Recommendations for Improving

School-Home Communication

# Context

The board members of Partnership for Extraordinary Minds (xMinds) have received multiple anecdotal reports from parents, guardians, and caregivers (herein after referred to as *caregivers*) regarding their level of dissatisfaction with the quality and frequency of communication from their child’s school team.

In response to these anecdotal reports, xMinds created and offered to caregivers on our electronic mailing list, as well as visitors at our website and social media platforms, the opportunity to respond to a survey regarding school communication about their child with autism so we could better understand the nature of communication practices in MCPS.

**The Importance of School-Home Communication**

School-home communication is an essential aspect of learning for a child with autism. Several core challenges of autism—such as difficulties with communication, executive function, and self-regulation—can significantly limit a parent’s knowledge of their child’s day-to-day school life and academic and social functioning, making it difficult to support and reinforce their child’s learning at school.

Communication difficulties can include a child not reporting challenges they may be having at school, whether they may be academic, emotional, or social, or failing to self-advocate with a teacher or parent when he or she doesn’t understand an assignment or has a need. Because of this challenge, caregivers are more able to support their child’s academic success if their source of important information is the school rather than the student.

Challenges with executive function can result in autistic students having difficulties breaking tasks into manageable pieces, remembering to bring their assignments home, and keeping track of their homework and tests for multiple classes. If caregivers are kept apprised of the work their child is assigned, as well as strategies for success, they can better support their child at home so they can be more successful at school and gradually need fewer supports over time. Likewise, difficulties with self-regulation necessitate a team effort, including bidirectional school-home information sharing.

**About the Survey**

We asked caregivers whether their children were in preschool or elementary, middle, or high school, and whether they were in specific programs or placed in their neighborhood schools. If the latter, we asked if they had special education support. We then asked caregivers to report who their main communication contacts were at school, how often and by which methods they communicated, and whether they use a set form of communication such as a behavior contract or daily checklist. We then asked respondents to rate their satisfaction with the frequency and quality of communication. Finally, we asked caregivers to tell us their concerns and preferences regarding school communication by sharing in their own words what they like about the communication they receive from school and what changes they would like to see in communications; whether they would be willing to share their school’s communication template, if they used one; and whether there was anything else they would like to share regarding communications.

Because this was a voluntary survey, the respondents do not form a representative sample. The survey’s results reflect the responses shared by those who chose to participate. All or most respondents have children attending MCPS schools. Any trends in the data are not generalizable to the broader school system, but rather indicate experiences that some families connected to xMinds have had. We feel it is important for xMinds to understand these experiences so we can better advocate for families.

# Executive Summary and Recommendations

Sixty-four caregivers responded to the survey: 6 caregivers of preschool students; 32 caregivers of elementary school students; and 26 caregivers of middle or high school students. This report focuses on responses from 58 caregivers of elementary through high school age students.

By chance, exactly half of elementary and secondary school respondents were caregivers of students placed in special education programs (we term Program Placement) and half were caregivers of special education students placed in their neighborhood school (Neighborhood Placement). Differences emerged in our survey results between placement types at each of the two age levels, therefore we present our analyses separately by age level and placement type in the detailed results and recommendations that follow in the report. The aggregated results are briefly summarized below.

**SUMMARY OF RESULTS**

**Sources of Communication**

* Caregivers listed one or more sources of home-school communication. Aggregating Elementary and Middle School/High School caregivers reports together, special education teachers were the most common source of communication, listed by 93% of Program Placement caregivers and 60% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers. The difference in reports between placements was surprising. At the elementary school level, only 44% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported receiving communication from special education staff compared to 100% of Program Placement caregivers.
* General education teachers were sources of communication for 72% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers but only 24% of Program Placement caregivers.
* School administrators (principals, assistant principals) were listed as sources of communication for 22% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers and not listed by any Program Placement caregivers.

**Methods of Communication**

* Email was the most commonly reported source of communication, followed by behavior contracts.
* The use of set formats for communication, such as behavior contracts or daily checklists, was much more widespread among Program Placement students. Almost 60% of elementary, middle, and high school Program Placement caregivers, in aggregate, reported use of behavior contracts, compared to only 7% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers—a considerable difference.

**Frequency of Communication**

* 79% of Elementary School Program Placement caregivers reported receiving communication daily or weekly from school, compared to only 44% for Neighborhood Placement families. For middle school and high school, these numbers dropped down to 53% for programs and 0 (zero) percent for middle and high school.
* Caregiver dissatisfaction with the frequency of communication received was evident in the survey responses: Almost half (49%) of caregivers surveyed, in aggregate, evaluated the frequency of communication as not satisfactory.

**Quality of Communication**

* In aggregate, 26% of Program Placement caregivers were unsatisfied with the quality of communication, as were 48% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers. These numbers represent a high level of dissatisfaction with the quality of communication; however, we also found some caregivers to be pleased with the quality of communication (44% of Program Placement caregivers and 19% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers), suggesting that MCPS has strengths within the system—specific programs or engaged individual teachers—to consult as models.
* Many caregivers expressed that they like receiving updates on their children; they also appreciate ease of reciprocal communication and responsiveness.
* With vivid, sometimes urgent concern and emotion, caregivers shared what they would like to see changed in school-home communication. We tallied the most frequently mentioned themes, finding that many caregivers of students in both placement types want more frequent communication, more detail in communication, and more information related to their child’s special needs (e.g., updates on goals, observations, follow-through on implementation, and ideas to generalize at home). In addition, caregivers—especially with students in program placements—want more information on academics.

**SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the report, we provide detailed recommendation to MCPS for improving the quality of communication so that special needs students across the county are better supported. In summary, we advise that MCPS make the following changes:

**Sources of Communication**

* Increase involvement of special education teachers in communication, especially for students placed in their neighborhood schools.
* Increase communication from general education teachers for students placed in special programs and mainstreamed for parts of their day.

**Methods of Communication**

* Encourage the use of set formats of communication, such as behavior contracts, daily checklists, point charts, or journals that are adapted to each child’s needs. We suggest that MCPS consult programs that we found to have effective methods of communication (such as the elementary Aspergers and Behavioral and Emotional Support Services Programs and the secondary Bridge Program) and provide teachers across the county with a variety of models and tools to choose from to improve communication efficacy and quality.
* We recommend that special educators and general education teachers continue to make use of email for easy, reciprocal communication, with a mandate that teachers respond to parent communication within 24 hours.

**Frequency of Communication**

* Establish standards of frequency of communication.
* For the elementary school level, we recommend setting a minimum of *daily or weekly* communication.
* For middle and high school, we suggest a minimum of *daily to monthly*, or twice-quarterly for the most independent functioning older high school students.
* Require that all IEPs clearly define terms of communication: frequency, methods, and sources.

**Quality of Communication**

* Set guidelines for quality and content of communication to include sufficient detail and depth of information so that caregivers feel informed and can properly support their children’s success in school. Teachers should maintain open lines of communication with caregivers at all times.
* Set guidelines for special educators and general education teachers to address both academics and special needs concerns in their communications.
* Require that teachers set up and maintain current information on their classes’ online page, so reliable information about assignments and assessments can be easily accessed by parents and students; and require that teachers make their class notes and smart board slides available online daily for all students with ASD.

