



District  
Management  
Group

## CASE STUDY

# Special Education Opportunity Review Lights a Path to Improvement at West Feliciana Parish Schools (LA)

*by Maggie Gallagher*

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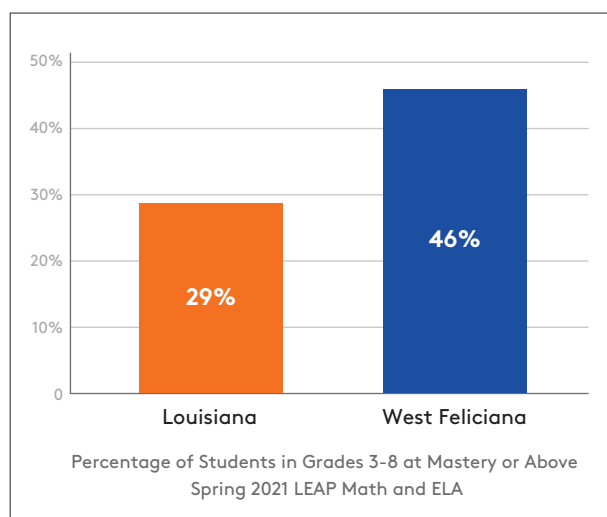
# Special Education Opportunity Review Lights a Path to Improvement at West Feliciana Parish Schools (LA)

Maggie Gallagher

**W**ith classroom closures continuing during the 2021-2022 school year and the detrimental impacts of remote learning coming into clearer focus, West Feliciana Parish Schools was pleased to learn that their overall student achievement was strong, as evidenced by standardized testing results (*Exhibit 1*). Additionally, the district had just received the highest score of any district in Louisiana on its state report card.

However, a closer look at the standardized testing data revealed a more complex story. While the district's students in general education as well as its students with disabilities outperformed their statewide peers, the gap in West Feliciana between students with and without disabilities was far wider than that of the state—35 percentage points compared to 22 percentage points at the state level (*Exhibit 2*). Despite the overall high achievement levels, this gap troubled the leaders of this high-performing district. Determined to take action, the district initiated a partnership with District Management Group to analyze the situation and identify ways to address these critical gaps. Superintendent Hollis Milton shared: “[District Management Group’s] reputation is well known, and we really needed a group to come in and give

*Exhibit 1* PERCENTAGE OF STUDENT MASTERY: STATE AND WEST FELICIANA PARISH



Source: Louisiana Department of Education – Spring 2021 LEAP Achievement Levels

us an outside view and look closely at our data. We were too dependent on how we felt about things, but not what the data said, and specifically how it compared to other similar districts.”

## FAST FACTS



### 2,156 students

- 59% White
- 36% Black
- 1.6% Latinx
- 2.4% Two or more races
- 0.5% Asian
- <0.5% American Indian/Alaskan Native
- 48% Economically disadvantaged
- 15% Students identified as having a disability

### 4 schools

- 2 Elementary
- 1 Middle
- 1 High

Source: Louisiana State Department of Education, Fall 2022





*“It took the opinions and subjectivity out of it and gave our current practice more objectivity, which I think was transformational. District Management Group had the data, knew best practices from the research and their work with other districts, and took a very humanistic approach to that data.”*

– Hollis Milton

Superintendent, West Feliciana Parish Schools (LA)

## Special Education Opportunity Review Provides a Deep Look

In initial conversations between district leaders and District Management Group, West Feliciana Parish district leaders humbly admitted, “we don’t know what we don’t know” about addressing learning gaps for students receiving special education services. This sentiment is shared by many districts across the country. Many district leaders began as core content leaders and rely heavily on the small numbers of special education leaders to hold most or all of the district knowledge of how best to serve students with disabilities. District Management Group (DMGroup) recommended the district undertake a Special Education Opportunity Review to examine the district’s current practices, compare them to best practices, and identify how to move forward.

The Special Education Opportunity Review at West Feliciana Parish Schools (West Feliciana) launched in August 2021 and was a six-month endeavor that ran through January 2022. The review included:

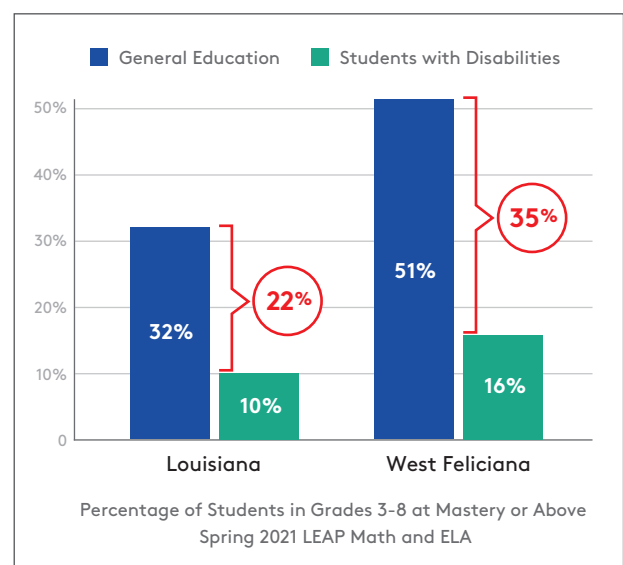
- Collecting and analyzing district and state quantitative data
- Gathering qualitative information through interviews and focus groups with district personnel and staff
- DMGroup analysis and benchmarking
- Actionable recommendations based on findings
- Prioritization workshop to plan next steps

Below is a summary of the Special Education Opportunity Review process and the various steps, both technical and adaptive, critical to shaping the findings and recommendations for the district.

