

**QUALITY EDUCATION IN THE LAST FRONTIER
(QELF) SPECIAL EDUCATION FOCUS GROUPS: FINAL REPORT**

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QELF SPECIAL EDUCATION FOCUS GROUPS: FINAL REPORT

Introduction

The Quality Education in the Last Frontier (QELF) project of the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED), funded in FY2000 by a State Improvement Grant from the US Department of Education (CFDA 84.323A) was an effort to work towards systems change by enhancing existing structures to increase educational services and successful outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities. Activities of the project addressed the goals of increasing student participation in reform efforts; supporting participation of parents, families, and community members in activities to promote student achievement; partnering with state agencies that provide relevant services; and developing infrastructure to recruit, train, and retain education professionals (approximately 80% of funding was proposed for personnel development). State agencies partnering in QELF activity included the Departments of Health and Social Services, Corrections, Labor and Workforce Development, and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

A focus group methodology was chosen as part of the evaluation process of the QELF project as a means to obtain feedback and recommendations from stakeholders. The focus group is not a rigorous scientific method and results should always be considered with that caveat in mind. However, within its limitations, a focus group can effectively “take the pulse” of opinions and perspectives held by stakeholders at a moment in time. As the end of the QELF project approaches, these perceptions of the moment can be compared across a span of five years.

2005 FOCUS GROUPS: SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTORS

On September 12, 2005 an invitation letter was sent to 20 directors or coordinators of special education programs in Alaska encouraging them to participate in focus groups while attending the annual Special Education Directors’ Conference in Anchorage. The letter was signed by Art Arnold, Special Education Director, Division of Teaching and Learning Support; Patrick Moran, State Special Projects Manager; and Karen Ward, Director of the Center for

Human Development. On September 29, 2005 the University of Alaska Anchorage Center for Human Development conducted two sessions of focus groups with special education directors.

Methodology

The invitation letter offered three scheduled time slots of 1-hour duration in the course of one day (Thursday, September 29) from which special education directors could choose. The letter informed potential participants that as an incentive, the names of participants would be entered into a drawing for a \$200 gift certificate to a popular Anchorage electronics store.

Participants

Eight participants chose to attend the first session, five chose the second, and no one chose the third, for a total of 13 participants. Eleven participants were special education directors or coordinators from rural school districts and two were representatives from the Alaska Special Education Service Agency (SESA). Participants represented the Aleutian Region, Bering Strait, Delta/Greely, Hydaburg, Ketchikan Gateway, Klawock City, Kodiak Island Borough, Lower Kuskokwim, Skagway City, Unalaska, and Yupiit school districts.

Procedure

A facilitator introduced the purpose of the focus group, informed participants the session would be recorded and transcribed, and provided forms and instructions to enter in the drawing for a \$200 gift certificate. Participants were asked four open-ended questions:

- 1) What are the three most critical issues facing you in achieving successful educational outcomes for students with disabilities?
- 2) What solutions to you suggest for addressing these issues?
- 3) What are the barriers you see to implementation of these solutions?
- 4) What major changes have you seen in special education services over the last five years?

The facilitator periodically checked with participants to ascertain if there was general agreement with comments made by individuals and asked follow-up questions as necessary for clarification. Focus group sessions were recorded, transcribed, and examined for patterns of responses.

Results¹

Question 1: What are the three most critical issues facing you in achieving successful educational outcomes for students with disabilities?

There seemed to be general agreement in the first and largest of the two sessions ($n = 8$) that the three most critical issues revolved around assessment of student learning and awarding a high school diploma, lack of qualified staff and providers, and lack of funding – in that order of priority. Participants in the second session ($n = 5$) expanded more on the problems revolving around qualified and supported staff and funding. No Child Left Behind, AYP (annual yearly progress), and the exit exam barely received a mention in the second session.

Participants in the first session ($n = 8$) clearly expressed dissatisfaction with heavy reliance on a single measure of learning, the Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (the exit exam), and/or the focus of education on what the exam measures. Comments were generally pertinent to all students with disabilities, but some also highlighted cultural differences between white and Native cultures, or rural and urban cultures.

“I don’t think the exit exam should be required for a diploma. I think that’s an unfair burden to put on disabled kids.”

“...if we have kids who have earned the required number of credits for the district and have taken the High School Qualifying Exam with accommodations or possibly the modified version and have been unable to pass it, yet have had success and completed their IEPs in the school, I don’t think that they should be denied a diploma...”

“...I think we assess the wrong thing.” I think people can get by in today’s society without necessarily having a high school level of reading.”

¹ For a brief summary of the issues raised in the 2005 special education directors focus groups, organized into subject categories under each question, please see Appendix A.

“I think the thing we’re really looking for is do they know how to gather and use information. And you can do that with a variety of assistive technologies and things nowadays and not have to be able to read all that well. Same thing with math. Do they know how to use the numbers and come up with the answers and reason out things, is more important than do they have formulas memorized and can they do pi level math. I think we’re saying to these kids by not giving them the diploma, we’re saying that they’re not really gonna be successful in the world. And I think that’s wrong...”

“...clearly in an era of technology that we’re in right now, we should be able to come up with a better way of determining if a kid is going to be able to graduate from high school than solely one test. A test could very possibly be part of the formula. But to have it solely the only criteria...I think is simply ludicrous.”

“The disparity or the difference between what the Native people in my region feel is needed for an education versus the white view of education, test scores. We have different priorities. And so we have 5-year-olds coming to school with no exposure to print material at all in the home and very little exposure to oral language...They don’t have school behaviors let alone any of that vocabulary.”