**Additional General Recommendations for Communication**

* Target our recommendations first to elementary schools as a starting point, especially to staff supporting students placed in their neighborhood schools, where the need was seen to be greatest.
* Determine whether our finding of low special educator involvement in communication is an indication of low involvement, engagement, and oversight of students or inadequate staffing in general. Full inclusion is an important goal for many special education students, and we commend MCPS for creating mainstreaming opportunities for their students. However, we urge caution with prematurely promoting full inclusion before staffing resources and staff training are adequate to the task. Inclusion is only inclusion if it is done right.

# Survey Findings

Respondents were divided according to their child’s level in school: elementary school or middle school/high school. For the purposes of analysis, we divided the elementary and middle school/high school respondents further into those representing students enrolled in the general education program at their neighborhood school, here termed Neighborhood Placement students, and those enrolled in a program outside of the “least restrictive environment,” termed Program Placement students. Some examples of special education programs include, but are not limited to, the MCPS Autism Elementary Program, the Asperger program, Autism Resource Services, and the Bridge program.

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Elementary caregivers reported on the *methods, sources, frequency, and quality of communication* they received from school. They also shared their *concerns and preferences* for communication.

Thirty-two caregivers of elementary-school aged children responded to our survey. The following programs were represented among the respondents: Aspergers Program (6), Behavioral and Emotional Support Services (2), Jones Lane Learning Center (now located in Darnestown Elementary) (2), LAD (1), LFI (1), ARS (2). Eighteen caregivers reported that their child was placed in their neighborhood school.

**Methods of Communication: Elementary School**

Caregivers were asked to indicate which methods of communication were used by school staff. Program Placement and Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported that they received communication through one or more of the following methods.

**Methods of Communication Reported by Elementary Caregivers**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Method of Communication | | Elementary  Program Placement  (n=14) % | Elementary Neighborhood Placement  (n=18) % |
| Phone | 1 7% | | 2 11% |
| Email | 9 64% | | 14 78% |
| Contract/Checklist | 10 71% | | 2 11% |
| Journal | 2 14% | | 0 0% |
| Quarterly Progress Report | | 0 0% | 2 11% |
| In Person | | 1 7% | 0 0% |
| Take Home Folder | | 0 0% | 1 6% |
| Don’t receive communications | | 0 0% | 1 6% |

The dominant forms of communication for elementary Program Placement caregivers were behavior contracts (reported by 71% of respondents) and emails (64%). Many caregivers reported use of multiple forms of communication, and fully half of students with Program Placements reported use of both email and behavior contracts or journals.

For Elementary Neighborhood School Placement caregivers, email was by far the most used method (78%). Only 11% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers named behavior contracts as methods of communication, a stark contrast to reports from Program Placement caregivers.

Elementary caregivers were asked whether a set format of communication, such as a behavior contract or daily checklist, is used by school staff and reported the following:

**Elementary Caregiver Reports of Set Format of Communication**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Staff Use Set Format for Communication | Elementary  Program Placement  (n=14) % | Elementary  Neighborhood Placement  (n=17)\* % |
| Yes | 11 79% | 3 18% |
| No | 3 21% | 14 82% |

\*One Neighborhood Placement caregiver reported receiving no communications and was not asked this question,

therefore is not included in these counts.

The vast majority of Program Placement caregivers (79%) reported that staff used a set format for communication, while a relatively small minority of Neighborhood Placement caregivers (18%) reported use of a set format for communication—a striking difference.

The fact that email is so widely used by teachers suggests it may be a preferred method of communication by teachers. The pervasive use of contracts in programs suggests they are useful with special education students and warrant consideration for use with mainstreamed special education students as well.

**Sources of Communication: Elementary School**

Elementary caregivers were asked to list their main sources of communication from school. The results are summarized below.

**Sources of Communication Reported by Elementary Caregivers**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sources of Communication\* | Elementary Program Placement  (n=14) % | Elementary Neighb.  Placement  (n=18) % |
| Special Education Teacher | 14 100% | 8 44% |
| General Education Teacher | 4 29% | 16 89% |
| RTSE | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| Counselor | 0 0% | 2 11% |
| Psychologist, Social Worker, Behavior Specialist | 2 14% | 0 0% |
| SLP or OT | 0 0% | 3 17% |
| Principal | 0 0% | 4 22% |
| Don’t Receive Communications | 0 0% | 1 6% |

The most frequently cited source of communication for Program Placement caregivers was special education staff (reported by all caregivers in this group). Only 29% reported that general education teachers are sources of communication.

Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported an opposite pattern. Just under half (44%) reported receiving communication from special educators and most (89%) reported receiving communication from general education instructors.

It is concerning that caregivers of special education students who are mainstreamed in their neighborhood schools are not receiving as much communication from special educators, which could indicate a lower level of involvement and oversight from special educators in their day-to-day school life. This is a concern given that the Homeschool Model is being adopted widely across MCPS.

A positive finding on the Homeschool Model is that most Neighborhood Placement caregivers appear to have contact with general education teachers, who are their main teachers. A concern about the special programs, conversely, is that relatively fewer caregivers report receiving communication from general education teachers compared to almost all of the Neighborhood Placement caregivers. While some students in programs don’t receive instruction in general education, many are mainstreamed for parts of the day. For these students, the findings raise questions about the degree of involvement of general education teachers with them.

Another striking difference between the Program Placements and the Neighborhood Placements is that Neighborhood Placement caregivers appear to hear from entirely different staff than Program Placement caregivers. Thirty-nine percent of Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported receiving communication from supplemental services staff, counselors, and administrators, while no Program Placement caregivers reported communicating with these staff. In contrast, 14% of Program Placement caregivers reported communication from a psychologist, social worker, and/or behavior specialist, while no Neighborhood Placement caregivers listed these staff as sources. These findings suggest there may be differences in staffing resources and supports given to students based on placement.

It should be determined whether the support and communication structures in Program Placement and Neighborhood Placements ought to be more consistent, especially considering that many of today’s Neighborhood Placement students were yesterday’s Program Placement students who were, quite possibly, receiving a higher level of support. While mainstreaming students is laudable, a consistency of resources and quality of support is expected, including within the school-home communication structures that are there to support the student.

It is noteworthy that almost a quarter of caregivers of Neighborhood Placement students reported receiving communication from the principal or assistant principal compared to none of the elementary Program Placement caregivers. As mentioned above, none of the caregivers of the elementary Neighborhood Placement students reported receiving communication from psychological support staff like school psychologists and behavior specialists, and, surprisingly, less than half reported communication from special education teachers.

While the sample size of this survey is small and not statistically representative of the entire school district, this particular finding of the difference in the roles of psychological support staff versus school administrators in how general education programs and special education programs approach behavior issues for special education students is important to examine.

Further investigation is warranted into whether students in general education programs are disciplined more frequently for behaviors that would typically be addressed by clinical staff or special educators as manifestations of the student’s disability in special education programs. Also meriting consideration is the question of whether administrators are adequately informed about special needs, and autism specifically, to justify their involvement over the involvement of special educators or specialists. Furthermore, it will be important to understand whether additional stress is created for both students and parents when behavioral issues and communications are handled by administrators as opposed to special education staff or psychological support specialists—and, if so, how this stress may affect students’ learning, behavior, and self-concept.The fact that special educators appear to be only in the background for many of the general education students bolsters the concern that there may be a potential need for greater special educator involvement for these students.