## Forming a Guiding Coalition in Pursuit of Change Management

For important work like a Special Education Opportunity Review to be conducted thoroughly and to have impact, DMGroup believes it essential to identify a diverse group of stakeholders to champion the work.

**Exhibit 2** PERCENTAGE AT MASTERY OR ABOVE: GENERAL EDUCATION VS. STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES



Source: Louisiana Department of Education – Spring 2021 LEAP Achievement Levels

This group, or guiding coalition, is involved in the entire process, from helping DMGroup gather information and hold discussions with the appropriate stakeholders to prioritizing findings and turning them into action in the district. The heavy investment DMGroup asks of this guiding coalition is rooted in a deep understanding of change management: having a dedicated group of staff who are invested in addressing the challenges and desired outcomes is essential to move the needle in a district over the long term.

At West Feliciana Parish Schools, this guiding coalition was a 13-member coalition including the Superintendent, Director of Special Education, and Director of Accountability, as well as special education staff, school leaders, related service providers, and general education teachers.

“

*Interview and focus group participants were selected in collaboration with district staff to ensure that the appropriate voices and stories were being heard and elevated as a part of the analysis.*

## A Deep Look at Quantitative Data

DMGroup began by conducting a robust quantitative analysis of existing district data that included:

### Academic Data

- State standardized testing data
- Graduation rates

### Social-Emotional Data

- Social-emotional survey data (such as Panorama Education surveys or other district surveys)
- Attendance data
- Disciplinary data

### Special Education–Specific Data

- Referral and identification rates for all students and student subgroups
- Breakdown by disability category
- District special education spending

## Qualitative Data Captured Through Interviews and Focus Groups

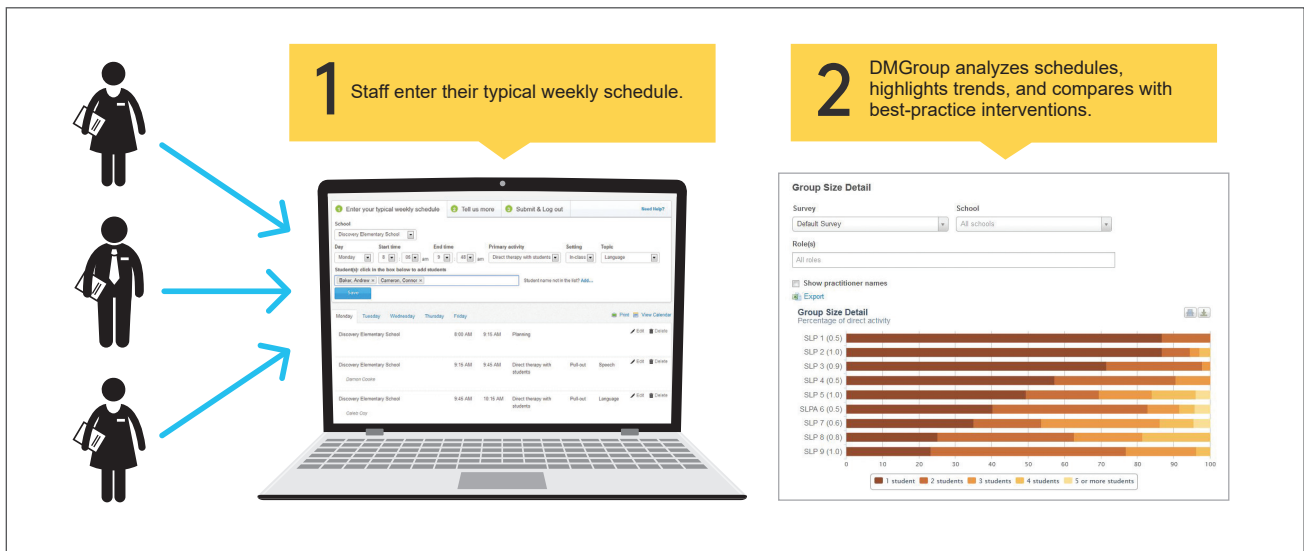
While quantitative data is compelling and enriching for understanding a district's challenges, it provides an incomplete picture of the realities in any given district. DMGroup engages in a robust qualitative analysis of the strengths and challenges of a school district through one-on-one interviews with district-level leaders such as the superintendent, assistant superintendents, department heads, and other key central office staff. In addition, focus groups held with a variety of school staff members and other stakeholders allow DMGroup to better understand the ways that decisions are shaping and impacting how students are served. This qualitative information helps paint a more detailed and nuanced picture of the different tiers of intervention embedded in each school and in the daily practices of teachers.

In West Feliciana, interview and focus group participants were selected in collaboration with district staff to ensure that the appropriate voices and stories were being heard and elevated as a part of the analysis. This included about 7 district-level one-on-one interviews

and 17 focus groups. In total, about 115 staff members participated in these focus groups and interviews, and included the following:

- Superintendent
- Director of Special Education
- Supervisor of School Leadership and Instruction
- Director of Accountability
- Chief Finance Officer
- School leaders (principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches)
- General education teachers
- Special education teachers
- Related service providers (speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists)
- Mental health staff (social workers and school psychologists)
- Teachers of English language learners
- Paraprofessionals
- School Board members

### Exhibit 3 USING DMGROUP'S STAFF SCHEDULING SOFTWARE TO LEARN HOW STUDENTS ARE SERVED



Source: DMGroup

Questions vary between interviews and focus groups, and each person is asked questions specific to their position. However, some key questions transcend roles, such as the following:

- What is going well in the district when it comes to serving students in special education?
- What challenges exist in the district when it comes to serving students in special education?
- What is the process for identifying students for special education services?
- Do you believe the district has a problem with over- or under-identification of students who need special education services? Why or why not?
- How would you describe the district's approach to special education?