“And then we compound that because now they’re made to feel less than, instead of this is my culture and I’m okay... Now it’s not only am I not okay, I’m at deficit somehow or another.”

“...in the...white culture we look at a student as successful when they have a high school diploma. In his mind whether you have a high school diploma or not has nothing to do with success. If you can take care of your family, if you can hunt, if you can get wood, if you can haul water...you’re successful.”

“I would be so interested in having more, or any voc ed options for our special ed kids in our district. That’s what they need. They need the small engine repair. They need carpentry...so much is driven now by reading, writing, math scores that are not really relevant to life in the village.”

“I think the good thing about NCLB, one good thing I see about it, is that we are using instructional designed approach to education. But it’s being used to satisfy testing, not being used for real analysis towards the students.”

Participants in both sessions ($N = 13$) noted the lack of qualified staff and providers as one of the three most critical issues facing achievement of successful educational outcomes for students with disabilities. Comments addressed both a lack of qualified people available to hire and the related issue of a lack of training/education resources in the state.

“I know it’s hard when they have to travel out because you only have one child with autism. But we only get that expertise once or twice a year...We need more support.”

“...we don’t see the number of PTs and OTs that we need to sustain the level of need...I could hire two full time speech and language people and fill their contracts. I could hire two occupational therapists and fill their contracts...I’ve got kids out there that cannot get serviced...”

“...I don’t understand why university systems in Alaska can’t develop our own programs for an OT, or speech, or ASL interpreters within the state.”

“Well related to [qualified teachers] it’s kind of like the grow your own, because my agency just deals with all the intensive needs. We have no prep programs...”

“...We have a very strong career ladder for aides to become teachers, for regular ed teachers to become special ed teachers, and for any teachers to become an administrator... But we have no luck getting regular ed people into special ed...”

“...in order for students with disabilities and probably all students to be successful in their educational outcomes, they have to have the staff who know what they’re doing to work with them – not just a warm body who happens to have a certificate, and that’s what the State is saying they have to have – but someone who really knows what they’re doing and understands the process of where these kids need to go.”

In this same context, participants in both sessions brought up the ongoing lack of willingness and/or skill of regular education teachers to implement inclusion, largely based on their lack of education or training.

“I think the other thing when we were talking about staffing and what [name] was saying about the regular ed teachers and their increasing importance. I mean that is...a barrier that we frequently bump up against is regular teachers who are still digging in their heels saying special ed is not my problem.”

“Well one of the things that keeps coming back to me at our site cause we’re so small is the regular ed teachers. The state wants us to put our students in as much inclusion as possible. But to be honest with you, the regular ed teachers don’t have a clue as to, even when we explain to them, what we want them to do. Unless you’re right there making sure it’s being done, it doesn’t get done...”

“...I’ve explained ‘til I’m blue in the face. But they just don’t get it...”

“...what we are talking about with the regular ed learning about special ed because, you know, with inclusion being in a lot of our schools, I don’t think it’s really happening the way it should be.”

An issue directly related to the need for qualified personnel, as well as for services and other resources, was the lack of funding. This was agreed upon in both sessions as one of the top three most critical issues.

“You know, they tell us you’re not supposed to consider money. But the bottom line is all of us have budgets that are finite... The costs are astronomical. So even when folks can be found, which as [name] said is challenging in and of itself, convincing a superintendent, a school board, or a business manager that, yes I know I only have one kid who needs OT services, but I’ve got to have that at least monthly contact...”

“...it’s simply a matter of money. And when the federal government funds us at 18 or 19 percent, and then the State of Alaska throws special education into a locked...with vocational education and bilingual, there really is a limited amount of money. Intensive kids is a prime example. Intensive kids will...cost my district about 100% over what’s reimbursed...”

“You see when the grants go away, the emphasis goes away, and so then there goes the motivation to continue...”

“And also it goes back to even though they start these related services that we need like [name] says, then once the money’s gone, they’re gone. They no longer continue them.”

There were a couple of other issues introduced by individuals that did not seem to inspire general agreement or further discussion from the rest of participants. One person elaborated on inefficiencies in the IEP process due to participation of many people invited by parents, all considered “experts,” resulting in plans that were highly unrealistic since they could not be funded or carried out. Another comment noted not only the scarcity of vocational education, but also that the process of preparing job sites and employers to receive students from vocational education programs is too time intensive.

Question 2: What solutions to you suggest for addressing these issues?

As participants in the first session ($n = 8$) had expressed dissatisfaction with the exit exam, some suggestions called for eliminating or modifying current requirements. Because the interaction between assessment and culture had been brought up as a specific area of concern, some suggested solutions were directed at that issue. One participant recommended high quality preschool programs to prepare students if the system was going to continue to be test-driven.

“Okay, I have a suggestion for the very first one. Getting rid of the requirement in the legislature that they have to pass the exit exam to get a diploma. I don’t care if you print the test scores on the diploma. I just don’t think you need to have to pass the exit exam.”

“...I think that the state should have different types of diplomas. So that students with disabilities can earn a diploma.”

“...having a definition of what successful education means. And that it’s not a universal definition. It may mean something very different in Anchorage and Fairbanks than it means on the Prince of Wales or Unalaska.”

“Do not have success driven by test scores. Do away with NCLB. I would be all for local control of what you think your kids need to know. What’s your choice of an outcome and we’ll be glad to adapt to your needs instead of trying to make you fit into our square little box for AYP, et cetera...”

“...I think that can be done without going one way or the other. I think you can have some accountability – you can have some state driven mandates and things like that...”

