

Running Project

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Part One

The Catholic Diocese of Dallas School system is a parochial school system that serves over thirteen thousand students in grades PreK through 12th. The district serves students from various socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. While Dallas proper is a large urban area, the district serves students also living in the suburban and more rural areas within the Dallas Diocese. Eighteen percent of the students in the diocese received some form of tuition assistance during the 2022 school year, with forty-one percent of students in grades PreK-12 qualifying for free or reduced lunch services (CSO 2022). The schools in the diocese accommodate students who have mild to moderate learning disabilities at all grade levels. Additionally, there is a private school in the diocese, Notre Dame School of Dallas, which serves roughly 150 students with developmental disabilities (The Notre Dame School of Dallas).

I work at St. Patrick Catholic School, an elementary school within the Diocese of Dallas, as a Content Mastery teacher. The scheduled classes I teach include a pullout small group of 5th graders for English Language Arts Reading instruction. Twice a week, I teach a Study Skills elective to a group of 7th and 8th graders. I work with students who are in the 5th-8th grades, and who have been diagnosed with a learning disability. These diagnosed learning disabilities are usually in the categories of Dyslexia, ADHD, Dyscalculia, or high functioning Autism. When I am not teaching, I work with the general education teachers to ensure that students' needs and accommodations are being met in the general education setting. At the beginning of each school year, I arrange and hold meetings with the families and students to review the student's accommodation plan and discuss any changes that need to occur for the upcoming year. As the

school year progresses, I monitor students' progress and communicate frequently with students' families concerning their child's progress or any concerns that arise.

Based on the QI-2 survey, the domain that is the strongest at the school I work at is Curriculum Instruction. This domain had a score of 2. On a diocesan level, this is seen as a strength because on average students in the diocese performed 72 percent better than their peers on the ITBS tests in 2022 (CSO 2022). At a school level, the grade school I currently teach at regularly scores twenty points above the diocesan average in the 8th grade. These scores include the students who have learning disabilities who took the assessment. In addition to the core academics, students can participate in a variety of specials classes and electives of their choosing. Students participate in art and music weekly in all grade levels. Seventh and eighth graders choose two electives a year to participate in. These classes vary in topics such as study skills, yoga, technology, yearbook, horticulture, puzzles and games, art, choir, speech and drama, and band. While core academics is a strength within the diocese, there are still areas of weakness. The main weakness that is found in curriculum instruction, especially at the elementary level, is providing students with opportunities to apply what they are learning to their lives outside of school. This connection is not always explicitly taught, and students often don't make the connection between what they are learning and how it can be used in their everyday life. A second weakness is that the curriculum is very rigid. Unless a student is in a Dyslexia intervention program at the school, the curriculum cannot be modified to meet individual students' needs. Students are expected to learn and pass grade-level material.

The domain with the second highest score was the Transition and Planning domain. This area scored a 1.88. Transition planning primary occurs in the parochial school I teach at when

students are at the end of the 4th grade. This is when students who have just finished the Take Flight Dyslexia intervention program prepare to learn using the general education curriculum materials as fifth graders during their pullout ELA small group. I meet in person with the families of the rising 5th graders who will need educational services to answer any questions they may have and share information about student services available in grades 5 through 8. At the start of the fourth quarter, in their fifth-grade year, students are transitioned from the pull-out ELA class back into the general education setting. This is in preparation for their 6th grade year where there is not a pull-out ELA class available. Students still receive academic accommodations through their sixth seventh and eighth grade year. A weakness that the school and diocese have with transition planning is its role in guiding families with transitioning students from middle school into high school. Much of this responsibility is placed on the families to navigate this transition on their own.

The Student Involvement domain scored a 1.71 on the survey. At the start of students eighth grade year, all students begin creating a digital portfolio website in their technology class. Here is where they compile samples of their work, share about their interests and hobbies, and any future goals they have. Students create business cards with the link to their portfolio. These cards are then given to the person who interviews them as a part of the application process to the private high school they are applying to. In preparation for these interviews, the school holds mock interviews where the students can practice and get feedback on their interview skills. As a part of the high school application process, students are required to take the Independent School Entrance Exam (ISEE). Students who have a diagnosed learning disability may apply for accommodations on this exam. The parents and I work together to complete the

necessary paperwork to request the accommodation that a student needs for this exam. A weakness in this domain is that some students often do not have the opportunity to express their thoughts about where they would like to attend high school. It often is assumed that they will go to one school and not another. Many times, this occurs because an older sibling or family member has attended a particular high school. That legacy status becomes more important than whether the student will be able to succeed at the school.

Systems Level Infrastructure received a score of 1.63 on the survey. While the private high schools do have similar application procedures, there is not a formal procedure in place to ensure that students with learning disabilities make the transition smoothly. There is not a transition coordinator at the diocesan office level. Much of the transition planning falls on the families at all levels, and the school counselors or advisors at the high school level.

Determining if a student is ready for the next grade or a transition to high school or beyond very much depends on the student's grades earned in traditional academic areas. The parochial school system has a strong academic program in place across all ages and all schools that monitor students' progress regularly. Assessment tools such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (IOWA) and CoGat, Renaissance Learning assessments are used to monitor progress. At the school where I teach, the eighth-grade students participate in the Clifton Strengths Finder survey to learn in what areas they may have a strength. The survey score for the Transition Assessment was 1.5. However, while the students can identify potential areas that are their strengths, they are not given the opportunity or guidance in putting this knowledge into practice and applying it to their everyday lives.

Interagency Collaboration and Community Services was one of the domains that scored the lowest on the survey. This domain's score was 1.29. At the elementary level, there is not opportunities for students to explore career or vocational skills. The schools do connect families to companies that may provide additional tutoring in academic or executive functioning skills. If needed the private school will call on the local public school to aid in meeting students' needs in areas that the school is not equipped to meet. For instance, services such as speech therapy may be provided through public schools or through a contracted party. However, the availability of this service depends on the funding in the public school system or the ability of the family to pay for private services. Coordinating with outside agencies remains a challenge when planning for transitions in the private school setting.

The domain with the lowest scores in the survey was Family Involvement. This domain had a score of 1.25. Families have many opportunities to be involved with the school. There is a parent/teacher association that meets bimonthly, and parents have the opportunity to be room parents at for their child's grade level. The school also sponsors a parent book club where parenting strategies and topics are discussed. There are grade level parent meetings at the start of each school year, and parent teacher conferences are held in the fall and the spring. In contrast however, when it comes to the topic of a student with special needs transitioning from one academic setting to another the school plays a very small role in working with families to ensure that that is a smooth transition.

Overall, the results of the survey indicate that there are several areas in transition services that the Diocese of Dallas and its schools could improve upon. One of the areas that may be the most critical to address is the Interagency Collaboration and Community Services.

This domain scored a 1.29 on the survey. Parochial schools can meet the needs of most of their students with very few resources and funding available to them. However, using these resources and relying on the community to support students with special needs is an area that parochial schools could explore more fully.

Resources:

CSO annual report. (2022). <https://csodallas.org/wp-content/flipbook-annual-report/CSO-Annual-Report.html>

The Notre Dame School of Dallas. (n.d.-b). The Notre Dame School of Dallas. <https://www.notredameschool.org/m/>