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Early Childhood Special Education works through year of changes

By Debra Bowers, Ph. D., Superintendent of Schools

Change can be hard. Especially when it has to do with your child's education. Nobody understands that better than the staff in our Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) department. They also know that frequent communication is key to successful transition. They have been keeping parents in a very close loop throughout the year as they've implemented changes in programming that came as a result of a process to reorganize the department and reduce its budget. Through the process, a task force comprised of parents, community members and staff studied program offerings and made recommendations for efficiencies.

At a recent school board meeting, Special Education Director Tami Reynolds reported that one of the biggest areas of concern for parents last year was, 'would the staff be there for them?' Reynolds responded, "Our staff has paid a lot of attention to that, and has been very attentive to parents. Kudos to staff because they've gone the extra mile."

The ECSE department serves children from birth through kindergarten and their families. Staff specialists identify children with special needs and form a plan to meet those needs, drawing from an array of service options. Efficiencies have been implemented in two of our core programs serving children ages three through kindergarten, PALS Plus and Ready Set Kindergarten (RSK). In these programs, ECSE students attend inclusive classes along with their typically-developing peers.

We started the school year with fewer PALS Plus classrooms and we redesigned the model in one RSK classroom. Those classrooms have more students in them than previous years as well as an increase in the number of children with higher needs, calling for us to create more spaces outside the classroom to do more small group instruction.

ECSE staff members also work closely with their colleagues in Early Child Family Education to respond to needs as they come our way. For example, as special needs students entered our program, we were able to create an additional collaborative classroom with RSK. Families were delighted to have this opportunity for their children.

"It worked beautifully," explained Special Education Coordinator, Louise Rath. "We're growing naturally and fluidly with Community Education."

Some basic logistical changes have resulted in efficiencies as well. Classrooms have been moved closer together, allowing staff to go back and forth readily between classrooms and more easily share materials. "It's really been a great change," reported Rath.

As we enter the final months of the school year, we will be evaluating the effectiveness of our program through parent and staff surveys and collecting end-of-the year data to gauge student progress. We will also get a report card from the Department of Education

indicating how well we are doing in connecting with and identifying special needs children throughout our district, how efficiently we are delivering services, and how effective our services are.

Thanks to all of our ECSE staff who dedicate themselves daily to making change in our students' lives.

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