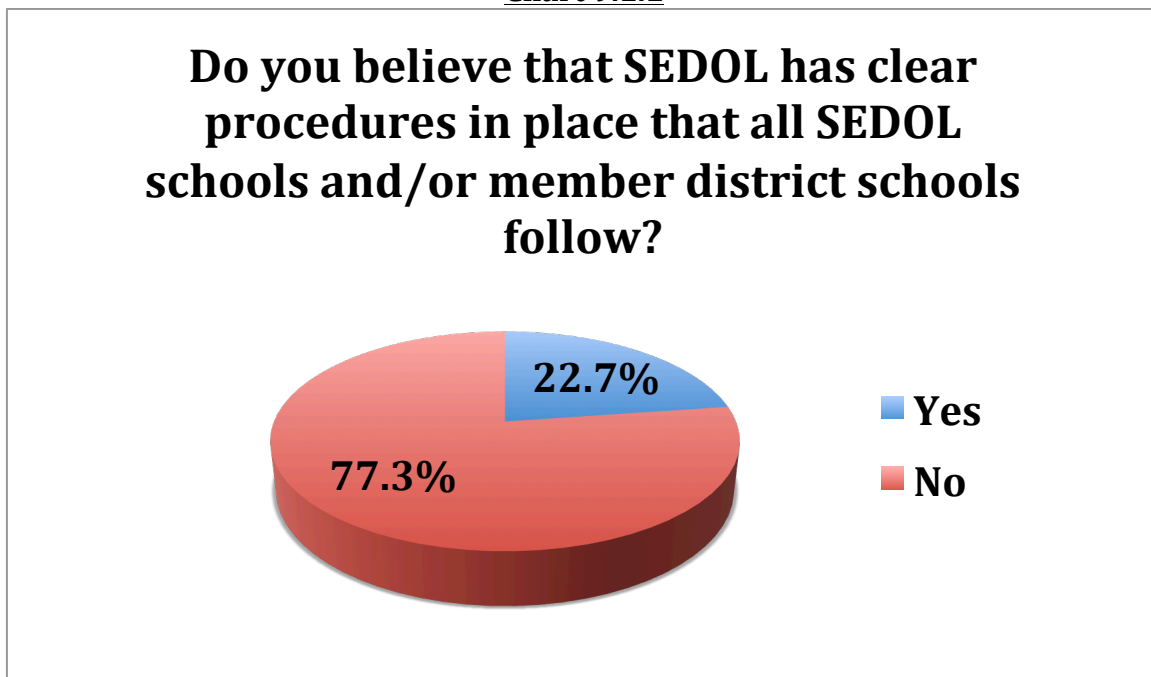
Not only should processes and procedures be defined and implemented, they should be followed. To facilitate compliance, it is important to understand that the role of a designated Local Education Agency (hereinafter, "LEA") has specific criteria, and as the appointed representative of the public agency should be:
- Qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of students with disabilities;
- Knowledgeable about the education curriculum; and
- Knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency.

One factor to consider in determining the LEA is to ensure the individual is someone with either a special education background or special education knowledge. Administrators or others holding an administrative license and designated as the LEA for IEP meeting purposes should receive additional training. Whomever SEDOL determines will be the LEA for IEP meeting purposes should be determined annually and must receive special education and IEP training to ensure that they can adequately represent the district as LEA. Designees need to receive comprehensive initial training and annual renewals to understand their role in the IEP meeting. This also means that the LEA will be the person who effectively runs the meeting and should have a knowledge of the legal aspects of IDEA. The LEA

needs to be empowered by the district and supported by district leadership and the school board. That includes ending or postponing a meeting if parents, advocates, and/or attorneys are disrespectful to district personnel or act in an inappropriate way.

The U.S. Supreme Court has referred to the IEP as the "centerpiece" and the "modus operandi" for ensuring the provision of FAPE to students with disabilities. Two landmark court cases, Board of Educ. of the Hendrick Hudson Central Sch. Dist. V. Rowley, 458 U.S. 176 (1982) and Endrew F. v. Douglas Co. Sch. District., 66 IDELR 31, 798 F.3d 1329 910th Cir. 2015 are the driving force behind what is referred to as the two-fold "process/content" standard for determining FAPE and the appropriateness of an IEP. The two-fold analysis is as follows:

- First, in the development of an IEP, has the school agency complied with the procedures set forth in the IDEA? (the "process" piece).

- Second, if so, is the IEP developed through the IDEA's procedures reasonably calculated to enable the child to make progress in light of the child's circumstances? (the "content" piece)

IEP team meetings should include parents, administrators, classroom teachers, related services personnel, psychologists, and any others who were involved in the evaluation of a student for placement into special education. The purpose of the IEP meeting is to meet as an educational team to establish goals for the student to become academically and behaviorally successful, determine the supports that student needs to meet those goals, and begin to develop a document that identifies those supports and interventions. During this process it is important to note that all relevant student records, data, and anecdotal records should be available to the team for consideration. Observations within SEDOL indicate that often student records and medical information are not transferred in a timely manner, which impacts the efficacy of the decision-making process and ultimately the IEP. Additionally, it is evident that one's attendance at the IEP is optional instead of a legal/professional obligation; all issues that must be rectified.

Evaluations/re-evaluations must be up-to-date, thorough, and adequate before appropriate IEP's can be developed and goals written. It is important to obtain all records, updated achievement and/or evaluative data (formal and informal) to determine student progress and to identify what needs may have changed. Thus, the student's present level of functioning is a significant piece of the IEP and should be developed and revised to accurately reflect current strengths and challenges the student faces so baselines can be established and progress can be measured and demonstrated. In many cases, IEPs developed within SEDOL contain old or recycled data. Not only is this procedure unacceptable it is not in the best interest of the student or parent who the district serves.

Predetermination of placement is of concern within SEDOL. A predetermination of placement or making placement decisions without parental input or outside of the IEP/placement meeting will not only cause a parent to lose trust in district/school staff, but it may also lead to a finding of a denial of FAPE. While SEDOL provides services specifically for students with disabilities, they also provide services to Member Districts who represent students with disabilities and their parents within their home district. Therefore, Member Districts should participate in the placement decision. It is essential that SEDOL central office administration, SEDOL building level teams, Member District school based teams all avoid predetermination of placement. The only appropriate place to make a placement decision is at the IEP meeting with the IEP team who must must come to the IEP meeting with an open mind and be receptive and responsive to constituents.

Secondly, recommendations for special education services are sometimes made based upon the availability of programs or services, rather than upon students' needs. Services or the amount of services should not be a one size fits all determination. Instead the decision should be based upon the individual needs of the student as set forth in the IEP so that parents have a clear understanding of the level of commitment of services on the part of the school district. Decisions to change any service or the amount of service must occur within the framework of an IEP team review, otherwise the IEP would not be compliant, in accordance with the IDEA.

Under the IDEA, availability of services cannot be a deterrent to making service recommendations and ultimately could be a form of predetermination of placement. Despite the fact that SEDOL, like most districts throughout the United States, has experienced staff shortages, the district demonstrates a significant pattern of shifting personnel to cover classes and/or staff utilization in non-licensed areas, which interferes with the service provisions determined by the IEP team (i.e., 1:1 support, interpreters, BCBA's, related service, social/mental health support, etc.). This potential violation of IDEA is viewed as non-compliant and could ultimately be detrimental to SEDOL's reputation as a district and service provider, if not corrected. If SEDOL is unable to implement the provision of services, then the district should convene an IEP meeting to discuss their inability to provide the agreed-upon services and seek out alternative accommodations.

Annual goals and objectives must be measurable to demonstrate progress toward achieving the goal, otherwise it is impossible to demonstrate student progress on the goals and educational benefit. Goals should be built with the end in mind to determine what data collection will be utilized when measuring student progress on the goal. During the school site observations conducted by the Exceptional Learning Solutions team, it was observed that there is not a systemic process for collecting data nor is data collection occurring consistently throughout the district. Subsequently, the data utilized on the IEPs is often inaccurate and, in many cases, the IEP goals do not address the whole student (i.e., academic, behavioral, social emotional, etc.). Goals are rarely measurable and/or the measurement is not always appropriate for the individual student. Additionally, appropriate progress monitoring and annual assessment tools are nonexistent for the specialized population that SEDOL serves. Overall, it is evident that SEDOL must hold their IEP processes and IEP implementation to a higher standard.

SEDOL has schools/programs that specifically serve students with behavioral issues. Currently, there is an insufficient number of BCBAs within SEDOL and of the ones currently serving SEDOL, it has been noted that there are multiple areas of concern: documentation, questionable service delivery minutes, multiple ways of work and lack of attendance at meetings. It would be beneficial for SEDOL to consider outsourcing additional BCBA's to meet the needs of the district and member districts.

For students with behavioral issues that impede the student's education or that of others, the IEP team is required to address behavioral strategies and interventions for that student either through the provision of services, a goal, or a functional behavioral assessment (hereinafter, "FBA"), and/or development of a behavioral intervention plan (hereinafter, "BIP").

School-based FBAs are understood to be an "evaluation" under the IDEA to assist in determining the nature and extent of the special education and related services that the student needs, including the need for a BIP. Generally, schools often conduct FBAs because the information provided by an FBA provides educators the fundamental content to develop a BIP that is individualized, relevant, and more likely supports the student's success towards achieving positive behavior. On September 30, 2022, SEDOL revised their "SEDOL Member District Placement Procedures" stating:

Students being considered for LASSO 2, TAB, LASSO 3, SAB or ED Alternate must have a current FBA/BIP in place prior to placement unless the student has not been enrolled for 30 days or without prior approval from SEDOL administrator within the receiving program.[3]

This policy change put the onus of the assessment on the Member Districts in lieu of SEDOL conducting the assessment as previously arranged. Member Districts, as customers, pay for services from SEDOL, and as such, should be able to rely on SEDOL's expertise and support to assess, facilitate, and provide services related to the development of FBAs and/or BIPs. In lieu of a policy change, a collaborative assessment most likely would be viewed as a quality service for an exceptional student. It would also be incumbent upon SEDOL to develop an alternative plan for students requiring 1:1 support services instead of delaying specialized services and placing the student on a waitlist. The Member District Survey results in Chart 9.1.2 demonstrate that of those who responded to the survey over half (55.0%) believe that SEDOL does not have clear processes/procedures in place for member districts to effectively utilize SEDOL services. Only 45% of those who responded to the survey indicated that they believe SEDOL does not have clear processes/procedures in place, illustrating discontent with the current state of those SEDOL services.

Chart 9.1.2

Do you believe that SEDOL has clear processes/procedures in place for member districts to effectively utilize SEDOL services?