**Frequency and Quality of Communication: Elementary School**

Elementary caregivers were asked to report the frequency of communication from the source(s) of school communication they mentioned, from the following choices: daily, weekly, monthly, as needed, infrequently, and quarterly. Responses are reported below.

**Frequency of Communication Reported by Elementary Caregivers**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Frequency of Communication\* | Elementary  Program Placement  (n=14) % | Elementary Neighborhood Placement  (n=18) % |
| Daily | 7 50% | 3 17% |
| Weekly | 4 29% | 5 28% |
| Monthly | 1 7% | 2 11% |
| As Needed/Infrequently | 1 7% | 5 28% |
| Quarterly | 1 7% | 2 11% |
| Never | 0 0% | 1 6% |

Fully half of Elementary Program Placement caregivers received communication daily compared to just 17% of Program Placement caregivers. Nearly 80% of Program Placement caregivers reported receiving communication daily or weekly, compared to 44% of Neighborhood Placement responses. Less than a quarter of Program Placement caregivers received communication monthly or less while a majority of Neighborhood Placement caregivers received communication monthly or less.

Due to the large differences we found in frequency of communication between placement types, we looked closer at communication specifically from special education staff. All Program Placement caregivers received communication from a special education staff member: 79% received communication daily or weekly and 21% received communication monthly or less. In contrast, of the 8 elementary students in Neighborhood Placements whose caregivers received at least some of their communication from special education staff, 2 received it daily (25%), 1 weekly (13%), and the rest as needed/infrequently or quarterly (63%).

The fact that only 17% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers mentioned receiving communication daily or weekly from a special education teacher for students of elementary ageraises a concern that special educators may not be adequately involved in the educational lives of Neighborhood Placement students. One of our respondents illustrated this need, describing the general education teacher and assistant principal as the main contacts and stating they had daily contact, suggesting a high need for support. A special educator was not mentioned as a point of contact. *We believe this concern deserves immediate attention.*

The frequency of communication caregivers receive may depend, to some extent, upon the needs of individual students. Looking at caregiver satisfaction with the frequency of school-home communication can help shed light on whether differences in the amount of contact for the two placement types are appropriate relative to students’ specific needs.

To determine satisfaction with communication, caregivers were asked to give subjective ratings of two aspects of communication on 5-point scales. Caregivers rated their evaluations of the frequency of communication (from 1 = “not often enough” to 5 = “too much/too often”) and the quality of communication (1 = “very unsatisfied” to 5 = “very satisfied”). Results are reported in the table below.

**Elementary Caregiver Satisfaction with Frequency and Quality of Communication**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Evaluation of Communication\* | Elementary  Program  Placement  (n=14) % | Elementary  Neighborhood  Placement  (n=17)\* % |
| Subjective Frequency Ratings |  |  |
| Low Frequency (1, 2) | 6 43% | 11 65% |
| Middle Frequency (3) | 7 50% | 6 35% |
| High Frequency (4, 5) | 1 7% | 0 0% |
|  |  |  |
| Subjective Quality Ratings |  | (n=16) |
| Unsatisfied, Very Unsat. (1, 2) | 4 29% | 8 50% |
| Middle rating (3) | 5 36% | 4 25% |
| Satisfied, Very Satisfied (4, 5) | 5 36% | 4 25% |

\*One Elementary Neighborhood Placement caregiver did not respond to the Quality rating; Another reported

they did not receive communications and therefore were not asked either evaluative question.

Nearly half of the Elementary Program Placement caregivers (43%) gave a low subjective rating for frequency of communication. Almost one-third (29%) were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with quality of communication and just over one-third (36%) were satisfied or very satisfied.

Looking closely at the data, we found that caregivers of students in the Aspergers Program (n=6), Behavioral and Emotional Support Services (n=2), and LFI (n=1) reported higher satisfaction with the quality and frequency of communication than other program caregivers. Most of these caregivers reported use of set formats of communication like behavior contracts or point sheets.

Of the Neighborhood School Placement caregivers, 65% perceived a low frequency of communication. While one quarter of Neighborhood School Placement caregivers reported being satisfied with quality of communication, fully half reported dissatisfaction with the quality of communication from school, with 35% of caregivers giving the lowest score, “very unsatisfied.”

Caregivers of elementary students in both general education and special program settings expressed dissatisfaction with the frequency and quality of communication they received from their child’s school. Low satisfaction with frequency and quality of communication was expressed in greater proportions (50% or more) by caregivers of Neighborhood Placement students than by caregivers of Program Placement students. Thus the frequency of communication seen for the Neighborhood Placement group (previous chart) is not simply reflecting lower levels of need for Neighborhood Placement students. Rather, it is likely their needs with respect to school-home communication are truly not being met.

**Concerns and Preferences for School Communication: Elementary School**

Caregivers were asked to report in their own words what they like about the communication they receive from school, what changes they would like to see in the communications, and whether there was anything else they would like to share regarding school communication.

Themes that emerged in the responses were tallied across caregivers’ open-ended responses to gauge common experiences and dominant concerns that caregivers had regarding school communication. *These themes were not prompted in the survey. They were spontaneously expressed by caregivers, in their own words, indicating what is important to them.* Several individual responses covered multiple themes. The dominant themes are listed below, along with the number of caregivers in each group reporting each theme.

**Themes in what Elementary Caregivers Like about School-Home Communication**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Salient Themes | Program Neighborhood  Placement Placement  (n=14) % (n=14)\* % |
| Satisfactions with getting updates | 9 64% 1 7% |
| Satisfaction with frequency | 5 36% 1 7% |
| Satisfaction with ease/responsiveness/friendliness | 2 14% 2 14% |
| Satisfaction with receiving behavior reports | 2 14% 0 0% |
| Satisfaction with detail | 2 14% 0 0% |

\*Four Neighborhood Placement caregivers did not respond to this question; few indicated something they liked.

Most Program Placement caregivers (79%) reported at least one aspect of school communication they liked. The dominant themes for what Program Placement caregivers liked about the communications they received were satisfaction with getting updates (64%), satisfaction with ease, responsiveness, and/or friendliness of communication (36%), satisfaction with the frequency of communication (14%), satisfaction with receiving behavior reports (14%), and satisfaction with detail (14%).

In contrast, only a few Neighborhood Placement caregivers (21%) stated something positive about communication from school. One caregiver mentioned frequency of communication as a positive aspect of school communication (7%), and one mentioned that they appreciated receiving updates about their child. Two caregivers (14%) reported satisfaction with ease, responsiveness, or friendliness of communication. These disparities in caregivers’ subjective assessments of the nature and quality of school communications by placement type are consistent with our other findings reported above—and another indication that caregivers of Neighborhood School Placement students are not receiving sufficient communication.

