



TJ Consultants

Advancing Special

Executive Summary

Enger School Review

Mannheim School District 83

Introduction/Overview

Enger School, located within the Mannheim School District 83, has had a long-standing history of providing specialized programming for students with significant needs ranging in age from Early Childhood through Grade 8 across the member districts of the Leyden Special Education Cooperative. Over the past several years there have been changes in the field of special education related to instructional practices and service strategies as well as regional changes in delivery of services. These changes have had an educational impact on District 83, as well as Enger School. Given these changes in special education programming, services and changes in practice, the District 83 administration felt it was important to conduct an external review of Enger School and establish priorities reflective of a continuous improvement approach to advancing the very specialized program in response to these changes with a focus on improved student outcomes.

Consultants engaged in a district-level discussion and met with the entire Enger staff to discuss the important areas of focus for the review and to communicate the process and timelines associated with this qualitative review. Input that was shared in these initial meetings helped shape the questions and scope of the review. In early Fall, 2016, the Mannheim School District 83 embarked on a review process for Enger School and contacted T/J Consultants to work with the district and school team to address the following areas of focus. Throughout that initial period of time, the opportunity to meet with district leadership, liaison leaders from LASEC and an overview meeting with the entire Enger School team was conducted. To help facilitate the discussion and complete the scope of work for the program review, the following guiding questions were generated.

The following questions guided much of the stakeholder group discussions and review of information.

General focus questions:

1. How do the instructional design and student growth measures align to the needs of the students educated at Enger School?
2. What processes for determining resources allocations to customizing student programs exist?
3. How does leadership engage students, families, and staff in evolving best practices?

Methods/Data:

The consultants met in two separate sessions with the Enger School staff, leadership at the district, school and cooperative levels, and once with a group of Enger parents. The majority of the data collected was qualitative reflecting stakeholder perspective, although requests for artifacts and evidence that support those perspectives were also made. The forums were engaging and candid and the review participants willingly provided information, insights, historical perspective and ideas that ranged from new staff to those with decades of experience at Enger School.

The following are the targeted questions, summary and recommendations.

How do the instruction design and student growth measures align to the needs of the students educated at Enger School?

Summary:

Based on input provided by leadership, staff and parents, several indicators demonstrate that there has been steady progress over the last several years in purchasing and using additional curricula and interventions to support the diverse needs of the student population at Enger School. However no articulated or data-driven process is evident to guide the analysis and determination of what curricula and interventions best meet the complex and diverse range of students' needs. Staff commented positively on an increase in curricular options but that it is most often left to the individual staff members to determine what to use in the classrooms with no defined scope and sequence for the program. Additionally there was considerable confusion related to what the focus of the program should be (i.e. academic, social-emotional, functional life skills).

Recommendations:

- A. Review and revise the focus and scope of instructional purpose to appropriately reflect a balanced and tiered approach that blends academic, social-emotional, behavioral and independent life skills into a customized educational plan for Enger School.
- B. Develop and implement a systems-approach using data and multiple measures to align curriculum, interventions, supports and resources to the needs of students requiring this level of intensity in programming.
- C. Develop and implement a process for continued review, evidence of progress and appropriate student growth measures to achieve long range student outcomes.

What processes for determining resources allocations to customize student programming exist?

Summary:

In meeting with staff and administration, the resource allocation process was vague, somewhat reactive and both staff and parents commented on the need for greater alignment between the resources determined and the service delivery. It was unclear what determining factors were considered before proposing staffing needs, classroom configurations or additional supports through consultation and programmatic supports. This is consistent with the previous questions as it relates to systems and process. Several parents commented on the determination and supports of related services seemed formulaic or budget-directed in nature and that it often appeared that recommendations for services were based on staff availability, budget constraints, not overtly on student needs. There was not a clear process or rationale provided by building leadership beyond the relationship between enrollment and staffing, leaving staff and parents perplexed on how some of those resource decisions were made. While it appears that student IEP minutes have been met through appropriate levels of resources, there is still uncertainty and speculation on effectiveness of some of the associated levels of supports, particularly in the areas of autism, behavior and coaching supports.

Recommendations:

- In line with the systemic approach to instructional focus, resource determination should be an integral part of the short-term and long-term planning for the program, aligned with a comprehensive analysis of student and program needs.
- As a critical step in the redesign of the educational environment of Enger School, refining the use of space, programming and staffing ratios should be a part of the planning for staff and resource alignment to student needs.