- Yes — 45.0%
- No — 55.0%
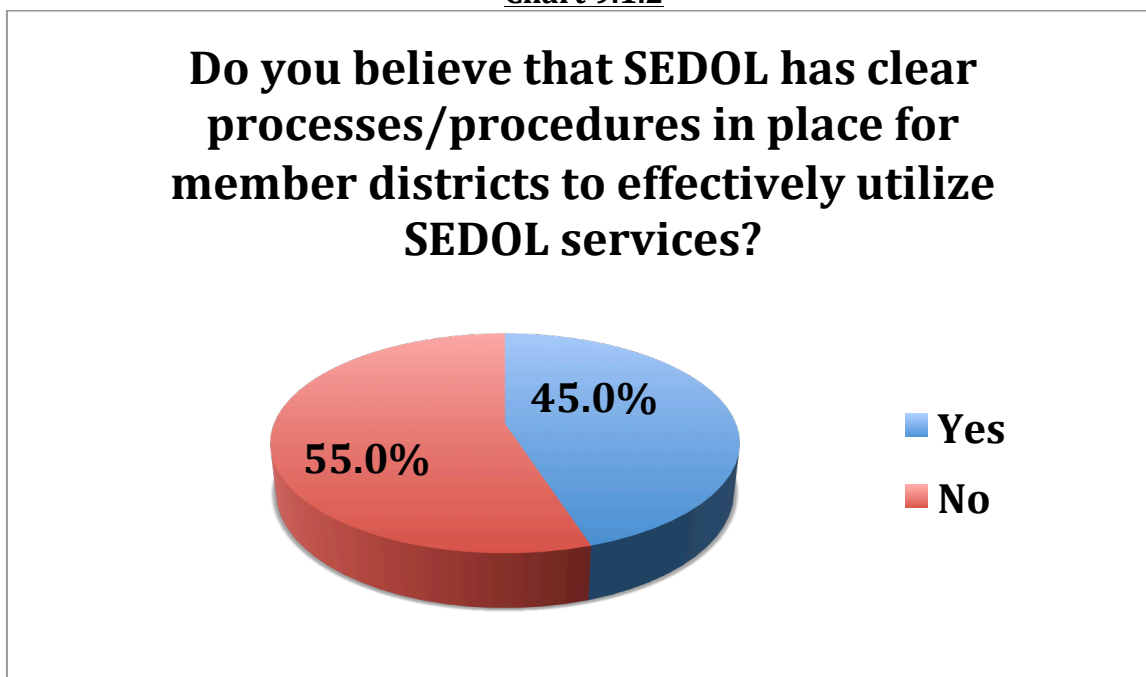
The Exceptional Learning Solutions team gathered information from the district through electronic records, district documentation, district policies, and discussions with district personnel. SEDOL and Member Districts were asked to provide documents and information about special education and support services, as well as systems, processes, and procedures. It was apparent during the Exceptional Learning Solutions Special Education Program Review that the processes and procedures for SEDOL, and in some cases Member Districts, is a concern for administrators and staff. IEP processes and procedures need to be overhauled. While processes and procedures exist, they are not consistently followed and are not user friendly. Additionally, there is a lack of consistent implementation and staff are not thoroughly trained.

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[3] *Special Education District of Lake County, 7:50-E-SO*

Recommendation 9.1-A: Overhaul the IEP processes and procedures to ensure compliance and accountability by monitoring, tracking, and addressing the following: develop explicit IEP processes and definitive procedures which include defined roles and responsibilities; identify/designate SEDOL and Member District LEA's with a role specific criteria, and train staff from both a procedural and legal standpoint (See Appendix A: IEP Process Timeline).

Recommendation 9.1-B: Set expectations; implement effective parent and staff communication; ensure transition of student records and medical information; develop a systemic process for data collection; and ensure goals are measurable, focused on outcomes, and monitored utilizing the appropriate progression tools and annual assessment tools in order to achieve higher standards.

Recommendation 9.1-C: Eliminate the practice of student placement pre-determination by SEDOL central office administration, SEDOL building level teams, and Member District school based teams.

Focus Area 9.2

All SEDOL schools have a uniformed Student Handbook, which provides a summary of Board policies governing the district. The Handbooks are comprehensive, yet the majority of the documents relate more to district information than the unique aspects of each of the schools. (i.e., school population, program clarity, programmatic descriptions, defined continuum of services, schedule of events, parent information, etc.). It is important for schools to have the opportunity to highlight, share and market their school to parents and the community.

Recommendation 9.2: Design a Parent Handbook that highlights the opportunities within the school, addresses unique programmatic aspects of the curriculum, and outlines the provision of services.

Category #10: Finance and Budgets

- Hiring of a new Chief School Business Official with extensive school finance and budgeting experience to update policies and practices to realign the financial health of the district.
- Critical software update will directly and swiftly improve the overall functionality of the business office.
- Plans for intentional collaboration between human resources and the business office will create transparency and enhancement of services.

Focus Area 10.1

SEDOL will have a new Chief School Business Official, which Exceptional Learning Solutions has recommended renaming as the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management, beginning in the 2023-2024 school year. This is an exciting opportunity for SEDOL to update its finance and budgeting processes. One significant part of that updating is the school autonomy discussed in Focus Area 1.3. An important component of school autonomy is school-based budgeting and purchasing. Up to this point, SEDOL has had a fairly traditional budgeting and purchasing structure, with budgeting primarily handled by central office administrators and purchasing requests processed through central office, as well.

Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends changing the budgeting process to be school-based. That effectively means that Principals will be responsible for their own school budgets. Principals will need to develop a budget based on historical data and projected school needs. The Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management and staff will be involved in the budgeting process to assist Principals who may not have experience developing a school-based budget from scratch. The finance and budgeting experts will be a valuable resource for the Principals as they initially develop their budgets and will also be intimately involved throughout the school year for reporting and accountability purposes.

Budgets for the 2023-2024 school year have already been developed and adopted by SEDOL, so the Principals will not have an opportunity to be involved in the initial creation of the budget for the coming school year. However, the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management and staff should begin the gradual release of monitoring the budget and making budgetary decisions for the school. At the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management should schedule time with each building Principal and Sector Supervisor to explain the budget and begin training the Principals and their designated staff on how to report expenditures and update the budget on a monthly basis. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team recommends that for the first year (2023-2024 school year), the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management and/or staff meet with principals monthly to help them through the monthly reporting process.

Principals will additionally have the ability to make purchasing decisions for their schools, under a pre-determined dollar amount, based on the Exceptional Learning Solutions recommendation. The Principals will need to understand how to report their purchases to the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management and correctly code purchases to be reflected in the correct line items within the budget. This should be part of the monthly meetings between the Principals and the Assistant

Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management. Additionally, the Principals and Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management should meet quarterly to address end of quarter reporting for purchases and review the budget.

> **Recommendation 10.1:** Schedule an initial meeting between the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management and each building Principal/Sector Supervisor to begin transitioning budgeting and reporting responsibilities from central office to the school sites, determine monthly meeting times during the 2023-2024 school year for training/reporting follow up, and create end-of-quarter meetings to close out each quarter.

Focus Area 10.2

SEDOL has received a number of governmental and non-governmental grants during its operation. Grants are an important part of funding for all districts, but particularly for a district like SEDOL that primarily relies on tuition from Member Districts for operational funding. The grant awards are typically not utilized for day-to-day operational spending, and some grants specifically exclude that as a use. As a result, grants are most often used for new or expanding programs, specialized equipment, or training and professional development. One example of SEDOL using grants for funding a new initiative in the district is receiving a grant to remodel and update the sensory rooms in several SEDOL schools. This was a great benefit for the district and for the students who need those rooms to de-escalate during the school day.

SEDOL has been successful getting some grants in recent years; however, as a unique school district specifically serving a special needs student population, there are many grants available for SEDOL to expand programming and provide support for students. Up to this point, when SEDOL identifies a grant that would provide benefit to the district, either an administrator or other staff member was assigned to respond to the grant offering. While this has been successful in many cases over the years, current staff only have a limited amount of capacity to respond to grants and fulfill all of their other job responsibilities. As a result, there are many potential grants that SEDOL has either not identified or not provided a response due to capacity issues within the district. In many ways, this is like leaving money on the table.

Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends that SEDOL have a grant writer on staff within the district. With Exceptional Learning Solutions proposed role of Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management, the grant writer should be in the Finance Department and report to the Assistant Superintendent. It is important to have an experienced and skilled grant writer on staff, not just someone assigned to the task. If there are staff members already employed in the Finance Department, then their role could shift. However, if there are not staff members with grant writing experience, SEDOL should hire a grants expert for the district. If SEDOL hires a skilled grant writer, that person will more than pay for their employment costs by bringing in additional dollars to the district. With those additional dollars, SEDOL will have the opportunity to expand and/or offer new programs and provide additional resources for staff and students.

> **Recommendation 10.2:** Hire an experienced grant writer for SEDOL to research applicable grants, apply for the grants, and manage the grant reporting process once awarded.

One of the important financial and budgetary factors for a district to consider is who provides financial resources for the district. A majority of SEDOL's funding in its current structure comes from Member Districts in the form of tuition payments for students served by SEDOL. These tuition payments can be for students who are attending a SEDOL school or a Sector School or it may also be for receiving a specific service within the Member District. Whatever the service provided, SEDOL has Member Districts as customers. Because of this, SEDOL needs to evaluate if those Member District are receiving value for the tuition and/or fees paid to SEDOL. This evaluation should be done with input from the Member Districts so that SEDOL has a full and accurate understanding from a Member District perspective.

When meeting with Member District special education directors and/or superintendents, one of the greatest concerns that the Exceptional Learning Solutions team heard was that many of the Member Districts did not feel like they were getting value for the money that they were paying to SEDOL. However, most admitted that they were not able to provide services on their own within district, so SEDOL was either their best or only option. This does not reflect a quality customer experience or the image that a service provider striving for excellence should have. In the Member District Survey, the respondents were asked, "Do you believe that you receive the value that you expect from the tuition/fees that you pay to SEDOL?" Of those who responded to the survey question, 75% said "No," and only 25% said "Yes" (See Chart 10.3.1).[4] Those are surprisingly low approval numbers.

Chart 10.3.1

Do you believe that you receive the value that you expect from the tuition/fees that you pay to SEDOL?

25.0%

75.0%

■ Yes
■ No
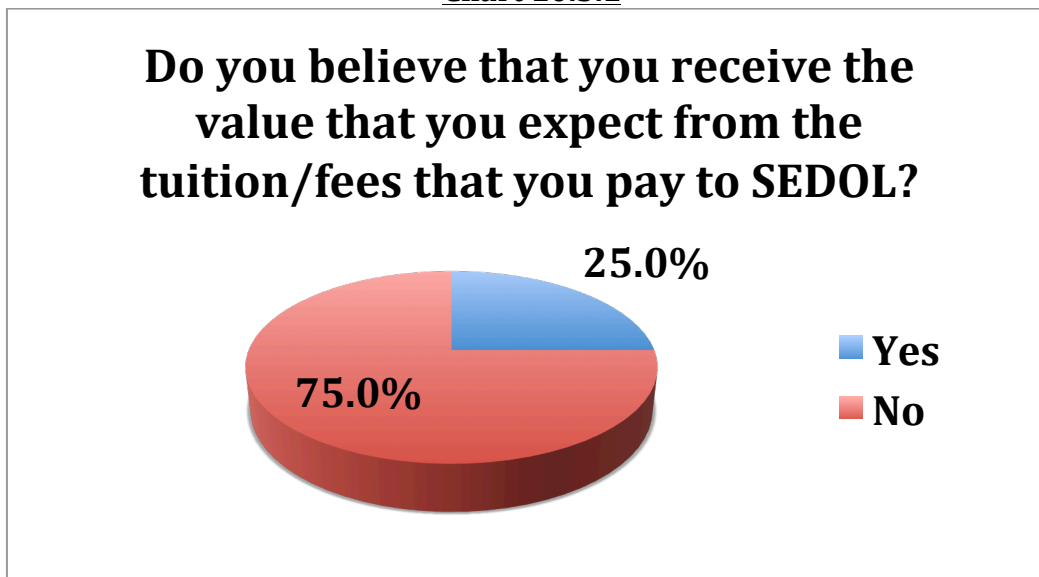
The general perception of most Member Districts appears to be that they do not feel SEDOL offers the valuable services that they expect from a cooperative. During the Exceptional Learning Solutions

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[4] For those respondents who answered "No" to the question "Do you believe that you receive the value that you expect from the tuition/fees that you pay to SEDOL?", they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: "We don't get much from our cooperative, yet we pay a lot. Other cooperatives provide a large variety of options (PD, coaching, expertise) in addition to placement. SEDOL only provides placement options, and even those are limited due to lack of open spots."; "We can't utilize the programs when we need them; poor and late communication about PD offerings."; "Related services continue to be problem when not provided all year."

conversations with Member Districts, many expressed frustration that there have been increases in tuition rates without an increase in service or program offerings. The most recent budget provided to Exceptional Learning Solutions was the "Fiscal Year 2023 Final Budget." Within that budget, there was a 4% increase in tuition rates for the Education Fund. This was due in part to the change that IDEA grant funds no longer flow directly to cooperatives. It is also indicated in the budget that additional tuition "rate resets" will occur in the future every two to three years. Member Districts also indicated that there are budget surpluses in SEDOL, yet the tuition rate has increased. For example, for Fiscal Year 2023, SEDOL has budget surplus of just over $12 million in the Education Fund (See Chart 10.3.2). The fact that there was a tuition increase with a budget surplus of that amount frustrated most Member Districts.