For staff members more involved in programming and curriculum, a more nuanced look at special education programming may be gained through the following questions:

- What is the district's approach to co-teaching between special education teachers and general education teachers?

- How is the curriculum determined for special education programming?
- What is the district's approach to scheduling special education services?
- What kind of support do you receive when it comes to supporting students both with and without disabilities? Is this support adequate? Why or why not?

### A Close Look at Schedule Data Provides Insight

A key part of DMGroup's data analysis involves gathering detailed information about how students are served. Deep insights are garnered by collecting information about a typical week's schedule from all staff who support students with disabilities. DMGroup asked 105 West Feliciana staff members across 13 roles (including psychologists, social workers, paraprofessionals, and therapists) to log their activities and responsibilities in 30-minute increments for one full week using DMGroup's easy-to-use, proprietary schedule-sharing software (Exhibit 3). Data captured included answers to the following questions:

- What is the primary activity (e.g. student instruction, attending a meeting, IEP compliance monitoring, paperwork, assigned school duties such as bus duty or lunch duty, etc.)?

- Which student/students are you meeting with?
- What is the group size? One-on-one? If not, how many are being seen at one time?

With this detailed information about staff schedules and responsibilities, DMGroup's schedule-sharing software can quickly generate reports that provide insightful, detailed information about how students are being served and how time is being spent. Reports can be generated to answer questions such as the following:

- What percentage of service was push-in versus pull-out or co-teaching?
- How much time was devoted to supporting students directly?
- What topics or content areas were being supported?
- How many students were being supported at a time?

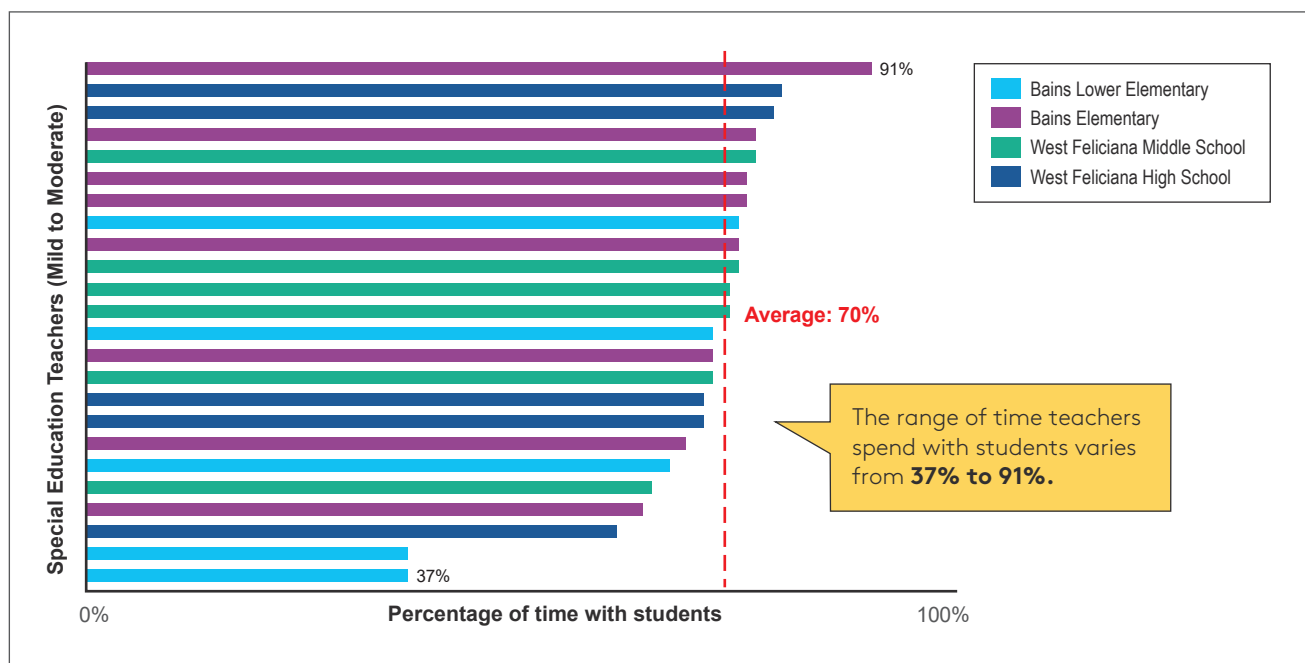
DMGroup is then able to benchmark the findings, enabling districts to understand how their schedule-sharing

data compares to that of other similar districts and to best practices.

One analysis that districts find particularly helpful is how much time special education teachers and other related service providers are spending working directly with students as opposed to working on other responsibilities of the job, such as IEP paperwork or school duties. In West Feliciana, DMGroup's schedule-sharing analysis was able to show that special education teachers supporting students with mild to moderate disabilities were spending, on average, 70% of their time directly supporting students (*Exhibit 4*). While the exact percentage varied by practitioner, this average indicates that teachers are spending much more time working directly with students than they are on some of the indirect aspects of the job—a success worth calling out for the district, as anything greater than 50% of direct service is an ideal target.