How does leadership engage students, families, and staff in evolving best practices?

Parent Perspective:

Clearly the parents who participated reflected great appreciation and collaboration with the staff at Enger and enjoy a close working relationship with the staff, participating in numerous activities and celebrations at Enger School. They were less certain about the vision or future focus of the Enger School, the communication from the building leadership, how standards are established and resources determined. Several parents indicated that a closer working relationship with the school in general would be more effective and that increased communication and collaboration, translations into Spanish and greater focus on parent involvement and training would be advantageous. Given the wide range of student needs and complexities, a few parents voiced individual concerns regarding the extent of related services and feel the program and their students would benefit from additional Speech/Language and Occupational Therapy services, as well as the support of a BCBA, trained with greater emphasis on behavioral and autism expertise. When asked what would be most beneficial for parents, increased focus on greater understanding and participation on student progress/growth related to individualized education plans (IEPs), more focus on student interaction and parent training.

Staff Perspective:

There were numerous opportunities to meet with certified and classified staff from Enger School and the discussions were candid, reflective and engaging. These discussions were critical as staff shared history and experience, strengths, challenges and suggestions that could enhance the program. The forum provided an opportunity for staff to respond to several different areas of focus reflected in the questions listed in the introduction and to expand on areas that they felt were important to expound on.

Strengths:

The staff shared appreciation for the additional resources over the past several years and the availability and expansion of curriculum and instructional materials.

The team also spoke passionately about the families at Enger, the complex needs of students and the overwhelming participation of parents at IEP meetings, enthusiastic support of the Parent club, Fall Festival, etc. The staff conveyed pride and appreciation of ongoing relationships with parents and understand the important role those relationships play in enhancing the educational process.

Among the staff it was also clear that the staff cared deeply about the students, the families and their colleagues. They see the possibilities and potential of students and conveyed a strong commitment to their work with this very special and complex program.

Challenges:

While additional instructional resources were cited as strength, time to plan effectively, to make decisions collaboratively and to focus as a program on goals is not currently in place. There were repeated comments on no process to pilot, train and analyze new methodologies.

While several different initiatives have been tried, Enger School does not currently have a cohesive long-range plan and staff tends to work more independently in classrooms or levels, creating their own curricular designs and processes. There are very few program meetings that articulate the focus, the vision of the future of Enger School and how to best meet the changing needs of the program.

Staff also shared the increasing complexity of needs requiring more time to plan and collaborate, more training, more expertise and more coaching support. Several staff voiced the need for a BCBA and how additional support and coaching could be effectively integrated into the program. While there are a number of committees, there is a lack of cohesiveness and focus on those at a program or school level and often it is unclear the purpose and the outcome for committee work.

Paraprofessionals shared a wide range of expectations, changing roles and responsibilities, lack of substitutes compounding challenges.

There appears to be a pervasive lack of clarity, direction on the evolving purpose of the Enger program, with several staff commenting on the perceived shift away from functional skills, lack of connectedness to district, the special education cooperative and the high school district. Staff conveyed concern on the current enrollment, wanting more leadership and direction of how the program is evolving. Several staff shared their understanding of the program purpose: to foster independence, generalize skills and be successful in the next phase of their education.

Summary:

Through each of the forums and discussions with Enger School stakeholders, a clear understanding of mission, vision or core goals was not evident thus lacking articulation on how that might guide practice. While there are clearly defined district goals and an identified school improvement plan for Enger School, the purpose and priorities for Enger School were not commonly known and shared by staff, parents and leadership. Absent of direction, decisions regarding focus, instructional supports and professional development training seems scattered and unaligned. There are many indicators and examples of a very caring, compassionate and dedicated staff that understands the important role they play in the lives of students and families in the Enger School community. While there are several indicators of information shared externally through a weekly phone call informing parents-staff on social activities and individual calls regarding IEP meetings, there is no evidence that Enger Schools reflects an integrated and effective school/family/community engagement process. This concern connects back to the broader issue that there is no systemic approach to the program, making the programmatic communication limited and reactive in nature. The field of special education continually evolves and changes in ways that challenge the program to continually provide the most current and research-based methods of instruction and service delivery. Throughout this review process there was very little evidence that the school leadership regularly seeks and implements special education best practice methodologies.

Recommendations

- Reaffirm the vision/mission and core values of the program, aligned to the district mission and goals.
- Develop succinct leadership goals and activities that facilitate the essential priorities indicated throughout the program review that includes best practices, school/family/community engagement, enhanced communication and alignment to the core purpose and goals of the program and district.