“...if we are going to continue with the test-driven academic content area kind of thing, as being successful, at least in my villages, we need a certified preschool teacher and a program in every village... So if we want kids to come to school ready with our white idea of ready, and still have to meet those academic outcomes, we need to have district-run preschools.”

Participants in both sessions ($N = 13$) put forth ideas to address the shortage of qualified staff and providers. Most of these comments had to do with increasing in-state education/training opportunities, as well as access to education/training. Some of these comments specifically addressed a need to require all teachers to have education/training in special education. It was mentioned there are technology resources already in place in rural communities that could be used for distance education/training such as videoconferencing, language labs, polycom systems, etc. Other comments addressed a need to increase salary, career ladder prospects, mentoring opportunities, and other incentives/supports.

“I would like to have UAA start a prep program...expanding on the special ed they already have, but being able to endorse other areas... I’m talking about all special ed, related services, low incidence disabilities...”

“...I think it has to start at the teacher preparation level at the college level. Every teacher should have more than an intro to special ed...I think that every teacher, elementary and secondary should have almost a parallel special ed minor...so that there is a greater understanding, and along with that coursework, in making accommodations and modifications. Because the bottom line is we don’t have the number of special ed teachers that we once did. And if for no other reason, even if you’ve been over Best Practices and IDEA, in some schools the only people available to provide services to special ed students are classroom teachers...”

“You know, one of the things I did a couple of years when I had the money to do it – and I don’t have the money to anymore – is I brought several teachers...from each site into the special ed conference in February. And I had several of them come up to me afterward and say it was eye opening...it’s professional development that can be provided by the district when possible...”

“...I’d like to see the concept explored of differentiated pay or bonuses or career ladder type incentives for regular educators that choose to go into special ed and take on the challenges.”

“...our salaries are not drawing people to the state as they once were.”

“Well beyond salaries, the second questions I get asked is,... ‘What kind of assistance are you going to give me to move?’ ...And we have no capacity to do that.”

“One of the things on the solutions...besides the mentoring for the special ed teachers, I think we need mentoring for the special ed directors. Right now I go to the superintendents meeting and 15 superintendents are now the new special ed directors.”

“...we should have all the new special ed teachers, no matter where they’re going...congregate and we should have a special 3-5 day, ‘This is special ed in Alaska’ – this what the rural sites look like, this is where you get your stuff, this is what you have to do, this is where you’re gonna live,... And form some supports for these new people... And I think if they had some supports, they might hang in there a little longer... I was thinking each district, but you know, regional, that sounds like a good idea.”

“Well I know [SESA] could do a lot of the intensive needs trainings...”

“Can that be something accomplished through distance learning or videoconferencing? I mean we have that technology in most of our sites. So that would help offset some of the costs.”

Several comments in the context of “solutions” were related to supporting teachers by finding or creating more time for them to do their jobs, to receive training, to collaborate with others, or to support one another.

“More time and money, however that comes out. Those are the things I hear...the complaints there’s not enough time, there’s not enough time, there’s not enough time. Some we’re talking about modifying and adapting materials to help the students become successful in the regular classroom...”

“More professional prep time and ability to meet with each other...”

“I think each of the service providers, mental health professionals – we need to work together more than I’ll do my thing and then you do your thing – that there could be joining forces so that we were all somehow meeting together for this new student.”

“...It’s just that when we tried the inservice, even in our district, when you’re trying to inservice all the teachers at all levels, it’s very difficult to have enough days. It really could be a week.”

As funding was an issue interlaced with most of the issues facing special education directors, the need for funding was intermingled with, or at least implied by proposed solutions. Comments addressed increasing funding for education and special education in general, as well as in conjunction with specific needs to increase salaries, send personnel to the Special Education Conference, support personnel in their education/training, and to make more education/training resources available in the state. There were a couple of comments related to funding that did not exactly repeat these same themes and seemed worth mentioning here.

“...I get back to the categorical funding because I think that would be a fairly major issue. I don’t think special ed by itself is going to be able to move that train forward. But I see a train coming with vocational education because of the possibility of a natural gas pipeline and ANWR and some of these things. And I know that the governor is very, very interested in seeing a fairly large expansion in vocational education. If that were to be the case, that would be an opportune time for us to break away from this block grant mentality and go back to categorical funding in vocational education and special ed...”

“It seems like there needs to be kind of a leveling of the playing field...for the teachers so that we have what we need to do our jobs, just so we have the tools that we need to do our job... And I’m not saying that it’s Disneyland and there should be...unlimited resources. But I guess we need to say, a mindset that special ed is not the bottom of the barrel... And the realization and recognition that if we do that, we can hopefully keep these kids out of jail... If we’re talking about educational outcomes for these kids, we need the tools to do the job.”

While training and support for parents had not come up in response to the first question about critical issues, it did come up in the discussion about solutions. It was suggested parents should be trained in how to be involved in education and they should receive assistance to be able to attend meetings.

Question 3: What are the barriers you see to implementation of these solutions?

Many comments in response to this question echoed themes already discussed: unrealistic laws, the exit exam, and resistance from regular education teachers; as well as the lack of higher

education and specialized training in the state, lack of community support (particularly across cultures), lack of time, and lack of funding/resources. Several comments quoted below brought up slightly different issues that seemed to generate some agreement from other participants.

“I think people are not trained to look outside the box for solutions...”

“Lack of collaboration amongst agencies for a lot of our stuff... Let’s say something like get away from the silo mentality...this happens in education and this happens in mental health and this happens in health and human services...”