Chart 10.3.2

SEDOL EDUCATION FUND BUDGET - FY23

SEDOL Education Fund
  Budget FY23

Beginning Fund Balance*
                $12,271,056

FY23 Budgeted Revenues -
By Source Education Fund

BUDGETED REVENUES		
Local Sources	$42,163,349	84.23%
Flow-Through	824,000	1.65%
State Sources	4,265,971	8.52%
Federal Sources	2,805,923	5.61%
Total Revenues	$50,059,243	100.00%

FY23 Budgeted Expenses - By Use -
Education Fund
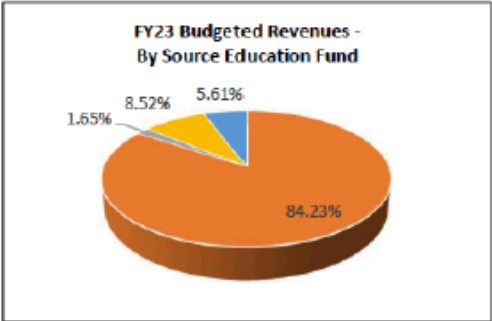
BUDGETED EXPENSES		
Instruction	$26,396,614	52.60%
Support Services	22,511,062	44.86%
Community Services	26,000	0.05%
Payment to Districts	1,000,000	1.99%
Tsf to Trans Fund	250,000	0.50%
Total Expenses	$50,183,676	100.00%
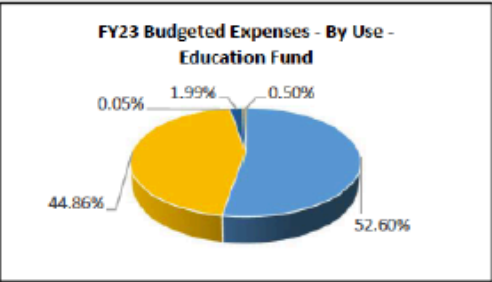
Budgeted Ending Fund Balance
                $12,146,623

*Unaudited figures

While it is certainly prudent to have reserves available for unforeseen expenses, SEDOL needs to be careful how these tuition-based funds are managed in light of the fact that Member Districts provide the majority of funding but feel that the value of the service is not in alignment with the associated cost.

Recommendation 10.3: Create a committee consisting of SEDOL leaders and Member District representatives to evaluate the services provided by SEDOL, the value of the services received, and the cost associated with the services to determine if budgetary and/or service adjustments are needed.

Category #11: Parent and Community Relations

Commendations

- SEDOL schools and staff work diligently to build relationships with parents and to communicate regularly regarding student progress, challenges, and health-related issues.
- SEDOL staff provide parents with support to engage their students outside of the school day (i.e., sign language classes for parents with DHH students at John Powers Center, equipment assessments and repairs for students with mobility needs, and assistive technology for students with communication needs).
- SEDOL provides tuition reimbursement for relevant courses of study for SEDOL staff by developing partnerships with colleges and universities, particularly the Southern Illinois University through the College of Lake County.

Focus Area 11.1

Parents are typically fierce advocates for their special needs students. In many cases, they have had to fight for their student to ensure the receipt of medical supports, educational supports, and therapeutic supports at each developmental stage of life. This is admirable and often necessary to ensure that their student has the benefits needed to survive and succeed. SEDOL is a unique district because all SEDOL families have students with special needs. Collectively, families have a wealth of knowledge and experience related to the special needs of their individual student(s), as well as a broad special education perspective. SEDOL has a unique opportunity to engage all parents in the life of the district and the school(s) attended by their student(s).

SEDOL leadership and staff work hard to build relationships with parents and family members. In the Parent Survey, parents were asked, "Do you feel like you are a partner in your child's educational journey?" Of the survey respondents, 93.2% indicated in the affirmative that they felt like a partner in their student's education at SEDOL, with 6.8% indicating that they did not feel like a partner in their student's education (See Chart 11.1).[5] This is phenomenal feedback and speaks to the work done at SEDOL to create that relationship. Also in the survey parents were asked a similar question: "On a scale of one (1) to five (5), how involved are you with your child's education?" The affirmative results were identical with 93.2% of respondents indicating that their involvement in their student's education was either a "five" or a "four", and the remaining 6.8% indicating their involvement was either a "three" or a "two." No one indicated that their involvement was a "one." Not surprisingly, what this demonstrates is that parents who are more involved in their student's education also feel like they are a partner with SEDOL on their student's educational journey.

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[5] For those respondents who answered "No" to the question "Do you feel like you are a partner in your child's educational journey?", they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: "They worry more about behavior then [*sic*] education…."; "The IEP teams [meet] once a year to set very generic goals. There is nothing that is 'individualized' about the process."; "I feel like we are intentionally kept in the dark."

Exceptional Learning Solutions

Chart 11.1

Do you feel like you are a partner in your child's educational journey?

6.8%

93.2%

■ Yes
■ No
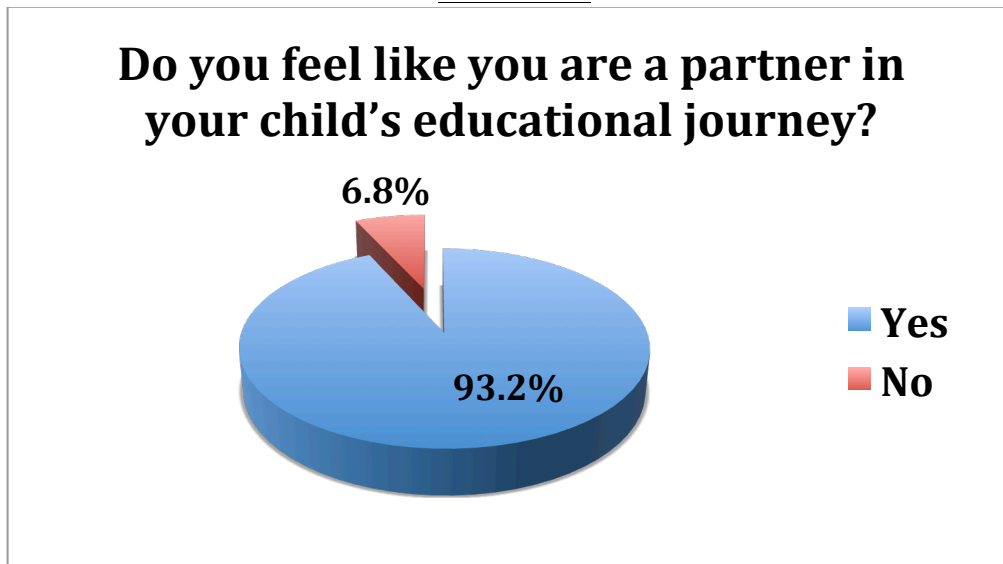
A vast majority of the parents who participated in the Parent Survey indicated that they were engaged and felt a partnership with SEDOL in their student's education, but the survey participation rate was very low. Of the 935 emails that were sent to parents and/or family members of SEDOL students, only 59 parents responded to the survey. Statisticians may argue that such a low survey rate invalidates the survey data. However, for the 59 respondents, their experiences were shared, their voices were heard, and their feelings were recorded. Yet a survey response rate of just 6.3% raises the question of why the response rate is so low. There are many explanations, such as busy parents of special needs students may not have time to respond while caring for their student, or the survey email was overlooked/labeled as "junk" by their email provider. While there are myriad reasons why parents may not have responded, at least one important reason must be considered as a possibility: some parents do not feel engaged with SEDOL in the education of their student(s) and chose not to engage with the survey.

A further example of limited parent engagement is from the two virtual Parent Meetings that the Exceptional Learning Solutions team made available to parents. Both were virtual, in different weeks, and on different days of the week. Participation invitations were sent to the same 935 parents and/or family member emails yet for both Parent Meetings a combined three people chose to attend. Again, there are many reasons why there was such low attendance. However, prior to the meetings the Exceptional Learning Solutions team was informed by a number of people at all levels within SEDOL that parent participation is generally low and that we should not expect high turnouts. While that demonstrates a knowledge and understanding of SEDOL parents, that cannot be the expectation in a school district that has a need and an obligation to engage parents.

Parents of special needs students need to be engaged in creative ways. Caring for a student with special needs outside of the school day can be challenging, overwhelming, and exhausting for many parents and family members. Those feelings can be exacerbated when there is a single parent family or a family with limited outside supports. As a result, parents may feel like they do not have the time or capacity to engage with SEDOL outside required IEP meetings or check-ins with teachers. However, that does not mean that SEDOL should not make an effort to actively engage parents. It means that parents need to be engaged in ways that will benefit them and their student(s), making participation worth their time and effort.

There are positive examples of parent engagement outside of the school day already occurring at SEDOL. For example, sign language classes for parents with DHH students at John Powers Center and equipment assessments and repairs for students with mobility needs at Laremont School. These examples address specific parents needs that directly impact their student(s). This type of engagement is needed at every school to enhance and increase parent participation. Parent "open houses" that invite parents to come to the school for a social event will most likely not be effective in engaging parents. Identifying parents needs and then providing programming and supports that meet those needs is paramount. For example, many SEDOL schools have students with significant behavior needs. Those behavior needs most likely do not only manifest at school but also are present at home outside of the school day. Engage parents by helping to address the behavior needs at home. Create a parent boot camp for behavior where parents can come to the district, in person or virtually, and learn specific techniques for de-escalation and addressing extreme student behavior. Develop a multipart curriculum that will bring in behavior experts to instruct parents first, then demonstrate the techniques, and finally give parents an opportunity to use their knowledge at home and report back to gain support from their fellow parents and the experts. This is only one of many options that are available to SEDOL for parent engagement. Ask parents what they need to better assist their student(s), and use those needs to drive the supports, engage parents, and ultimately create a community of partners for student support within the district. SEDOL has special education experts who have the ability to be innovative in creating opportunities to meet parent needs and skilled in the dissemination of support for parents.

Recommendation 11.1: Develop a parent engagement plan for each school, complete with topics, dates for delivery, and expert facilitators, to address parent needs and drive parent engagement within SEDOL; execute the plan consistently throughout each school year.

Focus Area 11.2

Parent engagement is an important component for SEDOL. As described above, parent engagement is most effective when SEDOL meets parents' needs in an effort to engage parents and family members in the life of the schools and/or district. One particularly compelling way to do this is through a Parent Education Program or Parent University. Parents and family members are often left on their own to research what is best for their students or pay outside providers to give them vital information. SEDOL has a broad base of experts in every facet of special education who can serve as a resource of information for parents, specifically in regard to special needs and the special education law.