Sample responses for what Program Placement caregivers like about communications follow:

*“I like that communications are detailed, timely, and consistent.”*

*“Frequency, ease of communications, responsiveness, collaborativeness are all great.”*

*“I like that I receive daily communication, but I would like more information about what is being taught.”*

*“Gives me a sense of my daughter’s activities on that day, but no sense of focus on what really matters, how we can make changes to adjust.”*

Three Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported something they liked as follows:

*“I like the frequency, content, the fact that it isn’t just when something is going wrong.”*

*“Communication is friendly. Expedient. I would like to receive them daily.”*

*“The teacher answers my questions, but I would like updates biweekly.”*

Caregivers were asked what they would change about the communications that they are currently receiving. The dominant themes among respondents are listed by placement below.

**Themes in what Elementary Caregivers Would Change about Communication**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Salient Themes | Program Placement Neighb. Placement  (n=14) % (n=14)\*\* % | |
| Want more communication regarding special needs themes, goals, and follow-through\* | | 7 50% 3 21% |
| Want more academic information | | 5 36% 0 0% |
| Want more detail | | 5 36% 5 36% |
| Want more frequent communication | | 3 21% 8 57% |

\* Special needs themes encompass identified problems, patterns of behavior, goals, more positive reports specific to

child’s needs/not just problems, and what parents can do at home.

\*\*Four Neighborhood Placement caregivers did not respond to this question.

Dominant themes expressed by caregivers of students in Program Placements were the following: wanting more information related to their child’s special needs and/or related goals (50%), more information about their child’s academics (36%), more detailed communications (36%), and more frequent communication (21%). alf of Program Placement caregivers expressed a wish for better communication about special needs themes and goals suggests caregivers are not getting enough specific information about their children’s functioning vis-à-vis their autism-related needs. It is noteworthy that many respondents expressed a desire to work on academic or school-related challenges at home and/or work on generalizing skills at home, indicating a desire to be engaged in their child’s special needs support and be part of a team effort supporting their child.

Similar to Program Placement caregivers, 36% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers expressed a desire for more detail in communications. Twenty-one percent of Neighborhood Caregivers wanted more communication regarding special needs themes, goals, and follow-through. Like Program Placement caregivers, Neighborhood Placement caregivers wished for more frequent communication, but in much higher numbers (57% of Neighborhood Placement caregivers versus 21% of Program Placement caregivers), indicating a significant need for more frequent communication for families of Neighborhood Placement students, as seen earlier in the other measures reported above.

No Elementary Neighborhood Placement caregivers mentioned wanting more information about their child’s academics, compared to one third of Program Placement caregivers. This may be due to the fact that Neighborhood Placement caregivers generally had more contact with general education teachers than Program Placement caregivers.

Sample responses from Program Placement caregivers on what they would like to see changed about school communication follow:

*“Able to get a good idea of how our child is doing throughout the day. Sometimes would like more specifics when our child is having a bad day such as were there any antecedents and would like more info on educational progress.”*

*“I like that I know if he has any meltdowns, but I’d like to know what set him off and what they did to calm him down.”*

*“I would like to see more schoolwork so I can see progress and ask better questions about the work.”*

*“When I get them, they are specific to my child. Not enough focus on specific academic work and themes which could be supported at home for generalization (even though I have asked). Highly unreliable with frequency . . . .”*

*“I like that I get a sense of how my child behaves daily, but there is very little explanation in addition to a number rating . . . . I tend to only get notes regarding problems, not successes. I would like communications to be more detailed, outlining both positive and negative.”*

*“I would like to see better follow through on what has been previously discussed.”*

Neighborhood Placement caregivers expressed their desires for change in the following responses:

*“More frequency and detail. During the last IEP meeting we mentioned we needed more feedback. To make it easier, we supplied a short table that teachers could complete once a week just by checking boxes. They never did it.”*

*“I’d like to know more about how my child’s day went.”*

*“Not frequent enough which makes it difficult to discuss with child.”*

*“…We requested a checklist from the teacher—she doesn’t want to do it. The teacher and assistant principal are not held accountable by MCPS for their lack of communication. ”*

*“Would like the positive along with the negative, not just negative.”*

*“More communication with the teacher and the special education coordinator – fewer complaining calls from the assistant principal….”*

*“The Quarterly progress reports and report cards are too general and vague. It should be easier to schedule meetings with the school to review these things in person, especially if there are concerns.”*

The themes expressed in open-ended format for all caregivers echo concerns that arose in the structured survey responses reported above but also elaborate that in addition to wanting more frequent contact and more detailed information, caregivers want more information from school regarding issues related to their child’s special needs and progress toward their related goals. And in the case of Program Placement families – more information related to academic learning.

**Elementary School: Recommendations**

The elementary caregivers who responded to our survey represented several special education programs within MCPS as well as neighborhood schools in which their children were receiving special education services. The survey yielded the following recommendations:

**Recommendations for Elementary Special Education Programs**

Sources of Communication

* We recommend that general education teachers of students who are mainstreamed for parts of the day get involved in updating caregivers on their student’s progress. One way to do this would be to create a set format for twice-quarterly progress updates from teachers similar to what is used for teacher reports provided with the annual IEPs. In addition, teachers should maintain open lines of communication with parents.

Methods of Communication

* Programs should consider using set formats of communication tailored to each program or to each student, to fit their unique needs. Set formats, such as behavior contracts, daily point sheets, or journals should be meaningful and provide details about the day or week, including positive reports as well as concerns. Some programs in MCPS, such as the Aspergers Program and Behavioral and Emotional Support Services, may serve as models for developing set formats. Caregivers with students in these programs reported higher satisfaction with the quality and frequency of communication than other program caregivers.
* We recommend that special educators and general education teachers continue to make use of email for easy, reciprocal communication, with a mandate that teachers respond to parent communication within 24 hours.

Frequency of Communication

* We recommend MCPS consider a minimum standard of frequency for meaningful communication from staff in special education programs: daily or weekly, as needed by each individual student. Our survey clearly demonstrates that caregivers feel that receiving communication from school is very important and they appreciate receiving updates regularly.
* We urge MCPS to require that all IEPs specify terms of communication appropriate for each student: frequency, methods, and sources.

Quality of Communication

* We recommend that a quality standard for communication be established to include more information for caregivers on special needs concerns such as their child’s progress on goals, ways for caregivers to generalize skills at home, follow-up on implementation of strategies, etc.
* In addition, we recommend that special educators and/or general educators regularly update caregivers not only on concerns related to behavior, learning, or executive function but also on academics, ideally including what curricular content is upcoming or what the week ahead will look like for assignments so caregivers can support their children at home when possible. Given the decreased use of textbooks in schools, one important way that teachers can support students is to offer class notes and copies of smart-board slides. Such support materials, in addition to textbooks for home use when available, should be issued as a rule rather than only upon request and made accessible online, along with homework assignments for all students with ASD.