“One of the other things is, and I don’t have a real finite way of saying it, but an absence of realism. And I can think of two things. One, the field of special ed is driven by caseload. So it’s a moving target. It’s not finite in terms of following guidelines...it’s a topic that’s driven by emotion...you as a special ed director are supposed to do almost everything that everyone asks to be in compliance with the law.”

“And we’re always saying it would be cheaper to just do this rather than go to court. So there is a real absence of realism...”

Though resistance to special education was a continuing theme, some of the comments brought up in response to this question seemed to go beyond the issue brought up previously about resistance from regular education teachers.

“...we’re a minority group of staff working with a minority group of students. Therefore our voices are not necessarily always heard...”

“And special ed is not a...popular population...our kids are the most difficult to work with. And so we probably don’t have as much power.”

“Oh and people say, ‘Well if we didn’t have to spend all that money on those sped kids...’”

“...when you’re weighing the cost of an aide to serve one student versus an aide in regular ed to serve 20...that’s uncomfortable for me at a meeting when I’m telling the principal that that’s what they need to use their budget money for.”

“I also think the lack of understanding of the importance within different agencies like the mental health and DHSS and DVR and the list could go on.”

“...And I guess also to go along with that, just a lack of understanding within the school districts by administrators and regular ed teachers about how important it is to make sure we have this.”

Question 4: What major changes have you seen in special education services over the last five years?

It was noted in the first session that directors were seeing an increase in the drop out rate of special education students in spite of information presented to them the previous day that showed it had remained the same. Similarly, from 2000 through 2004, overall drop out rates reported by the state (www.eed.state.ak.us/stats) have remained about the same, if anything it looks like the situation has slightly improved. School district administrators residing and working in rural areas, certainly more on the “front line” than the State, see it quite differently.

“We’re losing people in the village.”

“I don’t know about you guys, but they’re dropping out like...”

“Oh yeah. We’re losing them.”

“Yesterday they presented information that the graduation for SPED kids had stayed the same. But if anybody noticed that was before the exit exam was required. And I’ll be real curious to see what the graduation rate was as of last year and this year. I think it’s got to be dropping. Fewer kids are graduating with diplomas.”

“And then, you know, they get their certificate of achievement. They don’t want to come back. You know, very few of those students will because their experience hasn’t been positive. So very few of them are going to come back.”

Continuing with a theme brought up in response to a previous question, directors in the first session noted they had seen an increase in anxiety over the past five years due to litigation. They also noted they had seen an increase in the incidence of autism spectrum disorders, which has had major consequences.

“Another major change is the increase in the level of anxiety around litigation.”

“Oh absolutely, absolutely. What really gets back to us...is that...you do everything to stay out of litigation. And whether it is necessarily the best possible program for the kid becomes somewhat irrelevant. You do what you have to do to stay out of litigation.”

“I think the rise in autism spectrum disorders.”

“And that’s had a huge impact, you know, financially and morale-wise, and staff training. I mean just huge impact.”

“...And that’s so scary because the teachers are, ‘Oh gosh, autism. I have no clue.’ ...And you spend the whole year trying to calm down and take a look at this being that’s sitting there with you.”

One director in the first session made a comment about a positive change in the quality of education, but this stood in stark contrast to comments made in the second session. This may indicate some school districts have much more difficulty finding qualified teachers.

“I do think on a positive note, at least our district, there’s been an improvement on the focus of the teachers, the special ed teachers, on what they’re teaching the kids as far as the academics go. Now I do think that that has been sometimes at the cost of some other things. But they’re more cognizant of the fact of what they’re teaching and why they’re teaching the kids.”

“Well I’m just coming from the special ed perspective. And not all SPED teachers, but over five years, the quality I think has lessened.”

“I do too. Because I think places, well and I can see it in regular ed teachers... we’ve been told for a long time the shortage was coming. So places like UA Southeast said, ‘Okay, we’re going to figure out the fast track.’ And we said we don’t have enough people. So they developed a fast track to get people out to the job market. That fast track doesn’t prepare those people for the job...”

“... the regular ed teachers are not feeling like they have – more and more they’re not feeling like they have any skills to offer a special ed student, especially if the category for that student is autism, which is increasing...”

“...And I see fewer classroom management skills with our teachers, whether they’re SPED or regular ed teachers. And that just creates a whole different issue for everyone.”

Other changes in the last five years participants had seen in their districts included an increase or decrease in parental involvement, increase in behavioral issues and lack of discipline, and a decrease in attendance. In addition, there were several comments in the second session addressing the role of paraeducators.

“I see the role of paras over the last five years has become the role of the teacher – the paras are doing the teaching and not the teachers.”

“And it’s much more likely that any given district is gonna hire a para for a SPED student.”

“I’m seeing an increase in the likelihood that a district is going to hire a para to work with a given student. We got three new students this year at one particular elementary school and two of them have one-on-one paras written into their IEPs.”

“...But the paras are the constant in the village. They’re the constant in the child’s life and they’re cheap.”

“...But how can we require these people to be highly qualified... I can’t compete with two other agencies in my community right now in salary...”

Conclusions

It is clear that a number of special education directors from the more rural areas of the state continued to be frustrated with how student learning is defined and assessed, particularly regarding heavy reliance on the Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam and what it measures. Frustration was expressed about a lack of flexibility in how “success” is defined, either for persons with disabilities or for persons with different cultural or community values.