Additionally, the schedule-sharing analysis allows DMGroup to conduct the same analysis by school. This information provides insights and allows schools and districts to make decisions and allocate resources in a way that minimizes the amount of time teachers spend doing compliance-related work such as paperwork and maximizes the amount of time they spend with students.

**Exhibit 4 WEST FELICIANA SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS' DIRECT SERVICE—BY TEACHER AND SCHOOL**



Source: DMGroup analysis of West Feliciana Staff Schedule Sharing Data, October 2021



## Findings and Recommendations

With this robust set of data and rich qualitative information, DMGroup analyzes the information and compares findings to benchmarking data and best-practice research. DMGroup then goes through a deep review of this information to formulate a set of key, actionable recommendations for the district. Highlights of findings and recommendations for West Feliciana were as follows:

### Recommendation #1: Capitalize on District Strengths

Part of any Special Education Opportunity Review includes assessing and understanding the current strengths of the district. Not only is it important to acknowledge the good work that is being done, but an identification of strengths allows districts to capitalize on them as they make a plan to move forward. In West Feliciana Parish Schools, the following strengths were highlighted in DMGroup's analysis and should be leveraged:

- **Learning Mindset:** The learning mindset of staff in West Feliciana was notable and profound. Specifically, staff articulated during focus groups and interviews a deep desire to gain additional knowledge and skills to support students.
- **Strong Intervention Practices Established:** West Feliciana had made several key investments in structures for intervention to support students in closing learning gaps. Each elementary school has 45-minute, staggered intervention blocks that exist for the sole purpose of providing students with additional support in math and reading. Additionally, following the Covid-19 pandemic, the district made notable investments in the training of interventionists in evidence-based interventions and strategies such as Orton-Gillingham.
- **Strong Overall Student Achievement:** Despite the disruptions to learning related to the pandemic, West Feliciana continued to see overall gains in student achievement as evidenced by standardized testing scores.

### Recommendation #2: Establish a Clearly Articulated Shared Vision

It was clear that West Feliciana had done much to be proud of to support its students with disabilities: the district had a dedicated staff, strong intervention practices, and a history of strong outcomes. However, DMGroup identified that the district lacked a unified vision and clearly articulated district-wide priorities for special education and student supports.

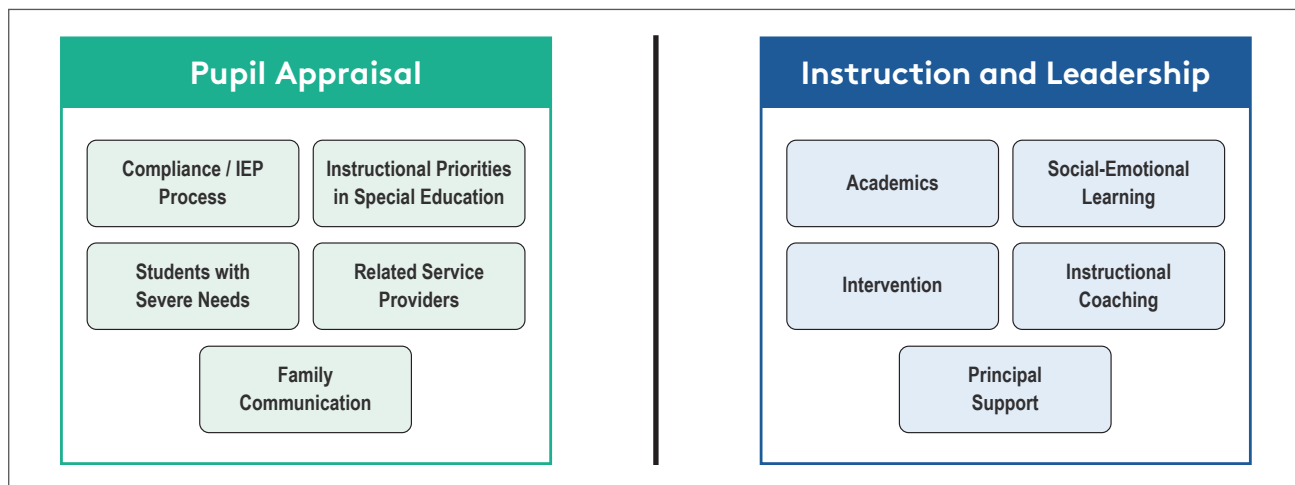
For example, in many districts, leaders and staff will indicate that inclusion and dedication to the least restrictive environment guide all decision making for student support services in the district. This priority may prompt the district to make strategic investments in co-teaching or additional staff in general education classrooms. In other districts, strong programming and curriculum for students with severe needs is an ongoing priority, which may prompt the district to invest in strong curricular materials and train teachers to use those materials effectively.

Ultimately, the vision or theory of action that a district sets for special education should drive its actions and resource allocation. In West Feliciana, high levels of principal autonomy meant that each school leader could decide independently on how to implement special education programming, and this could look very different across the district's schools. This lack of unified vision poses two major challenges. First, without a shared vision, even the most adept and collaborative staff are unable to consistently and measurably achieve success with students. Secondly, determining which improvements or changes the district might want to pursue becomes challenging without a clear vision or outcome to align those decisions to.

DMGroup stressed the need to articulate a clear, shared vision and priorities within the district so that programming can better meet the needs of students with significant learning disabilities.

### Recommendation #3: Clarify District Roles and Responsibilities and Collaboration Structures

In West Feliciana, as in many districts across the country, general education efforts and special education or student support efforts were housed in two separate departments at both the district and school levels.