**Recommendations for Elementary Neighborhood Schools**

Sources of Communication

* We strongly suggest that MCPS look closely at the amount of time special educators are spending in direct interaction or oversight with special education students and consider whether special education staffing levels might be too low in neighborhood schools to meet the needs of the growing population of mainstreamed special education students. While special education students placed in their neighborhood schools may be more independent and have needs that can more easily be met in the least restrictive environment than students placed in programs, they still need close engagement and oversight by school staff, especially special educators. The survey data show a surprisingly low number of caregivers—less than half—receiving regular communication from special educators. While this figure is not a direct indication of special educator involvement, we believe it suggests that special educator involvement may be less than optimal for mainstreamed students.
* We encourage MCPS to provide special educators who support mainstreamed students in their home schools with training, resources, and support so that they can provide the range and quality of support that students in programs receive.
* We recommend that MCPS encourage general education teachers to share information with caregivers pertinent to their special education student’s needs, including academic concerns, positive reports, ideas to help at home, notes or smart-board slides, study tips, notifications of upcoming changes or new material, etc.
* The greater involvement of general education teachers in special education students’ learning, especially for mainstreamed students, indicates a strong need for more teacher training on teaching students with autism and related disorders.
* Over 20% of Neighborhood Placement student caregivers mentioned administrators (e.g., principal, assistant principal) as sources of communication from school. In contrast, no Program Placement caregivers reported receiving communication from administrators. This is a red flag possibly indicating these mainstreamed students have unmet needs resulting in behavioral challenges, and that these challenges are not being addressed adequately by special education staff, but are instead escalating to administrators (who may not have adequate training on autism). We subscribe to Ross Greene’s concept described in his book *Lost at School* that a student’s behavior problems are often an indication of unmet needs and lagging skills. The Collaborative Problem Solving approach advanced in *Lost at School* can help students be successful, but appropriate staffing and training are essential.

Methods of Communication

* We suggest that MCPS create several options for set communication formats for teachers to consider using to meet the unique needs of students. These could include updates on what academics are being covered, reports of positive behaviors and concerns, behavior contracts, checklists, point charts, journals or notebooks, and the like. These options should be encouraged for use by both special educators and general education teachers, as respondents to our survey expressed a wish to receive communication from both sources.
* One idea to consider is to have more frequent reports on IEP goals. Special education teachers could write updates on IEP goals in narrative form so the information is personalized to each student. This could serve the dual function of ensuring that special education teachers are monitoring progress on goals and staying involved with each student.
* We recommend that special educators and general education teachers continue to make use of email as the primary method for easy reciprocal communication, with a mandate that teachers respond to parent communication within 24 hours. Neighborhood Placement caregivers especially need clear direction on who to contact when questions or concerns arise, with an explicit invitation to collaborate as members of a team supporting the student.

Frequency of Communication

* We strongly recommend for students in neighborhood school placements that MCPS consider a minimum standard of frequency for meaningful communication from staff: daily or weekly for the elementary school level according to each child’s individual needs. We urge MCPS to hold school staff accountable to such a standard, especially for mainstreamed students who can and do easily fall through the cracks. Less than half of Neighborhood Placement students’ caregivers reported daily or weekly communication. And 65% of caregivers were unsatisfied with the frequency of communication. Less than weekly communication for a child with autism in elementary school is not adequate. This rate of communication should be remedied as soon as possible. If students are doing well in school, caregivers would certainly appreciate positive reports and updates on goals.
* We urge MCPS to require that all IEPs specify terms of communication appropriate for each student: frequency, methods, and sources.

Quality of Communication

* 50% of Neighborhood school caregivers were dissatisfied with the quality of communication. Neighborhood school caregivers reported wanting more detail in communication, with some specifically wanting more information regarding special needs themes, goals, observations, and ideas for ways to generalize skills at home. We suggest that MCPS make recommendations to teachers and special educators for the content of communication to include more detail on issues related to their special needs.
* We emphatically urge MCPS to remedy the problem identified through our survey of infrequent and low quality communication for special education students attending their neighborhood schools. Not every student will need a behavior contract or checklist, and some students in the mainstream may function quite independently, which of course should be encouraged. But all students can benefit from staff-caregiver reciprocal communication and appropriate special education involvement and oversight.

Strategic changes within MCPS have led to more students being placed in Neighborhood Placements than previously, when the same students might have been placed in programs. While the placements may have changed, the students’ needs have not. Students are entitled to the same supports no matter what the placement. School-home communication is an essential part of students receiving proper support for their learning.

**MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL**

Twenty-six Middle and High School caregivers responded to the survey. Fifteen reported their children’s placements in the following school programs: Aspergers Program (3), LAD (1), ARS (4), Autism Program (1), Autism Services (1), Bridge (4), and GTLD (1). In addition, 11 caregivers reported that their child was mainstreamed in their neighborhood middle school or high school.

Reports of *methods, sources, frequency, and quality* of communication from caregivers are reported below, as are reports of *concerns and preferences for communication*, by placement.

**Methods of Communication: Middle and High School**

Middle and High School Program Placement caregivers and Neighborhood Placement caregivers were asked to indicate which methods of communication were used by school staff. Caregivers reported that they received communication through one or more of the following methods.

**Methods of Communication Reported by Middle and High School Caregivers**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Method of Communication | MS/HS Program Placement  (n=15) % | MS/HS Neighborhood Placement  (n=11) % |
| Phone | 4 26% | 2 18% |
| Email | 12 80% | 8 73% |
| Contract/Checklist | 7 47% | 0 0% |
| Journal | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| Quarterly Progress Report | 0 0% | 1 6% |
| In Person | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| Take Home Folder | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| Don’t Receive Communications | 2 13% | 2 18% |

Caregivers were also asked whether a set format of communication, such as a behavior contract or daily checklist, is used by school staff and reported the following:

**Middle and High School Caregiver Reports of Set Format of Communication**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Staff Use Set Format for Communication | MS/HS Program  Placement (n=13)\* % | MS/HS Neighborhood  Placement (n=9)\* % |
| Yes | 5 38% | 0 0% |
| No | 8 62% | 9 100% |

\*Two Program Placement caregivers and two Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported they did not receive

communications. They were not asked about format of communication and were not included in these counts.

For Middle and High School Program Placement caregivers, email was the dominant form of communication (80%), followed by Behavior Contracts (47%). Forty percent of caregivers indicated use of both email and behavior contracts.

For Neighborhood Placement caregivers, email was the dominant communication form, same as for Program Placement caregivers. Notably, no Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported use of behavior contracts or any set reporting format to communicate. Comparatively, nearly half (47%) Program Placement families reported use of behavior contracts, suggesting they are still useful forms of communication and/or behavior or executive-function management for students with autism at this age (though reported in lower proportions than by elementary school caregivers).

Telephone was also used according to some caregivers, reported in higher numbers than for elementary school. Notably, two caregivers in each placement group reported receiving no communication.

**Sources of Communication: Middle and High School**

Middle School and High School Program Placement and Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported the following sources of communication.

**Sources of Communication Reported by Middle and High School Caregivers**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Sources of Communication\* | MS/HS Program Placement  (n=15) | | % | MS/HS Neighb.  Placement  (n=11) | % |
| Special Education Teacher | 10 | 67% | | 6 | 55% |
| Gen. Ed. Teacher or Support | 3 | 20% | | 5 | 45% |
| RTSE, Case manager, Director | 5 | 33% | | 2 | 18% |
| Counselor | 3 | 20% | | 1 | 9% |
| Psychologist, Soc. Worker, Beh. Specialist | 0 | 0% | | 0 | 0% |
| Transition Specialist | 1 | 7% | | 1 | 9% |
| SLP, OT, Related Services | 0 | 0% | | 0 | 0% |
| Principal, Assistant Principal | 0 | 0% | | 0 | 0% |
| Don’t Receive Communications | 2 | 13% | | 3 | 27% |

\* Respondents could report more than one source of communication

Special education staff remain the central sources of communication for Middle and High School Program Placement caregivers, with special education teachers, RTSE’s, caseworkers, and program directors being the dominant sources for 87% of caregivers reporting. Counselors were also mentioned by 20% of Program Placement caregivers as sources of communication. Twenty percent of Program Placement caregivers reported receiving communication from general education teachers. Thirteen percent reported receiving no communication from anyone.

