

2019

An investigation of how IEP teams function in select Michigan high schools when developing a course of study decision for students with disabilities

Patrick Mies

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An Investigation of How IEP Teams Function in Select Michigan High Schools When
Developing a Course of Study Decision for Students with Disabilities

by

Patrick Mies

Dissertation

Submitted to the Department of Leadership and Counseling

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In

Education Leadership

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May 19, 2019

Ypsilanti Michigan

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my Dad for believing in me.

Acknowledgments

I acknowledge my family and close friends for their relentless support and encouragement while I was prioritizing this work. I especially thank my wife, Shelby, and children, Nora Elizabeth, Ava Rosie, and Nicholas Casey (Nicky-Boy) for their understanding while I dedicated time to complete this important study. Thank you for allowing me to further my education.

With abundant gratitude, I would like to thank my dissertation chairperson, Dr. Ronald Williamson for his thoughtful feedback, swift responses, constructive criticism, and encouragement. I am indebted to Dr. William Price for continuing to serve on my committee in his retirement. I greatly appreciate Dr. Theresa Saunders' willingness to participate on the committee, despite not having met me prior. Dr. Derrick Fries was instrumental to me as I learned more about personal curriculums and the corresponding historical perspective. Dr. Fries' passion for students with disabilities inspires me to work even harder to meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of our most vulnerable students.

To my siblings, thank you for helping me laugh in the midst of stress and frustration and for the countless jokes along the way. The "doctor jokes" are already old, but appreciated.

Kathleen and Tera, thank you for the help with analyzing numerical data. You shared your wisdom and the gift of time with me. I appreciate you both.

I thank the teachers who participated in the study as well as the special education directors who gave up some of their time to talk with me. I especially valued the candor with which they spoke.

I thank Dr. Norma Ross for her assistance with editing and for helping me properly format this work. Her expertise and positive attitude will never be forgotten.

I am grateful to my parents, Ann and Jerry, for their interest in my study and for pushing me to pursue a Ph.D. Without the early encouragement and unabating discussions with my Dad, I doubt I would have sought a doctoral program.

Finally, I thank my Grandparents, Judge James E. Mies and Mary Patricia Mies for instilling in me the profound importance of education. They, along with my maternal Grandparents, Richard and Genevieve Mooney, helped to frame my faith, for without God, nothing is possible.

I am a better person because of those mentioned.

Abstract

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the ways that Individual Education Program (IEP) teams function when developing a course of study decision for students with disabilities in high schools in 19 school districts from four intermediate school districts in Michigan. Topics included teacher professional development for reaching consensus in IEP meetings and personal curriculum (PC) plans for diploma acquisition by students with disabilities. Special education teachers who work with students with disabilities at the secondary level shared survey information, perceptions, and opinions about their experiences in IEP meetings. Special education directors, with oversight for special education programs, services, and staffing at the school district level, were interviewed regarding perceptions and practices in the preparation for and delivery of special education services. Data gathered led to findings about types of training provided to special education teachers by school districts to aid them in facilitating IEP meetings collaboratively to achieve consensus; whether IEP teams (IEPT) use any tools, models, or guidelines to help the team reach an informed course of study decision; and ways that teachers and families are informed of legislative mandates, such as personal curriculum (PC) options. Data gathered in this study determined that the majority of participating school districts sampled did not adequately prepare special educators with knowledge and skills required to hold effective IEPT meetings, especially regarding training for collaboration and consensus and information pertaining to PC options leading to decisions about the course of study for students with disabilities. Further, facilitators of IEPT meetings were not given a tool or model from the federal, state, or local education agency.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) is a federal law mandating appropriate services and supports to students with disabilities throughout the United States. This legislation replaced Public Law 94-142 of 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. IDEA (2004) is a highly prescriptive law that provides procedural and substantive guidelines to states and public education agencies regarding the appropriate programs and services for students with disabilities.

Despite the embedded supports guaranteed to students under IDEA (2004), many students with disabilities experience significant difficulties throughout their educational careers. When compared to their general education peers, students with disabilities typically experience unemployment, low pay, and job dissatisfaction (Dunn, 1996). Additionally, many students experience social and academic hardships and are disadvantaged economically as they exit their formal schooling. Students receiving special education services often fall behind their peers without disabilities in terms of educational and employment opportunities (Clark, 1996). For these reasons, it is important that an Individual Education Program Team (IEPT) works collaboratively and helps students experience school success.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) requires school districts to develop a Transition Plan for each student receiving special education services: “beginning not later than the first Individual Education Program to be in effect when the child turns sixteen, or younger if determined appropriate by the IEPT and updated annually thereafter” (section 3-5). Within this section of the IEP, a student’s course of study is discussed and determined by the IEPT: “The course of study decision is arguably one of the

most significant decisions to impact a student’s life in school and beyond. However, the method of determining the course of study among IEPTs is not well-defined in the literature” (Derrick Fries, personal interview, August 17, 2017).

The Michigan Department of Education (2007) provides the *Individualized Education Program Manual*. As shown in Table 1, the IEP manual contains comprehensive information regarding the IEP process and affords educators and parents an opportunity to become informed in all aspects of the IEP.

Table 1

Sections of the Individualized Education Manual.

Section	Information
1	Title Page
2	Eligibility
3	Needs for Learning and Present Level of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance, Course of Study, Transition Needs
4	Least Restrictive Environment
5	Supplementary Aids and Services
6	Annual Goals
7	Special Education Programs and Related Services
8	State and Districtwide Assessment
9	Commitment Signatures
10	IEP Addendum
1	Evaluation Review
12	Manifestation Determination review
13	Interim Alternative Educational Setting

Notably, Section 3 contains specific factors to consider in providing a free and appropriate public education, including assistive technology, present level of academic achievement and functional performance, transition, related services, termination due to ineligibility, and summary of performance. Each of the topics contains highly descriptive language; however, there is no section or subsection dedicated to the course of study decision. Rather, the manual contains a small box with a heading *Course of Study* and two check boxes:

- General and/or special education classes leading to a diploma.
- Course of Study leading to a certificate of completion.

There is no explanation within the manual designed to provide the IEPT with factors to consider when making this monumental decision (Michigan Department of Education, 2007).

The IEPT must collaboratively consider whether the student's needs are best met by working toward a diploma or a certificate of completion. This decision has life-long implications for students and their families and, for this reason, requires thoughtful consideration by the IEPT. As stated, IDEA (2004) is comprised of highly prescriptive rules and guidelines. For example, IDEA dictates participants are required to attend IEP meetings and provides language relative to timelines that must be strictly followed by special educators. The missing language pertaining to a student's course of study is not without consequence.

An IEPT typically comprises the student, the student's parent(s), an administrator, guidance counselor or social worker, and at least one general education teacher (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). Depending upon a student's needs, there might be

additional members of the team, such as a speech and language pathologist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, and so on. The course of study decision is to be made by this body. In Michigan, students either work toward a certificate of completion or a traditional high school diploma. To be clear, the *course of study* in terms of IDEA nomenclature refers to whether the student works toward a traditional diploma or a certificate.

Legal Perspective

Attorneys Lapointe and Butler (2015) cited the U. S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and reported that districts “must afford students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in diploma track (classes) and to graduate with a district diploma” (p. 17). Citing the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) Lapointe and Butler noted that the requirement does not guarantee a diploma for students with disabilities, but requires consideration regarding the benefits of personal curriculum (PC) before a determination is made about placement on a certificate track. Lastly, these authors contended that the OCR believes that a course of study decision cannot be a “drive-by decision/default decision and that it cannot be based on stereotypes of proficiency related to eligibility category, educational placement, credit status, attendance, and disciplinary status” (p. 18).

Lapointe and Butler (2015) believed “Drive-by Course of Study Determinations” to be a “hot topic” in special education law in terms of lawsuits against school districts. These authors asserted that “school districts must afford students with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in a diploma track and graduate with a district diploma” (p. 17). The mandate of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights specified “two levels of analysis” when considering course of study decisions: First, the IEPT must consider

“whether a student would benefit from a PC before determining that they be placed on a certificate track” and second, “consider whether a student on a diploma track has a disability which may necessitate a request for a Personal Curriculum” (p. 20).

IDEA (2004) requires each IEPT to determine an appropriate course of study within the transition plan and requires schools to provide measurable goals designed to assist the student in attaining his or her goal of graduating or completing the secondary school offering. Gaps often exist between a student’s stated transition goals and minimum education requirements set forth by employers. For example, some well-known businesses mandate that all potential employees have a high school diploma, which makes finding meaningful employment difficult for those who have demonstrated competencies in terms of skills required of a job, but who lack a diploma (Derrick Fries, personal interview, August 17, 2017).

The regulations outlined within IDEA are considered minimum requirements, and states can choose to provide services above that which is defined in the federal legislation. For example, IDEA states that students with disabilities must receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), in the least restrictive environment (LRE) between the ages of 3 and 21. Michigan law provides a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment for those eligible for special education services between birth and 26-years-of-age (Michigan Department of Education; Public Act 198).

The Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC) is the approved curriculum for all schools in Michigan, and after successful completion of all requirements, students receive a diploma. MCL 380.1278b modified the Revised School Code Act 451 of 1976 (Michigan Department of Education, 2017). This Michigan law comprises PC rules and regulations for students

enrolled in Michigan schools. MCL 380.1278b is the most recent iteration of the Revised School Code Act and replaced MCL 380.1278a. The PC legislation was initially drafted in 2005 and was amended in 2006 to include students with IEPs. This legislation affords students with an IEP in Michigan an opportunity for a modified curriculum based on the MMC. MCL 380.1278b also allows pathways for students without disabilities to receive a modification to the MMC to also earn a traditional high school diploma (Michigan Department of Education, 2010). Specifics related to PC usage in Michigan will be outlined further in Chapter Two.

Although the Michigan Department of Education has authorized schools to allow students in both general and special education to utilize a PC to meet the state's strict graduation requirements, the present study sought to determine, in part, teacher preparedness to consider PC plans for students with disabilities within the IEP process.

Data from the Michigan Department of Education show that some school districts are using PCs with frequency for students with mild impairments, whereas others are not. Some school districts have no students, with or without disabilities, using PC plans (Michigan Department of Education staff member. telephone interview, October 13, 2017).

The Michigan Department of Education requires *all* school districts to inform parents, guardians, and other stakeholders about PC options. Given this mandate, it is important for special educators, and to some degree, general education teachers to have knowledge of this mandate, as it must be considered within the IEP process. The IEP process is inherently collaborative (Derrick Fries, personal interview, August 17, 2017).

Researchers suggested that students with disabilities experience successful post-secondary outcomes when their transition plans were created and implemented through

collaboration of all IEPT participants. Further, that there must be an alignment between a student's transition plan, his or her goals and objectives, curriculum, and post school goals (Oertle & Trach, 2007).

Collaboration in decision-making is well studied and documented, but this researcher has found nothing in terms of scholarly articles related to a specific tool or model to aid IEPTs when making the course of study decision. According to D. Fries (personal interview, August 17, 2017), "While the research is rich in terms of the benefits of collaboration and consensus in decision-making, schools are largely without direction when holding IEP meetings for students regarding the most effective way to determine an appropriate course of study for a student with an IEP."

It is important to note that whereas this researcher sees value in a standardized tool, or centralized model for decision-making, it would be important for IEPTs to engage in discussion and possibly tangential conversations regarding this topic to view the decision from multiple lenses.

Statement of the Problem

Notwithstanding the guidelines found within IDEA (2004) regarding IEP timelines, required participants, and forms consisting of countless check boxes, there is no direction provided to special educators regarding making a course of study decision for students with disabilities. Additionally, IDEA does not address ways for IEPTs to conduct meetings collaboratively to achieve consensus. Furthermore, PC plans are options that must be considered for students with disabilities in Michigan, yet informal questions with special educators working at the secondary level led this researcher to believe that perhaps parents and educators were largely uninformed of PC options afforded to their son or daughter.

This study sought to determine how IEPTs function in terms of reaching a course of study decision, to examine teacher professional preparedness regarding research-based ways of reaching consensus through collaboration provided by their school district, and to determine the level of teacher preparedness to have discussions within the IEP meeting about PCs.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways that IEPTs function in select Michigan High Schools when developing a course of study decision for students with disabilities. Special educators were given an opportunity to share information regarding their experiences in IEP meetings by way of a survey. Special education directors from each school in the sample were interviewed by the researcher. Teacher professional development in terms of reaching consensus in IEP meetings, and their experiences with PC plans as a pathway to diploma acquisition for students with IEPs was also examined. This study was guided by the following questions:

- What types of training are school districts providing to special education teachers to aid them in facilitating IEP meetings collaboratively to achieve consensus?
- Are IEPTs using any tangible tools, models, or guidelines to help the team reach an informed course of study decision?
- How are teachers and families informed of mandates such as MCL 380.1278b (PC legislation) as it must be considered within the IEP process by the IEPT?