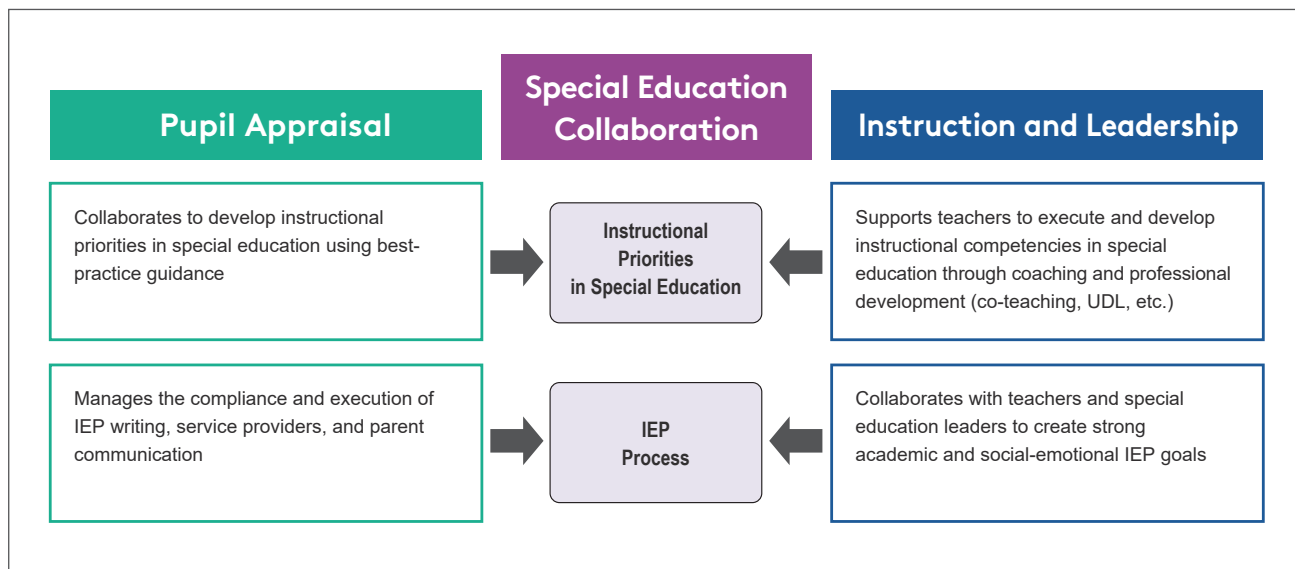
**Exhibit 5a** WEST FELICIANA CENTRAL OFFICE DEPARTMENTS AND WORKSTREAMS (BEFORE OPPORTUNITY REVIEW)

Source: DMGroup Analysis

Critical workstreams such as academics, social-emotional learning, intervention, instructional coaching, and principal support lived with the Instruction and Leadership team, while workstreams related to IEP compliance, related service provision, and students with significant or complex disabilities lived with Special Education and Pupil Appraisal (*Exhibit 5a*). Without close collaboration between these two departments on academic and social-emotional priorities for the district, there was no assurance that students receiving special education services were receiving the same curriculum and programming as their general education peers; this was

entirely dependent on the choices made by individual school staff rather than on strategic priorities set at the district level. Also, the professional development of general education and special education teachers was happening separately when, ideally, these two groups would be closely collaborating to support all students.

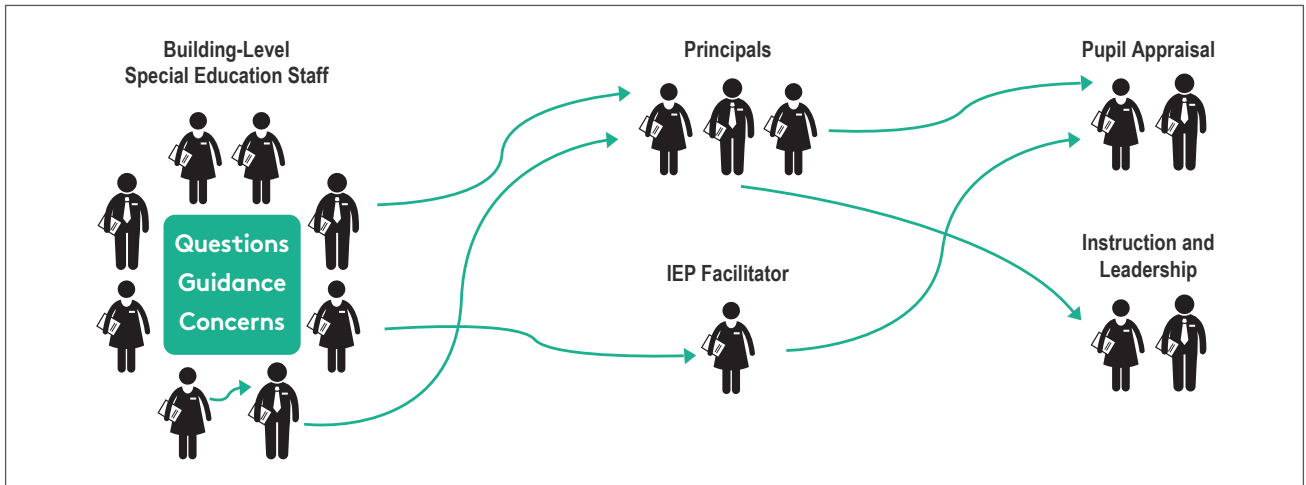
DMGroup's recommendation included creating and incorporating key collaboration structures for these two departments in order to make sure that knowledge and priorities were shared across them (*Exhibit 5b*).