After meeting with the respective representatives, T/J consultants aligned the needs and focus questions to the scope of the review, completed the process of gathering input from the various stakeholder groups, certified, classified, leadership and parents, and synthesized the information in an executive summary and report to assist in guiding the important next steps of establishing priorities for the 2017-2018 and subsequent years.

Enger School Review Recommendations for Consideration for 2017-2018

Through a comprehensive action plan, articulated timelines and collaborative facilitation, it is important that Mannheim School District 83 and Enger School prioritize the following to ensure that the needs of the students and families served, the member district needs and the district's strategic plan are aligned and focused on the current and future needs to advance the focus and goals of Enger School. This is a critical time and opportunity for the Enger School, through the supportive leadership of the Mannheim School District 87 to establish a plan to address these areas and advance the program to increase opportunities for student success.

Development of a comprehensive Enger School Action Plan with long and short term goals in the following areas with established steps, timelines, and identified team members, responsibilities to accomplish the following goals:

I. VISION/MISSION/CORE VALUES

Develop and articulate a mission statement that conveys the purpose of Enger School, reflects why Enger School exists and a clear articulation of what is about, accompanied by a vision statement that reflects the desired future state and direction of Enger School. Connecting to the articulated mission and vision are established coordinated core values and success indicators that best demonstrate how those core values can best be evidenced by the Enger School community.

II. ENGER SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Establish Enger School Leadership Practices. Establish a well articulated, inclusive communication plan that engages external and internal stakeholders - staff, parents, district, agency and community partners that reflects consistency, clear information in written, verbal and translated modes. Include opportunities for input, understanding and collaboration in all meetings - parent meetings, team meetings and collaborative meetings with district/cooperative representatives. Guide the development and ongoing implementation of the strategic/action plan with established action steps/associated measures and timelines, professional development and communication for each objective to address each priority comprehensively.

III. INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES/DESIGN

Establish and align, based on current student/class/program needs, with each of the following instructional areas of focus reviewed and determined through a data review, establishment of instructional materials, supplementary interventions and resources and associated assessment and progress monitoring tools for:

1. Literacy
2. Math
3. Communication
4. Positive Behavior
5. Independence/Work Skills

Access evidenced-based instruction and instructional practices for diverse range of needs aligned to the general education curriculum to the greatest extent possible, expanding beyond sight words and money focus. This area requires greater attention, refinement and progressive review and alignment. Establish a tiered approach regarding the decision-making process for instructional materials for the aforementioned areas of focus for a diverse range of student needs.

Align instructional focus to the state academic content standards and can enhance the alignment and crosswalk opportunities for students in accessing general education curriculum and opportunities. Using the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) process, review and inventory existing instructional curriculum and interventions in the respective subject areas to review what exists, what works and what is missing from the curricular inventory and what is needed to develop the units of study and measures to establish for programmatic goals and focus for the upcoming year.

Develop a contextual domain-based, age-appropriate scope and sequence that has increased opportunities for students to acquire life/functional skills, practice and generalize the skills in various environments – school, social and community settings, home, vocational opportunities, etc.

An important component of the Enger School program includes community-based trips that are an extension of the academic focus in the respective subject areas. Grade level teams could embed these trips into the units of study as age appropriate and evidenced-based in purpose and progress denoted. Those guides and progress monitoring tools could be established in grade level and school-based teams at the onset of the year and serve as opportunities to practice and demonstrate acquisition of skills across educational settings.

Aligned to the focus on data-driven process, establish a systemic instructional guide with ongoing progress monitoring measures appropriate for the range of student needs at Enger School.

Develop a customized checklist that reflects prompt hierarchies with fading of supports to promote independence, time delays, chaining, discrete trials, pivotal response training, self determination, positive behavior supports, visual schedules for individual and groups, reinforcement schedules and established transition routines.

Once the information is collected and organized in tiers, the Enger team should review and/or revise the focus and scope of instructional purpose so it blends academic, social-emotional, behavioral and independent life skills. This area requires further articulation of a data-based decision-making process that aligns needs to appropriate interventions, supports and resources.

Develop/Revise a customized instructional framework that aligns appropriate ways of assessing progress.

Review of current curriculum and how decisions are made to utilize the respective curriculum will be important foundational information to develop/expand the use of a systemic approach to decision-making on curriculum and interventions that best support the needs.