Significance of This Study

This researcher has been involved in special education for more than 16 years as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal. Presently, 100% of students in the school where the researcher is employed receive special education services. Professional experiences and informal conversations with others with similar educational training and professional experience have suggested that school districts were largely providing IEP members with little to no direction in terms of how to conduct IEP meetings or ways to reach a course of study decision using collaboration and consensus.

Additionally, past experiences and informal conversations led this researcher to believe that students with disabilities in Michigan and their families were widely ill informed of PC options afforded to them despite language within the legislation stating that schools must inform parents of students with and without disabilities of PC options. The findings from informal discussions and past professional experiences suggested a lack of professional training for special educators pertaining to conducting IEP meetings using collaborative approaches to reach consensus, and a lack of awareness among special educators pertaining to PC options for students with disabilities.

Based on the findings of this research, it would be beneficial to develop a tool, model, or guideline that takes into consideration a student's IEP, transition plan, and educational development plan to determine whether a PC plan would serve as a viable tool to aid the student in diploma acquisition, thus leading to gainful employment opportunities. Special educators who receive little to no training regarding collaborative strategies to achieve consensus and who are not familiar with PC plans for students with disabilities, coupled with

families who are not aware of PC, put the student with a disability at a further disadvantage when the IEP committee convenes to reach a course of study decision.

Summary

An overview of the purpose of the study, research questions, and the significance of the study for students with special needs and their teachers composed Chapter One. Chapter Two includes an historical perspective consisting of a review of literature pertaining to federal and state legislation and a review of prior research pertinent to the topics of interest to this study.

Chapter Two: Review of the Literature

Legislation Framework

To better understand the current problem, it is important to first explore special education law that plays a pivotal role in special education programs and services. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was authorized by the United States Congress. This legislation provided money to schools to support students between kindergarten and 12th grade. Since its inception, ESEA has been reauthorized eight times. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was signed into law in 2001 and, until December of 2015, was the most recent iteration of ESEA.

On December 10, 2015, Congress replaced NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act, ESSA. ESSA's predecessor, NCLB, contained many mandates, including that schools and students must make adequate yearly progress (AYP). For a school to make AYP, the school must have demonstrated that it met the targets for annual rate of increase determined by its state in math and reading proficiency each year (New America, 2016). Although the NCLB Act focused on school accountability measures, it did not require that NCLB assessments be used for promotion or graduation. It did, however, require that the graduation rate be another indicator at the high school level to determine whether districts successfully achieved AYP (Johnson, Stout, & Thurlow, 2009).

Students with disabilities and their graduation rates are of concern to school leaders, as their outcomes are factored into whether the school meets AYP. Although NCLB is no longer applicable, its successor, ESSA, is inclusive of similar components regarding accountability, and ESSA provides school districts with far more state accountability and less federal oversight. ESSA mandates that students take tests in Grades 3 through 8 and once in

high school, and the legislation restricts states to cap the number of its students who can take alternative assessments to only 1%. Alternative assessments are intended for students with severe cognitive impairments. One percent of all students equates to about 10% percent of students with disabilities (Samuels, 2015). Although some argue that a 1% cap is too restrictive, others see this as having far more meaning: “For those students who take alternative exams, the legislation prohibits states from preventing these students from continuing to work toward achieving grade level standards” (Diament, 2015, para. 7). However, Diament (2015) quoted Katy Neas, Executive Vice President for Public Affairs at Easter Seals, who said, “We really do think that at the end of the day this really does protect the right to a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities. What we want is for kids with disabilities to have access to the general curriculum so they have a chance at a general diploma” (para. 10).

Legislative impact upon students with disabilities. The Michigan Constitution, Article XIII, Section 8, provided the initial legal basis for special education in Michigan. Public Act 198 of 1971 later included in P.A. 451 of the Public Acts of 1976 (Michigan Revised School Code, 1976) mandated special education in Michigan. Public Act 198 provided those with disabilities a formal education between birth and 26-years-of-age. Presumably, lawmakers saw a need to provide a longer span of educational services to provide the student with meaningful skills and transition services.

In 1975, The U. S. Congress authorized Public Law 94-142, commonly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This act preceded the existing federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), which provides students identified as having disabilities with numerous protections. IDEA (2004) mandates that each state

provide students with disabilities with a FAPE that is to take place in a child's LRE. IDEA requires public schools across the nation to provide students identified as having one or more disabilities with educational services between the ages of 3 and 21.

Responsibilities of the IEPT

Transition plans. Beginning in 1990, the secondary transition provisions of IDEA, have required special educators to plan, coordinate, and deliver transition services to secondary-aged students with disabilities. The following Section 300.43 of re-authorized IDEA 2004 defines transition services:

A coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability that (a) is designed to be within a results-oriented process focused on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability to facilitate a child's movement from school to post-school activities including post-secondary education, vocational education, integrated and supported employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation and (b) is based on the individual child's needs, taking into account the child's strengths, preferences, and interests, including instruction, related services, community experiences, the development of employment and other post-school adult living objectives, and if appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and a provision of a functional evaluation. (IDEA, 2004)

To summarize, the IDEA (2004) legislation mandated that the role of special educators includes recognition of each child's specific characteristics in the development and delivery of academic services that facilitate continuing growth toward identified goals.

In the 2004 re-authorized IDEA, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) required school districts to collect data and report on 20 performance indicators. These indicators are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

OSEP Performance Indicators

Performance Indicator Description
1. Improving graduation rates for students with disabilities.
2. Decreasing dropout rates for students with disabilities.
3. Ensuring that all students with disabilities participate in statewide or alternate assessments.
4. Reducing suspensions and expulsions for students with disabilities.
5. Providing services for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE).
6. Providing preschool children with disabilities services in the LRE.
7. Improving cognitive and social outcomes for preschool children with disabilities.
8. Improving parent involvement in their child's special educational program.
9. Reducing disproportionality of cultural groups in special education.
10. Reducing the number of students from other cultures in certain disability categories.
11. Improving efforts to locate and serve students with disabilities.
12. Ensuring a smoother transition from preschool programs to school-based programs.
13. Improving transition services for students with disabilities at the secondary level, i.e. 16+ years.
14. Improving the outcomes for students moving from secondary to postsecondary activities.
15. Making sure the school districts correct noncompliance areas in the areas in the special education program.
16. Ensuring complaints filed by parents and other agencies are completed in a 60-day period.
17. Ensuring due process hearings are completed in a 45-day period.
18. Increasing the use of resolution sessions to resolve due process hearings.
19. Increasing the use of mediation to resolve differences with the school.
20. Making sure the data used by the state is valid, reliable, and accurate.

Lawmakers examining the 20 performance indicators emphasized transition services for students with disabilities, specifically indicators 13 and 14, which pertain directly to transition monitoring and creating and implementing meaningful transition plans. As special education laws have evolved over the decades, a strong commitment to transition services has remained constant since 1990 when IDEA mandated that school districts adhere to the following conditions regarding transition services:

- Transition services are based on age appropriate and measurable postsecondary goals and a coordinated set of activities.
- Students are included in the transition planning.
- Students' individual needs and interests are taken into consideration when preparing the plan.
- The planning process involves interagency cooperation.
- The transition services include courses of study that reasonably enable the students to meet their postsecondary goals.

Mandated transition services, response to intervention (RTI), enrolling fewer students in *special schools*, and extending the age limits for special education services has proven to be advantageous over the years for students with disabilities (Aron & Loprest 2012; Goupil, Tasse, Garcin, & Dore, 2011). The following is an important question to consider: What are these students with disabilities working toward at the secondary level?

The way IEPTs function is at the heart of this study. A Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency (RESA) Transition Consultant offered the following comments in a personal interview with this researcher:

Given the literature and Best Practices, Certificates of Completion should be given to a select group of students who need tremendous educational support. There are a lot of inconsistencies with transition plan practices. Sometimes, the IEPT convenes and makes a very informed decision about a Certificate of Completion or diploma, whereas in some schools, it appears that there is a gatekeeper who makes this very important decision (RESA Transition Consultant, personal interview, July 6, 2015).

Student focused planning. Authors Kohler and Field (2003) examined effective transition practices for students with disabilities. The researchers defined student focused planning as a way “for students to develop and strengthen self-determination skills through practice and application” (p. 176). Further, Kohler and Field asserted that students with disabilities should be provided with cross-curricular opportunities to help them set their own goals based on various experiences and interests. The researchers wrote, “Based on these goals, an appropriate IEP is developed in partnership with the student and his or her family. The process is continuous and cyclical: Help the student reflect on his or her experiences, derive meaning particular to his or her context, use that information for future action, and begin the cycle anew” (p. 176).

Parental roles. IDEA identified parents as necessary members of an IEPT. Parents are included in the special education decision-making process so that they can serve as monitors of accountability and protect their children’s rights to a free appropriate public education (Turnbull & Leonard 1981). Research indicated that parents rarely assist in making placement decisions or creating educational goals for their children (Goldstein, Stockland, Turnbull, & Curry, 1980). An explanation to this phenomenon is offered by Hoff,

Fenton, Yoshida, and Kaufman (1978), who thought that parents were likely uninformed about their rights regarding IEP meetings. Authors Ann and Rud Turnbull (2001) stated,

The bottom line is this, to move from relationships with families in which professionals have power over families to relationships with families in which the professionals and families have power with each other and in which power from within the relationships is naturally occurring and beneficial to professionals and families alike. (p. 36)

These researchers provided their definition of *collaboration* as it applies to the IEP process, “the dynamic process of families and professionals equally sharing their resources (motivation, knowledge, and skills) to make decisions jointly” (p. 13).

Parents as collaborators in the IEP process is well-documented, and the literature reflects that parents have felt less than equal to other participants at IEP meetings. Smith and Brownell (1995) noted that federal legislation requires collaboration of professionals and parents in the development and process of the IEP “to best meet the individual needs of students” (p. 4).

Rodger (1995) confirmed belief in equal participation of professionals and parents in the IEP process for individual students, as “each has a valuable yet potentially different set of perceptions, observations, and information, which may contribute to the development of an IEP” (p. 225). Rodger (1995) cited the work of Scanlon, Arick, and Phelps (1981) and Yoshida et al. (1978), “Team members sometimes viewed parents as passive observers rather than active participants” (p. 225).

Additionally, parental involvement is a common theme in the literature surrounding the topic of IEPs. Wakelin (2008) asserted that when a school fails to provide FAPE, or fails

to follow the tenets of IDEA (2004), parental recourse may include filing compliance complaints or file for a due process hearing.

Wakelin (2008) identified four inherent problems pertaining to parental enforcement and due process:

- Parents may be unaware of their rights under the IDEA or how they can challenge IEP team decisions (Wakelin, 2008, p. 274).
- Although identified as equal team members in the IEP model, lack of educational knowledge may limit parents' ability to successfully challenge IEP decisions (Wakelin, 2008, p. 275).
- Apprehension about retaliation against their children by the school or fear of damage to good relationships with the school are reasons that parents are reluctant to initiate due process hearings related to FAPE (Wakelin, 2008, p. 276).
- Wakelin (2008) contended that, "Even when parents are able to overcome their anxieties, they are unable to find the legal support and advocacy that the need to be successful in due process hearings" (p. 277).

For these reasons and more, it is important for school districts to engage and inform parents of their role within the IEP process, including but not limited to, the course of study decision.

Dynamics of IEP meetings. Authors Blackwell and Rosetti examined several studies surrounding IEP development. Included in their literature review are two studies pertaining to "dynamics of IEP meetings" (p. 8). Researchers Gaffney and Ruppap (2011) conducted a case study analysis of overall dynamics of IEP meeting participation. Authors Martin, Huber Marshall, and Sale (2004) also examined IEP meeting participation but

implemented a different approach to their research. These authors surveyed a wide range of IEP meeting attendees over a three-year period.

Blackwell and Rosetti (2014) reported that both studies had similar findings that team members, particularly families and general educators, did not always express their opinions in the meeting and that participant's roles impacted the extent to which they contributed to IEP development during the meeting. In these cases, administrators and special educators talked more and played a larger role in the IEP development than did families.

Blackwell and Rosetti (2014) examined a tool created by authors Childre and Chambers (2005) entitled the Student-Centered Individual Education Planning (SCIEP) tool. This person-centered tool was designed to increase the role of families in the IEP process. Childre and Chambers found that the SCIEP tool "increased the overall level of involvement and input for families in the IEP development process" (p. 9).

Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope (PATH), is another tool used by some school districts in the IEP process. With a focus on the future, this plan identifies the steps leading toward the individual's goals. This method of identifying a goal and working backwards is similar to the process outlined in the Michigan Revised School Code 380.1278b regarding PC Plans.