**Exhibit 5b** RECOMMENDED STRUCTURE: WORKSTREAMS FOR POTENTIAL COLLABORATION

Source: DMGroup Analysis



**Exhibit 6a** SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORT AND REPORTING STRUCTURE (BEFORE)



Source: DMGroup Analysis

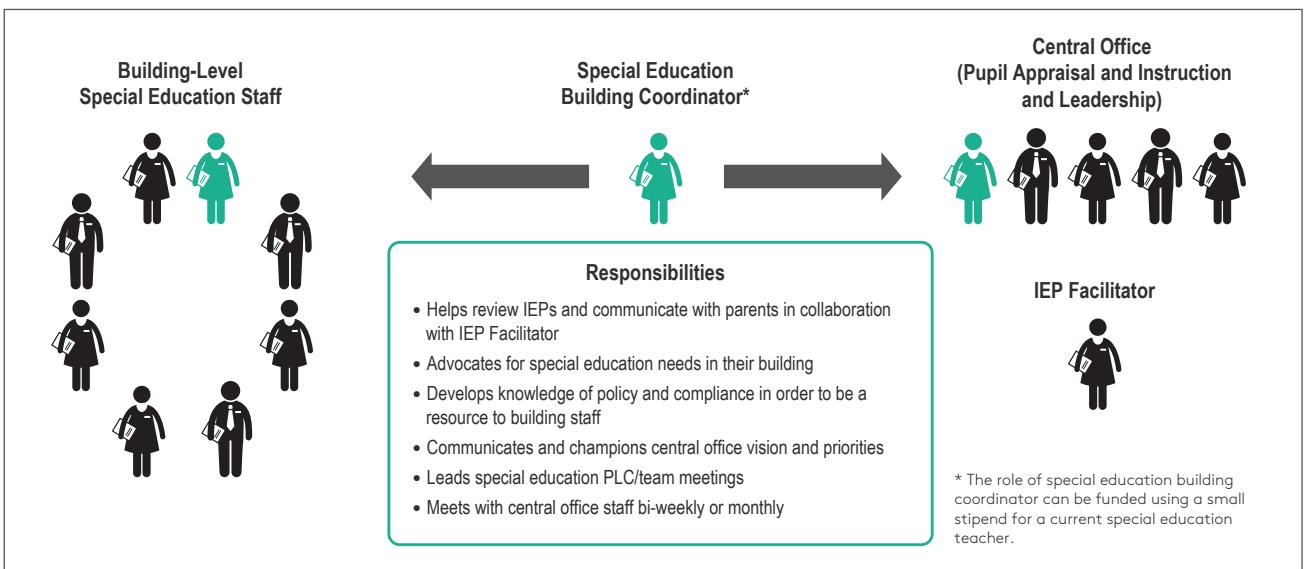
## Recommendation #4: Appoint a Building-Level Special Education Coordinator

In interviews and focus groups, general education leaders, general education teachers, and even special education teachers expressed a lack of access to key knowledge, development, and critical updates about special education or did not have a clear understanding of who to turn to when they had questions or needed additional resources. Some staff described using their principal as their key source of information, while others relied upon central office staff. Many teachers and staff simply used one another as resources

to get their questions answered (*Exhibit 6a*). While these were not inherently poor strategies for seeking and receiving information and development on special education topics and issues, the lack of clear systems and communication pipelines led to confusion and misinformation about special education among staff and leaders.

DMGroup recommended appointing a building-level special education leader responsible for answering questions, acting as a liaison between central office staff and school staff, and providing guidance on special education and student services–related issues (*Exhibit 6b*). This person is

**Exhibit 6b** SPECIAL EDUCATION SUPPORT AND REPORTING STRUCTURE (AFTER)



Source: DMGroup Analysis



Students at West Feliciana Parish Schools working together

typically a veteran special education teacher who already has strong relationships with their colleagues in their school building. The presence of this person and the formalization of their role as a special education building coordinator enables streamlined communication and information from central office to schools and ensures that teachers, both general and special education, are receiving the critical information and development they need.

### Recommendation #5: Develop a Communication Plan

Another resounding theme that arose primarily in one-on-one interviews and focus groups was the staff's desire for stronger communication from central office about special education updates.

These findings prompted DMGroup to recommend systemic changes to the approach that district leadership took in communicating updates to special education. This approach to communication, however, is *not* specific to special education, but rather, a best-practice technique in management that can be used for all departments and change management efforts at the district level. Strong communication planning requires clearly defining the following:

**1. Identify Key Stakeholders** - Who needs communication?

**2. Craft the Message** - What communication do they need throughout the year?

**3. Recruit a Champion** - Who is the best person to provide this message?

**4. Decide on Mode** - How will you deliver the message?

**5. Determine Timeline** - When will you deliver this information?

By using this framework for communication, West Feliciana could not only better communicate information to stakeholders but could do so with a level of strategy and intentionality that would ensure that the message was received and acted upon effectively.

### Recommendation #6: Create a Special Education Professional Development Arc for All Staff

While DMGroup's analysis of district practice revealed that West Feliciana Parish Schools has dedicated staff members who are hungry for development, there was evidence that development on special education topics for *all* staff, both special education teachers and general education practitioners, wasn't occurring at a rate that was meeting the needs of students. Though the district engaged special education staff in foundational training on IEP writing and compliance at the beginning of each school year, there was no ongoing training for these teachers *or* their general education counterparts on topics of special education.