It is also clear that rural areas continued to struggle with recruitment and retention – finding qualified personnel not only to serve as special education teachers, but also to serve as regular education teachers with the ability to implement inclusion in the classroom. There was also a continuing lack of qualified personnel to hire for delivery of specialized services, such as speech-language, occupational, and physical therapy. Directors attributed this problem, in large part to a lack of college-level programs and other training resources in the state. And if programs and training resources were available, it would not serve rural districts unless access was also facilitated with distance delivery and funds to pay for the expenses of education/training.

Lack of funding, or cuts in funding, was an issue intertwined with most issues of concern. It is not only related to deficiencies in personnel preparation, but also to the lack of student programs and lack of student access to specialized services. Low wages and benefits, the absence of career ladder opportunities, and the lack of incentives to enter the field of special education noted by participants, are all related to the inability to hire and retain qualified personnel. Moreover, the role performed by the paraeducator in Alaska has the potential to be a serious problem in terms of the State’s compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act. According to the Act, paraeducators are not allowed to function in the same role as teachers, but this clearly is the

case in much of rural Alaska. It comes back to issues of funding and personnel preparation. Paraeducators continue to function as teachers because qualified teachers continue to be scarce.

**SPECIAL EDUCATION FOCUS GROUPS: THEMES
SPANNING 2001 THROUGH 2005**

Questions used in the focus groups spanning the years 2001 through 2005 varied considerably. None-the-less, there were some consistent themes over that time: 1) Lack of Time, 2) Lack of Funding, 3) Lack of Qualified Staff, 4) Role of the Paraeducator, 5) Assessment of Student Performance, 6) Cultural Relevance, and 7) Anxiety and Fear. Below is a listing of the eleven focus groups that were conducted within the larger structure of QELF evaluation activities, and following are elaborations on themes that spanned the five years.

	Year	Type of Participants	#	Total by Year
1.	2001	Rural Parents	6	
2.	2001	Urban Parents	4	10
3.	2002	SPED Directors	7	
4.	2002	SPED Teachers	30+	
5.	2002	Paraeducators	12	49+
6.	2003	SPED Directors	26	
7.	2003	SPED Teachers	1	
8.	2003	Paraeducators	10	37
9.	2004	SPED Directors	4	4
10.	2005	SPED Directors	8	
11.	2005	SPED Directors	5	13

Lack of Time

Not surprising to anyone working in education, one of the most consistent themes across all the focus groups of special education teachers, paraeducators, and directors was a lack of time for special education staff to do everything required to do their job well. Participants noted that inclusion demands much more time for meeting with other staff and providers and for filling out paperwork. People from areas with rural schools decried the huge diversity of disabilities dealt with by a single teacher. Special education teachers expressed desires for more time for

instructing in the classroom, training, working on teams, meeting with and supporting one another, collaborating, networking, conducting assessments, and making modifications and adaptations.

“...If we’re talking about a teacher who deals with 13 different teachers, they’ve got to find time for 13 different teachers to talk about many, many different children not just one child in each classroom, but many children – communicate what’s on the IEP and progress reporting and that whole supervision factor is not included in that percentage of time.”

“Talking about supervision, they also have to be like administrators ‘cause they have assistants. And so they have to figure out how to give information to an assistant about carrying out a plan that they understand but perhaps the assistant doesn’t understand very well. They have to model how to do well. They have to have time to do that...”

“...I think about special educators in our district. And I can’t think of one who spends just seven hours a day doing their job. They spend so many hours a day doing their job. They take it home at night. They take it home on the weekend. You know the evenings and the weekend and that’s their time. But they earnestly want to do a good job...”

Lack of Funding

As funding was tied to most issues under discussion in all the focus groups across the years, the lack of funding was understandably one of the most consistent themes – not enough funding for special education and education in general were often mentioned. Lack of funding was tied to personnel shortages, low salaries, lack of student programs, lack of student services, and lack of education/training for staff, both in terms of a lack of resources (e.g., college courses) and a lack of access to existing resources (e.g., lack of financial aid or distance delivery).

“Yeah the education part as well... And what’s the cost gonna be had who’s gonna pay for it?... I mean there’s no way...”

“And I guess I would say that time actually comes down to money because the reason they’re overtaxed is because we don’t hire enough people to do the job and that’s because we don’t have the money.”

“...But it truly has become almost an undoable kind of thing under the requirements we’re supposed to be fulfilling. And I don’t know any good answer for that ‘cause we’re not getting any more money to help support our teachers and our staff to meet the needs of what they’re being asked to do...”

“Alaska gets less money than all the other states for special education, and rural schools get less money than schools in urban areas.”

“...even though they start these related services that we need...once the money’s gone, they’re gone. They no longer continue them.”

“...And when you’re having to spend at the minimum \$1000 a month per service provider... An OT, PT, an SLP... The cost is astronomical...”

Lack of Qualified Staff

The desperate need to have more qualified teachers was brought up in every focus group across the five years. As a director in 2005 stated, “...in order for students with disabilities and probably all students to be successful in their educational outcomes, they have to have the staff who know what they’re doing to work with them – not just a warm body who happens to have a certificate.” Comments over the years addressed a consistent shortage of qualified staff, and a lack of training or access to training. Specific problems included a lack of college courses in the state, particularly a lack of courses available by distance; training resources that were available for a time but went away as funding ran out; and training resources that people didn’t know how to access due to a lack of information. The Special Education Conference was mentioned several times as a good resource for training teachers, paraeducators, and parents, but that would require most school districts to provide a significant amount of funding for travel and accommodations, not to mention release time and substitute coverage for three to five days.