Resolving issues of disagreement. Studies have demonstrated negative parent experiences, and even conflict, associated with IEP meetings (Mueller, 2015), yet, little research highlights practices aimed to improve those noted IEP flaws. If educators are expected to adhere to the letter and spirit of IDEA by including parents as active IEPT members, there ought to be evidence of effective procedures used to foster shared decision-

making and problem-solving while generating a meaningful IEP for the student (Mueller & Moriarity-Vick, 2019).

Mueller and Moriarity-Vick (2019) defined the Facilitated Individualized Education Program (FIEP) as a system whereby “a facilitator uses procedural practice and skill to support the IEPT throughout the process. The FIEP is believed to enhance outcomes for students with disabilities” (p. 68). The researchers contended that “the aim of the FIEP practice is to provide the team with the opportunity to work through issues of disagreement throughout the IEP document as a team, with a facilitator available, to provide support, as needed” (p. 68).

Mueller and Moriarty-Vick (2019) conducted a research study that examined participant views of FIEP meetings. Findings showed that “participant experiences with the FIEP process were overwhelmingly positive. Notably, the educators spoke about the value of using FIEP procedures that ensured organization, shared decision-making, problem-solving, and active parent participation throughout the meeting” (p. 73). The researchers asserted that FIEP is beneficial in cases of conflict but recommended a neutral party to function as the facilitator. FIEP meetings are currently in use by 27 state education agencies, and “despite its wide use, until this study, there has been no research available regarding FIEP meeting practice” (2019, p. 68).

The course of study, a selection decided by the IEPT, receives no direction from state and federal education departments. It is important to recognize the distinction between the two course of study options for the team to consider. A high school diploma is arguably a well-understood credential; however, there are likely few who can articulate the criteria required to earn a diploma. This researcher examined the United States Department of

Education website; a diploma was not defined on the website. A staff person stated that the United States Department of Education does not define a diploma because, “we leave that up to the states.” Additionally, IDEA (2004) does not define a diploma, but the legislation does identify what does not equate to a diploma. Section 300.1202(a) (3) states, “A regular high school diploma does not include an alternative degree that is not fully aligned with the State’s academic standards, such as a certificate or General Educational Development (GED) credential.”

A certificate of completion, sometimes referred to as a certificate of attendance is frequently awarded to students with disabilities who, because of impairment, were unable to fulfill the requirements outlined by their state for diploma acquisition. Implementing PCs for students with mild impairments in Michigan would allow students to earn a diploma while taking a modified curriculum.

Standards for graduation. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education produced the report *A Nation at Risk*, which stated that the United States was “falling behind” other first world nations, propelling states to modify high school diploma requirements. Authors Johnson, Stout, and Thurlow (2007) explained the chain of events that resulted from *A Nation at Risk*:

In response to the critique of public education and the movement to standards-based education, states have implemented graduation policies and requirements that call for raised academic standards for all students; state and local district testing, development of exit examinations linked to a student’s eligibility to receive a high school diploma, and a focus on increasing graduation rates. (Introduction section, p. 1)

Passing a state exit examination appears to be increasing in popularity in the United States. In 1997, sixteen states required students to pass an exit examination to receive a high school diploma (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morrison, 1997). In 2000, twenty-two states mandated that students pass an exit examination before receiving a high school diploma (Olson, Jones, & Bond, 2001). Six years later, 24 states required exit exams as a condition of diploma acquisition. In 2006, twenty-one of the 24 states requiring exit examinations as a condition of receiving a high school diploma required students with and without disabilities to pass the state exit examinations to receive a diploma whereas three states mandated that only students without disabilities needed to take and pass the examination (Johnson et al., 2007).

Thurlow, Ysseldyke, and Reid (1997) analyzed the requirements set forth by each state and discovered that, in general, states used a combination of graduation requirements including Carnegie-unit requirements, competency examinations, exit examinations, and/or a series of benchmark exams. These authors suggested that students with disabilities are frequently not taken into consideration when lawmakers create graduation requirements. To substantiate this claim, they reported that the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) noted the “possibility that increased graduation requirements might have the unintended effect of causing at-risk students to abandon their quest for diplomas” but made no mention of students with disabilities and the impact of stringent graduation requirements on their ability to earn a standard diploma.

IDEA of 2004 required that students with disabilities participate in state and district assessments and that reports of the outcomes be reported. Johnson et al.(2009) asserted that

the use of state exit examinations in accord with state standards has widely been used to ensure that the high school diploma “means something” (p. 7).

In response to stringent educational reform, mandates, and performance objectives, some states have created different types of diplomas and graduation requirements for each. Johnson et al. (2009) said, “Diploma options range from only one option only (standard diploma) to up to five or more different options” (p. 7). Whether alternative diploma options equate to a standard high school diploma, particularly in relation to future adult outcomes and access to post-secondary education and to future earnings, has not been well examined, although investigators are beginning to study this issue (Gaumer, 2003). Presently, six states in the United States offer students a different type of diploma in addition to a certificate of completion.

School districts in Michigan provide students with one of two credentials upon completion: the standard diploma and the certificate of completion (Johnson et al., 2009). IDEA (2004) contains numerous procedural guidelines that must be met by those in charge of a student’s education when a student has been identified as having a disability and when an IEP is implemented. MacMillan (2016) stated, “Research agendas have emphasized the examination of procedural compliance with provisions of P.L. 94-142, whereas less effort has been devoted to the examination of actual student outcomes” (p. 20).

Johnson et al.(2009) conducted a study to better understand how states handled the dilemma of standard-based reform coupled with stringent graduation requirements for students with disabilities. The researchers examined graduation requirements from all 50 states and discovered that only 22 states had documentation regarding students with disabilities. Researchers contacted representatives from the department of education in each

state that did not identify graduation information for students with disabilities but had difficulties in the contacts, because, in many cases state department staff needed the name of specific school districts for which the information was requested. This demonstrates that defining graduation rules for students with disabilities at a state level is not often possible. Although states may have state-level policies or suggested practices, the question of how to implement these policies is often left up to local education agencies (LEAs) (Johnson et al., 2009)

Johnson et al. (2009) developed a survey to determine alternative diploma options and graduation policies and practices, including respondents' perceptions of intended and unintended consequences of students with disabilities receiving alternative diplomas. Respondents included the state directors of special education or their designees in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Further, the researchers sought to examine community stakeholders' perceptions of credentials other than traditional diplomas. Respondents were requested to provide information about the involvement of community stakeholders in discussions and decisions about alternative diplomas. The researchers achieved a response rate of 100%. Seven states involved the business community and post-secondary education representatives in a dialogue about alternative graduation credentials; few states involved post-secondary education institutions.

The findings suggested that many community members and business owners/managers were unfamiliar with alternate credentials for students exiting secondary schools (Johnson et al., 2009). Unfamiliarity with alternate credentials can negatively impact students with disabilities, who receive certificates of completion or certificates of attendance, when compared to their non-disabled peers who typically receive standard diplomas.

States have recognized that some students might have difficulty passing high stakes exams, such as exit examinations, as a condition of receiving a high school diploma. For this reason, many states permit students to retake the exam (Krentz, Thurlow, Shyyan, & Scott, 2005). Thurlow, Cormier, and Vang (2005) introduced an interesting perspective about retaking exit exams: “Retesting assumes that students eventually can demonstrate their knowledge and skills in the same way as other students” (p. 7).

Although the Michigan Department of Education does not require an exit examination as a condition of receiving a high school diploma, the state has increased the minimum requirements for all students to earn a diploma through the implementation of the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC). The MMC was Michigan’s response to increasing rigor for students to ensure that students were prepared for the increasing demands of society. This rigorous curriculum first applied to students who were in eighth grade during the 2005–2006 academic years (Michigan Department of Education, 2017). The requirements remain in effect today, but through legislative efforts in tandem with input from school officials, students with disabilities may utilize a PC to satisfy traditional requirements through alternative means (D. Fries, personal interview, July 2015). Further, Dr. Fries explained that the MMC has not improved learning outcomes for students. Citing graduation rates of 80.2% for Michigan students, Michigan’s SAT composite scores are “average at best.”

Personal curriculum plans. According to the Michigan Department of Education (2015a), “The legislative intent of the PC is to individualize the rigor and relevance of the educational experience and provide a tool to help all students succeed with the MMC” (Personal Curriculum section summary, p. 1). Additionally, the PC is a process to modify specific credit requirements and/or content expectations based on the individual learning

needs of a student. It is designed to serve students who want to accelerate or go beyond the MMC requirements and students who need to individualize learning requirements to meet the MMC requirements. If a student has an IEP, Michigan Compiled Laws (MCL) 380.1278b states that a school can implement a PC plan for the student, and the student is to be involved in as much of the MMC as *practicable*.

The following six steps must be followed to assist a special education student in earning a high school diploma through the implementation of a PC:

- Step 1: The PC is requested by the parent, student, or school personnel. The request is reviewed to determine whether modifications are consistent with state and district policy.
- Step 2: The PC Team writes the PC using the Educational Development Plan (EDP) and IEP for those students receiving special education services.
- Step 3: The PC is agreed to in writing by the student, parent/legal guardian, and superintendent/designee.
- Step 4: The PC is implemented by the appropriate staff. The PC must meet as much of the MMC as practicable, must include measurable goals, and a method of appropriate evaluation.
- Step 5: Student progress is monitored.
- Step 6: The school board of a local school district may award a diploma to students completing requirements outlined within the PC (Michigan Department of Education, 2015a; Personal curriculum modification process, section, p. 15).

In 2014, House Bills 4465 and 4466 amended the MMC to be implemented for the graduating class of 2015 and included the following changes:

- If requested by the allowable parties, a PC must be developed. The developed PC still needs to be agreed upon by the parent or legal guardian and the superintendent or designee before taking effect.
- The group of individuals that develops the PC must now include a teacher or a guidance counselor. The teacher should be directly educating the student and have expertise in the subject area being modified. An in-person meeting is no longer required.
- A student using a PC for the Algebra II content must now complete at least 1 math credit during his or her final 2 years of school. This provision amended previous language that stated that a student must complete a math course in his or her final year.
- Students may substitute a formal Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, regardless of content, for up to 1 credit of social studies, 1 credit of health, and physical education, and 1 credit of visual, performing, or applied arts.
- The department or any school district shall not limit or discourage the number of students with a PC on any basis other than the best interest of each individual student.
- Schools shall provide an annual notice to parents or guardians explaining the PC and that all students are entitled to a PC. This notice shall be sent to a student's home and can take several forms, including written letter, newsletter, or handbook. This notice shall also be posted on the school's website. (Michigan Department of Education (2014), What's New, p. 1)

It is important to clarify that the PC plan modifies the curriculum for students who are seeking a traditional high school diploma (Michigan Department of Education, 2015b). For

this reason, it is not necessary to consider a PC for a special education student whose course of study is anything other than a diploma. PC guidelines included the following statement:

The Personal Curriculum only modifies the Michigan Merit Curriculum. If a student with a cognitive impairment has an IEP that identifies the MMC as his or her course of study, then it would be possible for him or her to have a Personal Curriculum in place that, like all PCs, should be developed with the intent that it leads to a diploma. If a student's IEP identifies a course of study other than the MMC, a personal curriculum would not be applicable (Michigan Department of Education, 2015b, p 17).

Although the guidelines are clear and pathways have been created for diploma acquisition for students with mild disabilities, it appears that IEPT *gatekeepers*, or perhaps school administrators or central office administrators, have created norms that do not permit PC usage for students with mild disabilities to acquire a diploma. Considering that the Michigan Department of Education has data confirming that some large school districts in Michigan do not use PC plans, this assertion appears to have merit.

The focus of this study pertains to students with disabilities; thus, it is important to further explore the specifics related to PC plans and students with disabilities. Personal curriculums can be requested for a student at any time; however, the modifications cannot take effect until the student begins high school, and there must be consistency in programming between a student's IEP and EDP (Michigan Revised School Code, 1976). A Michigan career development model (Koenigsknecht ,2018) contains the following statement from Section 380.1166a(1) of the revised school code:

The board of a school district or board of directors of a public school academy shall provide the opportunity for each pupil to develop an EDP, during grade 7, and shall ensure that each pupil reviews his or her EDP during grade 8 and revises it as appropriate before he or she begins high school. An EDP shall be developed, reviewed, and revised by the pupil under the supervision of the pupil’s school counselor or another designee qualified to act in a counseling role under Section 1233 or 1233 selected by the school principal and shall be based on high school readiness scores and a career pathways program or similar career exploration program. An educational development plan shall be designed to assist pupils to identify career development goals as they relate to academic requirements. (p. 1)

Table 3 outlines the last six years of PC data from the Michigan Department of Education that illustrates that the number of PC plans has risen annually for both general and special education students since the 2012–2013 academic year.