In order for parents to understand SEDOL and the decisions that are made within SEDOL to benefit students, parents must first have an understanding of the current special education law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), how it functions, and why it functions in that way. For example, IDEA is designed to have parental involvement throughout the process of identifying a student for special education, developing and planning IEP goals, and requiring regular check-ins to assess and report on student progress. Parents may come to SEDOL in a mode to fight for what they want rather than collaboratively determining, along with professional educators and experts, what is in the best interest of their student from an educational standpoint. An adversarial mentality from parents or SEDOL is not constructive for identifying and implementing the supports needed for special education students. Simply understanding the "why" and "how" of IDEA and the provision of special education services at SEDOL can tremendously help parents through the IEP process and in interactions with SEDOL staff.

In the Parent Survey, parents were asked the question "Do you feel you are well-informed regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?" Of those who responded to the survey, 59.3%

answered in the affirmative that they feel well informed regarding IDEA. While a majority of respondents claim to be well informed, just over 40% indicated that they were not well informed or were "maybe" well informed (See Chart 11.2). Additionally, of the respondents who indicated they feel well informed of IDEA, we do not know their knowledge base or how well they understand the law. This provides a tremendous opportunity for SEDOL to provide parents with knowledge and information about a law that governs the district and also is intimately related to the services received by their student(s).

Chart 11.2

Do you feel you are well-informed regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

18.6%

22.0%

59.3%

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
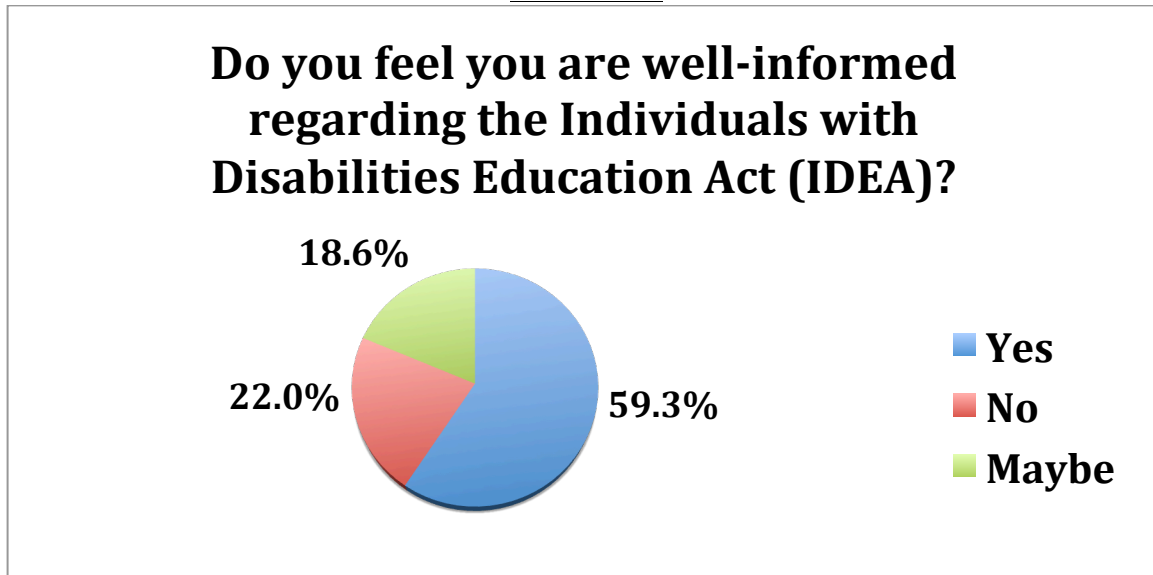
Therefore, a Parent Education Program or Parent University can be much broader than simply a discussion of IDEA. There are many topics that are relevant to parents of special needs students. Not all topics need to be delivered in a presentation-style format. There can be in person sessions for parents, virtual training for parents, and/or a clearinghouse of information for parents. Topics could include training for parents who are new to SEDOL (e.g., what to expect from SEDOL, or a "day in the life" of your student at SEDOL), understanding techniques used to support SEDOL students (e.g., understanding Ukeru® and its uses, or de-escalating students with intermittent explosive disorder), or understanding the IEP process for students with special needs. There are many options for parent education, and providing parents with survey or other means to select options can be helpful. Additionally, the current SEDOL website has a "Parents" page, complete with parent resources, forms, calendars, and other useful information. While this is a good resource for parents, providing a section that includes SEDOL-generated content that highlights the expertise of SEDOL staff and additionally provides parents with reliable information on special education law and topics would be a tremendous asset to both the district and parents.

Recommendation 11.2: Develop a clearinghouse of SEDOL-generated, expert information on special education topics and institute a Parent Education Program or Parent University for SEDOL parents with topics, including but not limited to, understanding the IDEA law, providing knowledge on techniques used to support SEDOL students, supporting parents who are new to SEDOL, and other topics determined to be beneficial.

Communication with parents, family members, and the broader community is vital to the success and longevity of SEDOL. There are two types of effective communication with these target audiences. The first is communication specifically related to SEDOL students. This can come in form of official communication regarding IEP meetings or conversation with staff members related to a student's academics, health/safety, and/or behavior. It is the regular communication that occurs between a school district and parents that is expected to ensure student stability and success, especially for students with special needs. Based on data from the Parent Survey, SEDOL staff does an excellent job of communicating with parents related to their student. Of the survey respondents asked the question, "Do you feel the school and/or teacher communication with you as a parent is appropriate?", 88.1% indicated that the communication with the school and/or teacher was appropriate (See Chart 11.3). Only 11.9% indicated that they did not believe the communication was appropriate.[6] This indicates that for the Parent Survey respondents, the first type of communication is strong between parents and schools/teachers.

Chart 11.3

Do you feel the school and/or teacher communication with you as a parent is appropriate?

11.9%

88.1%

■ Yes
■ No
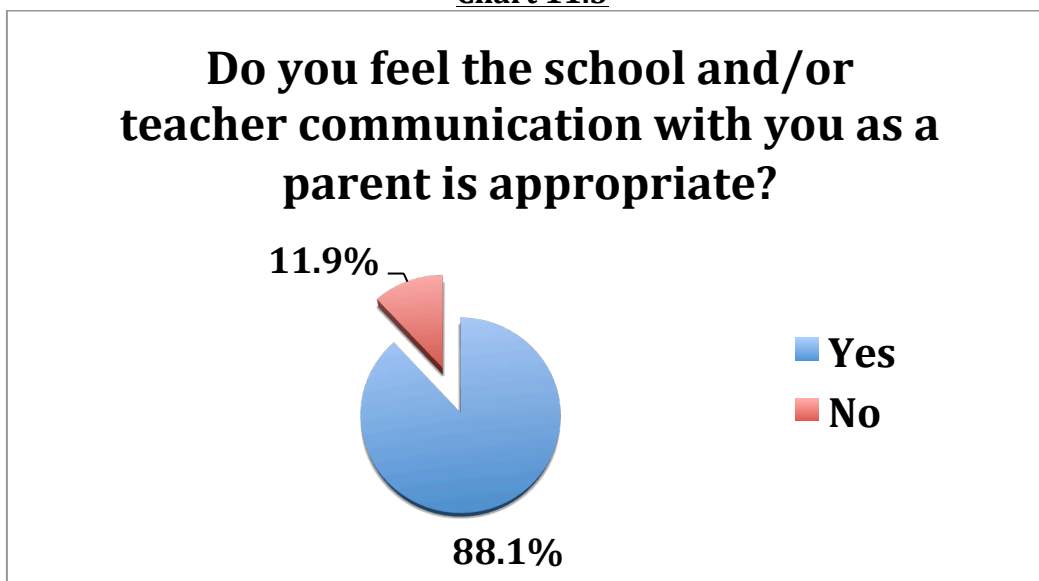
The second type of communication is communication with parents, family members, and the broader community that is not student specific but relates to SEDOL as a district. This communication is inadequate based on the findings of the Exceptional Learning Solutions team. More specifically, this second type of communication includes SEDOL-specific branded items like marketing materials/brochures, parent handbooks, and an updated website. While some of these items exist in one form or fashion, there is no consistency for the SEDOL brand nor do the existing items provide the necessary information or communication to parents, family members, and the broader community. We will examine each of these items below.

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[6] For those respondents who answered "No" to the question "Do you feel the school and/or teacher communication with you as a parent is appropriate?", they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: "Teacher is good about the communication. [W]ould like to hear from social worker also."; "The feedback is mostly negative and not constructive."; "We receive almost no communication as if they do not want us to know what is going on with our son.'; "Communication has been lacking for quite some time. For example, I had no idea that this review was being conducted until I received your email."

First, SEDOL needs consistently branded marketing materials and brochures for SEDOL as a district and each of its SEDOL schools. SEDOL is considered a school district in Illinois, but it is also a co-op and a service provider to Member Districts and families of students with special needs. As such, SEDOL does not automatically have a student population set by district boundaries. The students that SEDOL serves come from Member Districts based on placement needs and services provided by SEDOL. But that placement also is dependent on parental consent to have students attend a SEDOL school or a SEDOL Sector school. Prospective parents visit SEDOL schools and SEDOL Sector schools to determine if the school and environment is appropriate for their student's needs. Parents are often given a tour of the school by a school building administrator or other designee and have questions answered during the tour. There are no marketing materials or brochures produced by SEDOL that are provided to parents. Some schools have produced their own information to provide to parents, but it is inconsistent and not necessarily vetted through the district. One example of the development of materials for parents is that the Sector Supervisors and their teachers have produced informational sheets for parents. As good as that material content is, it is not consistently branded, and SEDOL schools do not necessarily have equivalent information. There are several alternative options to SEDOL in the surrounding area, and SEDOL needs to distinguish itself and promote its expertise to member school districts and potential SEDOL families. As a district, SEDOL should produce a consistently branded marketing brochure, detailing the continuum of services and all of the additional supports that SEDOL provides, as well as collaboratively produce school-specific marketing materials for each SEDOL and Sector school. These should all be uniform in style and design and approved through the district. This information must be provided to every visitor who enters any SEDOL building and should also be provided to all Member Districts to share with parents when they are presented with the option of enrolling their students in a SEDOL program.

Second, SEDOL should develop a parent handbook. Exceptional Learning Solutions was provided with a copy of the student handbook for each of the SEDOL schools. While these handbooks have some unique features based on the variances among the schools, the content and format are consistent across each of the schools. These are examples of a consistent SEDOL brand and provide a wealth of student-related information for families. They are valuable resources for parents and students. However, Exceptional Learning Solutions believes that SEDOL should produce a separate parent handbook that does not contain duplicative school information like building hours, drop off procedures, or school rules. Instead, the parent handbook should contain information that parents need to successfully navigate a relationship with SEDOL. For example, the handbook should contain the entire IEP process for parents, including referral, initial evaluations, re-evaluations, when interim meetings can be called and by whom, and the expectations of the parents and school representatives during an IEP meeting. Additionally, the parent handbook could contain a description of each of the SEDOL programs, meanings of terms/acronyms, and student requirements for placement in programs. The parent handbook should be a comprehensive resource parents turn to in order to understand SEDOL and their role as a SEDOL parent.