Sixty-four percent of Neighborhood Placement caregivers reported special education staff as sources of communication, including special education teachers, RTSEs, and/or case managers. General education teachers were reported as sources of communication by nearly half of caregivers (45%). Just over 25% of caregivers reported that they did not receive communications from school.

General education teachers are a greater source of communication for Neighborhood Placement caregivers (nearly half) as compared to Program Placement caregivers (one fifth). This may be due to less time in mainstream classrooms for students in special education programs; however, beyond elementary school, Program Placement students often have increasing mainstreaming opportunities. Communication from general education teachers is important for students with special needs from an academic standpoint as well as an inclusion standpoint, so this warrants further investigation and consideration when planning improvements in school-home communication.

**Frequency and Quality of Communication: Middle and High School**

Caregivers were asked to report the frequency with which they receive school communications from the following choices: daily, weekly, monthly, as needed/infrequently, and quarterly. Responses are reported in the table that follows for program and neighborhood placement caregivers.

**Frequency of Communication Reported by Middle and High School Caregivers**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Frequency of Communication\* | MS/HS Program Placement  (n=15) % | MS/HS Neighborhood Placement  (n=11) % |
| Daily | 5 33% | 0 0% |
| Weekly | 3 20% | 0 0% |
| Monthly | 1 7% | 0 0% |
| As Needed/Infrequently | 3 20% | 6 55% |
| Quarterly | 1 7% | 3 27% |
| Never | 2 13% | 2 18% |

One-third of Program Placement caregivers (33%) reported receiving daily communications from school staff. About half (53%) received communication daily or weekly. One third (33%) received communication monthly, as needed/infrequently, or quarterly. Two caregivers (18%) reported never receiving communication.

Frequency of communication was strikingly different for the Neighborhood Placement caregivers. Over half (55%) received communications infrequently or as needed; and the rest reported receiving communications quarterly or never. No Neighborhood placement caregivers received communication daily, weekly, or even monthly, differing from Program Placement caregivers, the majority of whom received communications daily or weekly. This difference merits further investigation.

To determine satisfaction with communication, caregivers were asked to give subjective ratings of two aspects of communication on 5-point scales. Caregivers rated their evaluations of the frequency of communication (from 1 = “not often enough” to 5 = “too much/too often”) and the quality of communication (1 = “very unsatisfied” to 5 = “very satisfied”). Results are reported in the table below.

**MS and HS Caregiver Satisfaction with Frequency and Quality of Communication**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Evaluation of Communication\* | MS/HS Program  Placement  (n=13\*) % | MS/HS Neighb.  Placement  (n=9\*) % |
| Subjective Frequency Ratings |  |  |
| Low Frequency (1, 2) | 3 23% | 6 67% |
| Middle Frequency (3) | 9 69% | 3 33% |
| High Frequency (4, 5) | 1 8% | 0 0% |
|  |  |  |
| Subjective Quality Ratings |  |  |
| Unsatisfied, Very Unsat. (1, 2) | 3 23% | 4 44% |
| Middle Rating (3) | 3 23% | 4 44% |
| Satisfied, Very Satisfied (4, 5) | 7 54% | 1 11% |

\*Two Program Placement caregivers and two Neighborhood Placement caregivers checked reported not receiving any communication and were therefore not asked about satisfaction or included in these tallies.

Over half of Program Placement caregivers (54%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of communications from school. However, 23% gave a low subjective rating of communication frequency and 23% reported dissatisfaction with the quality of communication.

When looking closely at the data, the Bridge program stood out as having generally high caregiver satisfaction with frequency and quality of communication. All four caregivers of students in Bridge who responded to our survey reported use of behavior contracts and email. Despite differences in student need between programs, the Bridge Program could be looked to as a model for successful communication between staff and caregivers.

Over half of Neighborhood Placement caregivers (67%) gave a low subjective rating of frequency of communication, indicating dissatisfaction. This compares to less than a quarter of caregivers of students with Program Placements (23%) reporting a low rating of frequency. Similarly almost half of Neighborhood Placement caregivers (44%) were unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with quality of communication. By comparison, less than a quarter of Program Placement caregivers (23%) reported dissatisfaction with quality of communication. Only one of Neighborhood Placement caregivers (11%) reported satisfaction with quality of communication, while over half of the Program Placement caregivers (54%) were satisfied or very satisfied with quality of communication.

Our survey clearly demonstrates that caregivers of middle and high school students in their neighborhood school receive less frequent communication than caregivers of students in programs. We considered that perhaps the students placed in their home schools are more independent, requiring less support by way of home-school communication. However, their caregivers reported a high degree of dissatisfaction with the frequency and quality of communication they received, suggesting their support needs were not being met.

**Concerns and Preferences for School Communication: Middle and High School**

Caregivers were asked to report in writing what they like about the communication they receive from school and what changes they would like to see in the communications.

A variety of themes emerged in the responses. These themes were tallied across responses to gauge common experiences and dominant concerns that caregivers had regarding school communication. Some responses reflected multiple themes.

**Themes in what MS/HS Caregivers Like about School-Home Communication**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Salient Themes | MS/HS Program MS/HS Neighb.  Placement Placement  (n=13\*) % (n=10\*) % |
| Satisfactions with getting updates | 4 31% 0 0% |
| Satisfaction with ease/responsiveness/friendliness | 3 23% 4 40% |
| Satisfaction with receiving behavior reports | 2 15% 0 0% |
| Satisfaction with detail | 0 0% 1 10% |

\*Two M/H Program Placement caregivers and 1 Neighborhood Placement caregiver did not respond and were not

included in these counts. Several caregivers in both groups did not mention anything they like about communication.

About one third of Program Placement caregivers (31%) reported appreciating being updated about their child. Almost 25% reported satisfaction with ease of communication, responsiveness, and/or friendliness of communications. Fifteen percent reported being pleased to receive behavior reports.

In contrast, no Neighborhood Placement caregivers made spontaneous comments about being satisfied with receiving updates or behavior reports. Forty percent of Neighborhood Placement caregivers were satisfied with ease of communication/teacher responsiveness. The fact that caregivers of students in both placement types reported satisfaction with ease of communication, responsiveness of teachers, and/or friendliness of communication suggests that these are important characteristics.

Some caregivers of students in middle and high school Program Placements described what they liked as follows:

*“The staff communicate clearly. No ambiguity.”*

*“I like that my concerns are addressed, but I wish school staff were more proactive. Most communication is initiated by me about a concern I have.”*

*“I like that I’m seeing the frequency of behaviors. There is no other information other than whether behaviors occurred. I have no idea what he is working on during the day.”*

Examples of middle and high school Neighborhood Placement caregiver responses follow:

*“The teachers respond quickly and in detail.”*

*“I can ask questions any time but I would like more information about what is or is not working.”*

*“My child's teachers are very responsive, open about what's going on in the classroom, willing to share what they're doing and open to suggestions. This year, the special ed coordinator's communications have been infrequent, condescending, and suggest lack of familiarity or concern with my child.”*

Middle and High School Program Placement Caregivers were asked to say in their own words what they would like to change about the communications they are receiving. The most salient themes follow.