Table 3

Total Number of Students with a PC in Michigan

Academic Year	Total PC Statewide	Total Students with IEP using PC
2012-2013	4509	1196
2013-2014	4994	1309
2014-2015	5690	1756
2015-2016	7417	2388
2016-2017	8344	2644
2017-2018	9657	2915

Notwithstanding consistent growth in terms of total numbers of PC plans and the total number of students with disabilities using them, some LEAs are not using PCs for any students despite MCL 380.1278(b). Given this reality, it is possible that some IEPTs might not consider PCs as viable options for students with disabilities, thus potentially imposing negative economic and social impact upon some students for the duration of their lives.

Although some might argue that allowing students with disabilities to earn traditional diplomas presents a concern surrounding the validity of a diploma, MCL 380.1278(b) is clear and does not appear to grant school districts an opportunity to make value judgments regarding whether a student *deserves* to have a PC. The specific language, as it relates to students with disabilities, states:

The PC shall incorporate as much of the subject area content expectations of the Michigan merit standard required under subsection (1) and section 1278a(1)(a) as is practicable for the pupil; shall establish measurable goals that the pupil must achieve while enrolled in high school and shall provide a method to evaluate whether the pupil achieved these goals; and shall be aligned with the pupil's educational development plan developed under subsection (Michigan Legislature Section 380.1278b, 2017, item 5b).

Economic impact of certificates of completion. Dupéré et al. (2015) cited Rumberger (2011): “Without a high school diploma, young people’s long-term prospects are severely diminished for virtually every valued life outcome, including mental and physical health as well as employment stability and lifetime productivity and earnings” (p. 615).

Given Rumberger’s assertion that decisions made by special educators and parents regarding

a child's educational program are likely to have far-reaching implications, IEPTs should be extremely cautious in developing an appropriate course of study for their students.

Smith (2015), an Eastern Michigan University professor in the Special Education Department, cited statistics from the Kessler Foundation, a national organization with interest on disability issues, that indicated 17% of adults with disabilities—one out of every six—report that they have never completed a high school education, a rate that is higher than for those without disabilities. A mere 28% of students with disabilities leave high school with a diploma (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

Osher, Woodruff, and Sims (2002) noted that dropout rates for minority students with disabilities are even higher. The relationship between disability and dropout status is well documented. Further, the relationship between disability and prison is also well-documented (Smith, 2015). For these reasons, IEPTs must function in a manner that is going to assist the student in earning a meaningful credential after high school so the school-to-prison pipeline can be avoided and so that the students have an opportunity to experience economic success.

DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith (2011) reported that for people with disabilities who are of working age, the poverty rate is 27.9%. Statistics reported in *2017 Annual Report of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Disability Statistics and Demographics* showed a gap of close to eight percentage points between the poverty rate of people with disabilities and those who do not have disabilities over the period from 2009 to 2016 (Kraus, Lauer, Coleman, & Houtenville, 2018). People with severe intellectual disabilities are three times more likely to be living in poverty than those without disability labels. As a result, most people said to have severe intellectual disabilities rely on federal income support benefits that are funded at sub-poverty levels (Test, 2008)

Authors Johnson, Stout, and Thurlow (2009) discovered that employers are widely unfamiliar with alternate credentials from high school. This unfamiliarity translates into lost employment opportunities due to a disqualifying factor, irrespective of one's ability to perform the described task. It is from this perspective that drives the researcher's interest in the way IEPTs function and the level of preparedness for IEPTs to consider all applicable factors within the IEP process. If employers do not recognize certificates of completion, how are young people without diplomas going to survive economically?

Shaina Cavazos (2018) wrote pertaining to the perils of alternative *credentials* awarded to students with disabilities. She noted Kim Dodson, Associate Executive Director of the Arc of Indiana, who said that students with certificates were at a disadvantage in the job market because a certificate was not accepted as a diploma and applications were not processed.

Collaboration and consensus. IEPTs must value each member and his or her perspective to collaborate effectively. Professor Amelia K. Moody of the University of North Carolina Wilmington wrote, "The partnership between home and school is an important one that is slowly being addressed through education policy and practices" (McNulty, Prosser, & Moody, 2010, p. 1).

It is important to define *consensus* and *collaboration* given that these concepts are important in this study. Martin (2005) defined *collaboration* as "working together toward common objectives." Additionally, the author defined *consensus* as "an opinion held by all or most; general agreement" (p. 44). Martin explained that consensus does not mean that the entire team agrees with a decision but that "teams can have consensus even with

disagreement, but only if the dissenting members are willing to support the decision of the group even when their individual choices differ” (p. 45). Martin asserted,

The truth is simple; it is not always easy, and the simple vision of the IEPT is certainly far from easy when it comes to putting it into practice. In the realm of special education, there are so many laws and policies, procedures and timelines, papers and reports, personnel and resources, agencies and authorities, tools and technology, and so on. Small wonder that training in the process of collaboration has often been neglected. Yet, collaboration leading to consensus is the very process that must be safeguarded in the IEP environment. (p. 43)

Furthermore, Martin (2005) noted that any alternative to consensus-reaching by way of collaboration falls under one category, “adversarial approaches.” He defined *adversarial approaches* as a full spectrum of silent withdrawal to violence and even war. The common element uniting all adversarial approaches is “againstness.” The author further contended that there are four likely “less extreme” forms of adversarial decision-making, including the following:

- Withdrawal: simply failing to appear and participate in meetings.
- Passivity: silently going along with the crowd, while secretly harboring disagreement, disinterest, mistrust, or resentment.
- Debate: advancing and defending a conclusion already reached, but not really sharing ideas or being open to alternative views.
- Hostility: raising voices, calling names, casting blame, making threats. (p. 45)

Some might think that students with mild to moderate disabilities are incapable of performing tasks that business owners will deem as valuable and on par with *neurotypical*

workers. On July 2, 2007, a former Senior Vice President of Walgreen's was interviewed by Mika Brzezinski on NBC Nightly News. The executive was a parent of a young man with autism and was determined to offer opportunities to those with disabilities. During the interview, he explained that in one of Walgreen's distribution centers, 40% of those employed had disabilities. Those workers performed tasks alongside *traditional* workers, and the center enjoyed more productivity than any other distribution center for the corporation. Individuals with disabilities are often very productive in the workplace, have very low absenteeism, and take tremendous pride in their work.

Unfortunately, when business owners are unfamiliar with credentials such as certificates of completion and make a standard diploma or GED the minimum credential for consideration, potential workers who are disabled are unable to procure competitive employment. To be clear, many students working toward a certificate of completion have the skills necessary to competitively work in entry level positions. Students profoundly impacted by their disability were not at the heart of the present study.

Fortunately, some employers are making efforts to broaden their employee base and become more diversified. In a personal conversation with this researcher on April 18, 2015, the Walgreen executive interviewed by a national network reporter in 2007 reaffirmed his company's philosophy that hiring workers with disabilities is good business practice. Although the executive's claims might seem to qualify only as anecdotal evidence, other major companies have taken note.

A 2014 article in *The Tennessean* noted that the Walgreen's executive worked closely with AutoZone, HCA, Lowes, and Nissan, as those companies explored ways to become more inclusive in their employment practices (Manskar, 2014). Corporations with minimum

requirements such as high school diplomas or GEDs ultimately exclude a workforce capable of tremendous output.

Although the purpose of the present study was not to determine minimum requirements for employment opportunities at various corporations, a connection will be made between students with disabilities and the importance of IEPTs considering all factors as they carefully select the appropriate course of study for students with disabilities in Michigan.

Richard DuBay (2016), a behavior consultant for students with disabilities in Livonia Public Schools, works exclusively with students receiving special education services with a *Moderately Cognitively Impaired* special education eligibility. Mr. DuBay stated,

A student with a certificate of completion with a goal of working competitively will likely experience strife as he or she attempts to navigate the hiring process of many well-known corporations when a diploma or GED is the minimum qualification for employment consideration, even though the student may actually have the skills to do quite well in that employment setting. (R. DuBay, personal interview October 4, 2016)

Data gathered from IDEA and reported by the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) revealed that more than six million students receive special education services in the United States, but little research is extant regarding factors considered by IEPTs when determining a student's course of study (D. Fries, personal interview, October 17, 2017). Authors and attorneys Lapointe and Butler (2015) cited the Office of Civil Rights pertaining to mandates surrounding course of study decisions but found an absence in the literature associated with IDEA and *Michigan Administrative Rules for Special Education*

(MARSE) pertaining to guidelines involving making a course of study decision (Michigan Department of Education, 2018).

Further, little research explored the timeline that schools follow for formalizing and adopting a transition plan for students receiving special education services. This is likely because IDEA documents only state that a transition plan be implemented during the IEP for students aged 16. The interpretation could suggest that if a student's birthday is in March and his IEP is in November, when the student is 15-years-old, the IEPT would need to create a transition plan. Best practices suggest that the IEPT consider a transition plan at a younger age if the IEPT deems it appropriate.

Although PC plans are being used more each year in Michigan, as described in Table 3, it appears that many local education agencies are not informing stakeholders of PC options or fail to initiate and adopt PC plans for another reason. This research study sought to discover the reasons for their decisions.

Summary

Chapter Two comprised a review of literature pertinent to this study, including a historical perspective of special education, special education laws, the MMC, alternative credentials awarded to students with disabilities who do not meet graduation criteria, and IDEA rules and regulations. Responsibilities and factors for consideration by the IEPT were examined including transition plans, parental roles, standards for graduation, PC plans, the economic impact for a person with a disability with a certificate of completion, and collaboration and consensus. An analysis of the methods employed in the study are discussed in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methods

This mixed-methods study sought to determine the ways that IEPTs in select Michigan high schools create meaningful courses of study for students with disabilities. Data were collected through a survey completed by special education teachers who work with students at the high school level and through interviews with special education directors who oversee each school within the sample. This study explored school-district-provided professional development (SDPPD) regarding consensus and collaboration and teacher preparedness for consideration of PC plans for students with disabilities within the IEP process. The study was guided by the following questions:

- What types of training do school districts provide to special education teachers to aid them in facilitating IEP meetings collaboratively to achieve consensus?
- Do IEPTs use any tangible tools, models, or guidelines to help the team reach an informed course of study decision?
- How are teachers and families informed of mandates such as MCL 380.1278b (PC legislation), as it must be considered within the IEP process by the IEPT?

Research Design

This mixed-methods study comprises both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from participants through questionnaires and interviews. Quantitative, statistical data related to practices or opinions were gathered from special education teachers in questionnaires, whereas qualitative data gathered in interviews of special education directors offered insight into preparation and practice in the conduct of IEPs and services to special education students. According to Creswell (2014), access to perspectives from the use of both research

approaches provides for a deeper understanding of phenomena than could be expressed in data that offers numeric interpretation alone.

Study Population

Participants for this study included special education teachers and special education directors from a convenience sample of four intermediate school districts (ISDs) located in Michigan.

Process of participant selection. Following selection of four ISDs, this researcher compiled a list of the school districts of varied sizes in each ISD. Slips of paper with the names of the school districts were placed into a bowl labeled with the name of their ISD. Five school districts were drawn at random from each of the four bowls. The researcher contacted the special education director who had oversight of special education services in each selected school district to request permission to conduct survey research in the school district and requested to personally interview the director.

Emails including a brief description of the study, the institutional review board (IRB) approval letter, and a copy of survey questions were sent to each special education director whose district was selected. If a special education director declined to grant permission for research to be conducted, the researcher repeated the process until the target of five special education directors, one from each school district granted permission. Within one ISD, only four special education directors agreed to participate; thus, four school districts participated in the research study. Thirty special education teachers from 19 school districts in the four ISDs were invited to respond to a survey. The district where this researcher is employed was excluded from the study.

Context for the Study

Erie Intermediate School District. The Erie ISD consists of a large geographic area encompassing nearly more than 30 individual school districts and more than 100 public school academies, PSAs. This ISD is both culturally and economically diverse.

Demographics for the Erie ISD are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Demographics for Erie ISD

	School	High School	Graduation	Special Education
ISD	District	Enrollment	Rate (4yr)	Graduation Rate (4 yr)
Erie	Gageview	950	89%	73%
	Springfield	1300	80%	67%
	Linn	1000	64%	62%
	Deer Valley	1000	93%	67%
	Monarch	1715	83%	59%

Approximately 20,000 residents live in the Gageview School District, a community surrounded by a large city, which has historically attracted immigrants from Eastern Europe. In recent years, this area has become more diverse and now has a large contingent of residents with Middle Eastern heritage. The Gageview School District has an 89% high school graduation rate, and 73% of students with disabilities graduate with a high school diploma within four years. Gageview High School, with approximately 950 students enrolled, is the only comprehensive high school within the school district.

The Springfield School District in the Erie ISD was home to nearly 40,000 residents in the Springfield community as of 2010. The one high school in the school district serves approximately 1,300 students and the four-year graduation rate at Springfield High School is 80%. Students with disabilities at Springfield High School graduate in four years at a rate of 67%.