Finally, SEDOL must update its website. An effective website should be the calling card of the district for new families, current SEDOL families, and Member Districts. Currently, some aspects of the website are outdated and/or contain incomplete information. For example, the district still has a Pandemic Planning section that indicates development of the section is "ongoing." While that was valuable information for the community during the pandemic, it no longer needs to be prominently featured on the SEDOL homepage. Some aspects may be useful to retain for future reference (e.g., distance learning plans), but even those sections should be reviewed for accuracy and efficacy. Additionally, SEDOL has a Curriculum Framework page purporting to have curriculum frameworks by subject area. An examination of these pages indicates that, with the exception of the Science and Social Studies page, there are generally no curriculum frameworks presented on this site. This is valuable information for teachers and parents

alike and should be updated with appropriate information (See "Category #5: Curriculum and Instruction" above for additional curriculum information). These are just two examples of many updates that need to occur on the SEDOL website. SEDOL should create a committee charged with updating the website and/or hire an outside content creator to update and redevelop the site.

Recommendation 11.3: Create consistently branded marketing materials for SEDOL as a district, each SEDOL school, and the Sector schools; develop a parent handbook with key information for parents to navigate their interaction with SEDOL and special education; and update the SEDOL website to ensure that information is current and accurate for internal and external usage.

Focus Area 11.4

The Parent Survey produced both quantifiable data and anecdotal data from the respondents to the survey. The Exceptional Learning Solutions team utilized the anecdotal data to create a complete picture and full understanding of the parent experience with SEDOL. That information is contained throughout the report, along with some specific examples of Parent Survey respondent statements contained within Category #11. Some of the quantifiable data is contained in the Focus Areas above; however, the remainder of the quantifiable data is summarized within Focus Area 11.4.

Parents were asked in the survey, "Do you feel your child's needs are being met by SEDOL?" Of those who responded to the survey, 83.1% of parents indicated that they believe their student's needs are being met by SEDOL, while 16.9% of respondents did not think SEDOL was meeting their student's needs (See Chart 11.4.1). A vast majority of the respondents indicate a favorable view of how SEDOL is addressing the needs of their student(s), but the nearly 17% of the parents who responded negatively is a significant number and should be seriously contemplated by SEDOL leadership. Focus Areas throughout this report indicate challenges with SEDOL structure, system, processes, procedures, and academic rigor. Implementation of recommendations contained within this report will rectify parents saying "No" to this question.[7]

Chart 11.4.1

Do you feel your child's needs are being met by SEDOL?

16.9%

83.1%

- Yes
- No

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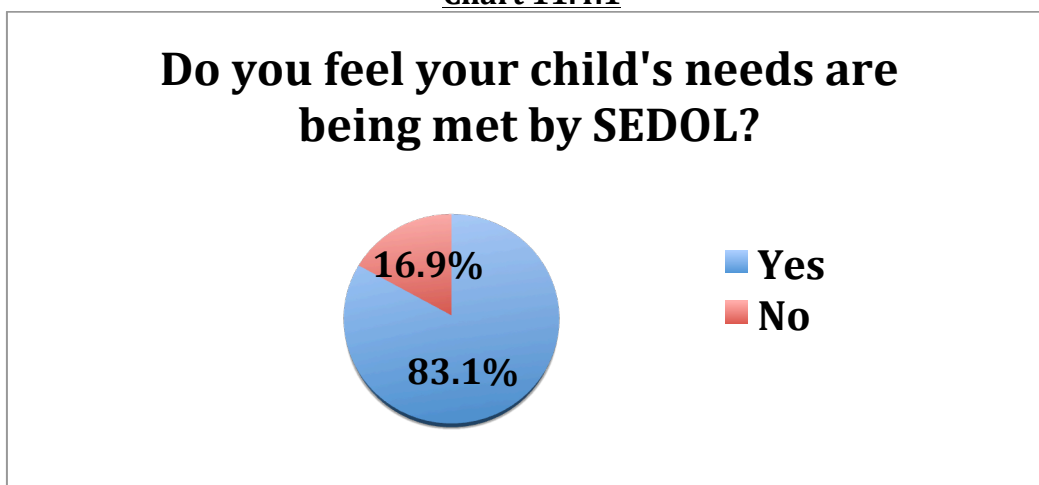
[7] For those respondents who answered "No" to the question "Do you feel your child's needs are being met by SEDOL?", they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: "I don't think there is enough staff and teachers seem overwhelmed."; "Not focued [*sic*] on education, my child is not learning anything."; "No access to typical peers."; "I believe the para's need more training. I understand staff is hard to find, but ours isn't a good fit for us."; "I think they should focus more on education then [*sic*] behavior at his school, not sure about the other schools in SEDOL District."; "Seems that the bar is held quite low for success."

A related question posed to respondents in the Parent Survey was "How would you describe the services your child receives from SEDOL?", with four options: Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor. Of those who responded, 54.2% indicated Excellent, 28.8% indicated Good, 13.6% indicated Fair, and 3.4% indicated Poor (See Chart 11.4.2). These results mirror the results contained in Chart 11.4.1 above with the same percentage of parents indicating Fair or Poor, reporting student needs are not being met. Similarly, the same percentage of parents indicating Excellent or Good also responded that SEDOL is meeting their student's needs. Parent comments again indicate that those who are generally dissatisfied with the services students receive from SEDOL, by answering Fair or Poor to the question, seek more structure and educational focus at SEDOL.

Chart 11.4.2

How would you describe the services your child receives from SEDOL?
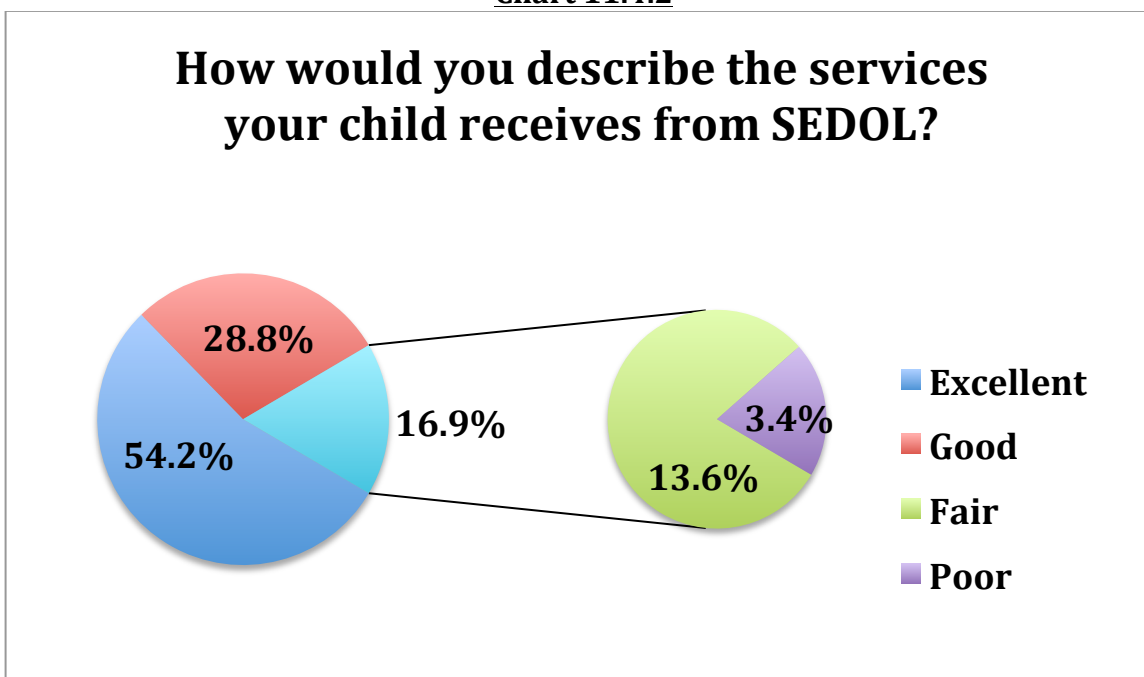
Additionally in the Parent Survey, the respondents were asked, "Does your child receive any of these services from private providers?" Of the options that were provided, 30 respondents indicated that their student received private Speech and Language Services, 22 respondents indicated that their student received private Behavioral Services, 21 respondents indicated that their student received private Occupational Therapy, 13 respondents indicated that their student received private Physical Therapy, 2 respondents indicated that their student received private Social Work/Social Services, and 4 respondents indicated that their student did not receive private services at the time of the survey (See Chart 11.4.3). This is interesting information for SEDOL to have with regard to the Parent Survey respondents, and SEDOL may want to consider collecting and recording this information from parents on a quarterly basis for additional insight into the students being served.

Chart 11.4.3

Does your child receive any of these services from private providers?
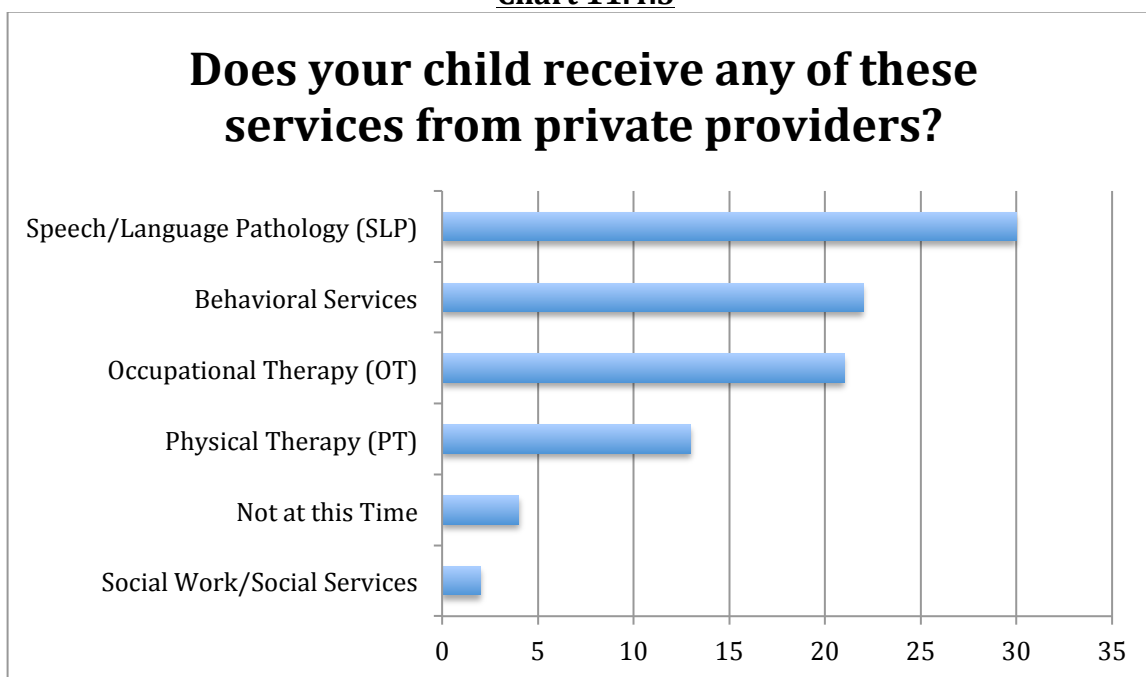
Recommendation 11.4: There are no specific recommendations for this Focus Area; however, the survey data indicate that SEDOL has a significant number of respondents to the Parent Survey who are dissatisfied with the services their students receive at SEDOL. A Fair/Poor rating is unacceptable for a district services all special needs students. This is further evidence that the district should heed the recommendations contained throughout this report and take action to address the deficiencies in a timely manner.

Category #12: Member Districts

Commendations

- Member districts desire to work collaboratively with SEDOL to provide successful, high-quality services.