In the 2005 focus groups, there seemed to be common agreement among special education directors that all regular education teachers should have special education training. It was further elaborated that this training should occur early in teacher preparation so that inclusion would be firmly established in their thinking. However, this was not an entirely new idea within the context of these focus groups. Both rural and urban parents in the 2001 focus groups expressed the need for all teachers to be trained in special education and to have a good attitude about inclusion. Special education teachers expressed it again in 2002 and 2003. The directors in 2002 noted that even with a long history of inclusion, special education teachers continued to spend a great deal of their time acting as diplomats and negotiators with regular

education teachers who continued to be resistant to inclusion. Directors in 2005 indicated this situation had persisted over the years.

“...a barrier that we frequently bump up against is regular teachers who are still digging in their heels saying special ed is not my problem.”

“...But to be honest with you, the regular ed teachers don't have a clue as to, even when we explain to them, what we want them to do. Unless you're really right there making sure it's being done, it doesn't get done...”

“...I've explained 'til I'm blue in the face. But they just don't get it...”

“...the regular ed teachers are not feeling like they have – more and more they're not feeling like they have any skills to offer a special ed student...”

2005 directors made comments that seemed to indicate a continuing resistance to special education at the administrative level as well.

“...we're a minority group of staff working with a minority group of students. Therefore our voices are not necessarily always heard...”

“And special ed is not a...popular population...our kids are the most difficult to work with. And so we probably don't have as much power.”

“...when you're weighing the cost of an aide to serve one student versus an aide in regular ed to serve 20...that's uncomfortable for me at a meeting when I'm telling the principal that that's what they need to use their budget money for.”

Role of the Paraeducator

Paraeducators have been extremely important in the education system in Alaska, particularly in the rural areas of the state. As a rural parent in 2001 noted, “teachers come and go, but paraeducators stay.” Directors in 2002 pointed out a heavy reliance on paraeducators to provide services and instruction in the classroom. Teachers in 2002 expressed the need for increased training, salary, and other supports for paraeducators. Similarly, paraeducators in 2002 asked for increases in education/training opportunities, salary, recognition, respect, financial aid for education, and other supports. Paraeducators indicated in 2002 they were at times performing the same functions as teachers.

“Paraeducators should be the support personnel to the teacher and not have to assume the responsibilities of the sometimes incompetent teacher.”

“While not having the degree, paraeducators are often given similar if not the same responsibilities as teachers...”

“The only difference between a teacher and paraeducator is the degree and their salaries.”

“Paraeducators think a substitute should come in and do the paraeducator’s work, and the paraeducator will do the work of the teacher.”

“Teachers interrupt paraeducators all the time, pulling us off our job to do theirs.”

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 set a national standard for qualifications and responsibilities of paraeducators, at least those to be paid with Title I funds. The Act required existing paraeducators to meet NCLB qualifications within four years of its enactment. The current deadline in Alaska is June 30, 2006 (Memorandum Number 2006-06, October 20, 2005 from the Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, Office of the Commissioner to Superintendents). While there are several ways for paraeducators to meet NCLB requirements, Alaskans seem to be focused on the associate degree as the standard.

By 2003, the feelings of paraeducators who participated in focus groups intensified as they had become well aware that NCLB requirements were an inescapable reality. Paraeducators expressed a great deal of resentment around this issue, particularly that their numerous years of experience and non-academic training did not count towards a college degree. Individuals were concerned about access to education, financing for education, time for education – and there was doubt expressed that this effort would result in any fair increase in salary. The fact that paraeducators felt they were doing the same job as teachers seemed to jump to a higher level of antipathy as they indicated they were equally and sometimes more qualified than teachers.

“I’ve come across it several times where the special education teacher doesn’t know how and is afraid to work with a child. And one of them actually said, ‘Oh I don’t know how to work with that kid – you go do it.’ I thought okay. Who’s got the education? Who’s getting the big bucks? And who’s the little peon, excuse me?”

“...oftentimes the teachers are so busy with paperwork and all that kind of stuff that the aides end up doing most of the teaching.”

“I’m having to teach the teachers.”

“...I know that my aides know six times more than any certified sub that they’re bringing in to me.”

“...there are some issues between classroom teachers who are uninformed about the disabilities of the children and often expect things of them that they’re incapable of – the issue of he won’t do this rather than he can’t do this. Those are some of the issues that I deal with.”

In 2005 a director stated, “I see the role of paras over the last five years has become the role of the teacher – the paras are doing the teaching and not the teachers.”

Assessment of Student Performance

The Alaska High School Graduation Qualifying Exam (HSGQE) or “exit exam” for receiving a high school diploma has been and continues to be a big topic of discussion in Alaska, particularly regarding students with disabilities. The test was first administered in Alaska’s schools in 2001. It became a requirement for graduation in 2004, however a lawsuit delayed its enactment as a requirement for students with disabilities. According to the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development (EED), the State currently allows the following options for students with disabilities (<http://www.eed.state.ak.us/tls/assessment/hsgqe.html>):

- 1) Take the HSGQE under the same conditions as non-disabled students
- 2) Take the HSGQE with accommodations (based on IEP or 504 plan)
- 3) Take a modified HSGQE
 - a. Modifications are changes to the setting, timing, presentation, or response format that alter what the assessment measures
 - b. Modifications must be required by an IEP or 504 plan and approved by EED
- 4) Take a non-standardized HSGQE
 - a. Juried assessment of student work
 - b. Student is working at or near grade level, but not proficient on HSGQE, and with documented history of inability to demonstrate proficiency on standardized assessment based on one or more allowed conditions
 - c. Must be required by an IEP or 504 plan and approved by EED
- 5) Apply for a waiver
 - a. Student meets one or more of a list of established criteria (e.g., student passed an exit exam in another state that assesses the same content areas)
 - b. A waiver must be approved by the local school board
- 6) Take an alternative assessment
 - a. Portfolio or special exam for severely cognitively-disabled
 - b. Leads to a certificate of achievement, not a high school diploma