The N. J. Linn High School is the only high school within the Linn School District, which is located in a city of slightly more than 20,000 residents. Although there is an airport located there, this community is rather impoverished. The four-year graduation rate at Linn High School, with an approximate enrollment of 1,000 students, is 64%, and students with disabilities graduate in four years at a rate of 62%.

Deer Valley High School is also within the Erie ISD. Although there are two school districts within the City of Deer Valley, only the Deer Valley School District was a participant in this research study. Nearly 1,000 students attend Deer Valley High School; they are very proud of their 93% graduation rate for all students and a 67% four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities.

The Monarch School District in the Erie ISD is a large district with nearly 12,000 students enrolled overall and 1,715 students served at Monarch High School. The four-year graduation rate at Monarch High School is 83%, and the graduation rate for students with disabilities is 59%.

Huron Intermediate School District. The Huron ISD comprises several suburban communities. Some of the communities are best described as rural yet somewhat affluent. This ISD is similar in geographic area to the Erie ISD and has nearly 30 school districts within its catchment. Demographics for the Huron ISD are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Demographics for Huron ISD

	School	High School	Graduation	Special Education
ISD	District	Enrollment	Rate (4yr)	Graduation Rate (4 yr)
Huron	W. Shores	1100	88%	50%
	Little Valley	1100	95%	71%
	Willow Springs	900	80%	74%
	Meadows	2000	95%	91%
	Northview	1500	95%	72%

The school district of West Shores serves two communities; however, West Shores High School, with an enrollment of fewer than 1,100 is the only high school in the school district. The four-year graduation rate at West Shores High School is 88%, and students with disabilities graduate in four years with a diploma at a rate of 50%.

Little Valley High School is located within Little Valley Township. There are two comprehensive high schools within the Lilley Valley School District, yet Lilly Valley High School, with an enrollment of slightly more than 1,100 was the only school involved in the study. The four-year graduation rate for all students at Little Valley High School is 95%, which is significantly higher than the other high school located in the same township. Students with disabilities graduate in four years at a rate of 71%.

The City of Willow Springs has slightly more than 16,000 residents. Willow Springs High School has fewer than 900 students enrolled. Their four-year graduation rate is 80% while students with disabilities graduate in four years at a rate of 74%.

Meadows High School, located within the City of Meadows, has a population of nearly 60,000 residents. This community can be described as affluent, with small impoverished areas. There are more than 2,000 students enrolled at Meadows High School that has a graduate rate for all students of 95%. As a subgroup, students with disabilities graduate within four years at a rate of 91%.

Northview High School's student body comprises nearly 1,500 students. Approximately 72,000 residents live in the City of Northview, where the Northview High School four-year graduation rate for all students is 94% and 72% for students with disabilities.

Ontario Intermediate School District. All of the school districts in the Ontario ISD can be described as rural. Wilcox Lakes High School, with nearly 1,800 students, is the only high school in Wilcox Township and boasts the largest enrollment within the Ontario ISD. Students enrolled at Wilcox Lakes High School have a four-year graduation rate of 93%. Students with disabilities graduate within the same period at a rate of 82%. Demographics for the Ontario ISD are shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Demographics for Ontario ISD

ISD	Schools	High School	Graduation	Special Education
		Enrollment	Rate (4yr)	Graduation Rate (4 yr)
Ontario	Wilcox Lakes	1800	93%	82%
	Warra Woods	500	95%	72%
	Phillipsberg	800	95%	95%
	Berwick	1600	92%	71%
	Rosedale	350	95%	85%

Warra Woods High School in the Ontario ISD can be described as small, as evidenced by a total enrollment of fewer than 500 students. This high school located within a rural community has a four-year graduation rate of 95%; students with disabilities have a four-year graduation rate of 72%.

Phillipsberg High is the only high school in the Phillipsberg community. This high school, nestled within a rural community has an enrollment of slightly fewer than 800 students. Students with disabilities and their general education counterparts both graduate at a rate of 95% within four years.

Berwick High School is the only high school located in the Berwick community. This rural high school has approximately 1,600 students enrolled. Students have a four-year graduation rate of 92%, and students with disabilities graduate within four years at a rate of 71%.

Rosedale High School is located relatively close to Berwick High School but serves a much smaller population. This high school has a total enrollment of fewer than 350 students. The four-year graduation rate for all students is 95% at Rosedale High School, and students with disabilities have an 85% graduation rate.

Superior Intermediate School District. The Superior ISD is combined of suburban and rural communities. Demographics for the Superior ISD are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Demographics for Superior ISD

ISD	Schools	High School Enrollment	Graduation Rate (4yr)	Special Education Graduation Rate (4 yr)
Superior	Garold	1500	95%	75%
	Warren M.	1500	95%	85%
	J. Edwards	750	92%	65%
	Mooney	1200	86%	60%

Garold Farms High School is the only high school in Garold Township. With fewer than 1,500 students and a 95% graduation rate for regular education students and a four-year graduation rate for students with disabilities at a rate of 75%. The Garold community is very proud of the high school.

Warren Meadows School District is located approximately 10 miles from Garold Farms. With fewer than 10,000 residents in the community, the size of the high school is notable with an enrollment of more than 1,500 students. Warren Meadows serves a portion of a neighboring community and participates as a school of choice, meaning a student residing

outside of the catchment can enroll within the Warren Meadows School district after completing an application and meeting criteria. Students at Warren Meadows graduate at a rate of 95% within four years, and students with disabilities have an 85% graduation rate in the same time period.

The James Edwards High School has an enrollment of fewer than 750 students. The school district is located within a rural community, where farming is a primary source of income for residents. Students graduate from J. Edwards High School at a rate of 92%, and students with disabilities have a four-year graduation rate of 65%.

The A. Mooney High School is composed of students from economically diverse backgrounds. Some families experience a high standard of living, whereas others living a short distance away struggle to make ends meet due to the failure of the manufacturing industry. Nearly 1,200 students attend Mooney High School where the four-year graduation rate is 86% for regular education students and a four-year graduation rate of 60% for students with disabilities.

Data Gathering Procedures and Instrumentation

The survey completed by special education teachers comprised 21 questions designed to answer the research questions. A Likert scale offered five possible responses in a range from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* with a neutral option at the center. The survey was created using Google Forms, which allowed for the participant to answer questions in an easy-to-use manner and provided the researcher with data reflected in both graphic and text form. An interview protocol created by the researcher gathered data from special education directors regarding training for teachers, practices, and perceptions about special education procedures in the IEP process.

Measures to ensure safety, confidentiality, and anonymity for participants. Each ISD and the school districts located within were assigned fictitious names to preserve anonymity. Any fictional names that sound or appear like actual school districts or schools located within Michigan is purely coincidental, and results are not reflective of that school or district.

Survey data were stored on a password-protected computer, and all respondents were assured anonymity. Participants were not given a stipend to participate, and no incentive was offered other than the opportunity to help in a research study that could result in increased functionality of IEPTs, thereby positively impacting students with disabilities. Interviews with special education directors were recorded with participant consent and were transcribed by the researcher. These data were also stored on a password-protected computer. Data were not available to anyone other than the researcher at any time.

To protect the anonymity of survey participants employed in the various school districts, interviews conducted with special education directors did not include references to survey data collected from teachers in a school district where that director was employed.

Data Analysis

This study comprised two units of analysis. The first included the perceptions and opinions of special education teachers from individual school districts, whereas the second unit of analysis consisted of perspectives and description of practices in the preparation for and delivery of special education services gathered from special education directors with oversight for special education programs, services, and staffing at the school district level. Likert scale responses of special education teachers to statements about practices and opinions regarding services for special education students in their school district provided

quantitative statistical data. Interview data gathered from special education directors offered qualitative data from an administrative perspective about teacher preparation, services for special education students, and the IEP process. The data from each of the databases were analyzed separately then discussed and interpreted together in response to the research questions.

Summary

Methods implemented for this study were discussed in this chapter, including the research design, selected ISDs, and participating individual school districts within. Data-gathering procedures and instruments were described along with the plan for analysis. Findings and detailed analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in response to the research questions are discussed in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways that IEPTs function in select Michigan high schools when developing a course of study decision for students with disabilities. The research questions addressed by survey responses of special education teachers and interview data gathered special education directors pertained to training received by the teachers for their role in facilitating IEP meetings, tools or guidance for reaching decisions about appropriate course of study for special education students, and process of communication regarding state legislation with impact on the work of the IEPT. Findings of the survey and interview data are discussed in this chapter.

Research Question 1

What types of training are school districts providing to special education teachers to aid them in facilitating IEP meetings using researched based ways to achieve consensus through collaborative efforts?

Findings from special education teachers' survey responses.

Question. 1.1. Special education teachers were asked to respond to the following: *In my school, or district, our special education teachers have received professional development regarding achieving consensus in IEPT meetings.*

Figure 1 shows that 36.7% of the respondents stated that they have received training in research-based ways for achieving consensus within the context of IEP meetings. Reaching consensus is an important aspect of the IEP process, especially as it relates to determining a student's course of study. Figure 1 reflects that 63.3% of respondents said they have not received training in research-based methods of reaching consensus in IEP meetings.

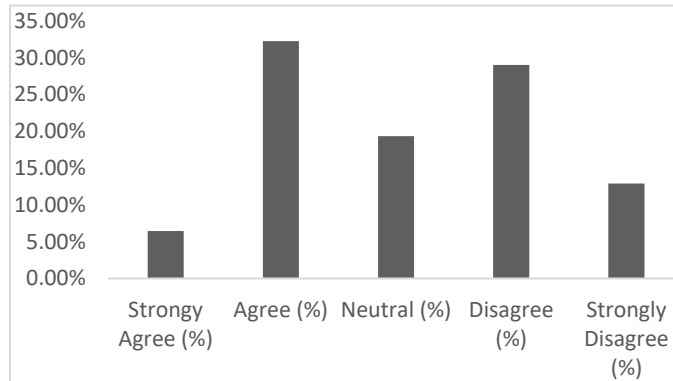


Figure 1. Percentage of teachers who received professional development regarding achieving consensus in IEPT meetings.

Question 1.2 Given that IEP Teams do not all function the same way, participants were asked the following question to determine their experiences with IEP collaboration: *In my school, or district, special education case managers are expected to help the IEP Team identify the appropriate course of study, but all IEPT participants have an equal voice.*

Figure 2 reflects that 61.29% of the participants indicated that, in their experiences, IEP participants have an equal voice when determining a student’s course of study. Best practice suggests that all aspects of the IEP are to be collaborative in nature; however, 29.03% of the respondents were neutral, and 9.68% of the respondents disagreed, which suggested that nearly 40% of the respondents were unable to agree that all IEP participants are believed to have an equal voice.

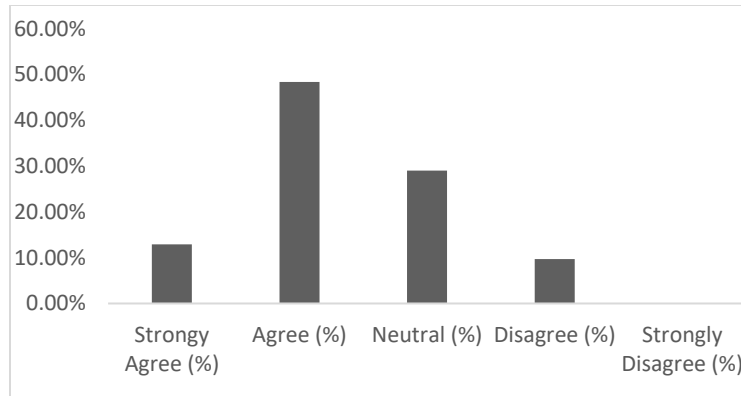


Figure 2. Percentage of teachers who believed that IEPT members have an equal voice about course of study decisions.

Question 1.3. Special education teachers were asked the following question regarding the course of study decision: *In my school, or district, a student's course of study decision is made by the case manager, and the other participants usually agree with the decision.*

Figure 3 shows that nearly half (46.7%) of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed to the statement pertaining to the case manager selecting a student's course of study and other participants usually agreeing. Ten percent were neutral. The remaining 43.3% either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

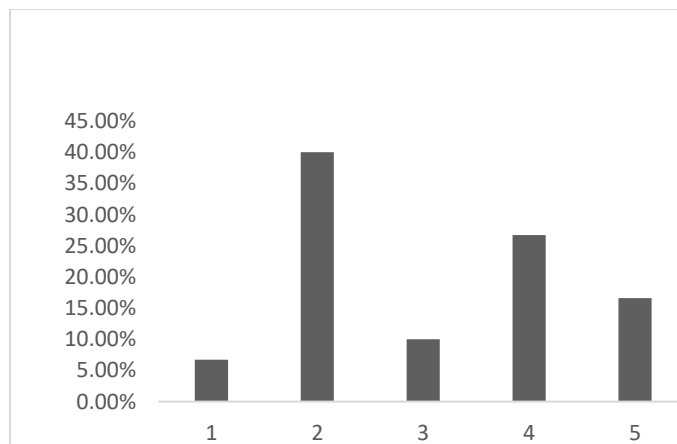


Figure 3. Percentage of teachers who reported that course of study decisions are made by the case mgr. and other IEPT members generally agree.