Focus Area 12.1

SEDOL currently has 31 Member Districts within its cooperative. Each one of the Member Districts has different needs and requires different supports and services from SEDOL. However, all of the Member Districts need SEDOL to provide high quality special education services to their students.   The Exceptional Learning Solutions team distinctly heard two things from Member Districts during interviews and through the Member District Surveys: 1) Member Districts want SEDOL to thrive and be successful, and 2) Member Districts currently have some frustrations working with SEDOL.

Member Districts want SEDOL to thrive and be successful as a partner in providing services to their special needs students. These Member Districts have a vested interest in SEDOL. Not only do they pay tuition for the services that they receive from SEDOL and are effectively a SEDOL "customer," but they also are dependent on SEDOL to provide services that the Member Districts cannot provide themselves either because of cost associated with creating a program and/or staff capacity within the Member Districts. Member Districts want SEDOL to grow and develop their service offerings, as well as improve the supports provided for the Member District students.

Member Districts utilize a significant number of SEDOL programs and services both within SEDOL schools and at the Sector Schools. The Member District Survey provided some insight into the services utilized by the Member Districts. Of those who responded to the Member District Survey, the two most utilized services are the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) Program and LASSO III (See Chart 12.1.1). However, Chart 12.1.1 reflects that the Member District Survey respondents utilize most of the SEDOL programs and services offered by SEDOL, and based on Exceptional Learning Solutions interviews and conversations with Member Districts, this appears to be true of Member Districts that did not respond to the Member District Survey, as well.

Chart 12.1.1

What are the SEDOL services that you utilize?

Program	Value
Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) Program	18
LASSO III	17
Education Life Skills (ELS) Program	14
Vision Program	14
LASSO II	14
LASSO I	11
Transition Program	9
Early Childhood (EC)	9
Teaching Appropriate Behaviors (TAB)	9
Vocational Program	7
None of the Above	1
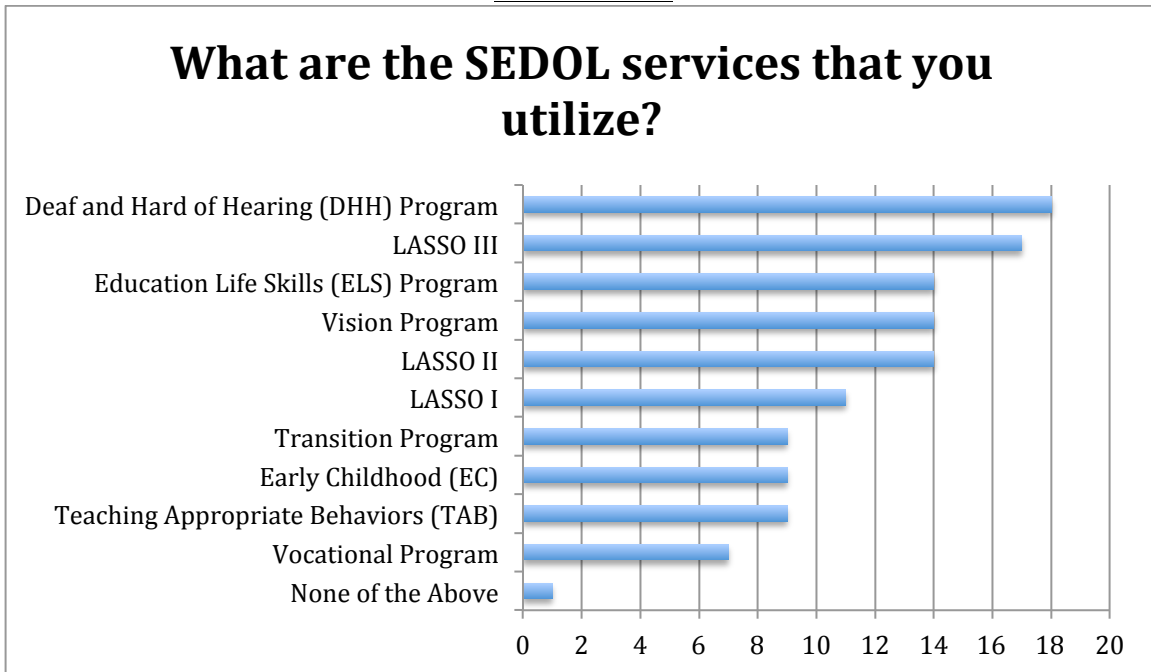
Itinerant Programs are very important to the Member Districts. The Itinerant Programs serve special needs students within the framework of their general education classrooms. These programs typically provide services to students in one-on-one sessions or in small group sessions, with the goal of providing students with special education support while remaining in their general education classroom setting. Of those who responded to the Member District Survey, an overwhelming 95.5% of respondents indicated that they utilized the SEDOL Itinerant Programs (See Chart 12.1.2). This demonstrates the importance of the Itinerant Programs among the survey respondents, which can be extrapolated to other Member Districts that did not respond to the Member District Survey based on Exceptional Learning Solutions interviews and conversations.

Chart 12.1.2

Do you utilize the SEDOL Itinerant Programs?

4.5%

95.5%

- Yes
- No
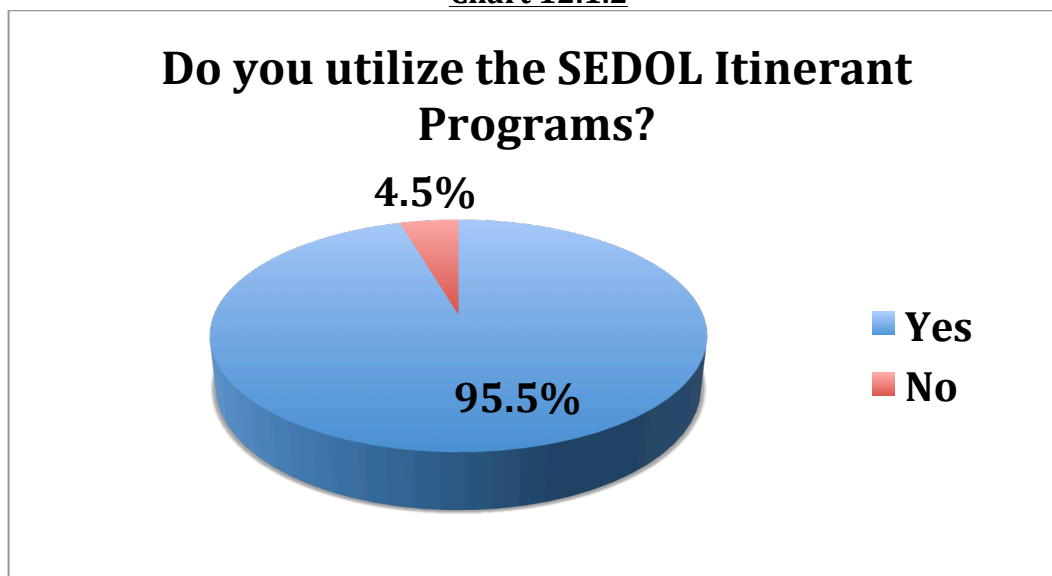
SEDOL offers a wide variety of Itinerant Programs for Member Districts. Of the Member District representatives who responded to the Member District Survey, the three most popular programs are the Vision Impaired Itinerant Program, Hearing Itinerant Program, and the Orientation and Mobility Program (See Chart 12.1.3). The remaining Itinerant Programs are also very important for Member Districts, both those who responded to the survey and those who did not.

Chart 12.1.3

If the answer to "Do you utilize the SEDOL Itinerant Programs?" is Yes, which Itinerant Programs do you utilize?

Program	Value
Vision Impaired Itinerant Program	14
Hearing Itinerant Program	13
Orientation and Mobility Program	11
Physical Therapy (PT)	6
English Language Learners (ELL) Program	5
LASSO Itinerant Programs	5
Adapted Physical Education	5
Occupational Therapy (OT)	3
Autism Itinerant	1
Assistive Technology Itinerant	1
Speech/Language Services	1

Member Districts want SEDOL to provide exceptional services to their students in SEDOL schools, in Sector Schools, and through the Itinerant Program. In addition to the expectation of exceptional services, Member Districts generally desire SEDOL to be special education experts for Member Districts. Currently, most Member Districts do not have the confidence in SEDOL to be special education experts, who are capable of advising Member District special education directors and families receiving services. However, there is a desire that SEDOL provide that level of expertise and advice to Member Districts. Professional development is one area in particular that Member Districts seek additional expertise and support from SEDOL. Based on Exceptional Learning Solutions interviews and survey results from Member Districts, there is an expectation that in addition to providing direct student services to Member District students that SEDOL also provides professional development and training directly to Member District personnel. Of the Member District representatives that responded to the Member District Survey, 76.2% of respondents indicated that they would find professional development, technical assistance, and/or training from SEDOL to be beneficial (See Chart 12.1.4). This is not an unrealistic expectation, as that is typically a service that a special education cooperative would provide to its Member Districts. Currently, SEDOL does not have the capacity to provide professional development to Member Districts, but they should prioritize expansion of support offerings to Member Districts to include professional development and training.

Chart 12.1.4

Do you believe it would be beneficial to receive professional development, technical assistance and/or training from SEDOL staff for your district team members?

23.8%

76.2%

- Yes
- No
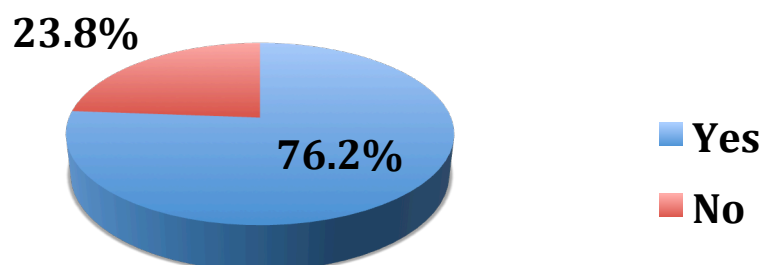
It is evident that Member Districts currently have some frustrations with SEDOL. Generally, there is a feeling among Member Districts that SEDOL is not providing the exceptional services that they expect from a special education cooperative. Member Districts continue to utilize SEDOL services because many are not able to provide the breadth and depth of program offerings that SEDOL has, yet many member districts do not feel that the quality of service equates to the cost of tuition or the expectation for a special education cooperative. In the Member District Survey, respondents were asked, "Do you feel that you receive the support expected by SEDOL?" Of those who responded to the survey question, 66.7% indicated "Yes," while 33.3% indicated "No" (See Chart 12.1.5). It is laudable that two thirds of respondents believe they receive the support expected from SEDOL. However, one third of the survey respondents indicated that they did not receive the support that they expect from SEDOL.[8] That is a significant percentage of respondents to be unhappy with the services received.

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[8] For those respondents who answered "No" to the question "Do you feel that you receive the support expected by SEDOL?", they were asked to explain their answer. Here are samples of the responses received: "There seems to be a great deal of turnover which leads to inconsistent practices."; "Often SEDOL is unable to fill our needs in regard to things like student placement and auxiliary supports."; "We have not been able to get placements for the students we cannot support in our gen ed buildings."; "A coop [*sic*] is supposed to serve as the expert for special education, and provide expertise and support to help member districts improve. We are definitely not getting this."

Chart 12.1.5

Do you feel that you receive the support expected by SEDOL?