For the district to truly support diverse learners, DMGroup recommended using a framework of high-leverage practices from the Council on Exceptional Children that includes development for all staff on collaborative practices, assessment, social-emotional learning, and instruction.

### Recommendation #7: Prioritize Inclusion

In DMGroup's schedule-sharing analysis, one of the most critical findings centered on *where* students with

disabilities were doing the bulk of their learning. We know that when students are able to access the least restrictive environment for learning, they are able to make larger academic and social-emotional gains. At the elementary level in West Feliciana Parish Schools, special education teachers at Bains Elementary School were spending about half of their time supporting students outside of the general education classroom. At Bains Lower Elementary School, they were spending 68% of their time outside of the general education classroom (*Exhibit 7*).

To remedy this, DMGroup recommended the following:

1. Ensure that students receiving special education services are not pulled out of core subject instruction and are able to learn within the general education setting.
2. Increase the amount of development that teachers receive on co-teaching, aimed at helping special education teachers to support students effectively within the general education setting.

Often, when students are being pulled out of their core classes to receive special education services, it is due to the complexities of scheduling. DMGroup has found scheduling to be a common problem for many districts in providing special education programming and services. To help districts address this challenge, DMGroup has developed sophisticated scheduling software that allows

districts to easily build schedules that meet their special education objectives and instructional priorities (for more information, visit [DMSchedules.com](https://dmschedules.com)).

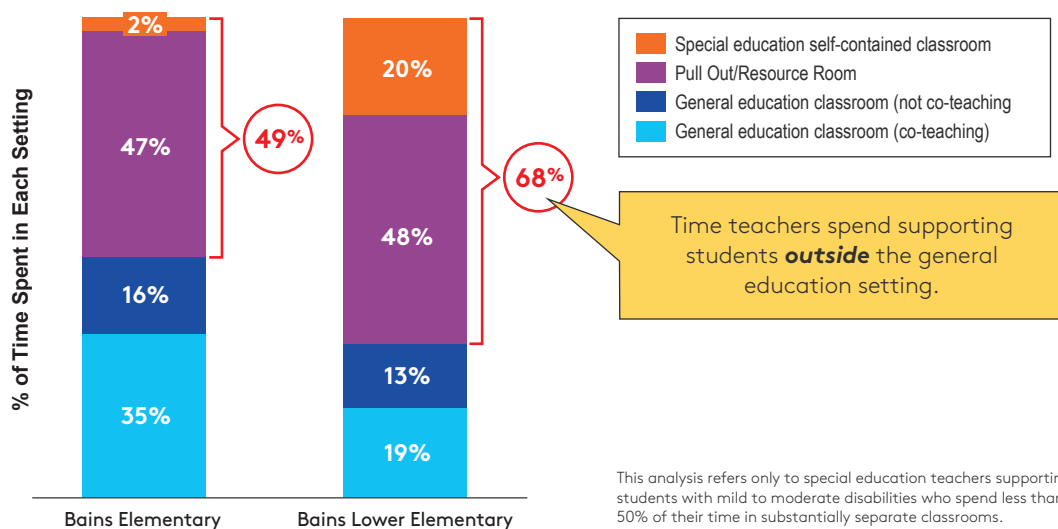
## Recommendation #8: Bolster Content Expertise at the Secondary Level

At the secondary level, a different set of challenges existed for supporting students with disabilities. In focus groups, secondary staff expressed the desire to use an authentic co-teaching model, where both the general education teacher and the special education teacher act as content experts in the classroom. However, the sheer number of different classes which special education teachers had to support hindered their ability to develop true content expertise or co-plan with the classroom teacher. This insight also bore out in schedule-sharing data, which showed that 100% of high school special education teachers were supporting two or more subjects throughout the day.

To address this challenge, DMGroup made the following recommendations:

1. **Create the conditions for special education teachers to support at most two subjects, if not one subject, in order to bolster content mastery.** Sometimes different scheduling or caseload considerations can be a remedy, but often staffing models have to be adjusted. Given that this is not always

*Exhibit 7* WEST FELICIANA ELEMENTARY SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER SETTINGS



Source: DMGroup Analysis and West Feliciana Schedule Sharing Data, Fall 2021

realistic for smaller districts such as West Feliciana, the next recommendation, below, is often more popular for districts to pursue.

- 2. Identify current co-teaching staff who could serve as model teachers or teacher coaches to strengthen the co-teaching model.** Many schools already have teachers they are using informally as mentors; elevating these teachers to the role of teacher coach or model teacher provides opportunities to bolster these teachers' leadership skills while providing greater support to more novice teachers.

## Prioritizing the Highest-Impact and Most Feasible Recommendations

### *Setting a Vision for Special Education*

After sharing the findings with district leadership and the guiding coalition, DMGroup worked with the coalition to articulate a shared vision for addressing the needs of students receiving special education services. Members of the guiding coalition were asked to reflect on their aspirations and desired outcomes for students with the most significant learning gaps, and DMGroup helped the district to draft a statement that would guide the remaining prioritization workshops and ultimately help the district to make decisions about which findings and opportunities they would pursue (*Exhibit 8*).

#### *Exhibit 8* VISION FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION AT WEST FELICIANA

##### VISION

All students receiving special education services in West Feliciana will have access to **specialized, inclusive, and student-centered** instruction that results in **increased student learning**. Staff will collaborate with one another, as well as families, to ensure **high expectations** for students rooted in **encouragement, motivation, and love**.