Findings from personal interviews of special education directors regarding professional development for teachers.

Erie ISD special education directors. The director of Gageview Schools stated that his teachers “have had no formal collaboration or consensus training.” Springfield’s special education director responded, “We have not done any of that. I am doing this in the fall. Our attorney will do it. This is my second year in this district.” Linn Schools’ director responded, “No, they have not had it. Not since I have been there.” Deer Valley’s director said, “No, but it certainly sounds like a wonderful idea! I would be really interested in doing that with my staff!” Monarch’s director replied by simply saying, “No.”

Huron ISD special education directors. West Shore’s director of special education replied, “Um no, we have not done that.” Little Valley’s director stated that some but not all of the staff, have participated in this type of training. The director from Willow Springs said, “No, we have not. This is definitely an area of need for us.” The special education director from the Meadows School District responded, “God, yes.” Northview’s Director had a slightly different answer. She responded, “I think mediation training is the best way to address this. We have provided mediation training to our staff.”

Ontario ISD special education directors. Director of Wilcox Lakes said, “Yes they have received training in collaboration and consensus.” One special education director oversees both Warra Woods School District and Phillipsberg School District. This director answered, “We have had a lot of professional development (PD) on IEP compliance. As far as research-based strategies to achieve consensus or anything related to collaboration, no.”

Similarly, one director oversees both Berwick Schools and Rosedale Schools. This respondent said, “Our teachers have not been trained in either of those. I think we should put something together.”

Superior ISD special education directors. Responses from districts located within the Superior ISD are not unlike those from the Erie and Ontario ISDs. Garold Farms’ special education director said, “Our teachers have not received that kind of training.” Warren Meadows’ special education director explained that he has not given the group any specific training, yet he talks about it informally, as needed. The special education director from J. Edwards Schools shared that his teachers have had no formal training or PD. He went on to share that they conduct internal meetings before IEP meetings if the meeting is anticipated to be contentious, and at that time, they discuss strategy pertaining to collaboration and consensus. The special education director from the Mooney School District responded to this question by simply saying “No.”

In summary, regarding Research Question 1, Table 8 reflects that two of 19 school districts (10.52%) have provided special education teachers with professional development opportunities relative to collaboration and consensus. One director stated that some (5.2%) special education teachers have had professional development surrounding the topics of collaboration and consensus. Most (84.2%) of the school districts are not providing professional development opportunities for their special education teachers.

Table 8

Special Education Teacher Professional Development by School Districts in Four ISDs

ISD	School District	PD Provided
Erie	Gageview	No
	Springfield	No
	Linn	No
	Deer Valley	No
	Monarch	No
Huron	West Shores	No
	Little Valley	Some
	Willow Springs	No
	Meadows	Yes
	Northview	No
Ontario	Wilcox Lakes	Yes
	Warra Woods	No
	Phillipsberg	No
	Berwick	No
	Rosedale	No
Superior	Garold Farms	No
	Warren Meadows	No
	J. Edwards	No
	Mooney	No

Research Question 2

In my school or district, we have a centralized model used by case managers to assist the IEPT in selecting a student's Course of Study.

Findings from special education teachers' survey responses. Figure 4 reflects that none of the 30 special education teachers strongly agreed that their district implements a tool or model to help the IEPT make informed decisions related to the student's course of study. Slightly more than 25% of the special education teachers agreed that they use a model, tool, or a guideline to assist the team in reaching the course of study decision. Seventy-five percent of those who participated in the survey indicated a *neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree* response.

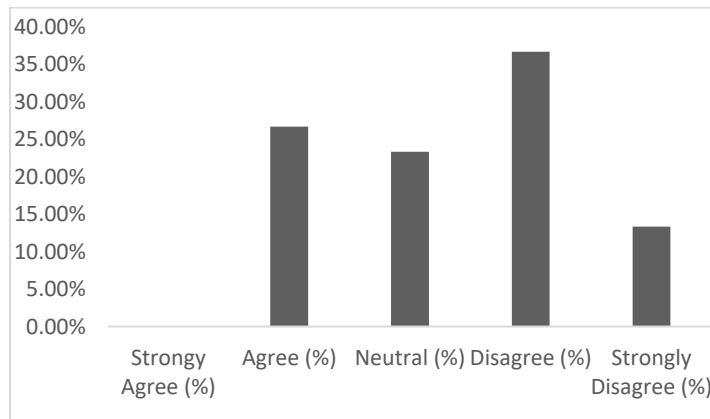


Figure 4. Percentage of teachers who reported the use of model, tool, or a guideline to assist the IEPT in reaching the course of study decision.

Findings from personal interviews of special education directors regarding use of model, tool, or a guideline to assist the IEPT in reaching the course of study decision.

Interviews with special education directors revealed that most school districts in the study did not utilize a tool, model, or guideline when making a course of study decision for a student.

Although some districts used a tool found on the Michigan Department of Education website as a guide to aid the team in reaching a decision, most of the teachers and special education directors indicated that IEPTs do not use a decision-making tool of any kind. In the rare cases where a tool was reportedly used, the IEPT adopted the tool found on the Michigan Department of Education website, which is designed to help determine whether a student should use an alternative assessment for the mandatory state assessments. Those participants explained that if a student is best fit for an alternative assessment, such as the Mi-Access, they typically assign that student to a certificate of completion course of study.

Erie ISD special education directors. The director of Gageview Schools stated that his teachers do not use a model or other tool to assist the IEPT in reaching a course of study decision. He stated, “If a student takes an alternative state assessment, such as the Mi-Access, 8 out of ten times, that student would be on a certificate of completion course of study. Springfield’s special education director responded quite succinctly, saying “Nope.” Similarly, the director from Linn Schools responded, “No, they do not.” Deer Valley’s director said,

We really started to talk a little further about that recently. We try to look at the tools that MDE has regarding assessment decisions and we consider those decisions when addressing a course of study for a student. We consider the 1% cap for the alternative assessment and we believe it’s best to make these types of decisions sooner rather than later.

Monarch’s director replied by simply saying, “No, that’s not something we have used before.”

Huron ISD special education directors. The director from the West Shores School District shared that they “have a model, but not a piece of paper. Our ninth graders try classes to support their eligibility for a diploma. If they are successful in these types of supported classes, we go that route.” The Little Valley Schools special education director said, “Funny you should ask, some IEPTs use a model, others do not.” The Willow Springs’ director was quick to respond to the question saying, “No we do not, but it would be *fabulous* to have. Let me know if you come across one in your research.”

Citing the importance of an IEPT, the Meadows Public Schools’ director stated, “This is an IEPT decision. The MDE puts out a tool to help teams determine appropriate assessments and this generally guides our discussions.” Northview School District’s director responded in a similar fashion by saying, “Our teams can use the MDE assessment tool if they wish. Other than that, there’s not much out there. This is an IEPT decision.”

Ontario ISD special education directors. The director of Wilcox Lakes said, “The teams have their own matrix that they use. I would say it’s not a consistent practice. I do know that each team has their own matrix regarding requirements for academic, social, and emotional success for students.” The director for Warra Woods and Phillipsberg answered by saying,

No, there’s no template that is used. Our teachers use the IEP itself. They focus on the student’s Present Level Statement and their Transition Plan. Our teachers consider what their students want for themselves after high school and then consider what makes the most sense for his or her course of study. Most of our students seek a high school diploma. It’s very rare that our team exhausts all options, like a PC.

Finally, Berwick Public Schools and Rosedale Public Schools' director responded by saying,

We use the information from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) website pertaining to alternative assessments. If a student is most appropriately assessed with alternative tests such as the Mi-Access, we use that information to guide our discussions with parents when we discuss the course of study.

Superior ISD special education directors. Garold Farms School District's special education director responded to the question by saying, "For us, it's not as black and white. We do not use a tool to help the IEPT reach the decision. We have conversations that are unique to the student and we discuss PC options and discuss a modified curriculum when appropriate. Warren Meadows School District's special education director provided the following information:

In Warren Meadows Schools, we do not use a tool or a guide of any kind. Rather, we have rough guidelines that help us determine what is in the best interest of the student. We know that if a student with an IEP gets a high school diploma, services stop for the student as soon as they graduate. So, we take a close look at their post-secondary vision. We strive to consider the individual nature of each student. We also conduct wrap-around meetings once each trimester.

The special education director from the J. Edwards School District stated, "No we do not." The director from Mooney Public Schools replied by saying, "We do not have a tool. If you find one, let me know. We consider the student, their ability, and their potential. We also have discussions with the parents."

Research Question 3

How are teachers and families informed of mandates such as MCL 380.1278b (PC legislation) as it must be considered within the IEP process by the IEPT?

Findings from special education teachers' survey responses.

Question 3.1. Special education teachers were asked to respond to the following statement: *In my professional career as a special educator, I have received Professional Development regarding Personal Curriculum Plans.*

Figure 5 suggests that the special education teachers had widely different experiences regarding district-provided professional development (DPPD) surrounding the topic of P C plans. Specifically, 26.7% selected *agree*, while 3.3% selected *strongly agree*. Percentages of 26.7% were shown for responses of *strongly disagreed* and *disagreed*, and the remaining 16.7% of the participants provided a neutral response.

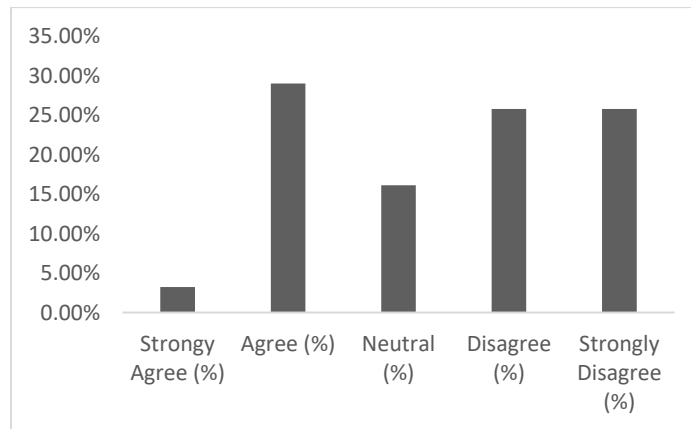


Figure 5. Percentage of teachers receiving professional development regarding personal curriculum plans.

Question 3.2. The special education teachers were asked to respond to the following statement: *In my school, parents and educators are informed of Personal Curriculum options for all students.*

Figure 6 shows that nearly half of special education teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. A relatively large percentage (32.26%) selected a neutral response, and fewer than one-quarter (22.58%) of the participants stated that they either agreed or strongly agreed to the statement.

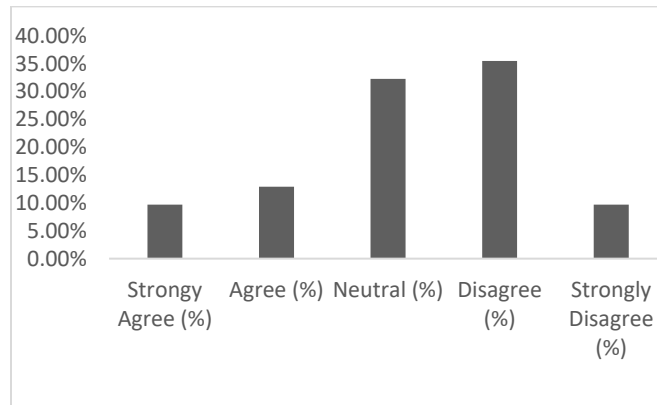


Figure 6. Percentage of teachers who believed that parents and educators are informed of personal curriculum options for all students.

Question 3.3. Special education teachers responded to the following statement:
School Districts can choose to inform students and parents of Personal Curriculum options.

Figure 7 demonstrates that nearly half (43.3%) of the respondents believed that school districts can choose to inform students and parents of PC options. An additional 29.03% selected a neutral response, suggesting that they were unsure, and the remaining responses indicated disagreement. As stated in the Review of Literature, the Michigan Department of Education is clear in terms of the expectation that school districts inform parents of PC options on an annual basis.