The problems associated with assessment of student performance was a continuing theme in focus groups that spanned the five years. Parents first expressed fears about the exit exam in 2001. A rural parent talked about students who were systematically excluded from the exam because teachers didn't want the lower performance of certain individuals to hurt the school. A teacher admitted to exit exam fraud in 2002, "the only way to win or survive is to cheat – we shouldn't have to but we do." Directors mentioned the specific problem of requiring a passing grade on the exit exam to receive a high school diploma in 2003, but their reviews of alternative assessments were mixed. One director noted, "As they stand today it is only an assessment of the teachers putting them together – they do not assess the student at all." A director in 2004 talked about returning the focus of assessment to the goals as outlined in the IEP. Most directors participating in the focus groups in 2005 seemed to agree that sole reliance on the exit exam and having it tied to granting a diploma was one of their top concerns, alongside staffing and funding.

Cultural Relevance

A continuing theme across all five years were problems associated with a clash of cultures. Parents in 2001 pointed out that Native parents didn't like the education system and would not support it. Specific reasons included negative parental history with education, migration of educated youth out of the village, lack of respect in the school for non-academic learning, lack of traditional or cultural values in education, lack of cultural competence in teachers, and miscommunication between people of different cultures.

Directors in 2002 pointed out that the material taught in school was often not relevant to village life and it took a lot of time for teachers to adjust material to be meaningful and interesting for rural students. In 2004, directors again pointed out that school curriculum was just not relevant to life in the community, and again mentioned the detrimental impact of a negative parental history with education.

In 2005 directors talked about the same cultural issues in the context of performance in school and proficiency on assessments. They noted that different cultures, particularly Native and white cultures, have very different views of what it means to be successful.

“The disparity or the difference between what the Native people in my region feel is needed for an education versus the white view of education, test scores. We have different priorities. And so we have 5-year-olds coming to school with no exposure to print material at all in the home and very little exposure to oral language...They don’t have school behaviors let alone any of that vocabulary.”

“And then we compound that because now they’re made to feel less than, instead of this is my culture and I’m okay... Now it’s not only am I not okay, I’m at deficit somehow or another.”

“...in the...white culture we look at a student as successful when they have a high school diploma. In his mind whether you have a high school diploma or not has nothing to do with success. If you can take care of your family, if you can hunt, if you can get wood, if you can haul water...you’re successful.”

Anxiety & Fear

Urban parents in 2001 noted they were afraid of giving information to school staff. One parent said this was because parents “use plain speech – not the right legal or educational terms” and another parent stated, “they fear retaliation.” Urban parents seemed to agree their input was not respected and not wanted. As one parent described, “schools don’t use my knowledge of my child – it’s like my knowledge is not good enough for the school.” It cannot be inferred that parental fear of staff was common or that it persisted over five years. Parent focus groups were only conducted in one year. They were small and these comments came from a single group.

However the parental fears that were expressed are interesting in conjunction with fears expressed by special education directors that did span the five years – fears of litigation.

“But there’s also litigation. There’s always the fear of threat that somebody’s gonna get mad and if I do something wrong, then I’m going to be held legally liable.”

“Don’t sleep half the year. I grind my teeth to pieces and then you just don’t know. Are you going to end up in court tomorrow?”

“And we’re always saying it would be cheaper to just do this rather than go to court. So there’s a real absence of realism...”

“Another major change [in the last 5 years] is the increase in the level of anxiety around litigation.”

“Staffing is huge. Cause staffing relates directly to, at least in my situation, to litigation. So that’s a huge issue for me.”

“...What really gets back to us...is that...you do everything to stay out of litigation. And whether it is necessarily the best possible program for the kid becomes somewhat irrelevant. You do what you have to do to stay out of litigation.”

[What is driving increased parent involvement in schools?] “Litigation. The opportunity to make money.”

Directors described in 2002, 2004, and 2005 how people could have highly unrealistic expectations and demands. They expressed resentment at having to meet these demands, sometimes at very high cost, just to avoid litigation.

“They now have the Internet and they can hear from other parents that you have the right to ask for this. You have the right to demand this methodology... And to find the time and resources and receive the approval for release time to be able to go and receive what they need to from training and awareness – it’s not there a lot of times. It’s just not there.”

“The mom fully believes that the whole system should be centralized around her kid. And she doesn’t care...she wants everything for her child. So the whole system has to stop functioning.”

“And people tend to think of the IEP meeting as a composition time. There’s no cost. So someone will say I think we should get the OT to evaluate this child. And in your head, you’re sitting there thinking, well that’s going to cost \$800. And somebody else says well maybe we should get a speech path involved in this as well. And then somebody else says, you know, I really don’t think the psychologist at the school knows what he’s doing. So we should get a different opinion for that...it now becomes an open ballgame.”

The persistence of this theme expressed by special education directors should not be interpreted as characteristic of the majority of interactions between parents of children with disabilities and staff. It was acknowledged there is a huge diversity among parents. However, a few antagonistic, anxiety-ridden experiences consuming a great deal of staff time and energy certainly have the potential to impact other relationships with parents, just by setting up an anticipation that any parent could become unhappy and litigious at any time.