33.3%

66.7%

- Yes
- No
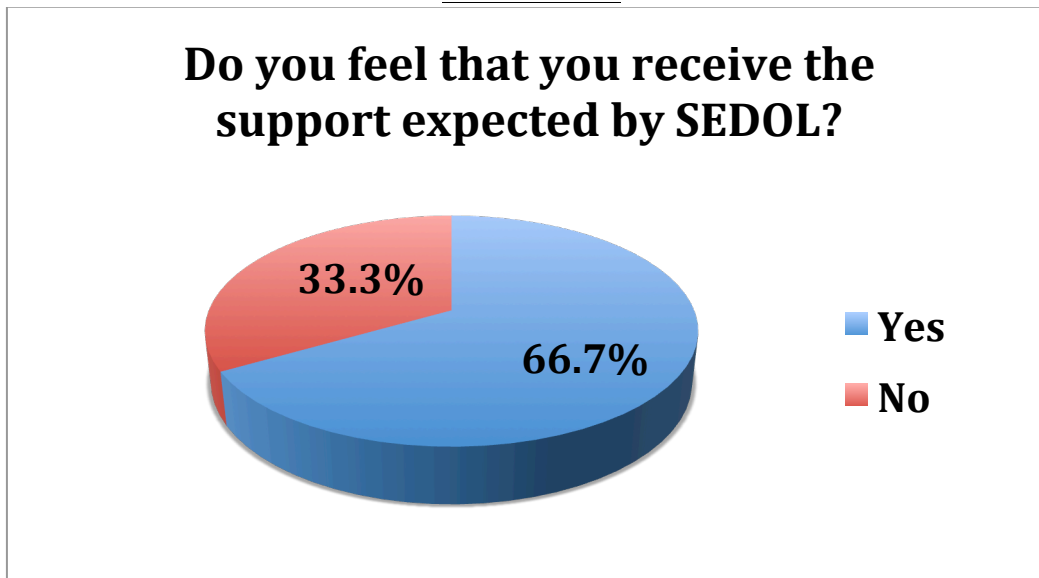
Customer satisfaction is important for all types of service providers. As a special education cooperative, SEDOL is a service provider of special education programs and services for Member Districts. SEDOL must be attuned to customer needs and concerned with customer satisfaction of Member Districts in order to continue to have the opportunity to provide special education services to Member Districts and their students. In the Member District Survey, respondents were asked, "On a scale of one (1) to five (5), how satisfied are you with SEDOL?" Of those Member District representatives who responded to the survey, three respondents indicated their satisfaction level at "One," seven respondents indicated their satisfaction level at "Two," nine respondents indicated their satisfaction level at "Three," three respondents indicated their satisfaction level at "Four," and zero respondents indicated their satisfaction level at "Five" (See Chart 12.1.6). There are a couple of key takeaways from this survey question. First, no respondents gave SEDOL a "Five", the highest rating. That suggests that there is not a feeling of excellence in the services provided by SEDOL. Second, the largest number of respondents gave a "Three" on the satisfaction scale. A "Three" is middle of the road. It suggests an indifference to their level of satisfaction—not exceptional but not terrible. If SEDOL is striving to provide exceptional services, the district should not be satisfied with the largest number of survey respondents awarding SEDOL a "Three" in customer satisfaction and zero survey respondents awarding the district a "Five."

Chart 12.1.6

On a scale of one (1) to five (5), how satisfied are you with SEDOL?
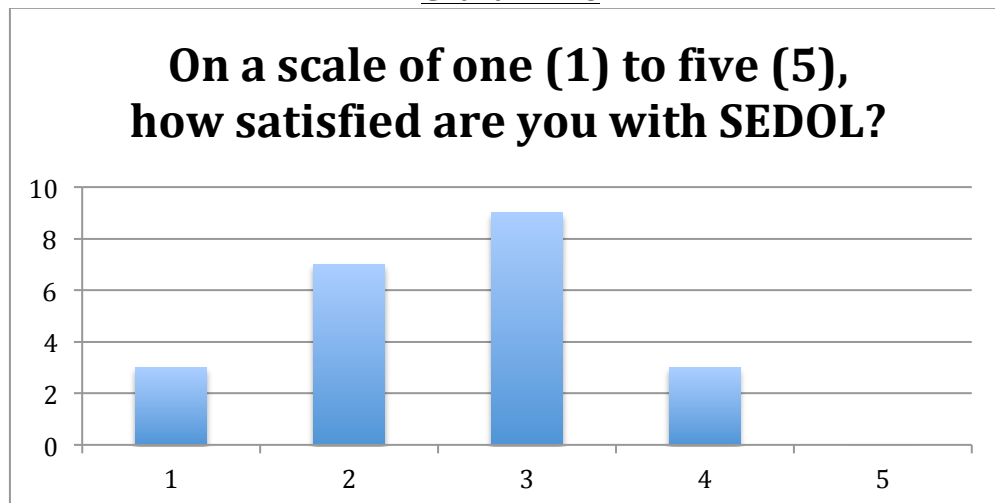
SEDOL has a significant amount of work to do to mend relationships with Member Districts and provide the services that Member District expect from their special education cooperative. One of the best ways to begin this process is by listening to the needs of Member Districts. The Member District Survey conducted by Exceptional Learning Solutions for the Special Education Program Review provides some insight into Member District feeling toward SEDOL. However, it is now incumbent upon SEDOL leadership to continue these conversations with Member Districts in order to understand the needs of the districts and to provide excellent customer service to the Member Districts and their students who SEDOL has the privilege to serve.

Recommendation 12.1: **Design programs and services collaboratively between SEDOL and Member Districts, and deliver the programs and services with fidelity to Member Districts in order to achieve a standard of high-quality customer service.**

Prioritization of Recommendations

6-Month Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
Central Office Administration	Recommendation 1.1; Page 12	Develop a working group of SEDOL team members representing central office, each SEDOL school, the sector programs, itinerants, and member districts who will meet regularly and work together with an outside monitoring team (see "Implementing and Monitoring" section) to prioritize and implement the recommendations contained in this report.	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation
Central Office Administration	Recommendation 1.3; Page 20	Establish school-based management at all SEDOL schools by giving Principals the autonomy to make decisions and operate their buildings, and transfer school budgeting and purchasing from district administration to Principals and building leaders.	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation
Safety and Security	Recommendation 2.1; Page 30	Recruit and hire a Director of Safety who has the primary responsibility for maintaining a safe environment throughout SEDOL, focusing on student safety, building safety,	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation

		development of Safety Plans, and safety training.	
Safety and Security	Recommendation 2.2; Page 32	Evaluate each school building within SEDOL, led by the Director of Safety, to determine safety deficiencies and develop a plan to address the safety deficiencies to ensure that students and staff are safe and secure within the school buildings.	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation
Human Resources	Recommendation 3.1; Page 34	Develop new processes and procedures for staff within the SEDOL Human Resources Department to ensure staff interaction with current SEDOL is positive, to make certain the department is more accessible and user friendly, and to implement new personnel recruitment and hiring practices.	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation
Human Resources	Recommendation 3.3; Page 40	Develop a new staffing model that accounts for the uniqueness of the student population within each SEDOL school building, and transition ownership from the Human Resources Department to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation
Human Resources	Recommendation 3.4; Page 43	Provide Human Resources Department staff with the knowledge and tools they need to accurately describe the role of the	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation

		paraprofessional during the interview process, as well as provide onsite school visits and robust training so that paraprofessionals fully understand their job responsibilities, thus increasing longevity at SEDOL.	
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 9.1-C; Page 68	Eliminate the practice of student placement pre-determination by SEDOL central office administration, SEDOL building level teams, and Member District school based teams.	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation
Finance and Budgets	Recommendation 10.1; Page 70	Schedule an initial meeting between the Assistant Superintendent of Finance, Budget, and Grants Management and each building Principal/Sector Supervisor to begin transitioning budgeting and reporting responsibilities from central office to the school sites, determine monthly meeting times during the 2023-2024 school year for training/reporting follow up, and create end-of-quarter meetings to close out each quarter.	Within 6 months of Executive Board Presentation

1-Year Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
Central Office Administration	Recommendation 1.2; Page 18	Adopt the Proposed SEDOL Organizational Chart developed by Exceptional Learning Solutions, rename and/or restructure the existing positions under new supervisors, and hire the new positions as soon as practicable.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Central Office Administration	Recommendation 1.4; Page 22	Address the culture and climate issues at SEDOL by re-establishing trust through transparency of initiatives, discussing the "why" and "how" of changes; end micromanagement through the Superintendent holding the Assistant Superintendents accountable for their direct reports and allowing Principals autonomy to operate their schools independently; and increase Superintendent visibility by carving out a few hours each week for in-person, onsite visits, selecting a few classrooms in each building to be visited in rotation.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Central Office Administration	Recommendation 1.5; Page 26	Develop a regular and reliable communication plan with the following components:	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
		~ Plan for an annual summer in-person school year kickoff staff meeting for SEDOL where the vision for the school year will be articulated and the	

		staff accomplishments can be celebrated	
		~ Schedule in-person SEDOL-wide quarterly meetings throughout the school year to discuss new initiatives, explain the "why" and "how" of changes to district policies and procedures, and provide an opportunity for staff members to ask questions and actively engage in discussion	
		~ Send out a substantive weekly email newsletter that addresses changes at SEDOL and includes updates and information that is relevant and useful for administrators, teachers, and staff members	
		~ Create a process for rolling out new initiatives, systems, processes, and procedures at SEDOL that includes in-person meetings, educator involvement in the development, and an explanation of the benefits for students and teachers	
Safety and Security	Recommendation 2.3; Page 32	Develop a SEDOL-specific Safety Plan to augment the Emergency Operations Plan that is developed by the Director of Safety to reflect the specific needs of SEDOL's student population in the event of an emergency in one or more SEDOL schools.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Human Resources	Recommendation 3.2; Page 39	Rewrite job postings that are clear, accurate, and detailed to fully describe the position being filled; expand outreach by attending additional job	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation

		fairs and developing relationships with strategic colleges and universities in the Midwest; and develop a robust mentoring program where every new direct student contact staff member receives a mentor for support for the first two years of employment.	
Curriculum and Instruction	Recommendation 5.1; Page 47	Require the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment to develop a plan with detailed action items, benchmarks, and goals/objectives to create curriculum frameworks, instructional strategies/training, and assessment/data usage protocols at SEDOL.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Curriculum and Instruction	Recommendation 5.3; Page 49	Conduct a review of instructional practices throughout SEDOL to determine programs and classrooms where instructional improvement is warranted, and provide targeted professional development, customized to each school building and/or program to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need for instructional excellence.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Assessments and Data	Recommendation 6.1; Page 50	Provide special education teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and staff with consistent professional development on how to accurately collect data, how to	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation

		analyze data, how to utilize data in the classroom, and how to preserve data as a vital component of the student's records for IEPs, placement, and future decision-making.	
Assessments and Data	Recommendation 6.2; Page 51	Continue administering IAR Assessments, DLM Assessments, and MAP Assessments and gradually increase the administration of MAP Assessments to include Fall, Winter, and Spring testing.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Assessments and Data	Recommendation 6.3; Page 54	Provide MAP Assessment data, IAR Assessment data, and DLM Assessment data to all teachers and administrators with students who took each assessment, and provide training on how to read the data and utilize the data to inform instruction.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Assessments and Data	Recommendation 6.4; Page 55	Develop and implement a district-wide data policy that creates a standard for student data collection, usage, and storage that is focused on student achievement, placement, interventions, and supports.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Behavioral Systems	Recommendation 7.1; Page 57	Develop a crisis response team in every SEDOL school building with dedicated and trained staff who respond to significant behavior incidents, and increase behavior training for all school staff on behavior interventions, such as Ukeru® and any other	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation

		adopted behavior supports.	
Behavioral Systems	Recommendation 7.2; Page 58	Hire three behavior specialists at Gages Lake School, three behavior specialists at Fairhaven School, three behavior specialists at Cyd Lash Academy, one behavior specialist at John Powers Center who will also serve the Sector Schools, and one behavior specialist at Laremont School to provide onsite behavior supports, lead the crisis response team at each school, and provide behavior training to school personnel.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Training and Professional Development	Recommendation 8.2; Page 61	Hire a Director of Professional Development and charge the Director with the development of a district-wide professional development curriculum and the coordination of all professional development and training within the district.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Training and Professional Development	Recommendation 8.3; Page 62	Hire one Paraprofessional Coach for each of the SEDOL school buildings to provide coaching, mentoring, modeling, and training for both new and experienced paraprofessionals throughout the school year.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 9.1-A; Page 68	Overhaul the IEP processes and procedures to ensure compliance and accountability by monitoring, tracking, and addressing the following: develop explicit IEP processes and definitive	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation

		procedures which include defined roles and responsibilities; identify/designate SEDOL and Member District LEA's with a role specific criteria, and train staff from both a procedural and legal standpoint (See Appendix A: IEP Process Timeline).	
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 9.1-B; Page 68	Set expectations; implement effective parent and staff communication; ensure transition of student records and medical information; develop a systemic process for data collection; and ensure goals are measurable, focused on outcomes, and monitored utilizing the appropriate progression tools and annual assessment tools in order to achieve higher standards.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Finance and Budgets	Recommendation 10.2; Page 70	Hire an experienced grant writer for SEDOL to research applicable grants, apply for the grants, and manage the grant reporting process once awarded.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation
Member Districts	Recommendation 12.1; Page 87	Design programs and services collaboratively between SEDOL and Member Districts, and deliver the programs and services with fidelity to Member Districts in order to achieve a standard of high-quality customer service.	Within 1 year of Executive Board Presentation

2-Year Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
Central Office Administration	Recommendation 1.6; Page 28	Expedite the purchase and implementation of a new SIS or update the existing SIS to its full functionality, add another data support person to the technology budget and long-range technology plan, and move Assistive Technology oversight from the Special Services Department to the Innovation and Technology Department.	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation
Programmatic Offerings and Continuum of Services	Recommendation 4.1; Page 45	Develop a student instructional model that provides a clear framework for establishing special education as a continuum of services, jointly developed by district administration, building leaders, special education teachers, and related services personnel, as well as outside supports as needed.	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation
Curriculum and Instruction	Recommendation 5.2; Page 48	Form curriculum committees to formally develop curriculum frameworks for each SEDOL program and/or subject area and provide training to teachers on the use of the curriculum frameworks in their classrooms.	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation
Training and Professional Development	Recommendation 8.1; Page 60	Design and implement a professional development curriculum that contains topics and training dates, including but not limited to: • Quality Instructional Practices	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation

		- IEP Development and Compliance - Data Collection and Usage - Paraprofessional Training - Safety Training	
Policies and Procedures	Recommendation 9.2; Page 68	Design a Parent Handbook that highlights the opportunities within the school, addresses unique programmatic aspects of the curriculum, and outlines the provision of services.	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation
Finance and Budgets	Recommendation 10.3; Page 72	Create a committee consisting of SEDOL leaders and Member District representatives to evaluate the services provided by SEDOL, the value of the services received, and the cost associated with the services to determine if budgetary and/or service adjustments are needed.	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation
Parent and Community Relations	Recommendation 11.1; Page 75	Develop a parent engagement plan for each school, complete with topics, dates for delivery, and expert facilitators, to address parent needs and drive parent engagement within SEDOL; execute the plan consistently throughout each school year.	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation
Parent and Community Relations	Recommendation 11.3; Page 79	Create consistently branded marketing materials for SEDOL as a district, each SEDOL school, and the Sector schools; develop a parent handbook with key information for parents to navigate their interaction with SEDOL and special	Within 2 years of Executive Board Presentation

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
		education; and update the SEDOL website to ensure that information is current and accurate for internal and external usage.	

3-4-Year Recommendations

Category	Recommendation and Page Number	Recommendation	Timeframe
Parent and Community Relations	Recommendation 11.2; Page 76	Develop a clearinghouse of SEDOL-generated, expert information on special education topics and institute a Parent Education Program or Parent University for SEDOL parents with topics, including but not limited to, understanding the IDEA law, providing knowledge on techniques used to support SEDOL students, supporting parents who are new to SEDOL, and other topics determined to be beneficial.	Within 3-4 years of Executive Board Presentation

Implementation and Monitoring

There are many Focus Areas and Recommendations contained within this Special Education Program Review report. The Prioritization of Recommendations contains a timeline and a roadmap for addressing the recommendations and estimated time period it will take to make the recommendations realities. There are many skilled administrators and staff members within SEDOL who will collectively need to work together in order to address the recommendations. Some recommendations may be relatively easy to accomplish and can happen quickly, while others will require more systemic change and have a longer implementation timeframe. Overall, the expectation for completely addressing and implementing all recommendations is typically between three and five years for most districts.

In order to fully address the recommendations contained in this report, Exceptional Learning Solutions recommends that SEDOL engage an external partner to assist with implementation of the recommendations and provide monitoring for the district. This implementation and monitoring support should last for two complete school years to ensure SEDOL has a firm foundation to address the areas of need and the support required to complete the heavy lifting that comes with a Special Education Program Review such as this. Exceptional Learning Solutions always recommends that our clients engage an external partner for implementation and monitoring support services. Some clients choose to engage Exceptional Learning Solutions to provide those supports; others choose to engage a different organization. Either way Exceptional Learning Solutions firmly believes that external implementation and monitoring support are vital components for districts to successfully implement recommendations. This partnership of accountability with an external partner will assure the district stakeholders—employees, parents, and students—that SEDOL is committed to meaningful district reforms that will strengthen its system and provide greater support for all students.

Conclusion

SEDOL provides a wealth of opportunities for students with special needs. The district is comprised of a knowledgeable district leadership team, dedicated teachers and staff members, and a broad spectrum of students who rely on SEDOL to provide them with educational opportunities in a safe and structured environment. The teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, and staff support students in a nurturing way to achieve their educational goals. While there are opportunities for change, growth, and development at SEDOL, the supports provided for special needs students should be celebrated.

Once again SEDOL has the opportunity to flourish as a shining star and national beacon for special education. Within SEDOL there are processes, procedures, and systems that need to be altered, adjusted, rethought, or reordered, but the components of a great district are all readily available, waiting for the educational professionals at SEDOL to collaboratively shape them into an exemplary special education district for students. With some time, effort, and supports along the way, SEDOL can become a laudable district where every child can learn, grow, and flourish.

It has been an honor to partner with SEDOL in this important Special Education Program Review. Exceptional Learning Solutions would like to thank the district administration, building administration, teachers, paraprofessionals, related services personnel, staff, and parents for their candor, open communication, and support throughout this review in order to strengthen SEDOL.

Appendix A: IEP Process Timeline

IEP Process Timeline

WRITTEN REFERRAL
Student Services Team (SST)/Parent

No more than 90 days from date of written referral

REFERRAL REVIEW
IEP Team Meeting to complete Referral Review/ Assessment Determination to determine if assessments are warranted.
(Parental consent)

60 calendar days from written consent

REVIEW OF INITIAL ASSESSMENTS
Complete assessments and meet to review the results of those assessments.

3 calendar years to meet to conduct a Reevaluation Planning/Review of Existing Data to determine if additional assessments are needed.

DEVELOP IEP
30 calendar days to develop the child's IEP

1 Calendar Year to conduct an Annual Review

IMPLEMENTATION OF IEP
Immediately upon receipt of parent signature on an initial IEP.

ANNUAL REVIEW
Must be conducted within 1 calendar year of the active IEP's approval date.

Reevaluation/Continued Eligibility
Must be conducted within 3 calendar years from the date of the most recent evaluation date.

INITIAL SUSPICION OF DISABILITY

Written Referral
↓
Referral Review/ Assessment Determination
↓
Review of Initial Assessments

} 60 Calendar Days from written parental consent for assessments
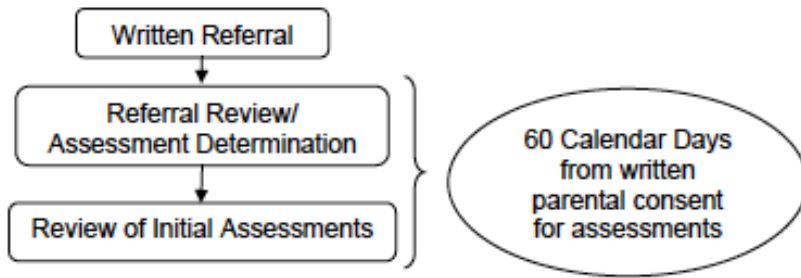
TESTING IN A NEW AREA OF SUSPECTED DISABILITY FOR A STUDENT ALREADY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Referral (Written Or Oral)
↓
Reevaluation Planning/ Review of Existing Data, Development of Evaluation Plan
↓
Review of Evaluation Information/Assessments Meeting

} 90 Calendar Days
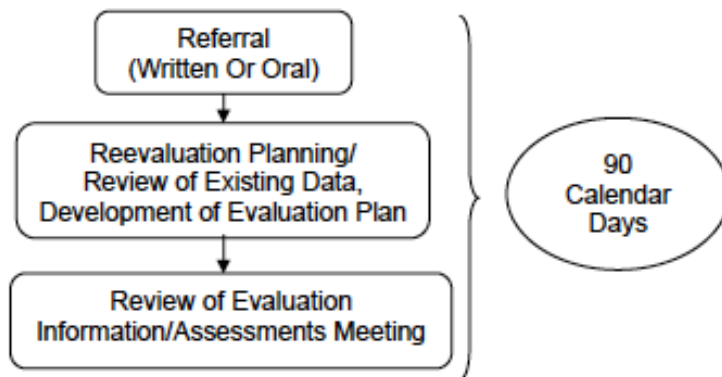
TESTING FOR CHANGE IN PLACEMENT FOR A STUDENT ALREADY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Referral (Written Or Oral)
↓
Reevaluation Planning/ Review of Existing Data, Development of Evaluation Plan
↓
Review of Evaluation Information/Assessments Meeting

} ASAP, but not more than 90

Reevaluation/Continued Eligibility*

```
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
                    │  Reevaluation Planning /Review   │
                    │         Existing Data            │
                    │ (At this meeting, discuss the    │
                    │   completed Review of Existing   │
                    │            Data)                 │
                    └─────────────────────────────────┘
                                    │
                    ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
                    │  Determine Need for Assessment   │
                    │    (Additional Information)       │
                    └─────────────────────────────────┘
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If No Assessments/Additional Information is Needed: If Assessments Are Needed:

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┌─────────────────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────────────────┐
│        Inform the Parent         │          │ 1. Complete the evaluation       │
│  Parent has the right to request │          │    process                       │
│     additional assessments       │          │ 2. Review assessment             │
└─────────────────────────────────┘          │    results                       │
                                               │ 3. Revise IEP by                 │
                                               │    reevaluation/continued        │
                                               │    eligibility date              │
                                               └─────────────────────────────────┘
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If the Parent Agrees to Proceed without assessments:	If the Parent disagrees:
1. Complete the evaluation process 2. Review and revise the IEP	1. Consider the request and determine if assessments should be completed.

If team decides to conduct assessments →

If parent agrees not to conduct

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*The entire reevaluation process (including IEP development) must be completed:
 1) Within 90 days of the Review of Exisiting Data/Reevaluation Planning meeting AND
 2) Before the Reevaluation date based on the current IEP