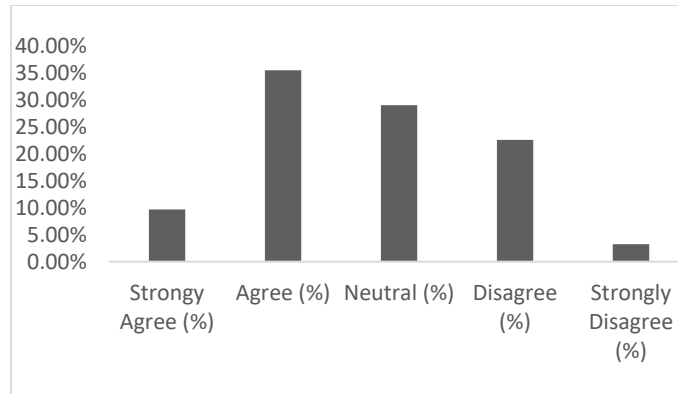


Figure 7. Percentage of teachers who believed that school districts can choose to inform students and parents of personal curriculum options.

Question 3.4. The special education teachers were asked to respond to the following statement: *In my school or district, we regularly consider personal curriculum plans for students with mild disabilities.*

Figure 8 suggests that 36.7% of the respondents reported that their school or school district's common practice is to consider PC plans for students with mild disabilities. A relatively large percent (30%) of the participants selected a neutral response, and one-third of the respondents (33.3%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed.

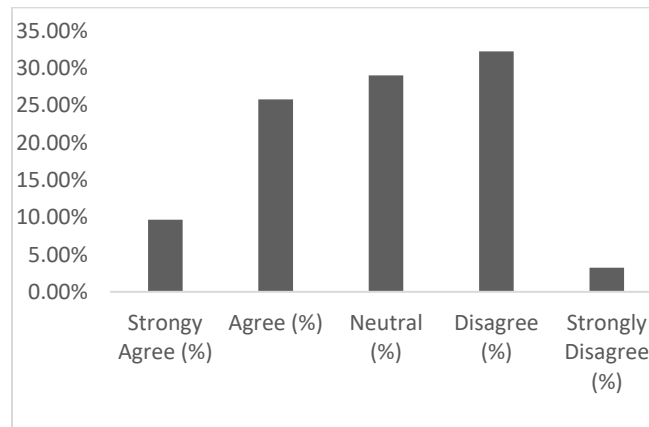


Figure 8. Percentage of teachers who reported that their school districts regularly consider personal curriculum plans for students with mild disabilities.

Additional comments from special education teachers about professional development, PCs, and course of study decisions. A special educator from the Erie ISD stated the following: “In our district, I don’t feel that we have had nearly enough training or information regarding PC plans for students with IEPs. I also feel that general education teachers could benefit from this training as well. A teacher from the Ontario ISD offered the following feedback: “The course of study decision is often determined by an administrator. Students are required to attempt the MMC in 9th grade before a decision is made to change the student to a Certificate program. In our district, we use PC’s, but minimal training has been offered to staff.” A teacher from the Superior ISD stated,

I am familiar with PCs, but I have never received Professional Development about creating them. I am not sure that there is a standard process within our ISD when creating them and even though my understanding is that a counselor needs to be involved, it typically falls under the shoulders of the student’s direct case manager or classroom special education teacher. I think each district within the ISD does things a little differently, but I absolutely believe that there needs to be a standardized process for developing meaningful PCs for students. I don’t hear them talked about as much in this district as I used to when I worked for another district within the same ISD, which leads me to believe it’s an option that isn’t presented to parents or students for whatever reason.

Another special educator from the Superior ISD said, “I would like training on PC options because I don’t really know much about it at all.”

Findings from personal interviews of special education directors regarding teacher preparedness for discussing PC plans and how their district informs parents of PC options.

Erie ISD special education directors. The director of Gageview Schools reported, “We have not provided formal training to teachers regarding PC plans.” Springfield’s special education director said, “As far as I know, our district has not provided teachers with any training.” Linn Public Schools’ director responded by saying, “I have a team of special education teachers and counselors who have had training, so only part of my staff has been trained.” The Deer Valley Schools special education director said, “We have not had any training since I have been here, but it’s something that we are looking into. We need to do a better job with this.” The director from the Monarch School District said, “Our teachers have received some training about PCs.”

Huron ISD special education directors. The special education directors from five school districts located in the Huron ISD reported about the types of training that school districts have provided to teachers pertaining to PC plans. The director for the West Shores School District responded by saying, “We provided training to special education teachers, but general education teachers have not had much training. We did, however, provide counselors with training.”

The director with oversight in the Little Valley School District stated, “I don’t think we have provided any actual training. I am quite sure that we have sent out an email or something about PCs, but in terms of actual training, no.” The director from Willow Springs said, “We have not had any training for teachers since I have been here.” The director from the Meadows School District provided the following information: “Our special education

teachers receive training through myself and our Transition Coordinator. If something new comes about, one of us informs the teachers.” The director from Northview School District shared, “Our ISD has done a great job communicating important updates and eligibility information to us. I would describe our teacher training for PCs as adequate.”

Ontario ISD special education directors. The director of Wilcox Lakes said, “In all honesty, I think the training comes from the principal at the high school when he meets with counselors and special education case managers.” The director for Warra Woods and Phillipsberg School Districts answered by saying, “We spend a lot of time with principals, counselors, and special education staff. They bring PC options up to families when needed.” Finally, Berwick Public Schools and Rosedale Public Schools’ director responded, “I only work with special education teachers, so I am not too sure about their training, but the superintendent has given the principals a lot of information on PCs with the expectation that the principal relays the information to teachers.”

Superior ISD special education directors. Garold Farms School District’s special education director responded,

There has been a lot of training provided to teachers. Our counselors have provided training to general education teachers and I have trained our special education staff.

We have a Board Policy related to PCs and we brought the MDE in for additional training.

Warren Meadows School District’s special education director said, “Training has been done on a case-by-case basis. I rely heavily upon case managers and counselors to spread the word. We have not had a district wide PD, but I would say we have had lots of internal communication.” The special education director from the J. Edwards School District

stated, “I have provided a couple of different trainings for teacher consultants and counselors regarding how to write PCs. In fact, we created a form to use to help teachers understand eligibility requirements.” The director from Mooney Public Schools said, “we have not had any formal training in a while. We had some training five or so years ago.”

Summary

This chapter comprised responses of special education teachers and special education directors. Chapter Five includes discussion of findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

Administrative Rules for Special Education (MARSE) contains highly prescriptive language about the functions and responsibilities of IEPTs for compliance with federal and state laws (Michigan Department of Education, 2018). Special education teachers who work with students at the high school level and special education directors, with district-wide responsibilities, who were members of IEPTs, were voluntary participants in this study. The important course of study decision, whether the student works toward a traditional diploma or a certificate, is made by the IEPT.

This study explored the ways that IEPTs function at the high school level, including training of special education teachers to achieve collaboration and consensus, the use of models or tools to aid in decision-making, and teacher and family awareness of PC plans leading to an appropriate course of study for students with disabilities. This chapter includes discussion of the research findings, limitations, and delimitations of the study, implications for students and administrators; recommendations for further research; summary and conclusions; and a personal reflection.

Addressing the Research Questions

Research Question 1 *What types of training are school districts providing to special education teachers to aid them in facilitating IEP meetings collaboratively to achieve consensus?*

Nearly two-thirds of the special education teachers indicated that their school and/or school district had not provided them with training related to reaching collaborative decisions. Of the 19 interviews conducted with special education directors, most (84.2%) directors were unable to answer affirmatively that their school district had provided special

education teachers with professional development related to consensus and collaboration. Comments, such as “that’s a great idea” and “we don’t, but I think we should,” indicated that directors involved in the study saw value in providing training, yet few had provided teachers with research-based training. The IEP process is inherently collaborative. Without training in collaboration as a method to achieve consensus, it is possible that those IEPTs are inherently dysfunctional from the onset.

Research Question 2 *Are IEP Teams using any tangible tools, models, or other guidelines to help the teams reach an informed Course of Study Decision?*

Interviews with special education directors revealed that, in general, their teachers do not use model, tool, or guideline to assist them as they work to reach a decision regarding the student’s course of study. A high percentage (69.9%) of special education teachers confirmed that they have not received any type of decision tree to aid them in reaching the course of study decision. Although the absence of a decision-making tool does not indicate that the team is not equipped with the skills to make a course of study decision, it does suggest that IEPTs are operating on their own without guidance. It is important to note that the absence of a tool or model does not necessarily indicate that IEPTs are unable to reach an informed decision regarding a course of study. However, when looking at the totality of this study, it is *possible* that failing to provide teachers with a tool designed to help the team reach an informed course of study decision *could* contribute to dysfunction within the IEPT. This researcher is not advocating for “one size fits all” or “cookie cutter” IEPs. Rather, it is the intention of this researcher to bring models such as FIEP, SCIEP, and PATH, to the forefront in an attempt to help the IEPT determine the appropriate, individualized, course of study.

Research Question 3 *How are local education agencies informing parents of Personal Curriculum options afforded to their son or daughter under MCL 380.1278b?*

Although 23.3% of respondents stated that their school and/or district informs parents and educators about PC options for all students, the clear majority indicated that, to their knowledge, their school and or district does not inform parents and educators of PC options for students that determine the course of study toward a traditional diploma or a certificate.

Most directors indicated that they either do not provide notice to students and their families or cited some type of passive communication, such as reporting that information could be found in a handbook or embedded within a website. One director described PC plans as “the best kept secret,” explaining further that, in some instances, she believed that superintendents direct teams to keep PC options “quiet,” because if it gets out that “special ed kids can get a diploma with their district name on it, it somehow diminishes the prestige of the diploma.” As described in Chapter Two, this tactic violates the law.

Results from the special education teacher survey showed that more than half of the respondents believed that school districts can choose to inform parents of PC options in Michigan; this finding suggested that respondents are widely uninformed of a law that they must follow. When more than half of the participants are misinformed about a law that imposes life altering consequences and affects students for whom they are directly responsible, many students are not receiving justice. Survey data also reflected that more than 16% of the respondents were unsure whether a parent or teacher could initiate the PC process, further demonstrating the confusion that exists among professionals.

Only 26.7% of the participants stated that they have received training regarding PC plans for students. Nearly three-fourths of the respondents provided a neutral, disagree, or

strongly disagree response, suggesting that the special education students of those teachers are at a significant disadvantage compared to their peers who reside in a school district where teachers are well- prepared to discuss PC options with families. Dysfunction within IEPTs may result when teachers lack awareness of a method of diploma acquisition for a student with a disability in Michigan.

Data gathered in this study determined that the majority of participating school districts did not adequately prepare special educators with the knowledge and skills required to hold effective IEPT meetings, especially surrounding the topic of training for collaboration and consensus and information pertaining to PC options leading to decisions about the course of study for students with disabilities. Further, those in charge of facilitating IEPT meetings are not provided with a tool or model from the federal, state, or local education agency.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Limitations. Although this study has provided meaningful data from the participants who volunteered to respond to the research questions, this study, like all studies, was limited by factors beyond the control of the researcher. In a qualitative study, limitations are imposed by characteristics of the setting or participants that may be unknown or unaccounted for by the researcher, such as related or length of experience; underlying discord surrounding relationships among the participants, governing agencies, or the community; or the willingness of participants to be truthful and unbiased.

The survey method of gathering data offered limitations. Survey participants may have answered questions hastily, and failed to give themselves adequate time to process each question or statement, reflect, and provide a thoughtful response. Although participants were given the opportunity to provide a question or statement at the end of the survey, few took

advantage of this option. Without asking a question or attempting to substantiate a response to specific questions, it is possible that a participants could misunderstand a question, thereby making their response invalid. Parents are an integral component of the IEPT. Their involvement and ability to participate is essential for the IEPT to function collaboratively. Although this study explored collaboration as one aspect of one research question, parents were not invited to participate in this research study.

Delimitations. Parameters set by the researcher control the scope of the study. The size of the sample limits the generalizability of the results and the extent to which the sample represents the population. A specific limitation to this study pertains to the size of the sample. Of the 840 public school districts in Michigan, according to Mi School Data (2018), this study involved 19 school districts from four intermediate school districts (ISDs) in one geographic area of the state. Further, this study comprised data gathered from 30 special educators from those 19 school districts; in some cases, only one teacher from a school district agreed to participate in the study. It is possible that the findings of the data gathered in this study are not indicative of the ways that IEPTs function in all schools in Michigan or even indicative of practices throughout the participant ISDs, given the limited number of participants.

Implications for Students

The implications of findings in this study for students are important. Decisions of the IEPT determine the course of study for students with disabilities. When those responsible for facilitating IEP meetings are not trained or given tools to implement research-based ways of working together toward a common goal and achieving consensus and who lack awareness of crucial items to consider, such as PC plans as a pathway to diploma acquisition, outcomes for

students may be impacted. The student who is awarded a diploma will have far more opportunities to secure gainful employment with lifelong economic consequences compared to the student who earns a certificate of completion. Inconsistencies in practice may result in problems concerning equity. Without a cohesive plan, one student's fate might be very different than another's even if they attend a school within the same ISD, or a school within the same district, or in some cases, the same school as a peer with similar abilities, challenges, and aspirations.