APPENDIX A: Summary of 2005 Special Education Directors Focus Group Responses

Note: Summarized responses to the first two questions are grouped by theme categories. As much as possible, all responses are represented. Categories are presented here in order of what seemed to inspire the highest agreement among participants.

Question 1: What are the three most critical issues facing you in achieving successful educational outcomes for students with disabilities?

Qualified Staff and Providers

- ω Lack of staff trained to work with students with disabilities
- ω Lack of staff with appropriate degrees
- ω Lack of support from specialists (e.g., speech-language, PT, OT)
- ω Paraprofessionals are providing professional services
- ω Resistance from regular education teachers for inclusion in their classrooms
- ω Lack of education/training programs in the state
- ω Lack of qualified special education mentors for new teachers
- ω Higher requirements cause more need for recruitment from outside the state

Assessment of Learning and Receiving a High School Diploma

- ω Reliance on a single assessment of success is a problem (exit exam)
- ω Requirement to pass the exit exam tied to receiving a high school diploma is a problem
- ω Students meet all the goals of their IEP and other requirements and are denied a diploma
- ω Drastic differences in cultural definitions of “success”
 - Drastic differences in how cultures value the education system and test scores
 - Native cultures have different priorities than the majority culture
 - Drastic differences in how well children are prepared to enter and succeed in school (e.g., vocabulary, behavior, exposure to print material)
 - Education is not relevant to cultural goals
 - Native children are discouraged and feel inferior to their non-Native peers in school

Funding and the Impact on Quality of Services

- ω High cost of specialized services
- ω High cost of training/education for staff
- ω Extreme cost of serving “intensive” individuals - education is piecemeal and service is largely relegated to babysitting and supervising
- ω Education mandates with limited funding prevent access to better services thru other means
- ω Increased funding in one area (e.g., retirement system) results in decreased funding overall
- ω Special programs are driven by funding – when the funding is gone, the program is gone

Student Transition to Work

- ω Lack of vocational education
- ω Preparing job sites and employers to receive students is too time intensive

Inefficiencies in the IEP Process

- ω A large number of people can be invited, all considered “experts”
- ω IEP teams make highly unrealistic plans that cannot be funded or carried out

Question 2: What solutions to you suggest for addressing these issues?

Qualified Staff and Providers

- ω Increase in-state university-level programs for training in special education
- ω Special education coursework/training for all teachers, starting early in their education
- ω Increase education/training available by distance, perhaps utilizing telecommunication systems that are already in place (e.g., videoconferencing, polycon)
- ω Have regular education teachers attend the annual Special Education Conference in Anchorage as a professional development activity
- ω Higher pay, bonuses, career ladder incentives for regular teachers to go into special education
- ω Certified preschool teacher and district run program in every village
- ω Increase collaboration with service providers, mental health professionals
- ω Provide mentoring for special education teachers and directors
- ω Inform all teachers at the time they sign a contract about their legal obligations (IDEA and 504)

Assessment and High School Graduation

- ω Eliminate the exit exam pass requirement to get a high school diploma
- ω Possibly have different types of diplomas
- ω Possibly put exit exam scores on diplomas
- ω Include local definitions of “success” in the assessment process
- ω Expand opportunities for and value of vocational education

Funding and the Impact on Quality of Services

- ω Fully fund special education and education in general
- ω Higher pay for teachers to attract and keep a higher quality professional
- ω Funding for regular education teachers to attend the annual Special Education Conference in Anchorage
- ω Categorical funding in special education (and vocational education) based on the number of students and severity of disabilities (managed by audits to curb potential abuse)
- ω Level the playing field - supply all teachers/schools with the tools needed to do their jobs

Support for Teachers

- ω Increase preparation time available to adapt materials and make student accommodations
- ω Allow time for staff to meet with and support one another
- ω Increase time for staff to collaborate and participate in training
- ω Offer financial assistance for teachers to move to Alaska from out of state
- ω Orientation for new special education teachers to prepare for rural Alaska
- ω Have district- or regional-level meetings of special education teachers to support one another

Support for Parents

- ω Provide training for parents in how to be involved in education
- ω Provide assistance for parents so they can attend meetings

Question 3: What are the barriers you see to implementation of these solutions?

Barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none">ω Lack of creative thinking to find solutionsω Lack of a voice/power - SPED staff is a minority group representing an unpopular minority group of studentsω High cost of SPED is resented by other staff, administrators, parentsω Topic is driven by emotionω Unrealistic expectations have to be honored to be in compliance with the law or to avoid litigationω Lack of collaboration to better serve student needs (e.g., education versus health and human services versus mental health) – passing responsibility to othersω Laws are unrealisticω Lack of higher education and specialized training in the stateω Lack of community support, particularly across culturesω Lack of timeω Lack of fundingω Lack of resourcesω Lack of understanding and support from administration and regular education teachersω Lack of understanding in state agencies of the importance of special educationω Territorial attitudes, unwillingness to share resources

Question 4: What major changes have you seen in special education services over the last five years?

Changes in Last Five Years
<ul style="list-style-type: none">ω Decrease in awards of high school diplomasω Increase in drop out rateω Increase in anxiety around threats of litigationω Rise in autism spectrum disorders with huge impacts (e.g., lack of qualified staff, inadequate funding)ω Improvement in teaching academics (teaching to the exit exam)ω Increased involvement of parents – possible motivations:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Potential to make money through litigation○ Parents know students cannot pass the exit exam without their helpω Decrease in the quality of special education teachers – too many people “fast-tracked” and sent into the job market unpreparedω Increase in student behavioral problems, lack of disciplineω Reduced classroom management skills in teachersω The role of the paraeducator has become the same as the teacher