**Themes in what MS/HS Caregivers Would Change about School-Home Communication**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Salient Themes | MS/HS Program MS/HS Neighb.  Placement Placement  (n=13)\* % (n=10)\* % |
| Want more detail | 4 31% 3 30% |
| Want more frequent communication | 3 23% 4 40% |
| Want more academic information | 3 23% 1 10% |
| Want more contact with gen. ed. teachers | 2 15% 0 0% |
| Want more communication regarding special needs themes, goals, and follow-through\*\* | 1 7% 4 40% |
| Want better coordination between Special Education and General Education Teachers | 0 0% 1 10% |

\* Two M/H Program Placement caregivers and one Neighborhood Placement caregiver did not respond.

\* Special needs themes encompass identified problems, patterns of behavior, goals, more positive reports specific to child’s

needs/not just problems, what parents can do at home.

Several dominant themes emerged from Program Placement caregivers’ reports of what they would want to change about school-home communication. Caregivers want more detail (31%), more frequent communication (23%), more information pertaining to academics (23%), and more contact with general education teachers (15%).

Similarly, the comments from Neighborhood Placement caregivers reflect a desire for more frequent communication (40%) and more detailed communication (30%). Additionally they desire more communication regarding special needs themes (40%).

Caregivers’ voices are especially important to hear on what they would like to see changed because they provide a basis for considering changes on the systemic level to meet families’ needs. In their own words, Middle and High School caregivers of students in Program Placements share their desired changes in school communication:

*“To a certain extent the infrequency of communication is expected because my child is in high school and should be advocating for herself more. But I’m often left in the dark about important behavioral concerns that I (and my child’s doctors) need to know about.”*

*“Teachers’ notes help us understand what is going on in school. I would prefer to have more information. Some days or even weeks we do not receive anything.”*

*“I am informed when something bad happens at school and at times good. I would like to hear more from the people behind the Sp. Ed teacher too. I am not sure they are engaged enough.”*

*“They reach out when my child has a tough day. Also reach out when things are going well. I would like more frequent communication about the curriculum.”*

Examples of responses from Middle School and High School caregivers of students in Neighborhood Placements illustrate the kinds of changes in school communication they desire:

*“My son's Counselor always answers my emails or calls, but never contacts me proactively. That is fine with me as my son is now a freshman and is learning self-advocacy. I would love to receive a quarterly report from his teachers, to make sure he is paying attention in class [he has attention-related challenges], that he is socially integrated, etc.”*

*“Communication is nonexistent and requires multiple requests through guidance counselor, grade administrators and finally the principal. When they do they are reluctant and combative.”*

*“I can ask questions any time, but I would like more information about what is or is not working.”*

*“Not detailed. Infrequent.”*

*“They fulfill legal requirements and highlight urgent problems. They don’t appear to be based in actual observation of my child and his progress, but are only triggered by extreme problems (i.e., failing a county assessment or us calling to complain).”*

Caregivers’ frustration is apparent in many of the open-ended responses. Their words indicate a strong need for more frequent, detailed, and proactive communication as well as more information on special-needs concerns and academics, reflecting the other findings in our survey.

**Middle and High School: Recommendations**

The middle and high school caregivers responding to our survey represented several special education programs within MCPS as well as neighborhood school placements of their children receiving special education services. The survey resulted in the following general recommendations.

**Recommendations for Middle and High School Special Education Programs**

Our recommendations for Middle and High School programs are similar to those for elementary school, with the exception that communication may not need to be as frequent in all cases for older students compared to younger students.

Sources of Communication

* We recommend that MCPS encourage general education teachers of students in programs who are mainstreamed for parts of the day to communicate with caregivers to share updates, observations, or concerns. MCPS must ensure that general education teachers receive training in working with students with special needs, and specifically autism, so they can increase their engagement with special education students and encourage mainstreaming when appropriate.
* We recommend that MCPS address the wish expressed by caregivers in this survey for more information on academics. This is a role for special educators *and* general educators, both of whom can share updates, strategies for learning, advance warning on content changes or timelines, observations, concerns, and positive updates on the student’s learning.

Methods of Communication

* We recommend that MCPS seek models of good communication already present within MCPS. Some programs in MCPS may serve as models for developing set formats, such as the Bridge Program, which was reported to use behavior contracts and received the highest levels of caregiver satisfaction with frequency and quality of communication among the programs represented by our survey respondents.
* Due to better mastery of school expectations for older students, not all students at the middle or high school level will benefit from behavior contracts or checklists. However, programs should consider using set formats of communication, tailored to each program or each individual student. Set formats such as behavior contracts, daily or weekly point sheets, or journals should be meaningful and provide details about the day or week, including positive reports, observations, and concerns. Individual student need should drive the choices of methods and frequency of communication—*we strongly advise against a one-size-fits-all approach*—but MCPS should ensure that staff have an awareness of a breadth of options and tools for communication and require staff to engage in appropriate, meaningful communication with caregivers.
* Email was a commonly-used method and provides the ease and responsiveness caregivers prefer. We suggest that MCPS mandate that teachers respond to parent communication within 24 hours.

Frequency of Communication

* We recommend that MCPS set standards for all programs to be consistently communicating with caregivers with minimum frequency and quality requirements: For middle and high school, we suggest daily to monthly. It may be appropriate to expand the minimum interval between regular communication as students gain independence in middle school and high school. We feel that communication less than monthly or twice-quarterly may not be appropriate even at the high school level, as students are experiencing multiple transitions and increasing demands during these years.
* In addition to increased regular communication, we also recommend twice-quarterly reporting on progress on IEP goals and general education teacher observations.
* We urge MCPS to require that all IEPs specify terms of communication appropriate for each student: frequency, methods, and sources.

Quality of Communication

* We suggest that a standard for quality of communication include addressing special needs themes, such as goal attainment, strategies, and ways to generalize skills relative to the students’ unique learning needs and abilities.
* MCPS should encourage special education teachers and general education teachers to address specific IEP goals in communications when possible and maintain open communication with caregivers.

**Recommendations for Middle and High School Neighborhood Schools**

Sources of Communication

* We recommend much greater involvement of special educators in communicating with mainstreamed students’ caregivers. Only about 60% of caregivers of Neighborhood Placement students received communication from special education staff. We also urge MCPS to consider whether the low level of communication coming from special educators is a red flag for low involvement by special educators in the day-to-day learning activities and experiences of mainstreamed special education students.
* We recommend that MCPS offer training for general education teachers on autism and common learning challenges for autistic students so that their involvement and communication can be optimally supportive for students.
* With the recent emphasis on full inclusion as a goal in special education, and effort from MCPS to place more students in neighborhood schools as opposed to programs, we are concerned that special educators who have not worked in program settings may not have the same range of tools at their disposal as special educators working closely with students in program settings. We also believe that program teachers could be a resource for sharing best practices with non-program special education teachers. We encourage MCPS to provide special educators who support mainstreamed students with training, resources, and support so that they can provide the range and quality of support that students in programs receive.
* While placements are shifting to less restrictive settings, levels of support should not change and should remain consistent with the students unique needs. Precisely because students placed in neighborhood schools are without the nurturing support of smaller, more personalized environments, more—not less—attention is required to make sure they are receiving an appropriate education based on their unique needs and the demands of the mainstream environment.

