Office of Student Services
Annual Report 2021-2022

The Merrimack School District's Office of Student Services is fully committed to the conviction that all students can achieve their fullest potential. Through perseverance and dedication, we fully commit ourselves to providing the tools, knowledge, and compassion to assist our children and youth to achieve their goals. Our mission is to improve the quality of life and education of our children and youth with disabilities by creating trusting partnerships with their families and our community and state agencies to develop, communicate and disseminate essential skills, knowledge and values through research-based best practices, teaching, and service.

The Merrimack School District's Office of Student Services is required to provide special education and related services to students with educational disabilities according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) along with the New Hampshire Rules for the Education of Children with Disabilities. These Federal and State mandates require school districts to evaluate students suspected as having educational disabilities, provide students with Individual Education Programs (IEP's), and provide students with specialized instruction including reading and math programs, speech and language services, occupational and physical therapy, counseling services, behavioral therapy and intervention, transition services, social work, mental health supports, along with other special services. These services are to be provided in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) providing access to non-disabled peers and the general education curriculum. To meet this legal mandate, the Merrimack School District has developed a wide array and continuum of programming supports to meet the unique needs of children within our public schools, and when necessary, in out-of-district placements.

Merrimack School District's Office of Student Services works with the New Hampshire Education Department (NHED) to monitor several State of NH Performance Plan Indicators identified by the United States Department of Education. The indicators are: Preschool Outcomes, Disproportionate Representation of Disability, Disproportionate Representation based on Race, Suspension and Expulsion Rates for students with Disabilities, Child Find, Early Childhood Transition, Secondary Transition and Timelines of Initial/ Ongoing evaluations. We have partnered with NHED to offer our educators and support personnel technical assistance and professional development around the various indicators and updates made at the state and local level over the past year. Additionally, we must meet federal auditing criteria in grant management, maintenance of effort and overall fiscal audit submitted to the NHDOE.

Over the past year we have focused on our continued collaboration and engagement with our parent community. We have continued to host evening Parent Conversations with Jessica Thompson, Alison Roy, Peg Dawson, Whitney Tave and Polly Bath to name a few to address parent survey results. Topics included workshops on supporting the special education process, parent advocacy, transitional services, executive functioning, addressing socioemotional and behavioral challenges, literacy, brain-based learning, and self-regulation. Annually we offer a daylong onboarding and annual review of best practices for our paraeducators to support employee retention and capacity building around special education and supporting students with educational disabilities in a variety of school settings held in late August.

We continue to hone and expand our array of extended school year (ESY) opportunities tailored to the unique needs of individual students beyond the traditional five-week programs. We continue to expand and improve our transitional services with ongoing opportunities for students to receive support throughout the summer and in the week leading up to the beginning of the school year annually. This has been identified as a priority by our families and educators who reported elevated levels of anxiety and worry in our student population as they transition. We continue to partner with the Office of Student Wellness and Fern Seiden to expand our social and emotional learning (SEL) skill building opportunities for students in our elementary and secondary summer programs and school year programs.

Student Services has continued partnerships with Literacy Learning Solutions to support Merrimack special educators in earning their certification as Orton Gillingham Dyslexia Instructors. We will have ten educators at the end of the school year 2023 who have completed this program. We are working across our lower elementary schools to improve our specialized instruction in all areas of literacy by adding specific programs, tools, software, and evaluations to increase our ability to respond to the complex literacy needs of our students with specific learning disabilities.

Aligning our programs for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities across our school district has been another priority this year. We have partnered with SERESC and Eric Mann to do this work. Ensuring consistent practice, programs, and care improve outcomes for our students. We continue to look at our systems and support in special education and student services to provide high quality services and educational support that are efficient and cost effective. We are invested in improving our prevention, universal support and skill building for all students in grades K-12 as part of a multitiered system of support (MTSS). By creating a tiered system of support for academic, behavioral, and socioemotional needs, we can offer universal support to all students, and improved outcomes for our most vulnerable students who exhibit elevated levels of anxiety and worry as they transition, especially to a new school. We continue to partner with the Office of Student Wellness and Fern Seiden to do this work.

It is with the greatest appreciation for this work that I have been charged with that I respectfully submit this annual report.

Respectfully Submitted,

Heather Barker