Source: West Feliciana Parish Schools

## Prioritizing Opportunities and Taking Action

A common pitfall of consultant reports is that they often present a set of findings, but despite the best intentions of the consultants or the district, those findings are “put in a drawer” somewhere and not acted upon due to competing priorities, limited capacity, or simply a lack of knowledge about how best to implement the findings. To make our findings as actionable as possible for any district, DMGroup includes a multi-step prioritization workshop to identify which findings will be most impactful and most feasible for the district (*Exhibit 9*).

During the initial presentation of findings, the guiding coalition is asked to rank how impactful and how feasible they believe each finding is in the district. Subsequently, DMGroup facilitates a workshop with the guiding coalition to reflect back to them their own insights on feasibility and impact as well as to identify appropriate next steps for the district.

Building on the guiding coalition's prioritization work, a small group of district leaders including the Superintendent, the Director of Data and Accountability, and the Director of Special Education, in collaboration with DMGroup, quickly put together a plan to address the following recommendations:

- Appoint a building-level special education coordinator;
- Revamp the professional development calendar to include more opportunities for development on special education topics;
- Clarify the central office staff's roles and responsibilities related to special education teaching and learning.

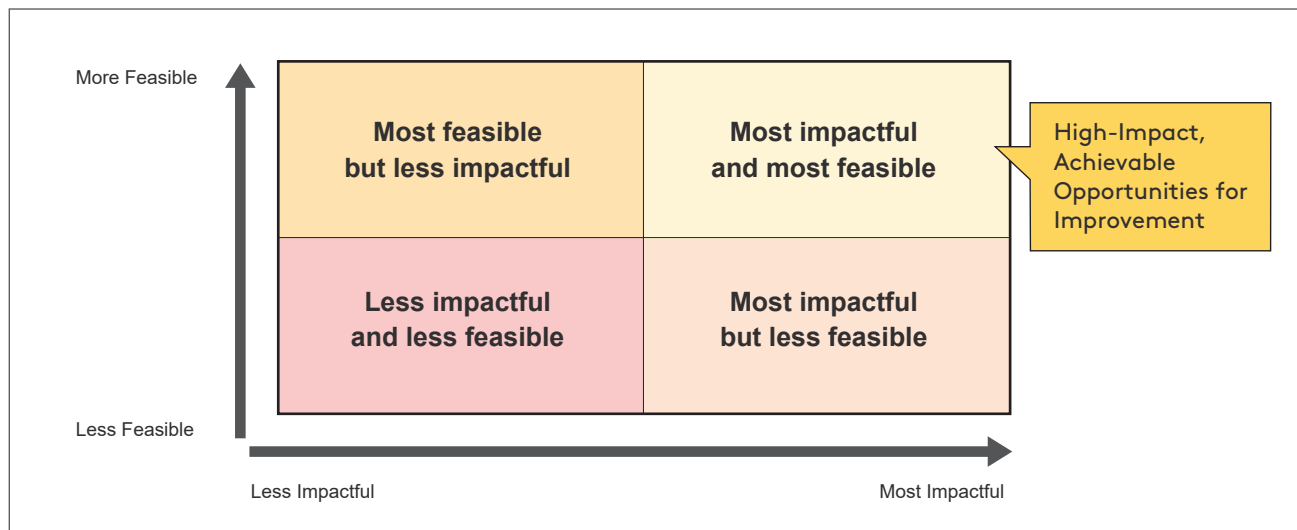
## A Year Later

One year later, Superintendent Milton reflected on the impact of the Special Education Opportunity Review: “It took the opinions and subjectivity out of it and gave our current practice more objectivity, which I think was transformational. District Management Group had the data, knew best practices from the research and their work with other districts, and took a very humanistic approach to that data.”

Superintendent Milton then shared how the district has thus far been moving forward with the recommendations:



*Exhibit 9* FEASIBILITY AND IMPORTANCE MATRIX



Source: DMGroup

### - Appointing a Building-Level Special Education Coordinator

After enlisting DMGroup’s support to draft a description for this role, the district was able to hire a building-level special education coordinator, which resulted in higher levels of alignment in the district on practices in special education. Superintendent Milton shared, “You need continuity between your schools, you need someone in a leadership role. It was crucial this be a teacher leader who was on the ground [and] who folks could trust, and who was already doing the work but could step back and see the bigger picture and vision. We’ve found that this is paying huge dividends. You can see it in our initial formative student data but also just from talking to teachers who are continuing to work on really strong alignment across buildings.”

### - Reducing Pandemic Harm

Superintendent Milton reflected that “the pandemic caused incredible learning loss and exacerbated the already present achievement gaps of struggling students. But it also was a great time to reset, and there was a sense of urgency around incredible challenges. What we could do was quickly minimize some of the damage that was done by the pandemic and hopefully get dramatically better than we were before.”

He added, “We have many areas in our student achievement—with all of our students, but also with our students who struggle—[where] we are doing dramatically

better than we were pre-pandemic. It’s not only tackling the learning loss of the pandemic, but then addressing those longstanding issues that were happening before the pandemic, and District Management Group was a huge part of our solutions process.”

## The Path Forward

Top of mind for the district, a year later, is being able to assess the fidelity and efficacy of the changes they are making. “I always think that our sense of urgency needs to stay up front and center. We are making good strides, and we need to continue to review and revise our plan, have really good alignment, and constantly be looking for new opportunities and communicating those opportunities effectively, all with that sense of urgency,” said Superintendent Milton.

Armed with a robust set of findings, a vision for special education programming, and a dedicated set of leaders and teachers, West Feliciana Parish Schools continues to hone its approach to support students with the greatest learning needs with a sense of urgency that drives results. ♦