Methods of Communication

* Standard formats for communication, such as behavior contracts or checklists, should be considered for each mainstreamed student if the need is there for frequent updates or behavioral or executive function supports. (See recommendations for Program Placement students above.)
* Email was a common method of communication and provides the ease of communication and responsiveness that caregivers appreciate. We recommend that MCPS mandate that teachers respond to parent communication within 24 hours.
* We recommend that MCPS require that teachers set up and maintain current information on their classes’ online page, so reliable information about assignments and assessments can be easily accessed by parents and students.

Frequency of Communication

* We urge MCPS to set a standard for frequency of communication appropriate to middle school and high school ages and levels of functioning unique to each student, with a minimum of weekly or monthly communication—more for middle school students, students transitioning to high school, and students with greater needs for behavioral, emotional, and/or executive function support.

No caregivers of students placed in neighborhood middle schools or high schools in our survey reported receiving communication from school daily, weekly, or even monthly. Fully two-thirds of caregivers were dissatisfied with frequency of communication indicating their children’s needs warrant more school-home communication home. For special education students with autism, this low frequency of communication is striking and may not be adequate given the pervasive needs that autism can present along with the attendant learning challenges, executive function challenges, developmental needs, and pressures inherent in the middle school and high school years.

* In addition to increased regular communication, we also recommend twice-quarterly reporting on progress on IEP goals and general education teacher observations.
* We urge MCPS to require that all IEPs specify terms of communication appropriate for each student: frequency, methods, and sources.

Quality of Communication

* For Neighborhood Placement students, as for Program Placement students, we suggest that a standard for quality of communication include addressing special needs themes, such as goal attainment, strategies, and ways to generalize skills relative to the students’ unique learning needs and abilities.
* Several caregivers reported that the communications they receive are not detailed enough. MCPS should encourage special education teachers and general education teachers to address specific IEP goals in communications when possible and maintain open communication with caregivers.
* We recommend that special educators and/or general educators regularly update caregivers not only on concerns related to behavior, learning, or executive function but also on academics, ideally including what curricular content is upcoming or what the week ahead will look like for assignments so caregivers can support their children at home when possible.
* Given the decreased use of textbooks in schools, one important way that teachers can support students is to offer class notes and copies of smart-board slides. Such support materials, in addition to textbooks for home use whenever available, should be issued *as a rule* rather than only upon request. This is essential for students who have difficulty taking notes, need to take more time to process the material, and/or need help from parents or tutors to master the material. With the decreased use of textbooks, students don’t have the opportunity to study class content independently or at times when they learn most effectively (which might not be during the lesson in a large class) unless notes are consistently provided. For this reason, we strongly recommend that teachers be required as a policy to reliably make their class notes available online for all students with ASD.

**FINAL CONCLUSIONS**

Our Partnership for Extraordinary Minds School Communication Survey findings echo feedback we hear informally from parents regarding their children’s special education experience and their need for improved school-to-home communication. While we did not have a representative sample of all MCPS schools, the 58 primary and secondary student caregivers who participated gave us an overview of how information is shared by school staff, what’s working, and what needs improving so students are better supported through school-home communication. Summaries of our findings and specific recommendations for improving the methods, frequency, and quality of school-home communication are presented above by age level and placement type.

Our survey found major differences in caregiver reports on sources, methods, frequency, quality and content of school-home communication for students who are placed in special education programs versus those placed in neighborhood schools.

* While special educators were the most common sources of communication for students in programs, they appeared much less involved in communicating with caregivers of students placed in neighborhood schools, especially at the elementary level.
* General education teachers were less involved in communicating with caregivers of students with special-education program placements—and caregivers expressed a desire for more academic information so they can better support their children.
* Both placement groups expressed an interest in receiving more information regarding their child’s unique special needs concerns so they can better support their education.
* Differences were found in methods of communication: Caregivers of students placed at their neighborhood schools at all age levels were less likely to receive communication in the form of set formats such as point charts and behavior contracts.
* Striking differences in caregiver reports were found in the frequency of communication caregivers received. Caregivers of students in neighborhood placements at both age levels received much less communication overall, and these caregivers expressed a great deal of dissatisfaction with the frequency and quality of communication.

Our report provides recommendations to address these concerns for each age level and placement type. These recommendations include increasing the involvement of both special educators and general education teachers in communicating with caregivers and establishing guidelines and standards for frequency, quality, and content of communications. We also suggest looking to special education programs within MCPS, where caregivers in our survey appeared to be generally satisfied with the quality of school-home communication, as models for communication practices not only for other special education programs but also for neighborhood schools serving special education students.

On behalf of our members and those who shared their experiences on our survey, we ask that MCPS implement the recommendations that we derived from the survey data, *beginning with the elementary school level where the most pressing needs were evidenced.* Appropriate school-home communication is an essential component of special education support, and for caregivers to be effective team-members they need to be fully informed.

Once guidelines for frequency, quality, and content of communications are developed and put into place, we recommend that a system of administrative oversight be developed: Offer training and periodic reminders of the importance of communication with caregivers; provide oversight and check in with teachers on the frequency and content of communication; solicit feedback from caregivers on satisfaction with communication and collaboration; emphasize the essential role of caregivers as members of the IEP team; and create an ethos of special education that is truly open and collaborative with caregivers.

We recommend that MCPS closely examine whether special education staff engagement and oversight of their students is adequate in neighborhood schools with full-inclusion models of special education. Full inclusion is an important goal for many special education students, and we commend MCPS for creating mainstreaming opportunities for students in MCPS. However, we urge caution with prematurely promoting full inclusion before staffing resources and staff training are appropriate to the task.

Some caregivers in each student-age grouping reported receiving little or no communication from school. Caregivers reporting receiving no communication were not asked questions about frequency and quality of communication, so our results on inadequate frequency or poor quality of communication are, if anything, conservative, likely underestimating the extent of the problems identified. In addition, the reports by some caregivers—and disproportionately Neighborhood Placement caregivers—of very low frequency and quality of communication, little to no communication from special education teachers, and communication coming from administrators, signal the possibility that the amount of support and oversight given by some school staff is not adequate for the needs of special education students and a possible indicator of insufficient special education staffing.

Understanding who communicates with family, how often, and about what tells us not only about communication but also possibly the level and quality of support the student is receiving at school. Improving the standards for communication could have the added benefit of improving the quality of involvement and oversight by special education staff, and possibly increase the involvement of general education teachers as well, thus improving the educational experience and outcomes of autistic students in MCPS. This is especially important to consider for students increasingly mainstreamed in their neighborhood schools, who appear to be receiving less attention in terms of school-home communication and are at risk of falling through the cracks. Their caregivers’ frustration is evident in the survey results, coming to life with vivid, urgent concern in our survey respondents’ own words, which we shared in this report.

The findings of our survey indicate the importance of school-home communication to caregivers, who believe communication is an essential part of supporting their children in school. We hope the results and our recommendations will help MCPS to make improvements on behalf of all students with autism in MCPS.