Researchers Kohler and Field (2003) examined effective transition practices for students with disabilities. The researchers defined student focused planning as a way “for students to develop and strengthen self-determination skills through practice and application” (p.176). The researchers advised that cross-curricular opportunities should be provided to students with disabilities to help them set their own goals based on various experiences and interests.

Implications for Administrators

This study identified inconsistent practice regarding requirement of schools and school districts to provide parents and teachers with information pertaining to PC plans. The language within the state statute is clear:

Schools shall provide an annual notice to parents or guardians explaining the PC and that all students are entitled to a PC. This notice shall be sent to a student's home and can take several forms, including written letter, newsletter, or handbook. This notice shall also be posted on the school's website. (Michigan Department of Education, 2014, para. 7)

When parents, families, students, and teachers are not notified about the options afforded by the PC plans as required, the IEPT may be unable to make an informed decision regarding a student's course of study. The law does not allow for communities, teachers, special education directors or superintendents to determine whether students with IEPs *deserve* to have a PC as a pathway to diploma acquisition. PC plans cannot be "the best kept secret." A failure to train teachers and to notify families of PC plans contributes to dysfunction in the IEP process as the team works to identify a student's course of study.

Blackwell and Rosetti, (2014) noted that when administrators and special educators talked more and played a larger role in the IEP development, families and general educators contributed less in IEP meetings. Childre and Chambers (2011) noted the use of the Student-Centered Individual Education Planning (SCIEP) tool designed to increase the role of the families in the IEP process and to adhere to the letter and spirit of IDEA by including parents as active IEPT members. Mueller and Moriarity-Vick (2019) suggested use of the Facilitated Individualized Education Program (FIEP) to enhance outcomes for students with disabilities. Effective procedures used to foster shared decision-making, problem solving, and active parent participation while generating a meaningful IEP for the student can include a neutral party to function as the facilitator to provide support, as needed.

Implications for Future Research

In this study, the participants included practices of special educators and special education directors. Extant research pertains to the thoughts and feelings of parents who report feeling ill-equipped to voice concerns as they enter the IEP process (Martin 2005). Parents express inadequacy in the use of special education jargon and frustration in their reliance on the special education teacher and his or her colleagues being the *experts*. It

would be important to examine the ways that schools work to combat those feelings in an effort to increase the role of parents as collaborators in their child's education.

The concerns about employment opportunities for students who do not have a diploma offer another opportunity for further research. Given the knowledge that many well-known businesses require a high school diploma or GED as the minimum qualification for employment despite students' skill levels, further research could examine the beliefs and attitudes of special educators about the value of certificates of completion for students with mild disabilities.

Although not included in the primary areas of concern in the present study, participants were asked to respond to the following statement: *I feel that Certificates of Completion should be the norm for most students with mild disabilities who are unable to meet the requirements of the Michigan Merit Curriculum, MMC.* About one in four of the respondents believed that certificates of completion should be the norm for students with mild disabilities, one-third provided a neutral response, and almost half disagreed or strongly disagreed. These results indicated that a more specific research effort be directed into the decisions about the merits of certificates of completion and under which criteria they should be determined to be the outcome of the course of study for special education students.

Future research could include examination of the role played by the state's ISDs in the functions of training, information regarding legislative mandates, and involvement of stakeholders in the practices of special education services. A companion to that legislation or another study could involve a more thorough look at the involvement and practices of business in employment of students with disabilities. A study of best practices could inform decisions of educators throughout the hierarchy about special education issues.

Future research could also include an examination of superintendents' awareness of the training provided, or not provided, to special educators pertaining to collaboration and consensus; the use, or lack of use, of a model to aid the team in reaching an appropriate, individualized, course of study, and the ways that schools inform parents of PC plans. Furthermore, the beliefs of superintendents surrounding a validity and appropriateness of diploma acquisition for students with disabilities via PCs would also be worthy of future research efforts.

Summary and Conclusions

The IEP process is inherently collaborative, yet more than half of the school districts involved in this study did not provide teachers with the building blocks necessary for holding collaborative meetings with the intention of reaching consensus. In terms of district-provided professional development, slightly more than one-third of the respondents stated that they have received training in research-based ways for achieving consensus within the context of IEP meetings.

Of the 19 interviews conducted with special education directors, most were unable to answer the question affirmatively pertaining to whether they have provided special education teachers with professional development related to consensus and collaboration. Directors' comments indicated value in providing training, yet few have provided teachers with research-based training.

Consensus-reaching is an important aspect of the IEP process, especially as it relates to determining a student's course of study. The failure to provide special education teachers with this necessary training contributes to dysfunction in the IEP process.

IEPTs are not widely using a tool, model, or any guideline to aid them in determining an appropriate course of study decision within the IEP process. Three-fourths of the 30 respondents showed responses of neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree that their district implements a tool or model to help the IEPT make informed decisions as they relate to the student's course of study. These findings suggest access and implementation of assistance available from state resources. Families, students, and special educators are frequently left in the dark in terms of a very important factor regarding the PC, to consider if the student and his or her family wanted to pursue a diploma course of study. These findings reflected an inherently dysfunctional process with lifelong implications for students.

Additional data suggest that participants had widely different experiences in training and conduct of IEP process, leading to indications of the need for consistent implementation of state and federal mandates for special education services among administration and practitioners throughout.

A Personal Reflection

Given this researcher's professional experiences in special education as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal, there was a desire to learn more about teacher training as special education teachers hold annual IEPT meetings to meet the educational needs of the students for whom they are responsible.

This researcher is not of the opinion that every student with a disability *should* use a PC plan or that every student with a disability *should* avoid a certificate of completion. However, students with mild, and arguably moderate impairments should at a minimum, be afforded the opportunity for the IEPT to consider the PC as an option. Students with severe cognitive impairments and those severely impacted by autism spectrum disorder will likely

find the certificate of completion to be beneficial as it affords them the option of receiving special education services in Michigan Public Schools until the age of 26.

Although this study included a relatively small sample with inherent generalizability factors, it is important to note that the students with special needs who attend the schools involved in this study are potentially deeply impacted by their school district's failure to provide their special education teachers with training in collaboration and consensus.

Additionally, the failure to utilize a tool to help the team reach an informed, individualized, and appropriate course of study is also potentially detrimental to students receiving special education services at many of the school districts involved in this study. A school district's failure to inform parents and students of PC options available to students with disabilities in Michigan could be described as both irresponsible and immoral.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: University Human Subjects Review Committee Approval

IRB Approval Letter Nov 30, 2017 2:43 PM EST Patrick Mies Leadership and Counsel,
Users loaded with unmatched Organization affiliation.

Re: Exempt - Initial - UHSRC-FY17-18-70 A MIXED METHODS EXAMINATION OF
COURSE OF STUDY AND PERSONAL CURRICULUM DECISIONS MADE BY
INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANNING TEAMS FOR STUDENTS RECEIVING
SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

Dear Dr. Patrick Mies: The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review
Committee has rendered the decision below for A MIXED METHODS EXAMINATION OF
COURSE OF STUDY AND PERSONAL CURRICULUM DECISIONS MADE BY
INDIVIDUAL EDUCATION PLANNING TEAMS FOR STUDENTS RECEIVING
SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES IN SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN.

You may begin your research. Decision: Exempt Selected Category: Category 2. Research
involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey
procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information
obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or
through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects'
responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil
liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Renewals: Exempt studies do not need to be renewed. When the project is completed, please
contact human.subjects@emich.edu. Modifications: Any plan to alter the study design or any
study documents must be reviewed to determine if the Exempt decision changes.

You must submit a modification request application in Cayuse IRB and await a decision prior
to implementation. Problems: Any deviations from the study protocol, unanticipated
problems, adverse events, subject complaints, or other problems that may affect the risk to
human subjects must be reported to the UHSRC. Complete an incident report in Cayuse IRB.

Follow-up: Please contact the UHSRC when your project is complete.

Please contact human.subjects@emich.edu with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee

Appendix B: Teacher Survey

Directions

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your answers will assist in helping to improve educational outcomes for students with mild impairments who receive special education services.

1= Strongly Agree, 2= Agree, 3=Neutral, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree

1. In my school, our special education teachers have received Professional Development on reaching consensus in IEPT meetings. (Q1)
1 2 3 4 5

2. In my school, we have a centralized model, used by ALL case managers to assist the IEPT in electing a student's Course of Study. (A standard system or tool to aid in decision making used by ALL case managers) (Q1)
1 2 3 4 5

3. In my school, we have a model, used by SOME case managers when selecting a student's Course of Study. (A standard system or tool to aid in decision making used by SOME case managers) (Q2)
1 2 3 4 5

4. In my school, special education case managers are expected to help the IEP Team identify the appropriate Course of Study, but all IEP Team participants have an equal voice. (Q1)
1 2 3 4 5

5. In my school, a student's Course of Study decision is made by the case manager and other participants usually agree with the decision. (Q1)
1 2 3 4 5

6. In my school, we make sure that all students receiving special education services have a Transition Plan on or before the student reaches sixteen years of age. (Q1)
1 2 3 4 5

7. In my school, we are intentional about creating a Transition Plan for students receiving special education services while they are in middle school. (Q1)
1 2 3 4 5

8. Students with disabilities are always required to meet ALL requirements set forth with the Michigan Merit Curriculum in order to receive a high school diploma. (Q3)
- 1 2 3 4 5
9. As a special educator working in a high school setting, I am aware of Personal Curriculum Plans. (Q3)
- 1 2 3 4 5
10. As a special educator working in a high school setting, I have participated in Personal Curriculum Plan meetings for students with disabilities (IEPs).
- 1 2 3 4 5
11. I am aware that the Michigan Department of Education allows students with Individualized Education Programs to utilize a Personal Curriculum as a pathway to receive a standard high school diploma. (Q3)
- 1 2 3 4 5
12. I believe that some students with mild learning disabilities, mild cognitive impairments, autism spectrum disorder, and emotional impairments should be able to use a Personal Curriculum plan as a way to earn a traditional high school diploma if the student and parent want a diploma course of study. (Q3)
- 1 2 3 4 5
13. In my school, we regularly consider Personal Curriculum Plans for students with mild impairments. (Q4)
- 1 2 3 4 5
14. In my school, parents and educators are informed of Personal Curriculum options for all students. (Q2)
- 1 2 3 4 5
15. In my professional career as a special educator, I have received Professional Development in the area of Personal Curriculum Plans. (Q3) (Q4)
- 1 2 3 4 5
16. A parent or educator can request a Personal Curriculum Plan for a student. (Q3)
- 1 2 3 4 5
17. A student's Personal Curriculum Plan should allow the student to take as much general education curriculum as "practicable" while working toward a diploma. (Q3)
- 1 2 3 4 5

18. I feel that students who receive Certificates of Completion are able, in general, to get entry-level jobs at most businesses despite not having a diploma. (Q3)

1 2 3 4 5

19. I feel that Certificates of Completion should be the norm for most students with mild disabilities who are unable to meet the requirements of the Michigan Merit Curriculum, MMC. (Q3)

1 2 3 4 5

20. School districts can choose to inform students and parents of Personal Curriculum options. (Q2)

1 2 3 4 5

21. When determining a student's Course of Study, it is important to make sure the Course of Study decision is aligned with the student's post-secondary goals as outlined within the Transition Plan AND a student's Educational Development Plan, EDP. (Q3)

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix C: Special Education Director (or designee) Interview Questions

Thank you so much for taking the time to allow me to ask you a few questions.

1. Can you please tell me how your teachers receive training in reaching a course of study decision? I am also interested in understanding how teachers are trained to reach consensus as it relates to course of study decisions at IEP meetings? (Q1)
2. I am quite interested in learning more about how your teachers determine a student's Course of Study. Can you please tell me whether your teachers use a tangible tool or model when attempting to reach a Course of Study decision? (Q1)
3. Can you please tell me how parents and students are informed of Personal Curriculum options in your school district? (Q2)
4. Does your school district currently have any students with mild impairments using a Personal Curriculum Plan as a pathway to the acquisition of a diploma? (Q3)
5. *If the answer to question four is "yes",* What factors do you think contribute to your district using Personal Curriculum Plans for students with mild disabilities and IEPs? (Q3)
6. *If the answer to question four in "no",* What factors do you think contribute to your district not using Personal Curriculum Plans for students with mild disabilities and IEPs? (Q3) (Q4)
7. Can you please tell me about the frequency of PC usage in your school district among general education students (Q3)
8. What opportunities exist for students on Certificate of Completion Tracks after they complete their traditional four years of high school? (Q3)
9. Please describe the training that your district has provided to teacher regarding Personal Curriculum options for students with and without IEPs? (Q2)(Q4)
10. What direction have you received from your Superintendent regarding Personal Curriculum Plans for students with IEPs? (Q3)