IV. COLLABORATION WITH HIGH SCHOOL AND PARTNER DISTRICTS

Communicate and coordinate transition of students into high school to continue a streamlined approach to instructional focus, goal development and student strengths.

Advance a coordinated partnership with high school staff through a person-centered approach to transitioning from middle school to high school, based on student interests and strengths. This approach should drive the IEP process and incorporate the critical aspects of transition planning.

Consider expanded use of transition assessments, interest inventories, vocational checklists and customized work experiences to provide an important springboard from the foundational work at Enger School to the high school settings.

Expand collaborative partnerships between Enger School and the High School Districts to enhance a smoother transition and vertical alignment of the collective efforts of staff and administration.

Working with team members from receiving high school districts, establish community trips to participate in high school events, activities that will enhance the transition, communication and focus at the elementary and middle school levels for the high school and transitional opportunities and focus areas.

Consider a joint parent meeting with high school parents to discuss the important steps ahead and the important areas of focus through a collaborative partnership.

Expand the depth and frequency of communication regarding the Enger School program, the focus and progressive changes in the instructional focus to guide a greater understanding and coordination between the districts.

Enhance communication through a variety of modes – written, email updates and forums and transition meetings will provide greater articulation and clarity of shared focus for the students served through Enger School and intensify the efforts as they transition to other district opportunities.

V. PARENT/FAMILY PARTNERSHIPS

Review role of parent as IEP team member, involve parents in identifying ways for greater understanding and engagement in the process

Revise needs assessment to address areas of need and conduct surveys after IEP meetings to review critical feedback that will better address continued areas of need and effectiveness of process.

Consider use of tools, survey, parent input forms prior to the meeting and engage parents in idea-sharing on how to more effectively involve parents in the decision-making process, addressing language and communication/cultural needs.

Incorporate and incentivize opportunities for direct instruction to parents on self-determination, self advocacy, parent training on PUNS, local resources, family behavior training and supports and generalization of skills to home application.

Establish and convey a process of working with outside therapists, ABA therapists, etc. in a collaborative mode of communication –articulating the role and parameters of the respective individuals,

Communicate the refined process and associated explanation in a parent-friendly IEP overview provided to parents annually in a handbook or written overview.

Review, consider and develop opportunities for student participation and student-led IEP meetings that reflect self-determination and personalized approach to the process.

VI. EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COACHING

Establish a comprehensive professional development plan for the school year, aligned to the district focus and reflective of the needs of a wide range of staff across Enger School that

includes a customized focus on inclusive context, whether in the classroom and other educational settings at school or in community settings.

Incorporate embedded training for practices and interventions for students with moderate to significant disabilities

Align a coaching approach from either peers or outside supports that can provide effective coaching supports to generalize new skills, processes or training on curriculum.

VII. TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATON

Incorporate low tech systems for communication across less structured environments such as gym, lunch, community and recess where students are mobile.

Create a low-tech back-up system for general use and as a fall back for broken devices.

Develop a defined use of a set of pics/symbols language to facilitate communication across staff, peers and various educational settings.

VIII. EDUCATIONAL/SOCIAL OPPORTUNITIES WITH PEERS

Create authentic opportunities for general education peer engagement both social and academic.

Provide peer- mediated instruction between students attending Enger School and gen education peers in the district, where possible and appropriate.

IX. BEHAVIOR

Provide professional development for Enger School staff on FBA/BIP components and plan development with emphasis on replacement behaviors and increasing desired behavior/outcome.

Review, revise and systemize a school-wide, classroom and individual supports using research based program and/or evidence based practices for behavior.

X. CRISIS PREVENTION AND PREPAREDNESS

Train and provide ongoing practice for Enger School staff with non-violent crisis response with an emphasis on de-escalation and communicative intent of behavior. (CPI)

XI. SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

It is important that the priorities are established and sequenced to maximize the important foundational areas of focus for the 2017-2018 under the leadership of a new Enger School principal and with the support of district and cooperative leadership that will enhance and advance opportunities for students at Enger School to achieve outcomes aligned to their needs and customized to build on their strengths.

The determination, compassion, experience and collaborative nature of the Enger School stakeholders will provide the tenacity and effective approach necessary to establish the appropriate steps to implement an action plan for Enger School. It is equally as important to review the plan frequently, make appropriate revisions and modifications and communicate regularly to ensure that stakeholders are involved and responsive in the respective roles of the Enger School community to the next important steps for Enger School continuous improvement planning.